

## On the Relationship between Folk and Classical Traditions in South Asia<sup>1</sup>

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### 1 Preliminary remarks

The relationship between folk and classical traditions in South Asia has been discussed over the last decades in a number of publications (see e.g. Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986, Blackburn *et al.* 1989, Hildebeitel 1999, Richman 1994, Sarkar 1972), and has come to be regarded as a topic that, at present, requires no new, intensive discussion. This, however, is no longer the case. Leavitt's response (Leavitt 2000) to my review article (Zoller 1995) showed that there indeed exist widely differing opinions on this issue in our academic community. But since it was not the intention of my review article to initiate a general discussion on this topic, I must begin the present article with a short summary explaining the background of its genesis.

My review article attempted a concise and critical appreciation of contributions to the study of central Himalayan forms of verbal art. Among other things, it concentrated on questions pertaining to the classification of oral genres, on the relationship between folk and classical traditions, and on the relation between forms of verbal art and social systems. Leavitt felt that he had been unjustly treated in my review article. He wrote a very extensive reply, in which he also made himself the advocate of the other authors discussed by me. Instead of attempting a constructive and differentiated discussion of competing hypotheses and models, Leavitt came forth with a monorhymed response, namely that my review did not merely contain contestable opinions and arguments, but that the review as a whole was amiss, and consequently every critical remark of mine was erroneous.

Of the three topics on which I concentrated in my review article (1995), it is probably the question of the relationship between folk and classical traditions which attracts the most general interest. The cultures of the Himalayas are especially suited to a

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discussion of this question. They are still the home of many indigenous traditions, and at the same time they are influenced to various degrees mainly by the great traditions of South Asian Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. Although I will not bring into question the scholarly distinction between folk and classical traditions, I have the impression that this *synchronic* distinction is still frequently equated with or influenced by the *historical* distinction made by Indologists between an earlier 'stern' Brahmanism of an elite and the later 'jungly' Hinduism of the common people. This pattern of historical decline has been extended by the same people on the basis of a distinction between an earlier Epic or classical age (the age of Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*) and the subsequent Middle Ages, which are marked by moral decline and the emergence of the vernacular languages (Inden 1992: 109-22). I will show in this article that for Leavitt too the relationship between classical and folk traditions is characterized by this very feature of 'decline'.

I will also show that the relationship between classical and folk traditions cannot simply be described in terms of 'borrowing', as suggested by Leavitt and Ramanujan. The metaphor of 'borrowing' is misleading, because no textual material is taken away from one tradition and transplanted into another. I will argue, instead, that the interconnection between different *poetic codes*<sup>2</sup> within and between classical and folk traditions is governed by mechanisms which I will call 'reference', 'global copying' and 'selective copying'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Here I am dealing mainly with oral and written *texts* of verbal art which are integral parts of more comprehensive *traditions*. Traditions are (realizations of) conglomerates of different types of codes (e.g. linguistic and social codes). Texts of verbal art are specific realizations of underlying poetic codes. A poetic code is a kind of subdivision of a linguistic code. It contains mutation rules that lay down how a non-poetic linguistic structure is transformed into a poetic structure. These rules frequently differ from one tradition to another. Additionally, each poetic code contains 'instructions' on how to combine the mutation rules (which change non-poetic into poetic structures) with normal linguistic realization rules in order to produce specific 'poetic patterns' (called 'genres' in literary studies), e.g. a ritual recital or a narrative. The poetic codes of the folk and classical traditions of South Asia contain partially different and partially similar mutation rules and 'instructions' on how to realize the underlying codes. Copying might take place from one 'poetic pattern' into an identical or a different 'poetic pattern', within either identical or different traditions. I will argue here that modifications of oral texts of verbal art typically occur when they are either copied several times (a common term for this is 'diffusion') or when they are copied from one type of 'poetic pattern' into a different type of 'poetic pattern' (i.e. when they change from one genre into another). The difference between folk and classical traditions is of no immediate relevance for these mechanisms of modification.

<sup>3</sup> I have taken the notion of *global* and/or *selective copying* from Johanson (1992: 12ff.)

The main part of the present article discusses the question of the relationship between folk and classical traditions with reference to *Mahābhārata* traditions in the central Himalayas. Leavitt tries to defend a *direct* relationship of one-sided dependence between the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and the regional *Mahābhāratas* of the central Himalayas, and he claims that the regional traditions developed directly out of a Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* tradition. My position, on the other hand, is to advocate an *indirect* relationship between the two traditions. Although I do not deny outside influences on the central Himalayan *Mahābhārata* traditions, in this article I will stress the autonomous dimensions. I will argue that some elements of the central Himalayan *Mahābhārata* traditions might have developed directly out of a Proto-*Mahābhārata*, and that it is not possible to claim direct derivation from Sanskrit sources.

An important additional dimension to the topic of this article is the ‘horizontal’ relationship between oral folk tradition, e.g. the relationship between different forms of folk *Mahābhāratas*, or between regional epics. I will therefore begin with a brief discussion of the regional Kumaoni epic *Māluśāhī* and its connections with other regional epics of northern South Asia. This will also offer an introduction to some historical aspects of folk *Mahābhāratas* dealt with in the third section. Moreover, it will show some pertinent aspects of the discussion that started with my review.

## 2 *Māluśāhī*

I briefly discussed Meissner’s edition and translation of this regional epic from Kumaon in my review (1995: 1-2). The epic recounts the love story between a trader’s daughter Rājulā and the Katyūri king *Māluśāhī*. Among other points, my critique related (and still relates) to Meissner’s classicist treatment of the epic and his search for origins.

Admittedly, Meissner’s search for origins was not precisely professional. In Meissner’s defense, however, Leavitt confused two different issues (p. 61). The first: what is the *original Māluśāhī*? And the second: what is the *origin* of the *Māluśāhī*? Meissner believes that the version of his bard is ‘nearest to the original’ (1985: xx), and tries to find in the epic traces of what he believes to be typical features of Sanskrit poetry (ibid.: 241). He concludes that one of the sources of the epic is to be found in Nāth traditions (ibid.: xvii). Regarding oral versions of an epic or ballad being ‘nearest to an original’, I share the opinion put forward in a standard Hindi

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who uses the German terms *Globalkopieren* und *Teilstrukturkopieren* in connection with language contacts. I use the word ‘borrowing’ in this article only in quotation marks in order to indicate its inadequacy with regard to intertextual processes.

literature dictionary which unambiguously declares that “it is not possible to state which is the original text of any ballad (*lok-gāthā*).<sup>4</sup> All its versions are of equal importance” (Varma *et al.* 1985: 222).<sup>5</sup> While searching for the origin of the epic, Meissner considers local backgrounds (which are there, of course) and casually mentions ‘love-stories from Rajasthan’, but then concludes: “It appears that the legends surrounding king Gopicand are one of the sources of the *Māluśāhī* song” (1985: xvii). The last statement is incorrect. I intend to show why, because this also has something to do with the historical background of regional *Mahābhāratas*.

None of Meissner’s five arguments (1985: xvii-xix) is well-founded. The whole epic contains not a single legend connected with the Nāths (though Guru Gorakhnāth plays a minor role in some versions in neighbouring Garhwal), and the name of king Gopicand is mentioned only *once* in the whole story (p. 205: “You all shall be immortal. . . like king Gopicand of Bengal”). Pointing out the place-name *jalanara*, correctly identified by Meissner with the town and district Jālandhara, can hardly suffice as an argument in favour of his hypothesis.<sup>6</sup> The facts that Māluśāhī’s father, like the father of Gopicand, plays practically no role in the story, and that the common Pahari word *māyerī*, ‘mother’, is used instead of the normal Kumaoni *ijā* in the name of Gopicand’s mother, also fails to lend any weight to Meissner’s speculations.

Thus, there is no convincing argument in favour of Meissner’s hypothesis, and I wonder why he did not pursue the obvious: namely, the parallels with the romances<sup>7</sup> from Rajasthan and many other places in North India and Pakistan. These include *Dholā-Mārū* (Rajasthan), *Hīr-Rānjhā* (Panjab), *Mirzā-Sāhibān* (Panjab), *Sassī-Punnū* (Sindh/Balochistan), etc. Older romances include *Padmāvat* and *Mrgāvati* in classical Hindi. Like *Māluśāhī*, these all describe a love affair between a hero and a heroine, the many obstacles they have to overcome, and their final happy union or tragic separation. A common motif found in many of these stories, and again shared with *Māluśāhī*, is that of the hero temporarily becoming a yogi. A

<sup>4</sup> A term also used in connection with the *Māluśāhī*.

<sup>5</sup> This and the following quotes from sources in Hindi have been translated by me.

<sup>6</sup> Jālandhara has always been a famous religious place. In Buddhist times many monasteries were located there; later on it is mentioned in some Tantras as a *śākta pīṭha*, and still later it was famous for its associations with the Nāth sect and with various Muslim saints.

<sup>7</sup> In his critique of my review, Leavitt devotes much space to the questions of whether *Māluśāhī* is (a) a ballad, a love song, or an epic, (b) whether or not it is a *jāgar* (i.e. a ‘vigil-performance’ involving possession), and (c) whether it is of a secular nature or not. The discussion of these three points, especially (b) and (c), has much to do with the ‘horizontal’ connections between this epic and other regional epics.

case in point is *Hīr-Rānjhā*, where the hero Rānjhā for a while becomes the pupil of Guru Gorakhnāth when the parents of his beloved Hīr want to marry her to another man (see Temple n.d.: 545ff). Other examples are the Panjabi folk romance *Mirzā-Sāhibān*, in which the hero Mirza becomes an anchorite for some time (see Quddus 1992: 199ff), and Kutuban's Hindi reworking of *Mr̥gāvati*, an old folk romance, in which the hero turns into a yogi in order to find his beloved. But the most famous of all is the classical Hindi romance *Padmāvat*, written in the 16th century by the Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi. In this story King Ratansen turns into a yogi in order to search for his beloved Padmāvat, who lives in Siṃhal dvīp.<sup>8</sup>

Thus we see that *Māluśāhī* shares the following pattern with many other folk romances. In order to search for and win his beloved, who lives in a far-away 'otherworldly' Elysium, the hero has to become an anchorite, i.e. a 'liminal' figure. This pattern very closely resembles countless fairy tales of northern South Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, etc. While searching for his beloved fairy, at a certain place the hero orders all his companions to stay back and wait for his return, as he is now going to enter a kind of 'other world' where the fairy lives (Zoller, in press). The main difference between these fairy tales and the romances is that the fairy tales lack a spatio-temporal linking with reality, whereas the romances are traditionally understood to have occurred in the historical past. The latter are, in a sense, 'historical' stories with an ahistorical plot. Both genres share the feature of two-dimensionality, of a 'this world' and an 'other world'. If the hero is able to act successfully, then the plot consists of a movement from 'this world' to the 'other world' and back into 'this world'. In the case of the fairy tales (where the hero is always successful) the movement takes place in a sphere not connected with reality, but in the case of the romances the movement takes place in the tangible reality of northern South Asia (as in *Māluśāhī*, *Ḍholā-Mārū*, *Padmāvat* and *Mr̥gāvati*). However, if the movement remains incomplete, then hero and heroine must remain in the 'other world', i.e. they are doomed to die (as in *Hīr-Rānjhā*, *Mirzā-Sāhibān*, *Sassī-Punnū*).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Siṃhal dvīp*, i.e. the island of Sri Lanka, is an elusive and faraway place. It also appears in other folk stories, frequently as the abode of the heroine, e.g. in the romance of *Ḍholā-Mārū*. This Siṃhal dvīp seems to have a function (as a kind of otherworldly Elysium) similar to that of Jālandhar in *Māluśāhī*. Other examples of faraway Elysiums in Himalayan oral texts are those connected with Kashmir, e.g. *Kulu-Kaśmīr* in western Garhwal, *Kaśmīr* in northern Pakistan, *Kāśī-Kasmerā* in western Nepal (Maskarinec 1998: 407), and those connected with Sri Lanka, e.g., *Siṅgal-dvīp* in western Garhwal.

<sup>9</sup> Here the 'other world' is typically symbolized by the hero assuming the role of an anchorite or a herdsman, the heroine living in an aloof Elysium, the lovers meeting in the jungle, etc.

Various yogi and Sufi orders ‘appropriated’ a number of the above-mentioned romances and other popular stories during the medieval period (Vaudeville 1996: 295), and these were moulded to some extent in accordance with the religious doctrines and world views of yogis and Sufis.<sup>10</sup> In the third section of this article I will show that during the medieval period yogic groups not only played an important role in the spread of folk romances, but also in the spread of folk *Mahābhāratas*.

It is possible to describe a *jāgar*, too, as a three-part movement, although in the opposite direction—from the ‘other world’ into ‘this world’ and back into the ‘other world’. Here, however, the movement is not contained in the plot of the story, but is a movement of the ‘story itself’. The divine actors incarnate temporarily in the human mediums who play or relate their story, and then again return into the ‘other world’. In the first case the movement belongs to the structure of a plot, and in the second case it belongs to the actors enacting the plot. This is because romances are primarily epic, first of all requiring a bard who *tells about* the actors, whereas *jāgars* are primarily dramatic, first of all requiring mediums and a bard who *speaks with* the divine actors incarnated in the mediums. And, whereas a romance relates a ‘human’ story that took place in the ‘historical’ past, a *jāgar* re-enacts a ‘divine’ story that took place in *illo tempore*.

The ambivalent character of *Māluśāhī* in comparison with ‘real’ *jāgars* can be attributed to the fact that it is a combination or fusion of a ‘human’ epic and a ‘divine’ drama. That is why the Kumaonis say that the hero *Māluśāhī* was originally a human being but is now a deity, and that is why he does not incarnate in mediums but only speaks through the bards. This specific background of the *Māluśāhī*, so different from that of other *jāgar* stories, is the main reason why a *Māluśāhī-jāgar* is felt to be not quite the same as a ‘real’ *jāgar*.

Mixed genres like the *Māluśāhī* are not uncommon in the central Himalayas. The Garhwali *Mahābhārata* from the Tons valley, called *Paṇḍuaṇ*, is another case in point.<sup>11</sup> It is performed annually, but does not involve the possession of mediums. The bards of the *Paṇḍuaṇ* say that it ‘sleeps’ most of the time in the ‘other world’;

An incomplete movement seems to be an indispensable prerequisite for the heroine to be deified. This appears to have happened in the case of *Sassī* and *Hir*. *Sassī* had a temple (which is now dilapidated) near the village of Shah Muhammad Wali, to the west of the town of Talagang in the Panjab state of Pakistan, and the tomb of *Hir* in Jhang (also in the Panjab state of Pakistan) is traditionally a place of pilgrimage for lovers.

<sup>10</sup> In the case of *Hir-Rānjhā* there exist several Muslim versions and a Hindu version! (Usborne 1966: 18; Sekhon and Duggal 1992: 14).

<sup>11</sup> I have written a thesis on this epic. The epic takes up eight hours on the tape-recorder. The thesis, including text, translation and analysis, will be published in the near future.

only during the performance does it ‘wake up’ and ‘speak itself’ through the mouths of the bards. After the performance it returns into the ‘other world’. But in contrast to the *Māluśāhī*, which is a story of the ‘historical’ past, the *Paṇḍuan*, like a *jāgar*, is a story which took place *in illo tempore*.

This short discussion of the *Māluśāhī* shows how important it is for an appropriate evaluation of oral folk traditions to see them in the context of other South Asian folk traditions. In the case of Himalayan oral epics, in particular, it is not sufficient merely to compare them with other Himalayan oral epics. Rather, one has to see them in the wider context of at least northern South Asia. This fact still has to be generally acknowledged because, when scholars in the twentieth century (and earlier) tried to connect specific folk traditions with other traditions, they frequently tended to exaggerate relationships with the classical traditions (see the critique by Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986: 2ff). Overemphasis of the ‘vertical dimension’ at the cost of the ‘horizontal dimension’ is also characteristic of Leavitt’s position. Although he pays lip service to a polycentric approach, in actual fact he merely reproduces the outdated position of a classicist’s centrism in his treatment of the Kumaoni *Mahābhārata*.

### 3 Mahābhārata

The points I have discussed above are also relevant in connection with the controversy regarding *Mahābhārata* traditions. Consider the following points:

When stories are transmitted only in one or more regional languages, then it is generally not advisable to search for original versions. Historical precursors (if such exist) and parallel forms are of equal value. Such stories are, in a sense, without origin, because no positive statement can be made in this regard.<sup>12</sup>

When stories are transmitted in one or more regional languages and in one or more sub-regional languages, and/or in a pan-South Asian language, then the question of original versions and copied forms arises. But here I should like to ask whether a search for original versions is *always* justified in such cases or not. Ramanujan and Leavitt think so, but I cannot agree. It is not justified in all those cases in which the assumed processes of copying are located beyond a horizon of scientific proof. A clear case of copying is Rilke’s poem ‘Die Gazelle’ in Ghazal style (the title of the poem in itself is an allusion to this), whereas the Garhwali *Mahābhārata*, called *Paṇḍuan*, and the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* represent a clear case in which two ver-

<sup>12</sup> Those stories in which, or in connection with which, it is said that they actually belong to another region and/or language constitute an exception. One example is the story of *Sassī-Punnū* in Panjabi, although *Sassī-Punnū* actually belongs to Sindh/Balochistan.

sions of a story are too far apart from one another to allow us to say anything about original and copied forms.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.1 Leavitt's 'complex model'

Let me begin with a few statements by Leavitt which show his basic assumptions regarding the relationship between folk and classical *Mahābhārata* traditions:

(1) Leavitt (2000: 66) makes the interesting distinction between purely regional forms of Kumaoni narratives with no parallels either in other regional traditions or in the Sanskritic tradition on the one hand, and traditions subsumed under the term *bhārat* or *mahābhārat* (“stories of Ram, Krishna... the Pāṇḍavas...”) on the other.<sup>14</sup> According to his understanding, all of the latter are connected with “classical Hindu myth” and “orthodox tellings by Brahman priests.’ On the same page he repeats this, saying that they “are *derived* [my italics] from classical Sanskritic myth and epic. Since Pāṇḍava stories are *mahābhārat* among others, this conclusion holds for them as well.”<sup>15</sup>

This means that Leavitt connects an important argument in favour of the derivation of the Kumaoni Pāṇḍava stories from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* with the issue of the *definition* of the genre of *bhārat*: For him, *bhārat* is a kind of container for (derivations of) classical Hindu myths, and since the Pāṇḍava stories are an element of this container, they also derive from the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. I have just expressed my doubts about the correctness of his definition of *bhārat*, as it conflicts with all the other generally accepted definitions of the term. In all

<sup>13</sup> Here and below, ‘Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*’ refers to the Poona Critical Edition.

<sup>14</sup> Leavitt claims that *bhārat* “names an indigenous genre that only includes material related to classical Hindu myth—material that has also long been available to rural Kumaonis in orthodox tellings by Brahman priests” (2000: 66). I, however, reject a definition of genre as something defined by its contents. The term ‘genre’ means a literary or artistic type or style. The Garhwali meaning of the word *bhārat* as a literary term is ‘epic’ (i.e. any kind of long story consisting partly of (more or less) sung and partly of (more or less) spoken passages). The Hindi meaning is *lambī kathā*, ‘a long story’, and the Rajasthani meaning is *lambā caurā vivaraṇ*, ‘an extensive account’. Interestingly, Leavitt’s definition of the meaning in Kumaoni contrasts with all the other definitions quoted here.

<sup>15</sup> Leavitt is not happy with my criticism of his graphical distinction between regional *mahābhārat* and Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. But then he must also distinguish between *premākhyān* and *Premākhyāna* (regional and classical romances), between *Hir-Rānjhā* in the classical written version of Waris Shah and *hir-rānjhā* performed by petty local bards, between a Sanskrit-speaking Brahmin from Benares and an illiterate brahmin from Garhwal, and between the Hindi of internationally renowned authors and the hindi spoken in the provinces, etc.



regions where this word is used, except in Leavitt's Kumaon, *any* kind of long story is called *bhārat*. Leavitt apparently confuses here 'genre' and 'subject-matter'.

(2) Later (2000: 67) he states that "the folk and the classical renditions in question have main characters who go through most of the same things and who have names that are different only as would be predicted by the differing pronunciations of borrowed Sanskrit words in the languages in question." And "an *Ur*-text is exactly what there seems to have been."

Apparently Leavitt assumes that this is sufficient to prove that the regional *Mahābhāratas* of the central Himalayas must derive from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. But is it not equally possible that the names of the characters were adapted by and by, and not necessarily through the influence of Brahmans, but by some other people who somewhere had picked up the 'correct' names? This is not a hypothetical question; I shall quote below several names of actors found in a regional *Mahābhārata* which are not borrowed Sanskrit words. And why does the fact that there indeed exist similar episodes in the regional *Mahābhāratas* and the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* necessarily mean that the former borrowed them from the latter? Where is the proof?

(3) Leavitt points out correctly (2000: 66) that "Kumaon has been on pilgrimage routes for millennia and... certain strata of Kumaoni society have been bearers of Sanskritic influence at least since the early Middle Ages...", and concludes (ibid.) that "unlike other genres of Kumaoni oral tradition, Kumaoni *mahābhārat* are derived from classical Sanskritic myth and epic." It is a fact that classical Puranic myths are recited in Kumaon, but to my knowledge (after interrogating Kumaonis who are very familiar with the customs and traditions of their home country) no recitations of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* take place in Kumaon. Moreover, Leavitt himself has pointed out (1991: 452) that the folk *Mahābhārata* traditions are stronger in Garhwal than in Kumaon. Still, it is well known that the Brahmanic and Sanskritic influence is weaker in Garhwal than in Kumaon. Apart from that, in Garhwal there are no recitations of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, whereas there are, as I will show below, Garhwali Brahmans who transmit *local* versions of the *Mahābhārata*.

I do not claim, of course, that the central Himalayas were immune to influences from Sanskrit and folk *Mahābhārata* traditions from outside. Such influences must have existed. However, Leavitt's claim that the *Mahābhārata* traditions of the central Himalayas can be *directly* derived from the Sanskrit source is untenable.

(4) Leavitt's central axiom regarding oral *Mahābhārata* traditions in the central

Himalayas is as follows: Input: classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* → Output: regional Himalayan *mahābhārat*. He refines this by postulating that some of the versions he was considering “had diverged further from this source than others had” (p. 68). The model he proposes here could be termed the ‘set-of-china model’. A properly-baked set of china is sent into a distant country; there it falls to the ground and bursts into pieces. The locals are either content with the shards or try to cement some of them together. This attempt, of course, cannot recreate the original set. So new consignments of the same set of china continue to arrive, though they are only doomed to suffer the same fate.

Curiously, this model fails to take into account precisely that complexity which is stipulated by Leavitt. Moreover, I cannot understand why, of all possible areas, the ‘set of china’ was sent to Garhwal, Kumaon and other rather peripheral areas only, and not to the many other centres of Brahmanical erudition and Puranic Hinduism. After all, on pp. 68 and 69 he himself claims that he is against unidirectional models of ‘borrowing’. If this is the case, then I wonder just where he can identify traces of Garhwali or Kumaoni folk *Mahābhāratas* in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*.

### 3.2 Folk *Mahābhāratas* and regional traditions

Nor is Leavitt happy with the observation I made regarding Sax’s works to the effect that “many aspects of life in Garhwal have been influenced by the local *Mahābhārata*” (1995: 5). His counter-argument is that one can use “ritual and text as sources for inferring a people’s cosmology and cultural categories” (p. 73). I would not deny that such ‘culture discovery procedures’<sup>16</sup> are a very important tool which produce significant results. However, I do not believe that oral texts are in any sense maps of the brains of the people who transmit them. There can never be, so to speak, complete identity between texts of verbal art and the people who perform and transmit them (see Zoller 1999: 206ff). How deep these gaps can occasionally be has been demonstrated by Leavitt himself in his treatment of the Hiḍimbā story (see below). What he proposes is a complete dependence of people’s thinking and acting on their oral or written traditions. However, there are countless examples of how different people of the same community interpret, and deal with, texts differently and even in ways that contradict each other.

### 3.3 Ramanujan’s question ‘What happens when...?’

Before I present my own position and arguments in greater detail, I have a few more things to say on the connection between Leavitt’s assumed derivation of

<sup>16</sup> I use this expression in allusion to the notion of the ‘grammar discovery procedures’ of American structural linguistics.

folk *Mahābhāratas* from the Sanskrit source and Ramanujan's four types of concomitant transformations ('fragmentization', 'domestication', 'localization', and 'contemporization'). Leavitt quotes Ramanujan, who raised the question, "What happens when classical myths are borrowed and retold by folk performers?" (1991: 453), and he gives an unambiguous answer: "He [Ramanujan] offers four ways in which such myths are transformed, all of which fit Kumaoni *Mahābhārata*." But now Leavitt (2000: 71) suddenly claims that these four ways are only 'common' transformations and not necessary ones. Thus the question is: how common are 'borrowings' without these kinds of transformations, in comparison with the 'common' cases? And if these processes from the classical to the folk level are so common, then Leavitt, as a competent scholar, should have observed them. But has he? And where does he locate the 'starting point' for the 'borrowing' of the central Himalayan *Mahābhāratas* when, as a matter of fact, there is no tradition of recitations of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* in the central Himalayas?

Ramanujan's classicist's centrism with regard to the great epics, which is shared by Leavitt, is clearly revealed in the headline of the section dealing with these four transformations: 'Classical Myths in Folk Versions' (Ramanujan 1986: 64). He points out that there are folk *Rāmāyaṇas* and *Mahābhāratas* in Kannada "which appear mostly in bits and pieces" (ibid.). Thus, it seems to be evident for him that they are the sad remains of classical epics after they had been 'borrowed and retold by folk performers'. There is also little doubt that Ramanujan regards the transformations as generally valid. Note, for example, the formulations "First of all the gods and heroes are *domesticated*" (ibid.) and "Second, the folk renditions *localize* the pan-Indian epics and myths" (1986: 67). There exist, however, serious doubts that these four transformations are crucial features of the relationship between classical and folk traditions. I should prefer to formulate them with examples from central Himalayan folk *Mahābhāratas*.

*Fragmentization.* In the case of the Kumaoni folk *Mahābhārata* this assumption makes sense only if there has been a direct 'borrowing' from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, for which we have no evidence at all. The model of fragmentization implies that the 'glue' connecting the classical stories gets lost on its way down to the folk level. However, how does this model coincide with the fact that beside the 'complete' text of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (and the 'complete' text of Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*) there also exist Sanskrit versions of fragments of the epic(s)? Moreover, during recitations of these Sanskrit texts it is usually only parts that are related. On the other hand, one finds on the folk level not only fragmentized *Mahābhārata* versions (e.g. in Kumaon, Rajasthan and Karnataka), but also 'complete' versions (e.g. in Himachal Pradesh, Garhwal, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Bundelkhand). Thus,

when there exist very similar textual situations on both the folk and the classical levels, then how can it be shown that a ‘borrowing’ from the classical to the folk level is usually accompanied by fragmentation? I will argue below that there are indications that the Kumaoni folk *Mahābhārata* fragmented not on its way from the classical level down to the folk level, but in a movement from one folk tradition to another.

*Domestication.* Leavitt cites “the incident of Bhīma’s urinating on the demons” (2000: 71) as a good example. Why is Bhīma domesticated when he pees on the heads of demons. Is ostentatious peeing not an act of free and bold self-assertion rather than of good domesticity?<sup>17</sup> The word ‘domesticated’ means ‘adapted to or content with home life and activities; tamed’. But Bhīma is neither tamed (according to Garhwali traditions, his feet are in the underworld and his head touches the sky!) nor did the Pāṇḍavas spend much time at home. According to the *Paṇḍuan*, they spent most of their life in exile in wild and dangerous places.

*Localization.* Again Leavitt’s arguments are trivial: “Ramanujan never claimed that all oral vernacular renditions of classical stories were re-set in local geography, only that it was a common feature of such renditions” (p. 72). Leavitt should have prefaced every sentence with: it may be so, but it also may not be so. The Garhwali folk *Mahābhārata* from the Tons valley contains place names from the very west of South Asia to Gaya in the east and Kailash in the north (besides local and fictitious place names). This covers a bigger geographical area than is described in many classical texts.

*Contemporization.* Leavitt mentions that the Kumaoni Pāṇḍavas use guns, and that “contemporization does not mean that a story is supposed to have happened this morning or last week, but that the world in which it takes place is like the world of today” (ibid.). My first question: when the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* was compiled, was it contemporized? My second question: when a classical myth is enacted in a *jāgar* performance, is it then contemporized? ‘Contemporization’ means ‘making something belong to the same time’. But Leavitt must first show me that Kumaoni person who does not believe that the war between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas took place a very long time ago. An explicit non-contemporization is also expressed in many other (folk) stories, where it is very frequently stated that the plots took place during the *satyayuga* (Sontheimer 1981: 98). And, in addition, which weapons appear in which stories has little to do with contemporization, but rather with questions of heroic ethics, prototypical examples of chivalry, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Traces of public peeing symbolizing sovereign power in the tradition of the Nāth yogis are found in Gold (1999).

Apparently, three of the four features imply a narrowing of horizons, and one a dissolution of coherence. ‘Fragmentization’ means disintegration, and the three other features all suggest a diminution of the world. ‘Domestication’ prompts a change from a ‘language of distance’ to a ‘language of immediacy’, and ‘localization’ and ‘contemporization’ suggest a contraction of the wide cosmos down to a provincial horizon. This would not be a serious problem if Ramanujan and Leavitt had said that these four features characterize *processes* of ‘borrowing’ between a *poetic code A* and a *poetic code B*. Unfortunately, however, both claim that the four features are intrinsic to folk traditions, whereas values which are the opposite of the four features are intrinsic to classical traditions.

The result of confusing ‘processes of copying’ with ‘essential features of particular traditions’ is that notions like ‘domestication’ and ‘localization’ take on a derogatory undertone. To say that traditions are ‘regionalized’ can easily be understood to mean that they are ‘parochialized’, and to say that traditions are ‘domesticated’ means that they are perceived as folksy. Moreover, the examples of ‘domestication’ provided by Ramanujan and Leavitt make it obvious that they confused what they believed to be a feature distinguishing classical from folk traditions with an actual difference in *language modes*. The difference both have in mind is in fact a difference between ‘language of distance’ and ‘language of immediacy’ (see Habermalz 1998: 290). Ramanujan and Leavitt’s examples of ‘domestication’ are all examples of ‘language of immediacy’, while Ramanujan’s examples from the classical tradition (1986: 67) all have to do with ‘language of distance’. But the difference expressed by these two notions has nothing to do with the distinction between classical and folk traditions. There are many examples in classical Sanskrit theatre and literature of ‘saucy’ dialogues which Ramanujan (1986: 60) believes to be typical of folk literature (see Siegel 1989 for Sanskrit works with unrefined contents), and there are as many examples in folk traditions of awe-inspiring verbal compositions.

Thus I do not claim that the four features cannot be observed in processes of ‘borrowing’, but I maintain that they do not characterize the essence of a tradition. Instead, they can be discovered in *any* kind or *any* direction of ‘borrowing’ and retelling. If this were not so, the only possible conclusion would be that classical stories are *substantially* different from folk stories. But this is not the case. Therefore I wonder what the epistemological value of Ramanujan’s question “What happens when...?” really is.

Fragmentization has also taken place through the ‘borrowing’ of sections of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* into various classical Puranas. Localization of old stories

is found in the classical *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, which centers around Dwarka and nearby places (in fact, a much better term would be ‘re-localization’, because this is what is actually happening). Prudish domestication can be found in classical Puranic retellings of sexually explicit folk stories, and contemporization in classical *Mahābhārata* and Puranic retellings of Vedic stories, etc.

### 3.4 Sanskrit Mahābhārata and ‘extravagant local developments’

A crucial point in examining whether Leavitt’s model or my position tallies better with the facts is the background to a Kumaoni *Mahābhārata* story recorded by Leavitt from Kamal Ram (Leavitt 1987). Leavitt believes that this story derives from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* story of the demoness Hiḍimbā. Since the Kumaoni story is not very similar to the Sanskrit story, Leavitt argues that, in the course of the ‘borrowing’ process from the classical to the folk level, it underwent “extravagant local developments” (1987: 11 and 2000: 72). But did this really happen? Leavitt suggests: “As for the extravagance of the developments I present, the reader will have to look at my papers and judge” (2000: 72). So let us do that. The gist of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* story from the *Hiḍimbā-vadha-parvan* is this: in a forest the Pāṇḍavas encounter the demoness Hiḍimbā and her brother Hiḍimba. The latter wants to devour them, but Bhīma kills Hiḍimba and, with Hiḍimbā, he sires a son named Ghaṭotkaca.

In the Kumaoni version of Kamal Ram, the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī, and Kuntī (but not Bhīma) have been abducted by a demon, who wants to sacrifice them to the goddess Kālikā. On his way to rescue his family, Bhīma encounters two demonesses named Heṛmā and Kheṛmā, who are the younger sisters of the demon, and who address Bhīma as their brother-in-law. Later on Bhīma kills the demon and his companions and liberates his (real) family.

Leavitt believes that this is a local version of the episode mentioned above from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* because of the name of the demoness Heṛmā and because of her brother having abducted the Pāṇḍavas. But the Kumaoni version mentions neither a marriage between the demoness and Bhīma, nor a common son. And whereas the demon of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* wants to devour the Pāṇḍavas, in Kumaon he wants to sacrifice them. Thus, the argument equating the Kumaoni story with the Hiḍimbā story from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* rests on the assumed preservation of two features: similarity in name and similarity in affinal relationship. Leavitt also believes that all the supposed deviations in the Kumaoni version are a result of all the local changes and adaptations the story has undergone since it was released from its original context, and that these deviations are the effect of the principle I have called the ‘china set’.

In the Garhwali *Paṇḍuan* recorded by me, the above Kumaoni story appears as two stories, which are not thematically connected. I intend to show that the Kumaoni version is not the result of extravagant developments from the classical down to the folk level, but the outcome of a collapse of originally two separate folk stories into one story (a phenomenon not noted by Ramanujan). In the first Garhwali story, Bhīma and Arjuna temporarily die in the ocean. The god Nārāyaṇa arranges a marriage between them and two girls named Uṛka and Lagendri. They are the nieces of Vāsukī Nāga of the underworld. In other words, they are themselves *nāga kanyās*, ‘serpent maidens’, and have nothing to do with Hiḍimbā. One of the girls revives the two floating corpses by bringing *amṛt* from their uncle Vāsukī Naga. The two girls have intercourse with the two brothers: Bhīma begets a son named Bagrikh, and Arjuna a son named Nāgārjuna (see also Sax 1995: 141ff). In the second story a giant named Kanbir, disguised as a Brahman, abducts the Pāṇḍavas (except Bhīma) in order to offer them as a sacrifice to the goddess Candikā (almost as in the Kumaoni story). When Bhīma sets out to liberate his family, he comes across a giantess named Himra Sitia. He sires with her a son named Guṛku and liberates his family in a way similar to that in the Kumaoni story. In Garhwal, however, the giant Kanbir is the *father* of Hirma Sitia. When he is killed, Bhīma asks Guṛku to marry his own mother Hirma Sitia.

The first Garhwali story connects two similar plots, one with a background in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, and a second with a supra-regional background in folk traditions. The first plot is the classical story of Arjuna and Citrāṅgadā begetting their son Babhruvāhana (the well-known story of the son killing his own father is in fact related in another section of the *Paṇḍuan*). A fairly close parallel to the Garhwali version is found in the Rajasthanī *Mahābhārata* story ‘The story of Arjuna’s visit to the underworld’ (Smith, n.d.), in which the son of Arjuna and a serpent maiden is called Nāgiyā. The second plot is the folk *Mahābhārata* story of Bhīma’s begetting a son named Babrik with a serpent maiden. According to Hildebeitel (1999: 437) this story is “largely oral and entirely nonclassical”. It has a close parallel in the Bundelkhand folk *Mahābhārata* (ibid.: 418, 421).

The name given to Bhīma’s son (Babrik/Bagrikh) in the folk tradition is apparently connected with the name of Arjuna’s son Babhruvāhana in the classical tradition (Hildebeitel 1999: 417, Harnot 1991: 251). On the other hand, the plot of Bhīma and Babrik is paralleled on the folk level by plots involving Arjuna and his son Aravān, who was sired with the serpent maiden Ulūpī. More details on these tricky textual problems are found in chapter 12 of Hildebeitel (1999).

The second Garhwali story displays a certain similarity with the Sanskrit Hiḍimbā

story, but nothing of this is recognizable in the Kumaoni story. The very close relationship between Himra Sitia (Hiḍimbā) and Guṛku (Ghaṭotkaca, called Ghaṛūko in Rajasthan) is not mentioned in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. However, it is well-known in other parts of the Indian Himalayas. Jettmar-Thakur (n.d.) points out that in the Kullu and Saraj valleys the mother (called Himra, not Heṛmā) and son always appear together (in Kullu their *mūrtis* are frequently together; in the Saraj valley there is a cave with two stones representing mother and son), and Harnot says (1991: 139) that in the Kullu valley Ghaṭotkaca used to provide his mother with a human being for consumption every day.<sup>18</sup> A close parallel to the second Garhwali story with basically the same plot is again found in Rajasthan, in the *āṃvalī bhārat*, ‘the myrobalan story’ (Smith n.d.). Here the demon’s name is Kicaka! He too wants to sacrifice the Pāṇḍavas to the Goddess. When Bhīma tries to rescue them, he meets the demon’s *sister* (who has no name) on the way and sires Ghaṛūko (Ghaṭotkaca) with her.

A particular feature of the Garhwali *Mahābhāratas* is the occurrence of pairs of actors (dyads). The actors of such dyads either have their own separate names or one name is the echo of the other (for very similar formations in Nepal see Höfer 1994 and Maskarinec 1998 in the indexes). Frequently the first is the echo of the second. There are, for example, two giantesses named Urma and Kurma. They guard the world pillar, which rests on the back of the kneeling giant Kurum. Thus, Urma is an echo formation of Kurma (which derives from Kurum). The same holds true for the Kumaoni Heṛmā and Kheṛmā, with the first name being an echo formation of the second—and not ‘a *predictable* [my italics] transformation of Hiḍimbā’ (Leavitt 1988: 7). Indeed, the pronunciation of Heṛmā-Kheṛmā resembles that of Urma-Kurma, and the function of the two resembles that of the serpent maidens Uṛka-Lagendri. In my thesis on the Garhwali folk *Mahābhārata* called *Paṇḍuan* (Zoller 1996) I showed that several such dyads are multi-forms of one underlying dyad (e.g. Uṛka-Lagendri are related to Vāsukī Nāga in exactly the same way as Urma-Kurma are related to Kurum).

This little exercise can teach us a lot. If there has been a copying of the Hiḍimbā story, then it certainly has not come into the Kumaoni folk *Mahābhārata* from the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, but from a Himachali or Garhwali folk *Mahābhārata*. At the end of this process of fusion of what were originally two separate

<sup>18</sup> This latter story is not mentioned in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, but, interestingly, it has a close parallel in the classical Sanskrit drama *Madhyamavyāyoga*, which is ascribed to Bhāsa. The drama states that Ghaṭotkaca has to catch a Brahman as breakfast for his mother. The parallel in the Sanskrit drama is an indication of the antiquity of this folk *Mahābhārata* motif (see Brückner 1996).



folk *Mahābhārata* stories, there is nothing left over in Kumaon which could be connected with the Sanskrit story. Besides, this example also suggests that, at least in the case of the Indian Himalayan *Mahābhāratas*, the process of fragmentization of an originally coherent epic was not from classical to folk, but from folk (perhaps Garhwal or Himachal Pradesh) to folk (Kumaon and other places in the Indian Himalayas). Further research is necessary to investigate possible correlations between the fragmentization of long narratives which consist of series of stories, and the fusion of originally separate stories.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.5 Classical and folk *Mahābhāratas*

#### 3.5.1 Origins

In our present stage of knowledge, it is not possible to say anything for certain about the origin of the Garhwali *Mahābhārata* traditions. I use here the plural ‘traditions’ because there is no homogeneous picture, and it appears that there are either older and newer layers or superimpositions of originally separate traditions. Thus, I agree that “To put it bluntly, the relationship between Indian oral epics and the Sanskrit epics is indirect” (Hiltebeitel 1999: 12) and that

This question of the precedence of the Sanskrit epics is, however, bedeviling. There is danger of implying a master narrative: one that is all the more problematic and even ‘politically dangerous’ because it seems to ‘privilege’ two Sanskrit texts. Let us repeat that regional oral epics develop in the medieval period in regions where it is probably never the Sanskrit epics themselves, but folk versions of the epics, that supply—to borrow a metaphor from Ramanujan—their regional pools of classical epic signifiers. (Hiltebeitel 1999: 43)<sup>20</sup>

Hiltebeitel speaks here of various martial epics which were created probably between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and were influenced in the process of their creation by folk or ‘underground’ *Mahābhāratas*.<sup>21</sup> This was also the period when “Nāths, Bairagis, Jogis, and Satpanth Isma’ilis... minted underground

<sup>19</sup> One would also expect the existence of the opposites of fragmentization and fusion, which one might term ‘concatenation’ and ‘division’ respectively.

<sup>20</sup> In taking up Ramanujan’s idea of ‘regional pools of classical epic signifiers’, which is a generalization of his concept of ‘fragmentization’, Hiltebeitel again runs the risk of accepting a kind of master narrative, this time the ‘fragmented master narrative’. There is a striking similarity between Ramanujan’s imagery with regard to an assumed pan-Indian stock of epical elements and Max Mueller’s concept of a “common fund. . . a large Manasa lake of philosophical thought and language” (1973: xiv).

<sup>21</sup> On the notion of the ‘underground *Mahābhārata*’, see Hiltebeitel (1999: 299ff).

*Mahābhāratas* with interregional and interreligious currency” (ibid.: 414). But, of course, folk *Mahābhāratas* also existed prior to the ‘appropriating’ activities of these religious orders. Thus, one can presume four interactive processes for the central Himalayas:

- (1) If we assume that the major plots of a Proto-*Mahābhārata* are located in the *doāb* of Ganges and Jumna, and if we accept that this must also be more or less the region where the genesis of the oral *Mahābhārata* traditions took place, then one could imagine (but not more than that), that *parts* of the Garhwali *Mahābhāratas* are more or less direct descendants of those original traditions.<sup>22</sup>
- (2) One or more folk *Mahābhāratas* were imported into the central Himalayas somewhere from northern India some time in the medieval period by invading/immigrating groups of Rajputs and/or ‘proselytizing’ yogis.
- (3) There was a constant import of oral and perhaps also of written collections of folk *Mahābhārata* stories of the type *Rānī Draupadī kī kahānī* and similar popular texts. It seems quite possible that it was chiefly the itinerant bards who were responsible for importing these texts.
- (4) There was a constant process of transforming *local* non-*Mahābhārata* stories into *regional* folk *Mahābhārata* stories. They were either integrated into the regional folk *Mahābhāratas* or continued to be transmitted as independent tales.

### 3.5.2 Layers and manifold traditions

It would be wrong to assume that interactions among these four processes led to one uniform tradition. This is very clearly seen in case of the Devāḷs, the bards of the Tons valley, who are the transmitters of the *Paṇḍuaṇ*. Between the *Paṇḍuaṇ* and the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* there exists no direct relationship of one-sided depend-

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<sup>22</sup> All the evidence seems to indicate that the Proto-*Mahābhārata* was an epic transmitted orally in a form of Old Indo-Aryan. On one level it continued to be transmitted orally, first in Middle Indo-Aryan and later in various New Indo-Aryan languages (it is, of course, a well-known fact that it was also translated into many non-Indo-Aryan languages). It was written down in classical Sanskrit at a time when various forms of Middle Indo-Aryan were spoken in northern South Asia. This fact gives reason to assume that oral *Mahābhāratas* in Middle Indo-Aryan dialects existed during those times (roughly between 400 BCE and 400 CE). As pointed out below, we do indeed have proof of the existence of a *Mahābhārata* in Middle Indo-Aryan. But it is also important to take note of the fact that it was not only the oral folk versions of the *Mahābhārata* that underwent linguistic changes in the course of time, but also the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. It has been pointed out (Masica 1991: 59ff) that the written Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* reflects the grammars of languages spoken at later stages.

ence. At the same time, the same bards also perform other *Mahābhārata* stories and songs which often deviate from and contradict the plots of the *Paṇḍuaṇ*, and which are closer to the plots of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*.<sup>23</sup>

It would also be wrong to assume that the manifold folk *Mahābhārata* traditions of the central Himalayas could be neatly explained as the result of the above-mentioned four interactive processes. I have dealt with these problems extensively elsewhere (Zoller 1996), but here are two examples demonstrating some aspects of the problems involved:

(1) Hildebeitel (1999: 414ff) has pursued the question of the relationship between old folk *Mahābhāratas* prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the ‘minted underground *Mahābhāratas*’ emerging after the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The *Paṇḍuaṇ* certainly does display some influences of yogic traditions, but its mythological universe also contains many elements which fail to tally with Rajput ideology, with preoccupations with “land and the goddess” (ibid.: 415), or with other elements regarded by Hildebeitel as central to the Indian folk *Mahābhārata* traditions. In fact, I have shown (Zoller 1997) that the ideology of the Rajputs of Western Garhwal is only indirectly connected with those cultic traditions of which the *Paṇḍuaṇ* is an integral part. Thus the survival of pre-medieval elements in the *Paṇḍuaṇ* is quite strongly indicated.

(2) A case in point in the copying of fragments of a regional into a local tradition is the shamanic recital of ‘Kadum and Padum’ in Western Nepal (Maskarinec 1995: 40, 1998: 292-304).<sup>24</sup> The recital describes how “The elder sister performs austerities for twelve years to obtain the blessing of sons, while the younger sister lives luxuriously, instead... When the time comes for the elder sister to collect her blessing, however, the younger sister deceives God and receives it instead” (Maskarinec 1995: 40). Maskarinec sees some parallels between this recital and the story of Vinatā and Kadrū familiar from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, from various Puranic and many other sources. But *exactly* the same motif is found in the first part of the *Paṇḍuaṇ*. The structure of the western Nepal shamanic text is quite different from a *narrative*, but it contains additional elements which have exact parallels in the *Paṇḍuaṇ*.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it is a distant echo of a central Himalayan folk *Mahābhārata*

<sup>23</sup> Various published Garhwali *Mahābhārata* texts also belong to this newer level (see, for example, Catak 1958 and Nautiyal 1981).

<sup>24</sup> I shall not deal here with non-*Mahābhārata* tales that change into *Mahābhārata* tales and continue as independent tales, but see Zoller (1996).

<sup>25</sup> For the moment it has to remain unclear whether the plot was copied from a central Himalayan folk *Mahābhārata* into the Nepalese recital of ‘Padum and Kadum’ or whether it originally belonged to some other unknown source with a ‘Vinatā and Kadrū’ subject. But it certainly was not copied from ‘Kadum and Padum’ into the *Paṇḍuaṇ*.

story which is found in the *Paṇḍuan*. In this, the *sisters* Kuntī and Gāndhārī<sup>26</sup> each desire a son; after 12 years of worship Kuntī is granted a boon by the Lord of the World which is, however, wrested from her by her younger sister, Gāndhārī. When Kuntī receives a second boon, she wants her future children to become immortal. She achieves this by preparing a meal for the Seven Rishis without using normal tools, e.g. winnowing rice without a winnowing fan (this is done by employing birds, but one bird keeps back a grain, thus creating some additional problems).<sup>27</sup> The same motifs appear more or less clearly in the same sequence in the recital ‘Kadum and Padum’ (Maskarinec 1998: 292ff).

The relationship between the *Paṇḍuan* (as a representative of regional central Himalayan folk *Mahābhāratas*) and the local recital ‘Kadum and Padum’ could be described at least partially with reference to the features employed by Ramanujan and Leavitt. Thus, this example too shows that the four features in fact characterize copying mechanisms between different poetic codes (e.g. ‘long narrative’ → ‘ritual healing text’) and not ‘borrowing’ of texts from the classical to the folk level.

### 3.5.3 Reference and copying, classical and folk traditions

We have seen that the relationship between folk and classical traditions cannot be adequately described merely as ‘borrowing’. I therefore want to suggest the use of the terms: ‘reference’, ‘global copying’ and ‘selective copying’. Each term has both ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ dimensions.

*Reference.* A ‘vertical’ reference exists where a particular folk tradition makes the (fictitious) claim of descent from a widely regarded classical authority (e.g. the Vedas, Puranas) or a superhuman being. ‘Vertical’ reference is typically linked with the need to establish authority, legitimacy or antiquity. In such cases it is frequently claimed that a particular oral folk tradition derives from a sacred book. One example would be the Tamang shamanic tradition (Höfer 1994: 32). This kind of ‘vertical’ reference is not found in the case of the *Paṇḍuan*, although the existence of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is generally known in the area. The *Paṇḍuan* contains a passage in which the Pāṇḍavas capture a big iron rod from a giant, on which ‘all knowledge’, including the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is engraved. Thus, by claiming that the *Paṇḍuan* realizes an ‘otherworldly book’, the epic employs a paradoxical self-reference in order to create authority. ‘Vertical’ references are

<sup>26</sup> In the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* their husbands are brothers.

<sup>27</sup> A somewhat similar story is found in some Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* versions which have not been taken into the Critical Edition: within no time Kuntī has to prepare a meal for a sage. He is satisfied and gives her a boon to procreate children with different gods (Mani 1984: 442).

also found within folk traditions. The four divine Mahāsu brothers from western Garhwal are regarded as the successors of the Pāṇḍavas; therefore the *Paṇḍuan* is regarded as a sacred text. A ‘horizontal’ reference exists where folk traditions allude to other folk traditions, and classical traditions to other classical traditions. There is, for example, a passage in the *Paṇḍuan* in which Bhīma claims that he has already killed the giant Kumbhakarna in Sri Lanka. This is a ‘horizontal’ reference to the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Another example of ‘horizontal’ reference is found in the romance of *Hīr-Rānjhā*, where the hero and the heroine are compared with famous lovers from other romances (Temple n.d.: 573ff).

*Selective copying.* Here one can differentiate between *material* and *immaterial* types of selective copying (Johanson 1992: 179ff). A case of material selective copying is found in those performances of the bards from western Garhwal where they employ aspirated mediae not used in normal language (e.g. *bh*, *dh*, *gh*) instead of unaspirated mediae, in order to create an elevated Hindi-like style. This might even lead to an artificial form like *Ghaṇeś* as a designation of the famous god. A case of immaterial selective copying is found where the same bards change western Garhwali syntactic patterns into patterns typical of Hindi. Other very common forms of selective copying are the copying of the subject matter of an ‘original’ story without copying the language of that story, e.g. copying Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* into a popular chapbook version, and the copying of a general action pattern, e.g. a typical fairy tale plot, into other genres. Many examples of selective copying are the result of diffusion, in which the individual steps of copying from one tradition into another can no longer be traced. Some of the north Indian folk *Mahābhāratas* which perhaps influenced the *Paṇḍuan* might themselves have copied motifs from the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Cases of selective copying frequently display transformations in the Lévi-Straussian sense. The direction of copying is not always clear. There is a myth describing Mahāsu’s advent in western Garhwal in which the deity kills a giant named Kirmir. This parallels an episode in the *Paṇḍuan* in which Bhīma kills a giant called Bag. Both these episodes again have a parallel in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (‘Book of the Forest’, 3.12), where Bhīma kills two giants called Baka and Kirmira, and also in the Sanskrit drama *Madhmayavyāyoga*. It thus appears that this story was always very popular on both classical and folk levels. Phenomena such as fragmentizations, concatenations, fusions, rearrangements, reversals, etc. of plots or motifs are either the outcome of repeated copying in a case of diffusion, or of a copying from one type of ‘poetic pattern’ (‘genre’) into another. Selective copying is frequently motivated by a need to adapt the copied elements to local conditions and ‘needs’, e.g. to pre-existing repertoires, to cognitive orientations (as manifested in the organization of kinship,

polity, ownership, ideology of the human self, aesthetic ideals, etc.), or to the demands of an audience and the circumstances of patronage.

*Global copying.* Examples include passages in Prakrit language in Sanskrit dramas, *tatsamas* (loan words used in a modern South Asian language in the same form as in Sanskrit), and the Sanskrit names of actors in folk *Mahābhāratas*. Another example of global copying can be observed during the so-called Daknātsaṅ festival in western Garhwal in spring. On the fifth and final day of the festival, the women of a village collect on the village ground and start to copy the dialects, gestures etc. of the people of the surrounding areas. The effect is highly amusing.

The above discussion of forms of reference and copying between different traditions and ‘poetic patterns’ shows that Ramanujan’s ‘borrowing of classical myths into folk traditions’ is, at the most, a very special case of a much broader complex of interrelated phenomena. His attempt, however, was perhaps guided by the intuition that the occurrence of copying is in many cases motivated by factors like ‘authority’ and ‘prestige’. The pursuance of authority and prestige in folk traditions of verbal art does not, however, automatically lead to a copying of Sanskritic traditions. In very many cases a vague and at times even unfounded reference to a prestigious tradition apparently serves the purpose. Leavitt’s crude image that “South Asia did have the equivalent of Roman Empires and of Christianity carrying common influence across a vast region” (p. 69) is thus not apposite; the *Paṇḍuaṅ* is still a living tradition in the central Himalayas, but the *Iliad* is not sung any more in the mountain valleys of Greece.

### 3.6 The *Paṇḍuaṅ* and other *Mahābhāratas*

The textual history of the *Paṇḍuaṅ* and other oral *Mahābhāratas* of the central Himalayas is apparently quite intricate. There is no indication of a relationship of direct transmission between the central Himalayan *Mahābhāratas* and the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, and there is nothing to indicate that the pandits of the central Himalayas played a pivotal role in the importation of supra-regional or Sanskrit *Mahābhāratas*.<sup>28</sup> Instead of just looking down on the Kumaoni *mahābhārat* and up to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, Leavitt would have done better to look into folk *Mahābhārata* traditions in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bundelkhand, Tamil Nadu, etc., for it is on the level of the folk *Mahābhāratas* of India that most connections, parallels,

<sup>28</sup> Among the very few Brahman villages in western Garhwal are some in which the Brahmins also occasionally perform *Mahābhārata* narratives. These (sung) narratives, however, are part and parcel of the regional tradition. Thus, Chandola’s ‘Folk to Classic to Folk’ model for Garhwal (Chandola 1977), which is a variant of Leavitt’s model, is just as incorrect as Leavitt’s.

and similarities are found. Let me present just a few examples of archaic traits and parallels:

(1) One knows of “the existence of an independent version of the *Mahābhārata* story in the Apabhramsa dialect of Sindh (and possibly also of North-Western or Western Panjab), prior to 1000 A.D.” (Chatteyji [sic] 1965: 163).<sup>29</sup> The first remarkable feature of this version is that the names occurring in it are partly *tatsamas* (loan words used in the same form as in Sanskrit), partly *ardhatatsamas* (loan words from Sanskrit borrowed at an early stage of Indo-Aryan), and partly *tadbhavas* (words which have evolved organically from early Indo-Aryan forms). And this is perhaps a reflection of its content. Besides a number of episodes which appear to be quite close to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, there are also other episodes which do not occur in the latter: “The divergences and new episodes show the existence of *saga* materials outside of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, and this points to a different recension or independent version of the epic which was current in Sindh and Western Panjab as well” (Chatteyji [sic] 1965: 159). Chatterji quotes several *tadbhava* names: *Ajjuṇa* (for Arjuna), *Dujjohṇa* (for Duryodhana), *\*Dovaddi* (for Draupadi), *Juhiṭṭhila* (for Yudhiṣṭhira), *\*Hatthinā* (for Hastinapura),<sup>30</sup> etc. (ibid.: 160-3). These very names prove the existence of a very old and at least partially independent regional *Mahābhārata* tradition, because their Middle Indo-Aryan forms reflect sound changes which were already completed when the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* was compiled.

(2) Chatterji points out that one section of this fairly independent *Mahābhārata* version deals with the early history of Sindh, in which two tribes, the Jaṭṭa and the Meda, are said to be ruled by the Kauravas. The name of the Meda survives in the modern name of the Meo of Rajasthan (Chatteyji [sic] 1965: 157). The present-day Meos, who are now Muslims, do indeed have a folk *Mahābhārata* tradition. We are eagerly awaiting the publication of a recorded version by Shail Mayaram, as it may show how this modern version is connected with the old Apabhramśa version. However, there do exist parallels between the Apabhramśa version and the modern Rajasthani *Mahābhārata*. Just one example:<sup>31</sup> the Apabhramśa version contains a story in which Gāndhāri piles up her hundred slain sons, and climbs up onto the heap of corpses in order to reach the food on top of it (ibid.: 159). Virtually the same

<sup>29</sup> The version was translated from Arabic into Persian in 1026. The translation from Sindhi Apabhramśa into Arabic was produced before that date, but the exact year is unknown. The original Persian version is no longer extant, but a quote or summary appeared in a later Persian work. This quote or summary was published and translated into French in 1844, and then translated into English in 1941 (Chatteyji [sic] 1965: 156).

<sup>30</sup> In the Garhwali *Paṇḍuan* it is called *athna*!

<sup>31</sup> A comprehensive comparison will appear in my publication of the Garhwali *Paṇḍuan*.

story is related in the Rajasthani *Mahābhārata* ‘myrobalan story’, which did not appear until 1000 years later (Smith n.d.).

The above example of the Jaṭṭa and Meda shows that groups of people connected with folk *Mahābhārata* traditions sometimes preferred to associate themselves with the Kauravas rather than the Pāṇḍavas. This contradicts the political outlook of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and suggests the existence of old folk *Mahābhāratas* with a different outlook. Compare also the genealogy (*vaṃśāvalī*) of the kings of the Himalayan state of Kangra, which mentions a king named Suśarma-candra who sided with the Kauravas (Hutchinson and Vogel 1982: 104), and note the old Kaurava cult in the upper valley of the Tons river in Garhwal (Sax 1999, 2000).

There are dozens of parallel plots in the various Indian folk *Mahābhāratas* which have no direct parallels in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, and at least some of the north Indian folk *Mahābhāratas* share a religious ideology which is not found in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. These parallels and the common ideology may perhaps not suffice to establish the former existence of a pan-Indian underground *Mahābhārata*, but they do strongly indicate the existence of very old regional folk *Mahābhāratas* with a common stock of ‘*saga* materials outside of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*’.

## Conclusion

Leavitt’s model of interactions between the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and the folk *Mahābhāratas* of the central Himalayas assumes a direct relationship of one-sided dependence between the two traditions. However, I have presented evidence which shows that this model is inadequate. It is based on a smattering of facts from the intricate history of oral traditions, and it tries to perpetuate an outdated ‘classical centrism’. I have shown, instead, that the folk *Mahābhāratas* of the central Himalayas are directly related only with other folk traditions, and that there exists no direct transmission from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* to the long-established folk *Mahābhāratas* of the central Himalayas. The relationship between classical and folk traditions is not essentially different from that between the different folk traditions or between the different classical traditions. They are all governed by the same mechanisms of reference and copying, which are frequently motivated by a search for prestige and authority. But this motivation does not inevitably lead to Sanskritization. After all, a Himalayan shaman aspires to become a good shaman, not a good pandit. These two great traditions, the folk and the classical, are like meandering rivers. Time and again they come very close, but this does not hinder them in the continuation of their own courses.



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