



Article

Comparative Poetics of Compositional Formulas in Karakalpak, Turkmen, and English Folk Tales

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Abstract: This article comparatively and poetically examines the techniques of the rule of three, repetition, accumulation, and contamination in Karakalpak, Turkmen, and English folk tales. It substantiates that a compositional formula is not merely a traditional phrase, but a stable structural device that organizes events in a particular order. The study identifies that the rule of three divides the action into preparatory and concluding stages, repetition reveals the moral differences between characters, accumulation expands the chain of events, while contamination combines several plot lines into a unified work. The comparative results demonstrate that although compositional formulas have a common structural basis, their content acquires national characteristics according to the lifestyle, system of characters, and performance traditions of each people.

Keywords: folk tale, comparative poetics, compositional formula, rule of three, repetition, accumulation, contamination, plot, oral performance.

1. Introduction

Events in a folk tale are not narrated in a random sequence. Its composition is based on a particular order and patterns formed through the process of oral performance [1]. The hero undergoing a trial three times, the repetition of the same question or action, the expansion of the chain of events as new participants are added, and the combination of several plot parts within a single work are stable characteristics of folk-tale composition [2].

The term *compositional formula* is often used in relation to ready-made words and expressions. However, this concept is not limited only to traditional openings and endings [3]. The organization of events into three stages, the sequential repetition of similar episodes, or the gradual addition of new elements to previous actions can also function as compositional formulas [4].

The researcher Axel Olrik pays particular attention to the rule of three, repetition, and the intensification of the final position among the principles that ensure the stable preservation of folk narratives in oral tradition [5]. According to the scholar, the same action in folk narratives is often presented three times, while the principal result emerges in the final episode. Thus, the rule of three and repetition are not methods of artificially extending an event, but devices for organizing it and emphasizing the decisive result [6].

The purpose of this article is to comparatively analyze the compositional functions of the rule of three, repetition, accumulation, and contamination in Karakalpak, Turkmen, and English folk tales and to identify their common and national-artistic characteristics [7].

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2. Materials and Methods

The study employs comparative-typological, structural, textual, and poetic methods of analysis.

The **rule of three** refers to the organization of characters, actions, objects, tasks, or time according to three units. The mere mention of the number three in a tale does not constitute a compositional rule of three. The formula of three is formed only when the three units are functionally interconnected and influence the development of events.

The rule of three often consists of two preparatory episodes and one decisive episode. The first two actions establish a particular pattern, while the third action provides a concluding meaning to this pattern. Such a structure creates a sense of anticipation in the listener and strengthens the impact of the final action.

Analysis of the Rule of Three

In the Karakalpak folk tale "**Möjenetas**," a rich man gives his son money to test his ability to trade. On his way to the market, the young man first buys a suffering donkey, then a cat, and on the third occasion a snake. In all three episodes, the questions and answers are constructed according to the same pattern:

"— Hey, why are you beating this one? — he asks..."

"— Then will you sell this to me? — the boy says..."

"He asks for one thousand gold coins. The boy gives one thousand gold coins ... and takes the donkey home".

According to the logic of the market, the young man's actions appear unprofitable. Instead of purchasing goods that could generate income, he buys suffering animals. However, the threefold repetition of this action demonstrates that his compassion toward animals is not accidental.

The rescued donkey, cat, and snake later establish a common objective:

"Beyond this mountain, in front of a rich man's house, there is a stone called Möjenetas... That Möjenetas will lead all of us to wealth and happiness".

Each of the three animals performs a distinct function in the plot. The donkey provides transportation and carries loads; the cat helps through its agility; and the snake fights against dangerous creatures. Thus, the rule of three establishes not only the number of characters but also a system of mutually complementary functions.

The rule of three is gradually intensified in the tale. While the donkey and cat are ordinary domestic animals, the snake is a dangerous creature. Each successive choice of the hero becomes more complicated than the previous one. In this way, the rule of three reveals the hero's character while simultaneously preparing the subsequent magical events.

In the Turkmen folk tale "**Üç gyz dogan**," the three sisters constitute the basis of the entire composition. The father encourages his daughters to work, but each of them avoids the task with a separate excuse:

"The eldest daughter said: 'Father, I am spinning silk.' The middle daughter replied: 'Father, I am making a skullcap, I do not want to get my hands dirty.' The youngest daughter said: 'I am playing with a doll'".

Although the answers are structurally similar, they individually express the three girls' attitudes toward work. The rule of three does not make the characters identical; rather, it creates an opportunity to compare their personalities and subsequent choices.

When the girls return home, each of them guesses a separate object left by their mother: one mentions a mirror and comb, the second a water jug, and the third sour milk and bread. They then ask the sleeping places of the sheep, cow, and camel about the direction in which the family has moved. Each sleeping place repeats the girls'

earlier mocking words and refuses to answer:

“— Hey, sheep’s sleeping place, where has our house moved?”
 “— Well, you used to say, ‘the sleeping place has become dark’”.

Here, the ethical function of the rule of three becomes apparent. The words previously spoken by the girls return to them later. As a result, the rule of three expresses the folk conception that a person’s words and actions do not remain without consequences.

In the English folk tale **“The Three Heads of the Well,”** the rule of three is integrated into all major stages of the composition. The heroine is instructed to strike a thorny barrier three times with a stick. Then three golden heads emerge from the well one after another and make the same request:

“Wash me and comb me,
 And lay me down softly.
 And lay me on a bank to dry...” .

The girl fulfills the requests of all three golden heads. In return, the first head grants her beauty, the second a pleasant voice, and the third a happy destiny and the opportunity to become a princess.

In the subsequent part of the tale, the same threefold structure is repeated with the stepsister. She treats the golden heads rudely. As a result, the first head gives her illness on her face, the second an unpleasant voice, and the third the fate of marrying a poor shoemaker.

Thus, two symmetrical sequences are formed.

In the English tale, the rule of three ensures the moral comparison of the characters. The different actions of two characters in the same situation and their different outcomes artistically express the folk attitude toward good and evil.

Repetition as a Compositional Device

Repetition is the recurrence of a word, action, question, or entire episode. In oral tradition, it enables the storyteller to preserve the sequence of events and allows the listener to anticipate the subsequent action. Therefore, folkloric repetition cannot be regarded simply as an unnecessary duplication within the text.

The following types of repetition can be identified in folk tales:

1. repetition of the same word or expression;
2. performance of the same action by several characters;
3. repetition of an episode with the same basic structure but a different outcome;
4. strengthening of danger or task with each repetition;
5. repetition of the same situation involving positive and negative characters.

In the Karakalpak tale **“Möjenetas,”** the questions “Why are you beating it?”, “Will you sell it to me?”, and “How much does it cost?” connect the episodes involving the donkey, cat, and snake. This repetition raises the hero’s attitude toward animals to the level of a stable moral characteristic.

In the Turkmen tale **“Üç gyz dogan,”** the father’s tasks and the girls’ excuses are presented through similar sentences. Later, the episodes involving the sleeping places of the sheep, cow, and camel are repeated. However, a new animal and a new response appear in each repetition. Therefore, this repetition simultaneously provides rhythm to the events and ensures semantic development.

In the English tale **“The Three Heads of the Well,”** the song spoken by the golden heads is repeated word for word. However, the characters’ attitudes are not the same: the first girl fulfills the request, while the second rejects it. As a result, the same repetition reveals contrasting moral meanings.

A comparison of the three traditions demonstrates that repetition in Karakalpak and Turkmen tales is more frequently expressed through questions and answers,

advice, and everyday actions, whereas in English tales it is more often represented through rhymed songs and symmetrical episodes. Their common function is to organize events, reveal differences between characters, and prepare the final outcome.

Accumulation

Accumulation can be simply explained as the addition of previous elements to every new element. In cumulative composition, when a new character or action appears, the previous elements do not disappear; instead, they are repeated as part of the new sequence. As a result, the text gradually expands.

Steve Thompson describes cumulative tales as works constructed on the basis of chains of numbers, characters, objects, or interconnected actions. In his *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, cumulative formulas are grouped under motifs Z20–Z59.

There is a distinction between simple repetition and accumulation. In repetition, the size of an episode may remain unchanged. In accumulation, however, each new repetition becomes broader than the previous one.

In Karakalpak folklore, “**Möjenetas**” is not a fully cumulative tale, but characters and their functions accumulate throughout the narrative. The young man first rescues the donkey, then the cat, and finally the snake. Each new helper does not remove the previous ones from the events.

During the process of obtaining the magical stone, each of the three animals performs a function corresponding to its nature. This may be regarded not as a complete verbal chain, but as an accumulation of characters and functions. As each new helper is added, the hero’s range of possible actions expands.

In the Turkmen folk tale “**Ýartygulak**,” the hero’s movement from one state to another creates a narrative accumulation. Ýartygulak first falls into a camel, after the camel is slaughtered he remains in a piece of intestine, and the wolf subsequently swallows the intestine. As a result, the hero begins warning shepherds while inside the wolf.

Whenever the wolf approaches the sheep, Ýartygulak shouts:

“Hey, shepherd! Do not say that you did not hear me, hey, the wolf has taken your sheep, hey”.

Each new event results from the previous one: the camel swallowing Ýartygulak leads to the camel being slaughtered; the disposal of the intestine leads to the wolf swallowing it; and entering the wolf leads to the episodes in which the shepherds are warned. Therefore, accumulation in the tale emerges not through counting words, but through the accumulation of causes and consequences.

In English folklore, “**The Old Woman and Her Pig**” is an excellent example of cumulative composition. The pig bought by the old woman refuses to cross a barrier. She asks the dog for help. After the dog refuses, she successively turns to the stick, fire, water, ox, butcher, rope, rat, and cat. With each new request, the previous actions are fully repeated:

“Cat! cat! kill rat; rat won’t gnaw rope; rope won’t hang butcher; butcher won’t kill ox; ox won’t drink water; water won’t quench fire; fire won’t burn stick; stick won’t beat dog; dog won’t bite pig...”.

After the chain reaches its highest point, the actions occur in reverse order:

“The cat began to kill the rat; the rat began to gnaw the rope; the rope began to hang the butcher...”.

In the tale, each new participant is added to the previous sequence, increasing the volume of the text. At the end, the entire chain moves backward, and the initial problem the pig’s inability to cross the barrier is resolved.

Comparative material makes it possible to distinguish three forms of accumulation: the gradual addition of words and sentences; the accumulation of characters and their functions; and the expansion of a chain of events consisting of

causes and consequences.

Contamination

Contamination is the combination of two or more previously independent plot parts within a single tale. It can simply be understood as the “creative combination of plots.”

It is not appropriate to apply the concept of contamination to every multi-episode work. To identify it, it is necessary to examine the presence of relatively independent parts of events, the emergence of a new goal after the first problem has been resolved, changes in the composition of characters or direction of action, and the independent occurrence of certain plot parts in other variants.

D. V. Dyakov considers contamination not a simple mechanical combination of plots, but a device that expands the scope of a work in oral tradition. Researcher Julien d'Huy studies the combination of tale types in the form of networks and demonstrates that certain plots may function as centers connecting different narrative types.

In the first part of the Karakalpak tale “**Möjenetas**,” an inexperienced young man goes to the market and buys animals instead of goods that could generate income. This part represents a household-didactic episode associated with the parents’ desire to teach their son trade.

In the second part, the rescued animals begin to speak and direct the hero toward obtaining the magical stone. From this point, the everyday episode transforms into a plot involving an extraordinary journey and a struggle against dangerous forces.

Three layers are combined within the tale: the everyday story of an inexperienced merchant; the return of kindness by the rescued animals; and the adventure of obtaining the magical stone.

These parts are causally connected. The young man’s initially seemingly useless purchases prepare the helpers necessary for his subsequent journey. Therefore, contamination in the tale can be understood not as accidental mixing, but as a logical and creative combination.

In the Turkmen folk tale “**Üç gyz dogan**,” the beginning describes the father’s attempt to teach his daughters to work. This part is based on family upbringing and attitudes toward labor. After the girls remain far from home, the tale moves into a new stage based on choosing a path, wandering, and encounters with extraordinary creatures.

The problem in the first part is laziness, while the goal in the subsequent part is to find the home and survive in a dangerous environment. Thus, a household-educational plot is combined with a magical journey plot.

However, in order to define this phenomenon strictly as contamination, comparison with other Turkmen variants and international tale indexes is required. Therefore, it is more scientifically appropriate to regard this text as a complex composition inclined toward contamination.

The English folk tale “**Nix Nought Nothing**” is distinguished by the combination of several independent plot directions. At the beginning of the work, the king unknowingly promises his son to a monstrous creature in order to cross a river. The creature first takes the children of the henkeeper and gardener, and on the third occasion captures the real hero.

In the second part, the hero is given three impossible tasks: cleaning a seven-mile-long stable, drying up a huge lake, and bringing eggs down from a tall tree without breaking them. The monster’s daughter helps him.

In the third part, the characters escape. A comb, hairpin, and magical vessel are thrown behind them and transform into a thorny barrier, a sharp obstacle, and water in the pursuer’s path.

In the fourth part, after returning home, the hero falls into a magical sleep. The

girl who helped him must awaken him and expose the plan of the false bride.

Thus, the following plot parts are combined in the tale: promising a child to a supernatural force; three impossible tasks; magical escape; the hero forgetting or failing to recognize his beloved; and the opposition between the true and false bride.

These parts are connected by the character of the monster's daughter. She helps complete the tasks, organizes the escape, and restores the hero's memory at the end. Thus, the consistent activity of one character combines different plot parts into a unified composition.

3. Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that although the rule of three, repetition, accumulation, and contamination are closely related, they are not identical phenomena.

Table 1. Main Compositional Devices and Their Functions in the Text

Compositional device	Main characteristic	Function in the text
Rule of three	Organization of a character or action into three units	Creates preparatory stages and intensifies the third action
Repetition	Recurrence of a word, action, or episode	Provides performance rhythm, memory, and character comparison
Accumulation	Addition of previous elements to a new element	Expands the chain of text and events
Contamination	Combination of relatively independent plots	Increases the scope and compositional complexity of the tale

The rule of three expresses quantitative order, repetition expresses recurrence, accumulation represents a growing chain, while contamination represents the combination of plot parts. Several of these devices may occur simultaneously within a single tale [8].

For example, in *"Nix Nought Nothing,"* the three tasks represent the rule of three; the similar commands within each task represent repetition; the increasing obstacles during the escape represent cumulative expansion; and the combination of the impossible tasks, magical escape, and forgetting plots represents contamination [9].

The comparative analysis of the three folk traditions demonstrates that compositional formulas have a common poetic basis. In all three traditions, the rule of three serves to facilitate memorization, compare characters, and intensify the decisive action. Repetition provides rhythm to performance and allows the listener to anticipate the development of events [10].

National characteristics are manifested not in the existence of the compositional formula itself, but in the characters and events through which it is expressed. In the Karakalpak tale *"Möjenetas,"* the rule of three is associated with the market, trade, compassion toward animals, and the magical stone [11]. In the Turkmen tale *"Üç gyz dogan,"* it serves family upbringing, labor, and the comparison of the destinies of three sisters. In the English tale *"The Three Heads of the Well,"* it is expressed through the well, golden heads, magical gifts, and punishment [12].

The national-performance forms of accumulation also differ. In the Karakalpak tale, helpers and their functions accumulate; in the Turkmen tale, a chain of events based on causes and consequences expands; while in the English tale, the entire preceding verbal sequence is repeated with each new participant [13].

Contamination in Turkic tales demonstrates the combination of household-educational events with a magical journey, while in the English tale it demonstrates the combination of several magical plot directions within a single adventure [14]. However,

the mere abundance of motifs in a text does not prove contamination. For this purpose, variants, tale indexes, and the relative independence of event parts must also be examined [15].

4. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Karakalpak, Turkmen, and English folk tales demonstrates that compositional formulas constitute an important part of folk narrative poetics. They function not merely as conventional linguistic patterns but as stable structural mechanisms that organize events, regulate narrative development, reveal character traits, and strengthen the impact of the final outcome. The analysis confirms that the rule of three, repetition, accumulation, and contamination have distinct functions while frequently operating together within the same tale. The rule of three is primarily associated with the organization of actions into three interconnected stages, often progressing from preparation to a decisive final action. Repetition supports the rhythm and memorability of oral performance and creates opportunities for comparing characters and their moral choices. Accumulation expands the narrative through the gradual addition of characters, functions, or cause-and-effect events, whereas contamination integrates relatively independent plot components into a broader and more complex narrative structure. The comparison also demonstrates that these compositional principles have a common structural basis across the three traditions, but their realization reflects national artistic and cultural characteristics. Karakalpak tales tend to express accumulation through the addition of characters and their functions, Turkmen tales frequently develop cumulative structures through chains of causes and consequences, while English tales demonstrate particularly clear verbal and sequential accumulation. Similarly, contamination in the examined Turkic tales often connects everyday and educational situations with magical journeys, whereas English tales combine several magical and adventurous plot directions. Therefore, compositional formulas should be regarded as fundamental poetic mechanisms through which oral narratives achieve structural unity, rhythm, memorability, and artistic coherence. Their comparative study provides a productive basis for understanding both the universal principles of folk-tale composition and the national features through which these principles are transformed in different cultural and performance traditions. Further research comparing additional tale variants and international tale indexes could provide a broader understanding of how compositional formulas develop, interact, and change across folklore traditions

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