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THE ROLE OF MEMORISATION AND IMPROVISATION IN THE TRANSMISSION AND PERFORMANCE OF THE ALTAI EPICS

Abstract. The author of this paper will examine the role of both improvisation and memorisation in the oral performances of the Altai epics. In order to do this, initially the author will describe for the reader the Altai epics, their plots, the values that they reinforce, the singer and his instrument. Then, based on a discussion about the context in which the epic is performed and the poetic features of the epics, this paper will explore the theory that the epic teller is not repeating an exact text but is improvising and composing throughout the performance of the epic, producing a different version each time. The author bases her research in particular on several personal interviews with oral epic singers in the Altai Republic. One of these interviews was with Anatoly Turlunov from the Kosh-Agach district, who is a famous performer of the epic in the Altai Republic and now teaches throat singing. The second was with Nikolai Sergetkishov, a young epic singer living in Gorno-Altai, who is trying to revive the tradition of epic storytelling. The final interviews were with Aydin Kurmanov, also a famous epic singer in the Altai Republic, who received many awards for his performances, and Yuri Chendelev, a musician who created his own Altai musical ensemble, and currently teaches music.

Keywords: epic; poetry; oral; improvisation; memorisation; epic teller; community; values; singer; instrument.

Бронуэн Кливер

Роль запоминания и импровизации в передаче и исполнении алтайского эпоса

Аннотация. Автор данной статьи рассматривает роль импровизации и запоминания в вопросе устного исполнения алтайского эпоса. Для этой цели автор вначале описывает алтайский эпос, его сюжеты, ценности, которые они утверждают, исполнителя и его музыкальный инструмент. Затем, основываясь на анализе среды, в которой исполняется эпос, и поэтических особенностей эпоса, в статье рассматривается теория о том, что сказитель эпоса не повторяет точный текст, а импровизирует и сочиняет на протяжении всего исполнения эпоса, каждый раз создавая новую версию. Исследование автора строится, в частности, на нескольких личных интервью с исполнителями устного эпоса в Республике Алтай. Одно из таких интервью прошло с Анатолием Турлуновым из района Кош-Агач, который является известным исполнителем эпоса в Республике Алтай и сейчас преподаёт горловое пение. Второе было с Николаем Сергеткишовым, молодым эпическим певцом, живущим в Горно-Алтайске, который старается возродить традицию эпического повествования. Заключительные интервью были с Айдыном Курмановым, также известным эпическим певцом в Республике Алтай, который получил множество наград за свои выступления, и Юрием Чендеевым, музыкантом, который создал свой алтайский музыкальный ансамбль, а в настоящее время преподаёт музыку.

Ключевые слова: эпос; поэзия; устный; импровизация; запоминание; исполнитель эпосов; общинный; ценности; певец; инструмент.

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Introduction

Epics are long narrative songs featuring the heroic deeds and adventures of legendary figures. The Altai epics are oral masterpieces that have been passed down from generation to generation. In this article, Altai epics and epic storytellers are considered in order to identify the role of improvisation and memorization in the issue of oral performance of the epic. The research will be based on the works of famous scientists, such as J. D. Niles, K. Reichl, C. Pegg, L. Harvilahti, R. S. Plueckahn, C. Gejin, M. Parry, A. B. Lord etc. and personal interviews with performers of the oral epic of the Altai Republic.

The Altai epics

The Altai Republic

The Republic of Altai, Siberia, is an area of 92,600 km, about 500 km South of Novosibirsk, bordering China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan. In the past the territory of Altai was occupied by various nomadic groups. In the 18th century the Russians began to colonise Altai, and in 1756 the Altaians came under Russian sovereignty [1, p. 244]. From 1918–1922 there was a civil war between the Altaians and the Bolsheviks, and in June 1922 the Oyrot Autonomous Oblast was formed. In June 1991 the Gorno-Altai Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed, and in May 1992 they adopted the name Altai Republic.

The Altai people number about 76,000 and are made up of six different groups: Telengit, Altai Kizhi, Tubular, Kumandin, Shor and Chalkan. 55,000 people (Telengit and Altai Kizhi) speak the Turkic language of Southern Altai fluently [1, p. 244]. The vitality of the Altai language is still high and has the possibility for future growth because of an ethnic revival in the Altai region. The language is used in arts, media, in education and in everyday life. The majority of the Altai are also fluent in Russian, with the exception of those living in remote villages.

Epics

The term *epic* has been used by Westerners since Homer's epic [2, p. 255]. Reichl cites Aristotle who states that the epic is narrative, of a certain length and is a representation of heroic action [3, p. 11]. Reichl also quotes Bowra who defined the epic as follows: 'An epic poem is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events which have certain grandeur and importance, and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war' [3, p. 11]. Niles suggests an alternative term *dastan*, of Persian origin, used in many areas of Central Asia to describe these lengthy oral narratives performed by professional singers [2, p. 255]. Such epic songs are not only sung in the region of Altai but have been in circulation all around Asia for several centuries, ranging from Eastern Turkey, Mongolia, Siberia and Northwest China.

Oral Epics

Reichl defines oral poetry as poetry recited, spoken or sung, orally performed and orally transmitted [3, p. 12]. Oral poetry is normally a song or narrative learned by word of mouth and passed on through a chain or oral transmission. Epic tales were also composed orally. However, the fact that it is oral does not exclude there being the possibility of a written text. Finnegan argues that in reality the oral and written traditions are interlinked [4, p. 57]. Reichl confirms that in the Turkic world, some of the oral epics were available in print [3, p. 13]. So, in conclusion, oral epics are extended heroic narratives performed by singer-narrators, who sing or chant them [3, pp. 19–21].

The Altai epic heritage

One of the main indicators of the orality of the Altai culture is their love of their heroic epic stories. Understanding some of the specific features of Altai epics will help in identifying some of the key features of the Altai oral culture. Pegg says that 'Heroic epics are vital to contemporary Altaian culture and identity' [5, p. 128]. Like other Turkic people groups, the Altai have a rich heritage of such epics, praising the great deeds of heroic warriors. One of the pioneering scholars of Altai epic poetry and folklore was Wilhelm Radlov (1837–1918), who collected large samples of this oral material, including ten epic oral texts, which were published in St. Petersburg [6, p. 215]. In 1963 the researcher and collector of Altai epics S. S. Surazakov (1925–1980) recorded one of the best known of the Altai heroic songs, Maadai-Kara, performed by Kalkin. This version contains 7,738 verses, and it was published in 1973 in bilingual format in Altai and Russian by the Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Surazakov was also the founder of the series "Altai Baatylar" ("Altai Heroes"). The twelve volumes published so far include more than 80 epic texts.

Values

Plueckahn in her discussion of Mongolian Altai Urianghai, observed that epic song performance is connected to the mythology, customs, history, lived experience and the social, political and musical identity of the people group [7, p. 186]. Wood in her study of Altai epics describes how Altai heroic epic poetry is a key to understanding the values of the Altai people [8]. Altai heroic epic poetry represents the following values: the respect of the Altai people of the heavens; a unity of the Altai people with the land of Altai and its natural environment; preciousness of family; tolerance and peacefulness; freedom and courageousness in freeing the land of Altai from oppressive enemies; generosity to guests and helping others; a group mentality; a unique expression of beauty as a reflection of nature; and the mastery of art and music.

Harvilahti argues that one of the main tasks of an epic tale is to reinforce the people's self-esteem and inspire respect for their history and culture [9, pp. 45–46]. The hero belongs to the people and is unconquerable – even if he was defeated once, he is ultimately invincible and will return one day. He says that use of epics in cultural life has many positive aspects, especially in strengthening cultural and national identity. In a personal interview of the author with Nikolay Sergetkishev, Sergetkishev said that the singing of the epics was, and is, a way of passing on Altai traditions, customs, mythology, philosophy and the Altai worldview¹. The epic singer is not only able to sing epic tales but has a whole wealth of knowledge of folklore and information about the Altai people, their history and their culture.

Plots of the Altai epic

The plots of the Altai epic are eternal in content, and they talk about the fight between good and evil, light and darkness, truth and lies. The hero always possesses magic powers; the hero's horse knows and sees everything; the wife of the hero can predict the future; and the young girl knows beforehand whom she will marry. The hero is often at war, defending his land, his people and his love: wars against lords, who attack Altai land and property; wars for brides, when there are too many suitors; and wars to regain stolen herds of livestock. He always defeats his enemies, and he does so through miraculous deeds. He rises up to the upper world to talk to the gods and goes down to the lower world to fight with under-world monsters.

Niles notes that the oral poetry of Central Asia is linked to the life of the semi-nomadic peoples of the steppes and includes references to the yurt (felt tent of the nomads, similar to an Altai *ail*), felt rugs, horses, the pastoral economy, clan loyalties, acts of masculine courage, and feminine virtues of loyalty and bravery [2, p. 261]. Gejin, discussing Mongolian oral epic poetry, argues that the epic poems depict the ideal heroes of the Turkic people, with their courageous hunters and herdsman, and their ideal world full of fast horses, beautiful women, ornate yurts and palaces, open steppes and rich pastureland [10, p. 322]. The heroes guard their treasure, perform brave deeds to defend it and their women, and in doing so, gain possession of new cattle and new territory. The best friend of the Altai warrior is his horse, his loyal, wonderful helper. The hero's horse saves his owner, carrying him through mountain passes and ravines and flowing rivers. Therefore, the old Turkic peoples always buried the horse with the warrior. Gejin in his study of Mongolian epics observes that there is no nomadic epic in this tradition without a horse and its assistance [10, p. 335]. The horse is able to speak and is full of wisdom, magical power, supernatural strength and speed. The horse often plays a key role in the story and can also warn the hero of events or danger that will come. The horse can transform itself into various shapes, normally other living objects such as a bird, in order to help the hero win.

Throat singing

In the Republic of Altai, the epic stories are sung using the technique of throat singing. Throat singing, or overtone singing, is a type of guttural singing in which singers produce more than one pitch at a time. By employing the whole spectrum of their organs of speech – lips, tongue, jaw, velum and larynx – throat singers take full advantage of the throat's resonance capacity to produce a unique harmony. Anokhin said that the Altai people sing heroic epic tales using a tone that is like the buzzing of a flying beetle [11, p. 459]. The art of overtone singing probably originated in southwestern Mongolia. In the Altai Republic of Southern Siberia, the indigenous Altai people developed their own variant of throat singing called *kai* and the term for an epic teller is *kaichy* 'a kai person' [5, p. 128].

¹ Personal interview with Sergetkishov Nikolay Grigoriovich (September 10, 2021).

There are three different types of throat singing styles in both the Republic of Tuva and the Republic of Altai, but for sung epics, the singers use *khöömiy*, which is in a deep register [3, p. 78]. The sustained notes contain the overtone effect in *kai*. Linguistic evidence suggests that the original meaning of the word *kai* was related to shamanism and signified the spiritual energy of the shaman's words. In ritual performance contexts, the throat-singing is crucial because it enables the *kaichy* to change his state of consciousness, and to travel with, or as, the hero through the three worlds and maybe even to parallel worlds, and to travel in *kai-time* or '*epic space-time*' [5, p. 129].

The singer

A man *kaichy* normally becomes a *kaichy* from childhood, after several years of dedicated training [3, p. 28]. Singers have often listened to epics from an early age, often sons imitating their fathers, and then some go on to have more formal training. A *kaichy* may be chosen by spirits and may be punished by the spirits for making a mistake in the epic performance. In a personal interview with Nikolay Sergetkishev, Sergetkishev said it is the hero of the epic tale who punishes the epic singer, if he is not able to finish the tale. In a performance at a festival, if the *kaichy* is stopped before the end of the epic tale, he may leave and finish singing it somewhere else, so that he will not be punished. Since the spirit world is listening, as well as the human audience, the epic tale must be brought to conclusion.

In a personal interview taken by the author with the musician Yura Chendeyev, he referred to the *eelü-kaichy*, as 'the master of the epic tale'². According to Chendeyev, there are now no such masters alive, but previously the *eelü-kaichy* could predict the future, heal and spiritually influence the Altai people. Pegg calls the *eelü-kaichy* 'a with spirit' epic teller, and notes that he has been chosen by spirits, and has extra-sensory abilities [5, p. 129]. Pegg writes that Elbek Kalkin is the only remaining *eelü-kaichy* alive today, the son of Alekei Kalkin (1925–1998), now living in Yabogan, Ust'-Kan district [5, p. 128]. In a personal interview with Nikolay Sergetkishev, he referred to his great-great-grandfather as an *eelü-kaichy* who had the gift of seeing and understanding dreams. Sergetkishev also asserts that there are no *eelü-kaichy* alive today, and that an *eelü-kaichy* is born with the gift of epic singing and with other supernatural abilities. It is accepted that one might still be born, but so, he would be in the blood line of a previous *eelü-kaichy*.

The instrument

Throat singing is usually accompanied by the playing of the *topshur*, a small, two stringed, lute, with the nylon strings tuned in a fourth, with the higher notes strung above the low note. Traditionally, the sounding board and the strings were made from the hide and gut of the animal, which then becomes its master-spirit or helper-spirit [5, p. 130]. The instrument is in some sense animated and initially becomes a horse on which the epic teller rides. It can shape-change during the epic even into inanimate objects, such as a boat.

Lord (2017) entitled his study of South Slavic oral epic poetry *The Singer of Tales*, highlighting the fact that the singer often accompanies his song with a musical instrument [12, p. 1]. Epic poetry is oral, experienced in performance through hearing and communicated in the first place through vocalization [13, p. 576]. It depends on the role of sound, in both the poetry and the music. The quality of the resonance of the sound itself from the *topshur* can influence and affect the person. Reichl writes that 'as part of the living performance, epic music is not mere ornament, but an essential element of the communicative event' [14, p. 26]. Reichl notes that in most epic traditions the melodies tend to be fairly repetitive and of a simple monotonous structure, which is certainly true of the Altai epic songs [12, p. 2]. The playing of the *topshur* may include the imitation of a horse's gallop during the epic tale.

Plueckahn in her discussion of Mongolian Altai Urianghai, observed that epic songs use a repeating, descending melody, accompanied by a plucked accompaniment on the two-stringed *topshur* [7, p. 191]. This melody is normally repeated twice, perhaps with some minor variation, after which the singer takes a breath, while continuing to play *topshur*. The singer will then exclaim two vocal sounds *oii*, *ee* which mark the beginning of this new verse.

The context in which the epic is performed

Now that the reader is more familiar with the Altai epic, including why and how it is performed, the author will consider the context in which the Altai epic was performed. This will be vital in the discussion of the role of improvisation and memorisation in the performance of the Altai epics.

² Personal interview with Yura Chendeyev (September 23, 2021).

The environment

Normally a special time is set aside for the epic storytelling and the mood of the audience may be festive, as it could be a feast of celebration. It could be during the turn of seasons or during the waxing moon [15]. Reichl confirms that traditionally epics all over Central Asia were told in the evenings and into the night [3, p. 54]. The atmosphere during the performance is very important. Sergetkishev, in a personal interview with the author, commented that the best place to sing *kai*, is in an Altai *ail* (nomadic hexagonal wooden house) around a fire, with the audience relaxing and drinking tea. Reichl describes a performance of epic tales among the Central Asian peoples taking place in yurts [14, p. 40]. The singer is seated in the place of honour, opposite the entrance to the yurt, where there may be decorated wall carpets and floor rugs. The more important members of the audience sit closest to the epic singer, the table is covered with food, and the epic tale is accompanied by a feast. The performance takes place during the evening and the night, after the feast has begun.

Performance during the hunting season, perhaps in the evening round the fire, is characteristic of the Altai peoples. The spirits of the animals to be hunted are soothed or even distracted by the singing and storytelling. In a personal interview, Kurmanov said that the *kaichy* will go on a hunt to bless the land and ask the spirit of the forest to give the hunters success in the hunt³. Some have even reportedly seen the spirits of the forest come and gather around the area during the epic tale before the hunt. In a personal interview, Nikolay Sergetkishev affirmed that the Altai spirit of the forest likes to hear *kai* singing and will reward the hunter with animals.

In a personal interview with Kurmanov, he said that epic throat singing would often take place during the hay making time in the Republic of Altai in August. At this time, the whole community would gather together, gather hay in the day, and the *kaichy* would sing together with them every evening over a communal meal in the *ail*, which provided excellent acoustics. Kurmanov called this 'audio-therapy' because the effect of the vibration of the throat singing and the sound of the *topshur* was therapeutic. He commented that the audience can go into a kind of trance during such a performance, or at least a state of meditation, and they find a peace and satisfaction for their soul through this influence. The *kaichy* must take the audience into the reality of the mythology, where good always defeats evil. Kurmanov's grandfather told him that the singing of epic tales was used even for the rehabilitation of soldiers from Altai who came back from the Second World War. Schubert comments that heroic epics, in Central Asia and the Altai region, also had a ritualistic function, as well as being poetry and art [16, p. 2]. Performing epics in a family home or yurt would have a positive influence on that family, protecting them against evil spirits by creating contact with the invisible world and the supernatural forces that rule that world.

Harrison describes epic performances in the Republic of Tuva practiced by itinerant storytellers [17, p. 2]. They would visit a nomadic camp for a period of time, telling an epic in stages over a succession of evenings, after the day's work. The story would begin around the evening mealtime, after the animals were brought in and the people were ready to rest. Niles remarks that when already the heroic poem performances are restricted to official occasions such as festivals, it is already very different from when they were performed in a more natural environment such as the domestic yurt [2, p. 261].

The communal nature of the performance event

In the performance of the Altai heroic epic, performers and the audience are united by a special bond by being involved together in this ceremonial event [18, loc. 2285]. The audience is drawn into the performance and takes part in it as ritual, and the singer is dependent on his audience.

Reichl notes that the epic singing event is entertainment, as the audience enters the world of the epic tale and appreciates the poetic and musical art of the *kaichy* [3, p. 58]. However, it is not only entertainment. The performance is also asserting the common cultural heritage of both the audience and the *kaichy*, their language, tradition, poetry and music. In a personal interview, Nikolay Sergetkishev commented that during the beginning of the epic tale, the *kaichy* takes his audience in to the world of the epic tale, waking up the hero for the duration of the tale. Towards the end, the *kaichy* must put the hero back to sleep again and bring back his audience into the real world.

³ Personal interview with Aidin Kurmanov (August 21, 2021).

It can be concluded that epic performances are traditionally performed in a natural atmosphere and environment, rather than on official occasions. This is a familiar communal environment, where both the epic singer and the audience were relaxed.

Features of Altai epic poetry

Examining the features of the Altai epic poetry will also help the reader to understand more about exactly how the Altai epic is performed. The Altai epic poetry is highly patterned and formulaic [18, loc. 4204]. The presence of this highly patterned and formulaic diction in oral epic poetry is explained by the fact of its oral composition and transmission. The beginning of the epic is normally formulaic, which may stress the authenticity of the stories by referring to their oral transmission from storyteller to storyteller.

Parallelism is also one of the features of epic poetry [18, loc. 4194]; often the idea expressed in the first half of the parallel structure is repeated and varied in the second half. Alliteration is also used to create an intricate pattern of sound and meaning. Addition and 'summation' (where point after point is numerated and described) are also common stylistic traits of Turkic epic oral poetry, particularly in type-scenes such as the arming of the hero and the saddling of his horse, where point after point is numerated and described. Hyperbole is also a common stylistic trait, for example, the seven headed monster that is a stock figure of the Altai epic.

Bunn also refers to onomatopoeia [13, p. 558]. The Turkic people, including the Altai, have an extremely close attachment to their landscape and their environment, which influences their poetics. This includes their herding and hunting of animals, their constant moving and nomadizing, and the sounds of approaches horses, wolves, sheep, wind and other weather fronts. The epic singers to some extent attempt to transmit the sound of the weather, the animals and the mountains through the noises they make by throat singing.

These poetic features and images, which are conveyed through narrative, words, sound and music, help to bring the audience into the epic tale and inside history, evoking past memories, relationship and experiences. The epic singer is not just passing on information, but connects the past to the present for the audience, giving wisdom from the age-old story for the current time [13, p. 580].

The characters in these epics are recognised cultural archetypes, and their actions and feelings archetypal and idealised [15, loc. 3599]. Each figure normally has a clearly defined function (the hero, the opponent, the helper and the heroine). The heroine is generally defined in relation to the hero, as his beloved, wife, bride or sister. It is believed that an older shamanistic world and influence lie at the basis of the Altai oral poetry. Heroes often have shamanistic powers which they use against their underworld opponents. Shape-shifting and other shamanistic traits are common, for example horses can change in appearance to stars. The epics are highly predictable in their form and structure. Diction is formulaic, the plot determines the development of the story and the figures appearing in the epic are on the whole two dimensional rather than rounded characters.

It has been shown that there are often a number of narrative units, which occur repeatedly in the epics, which are compared to building blocks from which the singer can construct his epic. The singer then strings together all these ready-made narratives and links them with spontaneously composed lines. Bunn comments that it is these patterns, imagery and poetic effects that help the epic singer to remember the poem, and also have effect on the audience, helping to bridge time and experience for them, and drawing them inside their own memories and past [13, p. 575].

Memorisation or Improvisation?

This brings the author to the discussion of the role of both improvisation and memorisation in the oral performances of the Altai epics. Niles, discussing the epics of China and Central Asia, gives the opinion that the more able and confident performers are able to improvise each new performance of the epic [2, p. 256]. There is, therefore, no one original text or version of these epics, and each epic can have an infinite number of different variations, according to the creativity of the singers. Much of the art of epic singing and improvisation is learnt through apprentices spending time learning the skill from master singers [18, pp. 261–270].

The research carried out by Parry and Lord, in the early 1990's, suggested that Homer was a semi-literate master poet who was very skilled at joining together multiple oral legends into epic poems like the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* [19, 20]. They proposed that these classical texts must have originally

arisen as oral forms, because they have so many characteristics indicating they were originally told and re-told, rather than being composed by one individual and immediately written down. In their field research in the Balkans, Parry and Lord discovered similarities between Homer's performances of such epic poems and oral storytelling performances in Yugoslavia. They found patterns in the oral epics, such as the use of formulae and repeated themes, which enabled the performers to remember and recite the epic more easily, although there was also improvisation involved. Such master poets learn set sections of the epic poems yet are able to improvise in how they join them together. Lord asserts that an effective performance of an oral epic depends on the ability of the epic singer to join building blocks together to create the poem, rather than reciting it from memory [20, p. 4]. Ong, based his work on Parry and Lord's research and interprets characteristics of the epics, such as formulae, themes, vivid imagery, repetition and larger-than-life characters, as mnemonic devices to help the singer remember the long poems [21, p. 34].

Schubert, in her article on the Altayn Magtaal (an Ode to the Altai Mountains) says that the Mongolian epic singers did not just learn this ode by copying from one another, but are able to add their own artistic expression, creating different performances in terms of content, style and duration [16, p. 5]. Bunn, when discussing the famous Kyrgyz Manas (epic tale), notes that it would be unlikely that one would hear the same version of the Manas twice [13, p. 574]. She agrees, that as Parry and Lord originally proposed, that the epic teller is not repeating an exact text but is improvising and composing throughout the performance of the epic, producing a different version each time. Bunn describes the poem as being 'spun' round these themes and patterns, rather than being composed of memorised segments, meaning they are vital, dynamic and creative in each new context and situation [13, p. 575].

In a personal interview with Kurmanov from Gorno-Altaysk, when asked whether the *kaichy* knows the epos off-by-heart or whether he improvises, Kurmanov replied that both memorisation and improvisation are important. The *kaichy* knows the skeleton or framework of the epic tale, but he is able to shorten or lengthen the epic. Every performance of the epic is different, but the framework will always be the same. In a personal interview with *kaichy* Anatoly Turlunov, who lives in Kosh-Agach, he commented that as the *kaichy* begins to sing the epic tale, the rest of the epic comes to him gradually⁴. He will not remember it word-by-word, but he can improvise the details, and each time it will be slightly different. In a personal interview with Nikolay Sergetkishev, Sergetkishev affirmed that there is always improvisation in epic singing, especially when the *kaichy* knows several different epic tales. The plot is always the same, but the *kaichy* may expand it and add details to make it more beautiful. As the *kaichy* begins to sing, the words will come by themselves.

Conclusion

In recent years, there have been fewer *kai* singers performing in Altai, however currently there is a revival of the epic stories performed by young throat singers and they are growing in popularity. These epics are still alive in the Altai culture and are very significant in the history and culture of the Altai people. The performance of these epic stories helped to communicate and reinforce moral values within the Altai community.

The Altai oral epics were performed as communal events in a natural environment. The epic stories themselves include alliteration, addition, repetition, parallelism, hyperbole and predictability in both plot and structure. These features assist the *kai* singer in the memorisation and the transmission of the texts. The author concludes, based on the communal relaxed environment in which the epics are normally performed, together with the poetic features of the epics aiding the singer in memory, that the epic teller is not repeating an exact text but is improvising and composing throughout the performance of the epic, producing a different version each time. In this way, the *kaichy* is integrating both memorisation and improvisation. This conclusion has been reinforced by personal interviews by the author with four well-known epic singers in the Altai Republic.

⁴ Personal interview with Anatoly Turlunov in Kosh-Agach (September 22, 2021).

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