

Altai Oral Epic

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The History of Research on Altai Epics

One of the pioneering scholars in the field of multidisciplinary cultural and linguistic studies of the Altai region was the orientalist Wilhelm Radlov (1837-1918), founder of the first International Association for the Exploration of Central Asia (1899), director of the Asian Museum in St. Petersburg, and a prominent collector and publisher of folklore texts. Radlov was already writing down Altai heroic songs in his youth during the 1860s, and large samples of this material, including ten epic texts (some of them consisting of short fragments), were published in St. Petersburg.¹ In the Upper Altai region one singing style called *Kai* (Qai) is of special interest.

Some singers using this peculiar technique of laryngeal epic singing have preserved archaic epic traditions up to the present day. According to the ethnographer and composer A. V. Anohin (1869-1931), the upper Altai people sing heroic epics using a tonality that resembles the buzzing of a flying beetle.² This technique of performing the epics has its roots in the same tradition as partial tone or “throat” singing. Epic singers in the Altai region use a singing style in which the words are clearly differentiated, but the timbre is very close to that of the two-voiced, wordless singing style of that region.

In addition to Radlov and Anohin, the first collectors of Altaic epics include A. Kalačev, who as a student of St. Petersburg University made a research trip to the southern part of the Russian Altai, the Russian missionary V. I. Verbickij (1827-90), and the scholar and explorer G. N. Potanin (1836-1920). Some of the early investigators belonged to the

¹ Radlov 1866. See also Katašev 1997:12-13.

² See Šul'gin 1973:459.

indigenous Altaians, as for example N. Ja. Nikiforov (1874-1922), who collected epics from the singer Čoltyš Kuranakov. The Altai material collected by him has been lost, but Potanin published the material in Russian translation in 1915. Among the most important Altai scholars in the field of epic studies was the poet P. V. Kučijak (1897-1943). Kučijak himself was able to perform epics he had heard from his grandfather Šonkor Šunekov. His most important publications include the epic texts written down from the great epic singer N. U. Ulagašev (1861-1946). Other scholars who have contributed significantly to the study of Altai epics include the Turkologist N. A. Baskakov (1905-96), the specialist on Altai shamanism A. P. Potapov (1905-), and the renowned folklorist V. M. Žirmunskij.³ In 1963 the researcher and collector of Altai epics S. S. Surazakov (1925-1980) acoustically recorded one of the best known of the Altai heroic songs, *Maadai-Kara*, performed by Aleksej Grigorevič Kalkin in the Institute of Pedagogy (Gorno-Altajsk). This version contains 7,738 verses, and it was published in 1973 in bilingual format in Altaic and Russian by the Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in the series *Èpos narodov SSSR*, “The Epics of the Peoples of the Soviet Union.” Surazakov was also the founder of the series *Altaj Baatyrlar*, “Altai Heroes.” The 12 volumes published so far include more than 80 epic texts, among them 30 valuable texts from A. G. Kalkin and N. U. Ulagašev.

The Master of *Kai* (*qai*) Singing Aleksej Grigorevič Kalkin

Aleksej Grigorevič Kalkin (1925-98) was the eldest and most prominent among the last masters of the *Kai* in the Upper Altai region. He was born in the remote district of Ulagan Ajmak in the former Altai Autonomous Region of the Soviet Union. A. G. Kalkin’s grandfather, Teleš, and father, Grigorij, were also well-known singers. His eldest brother Jamay was a very promising singer but he died at the age of fourteen.⁴ Step by step, young Aleksej learned to perform the epic songs, first as prose, then as sung recitative; finally, toward the end of his thirties, he learned the proper technique of *Kai*. Already in his youth he had almost totally lost his sight due to an eye illness. In addition to learning from his father, the young singer had abundant opportunities to listen to other performers of the epics,

³ See in detail Katašev 1997:13-17.

⁴ See Šinžin 1988:194-95.

including N. U. Ulagašev, whom he had met in the hospital of Gorno-Altajsk.

After Kalkin won the contest for the title of the best singer during the festivities of the 25th anniversary of the Altai Soviet Autonomous Region (1947), he gradually became celebrated as a national artist.⁵ The following year he made a successful tour to Moscow, where he gave concerts in theaters and clubs, and took part in a gathering of folk-artists of the USSR. In the All-Union House of Folk Art named after N. K. Krupskaja, fragments of his performances of traditional Altai epic songs were recorded by a group of leading Soviet Turkologists. Later on, Kalkin also composed songs celebrating the Soviet leaders and the new life (according to the requirements of the time).⁶



⁵ See Surazakov 1973a:439; Šinžin 1988:194-95.

⁶ See Surazakov 1973a:439-42; Šinžin 1987.

These new songs had the same fate everywhere in the Soviet Union: they were regarded as artificial and fell into oblivion, since they were neither sustained by the oral tradition nor had any place in the literary culture. But the folk epics performed by Kalkin and other epic singers of Upper Altai have maintained their importance among the most attractive and peculiar forms of folk tradition in the world. Our research group had an opportunity to encounter A. G. Kalkin in his present home village of Jabagan in the autumn of 1996 and 1997. Our team consisted of Academician V. M. Gacak (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow) and local Altai members Z. S. Kazagačeva, M. Tolbina, and T. Sadalova. The fieldwork in 1996 and 1997 and subsequent transliteration and translation work would not have been possible without good working relationships with the staff at the Upper Altai Research Institute for the Humanities.

Although Kalkin was frail and sickly, his wit was intact and his nearly blind eyes had yet to lose their animation. He explained in a whispered voice:

Kalkin: Earlier I was a man known as a singer of tales. But some time ago I stopped singing; since my son Elbek began to sing *Kai*, I no longer sang. It's enough, if this boy—let him perform *Kai*, why should I do it anymore? Then, I stopped playing *topšuur*⁷ regularly, and my voice got ruined, totally blocked; my breast was ill, every kind of thing happened. My voice became altogether somewhat strange. If one wants to sing *Kai*, one has to tune the instrument the day before you are going to sing, to repair it, to start getting used to singing *Kai* again. And you have to make the *topšuur* accustomed to *Kai*, as well. Without it this whole thing doesn't work. And a true singer has to behave as I described.

Mira Tolbina: We invited Elbek. . . .

Kalkin: Elbek, if he would sing *Kai*, that would be a real one. . . .⁸

After a while, Elbek Kalkin entered the house. Elbek Kalkin, in the official documents Albert Alekseevič Kalkin, was born in Jabakan, December 19, 1953. He attended ten years of school and since then he has been working in different professions, “odd jobs” as he calls them, for example as a shepherd. At the time we interviewed him, he was a security guard at a commercial bank in In Ongudai, the center of his home district. Elbek started

⁷ A traditional plucked instrument.

⁸ From an interview recorded by Mira Tolbina, September 1996, Jabagan, Altai Republic.

to train with the plucked instrument *topšuur* in his boyhood while still in school, and his first song was a panegyric for the Altai mountains, *Altain Maqtal*. After that he started to learn epic songs. Elbek's grandfather, Grigorij, who was a singer himself, would often put the boy to sleep with lullabies. He also performed different styles of overtone singing *hömei* as well as epics in *Kai*, and the grandson began to imitate his singing. Elbek became serious about playing the *topšuur* only after finishing school.

Z. S. Kazagačeva: When did your father notice your fondness for *Kai*?

Elbek Kalkin: I was feeling rather shy in the beginning, and I did not want to show him what I had learned to perform.

Z. S. Kazagačeva: Where was your first public performance?

Elbek Kalkin: It was in Ust' Kaan, in the center of this district. I have also performed *Kai* in Gorno-Altajsk, Barnaul, Novosibirsk, Moscow, Leningrad (St. Petersburg), as well as in Kyzyl and Abakan. At an All-Soviet competition of singers, organized in Moscow, I won a medal. My son has been interested some four years in singing—he is now twelve years old, and he has been playing *topšuur*, but he has not yet learned the singing voice required for performing *Kai*.

Lauri Harvilahti: What is your religion?

Elbek: Among us—the real Altaians—the religion is a heathen one.

Lauri Harvilahti: Where does the epic come from? Does it originate from—what do you think?

V. M. Gacak: Who gave people the epic?

Lauri Harvilahti: Does it come from a god, or the ancestors? What would you say?

Elbek: I think it comes from, from the ancestors. Well, as heathens we worship the mountains . . . poetically, the *Altai Eezi*. That is the spirit of the mountain. *Altai Eezi* may also, how to put it—I mean, transmit the epics.⁹

V. M. Gacak: All right, then. So when did you start to listen to *Kai*, when did you start to learn the songs by heart, and when did you get the desire to learn how to sing? How did it happen?

Elbek: From my childhood I started to learn. I happened to listen to lullabies and *Kai*. And so I also wanted to learn, of course. And my grandfather and great-grandfather sometimes sang. The songs my grandfather sang, I tried to remember, to remember his music—¹⁰

⁹ See Potapov (1991:200), who states that in epics the god of Altai is called *Altai Ääzi*, “the lord of Altai.”

¹⁰ From an interview recorded by Z. S. Kazagačeva and Lauri Harvilahti, September 1996, Jabagan, Altai Republic.

The Epic of *Maadai-Kara* and the World Tree

The following is a short fragment from the *Maadai-Kara* poem performed by A. Kalkin:¹¹

Jeten airy kök talaidyn beltirinde
 Jeti jaan köö taiganyñ koltugunda
 Jüs budaktu möñkü terek. . .

By the shores of a blue river with seventy still waters
 By the loins of seven matched black mountains,
 (Grew a) hundred-branched eternal poplar. . .

The eternal poplar described in the poem is the world tree. The road to the lower and higher levels of the world runs, according to the elder Kalkin, up and down an eternal tree. It may be a single iron tree trunk or there may be one hundred trunks. The eternal poplar thus unites the upper and lower world by passing through the middle world, where humans dwell. It is believed that the world tree both brings forth and maintains life, as well as controls human destiny.

In Altai epics the eternal poplar marks the center of the world. This mythical tree is also characteristically a dwelling place for a number of mythical animals. These animals have various functions: they determine destinies, guard the tree, and caution those who have taken the wrong road. When the tree leans towards the moon, it begins to shed golden leaves; when it leans towards the sun, it begins to shed silver leaves. The treetop is the home of two golden cuckoos, who call out the number of days that remain for the living; they also know where the souls of the dying will go. In the middle of the tree perch two identical diamond-clawed eagles, the protectors of the firmament. Their breath is like the wind, and they shriek warnings to lost heroes on dangerous roads. At the base of the tree are two black dogs with flecked and flashing eyes who gaze in the direction of the underworld. Gnashing their teeth, the dogs bark to Erlik Kaan, the lord of that realm.

In addition to the iron poplar, or any other tree symbolizing the center of the world, the iron mountain also functions as a symbolic center of the world in Altai mythology. The task of the shaman was to take the souls of the dead to the base of the world tree or mountain, that is, to the tortuous path leading to the Erlik's realm.

¹¹ Surazakov 1973b:verses 45-47.

Another symbolic center of the world is the hitching post described in the Altai and Yakutian shamanistic epic. This pole runs through the lower, middle, and upper levels of the earth. The upper part belongs to the god of the heavens, generally known in the poems as Üč-Kurbustan,¹² while the middle belongs to the poem's hero, Maadai-Kara, and the lower part to Aibystan, the god of the underworld.¹³

Togzon kyrly taš örgöödiñ ežigi alty
 Togus kyrly möngün čaky bar boluptyr.
 Altyy učy altyy oroon —
 Aibystannyñ bu čadany,
 Üstin učy üstin oroon —
 Üč-Kurbustan bu čakzy.
 Tal ortozy
 Kara kaltar jakšy attu
 Maadai-Kara baatyrdyñ
 Bu čadany bu boluptyr.

At the mouth of the ninety-sided stone yurt
 Stands a ninety-sided silver hitching post.
 Its lower part is in the underworld,
 It is Aibystan's hitching post.
 The upper part extends to the upper world,
 It is Üč-Kurbustan's hitching post.
 The middle part belongs to
 The one who rides the dark gray steed,
 It is the hitching post of the hero Maadai-Kara.

¹² In Altaic epic poetry, *Üč-Kurbustan* is the god of the heavens and corresponds to *Ülgen*. Kurbustan refers to the Persian god of the sky Ahura Mazda. As it was adopted by Buddhism, this divinity was identified with *Šakra* (Indra) and in the Mongolian Lamaist cosmology it became the leading divinity of the group of 33 divinities of the sky (*teŋgri*). It was also adopted with varying significance in shamanistic concepts, in particular as the highest god of the sky, but among the peoples of the Altai mountains it also applied to spirit beings (*körmös*) from shamanism in general. The first part of the name appearing in the poem, *üč*, which means three, may allude to Buddhism (the number three in place of the original 33). For more details, see Harva 1933:97-98; Nekljudov and Žukovskaja 1991:594.

¹³ Surazakov 1973b:verses 156-65. Aibystan ("sable-fur-blanket") is a euphemism for Erlik, the lord of the underworld (see Puhov 1975:24; Kazagačeva 1997:638).

In the narrative poetry of the Yakutians (a Siberian ethnic group), the top of the world tree serves as a hitching post for the highest god. During Buryat shamanistic funeral rites, participants would place three posts on the way to the burial site, posts where the shaman's spirit might tie his horse.¹⁴

Uno Harva shows the close link between the shaman's tree and its guardian. According to the Yakutian myths, the supreme god *ajyy tojon* brought the blossomless tree into the world and taught the first shamans their incantations and powerful techniques. Each shaman had his own tree that would begin growing as soon as the sorcerer found his calling. When the shaman died, the tree would also begin to decay. The belief that chopping down a shaman's tree also spelled the death of the shaman is widespread among the peoples of Siberia.¹⁵ According to local Altai researchers, a deceased shaman would customarily be entombed in the hollow of a deciduous tree. The shaman's final resting place and the surrounding woodlands were highly venerated. Even today, the multi-branched tamaracks at an old sacrificial site are surrounded by a thick log fence. According to one explanation, this practice also prevents animals from digging at the roots of the sacred trees.

The beginning of *Maadai-Kara* is a typical description of the mythical time and golden age. The epic begins with familiar elements from the mythical landscape, including the holy poplar as a symbol of eternal life. *Maadai-Kara* is an old hero who has already lost his power. He sleeps for sixty days. When he finally wakes up, he notices that a hostile *kaan* (lord or ruler) is approaching in order to seize him and capture his livestock, people, and property. When his wife gives birth to a son, *Kögüdei Mergen*, *Maadai-Kara* hides the boy in the black mountain and leaves him under the protection of the birch trees of Altai. The hostile *Kara-Kula Kaan* arrives and enslaves the white-faced people of *Maadai-Kara*.

The son remains in the mountain, however, and becomes the real hero of the epic. The old mistress of Altai finds him, takes good care of him, and soon the boy starts his heroic exploits. First he shoots two gigantic wolves and ravens with his bow and arrow. Then he rides his heroic steed toward the domain of *Kara-Kula Kaan* and kills all of the monsters on the way. His horse jumps over a yellow poisonous sea and through two continuously opening and closing mountains. After multiple adventures, *Kögüdei Mergen* finds out that *Kara-Kula Kaan's* soul is hidden in the form of a quail's chick

¹⁴ Harva 1933:53, 201; see Puhov 1975:24.

¹⁵ Harva 1933:319-20.

in a gold coffer in the abdomen of one of the heavenly reindeer. Finally Kögüdei Mergen is able to shoot the middle reindeer, causing the golden coffer to fall out. In the struggle between the hostile *kaan* and the hero the quail chick is injured, and Kara-Kula dies. With the help of seven identical heroes Kögüdei Mergen is able, after a long wooing competition, to win the daughter of Ay Kaan, *Altyn Küskü*, as his bride. Finally he is able to kill Erlik by burning him into coal. Then he sets free all the just prisoners from Erlik's domain, but the unjust remain there. As a result, a golden era returns to Altai.

At the end of the epic Kögüdei Mergen and Altyn Küskü, as well as the seven identical heroes, turn into stars. In the night sky the seven *kaans* (the Great Bear) are the seven heroes going to the wedding, the North Star is Altyn Küskü, and above the constellation of the Three Reindeer (Orion) is a red star. That is the arrow of Kögüdei Mergen. In the Altai language the Great Bear is *Jeti-kaan*, "Seven kaans," and Orion *Üč myjgak*, "Three reindeers," and the North Star is called *Altyn-Kazyk*, "The Golden Pole." This summary is in brief the main content of this fantastic mythical epic, a total of 7,738 verses in Aleksej Kalkin's version.

According to Ugo Marazzi the epic of Maadai-Kara is an example of the cosmogonic theme of "heavenly hunt," with a heroic plot borrowed from a shamanistic initiation experience. It serves as a tale of origin for the constellations Orion and the Great Bear, and the hero Kögüdei Mergen is a great proto-shaman.¹⁶

There are many versions of this epic in collections from different eras. The earliest one was written down by Wilhelm Radlov. He does not indicate from whom or where he collected his version of the song related to the heroic epics of Maadai-Kara, or *Kaan Püdäi*, as it is called in his publication. As Surazakov mentions, the language in which the text was performed belongs to the Southern dialects of the Altai region, and, according to Surazakov, the general story line or plot is "transmitted in fairly full order."¹⁷ In *Kaan Püdäi* as recorded by W. Radlov there are three main chapters: 1) The capture of the territory of the father (Karaty Kaan) of the main hero Kaan-Püdäi by the antagonist Kara-Kula, with the main hero releasing his parents, 2) the exploits connected with the wooing and wedding of the hero, and 3) the decisive battle of many years' duration against the hostile *kaan* and the victory.¹⁸

¹⁶ Marazzi 1986:7-8.

¹⁷ Surazakov 1985:160.

¹⁸ Radlov 1866:59-85.

As for the epic *Maadai-Kara*, Surazakov assumes an original form of the text, the one and only ancient source for the epics, and explains that the parts lacking from one or another version are deficiencies that derive from the varying skills of the singers, changes in the tradition, or the techniques of the collectors.¹⁹ If we take a closer look at other singers' versions that still resemble the main story line of *Maadai-Kara* as performed by A. G. Kalkin, it is easy to see that there are similarities on both the macro and micro levels. But it seems futile to suppose that one archetypal text served as the starting point for all of the versions recorded later. The epics *Kan-Tutai* by N. U. Ulagašev, *Ösküs-Uul* by P. I. Čičkanov, *Temir-Bii* by Mendi Kurtov, and *Kan-Saru* by D. Jamančikov are so different that they are best understood as belonging to the same Altaic epic tradition; they have points of contact on different levels, but they do not derive from any original text.²⁰ These points of contact are to be found in the semantic similarities of the story line, syntactic structures, systems of formulae, and parallelism. The easiest way to show such correspondences is to compare two singers—father and son—across a selection of different songs and multiple recordings of the same story-line. Here I offer as evidence only a sample of formulaic patterns.

The Formula

Both singers' versions have a large number of formulas that occur in exactly the same form and context. (Albert Lord named these "straight formulas.")²¹ I will mention the following two verses: "Altai tübin ödüp öskön" ("After arriving at the base of the Altai [they] multiplied"); and "Kün altynda tomyra tüšken" ("Arched below the sun"). The singers may use these direct formulas in different plot structures and themes, although the meaning is the same. It is clear that the core formulas used by the elder Kalkin and his father have been preserved in the versions of the younger singer (Elbek) as well.

It is worth noting, however, that we are able to trace a considerable variation in the three versions of the prologue to *Maadai-Kara* performed by Elbek. This variation becomes especially clear when comparing the multiple

¹⁹ Surazakov 1985:160-61, 207.

²⁰ Cf. Surazakov 1985:207-17.

²¹ Lord 1960:30, 35, 46.

versions by Elbek and the elder Kalkin, recorded at different times. The range of the variation reaches from phonological, lexical, and morpho-syntactical levels to larger contentual units or themes.

One example of the metonymic network formed by the formulas is the pattern “Eki tüñgei X” or “Two identical X.” Both the elder Kalkin and his son make frequent use of this formula. In the mythological introduction to the poem the formula is used repeatedly. Two cuckoos are sitting at the top of the mythical poplar tree: “Eki tüñei altyn küük” or “two identical golden cuckoos.” Halfway up the trunk of the poplar there are two guardian eagles. Elbek uses an identical segment as the beginning of the formula, with the flexibility localized in the latter part: “Eki tüñei kara mürküt” or “two identical black eagles.” The two guardian dogs at the base of the tree again form a symmetrical formula: “Eki tüñei kara taigyl” or “two identical black dogs.” In these cases, the formula is quite naturally adaptable for expressing similar content; the shamanistic auxiliary animals always occur here in pairs. But the same elements can be used in a wide range of contexts. In one of the variants sung by Elbek, the greatness of the heroic steed is described with a hyperbolic image of two identical scissor-like ears that are driving the clouds in the sky here and there, while its two identical jawbones, “tiži Eki tüñei,” are rasping the grass.

The same formula is used repeatedly in a sequence of passages that describe the guard animals in the eternal poplar. Interestingly, the same formula is used to produce different meanings as well. Thus the form and meaning create a metonymic network in which some of the core elements are used repeatedly on the surface level, although the context is different. The flexibility of the system becomes evident when we compare versions by the younger and elder Kalkin. Elbek uses the same formulaic pattern in the sequence describing the guard animals, whereas his father creates a formulaic structure of a different type, while still having recourse to the same formulaic model when needed. For example, when Kögüdei, the son of Maadai-Kara, the main heroic figure of the epic, is born and taken away as a baby from his mother, “two identical streams of milk” (“Eki le tüñei aktar südi”) flow from her breasts.

Elbek Kalkin

Mönkü temir terek ol bažynda
Eki tü ñi altyn küük
Tüni-týži em oturat
em otyrpy edip jadar

At the top of that eternal / iron poplar tree
Two identical golden cuckoos
Day and night sit there/
were sitting there / are made to sit there

Temir terek tal ortodo
Eki tünei kara mürküt
 Otyratan jaңdu boltyr,
 Ai kanady ak buluttyi
 Aidy-kündi bu čalytty.

Eki tünei kara taigyl
 Ežiginde jadar boldy.
 Azu tiži arsyldagan, ai,
 Ala közi jaltyragan
 Erlik-Biidiñ kara jolyn
 Keze körüp ürip jadar.

Altyn tügi mysyldagan,
 Ai tañmasy jaltyragan.
Eki tünei kaičy kulak
 Teñeriniñ agyn-kögin
 Elip-selip turatan boltyr.

Ai tañmasy jaltyragan
 Altyn tügi myzyldagan
 Kö-ö-örgöžin, emdi onyñ
Tiži Eki tünei
 Jer-Altaidyñ amyrjabyn
 Jula sogyp turatan boltyr.

Aleksej Kalkin

Jüs pudaktu temir terek ol pašyndai

Eki tünei at pašyndai
Altyn küük jyn kyldagan.

Jeti üjelü temir terek tal ortodo

Eki le kara pu mürküdim
 Ai kanady ak puluttyi,
 Oñ kanady kök puluttyi
 Teñeri tübin tosoogysy
 Asar-kasar eki kara ol mürküdi
 Emdi turbai pu la kaitty.

In the middle of the iron poplar tree
Two identical black eagles
 Were made to sit,
 (Their) moon-shaped white wings
 Reflecting the Moon and sun

Two identical black dogs
 Were made to lie at the door
 Grinding their fangs,
 Blinking their speckled eyes.
 At the black road of Erlik-Bii²²
 They are watching with their eyes, barking.

Its golden hair was gleaming,
 Its moon-shaped brand was glittering.
Its two identical scissor-ears
 The white and blue (clouds) of the sky
 Were driving here and there.

Its moon-shaped brand was glittering,
 Its golden hair was gleaming,
 And, with its
Two identical jawbones,
 The grass of Altai
 The standing steed was grazing.

At the top of the hundred branched iron
 poplar

Two identical horse-headed
Golden cuckoos were nodding.

In the middle of the seven trunked iron
 poplar

Two of my black eagles
 The moon-wing, the white wing,
 The left wing, the blue wing,
 Guarding the ground of heaven,
 Asar-Kasar, the two black eagles
 Were put to sit.

²² i.e., Erlik Kaan.

Eki emčektiŋ pu la südi
Eki le tüŋei aktar südi
 Pu la polyp jaikalala,
 Ulaasynaŋ jajylyp, agyp čyky kaitty.

From her two breasts the milk,
Two identical streams of milk,
 Were leaking from her
 To the floor of the yurt, so it was told.

While we were interviewing him, Elbek told us that a singer may improvise on the basis of traditional forms and repeat a song by altering it according to the situation, but that the widespread or well-known epic poems must be repeated in a traditional, standard form. We have evidence of this in the three versions performed by Elbek. Sometimes he included a passage or theme; sometimes he left it out. He often changed the wording, but usually the formulas remained relatively fixed. It was interesting to note that he and his father used partly the same key formulas, but their versions also show considerable idiolectal variation. It will be intriguing to compare the versions that we collected in September 1996 with the version compiled by Surazakov thirty years earlier from Kalkin. The elder singer used the formula “eki tüŋei X” in the version published in 1973, and then very consistently.²³ We may interpret this variation within limits as proof of the flexibility of the formulaic system. The same content may be expressed by using different solutions on the surface level, and the singer may replace one formulaic structure with another. It is also possible—since the father had not been performing the epics regularly—that he had lost touch with the intertextual links on the level of repeated formulaic structures. However that may be, this analysis reflects the interplay between the rhetorical stability of traditional forms and the rhetorical transformation of metonymic cues of performance.²⁴ The most characteristic feature is that the beginning of each theme or episode is relatively stable, but the constant formulas become key-elements or nodes in the text. The personal variation and the choices that have become customary in the individual versions form an interplay between constant and variable elements. The further the song proceeds, and the more versions we analyze, the more variation we find.

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²³ Surazakov 1973b:68-69, verses 69, 85, 103, 138, 141; 88, verse 924.

²⁴ See further Foley 1995.

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