

Basque *Bertsolaritza*

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What is oral tradition within Basque literature?

Prior to 1879, only 102 books were produced in Euskara and only four of those were literary (Lasagabaster 1990:2), as opposed to treatises on the language, sermons, and so forth, so in essence written Basque literature is a twentieth-century phenomenon. The forms of oral literature were abundant prior to the emergence of the written forms, and the art of the *bertsolari* ("Basque troubadour") formed the basis for much of the early written poetry. *Bertso paperak* ("paper verses") were printed with the name of the melody to which they should be sung, for example. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 gave Euskara and other minority languages of Spain equal status with Spanish within their respective regions. That development was a boon to the language as a whole and generated a renaissance in the oral art forms. The *bertsolaris* began competing in organized competitions that were televised and broadcast via radio, allowing superior competitors' names to become household words and making the champions celebrities. This also prompted some to complain of a loss of cosiness and cohesiveness as compared to performances during the Franco era (Garzia, Sarasua, and Egaña 2001:147). The rebirth of the *pastorale*, the outdoor community theater productions of lyrics and dance passed on from generation to generation, has generated a desire for new story lines that reflect more current issues. Although modern life has necessitated a shortening of the theatrical presentation and several towns now cooperate to produce a *pastorale* event (whereas in the past a single town would traditionally host it and provide the cast and crew), it is also true that thousands may now attend a *pastorale* instead of the few hundred from neighboring villages who once formed the audience.

A burgeoning written literature makes apparent a greater gap between oral and written traditions, but within Basque culture the oral arts hold a much more enthusiastic place in the hearts and minds of the people, who have as yet failed to become avid readers of works in Euskara (Olaziregi 1998).

What are the most interesting new directions in oral tradition studies within Basque literature?

Aulestia's work went to great lengths to establish that *bertsolaris* were, in fact, not troubadours at all. While troubadours reconfigure lines acquired over the span of a career to tell an old and familiar tale, *bertsolaris* extemporize, creating new verses on the spur of the moment about topics assigned to them at the moment of creation. The last decade has been an interesting mix of historical approaches to discussions of *bertsolaritza*, such as works by Aristorena (1992) and Amuriza (1996), along with new entries in the critical field that tackle theoretical questions. In the latter category, Garzia, Sarasua, and Egaña (2001) move beyond discussions of the socio-cultural relevance of *bertsolaritza* and address the co-textual factors, that is, the relationship between the artist and the audience, with regard to shared and disparate elements of the performance and its reception. They represent a unique mix of the new technologies and the traditional art form, as Garzia hosted a television program that featured *bertsolaris* in performance and both Sarasua and Egaña are celebrated *bertsolaris* themselves. Their discussion of poetic strategies and memory/memorability move the Basque critics into a new arena.

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