

## Towards Understanding Folk Epics: An Introduction

**Pragya Moirangthem**

### ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate the distinctive qualities of some folk epics of the world namely, the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Kalevala, the Kalevipoeg, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata vis-à-vis the Khamba-Thoibi of Manipur. These epics have represented different national cultural history, social life, myth, reality and folklore which collectively form the identity of the nations. In the discussion, the point how they existed or have continued to exist in tradition is also highlighted. As far as possible, I have tried to make the paper as engaging as anticipated. All world folk epics have been looked upon as the storehouse of religion, tradition and a number of practices, reflecting social, political, historical and cultural activities, manners, customs, traditions, festivals, rites, arts, artefacts, performing arts, courtly manners, games and sports which have been passed on to the future generations from the time of the Heroic Age. Each one of them has considerable national significance more than any other form of art can give. While emphasising these points the paper also addresses how folk epics grew alike out of different world cultures but each could adhere to distinctive social, cultural, historical conditions of nations that have been transmitted in native style of narrative by bards, singers, narrators and performers. It also devotes to the question of definition of folk/oral epic and adequately tries to seriously answer the complicated problems arising out of this academic and intellectual issue. Finally, it argues to include the Khamba-Thoibi of Manipur in the list of the great world folk epics.

**Key words** Folk epic, Khamba-Thoibi, epic traditions,  
culture, oral literature

As far as any study of oral epics is concerned no one can do it without making a reference to the great Greek epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It is because the standards they set are universally accepted, their form, structure, design have been looked upon as models not only for the world epics whether primary or secondary but also for many literary works. The reason behind this is that these epics have maintained one single aim that is the primacy of the central theme, in the *Iliad* the wrath and war cry of Achilles and in the *Odyssey* the journey back home of Odysseus. They can hold the themes steadfast and are able, through numerous events, adventures and heroic exploits of the heroes, to unfold the plot development of such massive stories on the epic scale firmly adhering to building the epic atmosphere charged with moments of emotional intensity, many intricate narrative devices, difficult problems and solutions associated with the narrative and plot, surprises, turning points, and artistic maneuvering of the epics. These are not simple things to deal with and be presented masterfully. It is the task of a genius like Homer who not only was a great singer of the epics but also was a craftsman to whom the authorship of the two epics has been ascribed.

In this paper some of the world's folk epics namely the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Kalevela*, the *Kalevipoeg*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are just taken up in brief to demonstrate their individual distinctions as being folk epics. These epics have become immortal treasures of the cultures to which they belong and each is an embodiment of the national culture, identity, and each represents the history, social life, myth, reality and folklore all to help build the entirety of the lives and activities of the people and society. It also will highlight one important aspect of epics, that is, how they existed or have existed in tradition. While focussing on them and them only I do not mean to say that other epics that are not discussed here are ignored nor are they to be treated as subjects not worth studying but for want of time and space, besides inclusion of them all is not the primary engagement of this paper. Their importance is fully recognized and cannot be, in other words, undermined. About the Mesopotamian/Sumerian epic the *Gilgamesh* believed to have come into being c.2100 BCE one can see: "The epic is regarded as a foundational work in religion and tradition of heroic sagas, with Gilgamesh forming the prototype for later heroes like Heracles (Hercules), and the epic itself serving as an influence on

Homeric epics” (Wikipedia. 12.3.2024). Often oral epics exhibit the Heroic Age, the expansion of empires, or they show myths of creation, the origin of life, the creation of living beings, the foundation of human civilization reflecting social, political, historical and cultural activities, manners, customs, traditions, festivals, rites, arts and artefacts, performing arts, courtly manners, games and sports. They have considerable national significance because they contain the values and morals aspired to by future generations. The values and standards they set have tremendous national significance towards shaping and influencing the minds of millions. A plethora of materials, fields not yet properly studied call for modern research and investigation to unravel the past human civilization even unperceived by modern man. The reawakening and renewal of the past through repeated retelling of such great stories that transcend time and space without ever questioning their relevance to the present century is their very *raison d’etre*. Our ancient bards and poets like Homer, Valmiki have become immortal singers, their songs by virtue of their narrative designs and devices and verse still reverberate to the modern ears and their works most acclaimed without losing the significance over the years. Apart from the great action, the suffering, adventures, heroic fights, discovery, recognition (peripety) as a genre, epics “are supreme” (Aristotle 87) because of their elegance of thought and diction

It is a common consensus that all cultures are different but in differences there are similarities and similitude of things. As such, the growth of epics as a form of expressive verbal art in world cultures has a curious strain running through the human mind irrespective of race, culture, geographical places. It is because of this that folk epics that grew from different traditional societies in different times could evoke the same kind of response to social, historical and cultural happenings in long narrative forms to be sung, recited, or told and transmitted by narrators and singers. Many of these are also motifs and archetypes that are found in multiple cultures the world over. Interestingly, there are tendencies in human response to the living world that would mould themselves into some universal patterns. Thus overlaps and intertexts within the same culture and outside a specific cultural boundary become a permanent feature of human culture and civilization. To anthropologists, historical researchers, sociologists, linguists, folklorists and literary scholars this universal phenomenon has become a field of critical enquiry and

investigation. The widespread commonalities of human cultural elements testify to multiple folk narrative genres prevalent in different cultures of the world. We share many times fundamentally similar elements in myths, legends, fairy tales that sprang from different cultures and lands separated by mountains, rivers and oceans posing difficult questions about the origins of such folk narratives – myths, legends, tales, beliefs, superstitions, proverbs, sayings, songs. Paradoxically that confirms the global oneness of all human races. That how such things happened to different cultures and races as far distant one from the other becomes a clueless mystery and a unique phenomenon. This makes the study of culture an ever growing interest to scholars and researchers. Within great nations and cultures epic poems on great events arose in the ancient and medieval times representing the distinctive cultural identities. What historical, mythological and other social factors were responsible for the birth of such great heroic epics still becomes a matter of inexhaustible academic inquiry. At many levels human nature has worked and responded to the social, cultural, historical and mythological events almost similarly. World great folk epics are an example of this pattern of thought inspired by real events, cultural myths, legends, tales. Most world epics are identical and can be defined as a

narrative, either orally performed or textual, that describes the exploits of one or more heroic characters, often from a national perspective, in a distinct, identifiable poetic style. Heroic characters are usually of great physical and/or mental prowess, of royal or at least noble descent, and capable of extraordinary deeds beyond the ability of ordinary humans. Epic narratives generally portray conflicts on a grand scale and may also be defined by patterns such as quest, return home, or escape from peril. The themes of epics range from topics associated with mythology and folktale to historical features and events.

Daskalopoulos 185

In this paper an attempt is made to recount some of the folk epics of the world by way of introducing them in relation to their national cultural consciousness and identity that would differ from those of other cultures and nations. These heroic epics are considered as the highest national treasure when history, culture, myth, legend and future development of national literatures are accounted for. The actions of the epic heroes have become a mirror of their societies.

It is true that oral/folk epics thrived in preliterate societies not only as a means of recreation but also inculcating social norms in the young. In preliterate societies their roles were very great as a source of information, communication, enlightenment and education. They are/were both aesthetic and didactic. They have existed in words to be heard and seen, in the sense that they were narrated orally, heard orally, transmitted orally but over time many were committed to writing. The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* whose poets might not have been singers, whereas Homer was well known as a great singer of the epics, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*. The Sanskrit epics have still continued to exist in both forms oral and written in Indian society. Valmiki was a poet who wrote the *Ramayana* but Vyasa is not even considered as a poet but some kind of a school of poets or a Chair, a status whosoever occupied the position was entrusted with the work of writing the epic *Mahabharata* whose completion was believed to have taken place in the course of some hundreds of years. It is believed that some poet or poets started on the work and later poets completed it. Nevertheless, their written status does not make them literary epics like the *Aeneid* of Virgil or *Paradise Lost* of John Milton any more than the *Panchtantra* or/and Grimm's *Fairy Tales* make them short stories. *Paradise Lost* has one definite author, whereas the *Ramayana* has many more versions than that of Valmiki, but all these versions are rooted in oral traditions available in different cultural settings. Prof Felix J. Oinas in his article "Folk Epic" writes, "Folk (or oral) epic songs are narrative poems in formulaic and ornamental style dealing with the adventures of extraordinary people. They are traditional, that is, handed down by word of mouth, as distinguished from literary epics, attributed to definite authors" (Dorson 99). For folk epics traditionally handed down by word of mouth become a genre that distinguish them from other genres easily. Again Albert B. Lord argues, "...oral epic song is narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write; it consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formula and formulaic expressions and the building of songs by the use of themes" (Lord: 1981: 4). These two definitions look alike; they emphasize the traditionally handed down story of an adventurous hero by word of mouth over many generations by singers of tales, and that they are so different with literary epics which are ascribed to definite authors who were/are very

conscious of showing sophistication of the plot and organization of the material in a perfect artistic fashion, a show of their skill and artistry. What we can see is that (1) written folk epic traditions from the ancient times continued in the West even after the Medieval period. The Old English *Beowulf* (8<sup>th</sup> c), the French *Chanson de Roland* (1040–1115), the German *Nibelungenlied*, written anonymously (c1200), and the Spanish *Cid* (12<sup>th</sup> c.) are examples of this category. In the past poets who knew how to write had written national epics drawing upon the myths and legends of their people and culture. Many of the acclaimed world folk epics, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* were put into writing in the classical period, and likewise a number of folk epic songs were later collected, reorganized and reproduced in written form such as Elias Lönnrot's Finnish epic the *Kalevala*. Another form of epic that derived creatively from the native mythology, legends and tales is the Estonian epic, the *Kalevipoeg* by Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882) based on the Estonian runo song published in 1857. By no means, their written versions make them literary epics, but rather they are termed folk or oral epics with their characteristic oral structure, plot, story line, narrative style, metrical lines, deployment of folk speech, sayings, proverbs, epithets, etc. all traditionally handed down, not invented by the poets themselves. The poets heavily drew upon the past myth, legend, traditions, tales, history, songs and so on. Some critics are of the view that since many of the mythological elements, legends and stories are the work of the individual poet the *Kalevipoeg* would not be researched in the canon of the Greek epics and even the *Kalevala*. They bring it close to the *Aeneid* of Vergil. Written or oral in whatever form they have existed they continue to remain purely folk epics, but they even set the norms and standards of national literary traditions. There is no point arguing over the line of demarcation between folk epics and literary epics, for the *Ramayana*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are a class by themselves and are contrasted with Vergil's the *Aeneid* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. However, Prof Oinas in his same article, "Folk Epic" in Dorson's edited book, *Folklore and Folklife* argues that *Beowulf*, *Nibelungenlied*, and *Chanson de Roland* "should be excluded from the term folk epic, since their development involves both oral and literary versions" (Dorson 99). Oinas's line of thinking is supported by Yüri Talvet in his "Kalevipoeg, A Great European Epic". *Beowulf* is the story brought by the Anglo-Saxon

invaders from Scandinavia containing the pagan mythology, folklore and historical characters and happenings from Denmark, and southern Sweden. In it one notices the juxtaposition of Pagan and Christian elements – the Pagan mythology, folklore, the weird world of the north, tribal values, traditions, codes, manners, conduct, morality, honours on the one hand and the biblical references and allusions known to the Christian world on the other: Grendel's ancestral lineage back to Cain, stories from the Genesis and the Exodus, King Hrothgar's warning to Beowulf of the three deadly sins, pride, sloth and covetousness, Beowulf's funeral scene with a woman mourning the death of Beowulf re-echoes the mourning of Mary on the death of Jesus. It is believed that the revision of the original *Beowulf* was done by some Christian poet who interpolated biblical parts very aptly. In both, the poets maintain their anonymity. Another view is that the Christian elements may be fortuitous, the *Beowulf* poet might not have intended to add Christian elements anyway. But the well crafted epic just does not subscribe to the latter view. Thereby our conclusion is that the Christian elements were deliberately added to the Anglo-Saxon poem by a later Christian poet. However, there is little information about the story of Beowulf having been narrated in song form except for the fact that the story is purely based on the pagan mythology and historical antecedents of the Scandinavian people who brought the story when they invaded England for about one century from the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The so-called Christian elements fail to command an overwhelming presence in a rather bleak and weird world of the Scandinavian mythology. *Chanson de Roland* has more than half a dozen variants, being it purely oral in character. Any amount of debate will not be able to weaken the sacrosanct folk epic character of these epics though.

The earliest surviving epic narratives are *Gilgamesh* from the Middle East, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from Greece, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* from India. With typical scenes and formulaic phrases that characterize oral poetry, these epics were apparently circulated for centuries in primal oral versions before they were later committed to writing in which form they have survived to the present (Daskalopoulos 185).

Lauri Honko, Jawaharlal Handoo and John Miles Foley, in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, made further segmentation of the epic as follows, (1) literary, (2) semiliterary or tradition-oriented and (3) purely

oral epic (Honko *et al.* 10). As for Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Vergil's *Aeneid* having been called literary epics there is no controversy at all. In them the poets have shown their individual talents in the composition of events, organization of the plot structure, in the choice of material, and stylization. But certainly, they were heavily influenced by Homeric epics which model they imitated, besides being the fact that they heavily drew upon ancient myths, legends and history. They displayed in their epics their scholarship, made use of borrowings from other texts, historical and geographical accounts which of course "do not direct the choice of plot or form" (*ibid.*). While composing their epics they got the influence of the long established literary traditions, and put their own individual ideas, reflecting their erudition and personality. The widely held view is that in *Paradise Lost* Milton makes Satan a vassal of his protest against monarchy and the power of king as the supreme authority on earth as shown by the Divine Right theory. In them the authors have become the sole makers of the form, structure, style, plot, materials even though they allude to "preliterary sources and traditions" (*ibid.*) many times over. On the other hand, the tradition-oriented or semiliterary epics are fraught with stories woven around heroic characters who fought wars, folk (war) ballads, heroic/romantic cycles, songs originally sung and narrated by folk singers partly or fully. Such stories are rooted in the national history, local legends and myths, and they were narrated and recited by singers and performers in song form for years in scattered forms before they were collected, edited and composed by conscious writers/poets known or unknown. The ballads, fragments of the stories were assiduously collected, reshaped, remoulded symmetrically by artists, poets until the final form emerged. While reproducing the epic the compilers and composers tried as far as possible to be faithful to the original that might comprise elements the poets themselves were not able to comprehend fully especially the uncommon linguistic and paralinguistic systems of communication, formula and formulaic expressions, multiforms and other narrative techniques that involved complex archaic folk sayings, sounds, connectives and other modes of utterance. Their duty was to document and transfer what was found in the oral tradition as truly as possible meaning thereby that the "poet's freedom in dealing with his matter is limited, however, by the fact that his prospective audience knows the story and would resent radical changes....Invention is restricted to shift



of stress, elaboration, variation of details” (Shipley 101). In this case we are not talking about the singers of tales or songs of the epic but the collector, composer and editor, who has put into writing what he has so collected. As a composer his task is/was to be very faithful to the material so collected unlike a literary poet. There difference lies in the fact that one adheres to tradition while another exhibits his sophistication, artistic talent and scholarship.

Today we have seen written folk epics as widely circulated for reading public. The exercise is more enterprising in view of the deadening impact of modernization, urbanization and technological development on rural structure of life and society in the present time. With that the singers’ generations are slowly phasing out in the non-Western societies too. For European epic traditions it may be noted: “Its epic traditions in many regions lost their orality centuries ago, and their literary history may not provide many innovative discoveries. Yet the Homeric paradigm continues to reign also outside Europe and North America, among Asian and African scholars, for example” (Honko *et al.* 10).

By no means, all written versions of folk epic will be called tradition-oriented epic and many of which are long ceased to be sung. The Homeric epics and the Sanskrit epics will not be called tradition-oriented epics for they cannot be treated as purely compiled epics like the *Kalevala*. For it is Lönnrot who compiled the epic songs as collected in fragments from singers who knew only parts of the story. Such song poems were recast in their symmetrical order by Lönnrot as per his own wisdom. Even then he is blamed for lack of symmetrical plot structure in the epic. Whatever is seen in the *Kalevala* is based on what Lönnrot collected in fragments from Karelia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That would mean that the *Kalevala* is a folk epic although its having been sung is a past historical fact. Whereas the *Kalevipoeg* has remained more a work of an individual artist, yet it could inspire the Estonians when they were constructing their identity, culture and their nationhood during a period of their struggle to achieve political self-determination and cultural self-definition. This is a task generally performed by a national epic, a task a *Paradise Lost* or an *Aeneid* would fail to do.

Based on the earliest song form of the epic narratives many of the world folk epics were written by ancient bards and poets closely guarding the

traditionally handed oral formulaic rendition. In some cases, their authors were written while still others did not have to ascribe to particular named authors like the Sumerian epic the *Gilgamesh*. Again some epics like the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana* continue to exist orally in various local cultures and in media. Outside the elite class the general public and the folk are closely associated with the oral form of the epics transmitted orally by singers, performers in native villages, towns and other places where large gatherings are organized. Generally, people are not very familiar with the printed form but they know about the epics from oral traditions, the localized versions, stories told, recited, dramatized, film versions, and so on. As a result, there are many faces of Rama, Lakshman, Sita, Hanuman, Bhima, Arjuna, and such versions vary from region to region. All this qualifies the nature of folklore and folk narrative. According to different regions legends and folktales and myths may appear in more than one version. Likewise, publication of an epic in the form of a book does not guarantee that the printed version would represent one fixed text for general approval for orality is always unfixed in itself as it is. For instance, the south Indian Tamil *Ramayana* is very different with the west Indian *Ramayana* or the Valmiki version. Mention may be made that when Benjamin Bagby made a new version of *Beowulf* in the recent past he “heeds those clues in his own half-chanted, half-sung approach to the poem” (Upchurch [mupchurch@seattletimes.com](mailto:mupchurch@seattletimes.com)) contrasting the earlier record that *Beowulf* was not sung by minstrels. But within the narrative text singers sing in praise of the past Germanic heroes and of *Beowulf*’s great feat and bravery defeating his adversary. That is another matter figuring in the 8<sup>th</sup> century *Beowulf* text.

As one of the world folk epics the *Khamba-Thoibi* of Manipur has been sung by bards and minstrels for centuries on the musical instrument *Pena*, but later another narrative method called *Khongjom Parba* style got widespread currency in the aftermath of the *Khongjom War* 1891. That even stimulated poet, novelist Hjam Anganghal to write the epic in verse almost a verbatim reproduction of Chungkham Manik Singh, a celebrated royal court singer of the *Khamba-Thoibi* epic purely following the traditional *Pena* singing style. The poem was posthumously published in the year 1964.

In our study we have categorically noted that folk epics are distinguished from the literary epics by virtue of the following criteria: (1) the nature

of transmission is communal, (2) the form and content of the story are traditional and they tend to vary from place to place, and teller to teller, but no one can tamper with any part whatsoever to suit the convenience of anybody, and (3) the originator is unknown, therefore anonymous. In his entry on "Folklore" in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* Jan Harold Brunvand makes an insightful remark:

The three common features of the numerous cultural elements (including proverbs, tales, songs, dances, games, toys, foods, fences and so forth) that are included in most folklorists' concepts of what comprises folklore are: (1) that these elements are transmitted orally or by means informal demonstration; (2) that these elements are traditional in form and content; and (3) that these elements (as a result of their traditional circulation) always exist in different versions, or "variants." Secondly, in a minimal definition of folklore, most folk traditional elements of culture are anonymous as to origin, and they tend to become formularized in the way that they are performed or expressed.

Brunvand 286

All forms of folklore are consistently inconsistent and continue to exist in a state of change and mutation results in variants, corresponding to human nature and "behaviour ... [expressed] during face-to-face interaction" (*ibid.*). Folklorists and anthropologists share this view that even similar tales, proverbs, myths, etc. are all pervasive the world over rejecting the theory of monogenesis, although migrational theory still holds true in many cases. The presence of similar motifs in tales and other folk narratives reveals the universal patterns in human thinking sharing of common collective consciousness. The elemental feelings, however, continue to remain the same irrespective of caste, creed, race, colour, language, thus emphasizing the commonality of human race as reflected in our modes of cultural expressions. Folktales, myths, legends, folk epics, proverbs, sayings, lullabies are significant examples of this.

Dorson in his Introduction to *Heroic Epic and Saga* rightly observes, "Epic poems grew out of appropriate cultural conditions, the so-called Heroic Age bridging nomadic and sedentary stages of civilization, a preliterate era when bards celebrated the deeds of great warriors" (Oinas 1-2). Folk epics were products under definite cultural conditions when such societies from which they sprang attained a high degree of civilization with stable

government after the consolidation of the monarchical authority, and nations were clearly demarcated and fortified with strong military power, but events beyond control dragged such civilizations to the verge of doom and destruction. The god of war and destruction stared in the face of all, nemesis relentlessly unleashed hatred, anarchy took over and blindfolded everything and both the hero and adversary culminated in a fall.

From the ashes of war and destruction sprang heroic stories and sagas embellished by tale tellers and singers immortalizing the deeds of superhuman heroes. Folk epics are, of course, a mixture of quasi history, myth, legend and folklore emanated from the nation's or community's rich culture and that they all are revealed in what happens in the story of a great hero whose valour and deeds were itched in gold in the annals of the oral history. With the character and action of the hero the nation was identified, and every man and every woman still feels proud of having descended from him. He became the icon of the society whom the future generation in his culture emulated, and got inspired by his lofty ideals, supreme sacrifice, and superhuman feat. Epic singing style is distinguished from other narrative arts, for it being created out of the creative modulation of the oral poets and story tellers in an elevated style of metrical lines charged with long (epic) similes, metaphors, personifications, epithets, anecdotes, formula and formulaic expressions, multiforms, and so on, with which such long narratives could sustain. Singing in honour of the marvellous deeds of heroes is sometimes almost instantaneous as is witnessed in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus hears his own valour in the war from a court singer in King Nestor's palace. In the past due to absence of script epics were orally sung but later educated poets, singers documented them and converted them to writing. Dorson, in his introduction to *Heroic Epic and Saga* edited by Oinas, says, "the heroic epic and saga have passed from spoken, sung, and recited renditions into pages of literature, and in so doing have created a tangle of problems for oral-literary scholars" (Oinas 1). He further adds:

There was a time, as older handbooks show, when the folk epic signified fixed texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungelied*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Cid*, and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – the great canon of Indo-European epic poems. While literary epics composed by the individual poet, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*, and Milton's

*Paradise Lost*, to all intents and purposes they treated them in the same manner: as written masterpieces to be read.

*Ibid.*

Before I conclude, in the light of the above discussion of the known and less known world folk epics the outstanding contribution of Manipuri folklore to the world folk epic genre, the *Khamba-Thoibi* will not miss the attention of folklorists for critical analysis, research and enquiry. It is because by the international standards the *Khamba-Thoibi* epic of Manipur, that grew from the myth, legend, culture, history and folklore of Moirang, one of the seven independent princely kingdoms of the erstwhile ununified Meitrabak (present Manipur), has today become a world class folk epic. The epic does not deal with the expansion of territory, external aggression of foreign enemies but it centres upon the indomitable free spirit of individual characters, Khamba, the hero and Thoibi, the heroine whose true love does not admit impediments, for they go up to the last point of suffering before they are united in marriage. The cherished values they uphold and the spirit and will to withstand all perils make a name for themselves inspiring generations of men and women for hundreds of years in the Meitei society. Both singers and hearers of the epic keep the epic as the epitome of Manipuri cultural civilization ever imagined by the faculty of a nation. Such a huge structure of a romantic epic with a glorious canopy of history, culture, myth, legends, tales surrounding traditions, customs, beliefs, laws, communal activities fundamental human civilization, is so powerful that over generations the superstructure of the epic has remained an unshaken cultural heritage of Manipuri folklore and expressive art. Their story has been in existence in tradition, transmitted orally by generations of singers, and the story has acquired its form and structure in oral composition like any well-known folk epic of the world.

The story of the characters, the heroic prowess of the epic hero, Khamba, in course of time, grew into casting an aura of antiquity, mystery, myth, certainly mixed with truth, history powerfully forged by human imagination in the hands of unknown skilled story tellers singing in songs. And through generations the story took root in tradition, expanding its horizon until it became a huge super story with additional interpolations transmitted orally by word of mouth in song and verse over several hundred years. The tempestuous true love, the heroic adventures of the

hero Khamba, his catching of the wild bull, the fight with and killing of a tiger single handed, the defeat of the evil Ravana-like villain Nongban, his ability to foil all attempts of Nongban to crush him in every fight become futile. Khamba's humility, his nobility, heroic exploits and many times a victim of the evil plans of Yubaraj Chingkhuba and Nongban and his firm love for Thoibi make the epic so extraordinary. But the full credit of its being an extraordinary oral epic goes to the singers of the epic. Over time as the style and treatment of the *Khamba-Thoibi* narrative song matured attaining the epic grandeur. Today the *Khamba-Thoibi* epic can be read along with the world folk epics, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Kalevala* and the Yugoslav epics. Based on their knowledge and understanding of what Felix J. Oinas discussed the world folk epics folklorists, Mani Meitei and Sanatombi make an important observation in their paper on the *Khamba-Thoibi* epic of Manipur published in Bloomington Indiana. I quote, "[The] *Khamba -Thoibi*, as the product of the Manipuri folklore, has to be listed among the folk epics of the world's peoples in global folklore research" (Sanatombi and Meitei 1996: 141).

Finally, it may be concluded that folk epics still sung and performed even if they have written versions, are all folk epics. Homeric nomenclature cannot be changed and challenged. The classical epics, those of Homer and the Sanskrit ones are never to be redefined and labeled differently. Later developments in the form of written versions will not question the earlier oral narratives of the epics. Elias Lönnrot did not claim that the *Kalevala* would be categorized as literary or semi-literary, and perhaps no Finnish literary tradition influences his epic composition/compilation, although some scholars would preferably call the *Kalevala* a semi-literary epic. A similar view is found in the case of the *Kalevipoeg* as well. *Beowulf* has no record of having been sung in the Scandinavian society but owing to the image of the heroic age, the use of pagan mythology, legends and tales majority of folklorists hold the view that *Beowulf* is a folk epic, and the theory that written literature influenced the epic when written by an unknown poet is rather too presumptuous to gain currency. For English literature in the 8<sup>th</sup> century was too nascent to influence the *Beowulf* poet. By all means, *Beowulf* be not be termed a semi-literary epic, and for similar reasons the *Kalevala* as well. As far as folk epics are concerned, we better stick to original anonymity, oral transmission, form and structure as

contrasted with the written literary work where stringent sophisticated rules are followed by individual authors. In India the Sanskrit epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are still very much alive in many forms, songs, dramas, radio and TV serials, performances, and in religious and ceremonial functions, all outside the written versions. Folklorists have not questioned the epics' having been folk or oral epics. Deviations are appreciated and the folk joyfully welcome such changes, and folklorists are eager to find multiple existence of the epics. What we come to know is that the written version is not necessarily to term a folk epic a literary one. Whereas, an established literary tradition is based on imaginative creation of an author; a folk epic originated from folk traditions, local cultures, myth, religion, rites, beliefs, legends, history or true accounts of lands and peoples, is likely to have more than one version. The *Iliad*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Ramayana* are clear examples. The question of semi-literary epic is still in doubt.

## References

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. FP Classics, 2018.
- Bruvand, Jan Harold, ed. *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Library of Congress Cataloguing - in - pub. Data 1996, 1998.
- Daskalopoulos, Anastasios. Epic. Mary Ellen Brown and A. Rosenberg Bruce. *Encyclopedia of Folklore and Literature*. ABC-CLIO, 1998.
- Dorson, Richard M. Introduction. Ed. Felix J. Oinas. *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to World's Great Folk Epics*. Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Honko, Lauri, Jawaharlal Handoo and John Foley Miles. *The Epic: Oral and Written*. CIIL, 1998.
- Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard University Press, 1960, 1981.
- Sanatombi, Soram and M. Mani Meitei. A Folkloristic Study on the Manipuri Folk Epic *Khamba-Thoibi*. *Eurasian Studies Yearbook*, 1996, 133-142.
- Oinas, Felix J. Folk Epic. Ed. Richard M. Dorson. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. The University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Oinas, Felix J. The Balto-Finnic Epic. Ed. Felix J. Oinas. *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to World's Great Folk Epics*. Indiana University Press, 1978.

Shipley, Joseph T. *Dictionary of World Literary Terms*. Doaba House, 1993.

Upchurch, Michael. mupchurch @ seattletimes.com. Web. 5.4.2013. Web.

Wikipedia. 12.3.2024. Web.