



# Or re Tradition

Volume 35 / No. 1, December 2021



# Oral Tradition

---

Volume 35

December 2021

Number 1

---

*Founding Editor*

John Miles Foley (†)

*Editor*

David F. Elmer

*Managing Editor*

Daniel J. Frim



Please direct inquiries to:  
Oral Tradition  
Department of the Classics  
204 Boylston Hall  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, MA 02138 USA  
+617.495.4019 (ph)

[journal@oraltradition.org](mailto:journal@oraltradition.org)

E-ISSN: 1542-4308

Each contribution copyright © 2021 by its author. All rights reserved. *Oral Tradition* is published by the Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University.

The editors and the publisher assume no responsibility for statements of fact or opinion by the authors.

*Oral Tradition* (<https://journal.oraltradition.org>) is an open-access journal devoted to the study of the world's oral traditions, past and present. The journal welcomes contributions that explore the creation, transmission, and interpretation of all forms of oral traditional expression, as well as investigations of relations between oral and written traditions, brief accounts of important fieldwork, and editions of oral texts. Submissions should be formatted according to the journal's style sheet (available on the journal's website, under "About"), and may be sent via e-mail ([journal@oraltradition.org](mailto:journal@oraltradition.org)). Contributions must be in English; all quotations of primary materials must be made in the original language(s) with following English translations. If appropriate, please describe any supporting materials that could be used to illustrate the article, such as photographs, audio recordings, or video recordings. *Oral Tradition* publishes such materials online. Submissions accepted by the editor for review will be refereed by at least two readers.

*Oral Tradition* appears once or twice yearly. The current issue and all back issues from 1986 onward are available open-access and free-of-charge at <https://journal.oraltradition.org>.

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Mark C. Amodio	Larry Evers	Nada Milošević-Dorđević
Patricia Arant	Ruth Finnegan	Stephen Mitchell
Samuel Armistead (†)	Joxerra Garzía	Gregory Nagy
Paul F. Bandia	Andrew Gerstle	Joseph Falaky Nagy
Richard Bauman	Terry Gunnell	Susan Niditch
Margaret H. Beissinger	Lee Haring	Walter J. Ong (†)
Dan Ben-Amos	Joseph Harris	Tom Pettitt
Mark Bender	Lauri Harvilahti	Shelley Quinn
Mary Ellen Brown	Galit Hasan-Rokem	Burton Raffel (†)
Jonathan Burgess	Holly Hearon	Karl Reichl
Chogjin	Lauri Honko (†)	John Roberts
Bridget Connelly	Dell Hymes (†)	Joel Sherzer
Robert P. Creed (†)	Bonnie Irwin	Joseph Sobol
Robert Culley (†)	Martin Jaffee	Timothy Tangherlini
Thomas DuBois	Minna Skafte Jensen	Dennis Tedlock (†)
Casey Dué Hackney	Werner Kelber	J. Barre Toelken (†)
Joseph J. Duggan (†)	Françoise Létoublon	Ronald J. Turner
Alan Dundes (†)	Victor Mair	Andrew Wiget
Mark W. Edwards (†)	Peter Middleton	Paulu Zedda

This page is intentionally left blank.

# Contents

<i>Editor's Column</i> .....	1
George E. Dunkel <i>The Oral Style of the R̥gveda</i> .....	3
Gabriel McGuire <i>Epic Inside-Out:</i> <i>Qız Jibek and the Politics of Genre in Kazakh Oral Literature</i> .....	37
Andrew Cowell <i>Coast Miwok Oral Tradition:</i> <i>Grammar and Ethnopoetic Organization in a California Context</i> .....	67
Larraitz Ariznabarreta Garabieta <i>Founding Fathers, Patrons, Mothers, and Other Bertso-School Groupies</i> .....	87
Richard K. Wolf <i>The Musical Poetry of Endangered Languages:</i> <i>Kota and Wakhi Poem-Songs in South and Central Asia</i> .....	103
Cheikh Tidiane Lo <i>Dynamics of Voiced Poetry:</i> <i>Popular Education through Wolof and Soninke Sufi Religious Texts</i> .....	167
<i>About the Authors</i> .....	189

This page is intentionally left blank.



## Editor's Column

Readers of *Oral Tradition* will find in this issue an exceptionally rich and varied assortment of topics. The six essays presented here discuss texts and performances in eight different languages, several of them appearing for the very first time in the journal's pages. As George E. Dunkel ("The Oral Style of the *R̥gveda*") points out in his formulaic analysis of the oldest sacred text of Hinduism, no discussion of *R̥gvedic* orality appears in any of the previous 34 volumes of *Oral Tradition*—a surprising omission given the undeniably oral character of the *R̥gveda*. One has to go all the way back to *Oral Tradition* Volume 4, Number 3, to find even brief mention of the text that stands at the center of Gabriel McGuire's study of what might be called the political ecology of literary genres ("Epic Inside-Out: *Qız Jibek* and the Politics of Genre in Kazakh Oral Literature"): taking the Kazakh "lyric epic" *Qız Jibek* as his example, McGuire explores the strategies used by Soviet scholars to accommodate oral literature within the ideology of the Soviet state. The language and texts discussed by Andrew Cowell ("Coast Miwok Oral Tradition: Grammar and Ethnopoetic Organization in a California Context") represent another first for *Oral Tradition*—and not just for *Oral Tradition*, since Cowell's article includes the first-ever publication of narrative texts in Coast Miwok, a language of the Indigenous inhabitants of the region north of San Francisco Bay. Using texts provided in the 1960s by Sarah Ballard, the last traditional speaker of Coast Miwok, Cowell demonstrates that even fragmentary narratives can exhibit notable verbal artistry. The Basque tradition of *bertsolaritza* will already be familiar to long-time readers of the journal (see Volume 22, Number 2), but Larraitz Ariznabarreta Garabieta ("Founding Fathers, Patrons, Mothers, and Other *Bertso*-School Groupies") generates new perspectives by examining the way *bertso* schools have shaped the modern performance and reception of *bertsolaritza*. Richard K. Wolf ("The Musical Poetry of Endangered Languages: Kota and Wakhi Poem-Songs in South and Central Asia"), drawing on extensive fieldwork in South India and Afghanistan, reveals the productive, vitalizing force of the "poem-song" in two endangered languages, which, again, appear in this journal for the first time. Finally, Cheikh Tidiane Lo explores the importance of "voiced texts" in the contemporary practice of Sufism in West Africa, with special emphasis on texts in West African languages ("Dynamics of Voiced Poetry: Popular Education through Wolof and Soninke Sufi Religious Texts").

These brief descriptions hardly do justice to the six articles contained in this issue—but I hope they suffice to justify my description of the issue as "exceptionally rich and varied." In the coming months readers can look forward to the arrival of another collection of essays that will be no less rich, although it will be more narrowly focused on a common theme: Volume 35, Number 2, to appear in the early summer of 2022, will be a special issue on Iranian religious traditions edited by Philip Kreyenbroek and Khanna Omarkhali. In the meantime, I hope that readers will enjoy the riches of the present issue.

David F. Elmer  
Editor, *Oral Tradition*

This page is intentionally left blank.

## The Oral Style of the *Ṛgveda*<sup>1</sup>

George E. Dunkel

### 1. The Study of *Ṛgvedic* Repetitions

In the second volume of his 1877 edition of the *Ṛgveda*, Theodor Aufrecht collects about three thousand repeated verses and phrases from that text. Beginning with the paired Vāṅkhyā hymns 8.49-52, which he describes as “two versions of the same material . . . like two school-essays” (1877:II, vii),<sup>2</sup> Aufrecht then lists, over twenty-five pages, 176 sets of formulaic verses and variants which “express the same ideas in a somewhat different style” (1877:II, xi). At the end of the volume he appends over 150 double-columned pages of verse-beginnings and parallel passages, along with their variants in the other Vedas (1877:II, 514-666).

From their plenitude he concludes that the *Ṛgveda* is the remnant of a long poetic tradition, in line with the Vedic belief in “an oldest or original Veda, of which the present ones are just relics.” He considers that “only few hymns are still in the form in which they were originally composed; . . . only a remnant of the ancient hymns of India survives” (1877:II, xii). This attitude is crystallized in his calling a *ṛṣi* (a Vedic singer or oral poet) an epigone (1877:II, xxiv).

In his epochal *Rig-Vedic Repetitions* Maurice Bloomfield reckons that about one-fifth of *Ṛgvedic* verses can be considered to be repetitions (1916:4). The total of repeated whole verses rises to “not far from a third” when the variants of the other Vedas are taken into account (Bloomfield and Edgerton 1930:11).

Bloomfield of course sees that shorter phrases of noun and adjective, of verb and subject or object, and of local particle and noun are even more frequent than the repeated whole verses: “Set phrases, groups of two or three words—what Bergaigne used to call formulas<sup>3</sup>—are, as every Vedist knows, the commonplace of Vedic technique” (1916:xiv); “It will be seen that

---

<sup>1</sup>This sketch arose from the research project “Familiengrammatik des *Ṛgveda*” at the Indogermanisches Seminar of the University of Zürich, funded from May, 2006, to August, 2009, by Merbag AG, Zug, and by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Bern. I thank both of these far-sighted organizations for their support. The complete version, with full material, will appear as Chapter 6 of my *Ṛgvedic Family Grammar* (forthcoming). *Ṛgvedic* translations are those of Jamison and Brereton 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Bloomfield similarly notes, “They read like two essays on the same theme, written by the same author, in two slightly differing moods” (1916:12).

<sup>3</sup>Abel Bergaigne frequently did use the term “formula” in the general sense of “text-passage” or “statement,” but without regard to repeated word-groups (1878-83).

repetition of two or more consecutive words is an established feature of Ṛg-Vedic composition” (4). He therefore distinguishes between “important, word-for-word repetition,” that is, of entire verses, and these “partial, less important repetitions” (4-5, 8-12). Of the latter he is remarkably scornful: “mere collocations of two or more consecutive<sup>4</sup> words,” “merely consecutive words,” “mere groups of words or set phrases” (3-4); “unimportant, formulaic, and hap-hazard . . . expressions” (9); “conventional thought and mechanical utterance” (21); “A great many of the repeated passages consist of commonplaces, or are mere formulas” (22). He sees the inflection of a formula as an “unimportant stylistic or metrical accident” (9).

Bloomfield’s disdain for the “partial repetitions” follows naturally from his focus on repeated whole verses. This disinterest keeps him from rigorously analyzing these shorter repetitions, so that he has no way to decide whether the ten variants of 8.56.5c, *agnīḥ śukrēṇa śociṣā* (“Agni with (his) blazing flame”), are modifications or different formulas (1916:9).

Of a Ṛgvedic reverse concordance that Bloomfield created using the original cut-and-paste technique (1916:xvii, 2-3, 11), only the collection of 1,675 repeated cadences ever saw print (1916:653-74). This did suffice to prove that repetitions are far more frequent at the ends of verses than at the beginnings (1916:11).<sup>5</sup> Bloomfield saw that in order to study the “partial repetitions,” that is, the formulas, even *ab initio* and *a tergo* concordances together would not suffice; instead something far more laborious, a “word-for-word concordance,” would be necessary (1916:3-4, 13); with Lubotsky’s work (1997), this dream has now become a reality.

## 2. Formulas in Homer and the *Ṛgveda*

Less often cited than Milman Parry’s classic definition of the formula, “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (see A. Parry 1971:xxxii), but perhaps a better summary of his viewpoint, is the following: “The diction which is needed for making verses orally . . . is made of a really vast number of word-groups each of which . . . expresses a given idea . . . and fills just the space in the verse which allows it to be joined” (M. Parry 1971d [1930]:270). Both versions hold up well for the repeated noun-epithet formulas on which they are based, but less so when it comes to other types of repeated word-groups. A description of Parry’s work on formulas and oral poetry must be omitted here, but two general characteristics which he ascribes to formula-systems do need to be addressed.

### 2.1 *Formular Economy*

The avoidance of metrical doublets, known as formular economy or thrift, comes about because alternatives are needless in oral poetry. Parry admits openly and often that formular economy entirely obviates meaning (as regards the epithets at least): “one expression is useful in

---

<sup>4</sup>Since Bloomfield is so insistent on this point let it be said that Ṛgvedic poetic formulas are often split and over a fifth is inherently discontinuous.

<sup>5</sup>A condition which holds true for Homer as well.

composition; equivalent expressions add no further advantage” (1971b [1928]:175)—except, of course, the advantage of differences in meaning being possible.

However Parry does in fact find a great many metrically equivalent formulas (1971b [1928]:173-89). A few he is able to explain away by analogy with other formulas or by truncation.<sup>6</sup> But outside of the name-epithet systems, the doublets or “breaches of economy” are even more frequent.<sup>7</sup> Friedrich concludes that between a fifth and a third of formula-systems present such breaches, and sometimes more than half. Formular economy is thus reduced from a principle to a tendency (2007:65, 140).

For the *Ṛgveda* the notion of formular economy is utterly otiose; in its simpler measures the choice of metrically equivalent epithets is considerable, as for the two main deities:

Indra: *śatakratu-* = *śacīpati-*, *kratumant-* = *harivant-*, *gopati-* = *satpati-*, *pūrbhid-* = *vajriṇ-*, *śakra-* = *śūra-* = *ugra-*.

Agni: *viśvavedas-* = *jātavedas-*, *ūrjām páti-* = *vaiśvānara-*, *havyavah-* = *viśvavid-*, *subhaga-* = *atithi-*.

## 2.2 Formular Extension or Density

Parry’s teacher Antoine Meillet taught that Homer was entirely formulaic (1923:61), and Parry implies this as well (1971b [1928]:80, cf. 8-9, 21). Based on an analysis of fifty verses, and having loosened his definition of the formula to include parallel phrase structures,<sup>8</sup> he concludes that formulas occur “one at least to every verse or so” (1971d [1930]:312). Reducing the sample to fifteen lines and using the same liberalized definition of the formula, Albert Lord reckons with “well over 90 per cent” of that text being formulaic (1960:144). Exiguous as they are, these samples have given rise to a “dogma of the 100% formularity of Homer” (Finkelberg 2004:245, cf. 236).

It took decades for objections to be raised. Arie Hoekstra opines that “the supposition that Homeric poetry is wholly formulaic is at all events unprovable (if not entirely unsound)” (1965:16). Joseph Russo notes the “surprisingly limited scope of these analyses . . . on which Parry’s orthodoxy of 80-90 per cent is based” (1976:40). Although Brian Hainsworth agrees that only one verse in ten may be totally free of formulas (1968:16-17), he still finds the frequency of non-formulaic material to be “disturbingly high” (1962:66) and that “a large part of [the *Iliad*’s] diction is not formular in the strict sense” (1993:4, 17), estimating total formulaicity to be no higher than “from one-third to one-half of the total” (1964:164 and 1968:16-17, 131;

<sup>6</sup>“A formula contained in a more complex formula . . . , formulae preserved because of their presence in more complex formulae” (M. Parry 1971b [1928]:180-81).

<sup>7</sup>See Hoekstra’s index under “equivalents” and “thrift” (1965:167, 171); surprisingly skeptical is Hainsworth 1968:7 and 1993:24-26.

<sup>8</sup>Such as, in an extreme example, *δοῖκεν ἑταῖρῳ* and *τεῦχε κύνεσσιν*. These have been called “sentence or phrase patterns” (Hainsworth 1968:16-7, 41-42, and 1993:9-10) and “structural formulas” (Russo 1966:217-40). This definitional shift has not escaped criticism; see Hoekstra 1965:11-2, 15-16, 24-25; Hainsworth 1968:16-17; Russo 1997:242-46, with n. 19.



followed by Finkelberg 2004:245). Naturally the formulaic density can vary from place to place: Hainsworth (1968:110-12) contrasts the higher formulaicity of a battle scene with the lower formulaicity of a lament.

For the *Ṛgveda* the question of formular density has been asked only in terms of the repeated whole verses. Bloomfield found these to constitute a fifth or more of the text, whereas the *versus iterati* that have fascinated Homerists since Aristarchus of Samothrace make up a third.<sup>9</sup> The higher frequency of repeated whole verses explains why the Homeric type-scenes tend to pale in a way the *Ṛgveda* never does. Conversely, due to its shorter verses and more limited subject matter, repetition in the *Ṛgveda* can at times approach a hypnotic incantation in a way that Homer never does.

Although Homer repeats more whole verses, the *Ṛgveda* preponderates in a specific type to which Parry (1971e [1933]:376-90) drew particular attention due to its usefulness in oral-poetic composition: verses containing exactly one sentence, that is, whose metric and syntactic borders coincide. In the *Iliad* such coterminous verses are one in ten, in the *Ṛgveda* one in four (Dunkel 1996:206). The lesser use of one-verse sentences makes Homeric poetry flow more continuously.

The *Ṛgveda* and the Homeric epics, both at least half formulaic, are quite comparable in bulk as measured by lexemes and syllables:

	Verses:	Words:	Lexemes:	Syllables:
<i>Ṛgveda</i> :	39,676 <sup>10</sup> (8-12 syllables)	164,766 <sup>11</sup>	9,891 <sup>12</sup>	395,915 <sup>13</sup>
<i>Iliad</i> + <i>Odyssey</i> :	27,850 (12-18 syllables)	198,837 <sup>14</sup>	9,893	403,000 <sup>15</sup> (?)

Of course, the non-formulaic (Parry's "untraditional" and "unschematized") language is no less important than the formulas, as its underived and unique expressions are crucial for the investigation of poetic originality.

---

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt (1885:viii) counts 9,253 *versus iterati*, including minor variants, out of the total of 27,850 verses; see also M. Parry 1971b [1928]:8, n. 2.

<sup>10</sup> This is based on the text of Van Nooten and Holland 1994.

<sup>11</sup> As counted in the "Familiengrammatik des *Ṛgveda*" project (see above, footnote 1).

<sup>12</sup> This is the number of entries in Grassmann's *Verzeichnis der Wörter* (1873:1690-1739), including the particles (358 of the total).

<sup>13</sup> In the metrically restored text of Van Nooten and Holland 1994, as counted in the "Familiengrammatik des *Ṛgveda*" project (see above, footnote 1).

<sup>14</sup> This and the number of lexemes are according to the *Thesaurus linguae graecae*, available at <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>.

<sup>15</sup> Estimated by reckoning 27,800 x 14.5 (the average between 12 and 17).

### 3. Formular Flexibility in Homer

Parry's definition of the formula does not expressly exclude nominal and verbal inflection, but these concern him only insofar as they lead to hiatus or *brevis in longo* (1971b [1928]:68-74 and 1971c [1928]:197-201). The idea that Homer's poetic formulas are basically fixed in form was rejected by Bryan Hainsworth (1962, 1968, and 1993) and Arie Hoekstra (1965) in favor of the view that the Homeric formula was flexible in various ways. Hainsworth's final panoply of modifications includes change of word order, movement, inflection and suffixal variation, expansion, and separation (including enjambment); these can apply concurrently. He estimates between a third and a half of formulas to be flexible (1968:118-19, 122). In spite of all these types of modification, "the word-group persists" (Hainsworth 1993:26).

The effect is to break Parry's intimate link between form and meter. Far from being the ultimate explanation for all formulaic usage, the meter is now just a framework over which the supple formulas disport themselves.

The reaction to this development has varied from acceptance, active or tacit,<sup>16</sup> to "a confused state" (Russo 1997:250, cf. 242, 252), "general bewilderment," and even to "a major crisis . . . and a defensive, if not apologetic, attitude" so extreme that publication in this field has "sharply decreased" (Finkelberg 2004:244-46).

As regards the *Ṛgveda* there is no such controversy, since no overly stiff definition of the formula—or any definition at all—exists to react against. When one is put in practice, the formulas turn out to be even more mobile and flexible than Homer's.

### 4. The Advent of Writing

In India writing remained unknown until long after the completion of the authoritative *saṃhitā*-text (perhaps around 600 BCE). Its first appearance there in any form was the Aramaic script, brought by the Persian Achaemenids after 500 BCE. Over the centuries this served as the basis for the Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī scripts, first attested in King Aśoka's Prākṛit rock inscriptions of c. 250 BCE (see Salomon 2003:87-89, 92-93). Given this chronology, the *Ṛgveda* cannot possibly have been composed, collected, and edited in any manner other than orally. The earliest preserved manuscripts of the *Ṛgveda* date from about 1350-1450 CE; they are practically irrelevant as regards its transmission.

While Parry's *guslari* mostly still "re-created" orally, as they were illiterate (Lord 1960:20; Kirk 1962:84),<sup>17</sup> in Greece the earliest rock graffiti and vase inscriptions are practically contemporaneous with the time assumed for "Homer," about 750-700 BCE. Homer's ignorance of writing has been the *communis opinio* since Friedrich Wolf's 1795 *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, but since the 1950s the possibility has repeatedly been suggested that the proto-*Iliad* might have been written on skin or papyrus, either by a scribe ("oral dictation") or by the singer

<sup>16</sup> See the surveys by Windelberg and Miller 1980:29-50; Russo 1997:238-60 and 2011:296-98.

<sup>17</sup> In fact becoming literate notably worsened their style (Friedrich 2007:138 n. 223).

himself (“oral autography”; Lord 1960:124, 129).<sup>18</sup> This does not change the fact that Greek epic reached the level which made Homer possible over many generations without the use of writing.

The delay between the end of composition and the advent of writing was centuries long in India, but practically nonexistent in Greece. The period from the end of composition until the use of writing to record our texts differs even more between the two societies. Despite this, the oral styles of both the *Ṛgveda* and Homer are still recognizable as such.

## 5. The Process of Canonization

Whatever “Homer himself” may have done, in Greece writing was early on felt to be necessary, whether due to continued poetic creativity or to less-than-perfect memory; acceptance was quick. Within two centuries Peisistratos not only needed, but was able to collect numerous official or approved texts from other municipalities. But after Śākalya’s *saṃhitā* the *Ṛgveda* was not transcribed in writing for over a millennium.

The reason for the indifference to writing in India is the sheer quality of the brahmanic oral transmission, which prevented any variation. To this day the Vedic-Hindu tradition rejects any dependence on writing, just as did the Roman *pontifices* and the Gaulish Druids (Watkins 1976:107-08).<sup>19</sup> Yet in contrast to the almost total loss of the latter’s hymns, brahmanic misography has not affected the text of the *Ṛgveda* in the slightest; as the most important possession of the priestly caste it has been transmitted with a rare exactitude, providing what has been called “a tape-recording of what was first composed and recited some 3,000 years ago,” a “snapshot of the political and cultural situation” which is “faithfully preserved, equivalent to inscriptions” (Witzel 1995a:91; see Bronkhorst 2002:797-99 and 2016:163-67). Due to this flawless mnemonic transmission the first written text, whenever and wherever it was made, was practically an irrelevance.

## 6. The Genesis of the Texts’ Present Form

The present forms of the texts were affected by both political and philologic factors in both societies. The earliest pre-*Ṛgveda*, consisting of the kernels of the family books (2-7) and the Soma book (9), was created at the time when the latest *Ṛgvedic* hymns were being produced, during the linguistic period of the *Atharvaveda* and the non-*Ṛgvedic* *mantras*, perhaps around 1000 BCE. Witzel ascribes this to the mythologized King Sudās (or his successors), standardizing the text in order to consolidate the Pūru and Bharata peoples after his victory in the

---

<sup>18</sup> The pro-writing arguments of Lesky and Erbse are summarized by Heubeck: “The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* . . . could not have been created at all without the aid of writing” (1988:12). See further Hainsworth 1968:2 n. 2; Burkert 1995:147-48; West 2011:9-11.

<sup>19</sup> Farmer et al. (2004:44, 48) suggest that the Indus Valley culture deliberately embargoed imports bearing the marks of this pernicious practice.

Ten Kings' Battle.<sup>20</sup> The kernels of the composite books (1, 8, and 10) were added during the period of Yajurvedic prose; Witzel ascribes a pre-*Ṛgveda* with ten books to the mythologized King Parikṣit, wanting to unite the "first Indian state."<sup>21</sup> All the books received further additions during the period of Brāhmaṇa prose.<sup>22</sup> After a spell of anonymous editorial activity<sup>23</sup> at the start of the Sūtra period (perhaps around 600 BCE) emerged the grammarian Śākalya's *saṃhitāpāṭha* or "connected text" of 1,028 hymns and almost 40,000 verses, unchanged by a syllable since.

In Greece the creation of an unprecedentedly long and excellent proto-*Iliad*, perhaps about half of its present length, is ascribed to an Ionian Homer<sup>24</sup> of around 750-700 BCE. This beloved text was subsequently expanded in various ways, leading to controversy at the competitive recitations of Homeric poetry at the Panathenaic festival. As a result, the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus of the sixth century BCE is said to have made a first standardization, collating the various texts κατὰ πόλεις, and to have produced an authoritative, translocal edition written in the Old Attic alphabet. In the following centuries new additions continued to be made (Atticisms, wrong word-divisions, and variants favoring particular groups), and the transliteration into the Ionic alphabet introduced metrical irregularities. As a result, textual criticism was found to be more necessary than ever, and the work of generations of grammarians of the third and second centuries BCE culminated in the Alexandrian edition of Aristarchus of Samothrace with its 28,000 verses. This text underwent considerable distortions in late antique and medieval times.

In sum, the canonizations of the *Iliad* and the *Ṛgveda* involved surprisingly parallel processes:

- An unknown agent collected the favorite oral compositions of a long poetic age into an unprecedentedly massive text (the kernels of books 2-7 and 9; the proto-*Iliad*).
- The largely anonymous compositions were ascribed to specific males, partly invented (the traditional *ṛṣis* of the *Anukramaṇī*, "Homer").
- The beloved text was expanded in various ways, leading to local differences (composite books; expansions of the epics).
- An ambitious leader codified the collection so as to reduce controversies (the early ten-book *Ṛgveda*; the Peisistratean recension).
- Additions continued to be made as orality began to give way to simple reproduction.
- The continued variation and increasing difficulties of comprehension called into being dedicated

---

<sup>20</sup> Witzel calls this the "Bharata collection" (1995b:337-38 and 1997a:290).

<sup>21</sup> Witzel calls this the "Kūru collection" (1992:616, 1997a:261, 264-65, 286, and 1997b:35-36, 38, 40).

<sup>22</sup> Namely 10.85-191, the *Vāḷakhilyam*, the maṇḍalar intrusions of books 3-5, and Oldenberg's *Anhangslieder*.

<sup>23</sup> Oldenberg's "orthoepic diaskeuasis" was a misometric modernization, which transformed verse into prose by an inconsistent application of the much later sandhi rules of classical Sanskrit (whence *saṃhitā*), as if the goal were a "Zusammenpressen des vedischen Textes auf die möglichst geringe Silbenzahl" (Oldenberg 1888:461).

<sup>24</sup> This has been suspected of being a professional or stage name, as seems to be the case with Hesiodos, Stesichoros, as well as other Greek poets, and probably with Ṛgvedic *ṛṣis* such as Bṛhaduktha ("Having high songs") and Śrutavid ("Tradition-knower").

philologists (the orthoepic diaskeuasts; Alexandrian grammarians), who eventually produced a definitive edition (Śākalya's *saṃhitāpatha*; Aristarchus' text).

## 7. Ṛgvedic Repetitions: Non-Oral Approaches

Theodor Aufrecht's explanation for the innumerable repetitions is epigonality: that they are mere remnants of a vanished poetry, "mere relics of an older or original Veda (*jyeṣṭhām bráhma*), . . . attributable less to direct imitation or unconscious reminiscence of the actual thing, than of what used to be" (1877:II, xii).

Maurice Bloomfield champions the epigonal point of view even more strongly. The repetitions he judges by modern literary standards, and his judgment is far from approving: "Vedic literary production is often in a high degree imitative and mechanical. The poets or priests, more or less consciously, fell into habits of expression such that entire lines . . . and considerable sequences of words . . . show much similarity" (1916:vii). Most of the repetitions are "literary or historical in nature" and indicate an "imperfect sense of literary proprietorship" or "plagiarism" among the *ṛṣis* (19). The high degree of repetition is the result of "reciprocal assimilation" (20): "Ṛgvedic repetitions are often due to more or less conscious imitation" (634). He does not speak of *ṛṣis* imitating *ṛṣis*, but of hymns and stanzas imitating other hymns and stanzas: "A pāda, stanza, or strophe . . . may imitate another without directly repeating its words, but in the manner of a paraphrase" (12). The Vāḷakhilyas are "entire hymns that are consciously imitative" (13). Correspondingly Bloomfield faults the *Anukramaṇī* for "find[ing] it in its heart to assign, with unruffled insouciance, one and the same verse to two or more authors, or to ascribe it to two or more divinities" (634). Of course, nothing is more fundamental to oral poetry than a common stock of formulas.

The term "orality" he uses only in reference to transmission, not composition, having "little doubt that this oral tradition [of transmission] was supported at a comparatively early time by written tradition (see AV 19.72)" (1916:vii).

Pavel Poucha puts a positive spin on the repetitions: "The old poets considered quoting from others to be honorable rather than a lack of originality" (1942:250). He thinks that the repeated verses' assonant figures of style make them easier to learn and thus more frequent (257-69). At the same time, the fact that only 11.2% of hymns are free of repeated whole verses shows the "lack of proper literary training of the composers" (250).

In a surprisingly influential footnote, Albert Lord briefly dismisses any relevance of "sacred texts which must be preserved word for word, if there be such" for the study of oral poetry (1960:280 n. 9), on the ground that the Vedic hymns have long been fixed and not "re-created" in performance. Lord is using the *Ṛgveda*'s mode of transmission as a straw man to avoid the question of its method of composition. He does not deign to mention that text's extremely high degree of repetition as established over 40 years earlier by Bloomfield. But this sentiment was to keep research on Ṛgvedic orality in the closet for a quarter century.

Jan Gonda (1975:193-97, 221-30) discusses formulas, repetition, refrains, similarities, parallelisms, and variation in the *Ṛgveda* at considerable length without suggesting anything new. He accepts everything anybody has previously said except for those denying the presence



of alliteration (224). However his brief mentions of oral poetry and formulas show no understanding of its improvisational nature (28 n. 26, 74-75, 221), as in his reference to “the works of predecessors which they had memorized” (193). Like an oral poet himself, Gonda repeats his predecessors’ literacist formulations, speaking of “an imperfect sense of literary proprietorship” (193) and of “the stereotyped literary form of the *Ṛgveda* and the problem of recasts and borrowings” (28), and averring that “the earlier poets had exploited these themes so thoroughly that nothing was left for their successors but to follow in their habits” (194, approximating Parry’s view on originality). Despite his oft demonstrated interest in linguistic repetition, he does not mention its connection with performance in public. This is a distinct step backward from his earlier position (Gonda 1959a), perhaps due to Lord’s portentous footnote.

Jack Goody (1985:7-17 and 1987:110-21) thinks that the Vedas are too vast and too consistent to have been composed and transmitted orally, since oral poetry from all over the world is characterized by widespread textual inconsistencies. Once again: the perfect transmission has no implication for the method of composition.

Michael Witzel (1997a:258-59) uses the term “oral” only in the sense of non-written, not in that of formulaic and improvisational composition. Elsewhere he states that the *Ṛgveda* was “composed in a traditional and complicated poetic language like the *Iliad*” (Witzel et al. 2007:477, cf. 448, 475), but still speaks of the Vedic *ṛṣis*’ “shamelessly copying” each other (448) and characterizes many Vedic hymns as “stereotyped” (451). He uses the term “formula” only in an untechnical, pre-Parry sense: “traditional formulas, figures of speech, epithets”; “pre-existent formulas, mobile components, epithets and kennings”; about the repetitions he says, “the poets often borrow even from their predecessors” (446-48). For Witzel, as for Aufrecht, the *Ṛgveda* is only an “afterglow” of Proto-Aryan and Proto-Indo-European poetry (449).

Jared Klein has devoted over twenty-two articles (listed in Klein 2012:191-201) to stylistic repetition in the *Ṛgveda* without ever mentioning oral-poetic formulas.

The striking paucity of work on *Ṛgvedic* orality is shown by the lack of a single paper on this topic in the thirty-four previous volumes of *Oral Tradition*.

## 8. Vedic Orality: Scholarly Acceptance

Parry’s ideas were accepted by Jan Gonda. He states that both Homer and the *Ṛgveda* are “traditional” in nature, and “improvised” by “oral poets” who were “neither free in their choice of words nor original in their invention: these very formulas and fixed expressions set them bounds and forbade them the search for an individual style” (1959a:254); the traditional oral-poetic formulas exist “to make it easier for the poet to compose as well as for the audience to listen” (1959a:29, 31, 254). But for both texts he rejects Parry’s idea that the epithets serve only metric purposes (see below, section 13.4).

But Lord’s dictum against *Ṛgvedic* orality the following year caused Gonda to abandon his acceptance in 1975, and in fact stifled any discussion of this topic until 1976, when Paul Kiparsky finally dared to contradict him: “Lord excluded the Vedic literature from oral poetry by fiat, in reserving the term ‘oral poetry’ for poetry composed during performance. This would make the most important thesis of Lord’s book true by definition” (Kiparsky 1976:101).

Kiparsky sees the genesis of both the *Ṛgveda* and Homer as “the collective elaboration of a fixed text out of a tradition of oral poetry . . . [by] a bardic guild” by means of “a gradual fixation of the text over several generations of continuous recitation by a family or guild of singers,” “a fluid oral tradition ‘freezing’ into an absolutely rigid shape,” “a gradual jelling of an initially loosely connected body of poetry which was gradually added to and reorganized” (102-04). In charmingly idealistic contrast to the usual view of Vedic society as riven by tribal jealousy and feuds, Kiparsky suggests that “what the singers probably did was to sit together and perform things for each other . . . and gradually a stable version was worked out” (in Stolz and Shannon 1976:116), that is, the collection arose as the result of Vedic Woodstocks. These would have fostered mutual borrowing and thus contributed to the homogenization of the *Ṛgvedic* poetic language.

In his response Calvert Watkins felt free at last to admit that “the formulaic character of the composition of the Vedic hymns is apparent in virtually every mantra” and, one imagines with a sigh of relief, to “welcome Kiparsky’s principled inclusion of Vedic poetry within the universal discourse of this conference [on oral poetry]” (Watkins 1976:107-08). He went on to reject Parry’s phrase, “regularly employed under the same metrical conditions” (109). In 1995 Watkins sees the formula as “a verbal and grammatical device for encoding and transmitting a given theme . . . . Theme is the deep structure of formula” (1995:17). He repudiates Lord’s dictum again (18), and also the phrase “group of words” in Parry’s definition of the formula by accepting single words as formulas (17). He operates as a matter of course with formulaic modification and lexical renewal (10, 15).

Applying Parry’s statistical measures of relative orality—frequency of enjambment as a whole, frequency of coterminous verses, and frequency of necessary and violent enjambments—to the *Ṛgveda*, George Dunkel finds its style to be distinctly more oral than that of the *Iliad* (1996:204-06). Elsewhere he uses formulaic theory to resolve some longstanding syntactic controversies. The alleged deletion or “gapping” of repeated preverbs and verbs in Vedic and Homer is often due to the reuse of formulas outside their original environments (1978:14-26). Formular truncation has led to oddities such as the seemingly conjunctive use of emphatic and local *ā* and missing endings as in *nāvyaśā vācas* (1982a:89-102) and to the so-called inverse *ca* (129-43).

Stephanie Jamison allows that the *Ṛgveda* was “composed entirely orally and transmitted entirely orally” but still follows Lord in taking it as “a type of oral composition very different from” Homer’s because “it was not an anonymous body of infinitely variable verbal material (re-)composed anew at every performance” (Jamison and Brereton 2014:I, 14). But neither is our *Iliad*! And hers is a perfect description of the long period of free oral composition which preceded the fixation of the *saṃhitā*.

Outside of the Veda, Indology has long since recognized elements of oral composition in the classical epics,<sup>25</sup> and its traces have also been found in the *Ṛgveda*’s closest linguistic and cultural relative, the *Gāthās* of Zarathustra (see Skjærvø 2012).

---

<sup>25</sup> See the Purāṇic and Epic Bibliography at <http://www.indologie.uni-goettingen.de/index.php?id=120&L=0>.

## 9. The Ṛgvedic Poetic Formula

Since Bloomfield's 1916 work much has been accomplished in Ṛgvedic linguistics, mythology, and society, but no more large-scale research on its poetic formulas has been undertaken. Here we shall apply the methods of formulaic analysis developed in Homeric studies to the notoriously repetitive *Ṛgveda*. The need for this became clear during an investigation of linguistic differences between the six great book families. We defined a familectally distinctive feature as one which recurs at least thrice in one family book and nowhere else. The "Familiengrammatik des *Ṛgveda*" project (see above, footnote 1) collected over a thousand recurring pairs of designators of possible interest, which I then filtered so as to arrive at the 177 candidate formulas for familectal distinctiveness that are analyzed below. However the following discussion is not limited to these, since during analysis countless related formulas were also examined in the same way.

### 9.1 Definition

A Ṛgvedic poetic formula is a repeated, semantically unified word-group. The words' position, form, function, and syntactic relation are irrelevant.

By "repeated" is meant occurring in the *Ṛgveda* thrice or more. Repetition is the first criterion of formularity. But although necessary, recurrence is not a sufficient condition; this is shown by the recurring chance collocations, that is, word-groups that are repeated without being formulas.

By "word" or "element" is meant "designator" (noun, adjective, or verb): as is traditional, we ignore the formators (particles, primary adverbs, pronouns, and the like).

"Group" reflects the fact that cooccurrence is the second criterion for formularity. Single words cannot be considered to be formulas.<sup>26</sup> Although the project originally searched only for recurring designator-pairs, analysis showed that many of these belonged to longer formulas, so that our candidate formulas can be six words or even an entire stanza in length; only 44% of the candidate formulas are limited to two words.

By "semantically unified" is meant that despite all formal modifications the elements continue to "express a given essential idea" (so Parry; cf. Aufrecht's "express the same ideas in a somewhat different style"; 1877:II, xi). However defined, this unity or identity is the third and final criterion of formularity. Hainsworth speaks of a high "degree of mutual expectancy" between the elements:

- "The use of one word created a strong presumption that the other would follow" (1968:35-36) in a "certain formulaic word association" (61).
- "Formulas are simply groups of two or more words that are associated with each other" (1993:18).
- "The word-group persists in spite of declension or conjugation, changed localization, expansion,

---

<sup>26</sup> On the stylistic repetition of individual words see Gonda 1959b and the twenty-two articles mentioned by Klein (2012:191-201), which have since doubtless been joined by others. Neither author mentions poetic formulas.

or shortening. . . . The formular link may even survive enjambement . . . ” (1993:26-27).

Of course, “mutual expectancy admits of infinite gradations” (1968:41).

A more formal way of saying that the meaning remains unchanged is distributional: since the modifications preserve the cooccurrence restrictions (or privileges of occurrence) of the formula’s elements, they can be seen as transformations of the formulas (Harris 1957), as paraphrases of their reports (Harris 1970:612-92).

Since a formula’s identity is not syntactically defined, its variants need not always be construed the same way, but they will talk about or mention the same thing. If the formula’s elements should happen to cooccur without expressing the same essential idea, this is considered to be not a repetition, but rather a chance collocation or a different formula.

## 9.2 Formula and Meter in the Ṛgveda

A formula can fill a whole verse, be shorter, or be longer. A formula’s boundaries practically never differ from the metric ones, both between the verses and within them.<sup>27</sup> While synchronically the formulas seem tailored to fit the meter, historically they may have played a role in creating it.<sup>28</sup> The transfer of formulas between meters often induces reduction, extension, enjambment, new boundaries, and so on.

Metrical pressure is weaker in the *Ṛgveda* than in Homer, since only the number of syllables is crucial; except for the cadence, their quantity is less important. This is illustrated by the relative rarity of completely artificial formations when compared with Homer, who has numerous forms which are found in no real dialect. Little dialect mixture can be registered and very few hyperforms.<sup>29</sup>

It often happens that the opening and the cadence of a trimeter verse are filled by four- or five-syllable formulas. The intervening break can then be filled either by expanding one of the formulas or by inserting a link-word (by definition not a formula).

	Formula	Link-word	Formula
8.100.4a	<i>ayám asmi</i>	<i>jaritaḥ</i>	# <i>pásya mehá</i>
6.9.4a	<i>ayám hótā</i>	<i>prathamáḥ</i>	# <i>pásyatemám</i>
6.5.6d	<i>táj juṣasva</i>	<i>jaritúr</i>	# <i>ghóṣi manma</i>
2.11.1a	<i>śrudhi havam</i>	<i>ind(a)ra</i>	# <i>má riṣanyaḥ</i>

<sup>27</sup> That is, between the opening, the break if there is one, and the cadence. In Homer, on the other hand, “the relation between colon and formula is so obscure that as an element of composition it may well be irrelevant” (Hainsworth 1968:20).

<sup>28</sup> According to Gregory Nagy “predictable patterns of rhythm emerge from favorite traditional phrases” and “formula generates meter” (1976:251-52; see 1990:18-35).

<sup>29</sup> The only hyperforms due to metrical pressure are unjustified disyllabic *ā*, anti-Sievers forms like *ásua-* for *ásva-*, and the first singular active subjunctive ending *-āni*.

## 10. Formulaic Flexibility in the *Ṛgveda*

Although Bloomfield considered the inflection of a formula to be an “unimportant stylistic or metrical accident” (1916:9), only one-sixth of our formulas are completely fixed; the rest are flexible to some degree, as illustrated by the formula, “to smash the demons”:

6.16.29c	<i>jahí ráksāmsi sukrato</i>
9.17.3c	<i>vighnán ráksāmsi devayúh</i>
9.49.5b	<i>ráksāmsi apajāñghanat</i>
9.63.29a	<i>apaghnán soma raksáso</i>

or by the formula, “Soma lengthens (our) lifetime”:

8.48.4d	<i>prá na áyur jīvase soma tārīh</i>
8.48.7c	<i>sóma rājan prá na áyūmsi tārīr</i>
8.48.10cd	<i>ayám yáh sómo ní ádhāyi asmé / tásmā índram pratíram emi áyuh</i>
8.48.11cd	<i>á sómo asmám aruhad víhāyā / áganma yátra pratiránta áyuh</i>
9.80.2cd	<i>maghónām áyuh pratirán máhi śráva / índrāya soma pavase vṛṣā madaḥ</i>
10.107.2d	<i>vāsodāḥ soma prá tiranta áyuh.</i>

Bloomfield classified the types of variation among repeated verses under two headings: “Metrical variations as results of addition or subtraction or verbal change in repeated pādas” (1916:523), involving changes in meter, and “Verbal variations of repeated pādas: lexical and grammatical” (548), involving inflection and lexical substitution. This is a useful first step, but when we change the focus from repeated verses to formulas, it proves inadequate. Expanding Hainsworth’s system we have arrived at the following nine types of modification which have proven to be both necessary and sufficient to account for the flexibility of all formulas we have seen.

Flexibility is of two basic types: formulaic modification and lexical substitution. “Modification” encompasses any change in a formula’s shape or structure, but not its word inventory. Any number of modifications can apply concurrently.

### The types of formulaic modification in the *Ṛgveda*

Change of form			Change of meaning
Change of position	Lengthening	Shortening	
	1. Inflection		
	2. Syntactic transformation		
3. Movement	6. Extension: at the margin	8a. Truncation 8b. Reduction	9. Metanalysis: change in structure or meaning, not form



4. Inversion	7. Split, Insertion (internal lengthening)	8c. Ellipsis	
5. Enjambment			

### 10.1 Inflection

Within a paradigm the number of syllables may remain unchanged:

*ahan—hanti—hanas—jahi—hatam*      *jaritā—jaritar—jaritús;*

it may be increased:

thematic nom. pl. *-āsas* beside *-ās*      thematic instr. sg. *-ena* beside *-ā*;

or it may be allowed to vary:

*śrudhi, śṛṇudhi*      *yaja(śva)*      *piba(ta) ṛtūna*      *paramé vyòman(i).*

*Derivation* within an inflectional category, that is, the production of new stems, belongs here as well. It usually involves suffixes:

-Suffixal variation:

*Dadhikrā(van)-, Médh(y)ātithi-* (personal names)  
*ṛjīpyá-, ṛjīpín-* (epithet of an eagle)

-Conversion to paradigmatic participles and verbal adjectives, as when the thrice-attested formula *úd eti sūryas* (“the sun rises”) is transformed into *udyántam tvā . . . sūrya* (thrice) or the locative absolutes *sūra údite* (9x) and *sūrya udyatí* (once).

-Change to verbal secondary stems, as in the formula, “to strike the demons”:

9.63.29a      *apaghnán soma rakṣáso*      beside the causative  
9.49.5b      *rakṣāṃsi apajāṅghanat*

Inflection and derivation occur together in “to know the ascent of heaven”:

4.8.4c      *vidvāṃ āródhanam diváh*      beside  
4.7.8d      *vidúṣṭaro divá āródhanāni*

### 10.2 Syntactic Transformation

This category encompasses diverse types of modification.

## 10.2a Subordination

This occurs in the formula, “the two go to the clan”:

7.73.4a	<i>úpa tyā váhnī <u>gamato viśam</u> no</i>	but relativized in
7.69.2c	<i>viśo yéna <u>gáchatho</u> devayántīḥ</i>	and causal in
7.74.1cd	<i><u>viśam-viśam</u> hí <u>gáchathah</u></i>	

## 10.2b Passivization

Passivization of active verbs often involves the verbal adjective, as in the formula, “to prop apart heaven and earth”:

6.44.24a	<i>ayám <u>dyāvāprthivī</u> ví <u>skabhāyad</u></i>	beside
6.70.1cd	<i><u>dyāvāprthivī</u> váruṇasya dhármanā / <u>viśkabhite</u> ajāre bhūriretasā</i>	

It may also involve the gerundive, as in the formula, “to choose Agni as messenger”:

1.12.1ab	<i><u>agnīm dūtām</u> vṛnīmahe</i>	beside
8.102.18bc	<i><u>agne dūtām várenyam</u> / havyavāhaṃ ní ṣedire</i>	

## 10.2c Nominalization

Verbs can be transformed into abstract nouns and infinitives, as when pan-*Ṛg*vedic *sutám piba* / *piba sutám* (“drink the pressings!”) (7x, 4x) appears as *sutásya pītáye* (8x) and *sutásya pītīm* / *-iṣ* (“a drink of the pressings”) (2.11.17d, 4.35.2b).

Verbs can also be transformed into agent nouns by suffixation or composition (with the above cf. *somapā-* (12x)). A change of mood can cause another verb to be inserted:

8.84.3a	<i><u>nṛm̐h pāhi</u> # śṛṇudhī girāḥ</i>	
	“Protect the men! Hear the songs!”	but
2.20.3b	<i>sákhā śívó <u>narām astu pātá</u></i>	
	“Let him be a benevolent companion and protector of the men”	

## 10.2d Stem Composition

This is another type of nominalization, which obscures the first element’s syntactic relation to the second. The verb of the formula, “the stronghold-splitter . . . to make,” is adverbialized and nominalized, respectively, between:

8.61.8c	<i>ā <u>puramdarám cakṛma</u> vípravacasa</i>	and
8.61.10a	<i>ugrábāhur mrakṣakṛtvā <u>puramdaró</u></i>	and
8.1.7c	<i>álarṣi yudhma khajakṛt <u>puramdara</u>.</i>	

## 10.2e Verbalization

When a root-compound occurs in variation with a finite verb, the nominal form need not necessarily be secondary. The phrase *āródhana- divás* (“the ascent of heaven”) occurs five times, but it is verbalized only once (*āroháyanti divi*); the compound *śucipā-* occurs five times, but is verbalized only once (*piba śúcim*, “drink (it) pure”). The pan-R̥gvedic formula *ádribhiḥ sutá-sóma-* (“Soma pressed with stones”) occurs fourteen times, but it is verbalized only thrice:

4.45.5d            *sómam suśāva mádhumantam ádribhiḥ*

9.34.3b            *sunvánti sómam ádribhiḥ*

9.107.1d           *suśāva sómam ádribhiḥ*

## 10.2f Simile

A formulaic element may be transformed into a simile by the addition of a particle meaning “like” (*ná, iva, yáthā*) without affecting the formula’s unity, as in the formula, “to cross hates (and) straits”:

6.2.1 = 6.14.6d   *dviśó ámhāmsi duriṭá tarema*

6.2.4d            *dviśó ámho ná tarati*

An element is shifted out of a simile in the formula, “to be swollen like ghee”:

8.7.19b           *ghṛtám ná pipyúsīr*, 8.12.13c *ghṛtám ná pipya*, but

8.6.43b           *mádhor ghṛtásya pipyúsīm* (“swollen full of honey and ghee”)

The next three modifications involve change in the elements’ position.

## 10.3 Movement

A formula can move within a verse, as with “enjoy that!” and “lofty light”:

4.2.20b           *avocāma kaváye # tá jūśasva*

6.5.6d            *táj jūśasva jaritúr # ghóṣi mánma*

6.47.10d          *táj jūśasva # kṛdhí mā devávantam*

1.45.8c           *brhád bhāh bíbhtrato havír*

4.5.1b            *kathá daśemāgnáye # brhád bhāh*

### 10.4 Inversion

Inversion of words has been recognized as an element of high style since the Greek Sophists; for the *Ṛgveda* see Bloomfield 1916:7, 552-53. Limiting ourselves to contiguous words, we may cite as examples the formulas, “I invoke Agni” and “Drink of this!”:

- 1.1.1a            *agnīm īle puróhitam*  
 3.27.2a            *īle agnīm vipaścítam*  
 3.35.6            *śasvattamám sumánā asyá pāhi*  
 5.43.3c            *hóteva nah prathamáh pāhy asyá*

The formula, “go home!,” exhibits inversion combined with movement:

- 10.95.2c            *púrūravaḥ púnar ástam párehi*  
 10.95.13d            *párehy ástam # nahí mūra mápah*

The formula may contain more than two words, as in, “Deliver the singer from narrow straits”:

- 1.58.8c            *ágne grnántam ámhasa urusya*  
 1.58.9c            *urusyá agne ámhaso grnántam*

### 10.5 Enjambment

The running on of a sentence into the next verse, that is, its continuation over a verse boundary, is one of the two fundamental deviations from coterminosity (the other being verse-internal placement of a sentence boundary). 16% of the candidate formulas are inherently enjambed, their elements never cooccurring within a single verse. The formula might be said to contain a verse boundary—which, like any other formulaic element, can be mobile. About the same proportion of our formulas are enjambed in more than one way, as in, “to convey the gods who wake at dawn toward”:

- 1.44.1cd            *ā dāśúṣe jātavedo vahā tvám / adyā devāṁ usarbúdhah*  
 1.44.9cd            *usarbúdhā ā vaha sómapīṭaye / devāṁ adyā swardṣāḥ*  
 1.14.9            *ākīm súryasya rocanād / víśvān devāṁ usarbúdhah / vípro hótéhā vaksati*

Maximal enjambment means continuing over an entire stanza, as in, “to call (on) Indra of a hundred resolves with praises”:

- 8.52.6cd            *vasūyávo vásupatim śatákratum / stómair índram havāmahe*  
 8.52.4            *yásya tvám índra stómesu cākāno / vāje vājiñ chatakrato*  
                      *tām tvā vayám sudúghām iva godúho / juhūmāsi śravasyávaḥ*

The next two modifications involve changes at the formula's margins.

### 10.6 Extension

The extension of a formula is its lengthening by inflection or by adding elements.<sup>30</sup>

#### 10.6a Juxtaposition

The simplest type of extension is juxtaposition or concatenation, that is, adding a word or a phrase at a margin, as in, “your most delightful favor”:

7.70.2a	<i>sīṣakti śā vām sumatīś cāniṣṭhā</i>	which is extended into
7.57.4d	<i>asmé vo astu sumatīś cāniṣṭhā</i>	and then reused elsewhere:
7.70.5d	<i>asmé vām astu sumatīś cāniṣṭhā.</i>	

#### 10.6b Overlapping

Overlapping is the combination of formulas sharing an element (“word association”; Hainsworth 1962:65), as when the formulaic variants *brhád arca* (“to chant aloft”) and *brhaté arca* (“to chant to the lofty one”) are combined:

1.9.10bc	<i>brhád brhatá éd ariḥ / índrāya śūśām arcati</i>
----------	--

A new overlap may itself become formulaic, as when the following verses:

5.41.16a	<i>kathā dāśemā námasā sudānūn</i> (“how should we do pious service?”) and
7.14.1d	<i>vayām dāśemā agnáye</i> (“we would do pious service for Agni”)

are combined and the combination then reused:

1.77.1a	<i>kathā dāśemā agnáye # kāsmai</i>
4.5.1b	<i>kathā dāśemā agnáye # brhád bhāḥ.</i>

Three formulas overlap when *dūtá- páti- agne* (“the messenger, the lord, O Agni”) (thrice), *viśām páti-* (“lord of settlements”) (10x), and *viśām asi* (“you are of the settlements”) (thrice) are combined in:

1.44.9ab	<i>pátir hí adhvarāṇām / ágne dūtó viśām asi</i>
----------	--

and again when the formulas *han- rákṣāṃsi* (“smite the demons”) (7x), *sedha- rákṣāṃsi* (“keep

---

<sup>30</sup> This is unrelated to the Parryan sense of “extension” (section 2.2).

away the demons”) (thrice), and *sédha- ámīvās* (“keep away the diseases”) (twice) overlap and recur as a hymn-internal refrain:

8.35.16-8b      *hatám ráksāmsi # sédhatam ámīvāh.*

### 10.7 Insertion of a Split

A split into a discontinuous formula occurs when additional words are inserted. A short interruption can nonetheless be important, changing “I exist” to the copula “I am”:

8.100.4a      *ayám asmi jaritaḥ # páśya mehá*

10.83.5      *ayám te asmy # úpa méhy arvāñ*

Longer ones can be banal, as in, “the cooked within the raw”:

2.40.2c      *ābhyām indraḥ pakvám āmāsy antáh*

1.62.9c      *āmāsu cid dadhiṣe pakvám antáh*

### 10.7a Maximal Split

Maximal split of a formula, that is, over an entire stanza, often coincides with maximal enjambment, as when the inherently enjambed bisentential formula, “Come to [place-name], drink Soma like a thirsty [animal name]”:

8.4.10ab      *íśyo ná tṛsyann avapānam ā gahi # / pibā sómam vásāñ ánu*

is split further into

8.4.3      *yáthā gauró apā kṛtām / tṛsyann éti ávériṇam*  
*āpitvé naḥ prapitvé tṛyam ā gahi # / káñveṣu sú sácā piba.*

### 10.7b Inherent Discontinuity

Over a fifth of the candidate formulas are inherently discontinuous;<sup>31</sup> here any previous contiguous version has fallen out of use. Even fixed formulas can be inherently discontinuous, as in, “great in might”:

8.6.1a *mahāñ indro yá ójasā*, 8.6.26c *mahāñ apārā ójasā*, 8.33.8d *mahāñ carasi ójasā*, and  
 1.9.1c *mahāñ abhiṣṭir ójasā*

<sup>31</sup> Hainsworth calls these “discrete formulae” (1968:91, 104).

Of course, inherently discontinuous formulas can be enjambed as well, as in, “Indra along with the Maruts drinks the Soma”:

- 3.51.7a *indra marutva ihā pāhi sómam*  
 3.47.1ab *marútvām̐ indra vṛṣabhó ráṇāya / pībā sómam anuṣvadhám mādāya*  
 3.50.1ab *indrah svāhā pibatu yásya sóma / āgátyā tūmro vṛṣabhó marútvān*  
 8.76.4 *ayám ha yéna vā idám / svār marútvatā jítám / indrena sómapiṭaye*  
 8.76.6 *indram pratnéna mánmanā / marútvantam havāmahe / asyá sómasya pītāye*

### 10.7c Inherent Contiguity

Formulas may also be inherently contiguous, that is, unsplittable, as in repeated whole verses. But inherently contiguous formulas can also be enjambed, even in various ways, as in, “Viṣṇu strode out three steps”:

- 8.52.3c *yásmai viśnus trīni padā vicakramá*  
 1.22.18ab *trīni padā ví cakrame / viśnur gopā ádābhyah*  
 1.22.17ab *idám viśnur ví cakrame / tredhā ní dadhe padám*

and in, “Indra puts the pressed Soma into his belly”:

- 3.35.6cd *asmín yajne barhīṣi á niśádyā / dadhisvémám jathára indum indra*  
 3.22.1ab *ayám só agnir yásmin sómam indrah / sutám dadhé jatháre vāvaśānāḥ*  
 3.40.5 *dadhisvā jatháre sutám / sómam indra váreṇyam / táva dyukṣāsa indavaḥ.*

### 10.7d Sentential Split

The most extreme type of formular split is that into two sentences. The mechanism is the insertion of either an additional verb (26x), as in, “to drive toward the good praise”:

- 8.34.1ab *éndra yāhi háríbhīr / úpa káṇvasya sustutím*  
 8.8.6cd *á yātām áśvinā+ # á gatam / úpemām sustutím máma*

or of a verse-internal sentence boundary (32x), as in, “to sacrifice to the gods with this offering”:

- 7.17.3a *ágne vīhí havisā # yáksi devān* beside  
 3.17.2c *evānéna havisā yakṣi devān.*

Another mechanism of sentential split is the syntactic reassignment of an element to a preceding verb in, “O Indra, drink this Soma!”:

- 10.24.1a *indra sómam imám piba, 3.32.1a indra sómam somapate pibemám but*  
 8.17.1ab *á yāhi, suṣumā hí ta / indra sómam # pībā imám*

None of these syntactic splits affects the formula's unity; if it did, the repetition would be invalid as a dissolution.

### 10.7e Subordination

Formulas can be split into subordinate and main clauses. Only twice is this by means of a particle (concessive *hi*); the others are by relativization, as in, "Soma lengthens (our) lifetime":

8.48.4d	<i>prá na áyur jīvāse soma tārīh</i>	and
8.48.7c	<i>sóma rājan prá na áyūmsi tārīr</i>	beside
8.48.10cd	<i>ayám yáh sómo ní ádhāyi asmé / tásmā indram pratīram emi áyuh</i>	and
8.48.11cd	<i>ā sómo asmāñ aruhad víhāyā / áganma yātra pratirānta áyuh</i>	

Even two-word formulas can be split by relativization, as in, "pressed Soma":

9.107.1ab	<i>pārītó śiñcatā sutām / sómo yá uttamām haviḥ</i>
-----------	---

The formula *vásavo juṣanta* ("the good ones enjoy") occurs thrice contiguously and twice split into subordinate and main clauses: once by *hi*, once by both relativization and vocativization.

7.5.6ab	<i>tvé asuryāñ vásavo ny ṛṇvan / krātuḥ hí te mitramaho juṣánta</i>
5.3.10ab	<i>bhūri nāma vādamāno dadhāti / pitā vaso yádi táj joṣáyāse</i>

### 10.8 Truncation, Reduction, and Ellipsis

When longer and shorter variants coexist, it is not always clear whether this is due to extension or to reduction, as with, "to praise and sing to Indra":

2.20.4a	<i>tám u stuṣa indram, tám grñīse</i>	beside
8.65.5a	<i>indra, grñīśé u stuṣé<sup>32</sup></i>	

When a variant loses marginal elements, we call it truncation; when it uses shorter allomorphs, we call it reduction, as in, "Become for us a giver of cows":

3.30.21d	<i>asmábhyañ sū maghavan bodhi godāḥ</i>	beside
8.45.19c	<i>godā id indra bodhi naḥ</i>	

When a variant lacks some of the formula's elements, we call it ellipsis.

In order to keep the assumption of ellipsis within reasonable bounds, we insist that a variant retain at least two elements of the full formula in order to count as a valid repetition. A

<sup>32</sup> The first passage contains far-deictic *u*, the second, conjunctive *u* (see Dunkel 2014:II, 822).



maximal reduction down to the minimal two words is not infrequent, as when the inherently enjambed, six-word formula *prāti váraṃ jaritré / duhīyád indra dáksīṇā* (“May the honorarium yield milk for the singer according to his wish, O Indra”) (attested seven times) is reduced to *dáksīṇā duhīta* in 2.28.8b.

### 10.9 Metanalysis

This category of modifications involves change in structure without change in form.

#### 10.9a Morphologic

Morphologic metanalysis involves ambiguous endings. The formula *bṛhád arca-* (“chant aloft”) shifts between the first singular subjunctive in:

5.85.1ab      *prá samrāje bṛhád arcā gabhīrám / bráhma priyám váruṇāya śrutāya*

and the second singular imperative in:

5.25.7ab      *yád váhiṣṭhaṃ tát agnáye / bṛhád arca vibhāvaso.*

The form *kánīyasas* (“younger”) shifts between the genitive singular in:

7.86.6c      *ásti jyāyān kánīyasa upāré*  
 “The elder exists within the misdeed of the younger,”

and the accusative plural in:

7.32.24ab      *abhī śatás tát ā bhara+ / indra jyāyah kánīyasaḥ*  
 “Bring this greater (good) to those who are lesser.”

#### 10.9b Semantic

This form of metanalysis involves homonymic words. For example, *padā́*, the nominative-accusative plural of *padám* (“step”) in the formula, “Viṣṇu strode out three steps” (7x), as in:

8.52.3cd      *yásmai viṣṇus trīṇi padā́ vicakramá*

shifts to the instrumental singular of *pád-* (“foot”) in:

6.59.6d      *triṃśát padā́ ny àkramīt*  
 “he trampled thirty with his foot.”

## 10.9c Metanalysis of Syntactic Boundaries

Sentence boundaries are not marked in the *saṃhitā*. This is usually innocuous because they almost always occur at verse end; in only two percent of verses are sentence boundaries shown by an accented verse-medial verb to be internal. Passages which contain the same words with and without an internal sentence boundary, such as:

- 3.17.2c      *evānéna havísā yaksi devān*  
                   “So sacrifice to the gods with this offering”
- 7.17.3a      *ágne vīhi havísā # yaksi devān*  
                   “Agni, pursue them with the offering, sacrifice to the gods,”

raise the question whether the sentence boundary has been inserted or lost—whether a formula has been split or two formulas have been merged.

It is also possible for a sentence boundary to change its position without being formally marked, this being a true metanalysis:

- 10.27.24a      *sá te jīvátur # utá tásya viddhi*  
                   “This is your means of life. And know this!”
- 7.72.2cd      *yuvór hí naḥ sakhyá pítiryāṇi / samānó bāndhur utá # tásya vittam*  
                   “For in you two are our ancestral companionships and common kinship.  
                   Be aware of this!”

## 10.9d Metanalysis of Phrase Structure

A loss of congruence need not affect the unity of the formula. This may be brought about by:

-Vocativization, as in *udyántaṃ tvā . . . sūrya* (10.37.7cd) beside *sūra údite* (9x) and *sūrya udyatí* (8.27.19c), or in *tvāṃ citraśravastama* (“thee, O with brightest fame”) beside *tvāṃ . . . citráṃ* (“thee, the bright”).

-Inflection of an element: *etāvat-* (“so much”) is attributive to *sumná-* (“goodwill”) in:

- 8.5.27      *etāvad vāṃ vṛṣaṇvasū / . . . / grṇántaḥ sumnám īmahe*      and  
 8.49.9      *etāvatas ta īmahe / indra sumnáśya gómataḥ*

but possessive (“the goodwill of such a one”) in:

- 8.7.15ab      *etāvataś cid eṣāṃ / sumnám bhikṣeta mártyaḥ.*

-Transfer of an element to a neighbor: the parallelism of “accompanied by horses, cow, heroes” with shared referent in:

7.41.7ab *áśvāvatīr gómatīr na uṣāso / vīrávatīh sádām uchantu bhadráh* and  
 7.75.8ab *nū no gómāḍ vīrávaḍ dhehi rátnam / úšo áśvāvaḍ purubhójo asmé*

is broken up in

9.63.18 *ā pavasva hīraṇyavaḍ / áśvāvat soma vīrávat / vājam gómāntam ā bhara.*

## 11. Lexical Substitution

The modifications discussed above affect the formula's form or structure, but not its constitutive elements. Fundamentally different, therefore, is the other basic type of flexibility: the replacement of an element by another word, a synonym or plesionym. I follow Hainsworth in separating this process from the modifications *sensu stricto*: "I do not consider the important technique whereby flexibility is obtained by using synonymic words: for a different word means a different formula" (1968:60; see also 1993:5, 13-15). Bloomfield had already done the same with his dichotomy between inflection and verbal variation of repetitions. But Watkins makes no such distinction, accepting the "renewal of one, two, or more members of a formula . . . under semantic identity" as a part of formulaic flexibility (1995:15, cf. 10).

In the following we shall keep substitution by synonyms manageable by insisting that at least two elements of the original formula remain unchanged, as for "the Ásvins mount onto the chariot," usually:

8.9.8ab *ā nūnām raghúvartaniṃ / rátham tisthātho áśvinā*

but also:

10.41.2ab *prātaryújam nāsatyādhī tisthathah / prātaryāvāṇam madhuvāhanam rátham.*

However for "to prop apart heaven and earth," as in:

6.44.24ab *ayám dyāvāprthivī ví skabhāyad*

the semantically equivalent:

8.41.10de *yá skambhéna ví róḍasī / ajó ná dyām ádhārayat*

is not similar enough to count as a formulaic variant.

Lexical substitution by non-synonyms leads to the loss of a formula's identity, that is, its change into a different formula or its dissolution.

Replacing all the elements by allonyms while leaving the syntactic and metric structures unchanged, as in *píba sómam* ("drink the Soma") beside *jáhi rákṣas* ("smite the demon"), leads to "phrase patterns" and "structural formulas" (see above, footnote 8).

## 12. Formulaic Flexibility and Unity

Unity Preserved: Variants of the Same, “Flexible” Formula				Identity Lost: A Different Formula	
Basic formula:	Expanded:	Inflected:	Substitute a synonym:	Substitute an allonym:	Substitute two allonyms:
<i>jāhi rākṣas</i>	<i>jāhi rākṣas</i> <i>viśváhā</i>	<i>jañghanat</i> <i>rākṣāṃsi</i>	<i>bhindhi</i> <i>rākṣāṃsi</i>	<i>paśya rākṣas</i>	<i>pība sómam</i>
<i>tásya viddhi</i>	<i>viddhí tásya</i> <i>nas</i>	<i>tád véda</i>	<i>tád jānīhi</i>	<i>tásya piba</i>	<i>vánād éti</i>

## 13. General Properties of the Candidate Formulas

### 13.1 Length in Words

Although the original search was limited to recurring designator-pairs, subsequent philological examination has shown that well over half of the formulas were actually longer.<sup>33</sup>

	Two:	Three:	Four:	Five:	Six:	More:	Total:
2. Gṛtsamada:	2	1	2	1	2	0	8
3. Viśvāmitra:	12	3	3	3	0	2	23
4. Vāmadeva:	7	3	0	1	0	1	12
5. Atri:	5	0	1	1	0	1	8
6. Bharadvāja:	6	2	3	1	0	0	12
7. Vasiṣṭha:	16	6	6	1	1	2	32
K Kaṇva:	30	26	19	4	2	1	82
Total:	77	41	34	12	5	7	177

### 13.2 Fixed versus Flexible Formulas

Only one-sixth of the candidate formulas are fully fixed—a far lower proportion than in Homer, where this is thought to hold for half to two-thirds (see above, section 3). Fully fixed formulas range from entire stanzas, such as Book 3’s family-refrain *śunām huvema maghāvānam*

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted, with regard to the column in the table entitled “More,” that of the seven formulas with more than six words, five are fixed whole stanzas, and two are three verses in length.

*īndram / asmīn bhāre nṛtamaṃ vājasātau / śṛṇvāntam ugrām ūtāye samātsu / ghnāntam vṛtrāṇi samjītam dhānānām* (“For blessing we would invoke bounteous Indra, most manly, at this raid, at the winning of the prize of victory, the strong one who listens, (we would invoke) for help in battles, him who smashes obstacles, the winner of prizes”) (occurring first in 3.30.22, repeated fifteen times); over whole verses, like Book 3’s *pātyamānas trīr ā divó vidāthe* (“being master at the rite three times a day”); down to the minimal two words, as in Book 5’s *āgre āhnām* (“at the start of days”). The distinction between fixed and flexible is far from absolute, since some of the flexible formulas are fixed in part, for example, as to two words out of three or as to word order. But five-sixths of the formulas are modified in one way or another, in addition to which comes lexical substitution.

In the *Ṛgveda* much formulaic flexibility arises due to the transfer of formulas between the different meters, leading to reduction, extension, enjambment, new boundaries, and so on. Within Greek epic this could not happen, but it did when Homer was cited in lyric poetry and tragedy.

### 13.3 Adjectives and Epithets

Among the seventy-seven two-word formulas, the noun-adjective and name-epithet combinations so influential in Parry’s work make up only one-fourth: *rayí- suyāma-*, *Agní-sudīti-*, *kumārā- Sāhadevyā-*, *śyenā- ṛjipyā-*, *Agní- dhartár-*, *rayīm rayivánt-*, *vāmā- bhūri-*, *sákhi-pratná-*, *hotar purvaṇīka*, *Índravāyū suṣṭutí-*, *Vāyú- śucipā-*, *Agní- rakṣasvīn-*, *Índra-somapātama-*, *girí- párvata-*, *mártāya ripāve*, *rādhas- áhraya-*, *havyavāhana- yájiṣṭha-*, and *hótāraṃ viśvávedasam*. All of these are flexible in one way or another except for the fixed vocative *hotar purvaṇīka*.

### 13.4 Epithets and Meter

In his pioneering application of Parry’s ideas to the *Ṛgveda*, Gonda rejects the idea that the epithets serve only metric purposes. While admitting that metrics do play a role (1959a:253-57), he finds that the epithets are primarily used to “suit the context” (63 and *passim*), “conditioned by sense and versification at the same time” (254) to achieve a “harmony between epithet and context” (175) so that “the epithet fits the context perfectly” (66), and that “places are very few where no motive whatever can be discovered for the occurrence of an epithet” (254). Gonda finds the Homeric epithets to be “in wonderful harmony with the situation” (30) as well. The approach seems circular.

The link between a name and its epithet is very loose in the *Ṛgveda*. The two are rarely contiguous, occurring in the same verse only 113 times in the 1,064 occurrences considered below, so that most of these theonym-epithet groups are inherently split and enjambed. Some epithets have distinct preferences as to position within a verse, but the groups of theonym and epithet are so free that they cannot possibly serve any metrical function in the *Ṛgveda*.

**Positions of some divine epithets:<sup>34</sup>**

	Verse-initial:	Medial:	Final:	Total:	In same verse as theonym:
<b>Agni:</b>				<b>453</b>	<b>58</b>
<i>sūnūḥ sāhasas</i>	5	39	0	44	5
<i>havyavāhana-</i>	0	0	17	17	3
<i>jātāvedas-</i>	13: voc. 11x	21: voc. 20x	95: voc. 34x	129	12
<i>dhūmāketu-</i>	4	0	3	7	0
<i>draviṇodas-, -dā-, -dā-</i>	9	10	11*	30	9*
<i>vaiśvānarā-</i>	59	2	0	61	9
<i>ūrjō nāpāt-</i>	17	0	1	18	1
<i>sūditī-</i>	6	3	4	13	4
<i>havyavāh-</i>	19	5	9	33	4
<i>dūtā-</i>	21	71	2	94	11
<b>Indra:</b>				<b>509</b>	<b>51</b>
<i>vājraḥasta-</i>	1	9	9	19	2
<i>śatākratu-</i>	3	2	64	69	2
<i>śacīpāti-</i>	9*	1	6	16	2
<i>adrivant-</i>	0	6x, all voc.	43, all voc.	49	1
<i>vr̥trahān-</i>	19	52	46, voc. 33x	117	17
<i>suśīprā-</i>	0	15	5	20	1
<i>hārivant-</i>	0	50x, all voc.	2	52	3
<i>pūrbhíd-</i>	1	5	2	8	5
<i>śakrá-</i>	3	68	4	75	2
<i>vajrīṇ-</i>	5	57	22	84	16
<b>Aśvins:</b>				<b>102</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>vājínīvasu-</i>	0	0	20x, all voc.	20	1
<i>divó nāpāt-</i>	6	0	0	6	1
<i>śubhás páti-</i>	0	1	20x, voc. 15x	21	0
<i>purudāṃsas-</i>	0	3	1	4	1

<sup>34</sup> The occasional use of these epithets with other divinities is ignored here; no distinction is made between meters.

<i>dhīṣṇya-</i>	2	8	2	12	1
<i>dasrá-</i>	14	21	4	39	0

\*Seven times in a single refrain.

## 14. Conclusion

The *Ṛgveda* is formulaic oral poetry. The great majority of its formulas is flexible and can be described using Hainsworth's approach to Homeric modifications. In fact, a higher proportion of the *Ṛgveda*'s formulas is flexible than the *Iliad*'s; this agrees with its higher overall formulaicity and shows that stylistically, the *Ṛgveda* is in fact more oral in style than Homer—a conclusion strengthened by its higher frequency of unenjambmed and coterminous verses and its lower proportion of necessary enjambment (Dunkel 1996:205-07).

**Measures of the relative orality of the *Iliad* and the *Ṛgveda*:**

	<i>Iliad</i>	<i>Ṛgveda</i>
Formulaic overall:	1/2 to 2/3 (?)	2/3 to 3/4 (?)
Fixed formulas:	1/2 to 2/3	1/6
Flexible formulas:	1/3 to 1/2	5/6
Unenjambmed verses:	39%	57%
Coterminous verses:	11%	26%
Necessary enjambment:	19%	12%

## 15. Beyond Vedic and Greek

The *Ṛgveda* is in fact not the only ancient Indo-European<sup>35</sup> text to surpass the *Iliad* in orality of style. As measured by modes of enjambment, the Roman comedian Plautus (*floruit* c. 200 BCE) considerably outdoes the *Iliad* and is very close to the *Ṛgveda* in stylistic orality (Dunkel 1996). This is also true, to a lesser extent, of Terence two generations later.

**The relative orality of Plautus, Terence (*senarii*),<sup>36</sup> and Menander (trimeter) as measured by types of enjambment:**

	Plautus:	Terence:	Menander:
Unenjambmed verses:	55%	48%	28%

<sup>35</sup> Much Hittite poetry is more formulaic still, as is true of Sumerian and Akkadian.

<sup>36</sup> That is, the meter of spoken dialogue; the values are even higher for the long verses spoken as recitative.

Coterminous verses:	18%	12%	4%
Necessary enjambment:	15%	26%	37%

This cannot be ascribed to his main literary model, the Hellenistic comedian Menander (*floruit* c. 315 BCE), since he is by these measures far more literary in style than any of the texts considered here. Furthermore all three ancient comedians without question used writing to compose and are not formulaic in the least. The reason for the Romans' oral style of enjambment might have been aural: for success in show business their dialogues had to be readily comprehensible by their public, which was far less literarily sophisticated than Menander's.

*University of Zurich*

### References

- Aufrecht 1877                      Theodor Aufrecht, ed. *Die Hymnen des Ṛigveda*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2 vols. Bonn: Adolph Marcus.
- Bergaigne 1878-83                Abel Bergaigne. *La religion védique, d'après les hymnes du Rig-Véda*. 3 vols. Paris: F. Vieweg.
- Bloomfield 1916                    Maurice Bloomfield. *Rig-Veda Repetitions: The Repeated Verses and Distichs and Stanzas of the Rig-Veda in Systematic Presentation and with Critical Discussion*. 2 vols. Harvard Oriental Series, 20 and 24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bloomfield and Edgerton 1930    Maurice Bloomfield and Franklin Edgerton. *Vedic Variants: A Study of the Variant Readings in the Repeated Mantras of the Veda, Volume I: The Verb*. Philadelphia: Linguistic Society of America, University of Pennsylvania.
- Bronkhorst 2002                    Johannes Bronkhorst. "Literacy and Rationality in Ancient India." *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatique*, 56.4:797-831.
- Bronkhorst 2016                    \_\_\_\_\_. *How the Brahmins Won: From Alexander to the Guptas*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, 2.30. Leiden: Brill.
- Burkert 1995                        Walter Burkert. "'Irrevocabile verbum': Spuren mündlichen Erzählens in der Odyssee." In *Hören, Sagen, Lesen, Lernen: Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der kommunikativen Kultur: Festschrift für Rudolf Schenda zum 65. Geburtstag*. Ed. by Ursula Brunold-Bigler and Hermann Bausinger. Bern: Peter Lang. pp. 147-58. (Also in Burkert 2001:117-26.)



- Burkert 2001 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Kleine Schriften I: Homerica*. Ed. by Christoph Riedweg. Hypomnemata / Supplement-Reihe, 2. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Dunkel 1978 George Dunkel. "Preverb Deletion in Indo-European?" *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung*, 92.1/2:14-26.
- Dunkel 1982a \_\_\_\_\_ . "Autour de *ā* ṛg-védique (A Lexical Study)." *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 24.2:89-102.
- Dunkel 1982b \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Original Syntax of Conjunctive *\*-k<sup>we</sup>*." *Die Sprache*, 28.2:129-43.
- Dunkel 1996 \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Relative Stylistic Orality of Plautus and Terence, as Measured by Enjambment-Types; With Remarks on Enjambment in Literary Saturnians and Menander." *Die Sprache*, 38.2:201-12.
- Dunkel 2014 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Lexikon der indogermanischen Partikeln und Pronominalstämme*. 2 vols. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Dunkel forthcoming \_\_\_\_\_ . *R̥gvedic Family Grammar*. Innsbruck: University of Innsbruck.
- Erdosy 1995 George Erdosy, ed. *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity*. Indian Philology and South Asian Studies, 1. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Farmer et al. 2004 Steve Farmer, Richard Sproat, and Michael Witzel. "The Collapse of the Indus-Script Thesis: The Myth of a Literate Harappan Civilization." *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 11.2:19-58.
- Finkelberg 2004 Margalit Finkelberg. "Oral Theory and the Limits of Formulaic Diction." *Oral Tradition*, 19.2:236-52.
- Friedrich 2007 Rainer Friedrich. *Formular Economy in Homer: The Poetics of the Breaches*. Hermes. Einzelschriften, 100. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner.
- Gonda 1959a Jan Gonda. *Epithets in the R̥gveda*. Disputations Rheno-Trajectinae, 4. 's-Gravenhage: Mouton.
- Gonda 1959b \_\_\_\_\_ . *Stylistic Repetition in the Veda*. Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen. Afd. Letterkunde. Nieuwe reeks, 65.3. Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij.
- Gonda 1975 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Vedic Literature (Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas)*. A History of Indian Literature I: Veda and Upanishads, fasc. 1. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

- Goody 1985 Jack Goody. "Oral Composition and Oral Transmission: The Case of the Vedas." In *Oralità. Cultura, letteratura, discorso. Atti del Convegno Internazionale Urbino 1980*. Ed. by Bruno Gentili and Giuseppe Paioni. Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo. pp. 7-17.
- Goody 1987 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grassmann 1873 Hermann Grassmann. *Wörterbuch zum Rig-Veda*. Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus.
- Hainsworth 1962 J. B. Hainsworth. "The Homeric Formula and the Problem of Its Transmission." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 9:57-68.
- Hainsworth 1964 \_\_\_\_\_. "Structure and Content in Epic Formulae: The Question of the Unique Expression." *Classical Quarterly*, 14.2:155-64.
- Hainsworth 1968 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Flexibility of the Homeric Formula*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Hainsworth 1993 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Iliad: A Commentary, Vol. III: Books 9-12*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harris 1957 Zellig S. Harris. "Co-occurrence and Transformation in Linguistic Structure." *Language*, 33.3:283-340. (Also in Harris 1970:390-457.)
- Harris 1970 \_\_\_\_\_. *Papers in Structural and Transformational Linguistics*. Formal Linguistics Series, 1. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Heubeck 1988 Alfred Heubeck. "General Introduction." In *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Volume I: Introduction and Books I-VIII*. Ed. by Albert Heubeck, Stephanie West, and J. B. Hainsworth. Oxford: Clarendon. pp. 3-23.
- Hoekstra 1965 A. Hoekstra. *Homeric Modifications of Formulaic Prototypes: Studies in the Development of Greek Epic Diction*. Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde. Nieuwe reeks, 71.1. Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij.
- Jamison and Brereton 2014 Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, trans. *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*. 3 vols. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kiparsky 1976 Paul Kiparsky. "Oral Poetry: Some Linguistic and Typological Considerations." In Stolz and Shannon 1976:73-106.
- Kirk 1962 G. S. Kirk. *The Songs of Homer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Klein 2012                      Jared S. Klein. "Categories and Types of Interstanzaic Repetition in the R̥gveda." *Historische Sprachforschung*, 125.1:191-210.
- Lord 1960                      Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lubotsky 1997                Alexander Lubotsky. *A R̥gvedic Word Concordance*. 2 vols. American Oriental Series, 82-83. New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society.
- Meillet 1923                Antoine Meillet. *Les origines indo-européennes des mètres grecs*. Paris: Les presses universitaires de France.
- Nagy 1976                    Gregory Nagy. "Formula and Meter." In Stolz and Shannon 1976:239-60.
- Nagy 1990                    \_\_\_\_\_. *Greek Mythology and Poetics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Oldenberg 1888            Hermann Oldenberg. *Die Hymnen des R̥gveda, Band I: Metrische und textgeschichtliche Prolegomena*. Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz.
- A. Parry 1971                Adam Parry. "Introduction." In M. Parry 1971a:ix-lxii.
- M. Parry 1971a              \_\_\_\_\_. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Ed. by Adam Parry. Oxford: Clarendon.
- M. Parry 1971b [1928]      \_\_\_\_\_. "The Traditional Epithet in Homer." In M. Parry 1971a:1-190.
- M. Parry 1971c [1928]      \_\_\_\_\_. "Homeric Formulae and Homeric Metre." In M. Parry 1971a:191-239.
- M. Parry 1971d [1930]      \_\_\_\_\_. "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style." In M. Parry 1971a:266-324.
- M. Parry 1971e [1933]      \_\_\_\_\_. "Whole Formulaic Verses in Greek and Southslavic Heroic Song." In M. Parry 1971a:376-90.
- Poucha 1942                Pavel Poucha. "Schichtung des R̥gveda. Bestimmung des relativen Alters der Lieder des R̥gveda mit Hilfe zahlenmässiger Berechnung. II." *Archív Orientální*, 13.3:225-69.
- Russo 1966                Joseph A. Russo. "The Structural Formula in Homeric Verse." *Yale Classical Studies*, 20:217-40.
- Russo 1976                \_\_\_\_\_. "Is 'Oral' or 'Aural' Composition the Cause of Homer's Formulaic Style?" In Stolz and Shannon 1976:31-54.

- Russo 1997 \_\_\_\_\_ . “The Formula.” In *A New Companion to Homer*. Ed. by Ian Morris and Barry Powell. Mnemosyne, Supplements, 163. Leiden: Brill. pp. 238-60.
- Russo 2011 \_\_\_\_\_ . “Formula.” In *The Homer Encyclopedia*. Ed. by Margalit Finkelberg. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 296-98.
- Salomon 2003 Richard Salomon. “Writing Systems of the Indo-Aryan Languages.” In *The Indo-Aryan Languages*. Ed. by George Cardona and Danesh Jain. London: Routledge. pp. 75-114.
- Schmidt 1885 Carl Eduard Schmidt. *Parallel-Homer; oder, Index aller homerischen Iterati in lexikalischer Anordnung*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Skjærvø 2012 Prods Oktor Skjærvø. “The Zoroastrian Oral Tradition as Reflected in the Text.” In *The Transmission of the Avesta*. Ed. by Alberto Cantera. Iranica, 20. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. pp. 3-48.
- Stolz and Shannon 1976 Benjamin A. Stolz and Richard S. Shannon, eds. *Oral Literature and the Formula*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for the Coördination of Ancient and Modern Studies, University of Michigan.
- Van Nooten and Holland 1994 Barend A. Van Nooten and Gary B. Holland. *Rig Veda: A Metrically Restored Text with an Introduction and Notes*. Harvard Oriental Series, 50. Cambridge, MA: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University.
- Watkins 1976 Calvert Watkins. “Response.” In Stolz and Shannon 1976:107-11.
- Watkins 1995 \_\_\_\_\_ . *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- West 2011 M. L. West. *The Making of the Iliad: Disquisition and Analytical Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Windelberg and Miller 1980 Marjorie Windelberg and D. Gary Miller. “How (Not) to Define the Epic Formula.” *Olifant*, 8.1:29-50.
- Witzel 1992 Michael Witzel. “Alfred Hillebrandt Reconsidered.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 112.4:611-18.
- Witzel 1995a \_\_\_\_\_ . “Early Indian History: Linguistic and Textual Parameters.” In Erdosy 1995:85-125.

- Witzel 1995b \_\_\_\_\_ . “Ṛgvedic History: Poets, Chieftans and Politics.” In Erdosy 1995:307-52.
- Witzel 1997a \_\_\_\_\_ . “The Development of the Vedic Canon and Its Schools: The Social and Political Milieu. (Materials on Vedic Śākhās, 8).” In *Inside the Texts, Beyond the Texts: New Approaches to the Study of the Vedas: Proceedings of the International Vedic Workshop, Harvard University, June 1989*. Ed. by Michael Witzel. Harvard Oriental Series, Opera Minora, 2. Cambridge, MA: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University. pp. 257-345.
- Witzel 1997b \_\_\_\_\_ . “Early Sanskritization: Origins and Development of the Kuru State.” In *Recht, Staat und Verwaltung im klassischen Indien*. Ed. by Bernhard Kölver and Elisabeth Müller-Luckner. München: R. Oldenbourg. pp. 27-52.
- Witzel et al. 2007 Michael Witzel, Toshifumi Gotō, Eijirō Dōyama, and Mislav Ježić, eds. and trans. *Rig-Veda: Das heilige Wissen: Erster und zweiter Liederkreis*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen.

## Epic Inside-Out: *Qız Jibek* and the Politics of Genre in Kazakh Oral Literature<sup>1</sup>

Gabriel McGuire

In spite of ourselves, epic absorbs us. And then we encounter issues that are more tangled than grass roots. For example, we have now identified two other versions of the adventures of Ajkuna, wife of Muj, and they give quite different explanations for what happened to her. It must have been the same thing for the rape of Helen in pre-Homeric poems—until Homer came along and chose one of the variants.

—Ismail Kadare, *The File on H*

*Novel: A small tale, generally of love*

—Samuel Johnson

In the introduction to the fifth volume of his *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme*, published in 1885, Wilhelm Radlov pauses to consider the differences between the oral literature of the “Kara-Kirgiz” (Kyrgyz) and the “Kirgiz-Kaisak” (Kazakh). The two peoples, Radlov wrote, “excel in eloquence and surpass all of their Turkic fellowmen in this respect,” but they differed in the kinds of orature at which they excelled. His earlier collection of Kazakh texts in the third volume of the *Proben der Volksliteratur* (1870) had shown the Kazakhs possessed “a rich lyrical poetry,” while “with the Kara-Kirgiz, however, epic poetry overpowered and suppressed all other folk-poetic creations,” swallowing within itself the lyric, the legend, and the folktale (Radloff 1990 [1885]:75-76).<sup>2</sup> Radlov’s introduction is now primarily famous for the ways in which his discussion of the creativity of the oral poet in the moment of performance

---

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on a paper presented at the 2019 biennial conference of the European Society for Central Asian Studies and the 2019 annual conference of the Central Eurasian Studies Society. Thanks are owed to my co-panelists at these conferences, Christopher Fort, Christopher Baker, Eva-Marie Dubuisson, and Meiramgul Kussainova; to the discussant, Virginia Martin; and to the editors and two anonymous reviewers at *Oral Tradition*. I also benefited from the discussion of *Qız Jibek* with the students in my seminar on oral epic at Nazarbayev University. Lastly, thanks are owed to my good friend and colleague Imangazy Nurakhmet for his assistance in resolving questions of translation, and to my research assistant Kamilya Khamitova for her help in locating some of the books used here.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed discussion of Radlov’s work, see Sinor 1967; for Radlov’s influence on Milman Parry, see Tate 2011.

inspired Milman Parry and Albert Lord's theory of oral-formulaic composition, but his brief contrast of the "epic" of the Kyrgyz with the "lyric" tone of the Kazakhs foreshadowed a thesis that has long endured in later scholarship on Kazakh orature. This lyric tone is said to be most clearly shown through the stories of *Qozı Körpeş-Bayan Sülü* and *Qız Jibek*, which together exemplify a genre sometimes known simply as *ğasıqtıq jırlar*, or "love epics," also glossed as "lyric epics" or as "romances."<sup>3</sup>

The *ğasıqtıq jırlar* feature tales of divided lovers whose unhappy fates are often compared with those of Romeo and Juliet or Layla and Majnun. The epic of *Qız Jibek* tells the story of a doomed love between a young man named Tölegen and a young woman named Jibek, and the similarity of this plot to Nizami's *Layla and Majnun*—and hence to the broader genre of Persian verse romances—was noted in even the earliest scholarship on the epic. Yet the fit is an inexact one for the simple reason that while Tölegen, like Majnun, dies, Jibek, unlike Layla, survives and eventually even marries Tölegen's younger brother, Sansızbay, in accordance with the custom of *ämeñgerlik jesirlik* (levirate marriage). This is a narrative detail inconvenient to readings of the text as a religious allegory akin to Layla and Majnun, characters whose shared deaths modeled Sufi discourses in which human love is permissible as a ladder through which lovers might ascend (as Layla and Majnun do when they are reunited in Paradise after their deaths) to divine love.<sup>4</sup> Yet Jibek's marriage with Sansızbay was equally inconvenient to Soviet-era attempts to read the text as a social-economic rather than a religious allegory, for the custom of levirate marriage was woven together with the payment of *qalın mal* (bride wealth), and the plot thus hinged on a practice that would be singled out during the Soviet era as the epitome of the feudal and the archaic.<sup>5</sup> Though this did lead to denunciations of *Qız Jibek* as feudalistic, the epic was more often read as a narrative that had somehow anticipated Soviet values. The thwarted dreams and unhappy fates of the protagonists of *Qız Jibek*, so the story went, modeled an inchoate rejection of feudalism, and the genre of "lyric epic" thus encoded critiques of feudalism absent from the heroic epic.

The positioning of *Qız Jibek* as a lyric epic in turn blurred into arguments where literary scholars increasingly talked about it as though it were a realist novel. The Kazakh author and scholar Muxtar Äwezov (1897-1961) initially suggested this in his 1927 *Ädebîet Tarıxı* (*History of Literature*), writing that "of all the literature of our nation, it is *Qız Jibek* that most resembles the novel of written literature" (1985 [1927]:132). He would revisit and flesh out this thesis in a series of later publications. Äwezov's interest in *Qız Jibek* was shared by a who's who of the leading figures of early Kazakh Soviet literature, including the poet Säken Seifullin (1894-1938),

---

<sup>3</sup> This classification can be found in Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969 and in Shoolbraid 1975, though both sources treat the classification as largely self-explanatory. For a more detailed discussion of how such genres might be distinguished, see Chapter 5, "Genre," in Reichl 1992.

<sup>4</sup> This argument is laid out in detail in Seyed-Gohrab 2003; but see also Meisami 1987 and her conclusion that Majnun's madness and death model the gap between earthly and divine love. Other Kazakh *ğasıqtıq jırlar* do feature shared deaths that carry religious overtones similar to Nizami; in some versions of *Qozı Körpeş-Bayan Sülü*, the titular characters are briefly brought back to life due to the interventions of either angels or Hajj pilgrims, a narrative resolution that hints at the motif of lovers who are reunited in heaven.

<sup>5</sup> For an early account of Soviet campaigns against crimes of custom, see Massell 1974; for a discussion of similar campaigns among the Turkmen, see Edgar 2003.

the novelist Säbīt Muqanov (1900-1973), and the playwright and novelist Ğabīt Mūsrepov (1902-1985), who through everything from critical essays, translations into Russian, adaptations of the epic into opera librettos and film scripts, and the inclusion of the epic in chrestomathies for high school students implicitly and sometimes explicitly defended *Qız Jibek*'s place in Kazakh literature.<sup>6</sup> This work was buttressed by the critical contributions of major scholars of Kazakh literature, who followed Äwezov's lead in praising *Qız Jibek* for the "realism" with which it depicted both its characters' psychology and the lifeways of the steppe Kazakhs.<sup>7</sup>

At stake in these debates over genre was not just the legibility of *Qız Jibek* within Soviet literature but arguably the prestige of Kazakh oral literature in its entirety. Äwezov and the scholars who followed him had worked within a taxonomy of literary history that sought to correlate literary genres with a Marxist conception of the stages in the evolution of human society. This was a taxonomy that understood the epic to be a literary form that emerged in the earliest stages of history, while the novel form in contrast was associated, if not with socialism, at least with modernity. This logic can be found in the introduction to Äwezov's 1948 *Qazaq Ädebētiniñ Tarıxı* (*History of Kazakh Literature*), with its careful reviews of Marx and Engels, of Lenin's remarks on oral epic, and of the contribution of N. Ia Marr to the Marxist study of language; it shaped Mälik Ğabdüllin's (2018 [1958]) contrast of the lyric epic and the heroic epic as well as his analysis of the "realism" of *Qız Jibek*; and it saw perhaps its most systematic deployment in Raxmanqul Berdibay's various histories of the genres of Kazakh literature, in which he assigned Kazakh oral literature to the categories of the archaic, heroic, and lyric epic, correlated each with a specific stage in a Morganian scheme of social evolution, and finally argued that *Qız Jibek* marked the transition from epic to novel. These scholars' elevation of *Qız Jibek* into a text akin to a novel relied on the detection of subterranean critiques of social class within the text, thereby redeeming not only *Qız Jibek* as Soviet but further creating a literary genealogy in which the novel form itself could be treated as a genre indigenous to the steppe. This was an intellectual history that promised to reposition the whole of Kazakh literature (and by implication, the Kazakhs themselves) vis-à-vis modernity. Yet these were also all scholars who wrote in the context of a still vibrant Kazakh tradition of oral improvisatory poetry, who were intimately familiar with the oral performer's ability to reshape narrative, and the literary

---

<sup>6</sup> Äwezov, a tremendously prolific scholar and author, is arguably the most important figure in twentieth-century Kazakh literary history. As an author, he wrote short stories, plays, and novels, but is primarily famous for a four-volume historical novel, *Abay Jolı*, devoted to the life of the nineteenth-century Kazakh writer Abay Qunanbayulı (Caffee 2018; McGuire 2018). As a scholar, he was largely responsible for the institutionalization of Kazakh literary studies, authoring a series of influential studies, gathering and publishing original texts of Kazakh orature, and mentoring a generation of scholars (Kudaibergenova 2017). For details of the other authors and their place in Kazakh literary history, see Winner 1958 for Säken Seifüllin; Kudaibergenova 2017 for Muqanov; and Kundakbayeva and Rustem 2016 for Mūsrepov. Advocacy for Kazakh literature came with considerable risk during the purges of Stalinism: Seifüllin was executed on charges of nationalism in 1938; Äwezov and Mūsrepov were both forced to flee Kazakhstan for Moscow to avoid arrest.

<sup>7</sup> A review of the voluminous literature on the form and history of the novel is outside the scope of this article, but see Auerbach 2003 for an influential account of the ways in which interiority and social realism mark the novel form as distinct from the epic. For a fascinating inversion of the claim that the Persian verse romance is akin to the realist novel, see Tahmasebian and Gould (n.d.) and their account of how translations of *Jane Eyre* into Persian involved claims that the novel resembled a Persian romance.



genealogies they proposed in turn often imagined oral narratives as inhabited by multiple and at times dissonant voices, undermining these taxonomies even as they constructed them.<sup>8</sup>

The task of this paper is to trace the logic of these chronologies of genre. What arguments were deployed to justify the claim that *Qız Jibek* was an epic of social alienation, where did these assumptions about genre and performance come from, and how effective were these analyses in revealing dynamics of character or plot? In answering these questions, the paper compares the canonical version of *Qız Jibek*, Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı's chapbook-style text from 1900, with a transcription of an 1887 performance by Musabay Jıraw, focusing on two of the most famous episodes in *Qız Jibek*: the death of Tölegen alone and surrounded by enemies in the desert, and Jibek's subsequent flight from her natal home in the company of Sansızbay.

### ***Qız Jibek*: Textual History and Plot**

The earliest known written text of *Qız Jibek* was unearthed by Mälıke Ğumarova in a Moscow archive in 1959. Ğumarova (2012:134) concluded that it was a transcription of a performance the singer Musabay Jıraw had made for a Russian army officer, E. A. Alexandrov, near Fort Kazalinsk in south Kazakhstan in 1887. In 1894, a different version was printed by an Islamic publishing house in Kazan, and then reprinted multiple times over the next few years. Credited to an “unknown Noğay,” the 1894 text was likely the work of Valıolla Tüxvatüllın, a Tatar teacher working in the Zäısan region in east Kazakhstan (Ğabdüllın 2018 [1958]:124). The canonical text, however, is Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı's version, published in Qazan in 1900, and republished many times thereafter.<sup>9</sup>

Jüsipbek Qoja (c. 1857-1937) was a prolific but now largely forgotten figure in the story of the codification of Kazakh oral literature. Born in the village of Qojatoğay in south Kazakhstan, he studied at a *madrassa* in the town of Äwlıe-Ata (present-day Taraz), where he is said to have learned Arabic, Farsi, and Chaghatai (Älbekov 2015:4). After finishing his schooling, he made his way north to his matrilineal kin in the Jetisü region, a history he refers to in the first lines of one of his works, “Qız Şökeymen Aytısqanı” (Şayxıslamulı 2015:303):<sup>10</sup>

Aq sur attı jılqıdan ustap mindim  
Nağası jurttarımdı köreyin dep edim

---

<sup>8</sup> Similar tensions between pre-revolutionary transcripts and Soviet-era recordings shadowed the study of the *Manas* epic in Kyrgyzstan, as reviewed by Jacquesson (2021).

<sup>9</sup> There have been multiple Cyrillic script editions of Jüsipbek Qoja's text. I have relied on a transcription published as part of Volume 53 of the Babalar Sözi series (Qosan et al. 2009), as this version includes line numbers and does not omit sections of texts. In addition to Jüsipbek Qoja and Musabay Zhiraw's versions, there are also multiple Soviet-era texts, including recordings of actual performances. Volume 53 includes transcriptions of two of the Soviet-era texts alongside those of Jüsipbek Qoja and Musabay Zhiraw. A discussion of the Soviet-era texts unfortunately lies outside the scope of this project, but see Sadırbayulı 2009:167, 172-82 for a detailed account of the variations between these narratives.

<sup>10</sup> The full title of the work is “Xıkayat Jüsipbek Qojanıñ Wäzıpa Qız häm Qız Şökeymen Aytısqanı,” or “Tale of Jüsipbek Qoja's *aytis* with Wäzıpa, or the girl Şökey”; Jüsipbek Qoja explains in a prose insert that the word *Şökey*, meaning “lamb-like,” was a nickname that referenced her small stature and delicate bones.

Jolğa tüsip Alla dep jürip kettim,  
Arada neşe qabat tawdan öttim.

From the herd I took a grey horse as mount,  
Saying I would see my mother's kin.  
"Allah" I said, and took to the road,  
How many mountain ridges I crossed.<sup>11</sup>

There, he occupied himself with teaching the local children while also devoting himself to the project of gathering Kazakh oral literature and arranging for its printing by Islamic publishing houses in Kazan. From 1890 through the early years of the twentieth century, he published some thirty different works, an astonishingly prolific output that included many of the most famous texts of Kazakh oral literature. *Qız Jibek*, the *Birjan-Sara aytısı*, and a wealth of legendary and religious poems are all known primarily from Jüsipbek Qoja's works. Mukhtar Äwezov apparently met him in the Jetisü region in 1926 or 1927.<sup>12</sup> Jüsipbek Qoja fled Kazakhstan for present-day Xinjiang during the collectivization drives of the early 1930s and remained there until his death, a fact that Toqtar Älbekov (2015:12), the editor of a recent edition of his works, offers as partial explanation for the relative obscurity of Qoja in comparison to the fame of the texts he published. Notably, neither Äwezov in 1948, Ğabdullin in 1958, nor Berdibay in 1982 explicitly acknowledge him as the source of the 1900 manuscript.<sup>13</sup>

Jüsipbek Qoja's own authorial relation to the texts he published is complex: he rarely recorded the names of the *aqıns* from whom he learned the works, and he sometimes positioned himself as merely the transcriber of others' words while at other times claiming the authority of authorship. The aforementioned tale of "Qız Şökey," for example, is an *aytis*, or oral duel, between him and a young woman singer whose *awıl* he visits as a wedding guest; he thus simultaneously stands externally as the author of the work as a whole and internally as the author of specific utterances within it.<sup>14</sup> His description of the journey to join his matrilineal kin with which he begins the work is itself in many ways positioned as a claim to the identity of a singer (Şayxıslamulı 2015:303):

---

<sup>11</sup> All English-language translations are original. Romanization has been done in accordance with the system proposed by the Eesti Keeli Instituut, with the exception of using "j" rather than "c" for Cyrillic ж. In keeping with this, I have used "Qazaq" when transliterating citations and quoted text, but have preferred the standard English "Kazakh" for my own words.

<sup>12</sup> This meeting is commonly mentioned in discussions of *Qız Jibek*—see for example Muqanov 1974:136—but I have not been able to locate a publication in which Äwezov himself writes of the meeting.

<sup>13</sup> Studies from the 1920s and 1930s, including those of Äwezov (1985 [1927] and Seifullin (1964 [1932]), do mention Jüsipbek Qoja by name, as do studies from the 1970s (for example, Düysenbaev 1973; Muqanov 1974)—Düysenbaev in fact expresses surprise that a 1964 edition of the epic had omitted the lines in which Jüsipbek Qoja identified himself as the author.

<sup>14</sup> The *aytis* was published in 1896 in Qazan (Şayxıslamulı 2015), but the oral duel itself would have taken place much earlier.

Tanısıp, araladım nağışım,  
 Kõrmep edim ol jurttan men heş kimdi.  
 “Jaña kelgen jien,” dep, äwes qılıp,  
 Öleñmenen ötkizdim kündiz-tüni.  
 Hâr qayıssı şaqyradı damıl bermey,  
 Kün-tüni öleñ ayttım uyqı kõrmey.

I met and mingled with my kin,  
 No one there was I did not see.  
 “Our nephew, newly-come,” they said in wonder,  
 As I filled the days and nights with poetry.  
 I was the guest of all, knew no peace;  
 Declaimed poems day and night, knew no sleep.

This is an assertion of Jüsipbek Qoja’s performative competence, one ratified by the displays of verbal wit and cultural fluency he exhibits in his subsequent confrontation with Qız Şökey. The twist is that this claim to the identity of oral poet occurs in a written text that is Jüsipbek Qoja’s own much later reconstruction of the original competition: he did not publish “Qız Şökeymen Aytısqanı” until 1894, long after he would have ceased to be the brash young *madrassa* student whose knowledge of Islam was tested by Qız Şökey. The overlapping and blurred borders between oral and written found here reflect the complex poetic ecology of Central Asia: the texts printed in the Islamic publishing houses of Qazan were often versions of oral-literary texts; once printed, they then made their way back into the steppe communities, being read aloud at gatherings and even used by *aqıns* to expand their own repertory.<sup>15</sup> As Ğumarova (2012) has shown, traces of Jüsipbek Qoja’s *Qız Jibek* can be found in Soviet-era recordings of other *aqıns* singing the epic.

Jüsipbek Qoja similarly begins *Qız Jibek* with an overt claim to the status of singer, yet here the claimed “communicative competence” (Bauman 1975:293) is at once that of an *aqın* singing to an audience and that of a scribe mastering a text. “I will speak,” he begins (Şayxıslamulı 2009:84, lines 7-12):

Qız Jibekti tıñdañız,  
 Zamandas erkek, urğası,  
 Aqsaqaldı şalıñız.  
 Jüsipbek qoja jırlasa,  
 Qız Jibektiñ sözine  
 Endi äbden qanıñız.

Let the men, the women,  
 The elders with their white-beards,

---

<sup>15</sup> See Reichl 1992:54, 87-89 for a discussion of the relationship between printed text and oral performance in Central Asia and for the figure of the public performer of written texts.

All sit and listen to *Qız Jibek*.  
 When Jüsipbek Qoja sings,  
 You shall be more than filled  
 With the words of *Qız Jibek*.

These words, he assures his listeners, will leave them weeping. He follows this appeal to an imagined audience with a meditation on the difference between his version and that of a written text whose author he does not know, but whose clumsy language moves him to neither tears nor laughter (85, lines 41-46):

Bir kúnderde qarasam,  
 Baspa boptı bul Jibek,  
 Qırsız ketip sözderi.  
 Baspağa jazğan adamnıñ  
 Ār sözina qarasam,  
 Noğalı eken özderi.

Then one day I looked  
 Upon a print *Jibek*, a thing  
 Of bent and twisted words.  
 Wherever I looked, the words  
 Of the one who wrote it out  
 Were all together Noğay.

Despite Jüsipbek Qoja's criticism of the earlier print version (presumably the 1894 text with its "Unknown Noğay" author), his *Qız Jibek* roughly parallels the 1894 text in both plot and language, but with some of the exchanges between characters significantly expanded and sections earlier rendered in prose converted into poetry.

Jüsipbek Qoja's text was reprinted multiple times before the October Revolution, was included in Soviet-era compilations of Kazakh epics, served as the basis for Säken Seifüllin's Russian translation as well as for Ğabıt Müsrepov's opera libretto, and finally, according to Ğumarova, was used by multiple other *aqıns* as a resource when incorporating *Qız Jibek* into their own repertoires. In addition, Jüsipbek Qoja's *Qız Jibek* was the basis of Muxtar Äwezov's initial study of the epic in 1927 as well as of his more detailed analysis in 1948. Jüsipbek Qoja's overt claims of authorial authority over the form of his text unintentionally foreshadowed a central theme of this scholarship: that the narrative was a work "of the people," but one warped by the interventions of reactionary singers. This was an interpretive turn necessitated by the taboos and perils of the Stalin era, yet one that ironically also led to the temporary erasure of Jüsipbek Qoja's name from the history of the text he claimed.

### ***Qız Jibek* and the Idea of Epic in the Soviet Union**

Äwezov openly credited *Qız Jibek* to Jüsipbek Qoja in his *Ädebîet Tarîxı* of 1927, a foundational attempt to organize Kazakh oral literature into a history of genres and the work in which Äwezov first hinted that *Qız Jibek* bore more resemblance to written literary forms than it did to other Kazakh oral epics. Äwezov outlined a history in which he credited Jüsipbek Qoja with having fashioned something altogether new in the history of Kazakh orature. “The basis of *Qız Jibek* is one of the nation’s ancient vernacular prose narratives, one resembling the fairy tale in form,” Äwezov wrote, but as this tale was now lost the extent of the changes Jüsipbek Qoja had made could not be assessed. Still, he went on, “if we look at the text that is in our hands today, we can say one thing: of all the literature of our nation, it is *Qız Jibek* that most resembles the novel of written literature” (1985 [1927]:132).

Äwezov did not then significantly develop this suggestion, instead devoting much of his remaining analysis to arguing that the epic’s protagonists, however distinct they might seem from the heroes of other oral epics, were still recognizably the products of Kazakh history and culture. He would return to the idea that *Qız Jibek* resembled a novel in 1948 in the *Qazaq Ädebîetiniñ Tarîxı*, a massive and multi-volume history of Kazakh literature for which Äwezov edited the initial volume on folklore as well as contributing the section on lyric epics. In the intervening years, the place of orature in Soviet literary culture had become an increasingly vexed question, and the suggestion that *Qız Jibek* as a “psychological lyric epic” somehow anticipated the realist novel now became central to Äwezov’s defense of a narrative he clearly still considered as among the greatest works of Kazakh oral literature.

Early in the Stalin era, folklore and oral literature had suddenly become central to Soviet literary culture. The key event in this was a speech by Maxim Gorky at the 1934 All Union Writers Congress (Oinas 1985:135; Howell 1992:324-26). In looking for models for Soviet literature, Gorky had said, “I again call your attention, comrades, to the fact that folklore, i. e., the unwritten compositions of toiling man, has created the most profound, vivid and artistically perfect types of heroes,” and praised folklore for being the artistic creation of the people and for being grounded in the physical work of the laboring classes (1935:35). Gorky’s speech was reprinted in *Pravda*, and Stalin himself was quoted as telling the Red Army Ensemble, “you must supplement your repertoire with folk songs; use folk songs as extensively as possible” (Oinas 1973:47). At the 1934 Congress the Dagestani *ashuq* Suleiman Stal’skii had performed an original composition in praise of the Congress and had been praised in turn by Gorky as the “Homer of the twentieth century” (Schild 2010:121-22). In the years to come, expeditions to collect new material were launched, folktales were published in *Pravda*, new translations were made, and especially talented singers were commissioned to compose “news” songs, or *novinny*, in praise of the Soviet Union. In 1938, several folk narrators were elected to the Union of Soviet Writers and awarded the Order of Lenin (Oinas 1973:52). In Kazakhstan, the *aqın* Jambıl Jabaev (1846-1945) became famous as a performer of supposedly extemporaneous oral compositions in praise of Soviet modernity (Witt 2011).

Gorky’s claim that folklore revealed the spirit of “toiling man” created a space in which certain kinds of folkloristics could be practiced and certain kinds of orature published but did not preclude attacks on other schools of folklore research or on specific examples of orature. The

scholars who collected new examples were also tasked with deciding which genres of oral literature could be considered “socialist” and with editing “bourgeois” themes from the store of orally circulated texts (Oinas 1985:136). In 1936, Vladimir Propp was obliged to disavow formalism at a meeting of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad, and then to apologize yet again in 1948, when both he and Mark Azadovskii were taken to task for their reliance on the work of European and North American scholars (Oinas 1973:49, 54). In 1944, the Tatar Party Committee condemned the epic of *Edige* as a feudalistic text that glorified military campaigns against medieval Russia; other Central Asian republics soon followed suit, with the Kazakh writer Qasım Jumaliev’s stage adaptation cancelled on similar grounds in 1946.<sup>16</sup> In the 1950s, a series of different epic texts were condemned on the grounds that they were feudalistic, or religious, or that, in their glorification of inter-ethnic violence, they were inimical to the ideals of *druzhba narodov*:<sup>17</sup> first the *Dede Korkut Kitabı* in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan in 1951, then the epic of *Alpamys* in Uzbekistan in 1952, and finally the epic of *Manas* in Kyrgyzstan in 1952 were all criticized in newspaper articles or at party committee meetings (Bennigsen 1975).

*Qız Jibek* too would come under fire as a text fundamentally at odds with the ideals of Soviet modernity. These denunciations were not confined to a particular time and place but rather flared up periodically from the 1930s onwards, though the criticisms never increased greatly in subtlety or substance. The historian Musatay Aqınjanov’s 1953 analysis exemplifies these critiques. *Qız Jibek*, Aqınjanov wrote, was not “of the people,” for it contained no images of class struggle and no dreams of a better life but rather propagandized for the nomadic way of life, for private property, and finally, “preached an archaic life in which women are bought and sold for cattle, and taken in levirate marriage” (Akhinzhanov 1953:11-12).<sup>18</sup> Kamal Smayılov, the producer of the film version of *Qız Jibek*, similarly recalled that in 1986 a commission sent by the Central Committee in Moscow had quizzed him on the film, noting it “depicts the former life of the Kazakhs as one of wealth and luxury. . . . [H]ad they then no need for socialism?” (Smayılov 2015:26). These were not new ideas, nor were they foreign to those Kazakh writers who praised the epic—Seifullin in 1932 (1964 [1932]) had characterized the text as glorifying the sons and daughters of the steppe aristocracy and as extolling feudal marriage customs, as had Äwezov in 1927—but they had escalated into a claim that *Qız Jibek* had no place in the canon of Kazakh literature. These concerns shadowed the composition of the *Qazaq Ädebietiniñ Tarıxı* in the late 1940s: the introduction to Volume 1 includes an extensive discussion of the changes that were made to the manuscript in light of a Central Committee commission’s criticism of the first draft, noting that the section on *ğasıqtıq jırlar* had been

---

<sup>16</sup> The irony of this criticism is that although the historical Edige did lead campaigns through Russia and even laid siege to Moscow in 1408 CE, the various *Edige* epics concern themselves almost entirely with the struggle between Edige and Toqtamysh Khan for power over the Golden Horde. Details of the suppression of the epic together with a comparison of the different versions of *Edige* and a translation of a Karakalpak version may be found in Reichl 2007.

<sup>17</sup> *Druzhba narodov*, or “the friendship of the peoples,” recast the relationship between the peoples of the Soviet Union as one of comity and aid; for the impact of this ideology on historical studies in Central Asia and the Caucasus, see Tillett 1969.

<sup>18</sup> Ğabdüllin (2018 [1958]:126-27) reviews Aqınjanov’s further conclusions on the dating of *Qız Jibek* in some detail and is largely dismissive, noting errors in both historiography and philology.

deemed the most problematic and error-ridden of all, necessitating extensive rethinking and revision (Äwezov 1948:9). This rethinking included a complete erasure of Jüsipbek Qoja's name: he is never mentioned, and though his opening words are quoted, the line in which he names himself is omitted. Yet the erasure coexisted with a series of increasingly subtle reflections on the role performer and genre played in shaping the text of *Qız Jibek*, reflections that paradoxically made the question of transmission one of ever greater import.

An awareness of the role of the performer in shaping the text was something Soviet scholars inherited from pre-revolutionary Russian folklore scholarship. It can be traced back to the insights of scholars associated with the Folk Song Commission of the Russian Geographical Society, which opened in St. Petersburg in 1884 (Krader 1967-68). The commission was dominated by scholars who utilized the historic-geographic method pioneered by the Finnish Folklorist Antti Aarne, building indexes of folktale plots in the belief that comparison of known versions could reveal the history of specific tales (Oinas 1973:46). The St. Petersburg scholars were distinguished from the broader European school of historic-geographic studies by virtue of their focus on the actual performance of the tale: Claus Oldenburg, the central figure in the Folktale Commission, wrote in 1916 that he had been surprised by the dearth of information on the performer in Aarne's work (Howell 1992:33). This interest in the performer culminated in 1925 with the publication of Mark Azadovskii's *A Siberian Tale-Teller*, a meticulous study of the ways in which individual singers leave their mark upon an oral text. Azadovskii himself cast his contribution as a reformulation of Aarne, writing, "his formula: 'Every folk imprints, so to speak, the tale with its own stamp,' must be considerably expanded: with each folk [group] the folktale receives its individual, local character, which is added by the individual narrator" (Azadovskii 1974:9). Echoes of this may be found in the introduction to the *Qazaq Ädebïetiniñ Tarïxı*, where Äwezov explains how oral literature is continually reimagined as it moves from mouth to mouth, with "those who tell and those who retell coming from every era, every tribe, every social class . . . . And each and every one of them reshaping the tale to flatter their own era and class" (1948:15). In order to disentangle the different voices within the text, he wrote, Soviet scholars were obliged to consider multiple variants and to not fall into the trap of those bourgeois scholars who mistakenly treated orature as the collective texts of nations. Yet this seeming awareness of the agency of the singer coexisted with an overarching belief that oral literature did indeed emerge from nations, and that the true singer was thus one who voiced the desires of the nation's popular class. In this regard, as Lauri Honko has observed, the Soviet Union was "one of the last bastions of Romantic attitudes toward folk poetry" (1996:30).

In his analysis of *Qız Jibek*, Äwezov would put this methodology into motion, arguing that those who critiqued the text as feudalistic aimed their fire at changes later "*üstem tap*" ("ruling-class") singers had introduced to the original "lyric epic."

The salience of positioning *Qız Jibek* as a "lyric epic" derived from the attempts of Soviet literary theorists to make gaps between genres index larger fissures in social and economic history. Äwezov's and, before him, Radlov's contrasts between epic and lyric both ultimately derived from the ways in which the German Romantics conceptualized links between poetry and nation. As Hegel mapped it out, the epic was the art of an early stage in history, a poetry expressing the "childlike consciousness" of a people only just "awakened," while lyric and dramatic poetry in contrast were the literary modes of an era in which the individual had been

“disentangled from the nation’s concrete whole,” and consequently “expresses *lyrically* its dwelling on self and its preoccupation with the inner life of the individual” (1975:1044-46). Soviet thinkers extended this idea by attempting to plot the supposed succession of literary genres onto Marxist schematizations of the evolution of economy and society, a project most famously articulated in Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Epic and Novel” (1981) and György Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* (1971).<sup>19</sup> These were theories that both praised the epic and buried it, suggesting the literary form (and, by extension, the people who possessed it) could be contemporaneous but never truly contemporary. Jambıl Jabaev, the example *par excellence* of the oral poet as a member of the Soviet community, embodied this logic: his illiteracy and age were central to his public image, and in his official appearances he was invariably clad not in suit and tie but in Kazakh national dress (Holt 2015:228).

The crux of Äwezov’s 1948 defense of *Qız Jibek* was that the genre of “lyric epic” was born from disenchantment with the archaic world epic poetry praised and from which Jambıl had seemed to come. Tölegen and Jibek’s marriage was read not as modeling the customs and norms of mobile pastoralists but rather as an incipient break, albeit one effaced by the later interventions of unnamed “*üstem tap*” singers, raising the question of to what extent Jüsipbek Qoja’s narrative did differ from other variants.

### “Lyric Epic” and the Marriage of Tölegen

Jüsipbek Qoja’s narrative begins with a young man named Tölegen who goes in search of the perfect bride, eventually meeting and marrying the fantastically beautiful Jibek. After the marriage, Tölegen sets out on a journey to visit his own family, promising Jibek he will return with the geese in spring. When Tölegen’s father Bazarbay refuses to allow him to leave so soon, Tölegen slips away on his own and, in the final scene of the first half of the epic, is murdered by a rival suitor, Bekejan, as he travels alone through a desert waste. In the concluding scene of the narrative’s first half, the dying Tölegen looks up, sees a flock of geese in the sky, and sings a song in which he bids the geese carry word of his death back to his family.

Though the various scholars discussed in this paper never explicitly compared Jüsipbek Qoja’s *Qız Jibek* with that of Musabay Jıraw (and Äwezov could not have done so, as it was not known in 1948), a comparison between the two is still useful in that it reveals the extent to which these scholars were indeed responding to details specific to Jüsipbek Qoja’s version. The distinctions between Musabay Jıraw and Jüsipbek Qoja’s versions begin with their framing of Tölegen’s search for a bride. Though Musabay Jıraw’s first lines do describe Tölegen as engaged in a fruitless hunt for a partner from among his own people, this immediately gives way to a description of how enmity broke out between the Kazakh *Kişi Jüz* and *Orta Jüz* and of the

---

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between Bakhtin and Lukács and the literary politics of the Soviet Union, see Clark and Tihanov 2011.



retaliatory cattle raids, or *barımta*, that followed.<sup>20</sup> In one of these raids, the Qıpşaq tribe of the *Orta Jüz* seize five hundred horses from the Jaǵalbaylı, the tribe of Tölegen's father, and the *Kişi Jüz* send a letter demanding their return (Musabay Jıraw 2009:38, lines 31-40):

Sonda Qıpşaq bolıp keñesti,  
Orta Jüz bolıp söylesti,  
Söyleskende ne desti:  
—Bılay barsaq, Qalmaq zhaw,  
Bılay barsaq, Qazaq zhaw,  
Ne qılıp kündi köremiz?  
Bazarbayǵa sälem de,  
Jibersin bizge xabardı,  
Bılǵı alǵan jılqını  
Izinen qaytıp beremiz.

Then the Qıpşaq took council,  
The *Orta Jüz* deliberated  
And they said:  
To one side, the Qalmaq enemy,  
In another, Kazakh foes,  
How then will we survive?  
Our *sälems* then to Bazarbay,  
If he will send a messenger,  
The horses seized last year  
We will make retrace their steps.

Bazarbay's fifteen-year-old son Tölegen joins a group of 200 young men the Jaǵalbaylı send to retrieve Bazarbay's horses. Tölegen has heard that one of the Qıpşaq *bays*, Alaşabay, has an astonishingly beautiful fifteen-year-old daughter named Jibek, and Tölegen's own mother suggests that he offer the returned horses as a bride price for Jibek. In Musabay Jıraw's version, then, Tölegen's journey to Jibek's home emerges from the collective concerns of the lineage to which he belongs, and his courtship of her is suggested and sanctioned by authority figures within his own family. That the marriage literally takes the place of peace achieved through the return of horses makes it an almost disconcertingly precise fit with Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1969) paradigm of marriage exchange as a foundation of society.

Jüsipbek Qoja's version omits any mention of the solemnity of *barımta* raids in favor of a narrative in which Tölegen's quest for an appropriately beautiful bride possesses the tone of a

---

<sup>20</sup> The Kazakhs comprised three different tribal confederacies: the *Kişi Jüz* ("Little Hundred") in the west, the *Orta Jüz* ("Middle Hundred") in the east, and the *Ulı Jüz* ("Senior Hundred") in the south. *Barımta*, or cattle-raiding, could be undertaken in pursuit of glory but could also, as seems to be the case here, be a way of settling disputes, with the seized horses returned to the original owners after an agreement was struck (Martin 2001:140-55). These raids were a frequent subject of Central Asian heroic epics—see in particular Prior 2013 for the translation of a Kyrgyz horse-raiding poem.

romantic comedy. Bazarbay, already eighty years of age when Tölegen is born, boasts that his son might choose whomever he pleases as bride, for his herds are vast enough to furnish the *qalın mal* (bride price) of even a Patsha's daughter. This then is what leads Tölegen to set out on a journey to the distant Aqjaııq, a trip that Jüsipbek Qoja depicts as a sort of slapstick beauty pageant—Tölegen announces that every potential bride will be given a horse as a gift; after he has seen 210 women, the young men who form his *comitatus* begin to hide him from potential brides out of fear he will give all their horses away and force them to go about on foot—which culminates in the arrival of Qarşığa, an *aqın* and the Vizier of Jibek's father, Sırlıbay Khan. Sırlıbay's people—here, not Qıpşaq but Altı Shekti—are migrating to summer pastures, and as Qarşığa and Tölegen ride after them they pass one young woman after another, each more beautiful than the next. Tölegen's headlong gallop across the steppe conjures a sense of effervescent adventure, as with each woman he passes he whips his horse to greater speed and as the horse itself takes the bit between its teeth, "foam dripping from its mouth" (*awzınan köbik şaşadı*) and "fire flashing in its eyes" (*közi ottay janadı*) (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:99, 102, lines 477 and 578).

The freedom and sense of adventure that characterized Jüsipbek Qoja's Tölegen are key to Äwezov's 1948 reading of the epic as, in his words, "the start of the psychological lyric epic." As he explains it, "Tölegen refuses the bride his father had chosen for him, his desire for true love leads him to seek for a bride himself, and once on this path he meets Jibek, who just like him longs for freedom—the poem seems to include within itself the first thoughts of what more just laws and norms might be" (1948:195). Tölegen and Jibek, it seemed, were as incensed as any good party member at the idea of arranged marriages, and their rebellion against this institution was then read as a rebellion against the broader world of feudalism. This was a conclusion followed by generations of subsequent scholars: in the introduction to the edition of *Qız Jibek* used in this paper, for example, the folklorist Seyit Qasqabasov writes that Tölegen and Jibek represent a new kind of protagonist, one caused by "a change taking place in the mental life of people, as a new social ideal emerged. . . . Singers, storytellers, and others all began to turn their attention towards the question of the individual and their happiness and destiny, towards love and the struggles of family life" (2009:10-11).

The epic takes on overtones of tragedy only after Tölegen's marriage with Jibek. When Tölegen returns to his natal family, his father and mother arrange a huge *toı* to celebrate his marriage, in the midst of which Tölegen says that he intends to return to Jibek in the spring. His father asks that Tölegen grant him one request, and when Tölegen heedlessly agrees, his father asks that Tölegen not depart again until a full year has passed. Tölegen angrily states that he returned without his bride's blessing and must similarly refuse his father. Bazarbay in reply prohibits any of his people from helping Tölegen, who is thus forced to make his preparations in secret and to travel alone through the desert, setting the stage for his later murder by Bekejan. Notably, this entire section is rendered as a brief prose narrative, in contrast to the elaborate songs and counter-songs that characterize other moments in the text. The scene does not appear at all in Musabay Jıraw's version, for the simple reason that in his text Tölegen is murdered by Bekejan on his initial journey home to his natal kin.

Äwezov's 1948 reading of *Qız Jibek* as a tale of social alienation begins from this defiance of the father. Äwezov writes that the narrative provides Tölegen with four distinct

challenges: the long and difficult road through the desert; the absence of his father and mother's blessing; Tölegen's own isolation and lack of allies; and finally, the enmity of Bekejan. Among these features, "Bazarbay's *teris batası* (curse) is no small barrier," and Äwezov notes that Sansızbay, who has his father's blessing when he departs in search of Tölegen and Jibek, reaches his goal. In this, Äwezov (1948:197) concludes, the ideology of the *aqın* can be seen, for the plot is the plot of:

a singer in whose mind the death of Tölegen is a fate that cannot be changed. . . . Tölegen may be given the dream of freedom, but this is to be a dream for which there is neither path nor place. In a poem so suffused with the tribalistic and the archaic, every fantasy or feeling must be subordinated to the rule that the blessing of the father is a necessity never to be forsaken.

In these lines, Äwezov hints at the idea of a dissonant text, one which reverberates with doubts and hopes that coexist uneasily with the singer's own apparent ideology.

Apparently neglected in this analysis is a consideration of a long series of other scenes in which Tölegen's death is foreshadowed by his indifference to the wishes and warnings of those around him. This pattern begins with Tölegen's first trip: as he prepares to set out for the Aqjayıq river, his mother comes and pleads with him not to depart, mixing warnings about Tölegen's death with appeals for him to stay and protect his parents. If he departs, she asks, who will be their guardian, for his younger brother Sansızbay is not yet of age to be a shield for his parents. When Tölegen replies that he is determined to leave in search of a bride, she commends her son to the care of a series of protectors, including Bibi Fatima, Zuleikha and Joseph, and Baba Tükti Şaştı Äziz. She begins, however, by asking protection from those "guardian spirits of love," Layli and Majnun (*Ğaşıqtardıñ piri ediñ / Lâyli-Mäjñün siz bar aw*), and in this way explicitly incorporates into the poem an allusion to what is one of the most commonly offered literary parallels for Jibek and Tölegen, Nizami's doomed lovers (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:92, lines 275-300).

This scene of leave-taking is repeated two more times over the course of Jüsipbek Qoja's version, in each of which Tölegen clearly rides towards his death but does not necessarily ride away from his natal kin. When Tölegen resolves to leave Jibek and return to his family, Jibek similarly prophesies Tölegen's death, and Tölegen similarly ignores this warning. As he prepares his horse for departure, Jibek sends one of her sisters-in-law with a message that she has seen a dream with portents of his death (121, lines 1145-55):

Aldımda janğan şırağım  
Birew ürlep öşirip,  
Közimnen boldı sol ğayıp.  
Qolımdağı tuyghınnıñ  
Zawlap kelip aspannan  
Jelkesin qıdı bıdayıq.

Before my eyes I saw,  
A candle gutter and go dark,

Its flame cut by an unknown hand.  
 From the sky a goshawk swooped  
 And broke the wings and killed  
 The white falcon perched upon my wrist.

Still later, this same scene plays out when Tölegen elects to leave his natal family and return to Jibek, with his younger brother Sansızbay now in the role of the one who warns Tölegen of the dangers of traveling alone across the steppe. Sansızbay concludes his appeal saying by saying, “If you do not return, / but choke on blood and sorrow, / I will grasp my *dombra*, / and pluck a song of lamentation” (*Bu bargannan kelmeseñ, / qayğimenen qan jutıp, / qobız alıp qolima, / tartamın sonda küi*) (126, lines 1290-95). In these scenes, Tölegen violates entreaties not to travel, but the act of travel itself does not always fit neatly into a pattern of departure or alienation from his patrilineal kin. Tölegen’s response to these pleas shifts from scene to scene, as he seemingly moves from being a young man who pursues his wishes at the expense of his family to one who views his own life as immaterial in comparison to the larger lineal group of which he is only a part. His mother’s appeal is met with Tölegen’s insistence on the necessity of his quest; in the words of Jüsipbek Qoja (92, lines 267-72):

Anası ğarıp jılaydı,  
 Jılaydı da tolğaydı.  
 Qoy dese de balası  
 Oğan, sirä, bolmaydı.  
 Bir sulū qız almay Tölegen  
 Dünıege könili tolmaydı.

Let his mother be crippled with tears,  
 Let her weep a funeral song.  
 Leave it be, she says,  
 but for him this cannot be.  
 If Tölegen never finds his beauty  
 This world holds nothing for him.

In the scene with Jibek, Tölegen both doubts the warning she sends—he tells her messenger, “dreams are but the shit of foxes” (*tüs—tülkiniñ boqı*)—but also argues for the insignificance of his own life, offering reasons both religious and lineal. If God wills his death, then God’s will be done, he sings, and goes on to tell her of his brother Sansızbay (123, lines 1207-13):

Jaman jaqsı bolsa da  
 Allanıñ bolar Ąmiri.  
 Jalğız ağaş kesilse,  
 Qūarıp qalar tamırı.  
 Olay bulay bop ketsem,

Toğız jasar artımda  
Jetkinşegim bar edi.

Whether grief or joy finds us,  
Allah remains our lord.  
If you hew a lone tree,  
The roots wither, the tree yellows.  
Yet if I should die,  
After me there would be still  
My younger brother, nine years old.

When Sansızbay appeals to Tölegen, Tölegen similarly replies by telling him of Jibek, enjoining him to travel to her should Tölegen himself not return.

Tölegen's speech as he dies similarly revolves around his natal family. After Tölegen's father prohibits him from leaving, Tölegen spends his days falconing. One day, two geese fly overhead cackling, and Tölegen is reminded of his promise to Jibek to return with the geese in spring. He sets out alone, but as the poem narrates, "of three months' journey / five- and forty-days' count / are desert wasteland" (*üş ayşılıq jerlerdiñ / qırq bes kündik ortası, / Atırabı şöl eken*) (129, lines 1413-15). In the midst of this desert, they reach Qosoba, the lake of the twin kurgans, where Bekejan, a suitor spurned by Jibek, lies in wait with a group of bandits. Tölegen, treacherously shot in the back by Bekejan, looks up and sees the geese who had flown alongside him on his journey circling overhead. In a long speech, he imagines the geese flying west and being greeted by his father, asking, "and if my old father should ask, / 'oh wild animals, and have you seen / my darling, my Tölegen,' / what shall be your answer?" (*Qartayğan äkem Bazarbay / Aldıñnan şıǵıp janūar / 'Qarağım meniñ Tölegen / Kördiñ be' dese ne deysiñ?*) (134, lines 1578-81). Tölegen repeats this motif two more times, imagining his mother and then his brother Sansızbay petitioning the geese for word of Tölegen, and each time answers his own question with an anguished recollection of his parents and his childhood. Finally, he tells the geese what message they might carry (135, lines 1620-28):

Öli ekenin bilmeymiz,  
Tiri ekenin bilmeymiz,  
Qosobanıñ jonında  
Qosa ketti degeysin.  
Mañdayınan aqqan qan  
Josa ketti degeysiñ.  
Altındı jabdıq kök jorğa at  
Bir qaraqşı qolında.

We do not know if he has died  
We do not know if he yet lives  
But there by Qosoba  
We have left him.

From his forehead blood flowed  
 And soaked the ground.  
 His grey pacer's gilt harness  
 Grasped by a brigand's hands.

Tölegen may be physically distant from his family when he dies, but in his last words, as in his farewells to Jibek and Tölegen, he imagines himself as a part of this corporate unit.

The motif of a farewell message addressed to wild geese is also to be found in Musabay Jıraw's version, but Jüsipbek Qoja's version arguably places a greater emphasis on themes of familial loyalty. In Musabay Jıraw's version, the geese literally carry a message from Tölegen to Sansızbay, alighting before the younger brother, telling him how and where his kinsman has died, and thereby setting in motion the second half of the epic (Musabay Jıraw 2009:55-56, lines 661-76):

Sonda qazdar söyleydi:  
 —Asa rudiñ elinde  
 Tölegendi kördik, dep.  
 Tölegen mingen jorğası  
 Kekten ketken eken, dep.  
 Jalğız ağań Tölegen  
 Tulap jatır eken, dep.  
 Qara qanı mañdaydan  
 Zulap jatır eken, dep.  
 Alpıs böri bir qoydı  
 Tosa ketken eken, dep.  
 Tölegen atqan tal oğı  
 Tasa ketken eken, dep.  
 Qazdar uşıp jönedi,  
 Tölegenniñ ölgenin  
 Sansızbay sonda bileđi.

Then the geese replied:  
 "Tölegen we have seen  
 In the land of the Asa.  
 And the horse of Tölegen  
 Is lost to enemies.  
 Tölegen, your elder brother,  
 Has fallen," said the geese.  
 His black blood spilling  
 From his wounded head.  
 As the flesh of a lone sheep  
 Is torn by sixty wolves, they said.  
 The willow-shafted arrows of Tölegen,

Have all been shot, they said.  
 And then the geese flew on,  
 And in this way Sansızbay  
 Knew of the death of Tölegen.

In Jüsipbek Qoja's version, an element of the fantastic is transformed into a rhetorical question, as Tölegen only imagines what the geese might say if they could only speak. In twisting the motif in this manner, he positions it as a moment in which Tölegen reflects upon his own family and his place within it. Crucially, as he dies, he remembers his father not as an authoritarian who prohibits his journey but rather as the old man who carried his child uphill though his back ached and downhill though his knees ached (*töbege şıqsa, belim dep, / Oyğa tüsse, tizem dep*) (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:134, lines 1576-77).<sup>21</sup>

When Jüsipbek Qoja's version is read alongside Musabay Jıraw's, then, the comparison suggests that loyalty to natal family is a central theme of both texts, but that Jüsipbek Qoja's Tölegen only slowly grows to hold these values. Though this would seem to support the claim that his version indeed does distinguish itself through the complexity of his characters, the problem remains that the growth here takes the form not of rebellion but of acceptance. In addressing this, Äwezov, Ğabdüllin, and Berdibay all relied on some variation of the idea that this represented later interventions by an unnamed singer. In Äwezov's discussion of the death song of Tölegen, his earlier suggestion of gaps and discords within the text becomes explicit. He argues that the audience's sympathies throughout this section would be squarely on the side of Jibek and Tölegen, and by extension, therefore, in support of a character who "wrestles with the injustice of an archaic society" (Äwezov 1948:197). Tölegen's song is followed by the *aqın*'s own commentary on Tölegen's death (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:136, lines 1644-50):

Ayıp-aytpay nemene,  
 Sol sekildi asyldar,  
 Kebini joq, köri joq,  
 İt penen qusqa jem bolıp,  
 Muratına jete almay,  
 Armanda bolıp ketipti.

What can be said,  
 of nobles like these,  
 with neither shroud nor tomb,  
 no more than meat for dogs and crows,  
 their journeys broken  
 their dreams flown.

This is a commentary that Äwezov (1948:197) suggests expresses either coolness or indifference,

---

<sup>21</sup> Though both Musabay Jıraw and Jüsipbek Qoja identify the geese as *qonır qaz*, or graylag geese (*Anser anser*), modern illustrations almost invariably use the more conventionally romantic imagery of swans.

pointing to the gap between the interpretation stressed by the singer and the one felt by the audience. Ğabdüllin (2018 [1958]:133) likewise saw in this scene the voice of a later *aqın*, one who places words supporting customary law in the mouth of the dying Tölegen and in so doing violates the spirit of the original popular version. Berdibay also treated this scene as evidence that the singer himself was a supporter of customary law. He further argued that Jibek's dream, rather than warning Tölegen against a return to his natal kin, actually warned against his return to Jibek. In Berdibay's estimation, the dream had an "*astarlı*" ("hidden" or "allegorical") meaning, one that foreshadowed the gravity of Tölegen departing without his father's blessing (2013 [1982]:261).

The plot detail most obdurate to a socialist interpretation, Jibek's marriage to Sansızbay, was still to come, and with it would come the most ambitious explanations of how and where the "popular" version had been lost.

### ***Qız Jibek* and Levirate Marriage**

The second halves of Jüsipbek Qoja's and Musabay Jıraw's respective renditions of *Qız Jibek* both tell essentially the same story, one that mirrors the plot of the first half but replaces tragedy with victory. In both tales, Tölegen's younger brother Sansızbay goes in search of his lost brother, taking the *aqın* Şege with him as a companion. They arrive just as Jibek's father is arranging her marriage to the Qalmaq Khan, Koren. Jibek tricks Koren into giving her his horse, which she rides as she and Sansızbay elope together. They are pursued by Koren Khan, but when they meet in the desert, Sansızbay fights and, unlike Tölegen, kills his adversary. Both versions then end with Sansızbay driving the Qalmaq army from the land before marrying Jibek. As in the earlier sections, the two versions vary in details of names and clans. Jüsipbek Qoja offers more elaborate songs and counter-songs, while Musabay Jıraw offers hyperbolic and even fantastic details: his Sansızbay is no more than seven years old, and the arrow with which he kills Koren flies on to kill the forty Qalmaq soldiers ranged behind their Khan. Yet the two versions agree in their reliance on levirate marriage as the device that brings about the story's triumphant end.

The two versions also likewise rely on the introduction of an external foe, the Qalmaq Khan Koren, in place of Bekejan. "Qalmaq" was the Kazakh word for the Oirat, a nomadic people from the Inner Asian steppe who in the first half of the seventeenth century moved west into the territory of the lower Volga and the Aqjayıq (or Ural) river, where they came into repeated conflict with the Kazakh *Kişi Jüz*. This is the apparent setting of *Qız Jibek*, for Tölegen's family is described as making their home on the banks of the Caspian, and Jibek's is described as living along the banks of the Aqjayıq. In the east, the Oirat formed the Jūngar tribal confederacy, eventually moving into east and south Kazakhstan, where they inflicted a series of crushing defeats on the Kazakhs and forced parts of the *Orta* and *Ulı Jüz* to flee south into present-day Uzbekistan in the early-eighteenth century. Long after these events, the Qalmaqs lingered in the oral literature of the Kazakhs and other Central Asian Turkic peoples as the



embodiment of enmity, an antagonism further colored by the Buddhist Oirat's status as a "heathen" other.<sup>22</sup>

Jibek's betrothal to the Qalmaq Khan Koren is shadowed by these fears of violence and of religious betrayal. In Jüsipbek Qoja's version, Sansızbay and Şege go in search of the lost Tölegen—crucially, now with Bazarbay's blessing—and finally arrive at Jibek's *awıl*. As they look down upon the crowds of people gathered there, a shepherd tells them not only of the murder of Tölegen but also that the Qalmaq Khan had heard of Jibek's famed beauty and came in search of her with an army of 9,000 soldiers. When Sırlıbay is told he must either yield his daughter or see his people put to the sword, he agrees to the marriage, but Jibek herself says, "If you indeed intend to give me to this *käpir* (heathen), then at least grant me forty days of wedding feast, thirty days of wedding games" (*meni şınımenen käpirge bermek bolsañız, tım bolmasa qırıq kün toy qılıp, otız kün oyın qılıp*) (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:143). Though Sansızbay is devastated by the news of his brother's death, he resolves to rescue Jibek. First he and then Şege slip into the encampment, where each hears Jibek singing songs of lamentation from inside her tent. Jibek appeals to God, asking why he has doomed her to marriage with "some Qalmaq of foul descent" (*Şınıñmen näsip qıldıñ ba, / Näsili jaman Qalmaqqa-ay?*) (147, lines 1971-72). In Musabay Jıraw's version, Jibek even threatens murder and suicide as preferable to marriage with a Qalmaq, promising to "take a steel blade / to stab Koren / then stab myself" (*Aq pışaqtı alayın, / Korenge de salayın, / Özime de salayın*) (2009:65, 988-90).

The flip side of Jibek's condemnation of marriage to a Qalmaq is her repeated questioning of why Tölegen's family never came for her. As Jibek sings in Jüsipbek Qoja's version (Şayxıslamulı 2009:148-49, lines 1998-2009):

Äweli bas qosqanı Jaǵalbaylı  
 Jılqısın köptiginen baǵa almaydı.  
 Ölgeni Tölegenniñ ras bolsa,  
 Qudayım Qız Jibekti nege almaydı?  
 Taǵı da bas qosqanı Jaǵalbaylı,  
 Jılqısın köptiginen baǵa almaydı.  
 Sol elde seri jigit joq pa, Tãñiri-ay?  
 Jesirin izdep kelip nege almaydı?  
 Taǵı da bas qosqanı Jaǵalbaylı,  
 Jılqısın köptiginen baǵa almaydı.  
 Sol eldi özim izdep keter edim  
 Jiñişke äyel jolı taba almaydı.

First I joined the Jaǵalbaylı,  
 With their horse herds beyond count.  
 If it was Tölegen's fate to die,

---

<sup>22</sup> For details of the Qalmaqs in the lower Volga, see Khodarkovsky 2004:133-46; for the Jūngars and the Kazakhs, Holzwarth 2005:193-201. The image of the Qalmaqs in Turkic oral literature is reviewed in Kara 2010. The memorialization of the Jūngar wars in Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakh nationalist discourse is surveyed in Hancock-Parmer 2015.

Why, oh God, did you not take Jibek?  
 And I joined the Jaǵalbaylı,  
 With their horse herds beyond count.  
 In that land are there no brave horsemen, oh God?  
 Who would come in quest of their widow, bring her home?  
 And I joined the Jaǵalbaylı,  
 With their horse herds beyond count.  
 I would myself set out and find this people,  
 But how would a frail woman find a path?

Musabay Jıraw too matches Jibek's horror at the marriage with Koren Khan with lines in which she represents herself as properly a part of Tölegen's family. As Äwezov explained in his 1927 analysis, Jibek's "love was not the love of today, which takes as its object a single person," but was rather a love that embraced an entire lineal group, one of which Tölegen was only a part (1985 [1927]:131).

In his 1948 analysis, Äwezov replaced this romantic defense of virilocal residence with blunt denunciations. The custom of levirate, Äwezov now wrote (1948:196):

sprang from an archaic socio-economic system in which women were paid for with cattle and were then themselves treated as possessions. . . . Nor was a woman bought with *qalın mal* merely her husband's possession, for she was also counted as the property of his clan. "You may leave your husband, but never his clan," the saying went, and when a husband died the widow was held just as close as his flocks.

For good measure, Äwezov further added that "until the October Revolution, this law was a constant source of sorrow for Kazakh women, who suffered uncounted hardship from it" (1948:196). Yet these observations demonstrated only that the scholars studying the tale condemned these customs; they did not necessarily reimagine Jibek herself as a secret opponent of levirate marriage. To accomplish this, a second level of analysis was needed, one focused on the character of Jibek and on the situation in which she found herself. Jibek, Äwezov argued, viewed marriage with Sansızbay as simply the most acceptable among a series of bad choices: absent a defender from among the Şekti, she was obliged to turn to the Jaǵalbaylı and to Sansızbay. The song she sings lamenting that no one came for her from the Jaǵalbaylı isn't evidence of a "passion" for Sansızbay but rather of grief over the weakness of the Şekti. This interpretation of Jibek's character was followed by multiple other scholars, becoming key to the argument that *Qız Jibek* offers both psychological and social realism. Ğabdüllin described Koren as arriving at Jibek's *awıl* with his "sword dripping blood"; though he saw this as a moment where Jibek herself appears to switch from discontent to support of marriage customs, he wrote that this merely illustrated the essentially powerless status of women (2018 [1958]:136-37). Berdibay too characterized the marriage as a "wise and necessary solution," one that reflects not loyalty to Tölegen's family but rather the violence represented by the Qalmaqs, thereby illustrating the ways in which the epic gives us not just Jibek's appearance but also "the waves within her" (2013 [1982]:260, 262). These are explanations that, knowingly or not, mimic the

justifications for Russian colonization of the steppe that Tillett (1969) showed were dominant in the 1930s: yes, colonialism was bad, but colonialism by Russia was infinitely better than the “greater danger” of colonization by China (who, like the Qalmaqs, coincidentally represented a threat from the east).

Yet these conclusions were troubled by the narrative’s apparent reward to Jibek for her loyalty to the Jaǵalbaylı, granting her a husband, Sansızbay, whose heroic qualities seemingly surpass those of his older brother. As Äwezov himself noted, Tölegen falls short of the ideal of an epic hero in many ways, but above all through his lack of an equally heroic horse. In Jibek’s dream, Tölegen’s death is foretold through the image of his horse wandering riderless; in the climactic battle, his horse collapses from exhaustion; in the final scene, after Tölegen dies, “the grey horse of Tölegen / having drunk its fill, / bore a brigand on its back / as it went prancing off” (*Tölegen mingen kök jorǵa at / sū işip äbden qanǵan soñ, / bir qaraqşı astında / oynaqtay basıp jönedi*) (Jüsipbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı 2009:133, 1549-52). This is a far cry from the behavior of the classic horses of Central Asian oral epic, who in their more fantastic forms speak and even fly, and who even in their more workaday forms display a loyalty that extends past the death of the hero. Though Jüsipbek Qoja does not grant Sansızbay a heroic horse—it is Jibek who rides Sandalkök, the horse she tricks Koren into yielding her—he does grant him the type-scene of the hero arming himself and a battle scene replete with challenges and heroic displays of martial arts.<sup>23</sup> As Berdibay (2013 [1982]:263) remarks, in this final section, the “lyric epic” seems to have been transmuted into heroic epic.

The resolution of these interpretive dilemmas was to lay the blame at the feet of the singer. Both Äwezov and Berdibay argued that the final section reflected the embellishments of a singer who was a loyal ideologue of the feudal class, one who exaggerated the heroic parts of Sansızbay so as to subtly justify the institution of levirate marriage. Ğabdüllin went a step beyond this, arguing that the entire second half of *Qız Jibek* was a later and unfortunate elaboration. As Ğabdüllin (2018 [1958]:128-29, 137-39) explained, the original “popular” version of the epic would have ended with the death of Tölegen and would have expressed the people’s discontent with feudal law. Later, however, the *üstem tap* (“ruling class”) made use of the plot for their own ends, adding the story of Sansızbay, and in so doing grafting a moral onto it in which those who would embrace individualism and social alienation (Tölegen) perish, while those who model loyalty and deference to authority (Sansızbay) are rewarded with victory. In this reading, multiple details of the plot—the absence of a heroic horse by Tölegen’s side, his death at the hands of an ignominious foe, and Sansızbay’s defeat of an at least courageous adversary—have all been marshaled to elevate the character of Sansızbay over that of Tölegen.

This thesis mapped out an interpretive path that would be followed by perhaps the most influential Soviet-era interpretations of *Qız Jibek*, the 1970 film of the same title directed by Sultanaxmet Qojıqov on the basis of a script by Ğabıt Müsrepov. Müsrepov had first adapted the epic into an opera libretto in 1935, turning in a script that was largely faithful to the plot of

---

<sup>23</sup> Though this is not discussed in any of the scholarship I have reviewed, Bekejan’s use of a matchlock musket to kill Tölegen further underlines the difference between him and Koren. As Levi (2020:152-69) points out in his review of the introduction of gunpowder weaponry on the steppe, the mounted archer possessed a prestige lacked by those who fought with muskets, a weapon that required little skill to operate. Though epic heroes may be killed by guns—see, for example, the death of the Kyrgyz hero Manas (Hatto 1990)—they rarely fight with them.

Jüsipbek Qoja's version and which drew heavily upon his language, incorporating verbatim Tölegen's final words to the wild geese as well as Jibek's lament that no one had come for her from the Jaǵalbaylı. Like the epic, the opera culminates with Jibek facing a forced marriage to the Qalmaq Khan, Koren, but it ends on an ambiguous note: the final words are Şege's, crying out that he has come with Sansızbay, and the final action Jibek's, as she falls in confusion (Müsirepulı 1935:58). In the late 1960s, the film producer Kamal Smayılov received permission to produce a film version and, as he tells it, "Around September 7<sup>th</sup>, Sultan and I went to meet Ğabeñ at his dacha in the mountains. As soon as he saw we were serious about the project, Ğabeñ said, if you give me two or three months, I'll rewrite the whole scenario from start to finish." Once the script was ready, the author came to the studio and, "in his own soft warm voice read the script out loud to us. . . . [W]e all sat spellbound, barely taking a breath" (2015:25). The script became perhaps the most famous film of Soviet Kazakhstan, the source of most people's knowledge of the story, and a revision that has essentially replaced Müsrepov's own earlier libretto as the basis for operatic performances.

In this revision, Müsrepov chose a simple resolution to the interpretive challenges posed by Jibek's marriage to Sansızbay: he eliminated the entire second half of the narrative.<sup>24</sup> In the final scene of the film, Bekejan reveals to Jibek that he has killed Tölegen, and she flees into the steppe where, in a direct echo of Jüsipbek Qoja's account of her dream, she sees Tölegen's horse running with an empty saddle. The film's final image is of Jibek's wedding hat floating away on the waters of the Aqjayıq, suggesting that she has drowned herself in sorrow. The script thus returned the story to an ending that parallels the tale of Layla and Majnun, but also one that mimicked the plots of such pre-revolutionary novellas as Mirjaqıp Dūlatov's *Baqıtsız Jamal* (2003 [1910]) and Beyimbet Maylın's *Şuǵanıñ Belgisi* (2009 [1915]), tales in which the inequities of Kazakh society were dramatized through the deaths of lovers divided by class. The cinematography, Peter Rollberg argues, similarly emphasizes themes of individualism rather than of national unity, with the camera's constant movement creating an atmosphere of "visual restlessness" that underlines the instability and isolation of Tölegen and Jibek (2021:222).

## Conclusion

In reviewing the mix of Stalin-era debates over etymology, literary history, and Marxist theory in which Bakhtin's theories were rooted, Katerina Clark and Galin Tihanov point out that these things mattered because "theorizing genre amounted to tentatively drawing and redrawing the boundaries of modernity" (2011:143). The arguments of Äwezov, Ğabdūllın, Berdibay, and others, though never in explicit dialogue with Bakhtin or Lukács, similarly drew on the linguistic theories of N. Ia. Marr (1936), on concerns about the links between literary and economic history, and on an understanding of oral texts as polyphonies born from the dialogue between

---

<sup>24</sup> Düysenbaev (1973:91) records that Musrepov himself claimed that the versions of *Qız Jibek* he had heard as a child completely omitted any mention of levirate marriage. Düysenbaev himself reviews the text and largely concurs with the conclusions of Äwezov and other scholars about the differences between the first and second halves, but also notes that they possess a stylistic unity that mark both as the work of Jüsipbek Qoja, a source he does not hesitate to name.

emergent performance and inherited texts. For these scholars, however, what was at stake in drawing these boundaries was the question not just of *what* was modern but rather of *who* was modern.

The Soviet feting of oral literature and folklore as the literature of “the toiling masses” did create space for the emergence of literary figures like Jambul and for literary projects like Mūsrepov’s adaptation of *Qız Jibek*, but it could also all too easily slide into a chauvinistic dismissal of Kazakh literature as somehow always something less than coeval. The Soviet project, so the story went, had made the Soviet people leapfrog all the way from the earlier stages of capitalism into the future of Socialism, but this story could also imply that some members of the Soviet community had started even further back, dragged from some distant twilight of feudalism into the sun of Socialist modernity. A desire to contest the place of the Kazakhs on these historical grids had elsewhere animated everything from scholarship on the history of Kazakh mobile pastoralism (Sneath 2007) to the themes of Kazakh Socialist Realist fiction (McGuire 2018), and here spilled into debates over how to understand the characters of Jibek and Tölegen. *Qız Jibek* came to be read as an epic turned inside-out, one in which the interior worlds of its characters mattered more than their actions. The “lyric epic” seemingly contained within itself the germs of genres yet to bloom, anticipating the realist novel thanks to plots driven by conflict with social customs and protagonists characterized by their alienation from their own communities. Yet these interpretations also imagined that the “lyric epic” had then been turned inside-out a second time, transformed back into the mold of a “heroic epic” by the interventions of reactionary singers.

This is a story of literary history that in many ways also flips the usual ways in which nations use epic texts to claim social capital. Rather than looking to a literary past for a sense of social and political unity impossible in the present (Bauman and Briggs 2003), the scholarship reviewed here sought prestige through reading the narratives as a story of alienation and social division. In doing so, the scholarship drew attention to the ways in which Jūsipbek Qoja’s text did indeed offer up complex characters who do indeed wrestle with their responsibilities to their families. The irony of this is that while these scholars succeeded in preserving *Qız Jibek*’s place at the center of the Kazakh literary canon, the consequence has been that the text is now often understood to offer, as national epics are so often thought to do, a bland endorsement of national unity, with Jibek read not as an iconoclastic breaker of norms but rather as a straightforward paragon of tradition. Thus it is that some universities now have “*Qız Jibek*” clubs which host conferences on the theme, “The upbringing of a single daughter is equal to the upbringing of an entire nation” (*bir qızdı tärбіlelew—bir ulttı tärбіlelew teñ*), and one university even organizes an annual “*Qız Jibek*” beauty pageant where contestants dress up like the Jibek of the film and compete in tests of their knowledge of Kazakh language and customs.<sup>25</sup>

*Nazarbayev University*

---

<sup>25</sup> “Qız Jibek: Qazaq qızdarınıñ taǵılmıdı uyımı,” *Qazaqstan dauiri*, March 20, 2019 (<https://www.elana.kz/en/qyz-zhibek-qazaq-qyzdarynyng-taghyly/>); “Qız-ulttıñ aynası, ulıstıñ şańsıraǵı” attı dástürlı ‘Qız Jibek-2016’ bayqawınıñ iriktew sını ötti,” December 2, 2016 (<https://www.enu.kz/info/zhanalyktar/41534/>).

## References

- Akhinzhanov 1953 Musatai Akhinzhanov. *Problema Narodnosti Kazakhskikh Sotsial'no-Bytovykh Poëm: Materialy k Diskussii Po Kazakhskomu Eposu*. Alma-Ata: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk Kazakhskoi SSR.
- Älbekov 2015 Toqtar Älbekov. "Alğı Söz." In *Altın Jambı: Jüsipbek Şayıslamulınıñ Jır-Muraları*. Ed. by T. Älbekov. Volume 1. Almaty: Azıya Arna. pp. 3-16.
- Auerbach 2003 Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Äwezov 1948 Muxtar Äwezov. *Qazaq Ädebïetiniñ Tarıxı: Fol'klor*. Volume 1. Almaty: Qazaq SSR Ǵılım Akademïyasınıñ Baspası.
- Äwezov 1985 [1927] \_\_\_\_\_. "Ädebïet Tarıxı." In *Muxtar Äwezov Jırma Tomdıq Şıǵarmalar Jınaǵı*. Volume 16. Almaty: Jazūşı. pp. 13-198.
- Azadovskii 1974 Mark Azadovskii. *A Siberian Tale Teller*. Trans. by James R. Dow. Austin: Center for Intercultural Studies in Folklore and Ethnomusicology, University of Texas.
- Bakhtin 1981 Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin. "Epic and Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. by Michael Holquist. Trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press. pp. 3-40.
- Bauman 1975 Richard Bauman. "Verbal Art as Performance." *American Anthropologist*, 77.2:290-311.
- Bauman and Briggs 2003 Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs. *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*. Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language, 21. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bennigsen 1975 Alexandre A. Bennigsen. "The Crisis of the Turkic National Epics, 1951-1952: Local Nationalism or Internationalism?" *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 17.2:463-74.
- Berdibay 2013 [1982] Raxmanqul Berdibay. "Qazaq Ėposı." In *Fol'klor jäne Ädebïet turalı Zerttewler*. Ed. by S. S. Qorabay. Klassikalıq Zerttewler, 16. Almaty: Ädebïet Älemi. pp. 185-323.
- Caffee 2018 Naomi Caffee. "How Tatiana's Voice Rang across the Steppe: Russian Literature in the Life and Legend of Abai." *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9.1:12-19.
- Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969 Nora K. Chadwick and Victor Zhirmunsky. *Oral Epics of Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark and Tihanov 2011 Katerina Clark and Galin Tihanov. "Soviet Literary Theory in the 1930s: Battles over Genre and the Boundaries of Modernity." In *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond*. Ed. by Galin Tihanov and Evgeny Dobrenko. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. pp. 109-43.
- Dūlatov 2003 Mirjaqip Dūlatov. "Baqıtsız Jamal." In *Oyan, Qazaq!: Roman, Öleñ-Jırlar, Äñgimeler*. Almaty: Atamura. pp. 6-44.

- Düysenbaev 1973 Israq Takimovıç Düysenbaev. *Qazaqtıñ Lıro-Èposı*. Almaty: Ğılım.
- Edgar 2003 Adrienne Lynn Edgar. "Emancipation of the Unveiled: Turkmen Women under Soviet Rule, 1924-29." *The Russian Review*, 62.1:132-49.
- Ğabdüllın 2018 [1958] Mälik Ğabdüllın. *Qazaq Xalqınıñ Awız Ādebıeti*. On Bir Tomdıq Şıǵarmalar Jınaǵı, 2. Almaty: İdan.
- Gorky 1935 Maxim Gorky. "Soviet Literature." In *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*. Ed. by H. G. Scott. New York: International Publishers. pp. 27-69.
- Ğumarova 2012 Mälike Ğumarova. "'Qız Jibek' Lıro-Èposynyñ Ğılımı Basılımin Baspaǵa Āzirlew Tājirbısinen." In *Xalıq Ādebıeti Ülgileri Men Abay Şıǵarmalarınıñ Tekstologıyası*. Ed. by T. K. Ālbekov. Klassikalıq Zerttewler, 3. Almaty: Ādebıet Ąlemi. pp. 134-54.
- Hancock-Parmer 2015 Michael Hancock-Parmer. "The Soviet Study of the Barefooted Flight of the Kazakhs." *Central Asian Survey*, 34.3:281-95.
- Hatto 1990 Arthur T. Hatto, ed. and trans. *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff*. Asiatische Forschungen, 110. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Hegel 1975 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Volume 2. Trans. by T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Holt 2015 Katharine Holt. "Performing as Soviet Central Asia's Source Texts: Lahuti and Džambul in Moscow, 1935-1936." *Cahiers d'Asie centrale*, 24:213-38.
- Holzwarth 2005 Wolfgang Holzwarth. "Relations between Uzbek Central Asia, the Great Steppe and Iran, 1700-1750." In *Shifts and Drifts in Nomad-Sedentary Relations*. Ed. by Stefan Leder and Bernhard Streck. Nomaden und Sesshafte, 2. Wiesbaden: L. Reichert. pp. 179-216.
- Honko 1996 Lauri Honko "Epic and Identity: National, Regional, Communal, Individual." *Oral Tradition*, 11.1:18-36. [https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/11i/6\\_honko.pdf](https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/11i/6_honko.pdf)
- Howell 1992 Dana Prescott Howell. *The Development of Soviet Folkloristics*. New York: Garland.
- Jacquesson 2021 Svetlana Jacquesson. "On Folklore Archives and Heritage Claims: The Manas Epic in Kyrgyzstan." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 64.4:425-54.
- Kadare 2006 Ismail Kadare. *The File on H*. Trans. by David Bellos. London: Vintage Books.
- Kara 2010 Dávid Somfai Kara. "Kalmak: The Enemy in the Kazak and Kirghiz Epic Songs." *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 63.2:167-78.
- Khodarkovsky 2004 Michael Khodarkovsky. *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Krader 1967-68 Barbara Krader. "Folk Music Archive of the Moscow Conservatory, with a Brief History of Russian Field Recording." *Folklore and Folk Music Archivist*, 10.2:13-46.

- Kudaibergenova 2017 Diana T. Kudaibergenova. *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature: Elites and Narratives*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Kundakbayeva and Rustem 2016 Zhanat Kundakbayeva and Kamshat Rustem. "Resistance to Ideology, Subjugation to Language: A Workshop by Writer Gabit Musrepov under Soviet Totalitarian Censorship in 1928-1964." *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 63:29-44.
- Lévi-Strauss 1969 Claude Lévi-Strauss. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Ed. by Rodney Needham. Trans. by James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer. Boston: Beacon.
- Levi 2020 Scott C. Levi. *The Bukharan Crisis: A Connected History of 18th Century Central Asia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Lukács 1971 György Lukács. *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Marr 1936 N. Ya Marr. *Izbrannye Raboty*. 5 vols. Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe izdatel'stvo.
- Martin 2001 Virginia Martin. *Law and Custom in the Steppe: The Kazakhs of the Middle Horde and Russian Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Curzon.
- Massell 1974 Gregory J. Massell. *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Maylın 2009 Beyimbet Maylın. "Şuğaniñ Belgisi." In *Beimbet Maylın Äñgimeler*. Almaty: An-Aris. pp. 9-31.
- McGuire 2018 Gabriel McGuire. "Aqyn Agha? Abai Zholy as Socialist Realism and as Literary History." *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9.1:2-11.
- Meisami 1987 Julie Scott Meisami. *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Muqanov 1974 Säbīt Muqanov. *Xalıq Murası*. Almaty: Qazaqstan Baspası.
- Musabay Jıraw 2009 Musabay Jıraw. "Qız Jibek." In Qosan et al. 2009:37-83.
- Müsirepulı 1935 Ğabīt Müsirepulı. *Qız Jibek: 4 Perdeli Küyli Drama*. Almaty: Qazaqstan Kórkem Ádebıet Baspası.
- Oinas 1973 Felix J. Oinas. "Folklore and Politics in the Soviet Union." *Slavic Review*, 32.1:45-58.
- Oinas 1985 \_\_\_\_\_. "Folklore Activities and Scholarship in Russia." In *Essays on Russian Folklore and Mythology*. Columbus, OH: Slavica. pp. 131-59.
- Prior 2013 Daniel Prior. *The Šabdan Baatir Codex: Epic and the Writing of Northern Kirghiz History: Edition, Translation and Interpretations, with a Facsimile of the Unique Manuscript*. Leiden: Brill.
- Qasqabasov 2009 Seyit Qasqabasov. "Ğaşıqtıq Jırlar." In Qosan et al. 2009:9-34.



- Qosan et al. 2009 S. Qosan, S. Qasqabasov, T. Älibekov, and G. Orda, eds. *Ğaşıqtıq Jırlar. Babalar Sözi*, 53. Astana: Foliant.
- Radloff 1870 Wilhelm Radloff, ed. *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme Süd-Sibiriens, Vol. 3: Kirgisische Mundarten*. St. Petersburg: Tipografia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk.
- Radloff 1885 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme Süd-Sibiriens, Vol. 5: Der Dialect der Kara-Kirgisen*. St. Petersburg: Tipografia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk.
- Radloff 1990 [1885] \_\_\_\_\_. "Samples of Folk Literature from the North Turkic Tribes, Collected and Translated by Dr. Wilhelm Radloff: Preface to Volume V: *The Dialect of the Kara-Kirgiz*." *Oral Tradition*, 5.1:73-90. [https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/5i/5\\_radloff.pdf](https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/5i/5_radloff.pdf)
- Reichl 1992 Karl Reichl. *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: Tradition, Forms, Poetic Structure*. Albert Bates Lord Studies in Oral Tradition, 7. New York: Garland.
- Reichl 2007 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. and trans. *Edige: A Karakalpak Heroic Epic as Performed by Jumabay Bazarov*. Folklore Fellows' Communications, 293. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.
- Rollberg 2021 Peter Rollberg. *The Cinema of Soviet Kazakhstan 1925-1991: An Uneasy Legacy*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Sadırbayulı 2009 Sultaŋalı Sadırbayulı. *Söz Asılı Sözde: Qanattı Sözder Jäne Fol'klor*. Almaty: Qazaq Ünıversıteti.
- Şayxıslamulı 2009 Jüsıpbek Qoja Şayxıslamulı. "Qıssa Qız Jıbektiñ Xıkayası." In Qosan et al. 2009:84-173.
- Şayxıslamulı 2015 \_\_\_\_\_. "Xıkayat Jüsıpbek Qojanıñ Wäzıpa Qız Häm Qız Şökeymen Aytısqanı." In *Altın Jambı: Jüsıpbek Şayıslamulıñ Jır-Muraları*. Volume 3. Ed. by T. K. Älbekov. Almaty: Azıya Arna. pp. 303-22.
- Schild 2010 Kathryn Douglas Schild. "Between Moscow and Baku: National Literatures at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers." Unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Seıfüllin 1964 [1932] Säken Seıfüllin. "Qız Jıbek Äñgimesi Turalı." In *Şıǵarmalar*. Volume 6. Ed. by Tursınbek Käkişev. Almaty: Qazaqtyng Memleketik Korkem Adebiet Baspasy. pp. 413-19.
- Seyed-Gohrab 2003 Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab. *Laylı and Majnūn: Love, Madness, and Mystic Longing in Nizāmī's Epic Romance*. Leiden: Brill.
- Shoolbraid 1975 G. M. H. Shoolbraid. *The Oral Epic of Siberia and Central Asia*. Uralic and Altaic Series, 111. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sinor 1967 Denis Sinor. "Radloff's Proben." In V. V. Radloff, *South Siberian Oral Literature: Turkic Texts*. Uralic and Altaic Series, 79/1. Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Smayılov 2015 Kamal Smayılov. "'Qız Jıbek' Osılay Tūǵan." *Añız Adam*, 5:25-26.
- Sneath 2007 David Sneath. *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and*

*Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Tahmasebian and Gould n.d. Kayvan Tahmasebian and Rebecca Ruth Gould. "The Translatability of Love: The Romance Genre and the Prismatic Reception of Jane Eyre in Twentieth-Century Iran." In *Close Reading a Global Novel: Prismatic Jane Eyre* (publisher not yet determined).
- Tate 2011 Aaron Phillip Tate. "Matija Murko, Wilhelm Radloff, and Oral Epic Studies." *Oral Tradition*, 26.2:329-52. [https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/26ii/06\\_26.2.pdf](https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/26ii/06_26.2.pdf)
- Tillett 1969 Lowell R. Tillett. *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Winner 1958 Thomas G. Winner. *The Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs of Russian Central Asia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Witt 2011 Susanna Witt. "Between the Lines: Totalitarianism and Translation in the USSR." In *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia*. Ed. by Brian James Baer. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. pp. 149-70.

This page is intentionally left blank.

## **Coast Miwok Oral Tradition: Grammar and Ethnopoetic Organization in a California Context**

**Andrew Cowell**

Little has been published on the oral traditions of the Coast Miwok that provides any information on the original language and linguistic verbal art of this group.<sup>1</sup> The Coast Miwok language was spoken north of San Francisco Bay, largely in an area corresponding to modern Marin County and parts of Sonoma County, California, in two dialects, Bodega and Marin.<sup>2</sup> More generally, relatively little has been published on the oral traditions of the San Francisco Bay area, which included speakers of the Miwok and Costanoan / Ohlone branches of the Utian language family, as early missionization led to the loss of the languages and associated oral traditions.<sup>3</sup> However, there are existing archival sources for exploring Coast Miwok language and oral traditions. In this article, I assemble and evaluate the available information, and for the first time provide accurate linguistic transcription and annotation of two texts representative of the Coast Miwok tradition of oral narrative. In addition to contributing to a basic knowledge of the oral traditions of the Coast Miwok, the article aims to situate these traditions in the broader context of Central California practices, while also commenting on their general ethnopoetic features.

Not even a single narrative of any sort has ever been published in Coast Miwok.<sup>4</sup> There are two small collections of Coast Miwok oral literature recorded in English, one by C. Hart Merriam (1993 [1910]), and the other by Isabel Kelly (1978b). Both include a few scattered Coast Miwok words. Kelly (1978a) also provides some basic information about performance of the narratives, which is similar to that reported for many other areas: narratives were told by both men and women, during winter, in the nighttime. Kelly's field notes have also been published (Collier and Thalman 1991) and provide some additional information on the tradition, including some linguistic terms (which I provide here retranscribed based on Callaghan's work). There is a specific word for Coast Miwok mythological-type narratives: '*akkala*' (Collier and Thalman

---

<sup>1</sup> For basic information on the Coast Miwok people, see Kelly 1978a. More extensive historical information can be found in Goerke 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Information on the language can be found primarily in Callaghan 1970.

<sup>3</sup> On the Utian languages generally, see Callaghan 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The available texts are a brief prayer (Loeb 1926), a translation of the Lord's Prayer and another translated Christian prayer (Kroeber 1911; Goerke 2007:208), and a series of Bodega Miwok war songs (Goerke 2007:208-09), which are however so poorly transcribed and loosely translated that they are largely unrecoverable.

1991:421). It is related to *'akkal*, “be old.” In these stories, the primary characters are First Peoples (*hukke micca*, lit. “before people” (87)). Merriam also reports use of the term *'ayyaako* (“children”) to refer to the First People. Although they are animals, they are different from the “mere” animals of the present, and some have different names in the oral tradition. The everyday word for coyote is *'oye* for example, but in the myths he was called /wuyoki/<sup>5</sup> (Bodega dialect) (Collier and Thalman 1991:422-23) or *'oye 'oyyiş*, “coyote old man” (Marin dialect) (98). These characters of the mythical age were then followed by the *şukku 'inniiko*, “new ones” (the present humans) (103). Specific beliefs about storytelling itself included the idea that telling a story during the day would actually shorten the day, and that summer nights were too short to tell the stories (421). More generally, the Coast Miwok traditions as documented by Merriam and Kelly belong to the central California cultural area, where Coyote plays a very prominent role, including that of a Creator in many stories, and the idea of the First Peoples is common.<sup>6</sup>

The last traditional speaker of the Coast Miwok language was Sarah Ballard, who passed away in 1978. Ballard worked with Catherine Callaghan in the 1960s to produce the 1970 dictionary of the Bodega dialect of Coast Miwok (Callaghan 1970), which also contains grammatical information. Callaghan also recorded ten short Coast Miwok texts and two songs from Ballard, which are deposited in the archives of the Survey of California and Other Indian Languages (SCOIL), but without transcription or translation.<sup>7</sup> I have transcribed and translated all of these texts myself, using Callaghan’s dictionary and the grammatical information contained therein, with additional reliance on the closely-related Lake Miwok language in some cases.<sup>8</sup> The transcriptions and translations are time-aligned to the original audio recordings, using the ELAN linguistic software (2020), and are deposited in the SCOIL archives along with the original data, as of 2019. All of the texts are thus available for consultation or download by the general public. There are many other texts in the SCOIL archives in other languages (not to mention in other archives around the world) which could be renewed in this way by linguists or others interested in oral traditions and made available to the public, and it is to be hoped that such work will grow in the future. The texts Callaghan recorded from Ballard are:

	Title:	SCOIL tape #:	Total Lines:
1.	“The Rattlesnake”	6-014	25
2.	“Barbecuing Meat”	6-016	12
3.	“Thunder and Lightning”	6-018	14
4.	“The Last of the Two Elk”	6-019	4
5.	“The Journey of the Dead”	6-020	6
6.	“The Disobedient Girl,” version 1	6-021	16

---

<sup>5</sup> Where the exact transcription of a word is unclear, I place the term in slashes (/ /) with the best-guess transcription.

<sup>6</sup> See Bright 1978b and 1994; Heizer 1978b; and Luthin 2002:513-41 for general discussions of the contents of the traditional verbal narratives of California.

<sup>7</sup> The archive can be accessed online at <https://cla.berkeley.edu/>.

<sup>8</sup> On Lake Miwok, see Freeland 1947 (grammar sketch with texts); Callaghan 1963 (grammar) and 1965 (dictionary).

7.	“The Disobedient Girl,” version 2	6-021	30
8.	“Wallipo Steals the Fish”	6-022	19
9.	“The Sun Girl”	6-023	22
10.	“The Two Lovers”	6-029	14
TOTAL			140

Of these texts, numbers 1, 2, and 8 are personal anecdotal accounts (although 8 involves a shamanistic component as well), numbers 6, 7, and 10 are legendary accounts, number 5 is an ethnographic account, and numbers 3, 4, and 9 are mythical narratives. The texts here for the most part have little in common with the material presented in Kelly 1978b or Merriam 1993. An exception is “The Sun Girl.” The same text was collected by Merriam originally in 1910. I give here the text, with linguistic annotation, as spoken by Ballard. I underline sentence-initial lexical elements, whose significance will be explained after the presentation of the text.<sup>9</sup>

### THE SUN GIRL

1.    ahh,<sup>10</sup> weya ka    yutte.  
       ahh    world PST dark

The world was dark.

2.    'iṭi ka    'iṣ= ahh hii-n    kooya-n    hanna    ka cewa.  
       then PST this= ahh sun-GEN girl-NOM the.only.one PST bright

Then that Sun Girl was the only light.

3.    ke        'iṭi 'opu    ka    ṣu[ṭa], yomik 'aalla-tto.  
       and.then 3S DECL PST located live    east-ALLAT

And this one was lo[cated], lived in the east.

4.    'inniiko ka    welak cewa.  
       3P        PST want shine

They wanted light.

---

<sup>9</sup> Concerning the orthography, c is pronounced as English ch, ṣ is a retroflex s, pronounced with the tongue curled back towards the roof of the mouth, ṭ is a retroflex t, and ' is a glottal stop. Coast Miwok has SVO word order, and resembles Latin in having a system of eight noun cases, marked by suffixes. It uses either pronouns or reduced pronominal clitics attached to neighboring words (usually the verb), and demonstratives are likewise either independent words or reduced clitic forms. Verbs can be altered by various suffixes that derive imperative, perfective, inchoative, and other secondary forms.

<sup>10</sup> *Ahh* is simply a hesitation here, so not considered as a line-initial form.

5. 'iṭi ka 'oye-n, 'oye-n hiyyappa 'oṣṣa tayih ka cuna cuna hii-n  
then PST coyote-NOM coyote-NOM send two man PST fetch fetch sun-GEN

kooya kon= hii-n kooya.  
girl 3P?= sun-GEN girl

Then the Coyote made / sent two men go after / get the Sun Girl they, the Sun Girl.<sup>11</sup>

6. 'enak-to ka koṣ='opyaṭi  
far-ALLAT PST 3D=leave.PERF

They departed for a distant place.

7. 'ENAK-TO ka,  
far-ALLAT PST

A distant place . . .

8. 'oye 'enak-to,  
coyote far-ALLAT

Coyote to a distant place . . .

9. ka 'ikkoṣ 'opyaṭi.  
PST 3D leave.PERF

And they departed.

10. 'iṭi ka 'iṣ=hii-n koola-n hella welak na'uuṭi-n 'ooni 'ikkoṣ ṣakkaa-ṭu  
then PST this=sun-GEN girl-NOM NEG want return-DEP come 3D with-INSTR

And the Sun Girl did not want to come back with them.

11. 'iṭi ka koṣ='aakal 'oye coote 'iṣ=hii-n koola-n hella welak 'ooni  
then PST 2D=tell coyote ? this=sun-GEN girl-NOM NEG want come

Then they told Coyote the Sun Girl did not want to come

---

<sup>11</sup> *Tayih ka* is possibly intended as *tayihko*, “men.”

12. 'iṭi ka 'iṣ=oye-n,  
then PST this=coyote-NOM

Then this Coyote . . .

13. 'iṭi ka 'iṣ='oye-n hiyyappa 'uni tayyik-ko-n cuna 'iṭi.  
then PST this=coyote-NOM send many man-PL-NOM fetch 3S

Then this Coyote, then this Coyote sent several men to go after her.

14. 'iṭi ka kon=, 'iṭi ka, 'iṭi ka kon=kalen 'iṣ=hii-n kooya.  
then PST 3P= then PST then PST 3P=tie this=sun-GEN girl

Then they, then, then they tied up this girl.

17. ke kon=camma-, 'iṭi-kko ṭeēcukay, kon=camma-n 'ooni 'iṭi  
and.then 3P=bring 3S-P ? 3P=bring-DEP come 3S

Then they brought, they [?], they brought her.

18. 'iṭi ka 'inniiko-n welak 'u[h]=hii-n koola-n cewwaṭi[yya] weya  
then PST 3P-NOM want 3S=sun-GEN girl-NOM shine.PERF world

Then they wanted the Sun Girl to light up the earth.

19. 'iṭi ka hella podeer;  
then PST NEG able

[But] she could not do it;

20. 'ellee, 'iṭi,  
fish 3S

fish<sup>12</sup> . . . she . . .

21. 'uh=meeh ka halle 'awwuk pollo  
3S=body PST covered(?) abalone shell

Her body was covered with(?) abalone shell

---

<sup>12</sup> The narrator apparently doesn't immediately remember the word for "abalone" and says "fish" instead.



22. 'iti kaa 'awwuk pollo-n cewwa.  
then PST abalone shell-NOM shine

Then the abalone shell gave light.

Callaghan (1970:1) notes that Ballard had not spoken Coast Miwok regularly for several decades at the time they worked together in the 1960s, and had forgotten many words. There is definitely searching or hesitation at some points in the texts. Her basic morphological and syntactic knowledge of the language appears to have remained intact however. Her grammar is regular and consistent throughout the texts, as well as other dictionary example sentences. We should not expect this and the other narratives to be highly elaborated, given the limitations of memory and vocabulary which Ballard experienced, but they are nevertheless useful samples of Coast Miwok language and oral narratives, and are of course the only examples that we have.

The text reveals several interesting features of Coast Miwok, as well as some probable absences of original features. To begin with the latter, the text makes no use of any special narrative marker of reported or myth-time events, unlike most other oral traditions of Native America (K. Kroeber 1997). All other well-documented Miwok languages do have such features. Southern and Central Sierra Miwok make use of special narrative and/or remote past tenses (Broadbent 1964; Freeland 1951). The more closely related Lake Miwok language uses the particle *weno* (“it is reported”) for this purpose (see Callaghan 1978). Such a particle would presumably have been a high-frequency feature of traditional narratives in Coast Miwok, and part of the speaker’s conscious “discursive awareness” (Kroskrity 2010), and thus something that we would not have expected Callaghan to forget, but it could be that after decades of not speaking regularly she omitted this stylistic feature. Similarly, although there is no direct citation in this text, citations do occur in other of her texts. In those cases, there is no special citational form used. Lake Miwok again has such a form: the particle *kaša*, which means “s/he said” (Callaghan 1978).<sup>13</sup> Since such a feature is almost universal in oral traditions, it seems most likely that Ballard simply omitted this particle, and thus I am tempted to assume that she omitted some type of attributive particle such as *weno* as well. Ballard also never uses any particular closing device for her narratives, whereas in Lake Miwok it is common to use the particle *'aweecu* (“that’s all / the limit / the extent of it”) (Callaghan 1978). Note finally that Ballard uses the everyday term *'oye* when talking about Old Man Coyote, rather than the special terms reported above (*'oye 'oyyiš* and so forth) for traditional narratives. Rather than examples of forgetting, however, at least some of these omissions may be indexical of the context of the retellings—as linguistic samples for a non-Miwok academic linguist, rather than attempts to fully perform the stories for an indigenous audience. Similar types of omission have been reported in other such ethnographic performance settings (see Moore 2015 on Chinook, for example).

Based on these apparent absences, we should not take this text as a representative sample of Coast Miwok narrative art as it was practiced at earlier times for an indigenous audience. But it does show several interesting linguistic and artistic features. Most notably, Coast Miwok uses

---

<sup>13</sup> Kroeber (1904) offers a brief text in the Rumsen language of the Costanoan group. Even in this short sample (1904:80-81), there is clear evidence of a citational form, {*kaii*}.

strict SVO word order. Sentences normally begin with a tense / aspect / modality particle (the past tense particle *ka* is a pervasive example in the preceding text). There is then an optional marked focus position, prior to the particle. This position can either be empty, be filled by a discourse marker (such as *'iti*, “then,” in several lines in the text), or on rarer occasions (underlined above) be filled by some other lexical part of speech: a subject noun which “slides” to the left of the particle; a verb accompanied by a pronominal clitic, which both “slide” to the left of the particle; some oblique nominal element (that is, not subject or object); or an adjectival or adverbial element, which can be detached from its normal place in the sentence and then moved to the marked focus position. The only restriction on the marked focus position is that the basic SVO order of the main constituents must be maintained.

In examining the full range of the narratives, it turns out that the marked focus position is filled by something other than a discourse marker only a small percentage of the time. In particular, this position is used to introduce important new participants or events into the narrative, and it is also used to emphasize certain adverbial and adjectival concepts or oblique participants that would normally be placed after the main SVO constituents of the sentence. Both of these usages can be seen clearly in “The Sun Girl.” In line 1, the world is introduced. In line 4, the people of the world are introduced. In line 6, the great distance to be traveled to get light is emphasized. Then in lines 20 and 21, the body of the Sun Girl, covered by abalone shells which are the source of light for the world, is highlighted. Note however that the Sun Girl herself is not given marked focus treatment when first introduced, nor is Coyote (in this case the mythical creator figure Old Man Coyote).

Except in these special uses of the marked focus position, virtually every sentence starts with *'iti ka . . .* (“then PST . . .”). The usage of this phrase is very similar to what occurs in Lake Miwok traditional narratives, where *miṭi 'ekal* (“so then . . .”) is used very commonly to begin lines of narrative—indeed, the two forms appear to be related (Callaghan 1978). In a few cases *ke* is used. This form is used only when the subject of the sentence is the same as the preceding sentence, and when that subject is expressed as a pronoun or pronominal clitic following *ke* (as in lines 4 and 17). It is effectively a same-reference marker, and can be translated “and” (though it is used only to link two sentences, not two nouns). It indicates strong continuity of action between two sentences.

It is interesting to contrast the pattern here with what one finds in the sample sentences in the Bodega Miwok dictionary that are not from narratives. Such sentences virtually never begin with *'iti*, since it is a discourse-level continuation marker. Instead they very commonly begin with a noun in marked focus position—so often in fact that one might assume from the dictionary alone that S + marker + V + O is the unmarked word order in the language. But in fact this is just an artifact of elicitation: when new topics and actions are constantly raised in the context of linguistic field work, these new items often get placed in marked focus position specifically because they are contrastive and new. But in a narrative, the language looks very different—the marked focus position is reserved for key narrative constituents or points of emphasis, and almost always only on their first mention. Thus *'iti ka* could be considered roughly as a narrative / poetic line marker, while use of content words in the marked focus position serves to create larger narrative chunks.

Below, for the sake of comparison, I offer one more full text—a legendary story:

**THE DISOBEDIENT / BAD GIRL (Second Version)**

(Title): 'om- 'omu-n kooya.  
bad bad-GEN girl

The bad girl.

1. 'inniiko ka ş[uta], yomik liwa-n noo hinewa-tto.  
3P PST located live water-GEN that side-ALLAT

There were people living across the water.

2. 'iṭi ka kenne kooya-n 'ame  
then PST one pubescent.girl-NOM menstruate

Then one pubescent girl . . .

3. ka 'u[h]=caa-??? 'u[h]=caamaṭi 'uṣ=huna kocca.  
PST 3S=ha[ve] 3S=have.PERF 3S=own house

And she had her own [menstrual] hut.

4. 'uk-'oo- 'uh='ooma ka HUJA HII.  
? ? 3S=fast PST four day

She was fasting / menstruating for four days.

5. 'i- 'ikko-n 'atawne, ka 'u[h]=tuppe 'alla-tto.  
3P-NOM speak.to PST 3S=appear outside-ALLAT

When they spoke to her, she came outside.<sup>14</sup>

6. şuṭA-MMI 'un=KOCOA-TTO!  
located-IMPER 2S=house-ALLAT

“Stay at your house!”

---

<sup>14</sup> Temporal subordinate clauses precede main clauses in Coast Miwok, so this line does not involve marked focus position.

7. 'eyya=n wetʃiʔi KAA!  
PROHIB=2S open.PERF door

“Don’t open the door!”

8. 'eyya=n 'aʔawne manti!  
PROHIB=2S speak.to someone

“Don’t speak to anyone!”

9. wette-mmi kaa!  
close-IMPER door

“Close the door!”

10. 'u[h]=caamaʔi ka 'uʃ= 'uʃ= 'uʃ=huna traaste.  
3S=have.PERF PST 3S= 3S 3S=own utensils

She had her own dishes / utensils.

11. 'iʔi ka manti-n hella pod[eer], manti-n hella huke 'iʔi --  
then PST someone-NOM NEG able someone-NOM NEG touch 3S

kuleyyi-kko-n hanna.  
woman-P-NOM only.ones[who]

Then no one can, no one is to touch them, women alone (menstruating).

12. kuleyyi-kko ka hinak 'uh=tuu.  
woman-PL PST make 3S=food

The women made her food.

13. 'iʔi ka, 'iʔi ka 'iʃ-'ame-n waa 'alla-tto.  
then PST then PST this=menstruate-NOM go outside-ALLAT

Then, this girl went outside [again].

14. kee  
and.then

And . . .

15. 'iṭi ka 'uh=waa 'iṣ=huyye-tto,  
then PST 3S=go this=point-ALLAT

Then she went to that point of land,

16. kee 'iṣ-ṣi 'omu  
and.then 3S=INSTR bad

And it was bad [weather].

17. 'iṭi ka 'iṣ='oolok, 'omu tayi-n cama 'iṭi 'iS=huyye-tto.  
then PST this=ocean, bad man-NOM take 3S this=point-ALLAT

Then the badly [crashing] waves carried her to that point of land (lit. “old man ocean”).

18. ke 'uṣ=hinkaṭi 'iṭi, 'oṣ=ṣawwatto  
and.then 3S=make/do.PERF 3S 3S=hurt.PERF

And she did / made it, [but she] was hurt(?) [cf. *ṣawwaṭi*, “to hurt”].

19. 'iṭi ka 'el(l)i-ttuma,  
then PST look.around-INCHOAT

She looked around,

20. ka 'uh='uṭe 'uh=ṣuṭa niṣ luppu-tto.  
PST 3S=see 3S=located this rock-ALLAT

And [she] saw that she was [alone] on this rock.

21. 'e[h]- ke 'u[h]=, liwa-n ṣuta nii hinne-tto he noo hinne-tto,  
? and.then 3S= water-NOM located this side-ALLAT and that side-ALLAT

And the water was on this side and that side of her,

22. ka 'uh='oolak 'ukan.  
PST 3S=cry enter

And she started to cry.

23. 'iṭi ka 'iṣ= 'inni(i)ko na'uūṭi-n 'ooni.  
Then PST this= 3P return-DEP come

Then they returned home.

24. ka kon=hella 'uṭe 'iṭi.  
PST 3P=NEG see 3S

And they didn't see her.

25. ka kon-liimATI 'iṭi.  
PST 3P=search.for.PERF 3S

And they looked for her.

26. 'iṭi ka kon='uṭe 'uh=wateh, 'uh=talah niṣ luppu-tto.  
then PST 3P=see 3S=sit 3S=stand this rock-ALLAT

Then they saw [her] sitting, standing by this rock.

27. ke 'uh='oolak.  
and.then 3S=cry

And she was crying.

28. neccuṭi, neccuṭi 'uume 'opu=n podeer . . .  
sometimes sometimes evening DECL=2S able

Sometimes, some evenings you can . . .

29. neccuṭi 'uume 'opu=n 'uṭe 'u[h]=talāh 'iṭṭi-tto 'iṣ=luppu-tto.  
sometimes evening DECL=2S see 3S=stand 3S-ALLAT this=rock-ALLAT

Some evenings you can see her standing by that rock.

30. ke 'uh='oolak.  
and.then 3S=cry

And she is crying.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This final verb, repeated in lines 27 and 30 (also in line 22), likely has an ironic sense. The word for “ocean” is *'oolok* (line 17), which is obviously very similar to *'oolak*, “cry.”

Note that this text includes a title. Titles lack any tense / aspect / modality marking in Ballard's stories, unlike other declarative sentences in the language, so they are immediately identifiable, and serve to key the coming narrative—though otherwise Ballard uses no devices such as “long ago . . .” to initiate narratives (Lake Miwok often uses *kilackilac*, “long ago”). Note also the use of direct citations here that were lacking in the other text, though without any citational framing device, as noted earlier. The citations are however the only lines in the story without any of the line-initial particles listed below. In this text, the use of *'iṭi ka* . . . and *ke* . . . can again be seen, along with a few occasions where (underlined> lexical elements occur in marked focus position. Note on several occasions only *ka* occurs rather than *'iṭi ka*. These all involve continuity of subject or topic (that is, *ke* could be used in these cases, but the continuity is apparently not seen as being quite strong enough to justify use of *ke*). Where a new sentence-level subject or topic occurs, *'iṭi ka* is always used. Thus Coast Miwok narratives, at least as told by Sarah Ballard, have a series of ranked devices that highlight relative newness as opposed to continuity in the flow of narration, while also marking the initiation of each new main clause:

Least Continuous	>	>	Most Continuous
Lexical element			
in marked focus:	<i>'iṭi ka</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ke</i>

Notice again that the Disobedient Girl—like the Sun Girl in the first story—is never in the marked focus position. Instead other elements occur in that position at various points in the story as they become salient. The presence of the central character is so salient that she never needs to make an appearance in this position (especially as she has been introduced by the title). This frees up the marked focus position to serve for introducing new episodes or sequences in the narrative. Thus Ballard's narratives also show a three-level distinction of discourse-level topics: the most central and continuous characters and topics are mentioned in the title perhaps, but do not occur in marked focus position; second-most-central elements occupy the marked focus position, at least on first appearance; and minor elements never occupy the marked focus position, and also appear only briefly or in one section of the story.

This particular line- and section-marking strategy is likely unique to Coast Miwok in Central California, at least so far as we can determine. Lake Miwok does not have a clearly defined marked focus position in the same way as Coast Miwok, and does not use sentence-initial tense / aspect / modality markers. The Eastern Miwok languages are structurally and morphologically quite different from Western Miwok, and show no features in the documented oral literature closely similar to what we have seen here.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately we have very little documentation of indigenous texts in the Northern Costanoan / Ohlone languages of the San Francisco Bay area.<sup>17</sup> The related Costanoan languages are most similar to Coast Miwok in

<sup>16</sup> See Broadbent 1964; Freeland and Broadbent 1960; and Berman 1982 for texts. See Cowell 2020 for a poetic analysis of a Central Sierra Miwok text in the original language.

<sup>17</sup> There are several missionary translations in a dialect of North Costanoan / Ohlone (Blevins and Golla 2005), but this is obviously not a useful comparison in relation to traditional narratives.

structure among the California languages, with noun case systems and uninflected verbs that combine with nouns or pronouns. There are two texts in Rumsen (South Costanoan) presented in Kroeber 1904:80-81 and 1910:255-58, though the latter one is actually a composite produced by Kroeber himself based on fragments of original Rumsen texts in his notes—and thus clearly not useable as a basis for extended discourse analysis. Two additional texts originally collected by J. P. Harrington are presented in Kaufman 2008, and one of these receives close linguistic analysis in Kaufman 2010. As opposed to Coast Miwok, the texts show much more variation in word order, including several examples of VS and OVS order. Such shifts in word order seem to be a key syntactic and narrative strategy in the Rumsen texts. The texts do show use of a line-initial marker (*neej*) similar to Coast Miwok, as well as following past tense / irrealis marker (*ku*), so that many lines begin as *neej ku* followed by the main clause, closely paralleling the Coast Miwok *'iŋi ka*. This marker also varies between *neej ku*, *neej-ink ku*, and *neej-ink-mur* in the texts published by Kaufman (the meanings of *-ink* and *-mur* are unknown), suggesting a set of line-initial variations similar to what is seen in Coast Miwok. There is no evidence of lexical elements placed prior to these markers in a focus position in the Costanoan texts, however. Nevertheless further detailed study of other potential parallels in narrative structure and rhetoric between the various Utian languages is certainly warranted. Stylistic variation of the expression “and then . . .” has been noted for Southern Paiute narratives (Bunte 2002:26) and also Western Mono in California, where the variation is noted as “an authenticating feature of proper performance” and key to textual cohesion (Kroskrity 2015:144).

The Coast Miwok usage of the focus construction and variations in the line-initial particles has further implications within the broader framework of ethnopoetics, beyond just central California. I have used the term “line marker” to describe the particles in question, with the focus construction denoting larger sections of discourse. But neither of these linguistic devices is limited to narrative—they are both easily found in the dictionary in individual sample sentences not drawn from longer discourses. As such they are among potentially a larger set of linguistic resources available to a narrator, but there is nothing to indicate that they are indexical of traditional narrative per se in the Coast Miwok tradition—unlike such forms as *weno* or *kaša* in Lake Miwok. There has been increasing awareness that grammar generally can serve key narrative or poetic functions at a discursive or structural level, with focusing functions being a key area of interest, even if the forms in question do not rise to the same level of discursive awareness as the traditional markers that often key a performance (see Bunte 2002 on Southern Paiute reduplication and Kroskrity 2010 on Tewa inverse constructions).

Both Bunte and Kroskrity note that such grammatical features, however, largely escape the conscious awareness of listeners and narrators, in contrast to more highly salient features of traditional narrative such as markers of narrative or mythological past tenses, formulaic openings and closings, and the like. The organizing features used by Ballard appear to be of this type, and to serve highly effectively, even in the absence of any devices that might explicitly key a full traditional performance. If we take seriously Dell Hymes’ concept of indigenous narrative “voice” and his calls to avoid narrative “inequality” (1996), as well as Robert Moore’s call to recognize the ethnographic encounter as its own ethnopoetic genre of narrative and performance (2015), then we must be very careful not to see narratives such as those of Ballard’s as merely incomplete, imperfect, or involving the “omission” of expected elements. It may in fact be the



case that this is what happened—or is some of what happened—in the production of these narratives. But Ballard clearly drew on the grammatical resources of her language to produce brief but highly organized narratives. I think it is likely she was able to do this because of existing narrative traditions in Coast Miwok, which relied on everyday tools for pragmatic focusing in order to produce narrative focus, and on everyday tools for indicating discourse continuity and discontinuity to produce narrative continuity. It would appear, ironically, that the elements of narrative poetics which were more “grammatical” and less available to conscious “discursive awareness” were the features which remained most intact and / or most relied on in the production of these texts, while features such as citational verbs and narrative past markers were the ones dropped—or perhaps were the ones easiest to choose to drop in the context of this particular ethnographic and textual encounter.

Returning to the Coast Miwok texts, one can however see elements of more traditional “performative” rhetorical organization, in particular in groups of four in the second text: the young girl is given four imperative commands in lines 6-9, or her parents go through four actions at the end of the story (lines 23-26). The structure of command, prohibition, prohibition, command in lines 6-9 provides further internal structure. The complementary parallelism of lines 24 and 26—not seeing, then seeing—gives added structure to that overall set of four lines, as does the set of *'iṭi ka, ka, ka, 'iṭi ka* as consecutive line markers (which also echo the structure of lines 6-9). Another notable feature is the final word and case marking in line 13, which ironically echo the same word and case in line 6, even as the phrase in line 13 also initiates the second, transgressive half of the story. Likewise the final demonstrative, as well as the noun and its case marking in lines 20 and 26 echo each other, and underline the fundamental predicament with which the story ends. The parallelism of lines 27 and 30 also nicely frames the end of the story, with the use of *ke* serving here to evoke figuratively the “continuity” or inevitability of the moral outcome of the story.

Similar features occur in the first story—the first four lines conclude with “dark” in line 1, and “light” in lines 2 and 4, forming a conceptual unit. (Four is reported as the most common sacred number for the Coast Miwok (Collier and Thalman 1991:486-87).) Lines 5 and 13 are closely parallel, with the main difference being that in line 13 the men that Coyote sends are now numerous, producing small grammatical adjustments. Lines 6-9 include three consecutive mentions of a far distance, and conclude with the same final verb in lines 6 and 9 framing this sequence. Note that because the initial position in Coast Miwok sentences is usually either empty or occupied by a fairly abstract discourse marker, and lexical elements occur rarely (and almost never twice) in the marked focus position, lexical parallelism is focused most commonly on the last word or words of a line. Note also that such parallelism, when it involves nouns, also includes parallel case marking on the nouns.

In summary, the two texts here—and the small Coast Miwok corpus generally—show evidence of the same kinds of formal poetic features that have been widely recognized in Native American verbal arts, despite the somewhat challenging nature of the data (Hymes 1981; Sherzer and Woodbury 1987), as well as the same kinds of relations often found between form and meaning (Foley 1991). They also show the unique way in which Sarah Ballard—and likely other Coast Miwok narrators, if we only had the data—made use of the specific morphological and syntactic features of Coast Miwok to develop a line- and section-marking system that was highly

sensitive to both sentence-by-sentence narrative continuity, and also larger-level topical continuity and newness. This system is not found in the other Miwok or Costanoan / Ohlone languages of California for which we have available narrative data, and illustrates the point that each individual language (and of course storyteller) to some extent draws on its own unique grammatical resources for creating narrative patterning (see Bunte 2002), even if general themes and plot lines are shared across several languages in an area, as was certainly the case for areas of California.

In concluding, it is worth thinking more about the implications of local particularities in the grammar and rhetoric of oral narrative in California. Efforts are increasing to reinvigorate traditional narratives and oral traditions, in both English and the original languages in California generally (O'Neill 2012; Field 2012; Nevins 2017), and in the Coast Miwok (and neighboring Kashaya Pomo) area in particular (Sarris 1993 and 2017). Much more attention needs to be paid to the verbal artistry which can be recovered even from fragmentary traditions. In discussing the traditions of the Yurok, Karok, and Hupa of northwest California, O'Neill (2012) shows that despite quite similar general themes and plots, the three cultural and linguistic groups have kept the stories rigorously separate in key ways, focused on small details of plot or style. This separation has been part of maintaining a strong sense of ethnic identity in a situation where basic lifeways and social structures were quite similar. Related to this were "caricatures . . . about the sounds of the neighboring tongues, much like the ones that English-speaking Americans spread about New Yorkers . . . or about Southerners" (2012:72) and a celebration of "the distinctiveness of their languages" (73). The overall result was a high degree of focus on "the uniqueness of their languages and storytelling traditions, despite quite similar overall cultural patterns and even narrative traditions, broadly speaking (74). O'Neill goes on to show that minute stylistic differences in things such as when and how characters are named, or opening formulas, were seen as important to this uniqueness (78-79), and that such distinctions continue to have high salience for the communities. Margaret Field (2012) reports a similar focus on local dialect (vocabulary) specificity and narrative uniqueness among the Kumiai of Southern California, again with a focus on maintaining salient local identity markers in the context of revitalization, where in fact overall cultural patterns may be quite similar. We should likely expect similar types of localisms for the Bay Area and central California.

In fact, the Coast Miwok even paid attention to fine-scale details that helped distinguish local identities within the language group. Isabel Kelly notes for example that her two consultants, one a Bodega dialect speaker, the other a Marin dialect speaker, were both very careful to point out that in the former dialect, the word for water was *líwa*, while in the latter it was *klik* (Collier and Thalman 1991:117). The point here is that speakers of one dialect were aware of varying forms in the other dialect, and this metalinguistic awareness was linked to conceptions of ethnic identity. Many similar remarks (related to cultural practices as well as language) recur in Kelly's notes with regard to both intra- and inter-linguistic boundary maintenance, such as efforts to maintain the secrecy of certain dances from those in neighboring rancherias (Collier and Thalman 1991:324). There is no information to show that unique oral narrative details in particular were a salient marker of ethnic identity among the Coast Miwok. But such unique features certainly existed, and in the context of highly locally-oriented efforts at language and culture revitalization in California, seem worth highlighting.

I am not aware of the exact status of revitalization efforts among the Coast Miwok at the moment (attempts at contacting the Tribe and selected tribal individuals were unsuccessful during COVID times of 2020-21). At a minimum, this paper and the narratives show that the way Coast Miwok was spoken and “performed” in the broadest sense, on a daily basis, was much more diverse than the documentation found in the 1970 dictionary would suggest. In fact the dictionary, based largely on elicited sentences in the traditional language description model of the 1950s and 1960s (which focused much more on phonology and morphology than syntax and semantics) probably presents a somewhat skewed understanding of the language as a communicative device. This can fortunately be mitigated by use of the narratives, and by an ethnopoetic approach which highlights not just ethnopoetic features narrowly conceived, but the broader communicative nature of the language overall. In this case, ethnopoetic documentation and analysis is not just a secondary addition to basic description of the language (still a common stereotype in linguistics), but is actually fundamental to basic linguistic analysis and understanding in my view. The paper also hopefully offers a model to the community for how future narratives might someday be produced. This is the reason I have made all the narratives available for free download from SCOIL with transcription and translation. They will also be included in a future grammar of the language.

*University of Colorado*

### Abbreviations

2 = second person; 3 = third person; ALLAT = allative case; D = dual; DECL = declarative mode; DEP = dependent; GEN = genitive case; IMPER = imperative mode; INCHOAT = inchoative aspect; INSTR = instrumental case; NEG = negative; NOM = nominative case; P = plural; PERF = perfective aspect; PROHIB = prohibitive mode; PST = past tense; S = singular; “=” indicates a clitic, loosely attached to the neighboring word; “-” indicates morpheme boundaries; capitalization in the Miwok text indicates verbal emphasis by the narrator.

### References

- |                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Berman 1982            | Howard Berman, ed. <i>Freeland's Central Sierra Miwok Myths</i> . Reports from the Survey of California and Other Indian Languages, 3. Berkeley: Survey of California and Other Indian Languages, University of California. |
| Blevins and Golla 2005 | Juliette Blevins and Victor Golla. “A New Mission Indian Manuscript from the San Francisco Bay Area.” <i>Boletín: The Journal of the California Mission Studies Association</i> , 22.1:33-61.                               |
| Bright 1978a           | William Bright, ed. <i>Coyote Stories</i> . International Journal of American   |

- Linguistics—Native American Texts Series, 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bright 1978b \_\_\_\_\_ . “Introduction.” In Bright 1978a:1-2.
- Bright 1994 \_\_\_\_\_ . “Oral Literature of California and the Intermountain Region.” In *Dictionary of Native American Literature*. Ed. by Andrew Wiget. New York: Garland. pp. 47-52.
- Broadbent 1964 Sylvia M. Broadbent. *The Southern Sierra Miwok Language*. University of California Publications in Linguistics, 38. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bunte 2002 Pamela Bunte. “Verbal Artistry in Southern Paiute Narratives: Reduplication as a Stylistic Process.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 12.1:3-33.
- Callaghan 1963 Catherine Callaghan. *A Grammar of the Lake Miwok Language*. Unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Callaghan 1965 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Lake Miwok Dictionary*. University of California Publications in Linguistics, 39. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Callaghan 1970 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Bodega Miwok Dictionary*. University of California Publications in Linguistics, 60. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Callaghan 1978 \_\_\_\_\_ . “Fire, Flood, and Creation (Lake Miwok).” In Bright 1978a:62-86.
- Callaghan 2014 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Proto Utian Grammar and Dictionary: With Notes on Yokuts*. Trends in Linguistics. Documentation, 31. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Collier and Thalman 1991 Mary E. T. Collier and Sylvia Barker Thalman, eds. *Interviews with Tom Smith and Maria Copa: Isabel Kelly’s Ethnographic Notes on the Coast Miwok Indians of Marin and Southern Sonoma Counties, California*. San Rafael, CA: Miwok Archaeological Preserve of Marin.
- Cowell 2019 Andrew Cowell. “Time-Aligned Annotations of Bodega Miwok Sound Recordings.” Collection Number 2019-18. Survey of California and Other Indian Languages archive, University of California, Berkeley.
- Cowell 2020 \_\_\_\_\_ . “A Central Sierra Miwok Origins Story: The Theft of the Sun.” *English Language Notes*, 58.1:132-44.

- ELAN 2020 ELAN. Version 6.0. Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>
- Field 2012 Margaret C. Field. "Kumiai Stories: Bridges between the Oral Tradition and Classroom Practice." In Kroskrity 2012:115-26.
- Foley 1991 John Miles Foley. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Freeland 1947 L. S. Freeland. "Western Miwok Texts with Linguistic Sketch." *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 13.1:31-46.
- Freeland 1951 \_\_\_\_\_. *Language of the Sierra Miwok*. Indiana University Publications in Anthropology and Linguistics, 6. Baltimore: Waverly Press.
- Freeland and Broadbent 1960 L. S. Freeland and Sylvia M. Broadbent. *Central Sierra Miwok Dictionary, with Texts*. University of California Publications in Linguistics, 23. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goerke 2007 Betty Goerke. *Chief Marin: Leader, Rebel, and Legend: A History of Marin County's Namesake and His People*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books.
- Heizer 1978a Robert F. Heizer, ed. *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 8: California*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Heizer 1978b \_\_\_\_\_. "Mythology: Regional Patterns and History of Research." In Heizer 1978a:654-57.
- Hymes 1981 Dell Hymes. "In Vain I Tried to Tell You": *Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics*. Studies in Native American Literature, 1. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hymes 1996 \_\_\_\_\_. *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality: Toward an Understanding of Voice*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Kaufman 2008 David Kaufman. "Rumsen Ohlone Folklore: Two Tales." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 45.3:383-91.
- Kaufman 2010 \_\_\_\_\_. "Some Observations on Rumsen Ohlone Grammar." *Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics*, 31:39-45.
- Kelly 1978a Isabel Kelly. "Coast Miwok." In Heizer 1978a:414-25.

- Kelly 1978b \_\_\_\_\_ . "Some Coast Miwok Tales." *The Journal of California Anthropology*, 5.1:21-41.
- Kroeber 1904 A. L. Kroeber. "The Languages of the Coast of California South of San Francisco." *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 2.2:29-80.
- Kroeber 1910 \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Chumash and Costanoan Languages." *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 9.2:237-71.
- Kroeber 1911 \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Languages of the Coast of California North of San Francisco." *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 9.3:273-435.
- K. Kroeber 1997 Karl Kroeber. "Introduction." In *Traditional Literatures of the American Indian: Texts and Interpretations*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. pp. 1-24.
- Kroskrity 2010 Paul V. Kroskrity. "The Art of Voice: Understanding the Arizona Tewa Inverse in Its Grammatical, Narrative, and Language-Ideological Contexts." *Anthropological Linguistics*, 52.1:49-79.
- Kroskrity 2012 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Telling Stories in the Face of Danger: Language Renewal in Native American Communities*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kroskrity 2015 \_\_\_\_\_ . "Discursive Discriminations in the Representation of Western Mono and Yokuts Stories: Confronting Narrative Inequality and Listening to Indigenous Voices in Central California." In Kroskrity and Webster 2015:135-63.
- Kroskrity and Webster 2015 Paul V. Kroskrity and Anthony K. Webster, eds. *The Legacy of Dell Hymes: Ethnopoetics, Narrative Inequality, and Voice*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Loeb 1926 Edwin W Loeb. "Pomo Folkways." *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 19.2:149-405.
- Luthin 2002 Herbert W. Luthin, ed. *Surviving through the Days: Translations of Native California Stories and Songs: A California Indian Reader*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Merriam 1993 [1910] C. Hart Merriam, coll. and ed. *The Dawn of the World: Myths and Tales of the Miwok Indians of California*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

- Moore 2015 Robert Moore. "Reinventing Ethnopoetics." In Kroskrity and Webster 2015:11-36.
- Nevins 2017 M. Eleanor Nevins, ed. *World-Making Stories: Maidu Language and Community Renewal on a Shared California Landscape*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- O'Neill 2012 Sean O'Neill. "The Politics of Storytelling in Northwestern California: Ideology, Identity, and Maintaining Narrative Distinction in the Face of Cultural Convergences." In Kroskrity 2012:60-89.
- Sarris 1993 Greg Sarris. *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sarris 2017 \_\_\_\_\_. *How a Mountain Was Made: Stories*. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books.
- Sherzer and Woodbury 1987 Joel Sherzer and Anthony C. Woodbury, eds. *Native American Discourse: Poetics and Rhetoric*. Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, 13. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Founding Fathers, Patrons, Mothers, and Other *Bertso*-School Groups

Larraitz Ariznabarreta Garabieta

In March, 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced hundreds of thousands of Basque citizens into full lockdown,<sup>1</sup> the electronic revolution in communications allowed the Association of the Friends of *Bertsolaritza* (Bertsozale Elkartea)<sup>2</sup> to extensively share, advertise, and disseminate their online offerings. (*Bertsolaritza* is the Basque cultural practice of singing improvised verses.<sup>3</sup>) The scheme presented *bertso* followers with an occasion for much looked-for collective engagement amidst the anxiety created by “physical distancing” in a country where

---

<sup>1</sup> On March 10, 2020, the Spanish government passed a decree to close all educational facilities around the country. They also recommended avoidance of travel in high-transmission areas and called for people to work from home. A week later, a total lockdown was declared. The peninsular Basque Country was severely hit with coronavirus.

<sup>2</sup> The Association of the Friends of *Bertsolaritza* was first created as the “Association of *Bertsolaris* of the Basque Country” in 1987, after a dispute between the organizers of a championship and some *bertsolaris*. The founding of the Association and its gradual institutionalization have been instrumental in the modernization of *bertsolaritza*. An important aspect of this modernization entailed the establishment in 2006 of Bertso Plaza Digitala (“digital *bertso* plaza,” a comprehensive internet project that offers creative and informative content on *bertsolaritza*), and the creation of the Xenpelar Digital Archive where the Association files and catalogues its collections. The main objective of the digital archives is the dissemination of its contents and the promotion of research. The creation of the digital corpus may be deemed as the beginning of the “electronic revolution” of *bertsolaritza*. Other significant steps in this “revolution” were the creation of new websites for Bertsozale Elkartea (<http://www.bertsozale.eus>); Lanku, a company created by Bertsozale Elkartea to offer editing services and organization of performances and events (<http://www.lanku.eus>); and Bertso Plaza Digitala (<http://www.bertsoa.eus>).

<sup>3</sup> *Bertsolaritza* can designate both the Basque crafting of oral improvised verses and the social movement created around it. As such, *bertsolaritza* is a deep-rooted cultural practice. *To talk, not in free regular sentences, but following the constraints of a melody, meter, and rhyme* could stand as the basic definition of what a *bertsolari* (improviser) does; the verses composed by such an improviser are referred to as a *bertso*. *Bertsolaritza* is highly popular in the Basque Country, a territory, largely defined by the Basque language, on both sides of the Pyrenees, opening to the Bay of Biscay. The Basque language, an isolated language, is the only remaining vestige of a non-Indo-European language in Western Europe. Labeling *bertsolaritza* as (nonstandard) literature has helped to furnish the phenomenon with social and cultural prestige by means of elevating the popular, once unfashionable, cultural practice, although *bertsolaritza* is mostly a live performance enacted in front of an audience. *Bertsolaritza* requires highly skilled performers who are able to juggle the formal constraints of the melody while swiftly responding to a cue or following another improviser’s train of thought. For a detailed description of impromptu oral poetry and the formal artistic craftsmanship it entails, see the short documentary *What is Bertsolaritza?* (2018), which was created by the Etxepare Basque Institute to introduce the Basque cultural practice to the international arena.



public communal life is at the very core of social habits and cultural rites. *Bertso* fans were provided a chance to engage in a communication network of Basque speakers while taking solace in an ecosystem shared by *bertso* devotees of all ages and diverse walks of life.<sup>4</sup> The ancient tradition of Basque improvisational verse singing had unearthed a new way to keep itself timely.

The online collection offered by Bertsozale Elkarte provided “cultural sustenance throughout the quarantine”<sup>5</sup> and included performances in which well-known improvisers collaborated from the seclusion of their homes; documentaries to learn more about the art and craft of *bertsolaritza*; on-demand sessions; links to festivals and championships; access to archives of traditional verses; and a repertoire of pedagogical approaches to improve *bertso*-singing techniques. The webpage further encouraged people to “take advantage of the *imposed change of pace*, deepen appreciation for the traditional art, and explore new paths in its development.” Acting as a chronicler, the young improviser Ane Txoperena even contributed with the first verses ever to be sung about the deadly virus:

Erreparatuz telebistako	As we watch TV
mila gertaera beltzi	a myriad of black episodes
sofan jarrita etxean preso	We are prisoners at home sitting on our couch
ta gaude ezin sinetsi	and we can hardly believe what we see
bertso sorta bat egin nahi dizut zuri, COVID-19	I want to sing you a bunch of verses, COVID-19
eragin duzun dena oroitu	so we remember everything you caused
dadin bihar eta etzi.	in days to follow. <sup>6</sup>

Hundreds of Basques connected, sang along, and made practical use of Bertsozale’s educational summons. The anecdote is indicative of *bertsolaritza*’s continuing relevance amidst modern crowds of Basque-speakers and serves as a contemporary example of the capacity of *bertsolaritza* to adapt to new times and subject matters.<sup>7</sup>

Though most opportune in troubled times, adaptation, technologies of communication, and comprehensive educational proposals were not unknown allies to the Basque popular cultural tradition. The movement leading to the 1987 establishment and subsequent

---

<sup>4</sup> When referring to the vigor of Basque improvisational singing and its environment, it must be underlined that such vigor occurs in the context of a minoritized linguistic and cultural community. *Bertsolaritza* is weak in terms of general cultural consumption. “Statistics allow us to infer that the true enthusiasts constitute around forty percent of the total amount of Basque speakers around the country; but while that number might chime a bell of satisfaction in many ears, it must be brought to the reader’s mind that less than half of the population in the Basque Country is, in fact, a Basque speaker. Hence, *bertso* enthusiasts account for a much smaller number: 11% of the total population of the seven Basque provinces” (Ariznabarreta 2019:130).

<sup>5</sup> “Bertso Ikasgela,” Bertsozale Elkarte, accessed March 21, 2021, [www.bertsozale.eus/eu](http://www.bertsozale.eus/eu).

<sup>6</sup> I propose this translation with awareness that much has been written (Fine 1998) about the fact that the skill of the improviser is lost in translation, and even at the risk of rendering it in a rather flat manner (without the original rhyme and other subtle stylistic features).

<sup>7</sup> Many scholars (Retortillo and Aierdi 2007) have explained the evolution and maintenance of *bertsolaritza* in terms of its capacity to adapt and reformulate.

institutionalization of the Association of the Friends of *Bertsolaritza* is to be credited for the general success and the current attention to *bertsolaritza* in digital media and the official Basque school circuit.<sup>8</sup> These days, the Bertsozale Elkarte reaches a total of 28,500 children and teenagers in sixty-three Basque schools. These remarkable figures alone demonstrate that the transmission into modern culture of a folkloric tradition once considered old-fashioned is now, at least marginally, present in the Basque educational curriculum and that many youngsters get a chance to have access to the *bertsolari* phenomenon and the collective vitality adhering to it.

Notably—and as opposed to what has generally been the case in the context of industrialized Western societies—to discuss the modernization and mainstreaming of improvised verse singing (*bertsolaritza*) in the Basque Country is to examine the process of its institutionalization. By educating larger numbers of more appreciative, artistically-minded practitioners in the art of improvisation, *bertso* schools have become the main nuclei of that process, which has, in turn, influenced the heralding of *bertsolaritza* as one of the most salient modern markers of Basque cultural identity.<sup>9</sup>

Through analysis drawn from archival work, key findings from the most important academic literature in both Basque and English, analysis of previously unexamined primary sources, personal interviews, and firsthand experience,<sup>10</sup> this article helps to show how the network of *bertso* schools has contributed to this evolution and provides evidence that these educational schemes were instrumental to the development of *bertsolaritza* into a progressive cultural movement—so much so that “oral artistic activity has become a touchstone for other aspects of contemporary Basque culture” (Garzia 2007:80).

*Bertsolaritza* is now recognized as the most significant ritualized expression of cultural solidarity in the minoritized realm of Basque speakers, and, as such, it has acquired a privileged position in the contemporary Basque cultural scene. The presence of young, university-educated improvisers, media attention, and academia’s conferral of prestige on oral culture have turned *bertsolaritza* into a trendy art. As such, Basque improvisational verse singing now enjoys an appreciative, knowledgeable audience that over time has come to share a symbolic inventory bearing a certain sacred quality: words, special knowledge, puns, references, memories,

---

<sup>8</sup> “[*Bertsolaritza*’s] found backbone of recent times up to the present lies in the Bertso Elkarte association and the network of bertso schools. . . . [These are] unquestionably the drive of contemporary bertsolaritza” (Ariznabarreta 2018:137).

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to the journal’s anonymous referee for suggesting this framing of my argument.

<sup>10</sup> Personal relationships with several former *bertso* instructors have allowed me to access non-systematized compilations of previously unexamined materials kept by these individuals and to conduct in-depth interviews with them. I am particularly grateful to Rosa Lertxundi Esnal and Juan Garzia Garmendia, whose expertise as forerunner *bertso* instructors in the early years of these educational programs pairs with their vast theoretical knowledge of the art of Basque improvisational singing. Many of my findings are the result of long conversations with them and their generosity in allowing me to use their private libraries and notes. Access to other archival documents, articles, and original books in the Basque language was facilitated by Iñaki Arrieta Baro, librarian at the Jon Bilbao Basque Library (University of Nevada, Reno). My own intimate experience as a young attendee at *bertso* schools in the seventies has no doubt contributed to my research interest.

experiences, and other resources that link and mark the members of the *bertso* singing circuit.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the unified social body that the *bertso* singing circuit—or *bertsogune*—constitutes “has drawn up its pathway with a rejuvenating and modernizing thrust” (Ariznabarreta 2018:118).

### Early Intuition: Visionaries and Patrons

However, the shift toward modern relevance did not occur overnight, or, for that matter, without the superlative and enthusiastic effort of a few visionaries, hundreds of patrons, and thousands of volunteers. The reinvigoration of Basque improvisational singing was the result of the joint effort of a crowd of enthusiasts who, in the early seventies, became persuaded that *bertsolaritza* was not a relic of the past that had lost its communicative genius and needed to be preserved as a folkloric remnant. Rather, the grassroots *bertsozale* movement regarded improvisational verse singing as a collective, living ritual that needed to be passed on to new generations. The tradition, they believed, would provide younger generations with a means of self-referentiality and act as a transmitter of idiosyncratic cultural values.

The first educational methods that were used in an attempt to transform *bertsolaritza*—considered until then as an innate talent that could not be learnt, and as a humble popular tradition—came by the hand of the *bertsolari* and writer Xabier Amuriza (born in 1941), the undisputed path-finder and guide for a renewed crowd of verse improvisers and theorizers. Amuriza, an ordained priest and political activist who was born and bred in a rural environment, was the first to connect the knowledge gained in the traditional atmosphere of the *bertsolari* with the intellectual ethos of the Basque seminaries of the 1960s. In 1980, Amuriza’s own ability as a *bertsolari* secured him, in what was an impressive triumph, first place in that year’s championship.<sup>12</sup> The 1980 championship has been recognized ever since as the inaugural landmark in modern Basque improvised verse singing.

One of the prominent anti-Francoist nationalist rebels, Amuriza was not a folklorist or a scholar jostling to collect rural folklore, and his involvement was not confined to the abstract sphere of academic studies. Rather, in the later years of Francoism, Amuriza’s challenge was political:<sup>13</sup> he aimed to provide people with a way to gain access to a repressed culture and to offer a means for self-liberating expression. In a lecture delivered in the late seventies, Amuriza conceded, “it is clear that improvisational singing was—and still is—an escape from the narrow

---

<sup>11</sup> As Zulaika suggests: “The *bertso* is indifferent to contradiction—as the argument of the song will deliberately seek contradictory words and images, ambiguity and paradox, to create a pun or suggest an analogy” (2018:166).

<sup>12</sup> The *bertso* championship is held every four years, and it is not a mere one-day event. It begins months before the Final, and it involves approximately fifteen sessions, for which forty-five *bertsolaris* qualify through regional championships previously organized in smaller local venues. Apart from these competitions, there are around 1,800 extemporaneous verse-singing performances that take place in several settings all around the Basque territory: town plazas, restaurants, cider houses, theaters, cultural venues, and *gaztetxeak* (“youth houses,” semi-official, self-managed associations of young people who occupy unoccupied buildings and organize events).

<sup>13</sup> For a short biographical sketch and Amuriza’s relevance in Basque culture during the 1980s, see Ariznabarreta 2019:49-53.

and almost hermetic forms of society . . . an escape from social pressure, a break from repression” (Amuriza et al. 1988:76). Amuriza eloquently narrates the story of a native English speaker who became acquainted with the Basque language and later took up the craft of *bertsolaritza*. The Englishman admitted: “I’ve noticed that through verses I say things I wouldn’t say otherwise. It also helps me discover feelings I don’t even know I have inside” (Amuriza et al. 1988:76).

The markedly political stance taken by Amuriza in those early years attempts to describe an art that “provides a free space to create new language, meanings and visions for the future” (Duncombe 2002:8). Amuriza’s first intuitions are remarkable in that they come close to several critical approaches to oral tradition with which, we assume, the Basque *bertsolari* was not familiar at the time. His perception echoes an approach to orality whereby spoken narratives are important sources of information and transmission (Boas 1935). Amuriza’s reflections also resonate with Geertz’s symbolic interpretation of oral tradition, which stresses the cultural significance of the performance itself: *people telling themselves a story about themselves* (1973:448). Equally, one can make obvious links between Amuriza’s early theorization and a psychological approach presenting orality as a socially legitimate means of expressing one’s social and personal anxiety (Dundes 2005).<sup>14</sup>

The following excerpt from a longer chapter in which Amuriza reflects on the values of improvisation clarifies the instinctive resonances alluded to above (Amuriza et al. 1988:77):

The pedagogical and liberating values of improvisation are many and precious. It [improvisation] strengthens the group by providing enjoyment to its members. It creates a community. It generates new and different relationships, as well as deep feelings. It opens people up and refreshes them internally, allowing them to dispel feelings and heartache that they would not otherwise express, and to discover their inner self. *Bertsolaritza* allows for the development and dissemination of the imagination and other talents. It teaches us to love life spontaneously; because that is, precisely, what improvisation is. . . . And all this while playing and having fun, practicing art and (mental) sport. How could such a tool not have this power if people themselves need it to oppose the formalities of society?

Amuriza’s strong identification with the social and political context of the time contributed to the success of his proposals. First known for his political activism and engagement, Amuriza was one of the preeminent anti-Francoist nationalist rebels that defended radical policies. The pursuit of ideological supremacy in cultural environments was crucial, and *bertsolaritza* started to acquire markedly political liturgic symbolism. *Bertsolaritza* managed to

---

<sup>14</sup> According to Dundes, “folklore offers a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of taboo and anxiety-provoking behavior. One can do or say in folkloristic form things otherwise interdicted in everyday life” (2005:359).

identify itself with a community with which it shared a system of difficulties, a system of risks.<sup>15</sup> The young improvisers coming out of *bertso* schools were proof that that Basque culture did, in fact, have a chance to survive. In short, as a young *bertso*-school attendee of the time later suggested: “they needed young people, to renew the practice, to attract new audiences, to create points of reference in areas in which *bertsolaritza* was losing its grip” (Lujanbio 2018:90).

Nationalist politicians in the newly appointed local administrations also supported the scheme and acted as essential patrons. Imanol Murua Arregi (1935-2008)—Deputy of Culture of the Government of Gipuzkoa (1983-85), later appointed Deputy General (1985-91)—stands out as a powerful supporter of the new improvisers, and his funding and ubiquitous presence in young *bertsolaris*’ performances bestowed prestige on them (A. Agirre 1999). Roaring political and cultural enthusiasm in the final breaths of Franco’s regime allowed *bertso* schools to grow and blossom.

Nevertheless, the accomplishment was probably more qualitative than quantitative at an early stage. At the same time, this very fact allowed *bertsolaritza* to expand beyond its traditional, rural domain, thus making a phenomenal contribution to the standardization and normalization of the Basque language in urban areas. The charting of new territories, of course, required the identification of and adaptation to a new situational context. From the outset, informal educational settings linked *bertsolaritza* with students’ everyday lives and were fueled by comprehensive theories of social/critical pedagogy: active learning, student-centeredness, critical thinking, and free argumentation were allowed and encouraged (Rodríguez 1984). Many years later, Estitxu Eizagirre, an adult *bertsolari* and journalist, advocated in favor of such pedagogical approaches in *Argia*, a current events magazine published in the Basque language. Amid the largely rule-bound, official—and textualized—world of the everyday school environment, *bertso* schools remain a milieu where performance is the principal instrument of communication, an instrument that allows for self-expression and horizontal collaboration (Eizagirre 2006):

*Bertso* schools give students a voice. Students are allowed to share their concerns through song, to show what they really think, to reflect about everyday situations, to express themselves. Students are encouraged to speak in public and they are persuaded their opinion matters. Fortunately, *bertso* schools are not schools. If only schools were more like *bertso* schools, what a difference that would make!

## Dissenting Voices

Many early volunteers championed the cause of a new pedagogical approach that would deepen appreciation for the ancient tradition through new methods. However, many also opposed

---

<sup>15</sup> As Mouillot contends (2009:6): “Being Basque has also come to signify the very idea of a struggle to maintain a cultural singularity based not only on the language but also traditions and values. If one perceives the Basque Country as a region opposing and resisting the overpowering, assimilative cultural values of a global superculture, then the intercorporeality of *bertsolaritza* reaffirms local Basque identity, while its institutionalization confirms the singularity of Basque culture as a whole.”

it. On July 7, 1981, Iñaki Eizmendi (“Basarri”) (1913-1999), a highly qualified *bertsolari* who had won the national championship on two occasions—the first one right before the 1936 war, the second in 1960, after the restoration of the championship—wrote an essay highly critical of modern instructional attempts to train novice *bertsolaris* (Eizmendi 1984). Basarri was not alone in his censure. Many other honored improvisers had, in fact, mistrusted such a modernizing thrust, believing that *bertsolaritza* would lose its popular drive and turn into folksy, phony mimicry. What appeared unusual in Basarri’s bearing was the fact that he himself was credited with efforts to unshackle Basque improvisational singing from the rural atmosphere of cider-houses and bars. Misgivings against *bertso* schools also stemmed from those bidding to intellectualize and modernize *bertsolaritza*. Basarri’s skeptical words expose the mistrust held by many *bertso* devotees prior to the institutionalization of the educational schemes:

It would be a great victory to have a good *bertsolari* in a school where two hundred young boys gather. If just one out of two hundred would turn out to be a *bertsolari*, then we would have a flood of them in a few years. Unfortunately, this will not happen. You cannot make a crab walk straight. Rather than attempting to “manufacture” *bertsolaris*, we must strive to create a Basque atmosphere and a popular atmosphere, creating an atmosphere and an audience, for *bertsolaritza* performances.

The philosopher and prominent researcher of Basque culture Joxe Azurmendi shared similar concerns about the manufacturing of improvisational singers. In a roundtable held at the School of Educational Sciences at the University of the Basque Country in 1983, Azurmendi emphasized his reservations about the excessive streamlining of a popular rite which had served a quotidian, ordinary function in the traditional world (1988:60):

We have to be on the watch if we do not want robots; that is, those who learn the craftsmanship of verse making: all the mechanisms, all the rhymes, “*bertso*-makers” who have learned everything which is combinatorial but not creative.

In short, early voices warned that enhancing the accessibility of *bertsolaritza* and boosting its social prestige could detach it from its roots and popular drive.<sup>16</sup> These concerns were, in fact, sustained in time by many other scholars and *bertsolaritza* pundits. One of the ideas central to Juan Garzia Garmendia’s book *Txirritaren baratzea Norteko trenbidetik* (1997) is that, paradoxically, the *written* pieces by the genius improviser Txirrita<sup>17</sup> are somehow *more oral and spontaneous* than many of the allegedly extemporaneous—and more sophisticated—*modern*

---

<sup>16</sup> Although the quote below does not directly refer to the schools of *bertsolaritza*, it is interesting to note that a claim about the necessary spontaneity of the *bertsolari* artist was also made by the Basque sculptor and cultural icon Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003) in his book *Quousque Tandem . . . !*: “This is what we have to discover in our *bertsolaris*, that their style is not based on intent but on what comes out” (Oteiza 2003 [1963]:350).

<sup>17</sup> Txirrita was the nickname given to the master *bertsolari* Jose Manuel Lujanbio (1860-1936), who is regarded as an icon of the traditional *bertsolari* (belonging to the world of orality). Apart from improvising in town squares (plazas) and other popular venues (bars and banquets), Txirrita is also well known for his penned *bertsos*, sometimes written under the commission of outside funders.

ones. Similarly, Juanjo Uribe, one of the early advocates and sponsors for *bertso* schools, recently revealed a certain skepticism regarding the spontaneous nature of the art of contemporary, elite verse improvisers, remarking, “I find it difficult to believe modern day *bertsolaris* are improvising” (Uribe 2018). Surely the gains made in the efforts of these early advocates were not achieved without a price. In that line, many of these divergent voices also underscored the fact that one of the chief shortcomings of *bertsolaritza*’s rise in social acceptance was the loss of its initial freshness and popular exuberance.<sup>18</sup> All in all, the words of Imanol Lazkano, president of Bertsozale Elkarte between 1987 and 2005 and a traditional improviser himself, eloquently speak for themselves (quoted in J. Agirre 2017):

Basque improvised verse singing has never done as well as today. There is a tremendous level, mainly thanks to the work done in the verse-schools. But *bertsolaritza* has lost its salt and pepper along the way. Whoever takes a step forward always leaves something along the way, and we did lose something. We have gained a lot all along the way, but we have jettisoned some advantages.

In some cases, the opposition to the paradigm shift also hid a somewhat ideological slant. The period between 1960 and 1970, in which generational reinvigoration occurred, had brought a breach of mentality, a radical change in ways of life. And, surely, culture does not occur in a vacuum. The ideas touted by the era—namely rationalization and widespread secularization—had permeated among a large part of the Basque youth, whose scruples against the “essentialism” of Basque culture led them in search of “more universal” perspectives that would open up the *traditional and ritualistic coterie* and make it accessible to, among others, new speakers of Basque. These new speakers had resulted from both the incipient attempts to normalize Basque among the sons and daughters of immigrants, and the standardization process that the language underwent in the 1960s. The new theorists and practitioners of Basque culture attempted to project it into a new social order.<sup>19</sup> In this light, many voices echoed that of the poet Gabriel Aresti, who deemed *bertsolaris* to be *social poets*. The push to modernize improvisational singing encompassed, in that sense, a transformational social and political strategy.

### Unacknowledged Advocates

However, applying theory to practice was not an easy task. It was the interaction between the visionaries and the practitioners that drove *bertsolaritza* from the prophecies auguring its disappearance to a rejuvenation that may be regarded as extraordinary. As a *bertso*-school instructor in the early years proclaimed: “Utopia is not what cannot be achieved, but what has not yet been achieved” (Dorronsoro 1988:87). Although most of the hundreds of individuals involved in the effort remain little known beyond their local realms, there are a few names that stand out. The prodigious and tireless efforts of Patxi Goikolea, Juanito Dorronsoro, Joxerra

---

<sup>18</sup> See Zavala 2005:16-17 and the various reflections covered in Rodríguez 1988.

<sup>19</sup> The artist Jorge Oteiza defended the notion that “Art, the school of art, is a political school for the development of consciousness. It is a dialectical process of questions and answers . . .” (2005:452).

Etxeberria, Pello Esnal, Juanjo Uria, Trino Azkoitia, and Andoni Iriondo, among others, resonate as emblems of a vibrant educational dynamic that managed to modernize Basque improvisational singing and facilitated its seamless continuum with the past. These early pioneers understood, often intuitively, that the abilities required for the spread of *bertsolaritza* transcended the development of individual skills. It was essential to prioritize socialization over technique.

Today few would argue with Dorronsoro's adage. According to Roxa Lertxundi, a primary school teacher who started a *bertso* school for young enthusiasts in Zarautz, a coastal town of the province of Gipuzkoa, it was the first goal of *bertso* schools to provide an atmosphere of camaraderie. She refers to the first group of *bertso* students she guided—jointly with Pello Esnal—as their “flock.”<sup>20</sup> The metaphor immediately echoes the idea of an organic and dynamic venture in which a group is drawn together around joint interests. According to Lertxundi, the *Etxe-Beltz bertso* school was such an occurrence. She poignantly refers to herself as the “mother” to the “*bertso* flock.” Although all were aware that high-end *bertso* performances were rated for skill and technique, they also understood that no superb talent could flourish without an atmosphere of self-confidence and collective support.<sup>21</sup> Since Lertxundi herself had been a *bertso* aficionado from an early age, she understood that singing was, most importantly, a means to communicate feelings, and that it in fact served a liberating purpose. Some of her first students would later become highly rated improvisers themselves, while some took different paths, but all remember the self-confidence that the *bertso*-school atmosphere granted them. Ainhoa Agirreazaldegí, a former *bertso*-school student, reminisces on the environment of freedom that was provided by the early schools of improvisation (Agirreazaldegí and Goikoetxea 2007:66):

An atmosphere of self-assurance, an atmosphere in which anything could be said, in which you knew you would not be judged, in which you were able to make a fool of yourself. An atmosphere where you could talk about things that could not be talked about anywhere else.

Lertxundi was one of the few women who led a *bertso* school. Given the claims to modernity touted by *bertsolaritza*'s pioneers, the scarcity of women practitioners is revealing of the absence of any gender-awareness among the early theorizers of modern *bertsolaritza*. Whereas female participation was the result of the “crucial mindset of a culture that was in a life-or-death position” (Lujanbio 2018:81),<sup>22</sup> the allegedly cutting-edge pedagogical principles reviewed above were lacking any gender-egalitarian—let alone feminist—premises. Although many witnesses to the times would argue such premises were redundant and unnecessary, the recent publication of the memoir *Kontrako eztarritik* by the *bertsolari* and writer Uxue Alberdi (2019) tells us a different story: young girls did in fact struggle to make it through in a male-dominated environment and were pervasively misinterpreted and misrepresented. Whereas, as

---

<sup>20</sup> Roxa Lertxundi, interview by Larraitx Ariznabarreta, Zarautz, January 10, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> For an article and graphic background on the *Etxe-Beltz bertso* school, see Agirreazaldegí 2002:375-84.

<sup>22</sup> As Lujanbio notes, “when you have little left to lose, inevitably the general attitude is one that embraces risk-taking. And since *bertsolaritza* was at risk of disappearing, it was everybody's job to save it, including women” (2018:81).



early as the 1980s, young girls made up a remarkable fifty percent of students in *bertso* schools, only twenty percent of them made it to the *fore*, to actual remunerated performances in town squares and festivals. Arguably, this blatant injustice was perversely conditioned by the fact that the young *bertsolari* girls themselves had grown “a thick skin for oblivion” (Lujanbio 2018:90). The two-time (2009 and 2017) champion Maialen Lujanbio, an attendee at her local *bertso* school in Hernani since its inception, recalls the days when split and Manichean ideological factions offered “no room for nuance” (2018:93). Lujanbio’s words are expressive in the way that they uphold a shared accountability for the utter lack of a feminist perspective in the early years (2018:93):

Besides, feminism had a bad reputation at the time. Even in that left-leaning and totally Basque-loving section of society we belonged to. All of us young girls, we did not think of ourselves as feminists . . . . [I]t was a difficult time politically. There was an armed conflict, a lot of tension in our society, and very intense “positioning” among us. Society was very much split in half. . . . Power looked on folk culture with disdain, because it was not at its service, because it was critical, among other things. The opposition, on the other hand, tried to take ownership of everything that was in its interest.

## New Bounty

Over the course of the past forty years, several noteworthy paths have opened the *bertso*-school movement to gender inclusion and other urban, modern-day ideological nuances. Arguably, many of the changes were facilitated by other novel, contributing factors: the renovation of tropes and motifs; increased breadth in the range of subjects; reconsideration of the cues provided by prompters; a new world in metaphors. Tellingly, Lujanbio observes that, amidst the new breeds of modern verse improvisers, the most successful ones have been those “who have drunk the least from the goblet of tradition” (2018:89, 92):

We *bertsolaris* of this young generation . . . have been raised by *bertsolaritza*. The world of improvised-singing put the questions to us before life itself did: about identity, ethics, love, and sex; about politics and conflict . . . equality and feminism.

Young *bertsolaris* slowly “felt a spontaneous sense of kinship, a sense of being part of a generation and the budding conscience of a desire to infuse new blood into” tradition (Lujanbio 2018:88). *Bertsolaritza* gradually developed into a progressive cultural movement that was well-suited for the changing times, and *bertso* schools, their environment, and their dogmas were instrumental in that change. In parallel, and propelled by this change, the configuration of *bertso* schools also grew, and the programs were altered accordingly. Verse schools became comfortable spaces for the development of trendy, hip, youthful individualities. As Lujanbio notes (2018:88):

Those little droplets of *bertsolaritza* renewal became rivulets, and the rivulets, with the new generation, would become a wave. We caught the wave, or maybe the wave caught us. Young

*bertsolaris* modernized and adapted *bertsolaritza* to their times. They introduced new attitudes, aesthetics and subjects: drugs, alternative discourses about love and sexual relationships, different cultural references, different ways of singing, of using the language, and so on.

Unlike their forerunners, those *bertso*-school debutants of the late seventies and eighties are now, for the most part, university graduates who have traveled a long path in other intellectual and cultural fields and are socially highly valued. As Zulaika divulges: modern *bertsolaris* are “endowed with the enigmatic agalma by which he or she is admired and loved, the owner of an uncanny treasure that will sparkle and satisfy the audience’s desire” (2018:168). In that line, Basque improvisers’ sphere of influence is no longer confined to the world of *bertsolaritza*: their intellectualization and benchmarking status “has given way to a hybrid wide-ranging cultural phenomenon” (Ariznabarreta 2018:126). One could contend that this ongoing trajectory of the once unfashionable art towards an ideologically dominant position is strongly associated with the ever-increasing tendency towards the institutionalization of formal training in *bertsolaritza*. Intuitively at least, certain shared values can be noted amid the new generations of *bertso* followers—and instructors—that stemmed from the original educational schemes: they all perceive the cultural capital of *bertsolaritza* as unique and recognize it as symbolic wealth that needs to be protected and transmitted. In that sense, a common focus and a sense of ideological righteousness about shared cultural symbols become advantages of group membership for the growing *bertso* community.

## A Coda

Indeed, as Lujanbio conceded in an interview, “a change in aesthetics implies a change in *bertso* prompts” (Aristorena Lasa 1998:85), and, as a result, we may infer: *a shift in the reaction of bertso followers*. The expertise applied to improvisation by former *bertso*-school children—now college-educated *bertso* instructors who deliver their know-how to new generations of *bertso*-groupies-to-be with a high degree of intellectualization and through digital means—has probably changed their new apprentices’ very perception of what constitutes a good *bertso*. Oihana Iguaran, a young female *bertsolari* and researcher, reflected on these changes as perceived by the performers themselves on the occasion of the most recent (2019) championship tournament (Ugarte 2019):

We have felt a different way of listening. Especially in the semi-finals, where issues of contradiction have been raised, we have seen doubts about the messages that have been sung, we have heard empty applause, sometimes even silence.

Admittedly, the institutionalization of *bertso* schools as intergenerational transmitters of the ancient craft—together with their role as supportive hubs of socialization—has been pivotal in the current appreciative expertise of the *bertso* audience, which has been molded by former

*bertso*-school attendees themselves.<sup>23</sup> This whole movement is to be credited for the contemporary appeal of improvisation in the Basque Country.

In fact, many of the ideological nuances brought about by the initial *bertso* schools have now permeated the Basque collective ethos; thus, these early educational schemes serve as a significant synecdoche of the evolution of Basque society in the last four decades. The contributions made by the patrons and early visionaries of *bertso* schools not only reformed and protected the ancient oral tradition and its transmission, but also favored an awareness of the fallaciousness of long-held irreconcilable tensions in the old-style Basque imaginary. Several binary oppositions—male/female (roles), individual/collective (worldview), rural/urban (identity), cosmopolitan/nationalist (ideology), folk/contemporary (culture)—slowly began to be surmounted following the hands-on contributions of these forerunners.

Improvisation remains a powerful means for collective self-expression and celebration in the realm of contemporary Basque culture and its enthusiasts. The pervasive online presence of *bertso* followers during the COVID-19 pandemic provides another significant indicator of its adaptability. Can the lessons extracted from recent experiences suggest wiser ways to deal with inexorable global issues through local creativity and know-how? The example provided by the *patrons, fathers*—and *mothers*—of the reinvigoration of *bertsolaritza* in the seventies allows us to look forward to such a utopian scenario, as the saying goes, “with hope, if not with confidence.”

*Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno*

## References

- |                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| A. Agirre 1999                    | Antxoka Agirre. “Imanol Murua: ‘Diputazioan bertsolariekin bilera bat tokatzen zen bakoitzean pare bat bertso eramaten nituen preparatuta.’” <i>Bertsolari aldizkaria</i> , 35:54-59.  |
| J. Agirre 2017                    | Joxean Agirre. “Koplak eta jotak: Bat-batekotasunetik fosilizaziora?” <i>Bertsolari aldizkaria</i> , May 31, 2017. <a href="https://www.bertsolari.eus/erreportajeak/koplak-eta-jotak-bat-batekotasunetik-fosilizaziora/">https://www.bertsolari.eus/erreportajeak/koplak-eta-jotak-bat-batekotasunetik-fosilizaziora/</a> |
| Agirreazaldegí 2002               | Ainhoa Agirreazaldegí. “Euskal Herriko bertso eskolak.” Special issue, <i>Bertsolari aldizkaria</i> , 48. <a href="https://www.bertsolari.eus/aldizkariak/euskal-herriko-bertso-eskolak/">https://www.bertsolari.eus/aldizkariak/euskal-herriko-bertso-eskolak/</a>  |
| Agirreazaldegí and Goiketxea 2007 | Ainhoa Agirreazaldegí and Arkaitz Goiketxea. “Verse Schools.” <i>Oral Tradition</i> , 22.2:65-68. <a href="https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/">https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/</a>  |

---

<sup>23</sup> As Arin and Satrustegi note, “Most of the young people who go through *bertsolaritza* school then become *bertso* fans, whether they are following *bertsolaris* or learning about *bertsolaris* from near or far, as listeners” (2019).

- Aierdi et al. 2007 Xabier Aierdi, Juan Aldaz, Eider Alkorta, Alfredo Retortillo, and Harkaitz Zubiri, eds. *Bertsolaritza: Tradizio modernoa*. Euskal literatura saila, 2. Bilbao: Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea.
- Alberdi 2019 Uxue Alberdi. *Kontrako eztarritik: Emakume bertsolarien testigantzak*. Zarautz: Susa.
- Amuriza et al. 1988 Xabier Amuriza, Joxe Azurmendi, Joanito Dorronsoro, Joserra Etxebarria, Jesus Mari “Izazpi” Etxezarreta, Fito Rodríguez, and Piarres Xarritton. *Bertsolaritza formarik gabeko heziketa*. Donostia: University of the Basque Country.
- Arin and Satrustegi 2020 Nagore Arin and Inigo Satrustegi. “Bertso eskolak, gozamenaren elkargune.” *Berria*, March 6, 2020. <http://astekaria.berria.eus/xehetasun/5873>
- Aristorena Lasa 1998 Paulo Joxe Aristorena Lasa. “Maialen Lujanbio: ‘Bertsolaritzarekiko harremana egunean-egunean biziko dut.’” *Hernani urtekaria*, 82-91.
- Ariznabarreta 2018 Larraitz Ariznabarreta. “The Presence of Women Bertsolaris as a Kind of Historical Comeback (After Their Eviction from the Public Space).” In Irujo and Arrieta 2018:131-40.
- Ariznabarreta 2019 \_\_\_\_\_. *Notes on Basque Culture: The Aftermath of Epics*. Montevideo: CLAEH.
- Azurmendi 1988 Joxe Azurmendi. “Bertsolaritzaren kontzeptuari buruz.” In Amuriza et al. 1988: 59-72.
- Bertsozale Elkarte 2020 Bertsozale Elkarte. “Etxeko egonaldian bertsoa lagun.” March 23, 2020. <https://www.bertsozale.eus/eu/albisteak/etxeko-egonaldian-bertsoa-lagun>
- Boas 1935 Franz Boas. *Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology*. Memoirs of the American Folklore Society, 28. New York: Stechert.
- Dorronsoro 1988 Juanito Dorronsoro. “Bertsolaritza irakaskuntzan.” In Amuriza et al. 1988:81-93.
- Duncombe 2002 Stephen Duncombe. “Introduction.” In *Cultural Resistance Reader*. Ed. by Stephen Duncombe. New York: Verso. pp. 1-15.
- Dundes 2005 Alan Dundes. “Afterword: Many Manly Traditions—A Folkloristic Malestrom.” In *Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinities*. Ed. by Simon J. Bronner. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 351-63.

- Eizagirre 2006 Estitxu Eizagirre. "Txirrita sartu da klasean." *Argia*, March 23, 2006. [https://www.argia.eus/albiste/txirrita-sartu-da-klasean?botua=1&albiste\\_id=21982](https://www.argia.eus/albiste/txirrita-sartu-da-klasean?botua=1&albiste_id=21982)
- Eizmendi 1984 Iñaki Eizmendi ("Basarri"). "Bertsolari eskolak." In *Bertsolaritzari buruz*. Tolosa: Auspoa. pp. 169-70.
- Ettxepare Basque Institute 2018 Ettxepare Basque Institute. "What Is Bertsolaritza?": *Ettxepare, mintzola eta sustatzaileen adierazpenak*. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_U1QvMHJv3s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U1QvMHJv3s)
- Fine 1998 Elizabeth C. Fine. "Leading Proteus Captive: Editing and Translating Oral Tradition." In Foley 1998:59-71.
- Foley 1998 John Miles Foley, ed. *Teaching Oral Traditions*. New York: The Modern Language Association.
- Garzia 2007 Joxerra Garzia. "History of Improvised *Bertsolaritza*: A Proposal." *Oral Tradition*, 22.2:77-115. [https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/22ii/8\\_garzia3.pdf](https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/22ii/8_garzia3.pdf)
- Garzia Garmendia 1997 Juan Garzia Garmendia. *Txirritaren baratzea Norteko trenbidetik*. Irun: Alberdania.
- Geertz 1973 Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Irujo and Arrieta 2018 Xabier Irujo and Iñaki Arrieta, eds. *Female Improvisational Poets: Challenges and Achievements in the Twentieth Century*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies Press, University of Nevada, Reno.
- Lujanbio 2018 Maialen Lujanbio. "As the Tree Grows, the Bark Cracks." In Irujo and Arrieta 2018:75-106.
- Mouillot 2009 François Mouillot. "Resisting Poems: Expressions of Dissent and Hegemony in Modern Basque Bertsolaritza." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 5.1:1-12.
- Oteiza 2003 [1963] Jorge Oteiza. "Tradition and Interpretation: *Quousque tandem* . . . ! Sections 123-133." In *Oteiza's Selected Writings*. Ed. by Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Center for Basque Studies Press, University of Nevada, Reno. pp. 346-61.
- Retortillo and Aierdi 2007 Alfredo Retortillo and Xabier Aierdi. "A Sociological Study of Sung, Extempore Verse-Making in Basque." *Oral Tradition*, 22.2:13-31. <https://>

[journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/22ii/3\\_retortillo\\_aierdi.pdf](http://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/22ii/3_retortillo_aierdi.pdf)

- Rodríguez 1984                      Fito Rodríguez. *Bertsolaritza eta eskola*. San Sebastian: Udako Euskal Unibertsitatea.
- Rodríguez 1988                      \_\_\_\_\_. "Bertsolaritza formarik gabeko heziketa." In Amuriza et al. 1988:25-44.
- Ugarte 2019                          Itziar Ugarte. "Aldaketa giroari dagokion finala." *Berria*, December 11, 2019. <https://www.berria.eus/paperekoa/1907/022/001/2019-12-11/aldaketa-giroari-dagokion-finala.htm>
- Uria 2018                              Juanjo Uria. "Zaila zait sinestea gaurko bertsolariak benetan bat-batean ari direnik." *Bertsolari aldizkaria*, January 4, 2018. <https://www.bertsolari.eus/bertsolaritzaren-hemeroteka/juanjo-uria-bertso-eskola-sortzailea/>
- Zavala 2005                          Antonio Zavala. "Prologue." In *Voicing the Moment: Improvised Oral Poetry and Basque Tradition*. Ed. by Samuel G. Armistead and Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Center for Basque Studies Press, University of Nevada, Reno. pp. 9-19.
- Zulaika 2018                          Joseba Zulaika. "What is the Sex of a Bertsolaria?" In Irujo and Arrieta 2018:141-72.

This page is intentionally left blank.

## **The Musical Poetry of Endangered Languages: Kota and Wakhi Poem-Songs in South and Central Asia**

**Richard K. Wolf**

Many peoples of the world conceptualize what English speakers call poetry and music or song as a single integrated unit, what I will call the “poem-song.” Poem-songs may function as models or molds, opening up possibilities for singers, poets, and composers to structure and remember texts, and to convey their ideas through familiar melodies and other channels. Singers may “compose and recompose the phrases for the idea of the moment on the pattern established by the basic formulas” (Lord 1960:5). They may also innovatively break, counter, or question the molds by changing typical metric structures, line lengths, context-appropriate tunes, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> I will be considering the poem-song in two endangered, minority languages of South and Central Asia, Kota and Wakhi, and showing how, in the absence of strong revitalization movements, small-scale acts of individual creativity contribute to the vitality of these languages.<sup>2</sup> As Gregory Nagy states in another context, “an oral tradition stays alive though its variations and

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Margaret Mills, who analyzes the transmission of Afghan tales and finds that variation does not merely consist of substituting “structurally equivalent objects, personages, and events into a single narrative ‘framework,’” but that variation is structural, leading to varied outcomes in the tales themselves (1990:233 and *passim*).

<sup>2</sup> The two regions under discussion are both long-term field sites of mine. I have been conducting field research in Tamil Nadu, India, since 1982, and specifically in the Nilgiri Hills, where the Kota people live, since 1990. My two years of doctoral research (1990-92) were conducted in all of the (at that time) seven Kota villages, and I lived continuously in one of them, Kolmel, for more than a year. From 1992 until the time of this writing, I have been conducting shorter field excursions to the Nilgiris, each lasting from several days to several months. In 2012 I began a new project in Tajikistan, initially focused on musicians who sing and accompany themselves on plucked lutes, with attention to how aspects of text are brought out on these instruments. Part of my research was conducted in the Wakhan, a border region of southeastern Tajikistan. My interest was in how speakers of the minority Wakhi language compose new poetry (which is always sung), drawing from models of classical Persian. I spent an academic year in 2012 working in Tajikistan as well as in Pakistan, where some Wakhis had migrated. Since 2014 I’ve been returning to Tajikistan several times a year to continue this research. Beginning in 2015 I extended this research to the Wakhan region of northern Afghanistan, across the river from the Wakhi-speaking part of Tajikistan.



reworkings” (1996:27).<sup>3</sup> The Kota and Wakhi cases are not unique, but rather illustrate the possibilities of the poem-song in any society in which “poets” are always creating texts meant to be sung. They also serve as a reminder that “starting with the text” need not necessarily blind one to the richness of a text’s musical realization.<sup>4</sup> I was motivated to write the present article both after observing striking parallels between the song traditions of these otherwise vastly different cultures, and upon reflecting on my own process of coming to learn the languages and sing songs in these languages.

In one sense, the poem-song is unremarkable. Songs are totalities that include melody, rhythm, and maybe instrumentation—they are generally not just song texts, although the musicality of a written poem may challenge even English-language distinctions between poem and song.<sup>5</sup> The melody of a conventional song melody will probably remind us, however imperfectly, of its lyrics, just as in ancient Greece a melody could stimulate a performer to remember its associated dance poses and words (Nagy 2010:382). We don’t usually hear song lyrics performed as speech, and when we read familiar ones, we might “hear” them sung in our heads.<sup>6</sup> Singer-songwriters are typically the wordsmiths of these kinds of poem-songs. In the languages many of us speak, poetry and verse also call for their own formal contexts—the poetry-reading, the play, the speech—in which the poet, the actor, the schoolchild, the politician, recite or quote the poem, usually in a manner distinct from ordinary speaking. This poetry can be set to music, too, but the poem and its setting come about through distinct phases of creation, and usually through the agency of different people. The poem-song becomes worthy of special attention when an autonomous tradition of spoken recitation does not exist. This is the case in the genres I explore in this article.

“Speech” often differs from “singing” in degree rather than kind. George List, in “The Boundaries of Speech and Song” (1963), was not the first to notice that words and concepts corresponding to speech, song, chant, recitation, oration, and so forth vary considerably from

---

<sup>3</sup> Nagy paraphrases the conclusions of Ramón Menéndez Pidal, who writes in his study of *La Chanson de Roland* (1960:67-68),

En conclusion, toute oeuvre qui demeure, des siècles durant, dans la tradition anonyme, tantôt interprétée surtout par les chanteurs professionnels, tantôt surtout par les simples amateurs (geste, ballade, conte . . . etc. . . ), toute oeuvre de cette catégorie ne revête pas une forme fixe, sculpturale, mais une forme vivante, continuellement renouvelée dans ses éléments constitutifs; c’est une oeuvre qui vit de variantes et de remaniements.

The key difference here is that the traditions under discussion are not entirely “anonymous,” and not merely “interpreted” by performers; in some cases, performers are in a more substantial sense composers and authors.

<sup>4</sup> See the debates on this matter laid out in Rodgers 2017:316-21.

<sup>5</sup> Elissa Guralnick calls the poem “Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal,” by Alfred Lord Tennyson, an example of a song written without music (Guralnick 2009). I have no quarrel with acknowledging the deeply musical qualities of some texts, whether explicitly poetic or not. But Guralnick seems to imply a poem can be a song even before it has been performed aloud, and that is to imply that even a spoken recitation of the poem is “singing.” The metaphor of music extends here beyond the ordinary use of “song” in English—and it locates the musicality entirely within the text. For a different view, see Bickford, who regards singing and verse as “organiz[ing] utterances in forms not native to language” and singing as “a layer of discourse built on top of language” (2007:439, 466).

<sup>6</sup> See Aaron Fox (2004) for a detailed ethnography of a Texan community whose members integrate the messages and styles of country music into their everyday conversations, as well as an analysis of everyday “country” tropes that are taken up in country music.

society to society, and many scholars have since reiterated this point (for example, Sherzer and Urban 1986:6; Seeger 1986).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, List (1963:1) could consider speech and song under a broad encompassing rubric because both are vocally produced, linguistically meaningful, and melodic. List's framework was designed to take account of an entity only in its moment of performance and not in its state of potential; it did not track the possibilities and limitations of a performance style. Does textual content dictate melodic possibilities? Does a tune, rhythm, or matter of enunciation suggest particular texts appropriate to it? In the cases considered here, the answers are often, "yes." This mutual implication is part of what gives the poem-song its coherence, recognizability, and force.

In surveying a range of scholarship on music-and-language relations published between 1994 and 2012, Paja Faudree argues for "viewing music and language as variably constructed distinctions in a total semiotic field" in order to promote holism in anthropological practice without sacrificing the analysis of text. She uses the term "language-music" for this "unified expressive field" (2012:519-20).<sup>8</sup> I find this formulation problematic: language is an entire sign system, present and recognizable in every society, that differs from other sign systems in particular ways. For Roman Jakobson, language is distinguished by the important role of the phoneme (1978:66-67) and by six functions, including the "poetic" (1960). For Steven Pinker (and Darwin), language is an "instinct": knowing it means "knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa" (Pinker 1995:82). Music, by contrast, cannot be defined across societies (except by the observer), and even if we provisionally agree upon sounds that are musical across societies, those sounds do not necessarily serve a common set of functions. Studies exploring language-music relations inevitably explore some aspect of language in relation to a particular kind of music.<sup>9</sup> I am not convinced that "language" and "music" constitute parts of a unified expressive field. I emphasize this, lest in the term "poem-song," "poem" be taken as synecdochical for "language" and "song" be taken as synecdochical for "music." Rather, I offer "poem-song" as shorthand for the following:

A poem-song combines verbal expressive forms, such as poetry and verse, with special uses of pitch, timbre, melody, rhythm, and, possibly, sound-producing instruments (sometimes called

---

<sup>7</sup> List created a "chart for classifying forms intermediate to speech and song," taking into account relative degrees of intonation and scalar structure (1963:9).

<sup>8</sup> While sympathetic to a holistic analysis of verbal expression, I take issue with the way Faudree and some others invoke "language." For example, some authors focus on *langue* (e. g., syntax or grammar) and others on *parole* (e. g., everyday speech rhythms) without acknowledging that these are but some of the attributes contained in "language," while they are not language itself. We can't substitute "language" for "speech," or "music" for "song," and speak of a language-to-music continuum. Although the term "language" can be used very loosely, it refers to a system and not to an act. Definitions of music today are often fraught with ideological concerns, and in some languages, need not include vocal production at all (and indeed, it is common to hear the English word music used in reference only to instrumental performance).

<sup>9</sup> There are too many examples to mention, but to give a small idea of the range, these include studies of the "semantics" of one musical system (Powers 1976); general arguments about the constraints imposed by tonal languages on musical settings—based on insights from one language (for example, Agawu 1988); analyses that stem from speakers' claims about the "musicality" of their language (Faudree 2013); and rhythmic analysis of purely instrumental repertoires that, according to nationalist sentiments, resemble particular European languages (Patel 2008:159-68).

music). While recognizing the poem-song as a unity, performers and listeners are usually capable of singling out elements or attributes for discussion, demonstration, or critique.

This article is divided into three main parts. Part I briefly discusses the ways in which music and poetry have been conceptualized as parts of larger encompassing wholes, especially in South, Central, and West Asia, and, because of its historical connections with these regions, ancient Greece. Part II is a general introduction to the Kota and Wakhi people, their languages, and their musical traditions. Part III, which forms the central body of the article, is itself divided into two sections. The first considers Kota speech, the life and songs of the modern composer A. K. Rangan, and the *āṭṭ* or song of grief in historical perspective. The second section considers the Wakhi *bylbylik* and its transformations, and the life and songs of a modern *bayd* composer, Qurbonsho. The South-Indian-Kota and Central-Asian-Wakhi case studies shine a light on one another, bringing into focus processes of composition and performance that transcend the particularities of one time or place. I conclude by considering the poem-song in light of Ibn Khaldun's image of the "mold" or "loom" in reference to Arabic poetry.

## I. Encompassing Wholes: Music and Poetry

Theorists of music in the Arabic- and Persian-speaking world drew upon and reinterpreted ancient Greek writings on music. Aspects of what they wrote about continue to be important to discourses on music in Central and South Asia today. Especially relevant to the poem-song is the idea of suitability between textual subject and musical setting.<sup>10</sup> The root of the word "music" in English and *mūsīqī* in Arabic is the ancient Greek term *mousikē*. But in ancient Greece *mousikē* meant much more than just music. It was the art or craft of the Muses, "goddesses who inspire the special state of mind required to create the special language that they control." *Mousikē*, the "special language" over which the Muses presided, embraced words, movement, and melody. Even performing on musical instruments was "in fact an aspect of verbal art" in ancient Greece (Nagy 2010:370). One of the reasons for this integration was the existence of both metric and melodic accent in ancient Greek (Nagy 2010:384; Allen 1973:3-5, 86)—so that a text was something akin to a musical score.<sup>11</sup> *Mousikē*, then, was grounded in a notion of divine inspiration with an emphasis on the verbal.

---

<sup>10</sup> This is not to imply that there is a single intellectual history of such ideas—composers in many parts of the world think about how music suits a text, and may even use disjunctions between music and text as an expressive tool. Stephen Rodgers writes, "The greatest conflicts between text and music have to do with subverting the natural declamation of the text" (2017:336). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a touchstone for ideas regarding verbal and musical correspondence in Sanskrit poetics: "Consonants, vowels, euphonic combinations (*sandhi*), case-endings (*vibhakti*), nouns (*nāma*), verbs (*ākhyāta*), prefixes (*upasarga*), particles (*nipāta*), secondary suffixes (*taddhita*), and syllabic and moric metres always relate to the verbal themes of music (*pada*)" (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 28:16-17, trans. by Ghosh 1950:II, 4). More specific indications of the kinds of *dhruvā* songs that are appropriate for particular dramatic themes are given in Chapter 32 of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, especially lines 422-70 (Ghosh 1950:II, 149-54). One such statement is, "In the case of crows, monkeys, swans, and peacocks, the *Dhruvās* should be made up of light syllables with swift movement, and of heavy syllables with their slowness" (32:430-31, trans. by Ghosh 1950:II, 150).

<sup>11</sup> In the classical period accents were not marked in the text, as they are today (Probert 2006:15).

The Greek term *melos* approximated what we now call music or song. In the writings of Aristotle's student Aristoxenus and others, *melos* had the broad meaning of "melody, rhythm and words" (Barker 1989:126) but could also refer more narrowly to melody or scale.<sup>12</sup> Music theorists writing in Arabic and Persian such as Al Farabi (872-950) and Safi ul din Urmawi (1216-1294), who drew on their knowledge of Greek writings, used the term *alḥān* (plural of *lahn*) to refer to a range of concepts corresponding to the Greek *melos*. *Mūsīqī*, in the Arab Middle Ages, was neither the Greek *mousikē* nor the art of sound, but was rather a branch of mathematics, the science of composing *alḥān* (Farmer 1913-36; Urmawi 1960-61). Al Farabi called melodies (*alḥān*) "perfect" (*kamilah*) if they were performed by the human voice and in some cases on instruments. Through their association with poetic discourses, perfect melodies could inspire listeners to seek wisdom and act ethically (Madian 1992:245, 351-52). *Mūsīqī*, then, was the science of making melodies etc., the most valued of which had a special relationship with poetry.<sup>13</sup>

In ancient India, prior to the fourth century BCE, Sanskrit writers used separate terms to designate song, instrumental music, drama, and dance. Owing to the close association of these arts, according to Manmohan Ghosh, the term *sangīta* emerged in about the third century CE, "signifying . . . all the different phases of music including dance" (1950:5). Just as the word "music" today has a more narrow meaning than *mousikē*, the term *sangīta* today refers more narrowly to instrumental music and song.

In contrast to the Sanskrit tradition, the South Indian concept encompassing music was—as in ancient Greece—language. In South India, that language was Tamil, and since at least the seventh century CE, Tamil grammarians have been representing their language as threefold, comprising poetry, music, and drama.<sup>14</sup> In the view of many writers, classical Tamil poetic works

---

<sup>12</sup> Barker (1989:126) translates the beginning of Aristoxenus's *Elementa Harmonica*, Book 1, as follows: "The science concerned with melody has many parts and is divided into several species, of which the study called Harmonics must be considered one: in order it is first, and its character is like that of an element." Barker comments (126 n. 1):

*Melos*, here translated "melody," can mean: (i) song, broadly conceived to include melody, rhythm and words (a common usage, sometimes expanded by technical writers into the phrase *teleion melos*, "complete melody," e.g., 12 Arist. Quint. *De Mus.* 28.8-10); (ii) melody conceived apart from the other elements (e. g., 35.24, 38.21 below), or (iii) the melodic series or scale on which a melody is based (e. g., 5.11-12, 39.20-3).

<sup>13</sup> For a deeper and more detailed discussion of these and other matters pertinent to musical knowledge in the Muslim world, see Blum 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Kamil Zvelebil notes that evidence for the term *muttamil* ("three-Tamil") dates back only to the late-sixth or early-seventh century CE, although the texts in which the term appears claim a more ancient origin for it. The three Tamils are *iyal* (speech and writing), *icai* (song or music), and *nāṭakam* (drama). In Zvelebil's view (1992:141-42),

it is a conception of and approach to language according to which language use is manifested in its *totality* when expressed as speech (or spoken → written word), as song (the word sung, speech joined with musical sound), and as enacted; it is a conception of and approach to language in its *dynamism and functional entirety*; that is to say, language (in this case, the Tamil language) is not "just" speech, not only spoken/written word (as in *iyal*, poetry) but also, simultaneously, song, music, word combined with musical sound, sung word, and again simultaneously, word enacted in performance.

were not just musical, but themselves constituted forms of music.<sup>15</sup> Grammars, such as Kuṇacākarar's commentary on Amitacākarar's tenth-century work, *Verses on the Precious Jewel Prosody*, employed specific terms for rhythmic feel and intonation in their analysis of prosody. These terms were often compounds that included the Tamil term used elsewhere for music, *icai* (Niklas 1993:141 and *passim*); in Tamil prosody, *icai* referred to a subdivision of rhythm (Niklas 1988:180).<sup>16</sup> The recourse of grammarians to *icai* and related terms speaks to the lack of a clear boundary between pure text and musical sound in Tamil poetry of this period.<sup>17</sup>

In many performance traditions of the world, words and music bind, limit, and provide space for one another. Musical considerations at times clarify the metric organization of poetry that has no regular pattern in terms of syllable count or quantity. What Mary Boyce called the "cultivated . . . imaginative and evocative" sung poetry of pre-Islamic Persia (1957:35-36 and *passim*) was, in her view, based on the musical placement of stresses. Ehsan Yarshater made a similar point, extending it to much modern Iranian folk poetry as well (1974:62 and *passim*). John Marr (1985:409) and Lynn Ate (1984) have analyzed Tamil poetry of the early and the early-medieval periods along the same lines, writing that syllable groupings do not always conform to the poetic feet of Tamil and Sanskrit classical meters, but are rather arranged according to the way they must have been sung. In both the Iranian-speaking and Tamil lands, music and poetry have been linked deeply both in concept and performance. The idea of poetry as an object separated from music is, in some cases, a modern one. But the idea of the poem-song, poetry and music as an integrated unit, has by no means disappeared.<sup>18</sup>

## II. Regions and Languages: The Nilgiri Hills and the Wakhan

The Nilgiri Hills are located at the juncture of three South Indian states, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka, and were one of the many hill stations in colonial India developed as respites from the heat of the plains.

---

<sup>15</sup> Or as David Shulman put it on the first page of his "biography" of the Tamil language, "Indeed, 'music,' or 'the Tamil that is music,' *icaittamil*, is one of the meanings of the name [Tamil] itself in the ancient grammatical and poetic sources" (2016:1).

<sup>16</sup> Since poetry and music are mutually constitutive in this grammar, it is problematic to define *icai* simply as "music."

<sup>17</sup> Examples of these terms for rhythmic variation are *ēnticai* ("rising"), *tūnkicai* ("swinging"), and *ōlukicai* ("flowing"). (Ulrike Niklas translates *ēnticai* with the word "eminent," which doesn't lend itself well to describing rhythm.) The same term *icai*, along with the terms *ōcai* and *oli*, are elsewhere implemented to indicate phonological uses, leading Niklas to translate them as "tone" (1988:193).

<sup>18</sup> See also Crosson, who discusses the value Gaelic poets place on traditional music—and how they have consciously turned to music to inform their contemporary writings, recognizing the "issues of a broken tradition and community" (2008:15 and *passim*).



Map 1. The Nilgiri Hills of South India (from Wolf 2009:238).

The British particularly enjoyed the Nilgiris for the similarity of their often rainy climate to that of England. The larger Nilgiri environment is populated by immigrants from the plains and other parts of India who own businesses and tea plantations, or work in them; a robust Indian and international tourism business operates there as well.





Fig. 1. Blacksmithing in Kolmēl village, 2001 (photo by Richard K. Wolf).

The special inhabitants of the region are “tribal” populations known as *ādivāsis* (“original inhabitants”), who once shared a caste-like system of economic and ritual interdependence.<sup>19</sup> Among those tribes, the Kotas were known for their skills as craftsmen, potters, jewelers, blacksmiths, and musicians, which they practiced alongside farming, hunting, and raising cattle (Wolf 2005).

The Kota language belongs to the South Dravidian group and emerged as an independent language no later than about 2,000 years ago, when Tamil and Malayalam became separate languages.<sup>20</sup> It is currently listed as “Critically Endangered” in the UNESCO *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*, meaning “the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently” (Moseley 2010). This is a mischaracterization, however. Despite the small number of speakers (roughly 2,000), most Kotas are fluent in their

<sup>19</sup> The governmental designation for *ādivāsi* is Scheduled Tribe, a term which contrasts with Scheduled Caste (dalit or so called untouchable), Other Backward Caste, and other labels, many of which remain in flux.

<sup>20</sup> Historical linguists attest to this using the so-called palatalization rule in which Proto-Dravidian /k-/ becomes /c-/ before front vowels, with some exceptions. Kota preserves the velar /k-/ from Proto-Dravidian (Emeneau 1995).



native language and use it for day-to-day communication with one another—particularly in Kota villages.

Unlike for Wakhi, as I shall discuss, no dramatic geographical factors account for the development of Kota in isolation from the plains languages of Tamil and Malayalam. Colonial writers on the region would commonly romanticize the isolation of the region, exaggerating the role of the mountains in separating the tribes from the plains population. Kota could well have developed in the context of relative social isolation, brought on by the caste-like intertribal system of economic and ritual interaction and the strict rules of endogamy.



Fig. 2. The Kota village of Kolmēl in the late 1990s (photo by Richard K. Wolf).

The Nilgiri mountain range is not vast, covering only about 1,000 square miles. In contrast, the home of the Wakhis and other Ismaili Pamir groups is much larger: the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region of Tajikistan covers about 25,000 square miles, and Badakhshan, Afghanistan, is about 17,000 square miles in size. The mountain peaks of the Nilgiris are in the 7,000-8,000 foot range. These are lower than even the valleys in Wakhan, some of which are as



high as 11,000 feet.<sup>21</sup> Some degree of isolation—social if not also geographic—allowed the Nilgiri languages to develop, but this was happening in an environment in which at least some members of the communities were conversant in several Dravidian languages of the region.

The population of roughly 2,000 Kotas is now spread out over six villages (a seventh village is now defunct), and some Kotas live and work in other parts of India, returning to their villages mainly for festivals and funerals. The community is strictly endogamous in the sense that those who marry outside the community are ostracized: there is no way (now) of “becoming” a Kota through marriage or residence.<sup>22</sup> Most Kotas live as peasant farmers in their villages or work in a variety of private and government jobs throughout India. Some own tracts of land with tea and other cash crops that yield significant income.

A small number of women maintain the craft of making special pottery for everyday and ritual use, and men still play and make musical instruments; both men and women dance, and women’s singing is an important concluding act at various ritual junctures.

---

<sup>21</sup> One of the possible isolating factors for Kota and its neighboring tribal languages was the presence of malaria in the moist, thickly forested foothills. Although malaria transmission can technically occur at all altitudes in the Nilgiris (Bishop and Litch 2000:157), it is commonly believed not to. In any case, those who regularly walked through the dense malarial zones would have developed a degree of immunity, as would those who lived in plains areas where malaria was prevalent.

<sup>22</sup> There are legendary exceptions to this in the distant past. For example, some of the exogamous clans of Kolmel village are said to have originated when a Kota and a non-Kota were married and had children.



Fig. 3. Kota woman making a clay vessel for use at the *varldāv*, a secondary mortuary ceremony. Mēnār village, the Nilgiris, 1991 (photo by Richard K. Wolf).

The principal musical repertoires are named for and tightly tied to ritual contexts. The ensemble of double-reed *koḷ* and drums plays one repertoire for funerals, one for god-related rituals, and a dance-music repertoire that to an extent cuts across these and other contexts. Unlike in most South Asian societies, no repertoire exists for weddings. Songs fall under the local categories of “god songs” (*devr pāt*, mainly sung by women as they dance in a circle), lullabies (*jo jo pāt*), and *āt!*, songs of grief and loss that are personal and do not form part of any ritual repertoire.



Fig. 4. Kotas playing music during a funeral in Kolmel village, January, 2015 (photo by Richard K. Wolf).

Men and women compose many songs that do not fall into generic categories, both in Tamil and in Kota, often adapting melodies they have heard from films, the radio, and local devotional singing. Kotas are occasionally called upon to perform their music at municipal and state functions, both in the local capital and in Delhi. However the kinds of songs to be discussed here are domestic and personal, performed alone or among a small group of neighbors and relatives out of grief, remembrance, in the course of storytelling, or for the sheer joy of singing. Although a few women composers have also sung their songs on a local radio station, this is not the norm.

\*

The population and geographic spread of Wakhi speakers is at another order of magnitude. While official accounts vary, some Wakhis estimate their numbers to be as high as 80,000. The UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* classifies Wakhi as “definitely endangered,” meaning, “children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home” (Moseley 2010). This too is a mischaracterization. *Some* children living outside of Wakhi-populated areas may not learn Wakhi as a mother tongue in the home. In my experience, Wakhis speak to one another (including children) in Wakhi.



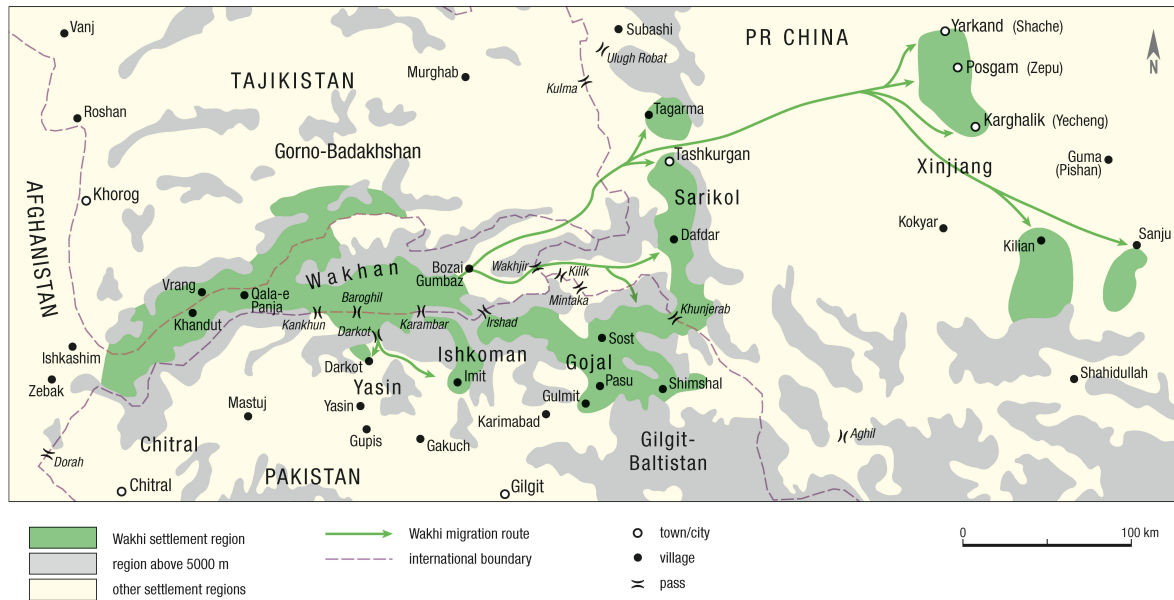


Fig. 5. Wakhan River Valley near Yur village, Upper Wakhan, Afghanistan (photo by Richard K. Wolf, January, 2020).

The Wakhi homeland is the Wakhan River Valley, beginning high in the Pamir Mountains along the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Wakhi settlements dot both sides of the Wakhan River and continue west until the Wakhan River joins the Panj River, which borders Tajikistan. The Panj turns southwest, and Wakhi settlements continue on both sides of that river, ending just before the administrative centers of Sultan Ishkashim in Afghanistan and Ishkashim in Tajikistan.<sup>23</sup> The Wakhan and Panj rivers are headwaters of the Amu Darya or Oxus River. Significant Wakhi diasporas also exist in Pakistan, China, and Russia.

---

<sup>23</sup> The rivers are not shown explicitly in Map 2, but the Wakhan River joins the Panj River from the east in Qala-e Panja, and from there onward (southwest, then north) the dotted line indicating the national boundary between Tajikistan and Afghanistan corresponds to the Panj River.



Map 2. Wakhi settlements and migration (from Kreutzmann 2017:197; reproduced with permission of the author).

Traditionally, Wakhis have subsisted on farming in their home villages near the river, but seasonally much of the village has regularly migrated to one or more high mountain settlements for the summer to graze its cows, sheep, and goats. Owing to heavy taxation within Afghan Badakhshan, and religious discrimination against this Ismaili Muslim community by various Sunni rulers in Afghanistan, the Wakhis were forced to move into some of the harshest and least productive lands in the region and at times, to sell their own people into slavery (Kreutzmann 2015:205-08, 210-12, 220, 248-58, 273, 295-98). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, populations of Wakhis migrated in waves to southwest Xinjiang, China, and to northern Pakistan (Kreutzmann 2015:208-09).

Unlike Kotas, Wakhis are free to marry non-Wakhis—the more important consideration being whether or not the prospective spouse is Ismaili. However, Ismaili-Sunni alliances are not unknown, and over generations non-Wakhis, even Sunnis, have become *de facto* Wakhis by living in the area, practicing Ismaili religion, and speaking the Wakhi language. Similarly, those Wakhis who were sold into slavery a century ago have apparently merged into the surrounding population of Badakhshan in Afghanistan, and their descendants may not even know that their ancestors were Wakhi.

The Wakhi language, called *ǰik zik* in Wakhi, belongs to the Pamir group within the Eastern Iranian language family. It developed independently from the language that, farther to the west, became Modern Persian. Some two to three thousand years passed before Modern Persian spread eastward, reaching the region of today's Tajikistan in the eighth century CE (Perry 2006). It probably took more time for the form of Persian that is now called Tajik in Tajikistan and Dari in Afghanistan to make inroads into the mountains where Wakhis live. Over the centuries, Persian speakers from farther west—that is, from modern-day Iran—settled in relatively small numbers in the Wakhan. Their descendants continue to live in Tajik-speaking



villages of Wakhan in Tajikistan today. Later, national projects led to the teaching of Tajik and Dari in Tajik and Afghan schools. Despite the relatively modern advent of spoken Persian in the region, Ismaili Muslims of the Pamirs and Badakhshan have been using Persian-language poetry as part of their religious practice for at least a millennium.



Fig. 6. Summer settlement in the upper pasture above the Wakhi village of Zumudg, Tajikistan. The river Panj is visible just beyond the descending mountains, and the Pamirs of Afghan Wakhan are on the other side of the river (photo by Richard K. Wolf, August, 2019).

In the Wakhi homeland, some of the prototypical song forms include the *bɪlbɪlik*, a three-line song, usually expressing longing for a distant or dead loved one; wedding songs (*tuyāna* or *bayd*), often accompanied by frame drum (*dā'ira*, Wakhi *dorya*) and sung in Persian or Wakhi; and funeral laments, sung either as quatrains in Persian or alternating between the Persian and Wakhi languages.



Fig. 7. View of Zumudg village and upper pasture from the Afghanistan side of the Panj River in winter (photo by Richard K. Wolf, January, 2020).

Modern Wakhi songs, called *bayd*, are often set in rhyming forms that correspond to the *ghazal* (rhyming couplets AA BA CA DA and so forth) and *rubāʿī* (quatrains in AABA, AAAB, and other combinations). As differences in vowel length aren't phonemically significant in Wakhi, Wakhi poetry does not draw upon the 'aruz metrical system. New Wakhi song tunes and performance styles are drawn from the musical environment in which the performer lives. Tajik Wakhis sing songs embracing some of the diversity of the cosmopolitan Soviet era, and Afghan Wakhis use tunes and styles they've heard in Afghanistan. Radio and television have also been conduits for transmitting the tunes of popular singers such as Ahmad Zahir (1946-1979) in Afghanistan and Dushanbe Pallaev (1950-2017) in Tajikistan. Wakhis of Gilgit-Baltistan in northern Pakistan sometimes describe the melodies of their newly composed sung-poetry in terms of the language in which they think the song was originally sung—as if the language sticks to the music. The musical styles in this part of Pakistan are distinctively different from those in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Georg Buddruss and Sigrun Wiehler-Schneider (1978) found regularities in the singing of Wakhis in Hunza that led them to speculate on the existence of an indigenous music theory.





Fig. 8. Left to right: Poet-singer Daulatsho playing *ghijak* and singing *bayds*, accompanied by Zarkub (*rābob*) and Mamad Ziya (*dorya*). Meadow called *Sir* on route to the upper pasture in Yur, Afghanistan (photo by Richard K. Wolf, July, 2016).

While poetry and music are deeply integrated in this region, melodies can nevertheless be detached from the particulars of a song and played alone or used for other poems. So, the integration of poetry with singing is not necessarily dependent upon a particular melody—poet-singers (and singers in general) may express themselves according to their choices of musical settings, based on their personal moods and the musical and social contexts in which a particular text comes to mind. This doesn't seem to be the case for the early-medieval Tamil texts discussed in the *Verses on the Precious Jewel Prosody*, where the musical characteristics are intrinsic to the text—that is, not separable from it at all. In the repertoires with which I work, particular texts and melodies together form well-defined genres or distinct pieces within those genres. This seems to be particularly true for songs of loss or sorrow, such as the *āṭṭi* in Kota and the *būlbūlik* in Wakhi.





Fig. 9. Karakoram mountains in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan (photo by Richard K. Wolf, July, 1997).

### III. Kota and Wakhi Poem-Songs

Kota and Wakhi, like all languages, include many borrowed words and constructions, the foreignness of which not all speakers recognize. The thorough interpenetration of Tamil and Persian into each language, respectively, and the further embedding of the words those languages had already incorporated from Arabic, Sanskrit, and other languages, make for a complicated linguistic picture with many openings for creative etymology. The Arabic word *ma'mul* ("customary") has made its way into both Kota and Wakhi. While Wakhi speakers would probably recognize the term as Persian or Arabic, Kotas generally see it as indigenous. Ironically so, for *māmūl* in Kota is the word for "traditional" or "the old way." (The contrasting term, meaning "modern," is *ocmūl*).<sup>25</sup> The mixed vocabularies of each language, along with exposure to popular and literary traditions of the dominant language in each case, have opened up avenues for new forms of verbal composition that transcend the boundaries of any one language. Supporting the vitality of a language, endangered or not, need not mean purging it of foreign

---

<sup>25</sup> The folk etymology of *māmūl* is *mā*—from a Tamilization of the Sanskrit *mahā*, meaning "great"—plus the Kota word *mūl*, meaning "direction." This yields "old way" or "great tradition," as it were. To distinguish modern innovation from the ways of the ancestors, Kotas substituted *mā* with the term *oc*, meaning "new." This yields *ocmūl*, "new way"—a modern innovation.

influences—despite the various attempts of ideologically driven political movements to do just that. Some of the most influential composers in Kota and Wakhi over the course of the twentieth century have experienced some form of separation from their homelands. This has, I think, given them perspectives and data from outside their village frames of reference to expand the linguistic and musical possibilities of their own languages.

### *Kota Songs*

In this section we will explore the life and music of an influential Kota song composer as well as analyze perhaps the most well-known Kota *ātī*, using recordings from 1922 and 2019. I will point out the ways in which Kota singing differs from speech, how Kotas create textual and musical parallelism, and ways in which they modify tunes, rhythmic patterns, and metric tendencies to work with a given text, as well as create texts in the first place.

#### A. K. Rangan

An introverted, imaginative Kota man named A. K. Rangan created a new style of Kota composition using popular tunes from Tamil films and the like, which were melodically more complicated and wider in tessitura or range than those of Kota *māmūl* genres. His compositions, of which about five are still sung, harked back to film songs from the 1940s onward, but by the time I met Rangan in 1990, he no longer sang or remembered any of his songs. From a young age, having fallen victim to the quarrel between the *māmūl* faction and the *ocmūl* faction of the village, Rangan was outcasted. After spending years wandering penniless through the cities and towns of the Indian plains, he eventually served in the army in far northeast India. The accompanying video excerpt of Rangan recounting his life story (Example 1 in the eCompanion) and the transcription below give an idea of the sound of Kota speech, shot through with many consonant clusters.

Rangan insisted on preparing his life story in advance rather than responding to an interview. My research assistant R. Kamatn sits to his right, responding attentively at the appropriate moments (the responder performs an important role in storytelling among the Kotas as in many cultures). All the untranslated responses mean roughly “yes” or “then what” and more generally “I’m listening.” The text begins just after Rangan describes being born, and the recording starts from the bolded words and ends at the underlined word.

#### **Excerpt from A. K. Rangan’s life story:**

**AKR:** alk enne mog vecko. mog vecvīlle, aṇ engicko? enne mupād mog āypīl| kārṁōrk parykm calckēmīrr ayk tūykir ōcīkmūd,

Then [she] gave birth to me. When [she] was giving birth to me, what did my father do? He said that when I became thirty [days old], they’d take me to Karamadai [temple on the plains] and fulfill a vow. So, it is said, they carried me there.

**RK:** cer

**AKR:** ayk oyṭke pūjm gīj̃m elm koṭṭk kev kutkōṛo id̃te, kev kuyṭiḷle kutilk enn viṛkīnāykṃūḍ

They said “we have to go there and perform a *puja* and everything and pierce his ears.” While piercing my ear, according to what they said, it wouldn’t pierce.

**RK:** e

**AKR:** ayk koṛikn kevatk ītr oygbaṭk, maykkir oygmūḍ. anmāyṭk añjīt, kutlk payḷad iṭ ītr vadko,

Then when they were removing the piercing instrument, I fell unconscious, they say. Then they became fearful because the piercing failed, and then they brought me home.

**RK:** cere

**AKR:** alk ītr vadṭke mm . . . anme itko. itrkveḍmēle, alk ān doḍa doḍa añj-ār varem āyko, alk ayn̄ inanm maṇḍn kirāp vecko. alle koṭ veykvōṛo, koṭ iḍmēle, naṛmaṇḍlike uṇck mīrn viṛkōṛo

So they came back and so that’s how it was. In the meantime I got bigger and bigger, reaching the age of five or six, then they cropped my hair. They were supposed to leave one tuft in the center with a little bit of hair [according to a custom related to receiving divine advice through an oracle],

**RK:** m micm pūrām mayṇḍr ōṛo

The rest should be shaved . . .

**AKR:** mayṇḍrkvōṛo. alk inm kirāp vecrkēḍbaṭk, am kōkāl janmele, aṛi, piṛi, “koṭ veyād, kōnātōn dākl kristvan dākl kirāp vecko” irr, ceriyāna pōrātṃ pōraṭṭ ūyrk,

Should be shaved . . . then when I was wearing the crop like this, the people of our village were punching me and grabbing me and saying “without keeping a tuft you’re wearing a crop like a Tamil plainsperson, like a Christian,” they fought fiercely and threw me out.

**RK:** cere

**AKR:** ad ayn̄ anme ēmāytr ad nālke naynke irre, ēmaytre vadk

Then my father deceived them, saying tomorrow or the day after he would [cut his own hair, leaving a little bit in the center, to make up for how he had his son’s hair cut].

**RK:** ceriya

**AKR:** alk eṅk pat varcm āyk alkī, tūj vāydyarayṇ tamīṅkdēnm kirāp veck, alk id entl galātāykūrdartm, kōkāl galātāykōre jāyt viṭiṭ taylṛkōro idtke . . .

And then I reached ten years of age, and the teacher Tuj also cropped his son's hair, which meant real trouble! In the village they said it would be necessary to outcaste [the ones who had had their hair cropped] . . .

Rangan is relatively quiet and subdued in the recording in comparison with most Kotas, who tend to speak in a more animated verbal style. However a close examination of the video reveals expressive hand gestures, referring to concrete objects (his ear, cropped head), the ends of sentences, thoughts, or moments in time (movements with distinct stops for closure), and more abstractly, the failure of the ear-piercing to work (a gesture outward from the chest). Rangan's manner of raising and lowering his fist is a common South Indian gesture used to ask questions—here, “why did you shave your head like a Tamil?” (it did not refer to the fighting).<sup>26</sup> Then at the end of the recording Rangan waves his hand in rhythmic coordination with the contour of his words, “ad aṇ anme ēmāytr ad . . .” All of these kinds of gestures are common to speaking, narrating, and singing the song genre *āṭl*.

Rangan describes a major event in the history of Kolmel village that had ramifications for the gods worshipped (modern versus ancient), the manner of conducting mortuary ceremonies (two or one, with or without bovine sacrifice), and what came to be perceived as a long-term rift in the village between its *māmūl* and *ocmūl* factions (Mandelbaum 1954:86). A. K. Rangan puts himself in the center of this story. By contrast, anthropologist David G. Mandelbaum narrated this moment in Kota history from the perspective of his main informant, Sulli (referred to above by his Kota name, Tuj), who situated himself as the major actor (Mandelbaum 1960:276).

The song sung by Rangan that we examine differs from most traditional (that is, *māmūl*) Kota songs in terms of its wide melodic range and its seemingly constant shifts in meter and rhythmic pattern. Based on my impression of the melody, and having identified film-song models for some of his other songs, I suspect this too was modeled on a film song. Kotas find some of Rangan's songs difficult to sing, producing results that come off as rhythmically and melodically meandering. The singer P. Kamatn, who died in the late 1990s, was considered a fine instrumentalist and singer. He and his sister Mādi (mother of R. Kamatn) both used to sing this song, but I haven't come across it otherwise. In general, Rangan would complain that people sang his songs incorrectly, but he could not remember how he used to sing them, nor had he committed the texts to writing. This leaves us in doubt about the orderliness of the “original” textual and musical parts of his influential compositions—if a stable original ever did exist (see Lord 1960:100 for a discussion of “originals” in oral performance). The first version of the song transcription shows the text as it would be spoken. Doubled consonants are pronounced individually, unlike in English. The text as sung is provided separately in a musical transcription.

<sup>26</sup> In the Tamil interrogative gesture, the thumb sticks straight up from the fist.

**“*Erdd tiglē*,” composed by A. K. Rangan and sung by P. Kamatn (May, 1992; consult the eCompanion, Example 2):**

**Refrain:**

erdd tiglē nīymn arḍg tiglē	O you shining moon, tell me
enālṇ oypd ālār ēdā?	Where is my husband headed?
arḍād oypd adecym ednā?	Why did he go without telling anyone?
erdd tiglē nīymn arḍg tiglē	O you shining moon, tell me

**Verse 1:**

āne andīrlil naylilk oygē	I go to play in the evening,
tiḡlē velpil āne ayāre vadmēl āgādām	in the moonlight, at a time
	you said it’s not good for me to go there

**Verse 2:**

alle nīye mañjuḷk uyktē	Then you hid in the mist
avn entk cēyṭṭ taḍīyē	and let him draw closer

**Verse 3:**

enayṇk anjṭ nī alāda cīmk oypiyo	Fearing my father, you’ve gone away somewhere
paṇm līlādn unaciṭ nī paridēcāyṭ oypiyo	Thinking you have no money, you’ve gone along
	like a beggar

**Verse 4:**

gav līlāde gaṇmog perpē	With the appearance of an unloved boy
arḍād oypd adecym ednā	Why did he go without telling anyone?

A wife asks the moon to identify the route on which her husband has embarked. She alludes to a tryst, when the moon hid in the mist so she could meet her lover under the cloud of darkness. *Ālṇ* means not only husband but any classificatory affine in the same generation as a Kota woman—that is, a Kota man with whom romantic relations would not be incestuous. So the lover *is* the *ālṇ*, but perhaps they haven’t been married. The boy-lover ran off in fear of the girl’s father, perhaps because, as a husband, he wouldn’t have had the money to support her. The feeling of alienation probably resonated with Rangan’s own experiences as an outcaste.

Certain prosodic features found here are common to all Kota songs. For instance, the phonemic distinction between long and short syllables is maintained rigorously, and consonant clusters are broken up a little bit by extending the release of each: for example, *erududu* and *arudugu* create space between the consonants in the clusters *d-d* and *d-g* in *erdd* and *arḍg*, respectively. More distinctive to modern Kota poetry, and likely borrowed from Tamil, is the use of rhythmically striking alliteration, consonance, and assonance to form internal rhymes and other parallelisms—and these parallelisms serve poetic functions (Jakobson 1960). In the refrain, for example, the shining of the moon is linked to the telling of the moon by the parallel sequence of vowel—liquid/flap-voiced consonant—voiced consonant: *erdd* and *arḍg*. The husband, his

route, and his “not telling” are all brought into poetic equation through the use of long *ā* vowels: *enāḷṇ*, *ālār*, and *ardād*. Notably missing is any kind of poetic meter; rather, the tune holds the text together and creates line breaks.

The melodic-rhythmic patterns alternate between duple and triple meters. The first line establishes a straightforward pattern of four units of six pulses based on the speed with which the syllables are uttered and the way they are accented. In the following notation, metric units are demarcated by slashes, and each pulse receives a syllable or a dot. The first line in each set indicates the scale degree in relation to the tonal center (taken as C). The second line indicates the text syllables, with vowels added to show how each one is articulated. Bold indicates dynamic accent, underline indicates word-beginnings, which receive stress in some positions more than others. Italics on the pitch positions indicate obvious points of metrical stress—such indications become more important in lines 2 and 3, where accents change. An asterisk indicates a position of metrical stress that does not correspond to a syllable articulation. As the first line is metrically ambiguous, only the first syllable of each six-pulse unit is italicized.

Each unit of six pulses can be heard as three sets of two. In this hearing, two units would be equivalent to a single 6/8 measure in Western staff notation. However, one can also hear each six-beat unit as 3 + 3 (over the 2 + 2 + 2 scheme). Many folksong types in South India, including some Kota women’s dance songs, maintain a steady two-against-three feel. In the text itself, both interpretations are supported: the position of *ti*, the first syllable of *tiḡl* (“moon”) in pulse position 5, reinforces an interpretation of each group of six pulses as 2 + 2 + 2. The word *ni* (“you”) in pulse 4 of the second set of six can support a 3 + 3 hearing, although *ni* is not strongly stressed.

As for the “color” of the musical articulations, the two halves of the first line (units 1 and 3) begin with the vowels [e] and [a]. In Tamil, Kota, and other Dravidian languages, the onset of [e] is a glide, indicated in the notation as “ye.” In the case of [a], the nasal from the previous word *nīymn* joins with it to yield “n\_a.” Both [e] and [a] return in transformed fashion in lines 2 and 3. As soft onsets, these vowels do not strongly emphasize metric units. By contrast, the [t] in *tiḡl*, as an unvoiced stop, is naturally harder and lends accentual force. The melodic line also reinforces the 2 + 2 + 2 grouping in the third unit, where the scale degree 3 $\flat$  is emphasized through upper and lower neighbors. The small melodic peak on *ti* in unit 3, pulse position 5, serves to reinforce its metric accent, and gives *ti* more rhythmic drive than in unit 1.

#### Key to notation:

	Unit X
Pulse positions (not labeled):	1 2 3 4 5 6
Scale degrees (in numbers):	/x x x x x x /
Syllables:	x x x x x x

**First line of “*erdd tige*,” as sung:**

Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
/7b 7b 7b 7b 7b 7b / 1 . . 1 1 2 / 3 4 3b 2 3b 1 / 1 . . . . .			
yer-də- də- də ti -gə -le . . ni-yu-mə- n_a - rə-də-gə ti-gu - le . . . . .			

The next line of the refrain reinforces the reading of each six-beat unit as two groups of three. The central units of lines 2 and 3 follow the 6 + 6 pulse duration set up in line 1, but only if we understand the extra syllables *ye* and *aṛə* as “pickup” notes, and *dā* and *nā* as downbeats of final units that are not fully realized. That is to say, the metric character of the singing is strongly active within the phrase but does not continue from phrase to phrase (cf. Foley 2002:33). Buddruss and Wiehler-Schneider note a similar phenomenon in their analysis of Wakhi songs from Hunza, Pakistan, where extra syllables are accommodated not by singing them more quickly, but by expanding the period, adding extra beats if necessary (1978:108).<sup>27</sup> I’ve found this to be more characteristic of Kota songs than Wakhi ones, especially if they are not accompanied by a time-keeping instrument.

**Lines 2 and 3 of the refrain with extra syllables framing the two-unit core:**

Unit 1	Unit 2
1 / 1 . 5 5 . 5 / 5 6b 5 * 3 2 / 3	
ye - n_a - ləṇ woy - pə / d_a - lā - r_e - / dā . . . . .	
1 2 / 3b 4 * . 3b 2 / 1 2 3 2 2 1 / 1 . . . . .	
a-ṛə- dā - - d woy-pə- d_a-de-cy-mə - n_e-də - nā?	

The syllable *yen*, meaning “my,” that precedes the first syllable of unit 1 is, sensibly, an anacrusis to the strong beat on *ālṇ* “husband.” Most of the words in lines 2 and 3 beginning with vowels, including *ālṇ*, are sung from the final consonant of the previous word (indicated as above with an undertie ). The word-initial [o] in *oypd* has a bilabial glide, making the sound *wo*. The complex duple metric feel in line 2 is supported by word-initial consonants or vowels on three of the four strong beats, positions 1 and 4. The syllable *r\_e* (unit 2, position 5), which is offset by a pulse, allows *dā*, the end of the question word, to fall on a strong beat. Unit 2 can also

<sup>27</sup> “Der Text einer Strophe bewirkt dann eine deutliche Variantenbildung, wenn seine Silbenzahl nicht mit der für das Versschema ungefähren Norm übereinstimmt. In der 2. und 4. Strophe des 1. Liedes hat Phrase A 1 eine Silbe mehr als in den anderen Strophen. Um diese überzählige Silbe unterzubringen, wird der sonst etwa drei Achtel lange Abschlußton unterteilt, in der 2. Strophe als Viertel + Achtel, in der 4. Strophe als Achtel + Achtel. Die gesamte Zeitdauer kann sich bei einer solchen Unterteilung durchaus verändern. Es scheint, als wird nicht so sehr nach dem divisiven, sondern mehr nach dem additiven Prinzip verfahren, indem der Grundsatz als metrisches Element beibehalten und die auf Grund der Silbenzahl erforderliche Anzahl an Tönen aneinandergereiht wird. Reicht die in den anderen Strophen aufgestellte normative Zeitdauer nicht aus, wird sie so weit verlängert, bis alle Silben untergebracht sind” (Buddruss and Wiehler-Schneider 1978:108).

be heard as 2 + 2 + 2 with each syllable lasting two pulses, driving forward to the strong beat on *dā*. The metric shift corresponds to the singer's wondering about the route (*ālār*) her husband (*ālñ*) is traveling (*oypd*).

Line 3 is a melodic answer to the question posed in line 2, resolving the third scale degree to the first. The pickup syllables are the stem of the verb “to say” (*ar-*). The strong beat at the beginning of unit 1 is a verbal ending expressing negation, meaning, here, “without informing anyone.” The extended syllable [*ā*] and the word following it, *oypd*, give the impression that the rhythmic pattern of line 2 will be repeated. But this turns out to be an illusion, as *woy* falls on pulse position 5 (not 4, as in line 2), and initiates a very clear pattern of alternating stresses. This reinforces the metric feel of both units as 2 + 2 + 2. In line 2 the woman is wondering where her husband is, whereas in line 3 she is asking a rhetorical question—the move from tension to resolution in the music is justified textually because of the enunciative force of the rhetorical question.

Listening with the principles laid out above in mind, the song is musically a set of melodic questions and answers, at different pitch registers, with one line of the pair favoring a two-against-three feel and the other emphasizing regular alternation of strong and weak beats (2 + 2 + 2 for each unit). The structure of the verses is as follows:

Verse 1: Line 1, Tune A, question, 2 + 2 + 2 feel

Line 2, Tune B, answer, two-against-three feel

Verse 2: Line 1, Tune C (lower in tessitura), question, two-against-three feel

Line 2, Tune D, answer, 2 + 2 + 2 feel

Verse 3: Same structure as Verse 1, using tunes A and B

Verse 4: Same structure as Verse 2, using tunes C and D

To summarize, the melody in this song holds together and reinforces poetic aspects of the text. The relationship between the text per se and the song as sung is not one of perfect conformity. The singer uses a couple of melodic ideas and structuring principles to create coherency for lines that otherwise vary in syllable length. Each line is separated by a pause that is not accounted for in terms of an overall musical meter, but on its own, each line has a metric feel. Among the reasons for this are the pickup notes, which reinforce the sense of meter within the lines but not between them. That focal meter consists of two sets of six pulses, divided into pulse groupings of two or three. The flow of the song is animated by these two different ways of dividing units of six pulses, and is held together by the repetition of verse melodies and the use of a refrain.

Āt!

In the *āt!*, or Kota song of grief, a flexible tune creates continuity from line to line, even when those lines vary considerably in length. The metric variation in the *āt!* and the degree to



which the singer may use her own words is greater than in the more strictly (and complexly) composed modern songs of A. K. Rangan and others. Generally, to refer to more regular metric songs (*pāṭ*), Kotas use the related verbal form for singing, *pār-/pāc-*.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Kotas tend to use different verbs for the *āṭṭ*. One verb, which means “to render a tune vocally or instrumentally,” *et-/eyt-*, has non-musical meanings that include “picking up and carrying,” “putting hands together in salutation,” and “building a house.” According to my observation, “rendering” involves the performer’s on-the-spot negotiation between several components of a performance—which leads to considerable variation. In the *āṭṭ*, the singer negotiates the song by fitting her mental image of a story into the textual and melodic mold of an *āṭṭ*. In the case of instrumental music, the shawm player makes the melody fit the drum pattern and vice-versa (the process is not always straightforward). *Āṭṭs* also have a related verb, *ār-/āc-*, meaning to speak or move (and, in other contexts, dance)—and this makes some sense, as the singer tells a story, sometimes with gestures.

The *āṭṭ* employs stereotypical forms of address and often refers to the deceased as one who didn’t heed sensible advice. The causes of the death are generally inferred, not told—the sorcery of a neighboring tribe being the proximate cause, perhaps brought into actuality by a wild animal or an illness. The song may be as short as about a minute or as long as about ten. Longer songs will likely narrate a series of place names and events that track the path of the subjects as they meet their fate. Shorter songs do not tell stories so much as allude to them; but even the longer ones seldom provide all the information needed to follow the underlying story, and thus rely on a paramusical tradition of storytelling to be fully understood.

*Āṭṭs* are not technically what many scholars call laments, in the sense of spontaneous, tuneful expressions of grief at the side of a corpse. Kotas call the latter “crying” (*agl*). Rather, *āṭṭs* are songs composed by particular people in response to particular events, and their styles are sometimes inspired by funeral lamentation. However, just because *āṭṭs* are particular, composed songs does not mean that they are performed the same way each time, nor does it mean that the singer is responding to the same event originally alluded to in the song. Rather, unless the singer is the composer and is thinking about her own life tragedies, she sings for aesthetic enjoyment and to pass the time, alone or with others. The singer may, in singing, both evoke and pacify her own pain and fear. Unlike most of the named Kota musical genres, *āṭṭs* have no ritual context.

In December of 2019 I traveled to the Nilgiris and initiated a survey of current Kota singing practices with an eye toward changes over the last thirty years. Kotas are apparently singing many of the same songs as they were in the early 1990s, as well as composing new songs; the new wave of composition brought on by A. K. Rangan more than forty years ago is still strong. *Āṭṭs* are still being sung even though some of these point to situations that are no longer so relevant to young people (such as the imminent threat of wild-animal attack). *Āṭṭ* singing styles are out of keeping with the song styles currently popular in South India. Even in 1991 I was struck by the perspectives of a young male musician, who criticized the *āṭṭ* because

---

<sup>28</sup> *The Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* (Burrow and Emeneau 1984) does not include this version of the verb in entry 4065, which suggests to me that the verb might have been created on the analogy of the Tamil headword, *pāṭu*, *pāṭi*, subsequent to Emeneau’s fieldwork in the late 1930s.

of its cut-up articulation and offered the smooth continuity of film songs as a favorable alternative.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 10. Kotas were valued guides for British colonial hunting expeditions. This photo was displayed prominently in the home of a religious officiant in Kurgoj village (reproduced by the author, December, 2019).

The *ātṭi* discussed below, arguably the most famous, is associated with several distinct stories and has been adopted into the instrumental repertoire for funerals.<sup>30</sup> The version on the accompanying video (Example 4 in the eCompanion) shares both the story and the melody with one recorded by the Gramophone Company of Calcutta under the auspices of the Linguistic Survey of India in 1922 (Gramophone Company of Calcutta n.d.; Gravely 1927:30-31; consult the eCompanion, Example 3).

A corrected transcription of the 1922 recording appears below, followed by the printed version from 1927. The singer probably dictated the words of the song to the fieldworker and likely a Tamil-speaking assistant. This dictation seems to be the basis of the printed version, for it omits many sung details and adds lines not present in the recording. I have transcribed the sung version in tristichs corresponding to the melodic strophes.

<sup>29</sup> See Wolf 2000/2001:161 for a description of the kind of disarticulation common in *ātṭis*.

<sup>30</sup> For a case study using this *ātṭi*, see Wolf 1997:360-84 and 2000/2001:160-64. See also my more general treatment of *ātṭis* in Wolf 2000/2001 and 2005:59-63 and *passim*.

**“Kōṭa. Song:—Story of Mathi.” 1922 version, as sung (consult the eCompanion, Example 3):**

1	la la la la la . . la la la . . la la . . a la la la a la la	
2	ēṭk ōkōme Māydē iḡre Māydē ōkēḡmēle Māydē	“Let’s go (collect) reeds, Mādi!” having said (that), Mādi while going, Mādi
3	pīc aḡal āyko Māydē vīdīke Māydē ōkēḡmēle Māydē	a cat crossed, Mādi the path from the house, Mādi while going, Mādi
4	nāy aḡal āyko Māydē ayo yanga Māydē enekēno Māydē?	a dog crossed (the path), Mādi Woe, younger sister Mādi! What to say, Mādi?
5	Kārgālke Māydē ōkēḡmēle Māydē kāk aḡal āyko Māydē	To Kārgāl (a place in Ticgār village), Mādi while going, Mādi a crow crossed (the path)
6	ayo yanga Māydē inekēnego Māydē? enangne Māydē?	Woe, younger sister Mādi! What to say, girl? <sup>31</sup> Mādi My younger sister Mādi
7	oḡ alāde aṇe mūnde aṇe cagnme āyko aṇe	“Not one, elder brother three, elder brother there were three omens, brother
8	tirgirkōme aṇe iḡmēleke Māyde nīyāne Māyde	Let’s turn around and go back, elder brother” When you said that, Mādi I said, “you Mādi”
9	tirigūḡigo Māyde ānāne Māyde ojāle Māyde	“You turn around, Mādi” “I, myself,” Mādi “alone,” Mādi
10	oyte Māyde vakēnego Māyde iḡīḡle Māyde	“Will go,” Mādi “And come [back to the village],” Mādi At the time of saying this, Mādi

---

<sup>31</sup> -go is a suffix used for addressing a female. It’s not a meaningful variation here.

- |    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
| 11 | paṛdgēne Māyde<br>iḍmēleke Māyde<br>aṇōr īṛāle Māyde | I said [this], Mādi<br>And while I was saying it, Mādi [said:]<br>“The two of us, brother and sister [will go together],” Mādi |
| 12 | oyte Māyde<br>itlārēne Māyde<br>eridire Māyde        | I will not go [alone], [said] Mādi<br><br>“I’m afraid,” [said Mādi]  |
| 13 | vakēḍmēlē Māyde<br>kōkālekē Māyde<br>vakēḍmēlē Māyde | While coming back, Mādi<br>To the village, Mādi<br>While coming back   |
| 14 | ananm ala aṇē<br>poraṇjeke aṇē<br>āype aṇē           | “It’s not like that, elder brother”<br>“I have to go ‘outside,’ brother”   |
| 15 | iḍre Māyde<br>paṛdgēn iḍmēl Māyde<br>ayo yanga Māyde | so said Mādi<br>while I was telling her, Mādi<br>Woe, younger sister Mādi  |

30 GRAMOPHONE RECORDS

[No. 124 A.K.]

KŌŦA.

SONG:—STORY OF MATHI.

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A BROTHER AND HIS SISTER.

Brother:—Lalale lalale edago  
*Meaning less song expressions reeds*  
 hōkom mādē pīs adaleiko  
*let us go girl cat crossed*  
 vidiga ōked mele mādē  
*street crossing after girl*  
 nāi adaleiko mādē  
*dog crossed girl*  
 karkl ōked mele mādē  
*place crossing after girl*  
 kākṽ adaleiko mādē  
*crow crossed girl*

Sister:—Odllade anṇe mūdu  
*Not one elder brother three*  
 sāṽunu aiko anṇe  
*omens occurred elder brother*  
 tirugulukōme anṇe.  
*turn back elder brother.*

Brother:—Anumālla mādē  
*Not so girl*  
 nīyṽm tirugulo mādē  
*you go back girl*  
 edage mādē  
*reeds (flute) girl*  
 otridu mādē  
*carrying girl*  
 vaged Mele mādē  
*return after girl*  
 pēiluke mādē  
*to house girl*  
 vadduḍude mādē  
*after coming girl*

GRAMOPHONE RECORDS 31

tattonale mādē  
*died girl*  
 aiyo enga mādē  
*alas sister girl*  
 ũk ēnako mādē.  
*thus done girl.*

## TRANSCRIPT IN TAMIL.

லா லா லா—எட்டகே  
 ஒக்கோம் மாதே பீஸ் அட்டலாய்க்கோ  
 கீழ்க்கே ஒகேட் மெலை மாதே  
 காய் அட்டலாய்க்கோ மாதே.  
 காகால் ஒகேட் மெலை மாதே  
 காக் அட்டலாய்க்கோ மாதே  
 ஒட்டலாதே அண்ணை மூடு  
 சாயன் ஆய்க்கோ அண்ணை  
 திருகுலை கோமே அண்ணை  
 அது மெலுமல்ல மாதே  
 கீழும் திருகுலை மாதே  
 வட்டகே மாதே  
 ஒத்திடுமாதே வக்கட் மெலை மாதே  
 பயிலுக்கே மாதே வத்திட்டுதே மாதே  
 தத்தோ கானோ மாதே ஐயோ அங்கா மாதே  
 ஈக் எனக்கோ மாதே.

## TRANSLATION.

Two persons, brother and sister prepared to go out, when a cat crossed their path, then a dog crossed, and then a crow. Seeing this the sister remarked, "not one, but three bad omens did we come across, let us return." The brother did not agree, saying she might go if she cared. They attended to their work and returned home with the girl carrying reeds. On reaching home she died.

Fig. 11. "KōŦa. Song:—Story of Mathi." 1922 version as printed (Gravely 1927:30-31).

The text printed with the 1922 recording (Gravely 1927:30-31) describes the journey of a girl and her brother, who meet three animals identified as bad omens. When they return home, the girl dies. The song as recorded on gramophone record (Example 3 in the eCompanion) is clearly rehearsed and more tidy than one tends to find now, and the printed text exaggerates this orderliness. Several key features of the *āt!* are left out of the 1927 published transcription even though they are present in the recording: address of the deceased with terms of endearment (here, "my younger sister"), and rhetorical expressions of futility—here, "what to say?" This version, even as sung, is unusual in explicitly identifying the animals crossing the path as bad omens. Singers will sometimes insert the names of other animals—which suggests that, at least for some, the animals are not really serving as omens at all. The animals may serve as variables that can be augmented or substituted according to the imagination of the singer and provide content to propel the melody onward. The theme of the girl telling the boy that this trip is not a good idea fits with the theme of blame common to many *āt!*s. In this case, Mādi warns her brother of what turns out to be grave danger.

The opening events in my 2019 recording conform to those of the song a century before, with a cat and a porcupine crossing the path. An element of the story normally not sung but told

or explained separately, involves Mādi going off into the reed forest to defecate. Normally the euphemism “go outside” is used in Kota, although direct reference to defecation is perfectly acceptable in everyday speech.<sup>32</sup> Maṇimāla made the act of defecation explicit in her 2019 rendering with a laugh, perhaps to clarify the meaning for the small children present. In the 1922 recording, Mādi refuses to go back to the village all by herself. She tells her brother on the way back, “I have to go outside,” and that’s all. No explicit reference to her death. Listeners are supposed to fill in the rest from their knowledge of the story. The 2019 recording provides quite a bit more detail than the 1922 recording, as actually sung.

**Mādi āṭṭ, as sung by Maṇimāla, age 55, Kurgoj village (December 22, 2019; consult the eCompanion, Example 4):**

1	enavā māyde, enkēna māyde, la la la, la la, li li lo, li lo	O mother Mādi, what to say?
2	āne vārādidēn vadī, vēḍārāme enāde, ammā nī māyde	I told you not to come out but you did  Mother, Mādi
3	paylene vārādi, pice kurke iṭo, vārādī idēna, vadiyo, māyde	“Don’t come out of the house” a cat crossed the path I told you not to come out You came anyway, Mādi
4	la la le la le . . . li li lo li li lo . . . kalavāleke vadī ammā vārā iḍe muḷgōyte kuruke, iḍtirā ammā	You came into the yard, I said not to A porcupine crossed the path
5	mayde <sup>33</sup> vēḍa dēnā vadī, la la la . . la le . . li li lo . . li lo . .	Mādi I said don’t, but you came

<sup>32</sup> The everyday word for “shit” used here, *kipās*, is also one of the many humorous nicknames Kotas use. The “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” printed immediately following “Kōṭa. Song:—Story of Mathi” in the Gravely anthology (1927:32-35), is attributed to “Kippas.”

<sup>33</sup> The singer melds the end of the previous strophe with the peak pitch of the next one—hence the lone word in the first line of this stanza.

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| 6   | arikōṭeke onāmā,<br>ay enene kurk itida<br>vēṭa dēnene,<br>ammā māyde             | When you went to Arikot<br>I crossed your path there<br>and said, don't!<br>mother Mādi  |
| 7   | enavā māyde<br>enkēnā māyde <sup>34</sup>   | My mother Mādi,<br>what to say?  |
| 8   | ayk mallāre oygo,<br>ayke oyte ammā,<br>porañjāre kipāc okvem                     | You went into the bamboo forest<br>having gone there, mother,<br>[you said] "I'm going to take a poop"                           |
| (At this point, the singer laughs, and a female listener makes a sound of affirmation and encouragement.) |   |  |
| 9   | kipāck okvē<br>paṛdiya amma<br>dūrtk vēṭa<br>otikene ūrvere                       | "I'm going to take a poop"<br>you said, mother.<br>"Don't go far"  |
| 10  | paṛidēne ammā<br>mantekēlāde, oygiyā<br>ennavā māyde                              | I told you, mother<br>You went without listening<br>my mother, Mādi  |
| 11  | eṛēne aṇḍire<br>vadoma māyde<br>paykene vadamā                                    | After picking reeds<br>we came, Mādi<br>we came home   |
| 12  | porañjekepere oygiya,<br>enavvēne māyde<br>enekēnā māyde                          | You "went outside"<br>My mother Mādi<br>what to say, Mādi?   |
| 13  | andelāyṛēne vadiṭe<br>porañjike aype aṇē dī,<br><br>enavva māyde<br>enekēna māyde | Having come back in the evening<br>You said, "elder brother, my menses have started"<br><br>My mother Mādi<br>what to say, Mādi? |
| 14  | nāl uṇāyṛe vadēne,<br>ammā enave māyde,<br>vaḍāme tēlvalke                        | I came the next morning<br>my mother Mādi<br>when I came to the menstrual hut  |

---

<sup>34</sup> Only the first half of the melody is sung here. The melody starts again in the next stanza.

- |    |  |  |
|----|--|--|
| 15 | kākvālēne id jāma<br>enave māyde<br>enīne vitīte | At cockcrow<br>my mother Mādi<br>you left me |
| 16 | kaṛdiviyā māyde<br>enavvanī māyde                | You departed<br>my mother Mādi               |

\*

The 2019 rendition of the *āṭṭ* presents the brother telling Mādi not to go far off but Mādi going anyway, “without heeding advice.” “One who doesn’t heed advice” is a formulaic form of address in the *āṭṭ* that presages events to follow. In this case, Mādi is violated by a member of another tribe, one universally feared in the Nilgiris as sorcerers. In other stories, the victim is impaled on the tusks of a wild board, trampled by a bison, or torn apart by a panther or a tiger. The listener knows that when the girl is alone, something bad will happen.

Mādi then returns home and says she has started to menstruate (expressed as “become outside”) and goes to the place in the village reserved for menstruation and childbirth. At dawn next morning, Mādi is found there, dead. Instead of saying that Mādi is dead, the song says that she “left” and “departed” (lit. “crossed over”)—to the world of the dead.

Thanks to the recording sponsored by the Linguistic Survey of India, we know that this song’s basic melody has been in circulation since at least 1922.<sup>35</sup> The arrangement of text into units of the melody, however, varies considerably. On the 1922 recording, a complete iteration of the tune consisted of three phrases, with up to six syllables corresponding to the six main pulses of the tune (in a few places an extra syllable is inserted). Each line ends with the addressee, either Mādi or the elder brother, and this textual repetition combined with the placement of the addressee within the structure of the tune creates and fulfills the listener’s expectations. These expectations are set up in the very structure of vocables at the start of the 1922 recording, with five or six *la* syllables distributed over eight beats (rests and sustained notes indicated with dots, underlines indicating double speed):

**Vocable structure and text structure of Example 3, compared:**

la la la la la la . . (six syllables)

la la la . la la . . a (3 + 2 syllables, with a melisma on the third and an articulatory [a])

la la la a-a la la . . (same as above, but two double-time articulatory [a] vowels after the third *la*)

---

<sup>35</sup> Usually the text to this song (meaning the text and story) remains attached to this very melody; however, in the fieldnotes of David Mandelbaum, I found a description of this story linking it to a different melody (Wolf 1997:362; Mandelbaum fieldnotes (n.d.), song 27 and cylinder 22; this recording is archived as part of Mandelbaum 1938). As of 1992 I had collected four versions of the present song melody attached to this story, and sixteen more examples with different texts/stories, adding up to a total of six stories (Wolf 1997:363-64). Since then I have heard more versions of the song than I can count. Instrumental versions of this tune exist as well. This is significant, because instrumental versions of songs are rare among the Kotas. The tonal system of the double-reed doesn’t conform well to the Kota system of singing, which is generally diatonic.



ēṭk ō-kō-mə Māy-dē . . (six syllables)

i-ḍi-re . Māy-dē . . (3 + 2 syllables, with a melisma on the third)

ō-*kēde*-mē-le Māy-dē . . (same as above, but two double-time syllables in position 2 (in italics))

Unlike our previous example, with its many instances of assonance and alliteration, the parallelisms in this example tend to be exact repetitions of words or phrases. A rare exception is in line 5, where the word *Kār-ə-gā-lā-ke* (“to Kārgāl”) appears in the expected position of the words *aḍal ayko* (“crossing happened”), deferring the latter phrase to the third line of the tristich.

Although the 1922 rendition sounds highly polished and regular, the logical boundaries for segments of content do not always conform to the boundaries of the tristich. For example, in stanzas 7-10, the content would suggest sets of four and three lines rather than sets of three:

**Mādi addresses her brother, “bad omens, let’s go home”:**

oḍ alāde aṇe	“Not one, elder brother
mūṇde aṇe	three, elder brother
cagṇme āyko aṇe	there were three omens, brother
tirgirkōme aṇe	Let’s turn around and go back, elder brother”

**Brother responds, “you go home”:**

iḍmēleke Māyde	When you said that, Mādi
nīyāne Māyde	I said, “you Mādi
tiriguḷigo Māyde	You turn around, Mādi”

**Brother tells Mādi what he proposes to do, “I’ll collect the reeds and come home”:**

ānāne Māyde	“I, myself,” Mādi
oḷāle Māyde	“alone,” Mādi
oyte Māyde	“Will go,” Mādi
vakēnego Māyde	“And come [back to the village],” Mādi

The fact that micro-level beginnings and endings provided by the three-line musical unit do not match up with the beginnings and endings of narrative units does not seem to be an issue for Kotas.

In the 2019 recording, the syllable counts in each line vary considerably more than in the 1922 recording. There are two main variations of the tune, one with three phrases and one with four phrases; occasionally Maṇimāla will sing just the two first phrases that both versions hold in common. The third phrase of the 1922 recording corresponds to the fourth phrase of the 2019 recording.

In the following outline of rhythm and melody in the 2019 recording, the note durations and/or rests are indicated with dots (as above), but a comma is added to indicate breaths and pauses between lines. (These are more substantial than the pauses we heard between the lines of

A. K. Rangan’s song and those in the 1922 recording of this song.) Underscoring is used to indicate a doubling of speed.

**First stanza of “Māyde” *āṭṭ*, transcribed (consult the eCompanion, Example 4):**

/ 1 4 4 3 2 5 . . /  
yen av-vā māy-de,

/ 4 4 5 4 3 2 1 . 2 /  
ye-ne- kē- na māy -de . .

/ 1 3 2 . 2 1 . 2 , /  
la la la . la lo . . ,

/ 1 3 2 . 2 1 . . /  
li li lo . li lo . .

Despite a rough start, Maṇimala presents the four-phrase musical structure of her version of the *āṭṭ* right at the outset—two lines with words, two lines with vocables.<sup>36</sup> The lines present metric variations on the basic tune, one tending toward a seven-beat phrase and one tending toward an eight-beat one. In the first stanza, Maṇimāla introduces the text using seven-beat phrases but completes the strophe with eight-beat phrases on vocables. The seven-beat line is characteristic of the version of this *āṭṭ* in Kurgōj village (where the song was recorded and Maṇimāla lives), and I will call it the “model” version. Versions in other villages tend to employ straightforward eight-beat lines. Compare the rhythm of Maṇimāla’s “model” version with that of the 1922 version (beats are numbered above the syllables):

**Comparison of seven- and eight-beat first lines in Examples 3 and 4:**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (8)  
yen av-vā māy-de . . 2019 recording

ēṭk ō- kō- mō Māy- dē . . 1922 recording

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (8)  
yene kē na māy- de . . 2019 recording  
i- ḍi-re . Māy- dē . . 1922 recording

<sup>36</sup> The beginning of the recording was interrupted because the singer was uncomfortable with the sound of her voice, causing her to pause a few times. You can hear another singer join in after the first line, and then Maṇimāla starts again, completing the tune on the vocables *la*, *li*, and *lo*.

The word *Māyde*, along with its melodic contour, appears in beats 4-5 in the model version (2019) and in beats 5-6 in the 1922 version. Because this difference leads to a seven-versus eight-beat line, the song feels very different. This baseline difference between the two versions has relevance for this *āt!* in general, but there are many other possibilities for stretching and compressing the melody.

**Stanza 2 of Example 4, transcribed:**

/ 1 4 4 4 4 4 2 5 . . 4 , / eleven beats

ā-ne vā-rā-di-dēn va-dī . . . ,

4 / 4 5 43 21 21 1 1 . 2 / nine beats (preceded by a vocalization on [a])

a vē-dā-rā-me ye- nā-de . .

/ 1 3 2 . , 1 2 1 . 2 , / eight beats (with an internal pause and vocalization on [a])

am-mā nī . , a māy-de . . ,

In the first line of this tristich, the formerly seven-beat melody extends over eleven beats to accommodate the extra syllables. I suspect that Maṇimāla prefixed the word “ān,” meaning “I,” to the line—this was unnecessary because the verb was conjugated for the first person.<sup>37</sup> Had she not, the melody would have conformed melodically and rhythmically to the model (that is, *vā-rā-di-dēn va dī* . = seven beats). These kinds of prolongation don’t seem to bother anyone, so my “correction” is merely theoretical.<sup>38</sup>

In the second line of the tristich, Maṇimāla begins by briefly intoning [a]. Such onsets are stylistic markers peculiar to the *āt!*, and they create the discontinuity alluded to in the musician’s comment above. Once the words start, the sung unit is still a little bit longer than the model, owing to a prolongation of the tonic on the word *yenāde*. This three-syllable word could have been replaced with the name of the addressee, *Māyde*, the word that typically appears in the line-final position in this song. As a two-syllable word, it would have kept the metric model intact (see, for example, Wolf 2000/2001:163-64). The third line falls within the model and ends with a rise to the second degree—which usually cues a fourth line that returns to the tonic. Here the third line is left (musically) hanging, and the next stanza begins.

As Maṇimāla warms up, she starts stanza 3, a quatrain, in close accordance with the model. The first line occupies seven beats and the second, eight beats:

<sup>37</sup> The *e* added to *ān* is a form of emphasis, and in general, vowels are added in singing.

<sup>38</sup> As Albert Lord cautioned, “we must be content with the texts that we have and not endeavor to ‘correct’ or ‘perfect’ them in accordance with a purely arbitrary guess at what the original might have been” (Lord 1960:100). In this case, I have heard enough versions of the song to consider plausible alternatives that more closely approximate the normative metrical structures. It is not a guess about an “original.”

**Stanza 3, line 1, from Example 4, transcribed:**

/ 1 4 4 32 5 . 4 , /  
 pay-le-ne vā - rā . dī ,

/ 4 5 4 3 2-1 2 1 . 2 , /  
 pi-ce ku-ru-ke i to . . ,

This time she completes both parts of the second half of the melody as well, but in both cases prolongs the melody by several pulses.

Throughout the song, the singer draws on one melodic idea with two basic templates consisting of seven-beat or eight-beat lines. But she is not bound by these metric frames. She simply tells the story, inserting here and there formulae and motives that are specific to the *āt!* genre. The result is a song that unfolds flexibly in time, as if reproducing the process of remembering—a process of recounting rather than reciting. I can't be sure if this halting cadence of performance was one of the elements, along with Maṇimāla's appreciated vocal tone, that led all those present to praise her. Indeed outside the frame of the camera, several women were weeping as Maṇimāla sang. They could not have been crying over the anonymous Mādi depicted in this old song (Mādi is the generic name of all Kota females), but might have been weeping for something in themselves, perhaps touched by the sensitivity and beauty with which Maṇimāla sang.

\*

What can we say about this poem-song and its role vis-à-vis Kota as an endangered language? Sir George Grierson, the British officer in charge of the Linguistic Survey of India, recommended the documentation project in 1918 in part “to form valuable records of languages which are liable to change, and which in future years may be extinct” (Gravely 1927:3).<sup>39</sup> In fact, these recordings and their transcriptions have not been readily available to Kotas, except when I played for them the cassette copies I'd made from an antique gramophone in the Madras Museum in 1991-92. While the printed text could potentially have been helpful (and it is now available digitally), it was completely inadequate as a documentation of the poem-song; rather, like the English “translation” at the end, it was a summary of an ideal-type of the song. And it left out almost every single marker of the performance: it lacked indication of where grammatical or melodic lines began and ended, and the characteristic features of the genre, as sung, were not represented. The recording is a valuable documentation of one performance in the past, but the project has not directly aided the Kotas in preserving their language. Rather the persistence of the tune and the formulaic nature of the *āt!* have allowed and encouraged a form of transmitting stories—and in more generalized terms, a way to give voice to emotion—that is unique to the Kota language.

---

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Linguistic Survey of India as a colonial project, see Majeed 2019a and 2019b.

### *Wakhi Songs*

This section considers what melodic and poetic features consistently make up Wakhi poem-songs, how individuals can be creative with these forms, and what kinds of variation typically occur. Wakhis consider *bulbuliks* quintessential examples of their verbal-musical art. Beginning with *bulbuliks*, in light of our discussion of *āṭls*, we proceed to the more general category of Wakhi poem-songs called *bayds*, examining how individual instances transcend genre boundaries and/or challenge conventions.

### Бульбулик

In their classic study of the Wakhi language published in 1976, Aleksandr Leonovich Griunberg and I. M. Steblin-Kamenskii preface their collection of 56 *bulbuliks* with these observations (1976a:23):

Only one genre of actual Wakhi poetic folklore remains—that of the small-song *bul'bulik*, consisting of three lines that rhyme according to the scheme a-b-a. The refrain *bəlbəlik tar nolam* or *bəlbəl tar nolam*, “I sing the *bul'bulik* to you,” is common to all *bul'buliks*. *Bul'bulik* is a specifically female type of folklore. Women sing *bul'bulik* in the summers, standing on the edge of a hill, facing the village and plugging their ears with their fingers.<sup>40</sup>

Steblyin-Kamenskii revises this interpretation of the refrain in his *Etymological Dictionary of the Wakhi Language*, writing that it can also mean “I sing to you *as* a nightingale” (Steblyin-Kamenskii 1999:107; emphasis mine). The source of this oft repeated earlier interpretation of the refrain may have been S. I. Klimchitskii’s 1936 publication, “Wakhi Texts,” in which twelve songs are identified as *bulbuliks*.<sup>41</sup> In 1965, Tatiana Nikolaevna Pakhalina (1928-1995) collected examples of *bulbulik* sung by women and girls aged seventy-six, eighteen, and fifteen. This was in Vrang, now the administrative center of Wakhan in Tajikistan. Pakhalina mentions nothing of a refrain and calls the poems “tristich song texts” (Pakhalina 1973 and 1975).<sup>42</sup> The

---

<sup>40</sup> “По сути дела сохранился лишь один жанр собственно ваханского поэтического фольклора. Это жанр короткой песенки бульбулик, состоящей из трёхстишия, рифмуемого по схеме аба и припева: Bəlbəlik ta-r nōlam или bəlbəl ta-r nōlam ‘Я пропою тебе бульбулик,’ общего для всех бульбуликов.

Бульбулик является специфически женским видом фольклора. Женщины поют бульбулики на летовках, встав на краю склона, обратившись лицом к селению и заткнув пальцами уши” (Griunberg and Steblin-Kamenskii 1976a:23).

<sup>41</sup> He wrote that each three-line strophe is followed by the refrain, “*būlbūlik tār nōlām ē*,” which he translates as “I sing the nightingale song to you” (Klimchitskii 1936:89). The most prominent scholar and native speaker of Wakhi, Bogsho Lashkarbekov, also translates the refrain as “I sing the nightingale song to you” (1972:144), although he writes it “*wuz bulbyl tar nolām e*,” beginning with the word “I,” which I have never heard sung.

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, in her 1973 samples, which are more extensive than those in her 1975 book, Pakhalina (1973:176) omits an outlier for rhyme in Wakhi—a case where the first line ended with *uč* and the third with *əšk*. In an edited volume entitled, *Problems in Oriental Versification*, one might expect this to have been included as a “problem.” No other example in Pakhalina’s later, 1975, publication was left out of the earlier one.

only version of a refrain containing the word “nightingale” (*bɪlbɪl*) I have encountered during fieldwork has been “*bɪlbɪl tar noləm*,” “[I] the nightingale, sing to you,” or more accurately, “lament to you,” which is what nightingales are said to do. Sometimes other refrains are used, and in some places no refrain is used at all (particularly in Afghanistan).<sup>43</sup>



Fig. 12. *Bɪlbɪlik* singers near upper pasture above Yur village, Afghanistan. They are facing the author, but would normally be facing the other direction (photo by Katherine Freeze, July, 2016).

I find it peculiar, in the first interpretation of the refrain, that Wakhis would think it necessary to state the name of the genre they are performing. In the case of an extreme variant performance—we shall examine one—the common refrain could serve as an argument that, “Yes, believe it or not, this is a *bɪlbɪlik*.” But in the vast majority of cases, Wakhis know that the singer is singing a *bɪlbɪlik*, and those who do not know the Wakhi language would not understand the refrain anyway. One might say the refrain performs the function of “finalization”: marking the end of one woman’s utterance and creating a space for taking turns (Bakhtin 1986:76-81). The second interpretation of the refrain frames the performance as a mimesis of the prototypical *nightingale*, familiar not only in the wider Persian literary world, but also, since

<sup>43</sup> Hiromi Lorraine Sakata made recordings in Afghan Wakhan in 1972, including example 31 in her book *Music in the Mind* (2002:164). She was kind enough to share all her recordings from that field visit, and none of the *bɪlbɪliks* on the recording had refrains.

ancient Greece, in the West and beyond.<sup>44</sup> The nightingale continuously laments, each song different from the last.

As several variant refrains exist in the performance of *bılbylık* today, variations may have been even more common in the past, crystalizing into a favored one over time. This would have happened by the early 1930s, or at least by the time Klimchitskiĭ conducted research for his 1936 publication—the first collection of *bılbylık* and the first mention of the refrain of which I’m aware (Klimchitskiĭ 1936). I can’t help but wonder whether the self-referentiality of this refrain was fostered by *korenizatsiya*, the Soviet nationalities policy instituted in 1923, which encouraged individual ethnic groups (“nationalities”) to emphasize if not invent outward markers of their cultural specialness (Martin 2001:12-13 and *passim*). The apparent absence of the refrain in Afghanistan suggests that it developed only in modern Tajikistan. Whether or not this reflexivity was a response to Soviet ideology, the refrain is an example of what Greg Urban calls “metaculture” (2001:3 and *passim*). The refrain is not only “about” the *bılbylık*, it is also a part of a process whereby Wakhis in Tajikistan have come to define *bılbylık* over time—to the point that the editors of a recent collection felt the need to print the refrain after each of the 257 *bılbylıks* it contains (Matrobov and Mirboboev 2015:58-94).<sup>45</sup>

The verb used in the common refrain, *nola car-*, means “lament, groan, complain,” as well as “sing, embellish.”<sup>46</sup> Although the nightingale may “lament” the *bılbylık*, singers aren’t normally said to “lament” it. The verb for most kinds of singing in Wakhi is *ǰan-/ǰat-*, meaning “to say, sing, or tell” (Buddruss and Wiehler-Schneider 1978:90; Griunberg and Steblin-Kamenskiĭ 1976a:505).<sup>47</sup> *ǰan-* is “telling” in the sense of expressing, and that expression can be mental. One couplet by the Wakhi poet-singer Qurbonsho, whose poetry will be examined in detail below, uses the term in this more abstract sense:

sad nolai yəm ǰə rəbobi tu ǰan  
yəm ǰə jonət ǰə jigari kəbobi ǰan

You imagine the 100 laments of my rubob,  
and my roasted heart and soul.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> As Gregory Nagy notes, mimesis of the nightingale’s lament forms part of Homeric epic (1996:86): “So also with laments that are quoted, as it were, in Homeric performance. When the rhapsode performs Andromache’s lament, he *is* Andromache, singing her lament, just as he *is* Homer when we hear in the Homeric poems: ‘tell me, Muse.’ So also, finally, with the lament of the nightingale in *Odyssey* 19.518-523: the songbird’s beautiful sad song is being chosen by an epic character as a *model* for her own epic self-expression. Moreover, in narrating the lyric lament of the nightingale, epic imitates it as a *model*. This way, epic is not only imitating but actually re-enacting lyric, drawing on its own resources of mimesis.”

<sup>45</sup> The discussion of the refrain in this work is plagiarized from Lashkarbekov 1972.

<sup>46</sup> I am providing a wide definition here to take in possible usages of *nola* brought into Tajik Wakhi from Tajik. The word *nola* is used for a musical ornament in Tajik.

<sup>47</sup> One contrastive verb is *joy-/joyd-*, which would be used for reading something aloud in a spoken form, or to say a prayer (*dao joy-*). Some verbal forms can also use the verb “to do,” *car-/kərt-*, including the former example of a prayer, as well as “explain” (*mano car-*), “recount” (*naql car-*), “tell a story” (*qisa car-*), or perform one of the genres of funeral lament (*rəboi*, *naw’agari*, *sifat*).

<sup>48</sup> Literally, the “kabob” [made of] my soul/heart and liver.

If performance involves some kind of projection, whether in vocally present form or as an abstraction of the mind, creating a song seems to be the process in reverse. The common verb meaning “to compose” any verbal art form is *niḵv-/niḵovd-*, which means also to “pull out,” “extract,” or “kick out (someone you’re mad at).”<sup>49</sup>

The Wakhi *bɨlbɨlik* is analogous to the *āṭl* in some ways. However, unlike the *āṭl*, which is only sung with an *āṭl* tune, the three lines of the *bɨlbɨlik* can be imported into other song formats. Like the *āṭl*, the *bɨlbɨlik* is a song of loss, not a lament, and is cryptic as regards any specific turn of events. Its generic conventions, like those of the *āṭl*, make it readily identifiable, and prosodically speaking, the *bɨlbɨlik* is more “poetic” than the *āṭl* in its form and use of metaphor. Unlike *āṭls*, which have variable stanza lengths, *bɨlbɨliks* are all fundamentally tristichs; the singer usually repeats the third line to fill out a four-phrase melody.<sup>50</sup> In general, *bɨlbɨliks* are more fixed than *āṭls*. *Āṭls* have irregular parallelisms; generic *āṭl* features can appear in more than one place in a line or stanza; and new *āṭl* tunes and texts continue to be composed. *Bɨlbɨliks* by contrast follow an A-B-A rhyme scheme and employ end rhymes. Generally speaking, the “rhyme” in a *bɨlbɨlik* consists of either a final vowel or a final vowel followed by a consonant, but near rhymes are also found occasionally—for example, *sarɣuɕ* and *niyəʃk* (Pakhalina 1975:176). (Kota songs use a variety of internal rhymes common to both the Tamil and Kota languages.) Each *bɨlbɨlik* line tends toward seven syllables—though differences are easy to accommodate—and these syllables correspond to the seven “beats” of the single *bɨlbɨlik* tune (not counting pauses between lines).<sup>51</sup> As John Miles Foley put it in the context of a different form of oral syllabic poetry, “Music and silence [aren’t] adjunct phenomena; they [are] part of the line” (2002:33). The first line of a *bɨlbɨlik* is an image with wide scope for interpretation; the next two lines allude to a person and describe some kind of action.

Both the *bɨlbɨlik* and the *āṭl* are gendered as female in their respective cultures, as is funerary crying. Kota women cry copiously and conspicuously at a funeral, men less so. At Wakhi funerals, women lament together using a tune very close to the *bɨlbɨlik*, while men gather for prayer led by the Khalifa, and sing or listen to *maddo*.<sup>52</sup> However, there is no restriction on men singing or composing the “women’s” genres of *āṭl* and *bɨlbɨlik*, so the

<sup>49</sup> The range of the Persian verb *barāvardan* captures both the “pull out” and the “compose” meanings of *niḵv-/niḵovd-* (Ḥayyīm 1934-36 s.v. *āvardan*, *bar āvardan*). Klimchitskii indeed defines the related verb *niḵn-/niḵt-* as *barovardan* in Tajik (1936:109). Nowadays some people write their compositions down and will use the verb “write” (*nəwiš-*, *nəwišt-*) for composing, just as in English. And, drawing from Tajik, if someone wants to say in a more elevated sense, “create a work (of art),” they could use the verb *ejod car-/kərt-*. I thank Zohir Piltaboev for this clarification.

<sup>50</sup> The form of repetition, where line 3 is repeated with a small variation to complete a four-part melody, is only one of several possibilities explored in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (see Mock 1998:114, 126).

<sup>51</sup> Griunberg and Steblin-Kamenskii (1976b:9-10) write that there is no consistent syllable structure, as the lines vary from four to eight syllables in length; this is technically correct, but the melody is articulated in such a way that seven-syllable lines fit best, and as Karomatov et al. put it, is “structured according to the rules of a musical work of art” (2010:III, 12).

<sup>52</sup> Drawn from the Arabic word for praise, *maddo* is a genre of Ismaili devotional music. It consists of sung Classical Persian verse accompanied by two types of *rubāb*.



gendering is more ideational than practical. The matter of how and when men take up these genres is beyond the scope of the present article.

Singers vary in the degree to which they compose their own *bylbylik* texts. Often the frame of a longstanding *bylbylik* is made personal with the name of a loved one and becomes for all intents and purposes the composition of the singer. In Example 5, which I recorded in Vrang, Tajikistan, the singer sitting in the middle, Kobulmo Rajabova, leads what she identifies as her own *bylbylik*. Only the insertion of her brother Xushjon's name makes it her own; the text is otherwise one of the most common.<sup>53</sup>

**Text of “*sətkək bə iwət buy*.” Sung by Ra’no Rojibekova, Kobulmo Rajabova, and Bibiniso Shogunbekova in Vrang, Tajikistan (January 14, 2014; consult the eCompanion, Example 5):**

e sətkək bə iwət buy	Little beads, one after the other
ar bor ki Xыšjon ʃanəm	Whenever I say “Xushjon”
e lol	O, little brother!
e woy aftboron arəm ʒə ruy	Woe! torrents of rain stream down my face
aftboron arəm ʒə ruy	torrents of rain stream down my face
e lol	O, little brother!
e bylbyl tar noləme	I, the nightingale, lament to you

The opening line refers to beads, that is, rosary beads, with the diminutive *-ək*—meaning something like, “dear little beads”—and alludes to counting, literally, “one and two.” Hearing this terse phrase, the listener imagines the experiencer counting beads as if reciting prayers, passing the moments contemplatively while remembering somebody who is far off or dead. I say the “experiencer,” because the singer may be voicing her emotion through images common to *bylbyliks*, not necessarily images that pertain literally to herself—the persona created as the experiencer in the *bylbylik* is not usually named. In the second line Kobulmo uses the Wakhi-ized Tajik word for “each time,” *ar bor*. This provides alliterative and internal rhyme with *aft boron* in line 3. *Aft boron* is also Wakhi-ized Tajik, meaning literally “seven rains”; in the *bylbylik* it is a metaphor for heavy crying.

The story behind Kobulmo's song concerns the tragic death of her brother, Xushwaxtsho. He'd lent money to a village-mate who after many excuses finally agreed to repay him. The debtor invited Xushwaxtsho to wait in a small room of his house. He got a gun, a plastic bag, and an axe, distributed fireworks to the neighborhood children, and connected a live electrical wire to the door latch. Once inside, masked by the sounds of the fireworks, he shot Xushwaxtsho. The injured man staggered toward him, grabbed the live wire and died. The murderer chopped him into pieces and dropped the bagged pieces of his dismembered body into a hole he had dug ostensibly for an apricot tree. Then he planted the tree. For some time the killer claimed that Xushwaxtsho had gone to Afghanistan, but eventually he was forced to confess to the murder.

---

<sup>53</sup> A version of this is the first *bylbylik* appearing in Pakhalina (1975:173; Russian translation on page 174).

This sent a wave of shock through the Wakhi community, where such violence is almost unheard of. In the context of this song, though the text of the song is hardly distinctive, the mention of Xushjon, “dear Xush,” is enough for a Wakhi familiar with the incident to recall the story and the sister’s grief.

A *bɨlbɨlik* tune operates within the interval of a minor second and is rhythmically flexible.<sup>54</sup> The singer generally gives each syllable (if there are seven) the same length, draws out the last syllable on a single pitch, and employs her own style of delivery and embellishment.

**Melody and rhythm of “*sətkək bə iwət buy*”:**

/ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ ----- 1 /  
e sət - kək bə i - wət bu ----- y

/ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 1 /  
ar bor ki Xyš- jon ǰa - nəm

/ 2♭ ----- 1 1 /  
e ----- e lol

/ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 1 2♭ 1 1 2♭ /  
e woy aft bo-ron a - rəm ǰə ru-----y

/ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 1 1 1 /  
aft bo-ron a - rəm ǰə ru-----y

/ 2♭ ----- 1 1 /  
e ----- e lol

/ 2♭ 2♭ 2♭ 1 2♭ 1 1 1 /  
e bɨl - bɨl tar no- lə-me

/ 2♭ ----- 1 1 /  
e ----- e lol

Kobulmo delivers the initial syllables of each line rapidly, in the manner of intoned speech. *E lol* is one of several generic insertions between lines and doesn’t always correspond, as in this case, with the subject of the song (the singer’s younger brother). It is rather an expression of grief and love. Each three-line unit is a complete *bɨlbɨlik*, and when women sing them

<sup>54</sup> Mark Slobin noted the melodic focus of some *falaks* in Afghan Badakhshan around a minor second (1976:208). This is indeed a stressed interval, both on the Tajik and Afghan sides of the border.

together, they generally take turns leading. The other women provide *owoŷ* or vocal support. The art in *bylbylik* singing is to maintain perfect unison, on the one hand, and create delicate filigree patterns in appropriate places, on the other.

A second example of *bylbylik* (Example 6) illustrates a more measured approach to the initial syllables, allotting almost equal weight to each and intoning them without any hint of speech. Both women in this video, taken in Shitkharv village in 2012, sing in unison—varying only in ornamentation. Izatmo Salimova (on the left) creates the filigree pattern against the steady intonation of Maliknoz Ghulomiddinova (on the right).<sup>55</sup> The image in the first line also appears in *bylbyliks* other women have created.

**Text and translation of “*šəmolək bə kuboda*” (consult the eCompanion, Example 6):**

šəmolək bə kuboda	Dear wind, beating against the mountain
o-yi sar bə məxaš e lol	Don't draw out a heavy sigh
o-yi sar-i ɣamboda	A heavy sigh is grief
e o-yi sar-i ɣamboda e <sup>56</sup>	
e bylbyl tar nolame e lol	I, the nightingale, lament to you

In Wakhi, even the wind can be addressed in the familiar, diminutive, using the *-ək* suffix. Listening to the wind hitting the mountain—remember, the singers are usually in the high mountain pastures during the summer when they sing these songs—the experiencer perhaps does not want to be reminded of sadness. Is she addressing the mountain, herself, or someone else?

## Bayd

In Tajikistan and Afghanistan, Wakhi songs sung to the accompaniment of a frame drum, *rəbob*, or other instrument are called *bayd* (from Arabic *bayt*, “house,” “family,” or “verse”). In Wakhi, there is no separate word for poem. *Bayd* means both “poem” and “song,” and like the *bylbylik* the *bayd* is “told” or “sung.” Texts in praise of religious figures or on explicitly religious themes are usually performed in a different style, and in Persian rather than in Wakhi. *Bylbyliks* are not considered kinds of *bayd*, although *bylbylik* texts can be incorporated into *bayds*.<sup>57</sup>

Many *bayds* in Tajikistan and Afghanistan are in the poetic form of the *ghazal*, but they can also take the form of quatrains. An excerpt of a performance I documented on my first visit

<sup>55</sup> This very common text is found in collections of Griunberg and Steblin-Kamenskii (1976a:25), Pakhalina (1975:13), and Matrobov and Mirboboev (2015:77).

<sup>56</sup> Although “*o-yi sar-i ɣamboda*” was clearly sung, and also appears that way in several collections, I am told that the line should be “*o-yi sar bə ɣamboda*” in order to make sense. Of the collections I’ve searched, only that of Klimchitskii (1936) gives the *bə* variant.

<sup>57</sup> According to John Mock (1998:105), however, *bylbyliks* are included in the category of *bayd* among Wakhis in Pakistan.

to Yur village, Afghanistan, in 2015 illustrates one method for incorporating a *bylbylik* text (or any three-line Wakhi poem) into the framework of a *bayd*. The first stanza in the excerpt is the refrain; the second is a verse consisting of the *bylbylik* discussed above, with an additional line that ties the object of the poem to the beloved represented in the refrain. One meaning of the Wakhi verb *ȳir-/ȳird-* is “go around a place” or “turn around,” but in this context it also means “devote oneself” or “sacrifice oneself.” I have translated the repeating Wakhi term with differing English ones to capture some of the nuances in each context. The style of rendition, the addition of a line, and the “finalization” with the refrain “I am obsessed with my ‘Leaf Flower’” serve to mark this as a *bayd* and not a *bylbylik*, despite their shared verse content. Note that a one-line refrain completes the quatrain and that a separate refrain quatrain is inserted between each verse. The recording begins with the refrain quatrain. *Bayd* singers incorporate *bylbylik* texts into their songs in several ways, often spontaneously.<sup>58</sup>

**Excerpt from Wakhi *bayd* sung by Baxmal, Mamadsharf, Shirxon, and Yusuf Ali in Yur village, Upper Wakhan, Afghanistan (August 6, 2015; consult the eCompanion, Example 7):**

wuz ǰə dələŋ ȳirəm	I sacrifice myself for my beloved
ǰə bylbyləŋ ȳirəm	I circle around my nightingale
wuz yaw junəŋ ȳirəm	I wander about for the sake of her soul
yaw tatxunəŋ ȳirəm	I devote myself to her father’s house
ti satki iwət buy	Your beads, one after the other
ar bor taw yod cərəm	Whenever I think of you
aftboron rəm ȳe ruy	Streams of tears run down my face
<i>bargigyləŋ ȳirəm</i>	<i>I am obsessed with my “Leaf Flower”</i>

In the context of the *bayd*, this *bylbylik* is no longer the lament of, say, a mother or a sister for a close family member who has died or traveled far away, but rather that of a love-crazed young man—yes, the beloved could be far away in fact, but it is just as likely that the beloved is far away in a metaphorical sense. And here the lover identifies the beads as those of the beloved—so rather than contemplating his far-away loved ones while counting rosaries, he may be looking at her actual necklace sitting out on a surface.

---

<sup>58</sup> John Mock illustrates this same process in a *bylbylik* text adopted by the singer Fazal Rahman of Chipursan valley in Hunza (1998:130). The refrain is essentially the same as that in the present example, however the tune Fazal Rahman uses (according to my own recordings of him) is of a type used in Northern Pakistan and not normally in Afghanistan (although Afghan Wakhis do sing tunes they identify as originating in Pakistan). Mock was convinced that Fazal Rahman obtained the texts via photocopies of Leonovich Griunberg and I. M. Steblin-Kamenskii’s published collection of *bylbyliks* in their monumental work on the Wakhi language from 1976 (Griunberg and Steblin-Kamenskii 1976a). This may have been the case, but Fazal Rahman told me that he obtained the text from a handwritten notebook in the Persian script with the heading, *Bylbylik*. It is possible that the texts were passed down in writing via the Persian script, but it is also possible that someone a generation ago transliterated from the romanized Soviet text into Persian. Mock is not correct in saying that Fazal Rahman “changed . . . the order in which the stanzas are sung” (1998:128), because *bylbyliks* are self-contained units; they are not stanzas as such, and in any case can be sung in any order.

On this 2015 recording, the singers are all disciples of the most respected Wakhi poet-singer in Afghanistan at the moment, Daulatsho. They sing to a stock tune and accompany themselves on *dorya*, *rəbob*, and *ghijak*. The *bylbylik* text begins at 0:14 in Example 7 (consult the eCompanion).

**Notation of verse excerpt, Example 7, derived from “*sətkək bə iwət buy*”:**

/3b 2b 1 2b . 7 1 . /  
ti sat-ki i - wət buy

/3b 2b 1 2b . 7 1 . /  
ar bor taw yo-d carəm

/3b 2b 1 2b . 7 1 . /  
aft-bo-rən rəm ʒe ruy

/3b 2b 1 2b . 7 1 . /  
bar-gi gylər ʒi-rəm

The refrain is a common poetic mold found in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan that can accommodate different melodies. It need not take verses that originate from a *bylbylik* but can use any tristich of a similar length. For instance, in Pətr, the Wakhi village closest to Sultan Ishkoshim (Afghanistan), there are no Wakhi composers, and for this reason, according to Ghulam Nasir, singers such as himself know only a few Wakhi songs (they sing primarily in Dari). One of those songs was a version of the *bayd* above, in this case accompanied by harmonium and *dorya*. I recorded this in the Afghan bazaar, a no-man’s land between Tajikistan and Afghanistan near Ishkoshim next to the bridge-border, in 2013. Being at a national border I could only video record inside an empty godown, not in the open where the market and the border security were visible.

**Excerpt from “*wuz ʔə dələr ʒirəm*,” performed by Ghulam Nasir (vocal and harmonium) and Amonbek (*dorya* and vocal), transcribed (consult the eCompanion, Example 8):**

wuz ʔə dələr ʒirəm	I sacrifice myself for my beloved
ʔə bylbylar ʒirəm	I circle around my nightingale
wuz yaw junər ʒirəm	I wander about for the sake of her soul
yaw tatxunər ʒirəm	I devote myself to her father’s house
ʒə gimjoni da sarsin	My lover in the mountain green <sup>59</sup>
dam kaf tiloyi dərbin	with golden binoculars in hand

---

<sup>59</sup> In this case, Sarsin is the name of a particular mountain green in Afghanistan, but the referent of this word varies by location.

iloy kartət maži win<sup>60</sup>  
wuz yaw junər ħirəm

Look at me one time!  
*I wander about for the sake of her soul*

Refrain:

/ 3b 2b 3b 2b 1 7 1 /  
wuz xə də-lər ħi-rəm-e

(The other three lines of the refrain use variations on this melody.)

Verse:

/ 2b 3b 3b 3b 3b 3b . /  
ħə gim jo-ni da sar-sin

/ 2b 3b 2b 2b 3b 2b 2b . /  
dam kaf ti-lo yi dər bin

/ 3b 3b 3b 3b 3b 2b 1 . /  
i - loy kar-tət ma-ħi win

/ 3b 2b 1 7 1 1 7 /  
wuz yaw ju-nər ħi-rə-me

Clearly this version draws on the same melodic resources as the version from Yur; however, here the verse is differentiated from the refrain through the use of 3b as a reciting tone on the first line. In this performance, none of the verses were based on *bılbyıls*, but each of them was formally similar to a *bılbyıl*: a tristich with each line containing seven syllables. However the tristich rhyme scheme in this example is A-A-A and not A-B-A. The fourth line returns to the refrain—this time using the third line of the refrain quatrain (and not a different line, as in our previous example)—and ending on the seventh below the tonic as a lead-in to the refrain quatrain. Another version of this setting is provided from Vrang, where a group performs this song in national costume as an accompaniment for a girl’s dance (consult the eCompanion, Example 9).<sup>61</sup> This orchestral version is the type one would encounter when Wakhis are featured in variety shows or at Ismaili cultural events. Whatever the version, the four-beat frame for each

<sup>60</sup> There is a problem with this line. My native-speaking Wakhi collaborators indicated the word is *wind* here, which would put it all in the past tense and make the tense agree with the first part of the line “did one time.” However, the singer didn’t pronounce the “d,” and if he did, he would have broken the rhyme.

<sup>61</sup> Recording details: Oshurmamad Sabzaliev (*balandzikom*), Shohqirghiz Mulloev (*rubobi badaxshi*), Azizxon Gulmirzoev (accordion), Imronsho Mirzoev (*rubobi badaxshi*), Bodurxon Rahmatshoev (*chang*), Mirboz Rahmatshoev Mirboz (*balandzikom*), Tohir Odinabekov (*dorya*), Nilufari Shohqirghiz (dancer). Performed for the author in Vrang, October 26, 2012.

line lends itself to the syllable structure of *būlbūlik* and other traditional three-line Wakhi poetic texts.

As a general matter, Wakhi musicians see the role of musical instruments as adding interest or excitement to the rendition, but it doesn't, for them, fundamentally alter a song to use one or another accompanying instrument. Weddings call for louder accompaniment and ideally for amplification. Electric instruments are universally seen as modern, but individuals vary in their aesthetic preferences for electric versus acoustic instruments. The *balandzikom* is used almost exclusively for *maddo* singing. The drumming patterns depend to an extent on the melody, and choices of melody can vary according to the mood of the performer and the context. However, Central Asian music in particular is known for taking a single melodic idea and creating contrast in a suite of successive items by altering the rhythmic cycle or *zarb*. The appropriateness of one *zarb* or another may depend on such features as line length or poetic meter (in Persian), as well as its perceived suitability to the meaning of the text (a lively dance groove would not be suitable for a song contemplating the transience of human life, for instance).

### New Wakhi Songs

In 1992, the Vrang native Qurbonsho (born c. 1964) introduced a new style of Wakhi song composition that drew on contemporary musical styles of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, often incorporating Pamiri rhythmic grooves. Many of today's Wakhi poets and poet-singers in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Russia view him as tantamount to an *ustod* (master/teacher) because he opened up a world of Wakhi creativity unknown to living generations of Wakhis. Over the course of his career, his "muses" have been two (imaginary) women named Sitora and Sharora, at times considered as one single beloved ("Richard, for one heart there is one beloved, right?" Qurbonsho would ask me); at other times, two ("One wears traditional dress, and the other wears modern dress," he would say). Cassettes and MP3s of his recordings circulate widely in the Wakhi world, and his tunes and lines of poetry wind up in the songs of others. In 2016, Qurbonsho was, he thought, bringing his life as a composer to a close. Sitora and Sharora had, in the end, failed him, and he was going to stop composing. Instead, by inhabiting his second persona by the name of Arghovon, he would give up his hermit-like existence and take up the project of traveling the world, singing his songs.

Now several Wakhi pop bands and many modern Wakhi poets perform using a variety of styles in Wakhi—that is, there is no single "Wakhi music." Given Qurbonsho's importance in the efflorescence of music in the Wakhi language, it is worth examining one *bayd* of his own. His compositions are products of his lifetime goal to raise the level of Wakhi artistry. Qurbonsho does not want to break from the traditional songs of the past, but wants rather to pull from the future and from the past to make Wakhi songs worthy of today. The following *bayd* (Example 10), which he composed in 2016, expressed a sense that Qurbonsho's poetic love affair was coming to an end: he was ready to shed his identity as Qurbonsho and take on the persona of Arghovon. Qurbonsho employs the Persian poetic form of the *rubā'ī* (here with the rhyme scheme A-A-B-A) and a symbolic vocabulary common to the Persianate world: the moth and the flame as representative of the lover and the beloved (and in mystical poetry, the individual in

relation to God); the idea of love as burning, scorching, and destroying; and the special role of songbirds (not here the nightingale).

**Text and translation of Qurbonsho's *bayd*, "nəxod ki tar ɣam nast" (July 31, 2016; consult the eCompanion, Example 10):**

1	nəxod ki tar ɣam nast də ti dida ɣal nam nast nəxod ki wuzəm parwonaət marət ʒə ʃam nast	Don't you really care? There are still no tears in your eyes Is it possible that I am your moth, but that you are not my candle?
2	tawiʃə wuz qɣwəm bəroi tawʃə nɣwəm nəxod ki bifoida ruyi dənyoʃ wuz ʃati ɸɣwəm	I'm calling out for you! I'm crying for you! Could it be that, roaming the world uselessly, I'm burning myself?
3	čizər yəm nowaxti kəʒəpčiš ʒaxti nəxod ki ʒə ɣyli arɣəwon wudg naɣdi ʃpaxti	Why, unexpectedly, do the magpies called out "ʒax ʒax"? Is it really possible, that my Arghovon flower has blossomed tonight?

In stanza 1, Qurbonsho addresses Sitora and Sharora, suggesting that they are not the ones he is meant to be pursuing, even though, from their point of view, he is acting like their "moth." In stanza 2, he seems to suggest that it is not the beloved that is causing him to be scorched, but his very act of calling out and crying for his beloved—that is, his own acts of singing. Stanza 3 alludes to the Wakhi belief that when magpies make the sound "ʒax ʒax," it's a sign of good luck. Asking why the magpies are making these sounds sets up the ambiguity in lines 3 and 4. "Arghovon's flower" could, of course, be the beloved, and so the magpies are crowing to celebrate the blossoming of his love. But, as Qurbonsho refers to himself as Arghovon here, and given the context of this poem in Qurbonsho's poetic life history, these lines suggest that he is leaving behind Qurbonsho and the troubles of Sitora and Sharora, his "useless" activities. Now he is blossoming as Arghovon (which is also the name of a flower)—in the new phase of his life as a performer.

Virtually all of the songs Qurbonsho sings in Wakhi can be sung to more than one tune and with the accompaniment of more than one instrument. So in analyzing this particular example, we are addressing only one possible manifestation of the song. At the main kind of venue for his public performances, *tuys* (celebrations associated with weddings and circumcisions), Qurbonsho will usually accompany himself on synthesizer with drum machine, or on accordion (in the latter case, he'll have backup singers and a frame-drum player).





Fig. 13. Qurbonsho performing at a wedding (*tuy*) in Vrang, August, 2019 (photo by Richard K. Wolf).

In Example 10 he is playing on a fancifully styled *rābob*, gifted to him by me and made by a nearby instrument maker, Imronsho Mirzoev. He uses the rhythmic pattern (*zarb*) called *rapo*, which consists of four beats, each beat distinguished by a particular form of attack or sequence of attacks:<sup>62</sup>

1	2	3	4
downward	down-up	downward	up-down
stroke	(quickly)	stroke	(quickly)

In the following notation, beat 1 conforms to the first beat of the pattern as Qurbonsho teaches it. The beginning of the strumming pattern does not need to correspond to the beginning of a line of text—indeed, in my experience, it usually doesn't. The rhythmic placement of some of the syllables is approximate. For example, in the first line, the second word in both *nāxod ki* and *tar γam* comes earlier—giving the impression of a multisyllable word (an amphibrach in the first case and a trochee in the second) rather than separate words. Lining up the melody in this way shows how line 3—the non-rhyming line—diverges from the others. (The use of rhyming lines to maintain a basic melody or range and non-rhyming lines to diverge is common in Central and South Asia.) The tonic, which does not appear in the vocal line until the end of the whole song, is iterated constantly only by the *rābob* (its three courses are tuned: 5<sup>ve</sup> 2 - 5 5 - 8 8).

<sup>62</sup> Qurbonsho gives more-or-less equal duration to each beat, but in the wider Pamirs, performers sometimes swing the rhythmic pattern considerably. The strumming pattern is an essential (though also variable) part of the definition of the *zarb*, wherever it appears.

The vowel [e] introducing lines 1 and 3 comes in earlier and on the beat for line 3, initiating a deliberate and stretched-out delivery of syllables in that line. This leads to a melodic climax on the words “Is it really possible?” (5 and 6b), followed by an undulating pattern downward on the words “that I am your moth.” The melody and text in this line stretches beyond the length of lines 1 and 2 by two full beats. The fourth and final line of this stanza is shorter, and, as a rhyming line, returns to the initial range. While I would not wish to claim that this fluttering descent is really meant to imitate a moth, we can observe that in each of the three stanzas there is a key phrase highlighted with the melody at that point, following the question “Is it really possible?” The musical drama of line 3 is also set up by the repetition of the first pair of lines in each stanza.

The syllabic structure in lines 1, 2, and 4 is closely in keeping with much traditional Wakhi singing—the first is six syllables, rounded out to seven with the vocalic [e] at the beginning. Line 2 is seven syllables. And line 4 starts late, as if making room after the long line 3, with five syllables. Counter to what Buddruss and Wiehler-Schneider (1978:108) observed in the Wakhi songs they examined in Pakistan (but similar to what we discovered in some of the Kota examples), the “period” does not get extended simply because more syllables need to be accommodated. Qurbonsho’s steady maintenance of the *zarb* allows him to play with line length and melodic placement without losing the periodicity of the cycle.

**Transcription of the first stanza of the *bayd* “*nəxod ki tar γam nast*,” performed by Qurbonsho (July 31, 2016; consult the eCompanion, Example 10):**

	4		1	2		3	4	1	2	3	
/	<u>3b</u>	<u>3b</u>	3b	3b		2b	3b	3b	.	.	/
/	e	nə-	xod	ki		tar	γam	nast	.	.	/
/	<u>3b</u>	<u>3b</u>	3b	3b		2b	3b	3b	.	5	/
/	də	ti	di-	da		γal	nam	nast	.	e	/

(The couplet above is repeated.)

/	5		6b	.		<u>4 4</u>	3b	<u>3b 3b</u>	<u>4 3b</u>	<u>4 2b</u>	/
/	nə		xod			ki-wu	zəm	par-wo-	na	-----	ət /
/	.	.	<u>3b 3b</u>	2b	3b	.	2b	.	.	.	/
/	.	.	ma-rət	žə	šam	.	nast	.	.	.	/

The same melody and line repetition structure is used for each of the three stanzas, and in the final stanza Qurbonsho repeats the last line and resolves the lowered second degree to the tonic on the vowel [e]. This form of cadence derives from the singing of Ismaili religious song,

called *qasoid* or *maddo*, and has been widely adopted in the music of Ismaili musicians in the Pamirs.

### Deformation in a Traditional Genre

Returning to the *bylbylik*, one might ask whether traditional genres leave room for innovation. In other words, must all creativity be channeled within the existing generic frameworks as commonly understood? To address this, we look at a second composition of Kobulmo's, again regarding the tragic death of her brother. In the previous *bylbylik*, she had personalized it by inserting her brother's name. This *bylbylik* goes a step further.

#### Text and translation of Kobulmo's "*bylbylik*" (consult the eCompanion, Example 11):

ey Xəşjoni noziyon e: lol	O my indulged Xushjon!
ey woy dəşman tawi nosti pərarmon e:	Woe, the enemy destroyed you, with all your hopes and dreams
ey Nişastajon vit ayron e:	Oh, Nishastajon became shocked,
e kumər žə širin tatjon e:	"Where is my sweet dear father,"
e woy cart maži məktab rəwon e:	Woe! "to send me off to school?"
e woy cart maži məktab rəwon e: lol	Woe! "to send me off to school?"
e bylbyl tar noləme:: lol	I, the nightingale, lament to you

Kobulmo addresses this poem-song to Xushjon, regarding the reaction of his daughter, Nishastajon. As she recounts it,

In this *bylbylik* I said that my brother used to take his daughter to school because his children were the light of his life. People would say, "But you have no son, only three daughters!" To which he'd reply, "to me my daughters are my sons," adding jokingly, "I will make my 'sons' march and send them to the army. When I take my daughter to school, I'll invite all my relatives and make a parade." The enemy killed him and he didn't realize his wish, but my brothers and I carried out his wishes: we brought her to school in a parade. But no matter how much we danced and had fun the girl didn't smile even for a moment. Her father's "taste" was not there. No matter how much we cajoled her, she didn't laugh even once. She was looking around asking, "where is my father?"

The second line of this *bylbylik* refers to the killer, who dashed the hopes of Xushjon. The child is shocked at the events and looks for her dad, wondering who will take her to school.

The style and structure of this song are not those of a typical *bylbylik*. Rather than being open-ended, this text alludes to a particular event and names individuals. It is five rather than three lines long, and the syllables come out in even more of a burst than in her performance of a straightforward *bylbylik*. Line 2 in particular has to accommodate nine syllables (if we leave out the vocative *e woy* or *woe* at the beginning). The overall tune is very close to that of a *bylbylik*:

it focuses on the very low flat second degree, touching the first degree once in the middle of each line, and resolving on it. But there are subtle differences regarding the antecedent-consequent structure of the melody and the use of repetition and insertions to articulate the usual parts of the stanza.

The first line approximates the grouping of typical *bylbylik* lines into 3 + 4 syllables, here “*ey Xəš-jo-*” plus “*-ni no-zi-yon.*” The line nevertheless comes off as subtly different owing to the addition of *e lol* to the first line (the downward arrow indicates a spoken drop in pitch). The second line of a *bylbylik* will usually have *e lol* or some similar extension, and the line will not rhyme. Instead we have a long rhyming line, and just a hint of a drop to the sixth below at the end with no *e lol*. Lines 3-5, which also rhyme, have seven central syllables (I am ignoring the introductory [e] and concluding [e] or *e lol*), but without the repeating third line, which forms a melodic conclusion in the *bylbylik*, this does not satisfy the expectations for a *bylbylik*. Overall, the melody and its articulation are similar to those of the laments Wakhi women perform at funerals—genres called *rəboi* and *nawhagari*. But those laments are either in Tajik (in the case of the *rəboi*) or a mixture of Tajik and Wakhi (in the case of *nawhagari*), and their poetic forms are different. In the repetition of the fifth line, Kobulmo lands confidently on the lowered sixth degree below the tonic. This is perhaps the strongest marker of the difference between a *bylbylik* and a *rəboi*. And yet, the three women conclude the stanza with the *bylbylik* refrain, leaving no doubt that they do, in fact, wish to represent this as a *bylbylik*.

**Transcription of Kobulmo’s “*bylbylik*” (consult the eCompanion, Example 11):**

1 2b 2b 1 1 2b 2b 1 1 ↘  
ey Xəšjo . . ni noziyo-----n e- lol

2b 2b 2b 2b 2b 2b 1 2b 2b 2b 2b 1 1 (6)  
ey woy dəš-man ta- wi nos-ti pər-armo-----n e-----

2b 2b 2b 2b 2b 1 2b 2b 1 1  
ey Ni- šas- ta- jon vi-t ay-ro-----n e-----

2b 2b 2b 2b 2b 2b 1 2b 1 1  
e ku- mər žə ši- rin tat-jo-----n e-----

2b 2b 2b 2b 2b 1 1 2b 2b 2b 1 1 (6b)  
e woy cart ma- ži . mək-tab rəwo-----n e-----

2b 2b 2b 2b 2b 1 1 2b 2b 2b 1 1 6b  
e woy cart ma- ži . mək- tab rəwo-----n e----- lol

2b 2b 2b 1 2b 1 2b 1 2b 1 1  
e byl byl . tar no lə m e----- e lol

\*

As we have seen, a vigorous tradition of contemporary *bayd* composition, spurred on in part by Qurbonsho, does not rely on the *bylbylik* for its poetic basis—drawing instead from the poetic forms that circulate widely in Persian, Urdu, and related languages of Central and South Asia. But this does not diminish the significance of the *bylbylik* as a site in which Wakhi language and emotion crystalize into a single form. Qurbonsho and others, however, question whether the *bylbyliks* handed down from generations past have heartfelt meaning for those who sing them today. In Qurbonsho's view, life conditions have improved to such an extent that singers cannot draw from hardship in their lives to generate true performances. *Bylbyliks* become simply songs. Qurbonsho claims never to have heard a *bylbylik* as it's meant to be sung—from the bottom of one's heart. We should be skeptical of such a claim, for how could Qurbonsho know the real *bylbylik* if he has never heard it? Still, his claim rings true as we see young girls don their folkloric white satiny costumes and perform *bylbylik* on stage, drawing out the self-conscious refrain "I, the *bylbylik*, lament to you." But then there are singers like Kobulmo, who will never be able to rid herself of grief, no matter how much she sings; the mere insertion of her brother's name into the most common of *bylbyliks* renders it intensely personal.

\*

What light do these examples shed on the poem-song? Tajik and Afghan musicians commonly use the Persian (ultimately Arabic-derived) term *qālab*, "model" or "mold," in reference to the form of a melody, piece, poem, and so forth. The *qālab* could be the basic note-structure of a melody, including the repeating strumming pattern if it is played on a musical instrument, and it can mean the prosodic rules of a poem. As musicians sometimes put it, after mastering the *qālab*, it is easy to pour in personalized content—whether that means ornamentation, the correct placement of text within the rhythmic structure, or the invention of new text. The use of *qālab* thus has an implication for expression. Mastery of form allows one to focus on the message itself as well as on the delivery of the message—even if the message is one of melody without words. The *qālab* itself determines, or is at least supposed to determine, the emotional-moral framework for the content—thus musicians will say such and such text is compatible with such and such a musical setting and not compatible with another. But in other cases, the *qālab* can shift our understanding of the message—as it did in the case of the *bylbylik* text framed within a *bayd* focusing on a worldly beloved.

The poem-song is one in which the *qālab* and the textual message it contains are in harmony. An effective poem-song in performance requires something extra—this may involve overt facial gestures or sounds of emotion, imaginative treatment of the melody or rhythm, but it also may involve something external to the performance itself—the knowledge of context and narrative that extends beyond the words of a song.

I'd like to close by considering the role of form—call it *qālab* or by any other name—in relation to the question of endangered languages. The fourteenth-century Tunisian philosopher-historian Ibn Khaldun, often credited as the first sociologist and anthropologist, frequently invokes the image of a loom and a mold in his famous work, the *Muqaddimah*. *Uslūb*, or

“method,” Khaldun writes (1970:373-74; translation from Rosenthal 1967:376; see also Blum 1975:223),

is used to refer to a mental form for metrical word combinations which is universal in the sense of conforming with any particular word combination. This form is abstracted by the mind from the most prominent individual word combinations and given a place in the imagination comparable to a mold or loom. Word combinations that Arabs consider [proper] are then selected and packed . . . into (that form), just as the builder does with the mold or the weaver with the loom. Eventually, the mold is sufficiently widened to admit the word combinations that fully express what one wants to express.

While it would be a mistake to say that people who speak endangered languages lack theories of prosody and music, it is likely that such theories are not articulated in the explicit forms we find in the codified traditions of Tamil, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic, or the methods of singing the classical music of South India, Iran, and Iraq. Nevertheless, highly complex musico-poetic traditions exist even in languages with a small number of speakers.<sup>63</sup>

The methods for composing such poetry are not given in grammars or dictionaries but are rather imbibed through existing models, which become looms or molds in Khaldun’s terms. The key here, I think, is the idea that the molds can be “sufficiently widened” to accommodate what the poet wishes to express. The cases we’ve seen are meant to be examples of possibility rather than the basis for generalization. I see the poem-song as a kind of mutually implicating mold: the “musical” side shapes, without fully determining, the kinds of verbal sounds the poem-song contains—and also helps the imagination fill in what might not be said explicitly. The textual side, through parallelisms, juxtaposition, terseness, or prolixity, can work within, create, or, as in the last case, break the usual molds. The fact that in many traditions, originary versions of any particular text or melody cannot be recovered or never existed in the first place in no way weakens the illusive mold—rather it leaves a great responsibility with the builder every time she builds, the weaver every time he weaves—rather than with the creator of the loom, the mold, or any product from them.

Changing life experiences of singers in the modern world can, perhaps, turn the woven products from the looms into lifeless objects, but we can’t be sure of it. While new experiences continue to stimulate poet-singers to press their speech into molds they have abstracted from the modern media, from musico-poetic exemplars in other languages, and from as-yet unrealized possibilities in their own languages, they enrich their languages and inspire others to do so as well. Ibn Khaldun wrote, “The desire to press speech into the molds of poetry sharpens the mind” (Rosenthal 1967:375). Perhaps we can say, “the desire to press poem-songs into action sharpens the language.”

*Harvard University*

---

<sup>63</sup> Take for instance the Todas of the Nilgiris, a tribal group of about 1,200 who live in small hamlets alongside their Kota neighbors. Murray B. Emeneau wrote a thousand-page book on their verbal art (1971), which continues to occupy the minds of contemporary linguists such as Peri Bhaskararao (Nara and Bhaskararao 2003).

### Guide to Transliteration and Musical Notation:

Transliterations follow the ALA-LC Romanization Schemes for non-Roman scripts or draw on the same principles (sometimes simplified: ligatures are not used for Russian here). Retroflexes are indicated by underdots (ṭ, ḍ, ṛ, ḷ, ṣ, ṣ̣, ṇ), alveolars are indicated by underscores (ṛ, ḍ, ṭ, ṇ) (except the [l] in Tamil), long vowels are indicated by macrons. Tajik, Dari, and Farsi are all versions of Persian, however Tajik is currently written in Cyrillic and is transliterated here from the Cyrillic. The Tajik [o] is equivalent to the Persian [ā], and [e] is equivalent to the Persian [i], in the ALA-LC system. In Kota, the difference between [r] and [ḍ] is length—the latter is held longer than the former. In Kota, the phoneme represented by [c] varies: English [s], [ch], and [ts] are all possible depending on speaker. Wakhi is transliterated according to the system established by Griunberg and Steblin-Kamenskiĭ 1976a, which uses a few Greek and Cyrillic characters as well as special signs. [ɣ] is a voiced velar fricative ([gh] in the ALA-LC tables for Persian), and [x] is an unvoiced velar fricative ([kh] in Persian). The same characters with a hachek, [ɣ̣] and [x̣], are pronounced with less vocal friction than their counterparts without the hachek. Wakhi [š] is like English [sh], but pronounced toward the front of the mouth (somewhat like the Russian [ɕ]), and [ṣ̣] is a retroflex [sh] (similar to [ɕ] in Russian). [θ] (theta) is pronounced like [th] in “three.” [δ] (delta) is pronounced like [th] in “the.” [ž] is pronounced like [j] in French “je.” [ẓ̌] is a retroflex version of the same sound. [č] is English [ch] pronounced in the front of the mouth, while [č̣] is a retroflex version of the same sound. [ʒ] is approximately [dz], as in “two heads are better than one.” [c] alone in Wakhi is [ts]. [ə] and [ɪ] are very similar sounding vowels, and even though in some words they are seemingly interchangeable (depending on speaker and dialect), they are nevertheless separate phonemes. [ə] is close to the [u] in “but.” [ɪ] is pronounced like the letter represented by that character in Russian: position your lips to say “oo,” stiffen them, and say “ee.”

The musical notation indicates scale degrees taking the tonic as C. So, 1 is C, 2 is D, 3 is E, and so forth. Flats are applied accordingly to indicate lowered scale degrees, so 3b is Eb. Rests and prolongations are indicated with dots, and double speed is indicated with an underline. Not all the music falls into “measures” in a Western technical sense. I have indicated relevant metrical units using slashes. Further details regarding notation appear alongside the descriptions of particular musical examples. In all cases, I recommend listening to the recordings provided with this article.

### Acknowledgements

I delivered a version of the present article as a keynote address at a symposium on the music and poetry of Kashmir, March 20, 2020, University of North Texas; in the wake of COVID-19, a scaled-down version of the symposium was held on Zoom. I thank Sadaf Munshi and Vivek Virani for inviting me to speak at the symposium and inspiring me to take my work in a comparative direction. I express my thanks to the performers whose singing and compositions I cite in this article. I am especially grateful to Qurbansho for the many hours he spent discussing his Wakhi poetry with me and teaching me to sing it. Zohir Piltaboev and Chorshanbe

Goibnazarov have provided me invaluable help in my efforts to learn Wakhi, hosted me in their family homes in Wakhan, and facilitated my encounters with many singers. R. Kamatn (also known as Duryodana), who became my Kota research assistant in 1991, has long been my friend and consultant. Most of the transcriptions of the Kota songs in this article were the result of our careful listening together and his acts of follow-up with others in the village when words or meanings were not clear. I also wish to thank the anonymous peer reviewer for this journal, as well as Stephen Blum and Gregory Nagy, for their helpful comments. David Shulman inspired me to look further regarding the musicality of Tamil and directed me to useful sources in this regard. Martha Selby read a late draft of the article with a critical eye on my discussion of Tamil poetics. To all these friends and colleagues, I owe a debt of gratitude.

### References

- Agawu 1988                      V. Kofi Agawu. "Tone and Tune: The Evidence for Northern Ewe Music." *Africa*, 58.2:127-46.
- Allen 1973                      W. Sidney Allen. *Accent and Rhythm: Prosodic Features of Latin and Greek: A Study in Theory and Reconstruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ate 1984                        Lynn Ate. "Literary Meter vs. Rhythmic Beat in Tamil Alvar Literature." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 19.2:1-7.
- Bakhtin 1986                    M. M. Bakhtin. "The Problem of Speech Genres." In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. by Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press. pp. 60-102.
- Barker 1989                    Andrew Barker, ed. *Greek Musical Writings*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bickford 2007                Tyler Bickford. "Music of Poetry and Poetry of Song: Expressivity and Grammar in Vocal Performance." *Ethnomusicology*, 51.3:439-76.
- Bishop and Litch 2000        R. A. Bishop and J. A. Litch. "Malaria at High Altitude." *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 7.3:157-58.
- Blum 1975                      Stephen Blum. "Towards a Social History of Musicological Technique." *Ethnomusicology*, 19.2:207-31.
- Blum 2013                      \_\_\_\_\_. "Foundations of Musical Knowledge in the Muslim World." In *The Cambridge History of World Music*. Ed. by Philip V. Bohlman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 103-24.



- Boyce 1957 Mary Boyce. "The Parthian Gōsān and Iranian Minstrel Tradition." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 89.1-2:10-45.
- Buddruss and Wiehler-Schneider 1978 Georg Buddruss and Sigrun Wiehler-Schneider. "Wakhi-Lieder aus Hunza." *Jahrbuch für Musikalische Volks- und Völkerkunde*, 9:89-110.
- Burrow and Emeneau 1984 T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau. *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Crosson 2008 Seán Crosson. "*The Given Note*": *Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars.
- Emeneau 1971 M. B. Emeneau. *Toda Songs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Emeneau 1995 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Palatalizing Rule in Tamil-Malayalam and Telugu." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115.3:401-09.
- Farmer 1913-36 George Henry Farmer. "Mūsīkī." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition (1913-1936)*. Ed. by M. Th. Houtsma, T. W. Arnold, R. Basset, and R. Hartmann. Leiden: Brill.
- Faudree 2012 Paja Faudree. "Music, Language, and Texts: Sound and Semiotic Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41.1: 519-36.
- Faudree 2013 \_\_\_\_\_. *Singing for the Dead: The Politics of Indigenous Revival in Mexico*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Foley 2002 John Miles Foley. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Fox 2004 Aaron A. Fox. *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ghosh 1950 Manomohan Ghosh, trans. *The Nāṭyaśāstra: A Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramaturgy and Histrionics, Ascribed to Bharata-Muni*. 2 vols. Bibliotheca Indica, 272. Calcutta: Asiatic Society.
- Gramophone Company of Calcutta n.d. Gramophone Company of Calcutta. "Kōṭa. Song:—Story of Mathi." *Records of the Languages and Dialects of the Madras Presidency*. Recorded c. 1922 and documented in Gravely 1927.
- Gravely 1927 F. H. Gravely. *Gramophone Records of the Languages and Dialects of the Madras Presidency: Text of Passages*. Madras: Government Press.

- Griunberg and Steblin-Kamenskii 1976a Aleksandr Leonovich Griunberg and I. M. Steblin-Kamenskii. *Языки Восточного Гиндукуша. Ваханский Язык: Тексты, Словарь, грамматический Очерк.* (*Languages of the Eastern Hindu Kush. The Wakhi Language: Texts, Dictionary, Grammar.*) Moscow: Nauka.
- Griunberg and Steblin-Kamenskii 1976b \_\_\_\_\_. *Сказки Народов Памира.* (*Tales of the Pamir People.*) Moscow: Nauka.
- Guralnick 2009 Elissa S. Guralnick. "Sound and Song in Poetry: Music as a Form of Explication." *English Language Notes*, 47.1:173-80.
- Ḥayyīm 1934-36 Sulaymān Ḥayyīm. *New Persian-English Dictionary: Complete and Modern, Designed to Give the English Meanings of over 50,000 Words, Terms, Idioms, and Proverbs in the Persian Language, as well as the Transliteration of the Words in English Characters. Together with a Sufficient Treatment of all the Grammatical Features of the Persian Language.* Tehran: Librarie-imprimerie Bérroukhim. <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/hayyim/>
- Jakobson 1960 Roman Jakobson. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." In *Style in Language*. Ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok. Cambridge, MA: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. pp. 350-77.
- Jakobson 1978 \_\_\_\_\_. *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Karomatov et al. 2010 F. M. Karomatov, Nizom Nurjonov, and B. Kabilova. *Музыкальное искусство Памира.* (*Musical Art of the Pamir.*) 5 vols. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: University of Central Asia.
- Khaldūn 1970 Ibn Khaldūn. *Al-Muqaddimah li-Ibn Khaldūn: Al-juz' al-awwal min Kitāb al-'ibar wa-dīwan al-mubtadā' fī ayyām al-'Arab wa-al-'Ajam wa-al-Barbar wa-man 'āṣarahum min dhawī al-sulṭān al-akbar: Wa-huwa ta'rīkh.* Beirut: Dār al-Qalam.
- Klimchitskii 1936 S. I. Klimchitskii. "Vakhanskie Teksty." ("Wakhi Texts.") *Trudy Tadzhikistanskoĭ Bazy*, 3:75-124.
- Kreutzmann 2015 Hermann Kreutzmann. *Pamirian Crossroads: Kirghiz and Wakhi of High Asia.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Kreutzmann 2017 \_\_\_\_\_. *Wakhan Quadrangle: Exploration and Espionage during and after the Great Game.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Lashkarbekov 1972 B. Lashkarbekov. "Ba'ze Namunahoi Nazmi Vakhonī." ("Some Examples of

- Wakhi Verse.”) In *Zabonhoi Pomirī va Fol’klor I*. Ed. by Dodkhudo Karamshoev and Svetlana Vasilevna Khushevnova. Dushanbe: Akademiai Fanhoi RSS Tojikiston, Instituti Zabon va Adabiyoti ba nomi A. Rudaki. pp 143-47.
- List 1963                      George List. “The Boundaries of Speech and Song.” *Ethnomusicology*, 7.1:1-16.
- Lord 1960                      Albert Bates Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Madian 1992                      Azza Abd al-Hamid Madian. “Language-Music Relationships in al-Farabi’s *Grand Book of Music*.” Unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University.
- Majeed 2019a                      Javed Majeed. *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India*. New York: Routledge.
- Majeed 2019b                      \_\_\_\_\_. *Nation and Region in Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India*. New York: Routledge.
- Mandelbaum 1938                      David G. Mandelbaum. “India, Kota and Toda, 1938.” Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington.
- Mandelbaum 1954                      \_\_\_\_\_. “Form, Variation, and Meaning of a Ceremony.” In *Method and Perspective in Anthropology: Papers in Honor of Wilson D. Wallis*. Ed. by Robert F. Spencer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp. 60-102.
- Mandelbaum 1960                      \_\_\_\_\_. “A Reformer of His People.” In *In the Company of Man: Twenty Portraits by Anthropologists*. Ed. by Joseph B. Casagrande. New York: Harper. pp. 274-308.
- Mandelbaum n.d.                      \_\_\_\_\_. “David Goodman Mandelbaum Papers, 1899-1991, 1933-1986.” BANC MSS 89/129 cz. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Marr 1985                      John Ralston Marr. *The Eight Anthologies: A Study in Early Tamil Literature*. Madras: Institute of Asian Studies.
- Martin 2001                      Terry Martin. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Matrobov and Mirboboev 2015                      S. Matrobov and A. Mirboboev, eds. *Wuǰ diyor ganj: Ganji Vaxonzamin. Majmu‘ai osori mardumī. (Treasure of the Wakhan Territory. Collected Words of the People.)* Dushanbe, Tajikistan: Gulu Giyoh.

- Menéndez Pidal 1960                      Ramón Menéndez Pidal. *La Chanson de Roland et la tradition épique des Francs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Trans. by Irénée-Marcel Cluzel. Paris: Picard.
- Mills 1990                                      Margaret Ann Mills. *Oral Narrative in Afghanistan: The Individual in Tradition*. New York: Garland.
- Mock 1998                                      John Howard Mock. "The Discursive Construction of Reality in the Wakhi Community of Northern Pakistan." Unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Moseley 2010                                  Christopher Moseley, ed. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Paris: UNESCO. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/atlas>
- Nagy 1996                                      Gregory Nagy. *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nagy 2010                                      \_\_\_\_\_. "Language and Meter." In *A Companion to the Ancient Greek Language*. Ed. by Egbert J. Bakker. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 370-87.
- Nara and Bhaskararao 2003              Tsuyoshi Nara and Peri Bhaskararao. *Songs of the Toda: Text, Translation & Sound Files*. Osaka: Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim.
- Niklas 1988                                      Ulrike Niklas. "Introduction to Tamil Prosody." *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 77.1:165-227.
- Niklas 1993                                      Ulrike Niklas, ed. and trans. *The Verses on the Precious Jewel Prosody Composed by Amitacākarar, with the Commentary by Kuṇacākarar (Amitacākarar iyaṛriya yāpparuṅkalakkārikai, Kuṇacākarar iyaṛriya uraiyuṭan)*. Pondichéry, India: Institut français d'Indologie.
- Pakhalina 1973                                  T. N. Pakhalina. "Образцы ваханской народной поэзии." ("Samples of Wakhi Folk Poetry.") In *Проблемы восточного стихосложения. (Problems of Oriental Versification.)* Ed by I. S. Braginskii. Moscow: Nauka. pp 68-76.
- Pakhalina 1975                                  \_\_\_\_\_. *Vakhanskii Iazyk. (Wakhi Language.)* Moscow: Nauka.
- Patel 2008                                      Aniruddh D. Patel. *Music, Language, and the Brain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Perry 2006                                      J. R. Perry. "Tajik Persian." In *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*. Vol. 12. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. by Keith Brown. London: Elsevier. pp. 484-87.

- Pinker 1995 Steven Pinker. *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind*. London: Penguin Books.
- Powers 1976 Harold S. Powers. "The Structure of Musical Meaning: A View from Banaras (A Metamodal Model for Milton)." *Perspectives of New Music*, 14.2:308-34.
- Probert 2006 Philomen Probert. *Ancient Greek Accentuation: Synchronic Patterns, Frequency Effects, and Prehistory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rodgers 2017 Stephen Rodgers. "Song and the Music of Poetry." *Music Analysis*, 36.3:315-49.
- Rosenthal 1967 Franz Rosenthal, trans. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sakata 2002 Hiromi Lorraine Sakata. *Music in the Mind: The Concepts of Music and Musician in Afghanistan*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Seeger 1986 Anthony Seeger. "Oratory is Spoken, Myth is Told, and Song is Sung, but They Are All Music to My Ears." In Sherzer and Urban 1986:59-82.
- Sherzer and Urban 1986 Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban, eds. *Native South American Discourse*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Shulman 2016 David Shulman. *Tamil: A Biography*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Slobin 1976 Mark Slobin. *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan*. Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, 54. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Steblin-Kamenskii 1999 I. M. Steblin-Kamenskii. *Этимологический словарь ваханского языка. (Etymological Dictionary of the Wakhi Language.)* Saint Petersburg: Saint Petersburg State University.
- Urban 2001 Greg Urban. *Metaculture: How Culture Moves Through the World*. Public Worlds, 8. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Urmawi 1960-61 Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Urmawī. "Kitāb al adwār fī al mūsīqī." Trans. (from Arabic into Persian) by Mīrzā Muḥammad Ismā'īl b. Muḥammad D̲j̲a'far Iṣfahānī. *Majallah-i mūsīqī*, 3:42-49 (1339 AH) and 3:50-58 (1339-40 AH).
- Wolf 1997 Richard K. Wolf. "Of God and Death: Music in Ritual and Everyday Life. A Musical Ethnography of the Kotas of South India." Unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

- Wolf 2000/2001                      \_\_\_\_\_. "Mourning Songs and Human Pasts among the Kotas of South India." *Asian Music*, 32.1:141-83.
- Wolf 2005                                \_\_\_\_\_. *The Black Cow's Footprint: Time, Space, and Music in the Lives of the Kotas of South India*. Delhi: Permanent Black. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.32620>
- Wolf 2009                                \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Theorizing the Local: Music, Practice, and Experience in South Asia and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yarshater 1974                        Ehsan Yarshater. "Affinities between Persian Poetry and Music." In *Studies in Art and Literature of the Near East: In Honor of Richard Ettinghausen*. Ed. by Peter J. Chelkowski. Salt Lake City: Middle East Center, University of Utah. pp. 59-78.
- Zvelebil 1992                        Kamil Zvelebil. *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature*. Leiden: Brill.

This page is intentionally left blank.

## **Dynamics of Voiced Poetry: Popular Education through Wolof and Soninke Sufi Religious Texts**

**Cheikh Tidiane Lo**

### **Introduction**

In African Muslim societies, religious values are transmitted and reinforced through “voiced texts,” poetic texts recorded in writing but designed to be performed orally and received aurally (Foley 2002). Aural reception implies the participatory and/or virtual involvement of an audience within sacred or hybrid frames. For most Muslim preachers, voiced texts, written and then chanted, take precedence over other means of communication. This inclination is probably associated with the prevalence of oral performance that underpins African traditional modes of communication, although written communication has always coexisted with orality within the Muslim world. This has been extensively discussed by William A. Graham in his work, “‘An Arabic Reciting’: Qu’ran as Spoken Book” (1987).

Contrary to prevalent beliefs, orality is not segregated from writing. Islam seems to have found an entrenched method of diffusion via direct performances and chanted poetry as it appears in West African societies, rather than solely through long, prosaic texts that demand sophisticated reading abilities. By shifting to voiced poetry, West African Muslim preachers demonstrate lucidity about “oral reason” (M. Diagne 2005) and the importance of collective learning through aural and oral performance. The embodied or living nature of Islamic knowledge transmission has been rigorously examined in the recent scholarship (see Ware 2014; Wright 2015; Ogunnaike 2020). In addition to Arabic, the preachers use native African tongues to convey their ideas, chanted or recited, to the broader public. Such poetic translations are designed mostly for people who have not been educated in religious schools, and therefore lack Arabic literacy, while texts in Arabic are written primarily for religious scholars and students.

The use of Arabic scripts, known as Ajami literature, is a long tradition, widespread across the world, including Africa (Ngom 2018; Şaul 2006). However, this article focuses on a corpus transcribed into Latin letters, highlighting the thematic dimension of poetic texts that teach Islamic spiritual and moral standards among the Wolof and Soninke ethnic groups. It argues that the capacity of vocalization to expand the scope of a printed text beyond its confines allows ample responsive engagement from target audiences who cannot speak Arabic. It further suggests that the success of African religious preachers lies partially in their choices, not only to translate the essence of the religion, but also to employ performative mechanisms to achieve their goals. It shows that, although the rise of new technologies and virtual conduits constitutes



an extension of such vocalization, it is creating means of expression that often fall beyond the control of the authorized producers of that sacred poetic corpus.

### Corpus and Community Backgrounds

A vast corpus of poetic texts remains unexamined and confined to annexes or appendices of numerous published and unpublished documents. The marginalization of these texts away from mainstream world literature rests on several explanatory factors, of which a false distinction between orality and writing appears to be the strongest. The emergence of Ajami and Timbuktu scholarship (Jeppie and Diagne 2008; Kane 2016; Lüpke and Bao-Diop 2014; Ngom 2010, 2017, and 2018) reverses the trend by foregrounding the treasures of African literature hidden in local languages (Irele 1990).<sup>1</sup>

This article draws from this corpus of texts that are often neglected within Eurocentric epistemologies to examine their meaning and value as compelling literature. To them, I add unpublished texts that circulate and are still performed in Senegal. For reasons of space, I focus on some Wolof and Soninke cases in Senegal. I further narrow down religious texts through their messages, performers, and occasion of actualization. Because of linguistic barriers in Soninke, I rely primarily on the appendices of Aliou Kissima Tandia (1999), a book that contains a rich corpus of religious poems that have not yet been fully analyzed; another pertinent published work is by Momar Cissé (2009). Other religious Wolof poems are from secondary sources, including those by Thierno Mouhammad Said Diop (2017), or posted on websites by disciples of Sufi orders and on YouTube.<sup>2</sup> The presentation of texts in such alternative spaces away from academic discourses accounts for the parochialism noted in literary scholarship: the unequal consideration of written versus voiced literature and European versus non-European languages as legitimate mediums of knowledge production (Brenner and Last 1985; Cissé 2007).

It is along those lines that Foley asks: “Given the built-in bias in favor of the technology of writing and printing, is it any wonder that oral poetry is ranked as a second-class citizen among the verbal arts?” (2002:27). Bringing out and shedding light on these forms of literary production may open new perspectives and understanding of the dynamics of grassroots African literature, and beyond—the religious life and ethos of the communities involved. I attended several religious events (Mawlid, Commemoration, *ziyaara*) where such poems and songs were performed from 2005 to 2010, and I have been distantly observing and examining those performances and debates around them through the Internet since 2010.

Little research has been conducted to analyze the contents and modes of composition and performance of religious poetry in Senegal (Sana Camara 1997). The most dynamic area of study is the interconnection between Islam and music (McLaughlin 1997; Niang 2010). Samba Camara (2019) has recently tackled what he terms the friction between secular music and Sufism,

---

<sup>1</sup> A vast corpus of digitized and non-digitized Ajami and Arabic manuscripts resides in many academic institutions, such as the British Library Endangered Archives Programme, the African Ajami Library at Boston University, and the Northwestern University Libraries.

<sup>2</sup> A notable example can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN5RhFS5IP4>.

showing the delicate frontiers between religion and its transposition in the popular music known as *mballax*, and the tension incurred by that fraught endeavor. Joseph Hill (2016 and 2017) has explored some rappers' engagement with the Tijaniyya Fayda.<sup>3</sup> Verbal arts in religious circles have been collected, but not closely examined. The most comprehensive research carried out on Sufi narratives, as distinct from poetry, is by Mamaram Seck (2013) and Cheikh Tidiane Lo (2018). In Senegalese scholarship on Arabic religious literature, Amar Samb's *Essai sur la contribution du Sénégal à la littérature d'expression arabe* (1972) remains a classic. Fallou Ngom (2016) has studied in a monumental book the forms of Murid Ajami literature. Sana Camara has collected and transcribed an important body of Murid Ajami poems (2008) and examined some poems by Musa Ka (1997). Christine Thu Nhi Dang's (2017) article on erotic Sufi poetry in Senegal is also a reference in this domain. The work of Aliou Kissima Tandia (1999) on Soninke poetry is probably the only published scholarly research on that subject. Thierno Mouhammad Said Diop (2017) and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2009) have documented some of Abass Sall's poetic production.<sup>4</sup> The other works are unpublished master's theses at the University of Dakar (M. Lô 1993). Oludamini Ogunnaike (2016 and 2020) did a compelling study focusing on Shaykh Ibrahima Niasse's Arabic poetry. However, a cross-cultural study of the transition from written to vocal, and of the role of performers in addition to the themes, still needs to be undertaken—a task this paper attempts to initiate. Some of the themes that are less addressed in scholarship concern *tawhid* or the oneness of God, the intercession of Prophet Muhammad, and the moral and etiquette standards to attain spiritual transformation. The centrality of *tawhid* in African Sufi texts can be understood within a context of religious syncretism where lingering African beliefs still shape approaches to Islamic faith. Intercession, being a cornerstone of Sufi schools, is given due consideration as well. Seydi Djamil Niane's (2016) work offers an interesting glimpse into the importance of prophetic intercession in Malick Sy's poetry.

The Wolof texts are chosen because of my linguistic fluency in that language. As for the Soninke, the availability of the texts in both the original language and in French allows me to combine them with the Wolof texts. Besides, the Wolof and Soninke people share several religious and cultural traits owing to their long-held cohabitation and blending. The Soninke are reported to be the first Islamized Western African ethnic group, since they interacted earlier with Berber and Arab merchants in the Wagadu Empire, known as Ancient Ghana, a century after the birth of Islam in the Hijaz. They lived in Wagadu, Kaarta, Gajaaga, and the Guidimaxe, meaning the elevated lands of Assaba, Tagant, Hodh, and Adrar (Bathily 1989; Kane 2004; Tandia 1999). This wide zone is couched between part of Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania. After the decline of the empire (a process sped up by the Almoravids' assaults), the Soninke migrated in different directions: some moved down to the current area of Burkina Faso, naming their settlement Wagadugu after their fallen empire; others followed the Senegalese River valley down to the eastern side of the Fuuta region, then inhabited by the Haal-pulaar, followed by a second wave of

---

<sup>3</sup> The Tijaniyya was founded by Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani in Algeria and then in Morocco, where his body was buried. The Fayda is a Sufi movement within the broader Tijaniyya Order created by Shaykh Ibrahima Niass (1900-1975) of Kaolack, who has millions of disciples in Nigeria and elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> Abass Sall is a Tijani Sufi guide based in Louga, Senegal.

Soninke migration to Fuuta. Yet, unlike the first group, the second group did not become integrated within Haal-pulaar culture: they moved outward to settle in Bakel (northeastern Senegal) when they felt oppressed by the Toucouleur, the Haal-pular people living in Fuuta (Bathily 1989; Kane 2004).

One of their influences upon the Haal-pular was the introduction of Islam. They counted several religious preachers among the Dramé and Cissé clans. Muhammadu Lamin Drame, a nineteenth-century Sufi leader who resisted French penetration, originated in the Dramé clan, based in Gunjur. The Wolof nicknamed them Sarakhole, a name that probably derives from the phrase *sar xole* (“shout”), an allusion to what seemed to them like a loud and incomprehensible language. The European explorers and colonizers retained the name of Sarakhole in their written documents. Therefore, it can be argued that the Soninke Islamized Fuuta, which, in turn, Islamized the Wolof, as the latter’s kingdom of Jolof was a neighboring entity to Fuuta. If Al Hajj Umar Tall (1796-1864), a Haal-pular-born religious propagator in West Africa, kept his native tongue as a medium of communication besides Arabic, the two other prominent Wolofized Muslim leaders of Haal-pulaar origin, Al Hajj Malick Sy (1855-1922)<sup>5</sup> and Ahmadu Bamba (1853-1927), chose Wolof as a lingua franca instead, to convert the Wolof communities in the early-twentieth century (C. A. Diop 1960:129). Next to their scholarly language of Arabic, their messages were transmitted to their followers in Wolof. In this way the Wolof and Soninke religious poems written by the religious guides and their family members and followers contributed to expanding Islam and Sufism, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In fact, poetry was commonly used as an effective rhetorical device of Islamic pedagogy by Arab Muslim scholars (Stetkevych 2010), especially Sufi writers (Ogunnaike 2016). It has been characterized as a medium of “mass communication” (Ngom 2016). However, in sub-Saharan Africa, oral performance of written texts seems to be a predilection, owing to the traditions already embedded in those forms of composition and vocal transmission. Oral poetry arguably can achieve what printed text alone cannot: “Because oral poetry has always been an essential technology for the transmission and expression of ideas of all kinds, it does not divorce entertainment from instruction, artistic craft from cultural work” (Foley 2002:28). The written genre of Muslim poetry becomes appropriated, contextualized to fit into the culturally dominant modes of communication, which are largely oral. The two modes, writing and orality, end up coalescing without any practical incompatibility, as previous scholars have generally assumed. Such a dichotomy has been challenged by several researchers of oral tradition and literature, demonstrating how the two modes often overlap and sustain one another (Finnegan 2012; Foley 2002; Ong 1982). Although this essay is confined to poetry as a genre, it needs to be mentioned that other Wolof prose texts have played similar functions, especially in the field of *tafsir* or Qu’ranic exegesis (see Jeremy Dell’s “Unbraiding the Qu’ran: Wolofal and the Tafsīr Tradition of Senegambia” (2018)).

---

<sup>5</sup> Malick Sy would teach both in Wolof and Haal-pulaar, depending on the students’ native tongues.

### Voiced Texts: Beyond Duality

That written texts may transition into oral texts is not unique to Africa. In Europe, many popular songs are known to be derived from literary texts. However, the passage from literature to orality has been devalued and cast as folklore: “It is not productive to think of orality in a negative fashion. Orality does not mean illiteracy, nor should it be perceived as a lack stripped of the values inherent to voice and all of its positive function” (Zumthor 1990:17). In contrast, oral poetry encompasses three modes of deployment: composition, performance, and reception (Foley 2002). When any strand of this triple continuum involves oral rendition, the dichotomy between writing and unwritten poetry becomes porous. Leaving aside a few special cases such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the canon of Western literature centers on texts composed, rendered, and received through writing. The other extreme edge is poetry composed, performed, and received through oral rendition. However, some forms of poetry may fall somewhere between these extremes. The voiced texts under scrutiny in this paper are cases in point, because they were originally composed in writing before being deployed and received orally. Therefore, when orality intervenes at any stage of the poetic spectrum, such a genre should be considered part of voiced textuality, a dimension of oral literature, broadly speaking.

The benefit of this theoretical point is that it allows us to expand the contours of oral literature by taking into consideration an important body of contemporary texts that fit within Foley’s template, and that are often neglected by many literary scholars. Foley is not the first and only scholar to shed light on the dynamic possibility of oral poetry—Finnegan and several others have pointed out the artificial boundaries between oral and written literature, or simply the disappearance of purely oral societies (Zumthor 1990:25)—but his template has been innovative. Those who emphasize the oral composition of poetry (Parry 1971; Lord 2019) or oral performance alone (Bauman 1977; Okpewho 1990) fail to capture the complexity to which Foley calls our attention. As argued by Zumthor, “oral poets come under the influence of certain linguistic procedures, certain themes found in written works: intertextuality plays back and forth” (1990:27). Similarly, many African writers are influenced by oral literature and traditions in their styles and themes.

Borrowing from Foley, I argue that the concept of voiced text captures a large swath of contemporary African oral poetry, more particularly in Muslim Sufi circles of West Africa. Sufi shaykhs of the various orders are generally prolific poets in both Arabic and their native tongues. Their poems in African languages are modeled upon the Arabic written *qasida* (ode, a classic form involving a single meter, with each line ending in the same sounds) or follow the rhythms of African songs. While their sophisticated Arabic poems are readable by only a few learned students, they are still chanted for larger audiences during Mawlid (observance of the Prophet’s birthday), *ziyaara* (spiritual gatherings), and so forth. For instance, the famous ode by Imam Al Bussayri, an Egyptian Sufi poet, called *Al Burda* (“The Mantle”), is sung during the first ten nights of Rabi al-awal (the first month of the Muslim calendar) before the Mawlid on the twelfth night of the same month: “The vocal style applied to the *Burda* is both vigorous and repetitive, with the same basic melody, rhythms and moderate, regular tempo employed with unflinching energy for the entirety of the recital” (Dang 2017:363). An audience does not necessarily understand the verbal meaning of poetry sung in Arabic, but people believe that simply hearing

and participating in the singing is a source of blessing. The aesthetic dimension of the melody attracts people to those religious gatherings in mosques, *zawaya* (spiritual centers), and more and more in public spaces. This has led Sufi leaders to tap into the attractiveness of the chanted texts to write religious poems in their native languages, accessible to all through communal performance.

The Murid Sufi community is the leading producer of religious poetry in Wolof. Fallou Ngom (2016) links the expansion of Ajami literature with the rise of the Muridiyya in Senegal. Among their distinctive identity markers, the Murids particularly valorize their African rootedness. Compared to other Sufi paths in Senegal, the Muridiyya is one of the rare *tariqas* (Sufi brotherhoods) to have been founded by a Senegalese-born shaykh, Ahmadu Bamba (1853-1927; Babou 2007). The other main brotherhoods, Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya, were founded outside the country. Such a position leads them to promote the black African identity of their community through their style of clothing and the use of Wolofal, a term coined to designate poetry in the Wolof language. As quoted from Sana Camara's book, *Sëriñ Musa Ka*, a prominent Murid poet, asserted this choice in two lines (2008:24):

Li tax way wiy wolof te waroon di yaaram	Why is the song in Wolof while it should be in Arabic?
Damaa nar gaayi jànjul xam Boroomam.	Because I want illiterates to know God.

A similar remark that foregrounds the didactic function of the songs is made in a Soninke religious poem drawn from Tandia's appendix (1999:146):

Suuguun misaali xampa yi	Take the songs like a ladder
Sondonme su gat into i ya,	Whoever uses them in that way
Ma ken ga hanmi katta i ya,	Going on them like a springboard
Ti na i kiñandi Alla yi,	To reach the peak of perfection
...	...
Nan li sigindi Alla ya.	Nothing will prevent him from attaining God.

Even in Tivaoune, home to one of the largest Tijaniyya branches of Senegal, the chanting of Arabic poetry is either preceded or succeeded by exegetical commentaries in Wolof for the non-literate audience. The traditional Wolof griots play an important role in religious oral performances. They transfer their artistic craft in the service of the religious songs. The Tijaniyya of Senegal is particularly visible in the reconversion of traditional secular griots into sacred song specialists. Their talent in creating what they call *air* (melody and rhythm), as well as the quality of their voices, factor into the profusion of poetic oral performances during religious events. The texts are generally composed by Sufi shaykhs, but the creation of the *air* designed for the performance rests with the singers, be they griots or non-griots. In other words, the authors of the texts are not always their popular performers or singers in the Sufi circle. The power of voicing is acknowledged in anthropology and literature, with its capacity, through repetition, to shape subjectivities. It is along these lines that Amanda Weidman claims: "Vocal practices, including everyday speech, song, verbal play, ritual speech, oratory, and recitation, can be viewed as modes of practice and discipline that, in their repeated enactment, may performatively bring into being

classed, gendered, political, ethnic, or religious subjects” (2014:44). So, the use of voiced text, beyond the communicative function, helps build distinctive community identity markers. With the profusion of Sufi affiliations, it is crucial for groups to forge their styles, called *daaj* by the Murids,<sup>6</sup> to distance themselves from other, similar communities. Even within a given community, different singers impose their idiosyncratic ways, despite the use of a shared repertoire of songs.

The properties of the voiced texts enable the expansion of African oral poetry in the era of mediatization. In fact, the diverse media platforms are conduits through which oral poetry thrives today. The shareability of voiced texts via social media platforms, such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook, provides unique and faster communication strategies for Sufi groups to circulate their messages and reassert their community identity and spiritual life. Sufi voiced texts are entering the world of multimodality, reaching audiences spatially separated but virtually interconnected, to engage with the oral poems produced by their religious communities.<sup>7</sup> Groups and individuals enjoy the possibility of consuming and sharing mediatized streams of oral and written poems enabled by social media applications. Those groups can now create audiovisual documents through YouTube, containing not only the written lyrics, but their sounds, which can be shared instantly among thousands of disciples and other listeners. The sonic dimension of the lyrics is critical as well, since “vocal communication fulfills an exteriorizing function within the social group. It assures that a society’s discourse about itself, be it serious or futile, is heard for the sake of its own perpetuation” (Foley 2002:23). For example, the religious epic of Al Hajj Umar Tall, the West African Tijaniyya jihadist, is made into an audiovisual text, and the epic composed and performed by the Senegalese singer Baba Maal<sup>8</sup> incorporates French interpretations.

Other poems by Al Hajj Malick Sy (1855-1922), such as his *qasida* titled *Taysir*,<sup>9</sup> are transcribed on YouTube into Latin letters, with both the Arabic text and the recited versions included in the transcriptions. The use of multiple modes for a single text further complicates and enriches Foley’s template. Today, old and new Sufi poems and songs are spreading to wider audiences, thanks to those technological and social media applications that continue to serve their original educational and spiritual function. Both functions are inseparable from the artistic and entertainment dimension—the essence of poetry at large. With the Coronavirus pandemic, many Mawlid events were canceled, but replaced by online and tele-Mawlid to avoid onsite crowding. Many of the song performances have been recorded and are still accessible on several social media platforms. This adaption has been made easy and effective because most Sufi communities have been engaging with new digital tools since well before the health crisis.

---

<sup>6</sup> The Murid use the word *daaj*, whereas the Tijani use the word *air* to designate the melody and rhythm of songs.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Diego Gonzales (2017) has explored how the Niass branch of the Tijaniyya reconnects its international community with the center in Kaolack via information and technologies of communication. Shaykh Mahy Cisse is playing a critical role in disseminating *mahrifa* knowledge through social media platforms.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of Baba Maal’s audio can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqB1ebFzAP0>.

<sup>9</sup> For an example of *Taysir* in Latin letters, see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_DjAa1ZFZXA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DjAa1ZFZXA).

## Religious Poetry: Generic Contours

African oral religious poetry, especially from Islamic inspiration, carries a variety of subgenres, including *marsiya* (eulogy), ode, panegyric poetry, supplication, sermons, and *sira* (the Prophet Muhammad's biography) (Seydou 2008:162). Ruth Finnegan frames the genre of religious poetry as follows (2012:166):

There are three main ways in which poetry can be regarded as being religious. Firstly, the content may be religious, as in verse about mythical actions of gods or direct religious instruction or invocation. Secondly, poetry may be recited by those who are regarded as religious specialists. Thirdly, it may be performed on occasions which are generally agreed to be religious ones.

Al Hajj Malick Sy's famous *sira* titled *Khilasu Zhahab* ("The Forged Gold") is a comprehensive biographical poem of around a thousand verses, with thirty chapters, chanted and translated in Wolof during Mawlid ceremonies. The following poem is not an exact translation of the Messenger's Ascension chapter in it, but a chanted synthesis in Wolof, intended for disciples ignorant of Arabic. The author, Mbaye Donde Mbaye, a singer from the griot caste, was the leading singer in the Tivaoune branch of Tijaniyya. The song, titled "Apollo," which I collected from YouTube,<sup>10</sup> is as follows:

Taraqaa: Yonent yeeg na.	<i>Taraqaa</i> : <sup>11</sup> the Messenger is ascending.
Mu reere Makka,	After taking dinner in Mecca,
Apoloo baa ngay langaan,	Apollo <sup>12</sup> took off,
Mu tong caak Jibriil,	Accompanied Gabriel,
Nees tuut mu jaar Yathrib.	Then they laid over in Yathrib.
Mooy Madinatul Munawara.	That is now Medina Munawara. <sup>13</sup>
Mu wacci fa, julli fa naari rakaa.	He stopped there and prayed two prayers.
Soog a depaar ak porotokol bi.	Then, he departed with the protocol.
Taraqaa Yonent Yeeg na.	<i>Taraqaa</i> , the Messenger is ascending.

Al Hajj Malick Sy, the main Tijaniyya preacher in Senegal, who was also a prolific poet (Diallo 2010; Samb 1972). His known poetic lines are estimated to number more than five thousand. Some of them are translated into Wolof by singers or mixed with Arabic words, such as the word *taraqaa* in the quotation above. This poem is derived from the chapter where Al Hajj Malick Sy describes the Prophet Muhammad's ascension. As a *sira* text, the poem teaches the Prophet's history, beginning from the events preceding his birth to his death.

The genre called *marsiya* is most commonly found among the Muridiyya Sufi Order, led

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HNfd\\_OhOUE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HNfd_OhOUE).

<sup>11</sup> An Arabic verb meaning "elevating, mounting."

<sup>12</sup> Apollo, referring to the space satellite as a metaphor for Gabriel, the Archangel.

<sup>13</sup> The city in Saudi Arabia where the tomb of the Prophet is located.

by Ahmadu Bamba. It is based on the Arabic elegy genre, which mourns deceased Sufi shaykhs or important religious figures to whom the disciples are attached. The following excerpt collected from YouTube<sup>14</sup> is from a long *marsiya* dedicated by Musa Ka to Ibrahima Fall, one of the most important followers of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba. It is chanted in a mournful tone and is accompanied by its transcription.

Seex Ibra gëm ga lândi na.	Shaykh Ibra's faith is overflowing.
Moo tax mu dëddu àddina.	That's why he turns his back on this world.
Fekki na Bàmba sotti na,	To go and completely join Bamba,
Wàcci na aljanay texe.	He has landed in Paradise; he is safe.

The poem was written by Musa Ka (1891-1966), a famous Murid poet, in both Wolof and Arabic. Here he chants about the death of Ibrahima Fall, abbreviated as Ibra, and his strong faith in Ahmadu Bamba, which accounts for his having left this world to join his shaykh in paradise. The song, modeled after Arabic poetic meter, is chanted by numerous singers, with a range of melodies. The intent behind the poem is not only to show how a disciple should be attached to his guide, but also to teach the younger generation about Ibrahima Fall's death. The events during which such poems are chanted in Wolof are mainly the Great Màggal of Touba (Coulon 1999) or during *cant* (thanksgiving ceremonies) of the Bay Fall, followers and imitators of Ibrahima, known for wearing clothing stylized with colorful patches and for their dreadlocks. The Bay Fall, unlike the Tijani followers, and some other Murids, use drums to accompany their *zikr* (recitative meditations) and songs.

Songs can also be a supplication to Allah (God) for protection or for obtaining specific favors and blessings. Consider, for example, this excerpt from a Soninke religious poem (Tandia 1999:144):

Alla o xalife an na maxa oku toxo!	O Allah, we are confiding in you!
Seyitaani do yonki bure maxa	Please, do not forsake us to Satan
Do xirise be ga ma foofo nari	With his dark suggestions
Kisi killun su ga sanku <sup>15</sup> a maxa.	And to any ignorant guide who went astray.

This passage is excerpted from a long poem of more than thirty lines in Soninke. It asks God for protection against Satan and a bad spiritual guide that leads people astray. Its formulation is indicative of Sufi orientation, which holds that a disciple needs a spiritual leader to guide him to God. Non-Sufi Muslims reject intermediaries between believers and God. As Finnegan has clarified the situation (2012:167):

In the areas where Arabic models have been influential through the tradition of Islam, religious poetry, often in written form, occurs with a pronounced homiletic and sometimes narrative

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDXzpigQxl0>.

<sup>15</sup> The word *sanku* in the original Soninke version has the same meaning in Wolof, a trait of their linguistic borrowing from each other.



emphasis. Such religious poetry occurs, for instance, among the Hausa and others in West Africa. Although written in the local language, it is often directly influenced by the Arabic models and contains many Arabic words and sentiments.

We can conclude that religious poetry is a rich arena, containing almost all the genres of Arabic-influenced poetry. Such similarity denotes a certain creativity of local poets and singers to transpose texts into Wolof or Soninke songs, with appropriate recontextualizations, like Mbaye Donde's synthesis of All Hajj Malick Sy's *qasida* examined above.

### The Leitmotif of *Tawhid* in Religious Poetry

Muslim life is said to be founded on five basic acts conventionally called pillars: profession of faith, five prayers a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, almsgiving, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition to these rituals is an exhortation to improve one's good manners and connection to God through meditation and personal efforts. The Sufi brotherhoods are mystical schools that emphasize this spiritual training to promote the individual's reconnection with God. Sufi poetry tackles all these ranges of topics. The fundamental pillar (*tawhid*), belief in the oneness of God, is prominent in their poems and songs. One is not a true believer unless one believes that there is only one God; believing in multiple gods is polytheism. Without this primary knowledge, no one can pretend to be a Muslim. This is perhaps why African religious leaders created songs in their native languages to educate the uneducated members in that regard. For instance, this Soninke poem from Tandia's corpus lays emphasis on the oneness of God and the need to rely entirely on him (1999:120):

Dunuya fiinum kunfa ga dangi mene.	The worldly things are fleeting.
Maxa hanmi an fin toxo Allam axa	Don't hesitate: return to God,
Tunka be ga siro an da na an dabari	The Supreme Master who created you
Na an riiti duna di komaaxu maxa	And who sent you on Earth to worship Him.
Xusa na a da kome ga sigi	Accept to be a permanent worshipper,
Batiye fi su di a ga duume a maxa	Always cultivating him.
Sere be ga a mulla a na i ku sago	He who wants his desires realized,
An xusa i fin su toxo Alla maxa	Let him entirely refer to God.

African Sufi leaders had to face the remnants of traditional religions and cults, even after the mass conversion to Islam. Polytheism and belief in supernatural powers other than God still influence the worldviews of recently converted Muslims. Al Hajj Umar Tall's jihad was waged against not only followers of traditional religions, but new Muslims, still adhering to paganistic practices, including divination (Dieng 1997). The consolidation of the *tawhid* becomes a cornerstone of the Sufi leaders' mission. Seeing the poor Arabic literacy of the recent converts, they decided to translate the tenets of Islam into their native languages. By replacing the traditional religious songs and rituals with Islam-oriented ones, they hoped to instruct those

unlettered masses. The following excerpt is drawn from a 75-line poem titled *Ben da in kamu tu* (“He Who Acknowledges the Oneness of God”) in Tandia’s corpus (1999:124):

I ben da in Kaman tu na a batu a ken	He who worships God and acknowledges his oneness
da ho kita	has something
Kitaana gabe su dangi kun su ma ken kita.	That the many wealthy people could not have.

These lines ending with the sound *a* are close to the Arabic poetic *ya* ending, called *Yahiya*, highlighting the incomparable value of having full faith in God’s uniqueness. Wealthy African kings, vaunting their gold mines, are probably the addressees of such an invitation to return to God, the source of all goods. The Soninke originated in Wagadu, the ancient Ghana Empire, which Arab merchants associated with the land of gold as indexed in the poem. Having those powerful tycoons abandon earthly riches in favor of pure worship of God could not have been an easy task. The recourse to poetry, because of its communication capacity, seems an effective strategy for preachers to get their messages across.

Besides *tawhid*, the love for the Prophet and his way of life are the highest values promoted in religious poetry as expressed in this Soninke poem excerpted from Tandia’s corpus (1999:158):

Xa sun ri seede in da	Come bear witness to my favor
Ti in ke dunje seren da,	To see that allegiance I have to the being
Fofo ga xaaye ken da.	To whom all creatures are submitted.
Annebi Mahammadu.	I mean Prophet Muhammad.

The poetic technique of announcing the thing to which the poet is alluding, as the singer does in the last line of the above excerpt, is called *ghazal* in Arabic; we see here an indication of Soninke poets’ borrowing from the Arabic poetic style. The term *seede* (“to bear witness”) in the first line is common to both Wolof and Soninke; it points to a history of exchanges between these communities.

The Prophet Muhammad is not only a messenger in the Sufi understanding, but a master, who deserves veneration and imitation, because he is considered an intercessor on the Day of Judgment. An illustrative poem goes as follows (Tandia 1999:160):

Annebi Mahammadu,	Prophet Muhammad,
O da an ñaaga Alla nen ña.	Intercede for us to God.
An na oku deema non ña.	Bring us your assistance.

Some non-Sufi Muslims doubt that anyone can intercede in favor of anyone else on the Day of Judgment, but the Prophet’s intercession is one of the backbones of the Sufi’s prayers. The love thematized in much Sufi poetry and song turns on the Prophet’s ability to assist believers against hellfire. In the following section, I will analyze poems related to moral decorum and good manners that are necessary for spiritual growth.

### Decorum and Good Manners

Showing respect and kindness to one's fellow Muslims and all human beings is highly valued in the Sufi paths. The following passage, taken from the corpus that Cissé collected, is a poem of the Layeen community of Dakar (2009:282):<sup>16</sup>

Jëfew yiw ak maandu.	Be pious and just.
Mooy li gën ci Taalibe.	That is better for a disciple.
Ku xemmeem ndënal noon Yälla	He who admires saints' hearts
Da ngay déglu woote ba.	Should listen to their message.
Nga am xel, te am teggin.	Be intelligent and full of respect.
Te bul déglu gaa ña regg	Never follow the wealthy people
Bay dox di puukare.	Who show off on Earth.
Lu du diine du teggin.	Unreligious behavior is disrespectful.

Being submissive and obedient are qualities expected from any disciple who yearns to be educated by a Sufi saint. Following the footsteps of wealthy people who are unmindful of divine religion is strictly prohibited for spiritual growth. Layeen songs are sung in unison during the group's religious gathering on Ngor's beach, wearing white clothes. Often, they make bodily movements in unison while seated. Men and women are separated in these gatherings, but everyone participates in the singing, which provides powerful spiritual flow and effervescence and helps the participants strengthen their sense of community belonging. The following excerpt written by Shaykh Abass Sall and drawn from Thierno Mouhammad Said Diop's book is telling in this sense (2017:31):

Bul gëd mak, bul wax yit fen nga	Never tell an elder you lie.
Waxal neeneen nu gën a noy sax juum nga	Better say it differently, like you are wrong.
Lu tee nga wax seetaat ko, ndeem kuy weddi nga	Instead tell him to check, if you disagree.
Gëmu ma lii, doy na lu naaw ci weddi	I don't believe it; it is better in refutation.
Wegu te teey, te jàng wax ci mbooloo	Be correct, and learn how to speak in public.
Wax mooy balaas, gaa naa ko wax te booloo	Your words are your judge according to all.
Dawal weereente, watul it wedente	Avoid disputes; avoid argument.
Bul di xulookat, bul di it xottante	Don't tussle; don't fight.
Bu wax bareee ba bëg naaw, jogal te wéy	When words get tense, go away.
Te noppi, noppiloo sa non, nga am woy	Be quiet, including your people, to win.

Shaykh Abass Sall is a prolific poet in both Arabic and Wolof; however, his Wolof poems are crafted according to Arabic styles. He respects the rhymes and meters. He is not known to be a singer, nor a performer, but some groups of his followers sing his poems for audiences. He is a famous Sufi shaykh and scholar whose work is popular across the Muslim world. Like other Sufi

---

<sup>16</sup> This is a Sufi group based mostly on the peninsula of Dakar. They believe their leader to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ and his son, the awaited Mahdi (see Sylla 1989).

shaykhs, he uses Wolof to reach listeners who are not versed in Arabic. Some of his poems are published and commented on by Mouhammad Said Diop (2017) using Latin scripts, as Abass Sall writes in Ajami.

Some singers have written their texts down, as they have been educated in Islamic learning. Mbaye Done Mbaye of Tivaoune used some sayings of Sëriñ Babacar Sy (known as Mbaye Sy) and reworked them in poetic forms. A perfect illustration is this song I collected from YouTube:<sup>17</sup>

**Awwukat:**

Ku fi yaakaar ne ganaaw Mbay  
Di na wuuteek kanamaam  
Xamuloo Yalla, xamoo Mbay Sy  
Xamoo it la nga ngoy

**Chorus:**

He who thinks that after Mbaye  
Will be different from before Mbaye,  
You neither know God, nor Mbaye Sy,  
Nor what you possess.

**Woykat:**

Réew mi nanu gem top ci Mbay  
Sàmmi waxam ngoy ci jeffam  
Te bañ geersu leeneen

**Soloist:**

People, let's follow Mbaye.  
Respect his words and action.  
Let's not turn away.

**Awwukat:**

Ko nak ci nu war na ganaaw Mbay  
Ba mu laqo nu taxaw ci juróomam yi  
Di ñaanal ak njabootam baña fay

**Chorus:**

Then what we should do after Mbaye,  
After he passed away, is to respect his five.  
Praying for his family to get united.

**Woykat:**

Sunu diine, sunu tariqa, sunuy Daahira tey  
Ak sunuy mecce a kit yoonu tiwawan  
baña fey

**Soloist:**

That is, our religion, brotherhood, and Daahira,  
And our professions, and our way to Tivaoune.

Sëriñ Babacar Sy, nicknamed Mbaye Sy, once called all the disciples to Tivaoune to tell them his last five recommendations before his death. These recommendations were respect for Islam, respect for the Sufi brotherhood of the Tijaniyya, having membership in a Daahira (religious association for solidarity), having a job for a living, and regularly going to visit Tivaoune for spiritual connection. Mbaye Done creatively incorporated these recommendations in his song, backed up by a chorus that reiterates the refrain in a call and response interaction. In short, the goal of Sufi voiced poetry is primarily to educate the masses to adopt Muslim values learned from the sacred text of the Qur'an and the hadiths or Prophet's sayings. Nevertheless, most of the songs are also panegyric texts, praising the Sufi shaykhs who have brought Islamic teachings to common believers in Senegal. I will briefly examine some samples of such panegyric genres, before concluding this article.

<sup>17</sup>The excerpt begins one hour and fifty-six minutes into the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpJd4HvYSGs>.

## Performing Panegyric Texts

The key notion of Sufi spiritual training is gratitude, considered a force that can effect a spiritual connection between a creature and God, believers and the Prophet Muhammad, and disciples and their guide. In addressing each of these relations, Sufi songs are pervaded by the motif of gratitude, as expressed in this Soninke poem from Tandia's corpus (1999:138):

Alla oku da an taiga ti an ga da ke be na	God, we are grateful to You for what you gave us.
Tiigaye daga an ya da duna do laaxara	You deserve gratitude in this world and in the hereafter.

The modes of performing panegyric songs vary from one religious circle to another. For instance, while the majority of Qadiriyya shaykhs accept the playing of musical instruments like the *tabala* (a local drum), others, including the Tivaoune branch of Tijaniyya, categorically reject the use of drums or any type of instrument to accompany the songs. Al Hajj Abdu Aziz Sy,<sup>18</sup> one of Malick Sy's successors, wrote a Wolof poem in which he describes how to chant in honor of his brother, Sëriñ Babacar Sy.<sup>19</sup> The following excerpt is transcribed from YouTube:<sup>20</sup>

Bul leen ko xiinal.	Don't play a drum.
Bu leen mbalax.	Don't use a <i>mbalax</i> .
Ba leen tama yi.	Don't use a tom-tom.
Ba leen junj junj yi.	Don't use a <i>junj junj</i> .

This excerpt is drawn from a larger bilingual poem, in which the author alternates between Wolof and Arabic verses. In this passage, he forbids disciples to sing like *mbalax* singers. (*Mbalax* is the predominant musical genre in Senegal.) He enumerates the names of local drums, such as tom-tom and *junj junj*, as formally prohibited in singing the praises of the Sufi guides. The implied opposition between Sufi songs and the secular modes of performance leads to questions about contemporary ramifications of the performance of Sufi songs outside the purely religious realm.

## Conclusion: New Developments

In Sufi circles, vocalization confers life upon written poetry. Written poems are often inaccessible to the masses, most of whom cannot read Arabic scripts. The existence of Latin letters facilitates the readability of such texts by Western-educated people. However, being able to read the transcribed poems in Latin letters is not, apparently, enough to duly appreciate the aesthetic essence and quality of the written poetry. Vocalization plays a bridging role, especially

<sup>18</sup> He was the successor of his older brother, Sëriñ Babacar, from 1957 to 1997.

<sup>19</sup> He was the first successor of his father, All Hajj Malick Sy, after the latter passed away in 1922, until 1957.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdlHgJ5EduY>.

when performed by adept singers, between the written texts and the broader audiences whom the author aims to educate. Two types of occasion, one ritualistic, the other more mundane, can be identified. By ritualistic occasion, I evoke those heightened moments of spiritual effervescence and communion associated with the Muslim calendar, like the Mawlid celebration, or invented by authorized figures, like a *ziyaara* or *màggal* (a commemoration of one's guide). The poems chanted or intoned during such occasions bear the mark of a special spiritual appeal, as they set themselves apart from those performed on ordinary days. The *qasida* known as *Al Burda*,<sup>21</sup> which is chanted on the eve of Mawlid night, stimulates emotion more easily than those recited in a different period. The degree of immersion and deference accorded to ritualized performances of poetry is immediately felt by the audiences, even by outside observers. In the Tivaoune *zawiya*, a loudspeaker repeatedly warns people to observe decorum and honor the recitation session of the *Al Burda* by avoiding futile talk and disrespectful bodily movements.

During the official Mawlid, a commentator leads the communication, accompanied by a band of singers, who back up his explanations through songs that match the events, ideas, or people being referenced. This dialogic interaction between commentators and singers, although it is present among the Senegalese Sufi communities such as the Murid,<sup>22</sup> is especially prevalent within the Tivaoune subgroup. The audiences' appreciation of the quality of the dialogic interpretation and song is expressed through snapping fingers, short but loud utterances of approbation, and even walking up to the singers or the interpreter to offer some cash or other gifts. Such monetary rewards account for the emergence of a greater number of interpreters, called *gàmmukat*, and singers that were previously unknown. Only renowned singers and interpreters, however, are allowed to perform in front of the khalif, the moral leader of the Sufi order, generally the oldest man in the extended paternal line of the founder. Small-scale religious ceremonies are held throughout the year at different localities in the country and among the Senegalese diaspora in Europe or North America, where emerging singers and commentators showcase their talent to earn the collective recognition of the whole Sufi community to which they claim to belong.

Such young singers often force their way to fame by recording videoclips and participating in semi-secular events, as well as by innovating on the established melody. Some even go beyond the traditional barriers by incorporating musical instruments. This new trend sparks vigorous rejection from the authorized voices of the Sufi communities, inviting the transgressors to return to orthodoxy or be excommunicated from the circle. Exclusion means losing legitimacy in the eyes of the disciples who consume the performances. In November, 2019, the general khalif threatened with excommunication a female shaykha among the

---

<sup>21</sup> A panegyric poem written by the Egyptian Abdallah Muhammadu ibn Sa'id al-Sanhaji al-Busiri (1211-1294).

<sup>22</sup> Akassa Samb, a famous contemporary Murid singer, and many others use it among the Murids.

Muridiyya if she continued to allow “lousy” or immoral dances with her followers.<sup>23</sup> She presented her excuses publicly.

Other groups that appropriate the Sufi religious poetic repertoire and symbolism are secular musicians. Some ambivalence, however, can be noticed in how such a phenomenon is handled in Senegal. The use of *qasayid* (plural of *qasida*) in musical lyrics dates back many years. It has sometimes elicited a reaction from authorized voices that would condemn it, but no systematic bans have been announced by any religious circle. Samba Camara (2019) characterized the ambivalent rapport between Sufi authorities and musicians’ appropriation of sacred texts, space, and symbolism as a source of friction, but no more. The boundaries between the repertoires and realms appear blurred when musicians are reaffirming their membership to the Sufi communities and at the same time exercising their musical professions. Youssou N’Dour and other hip-hop artists have clearly said that they sing what they identify with (Samba Camara 2019; Hill 2016). The categorical rejection tends to be expressed generally against religious singers who transgress the frontiers of the sacred by adopting secular musical styles, while moderate usage of Sufi poetic texts and symbolism by nonreligious singers is condoned.

In virtual spaces, powered by social media platforms, vocal songs benefit from a second life. Groups and individuals with the same Sufi affiliation constantly swap streams of religious songs, which they may use as cellphone ringtones, or for other purposes. Most religious singers have their own Facebook and YouTube accounts, which generate income through the increasing number of subscribers. Financial benefits are at the root of unwelcome innovation among young performers who compete to widen their fan base. All these new social dynamics are shaping Sufi poetry, dovetailed between sacred and secular styles of performance and communicated by multimodal vehicles of dissemination. The outcome of such interactions, typical of our postmodern and globalized world, will forcibly change the entrenched conservative modes of preserving this rich poetic heritage, created and still being produced after more than two centuries in Senegal.

*Gaston Berger University*

## References

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Babou 2007   | Cheikh Anta Babou. <i>Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853-1913</i> . Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.                         |
| Bathily 1989 | Abdoulaye Bathily. <i>Les portes de l’or: Le royaume de Galam (Sénégal) de l’ère musulmane au temps des négriers (VIII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)</i> . Paris: L’Harmattan. |

---

<sup>23</sup> Aida Diallo, who was one of the wives of Shaykh Bethio Thioune, the founder of the Thiantacoune. The latter was a disciple of Shaykh Saliou Mbacke, a son of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba. After Shaykh Bethio’s death, Aida Diallo claimed to be the new leader of the movement, in competition with Bethio’s elder son. This is particularly interesting as it challenges the male-dominant succession in Sufi communities.

- Bauman 1977 Richard Bauman. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.
- Brenner and Last 1985 Louis Brenner and Murray Last. "The Role of Language in West African Islam." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 55.4:432-46.
- Samba Camara 2019 Samba Camara. "Youssou N'Dour: *I Bring What I Love* (2008) as a Window into the Frictions between Islam and Popular Music in Senegal." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 32.3:286-301.
- Sana Camara 1997 Sana Camara. "A'jami Literature in Senegal: The Example of Sëriñ Muusaa Ka, Poet and Biographer." *Research in African Literatures*, 28.3:163-82.
- Sana Camara 2008 \_\_\_\_\_. *Sëriñ Muusaa Ka: Melokaani Roytéef*. Dakar: Papyrus Afrique.
- Cisse 2007 Mamadou Cisse. "Écrits et écriture en Afrique de l'Ouest." *Revue électronique internationale des Sciences du langage*, 6:63-88.
- Cissé 2009 Momar Cissé. *Parole chantée et communication sociale chez les Wolof du Sénégal*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Coulon 1999 Christian Coulon. "The *Grand Magal* in Touba: A Religious Festival of the Mouride Brotherhood of Senegal." *African Affairs*, 98:195-210.
- Dang 2017 Christine Thu Nhi Dang. "Erotics, Poetics, Politics: The Spheres of Action of Senegalese Sufi Voices." *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 26.3:349-72.
- Dell 2018 Jeremy Dell. "Unbraiding the Qu'ran: Wolofal and the *Tafsīr* Tradition of Senegambia." *Islamic Africa*, 9.1:55-76.
- M. Diagne 2005 Mamoussé Diagne. *Critique de la raison orale: Les pratiques discursives en Afrique noire*. Paris: Karthala.
- S. B. Diagne 2009 Souleymane Bachir Diagne. "Shaykh al-Hajj Abbass Sall: In Praise of the Tijāniya Order." In *Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation*. Ed. by John Renard. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 169-78.
- Diallo 2010 El Hadji Samba A. Diallo. *Les métamorphoses des modèles de succession dans la Tijāniyya sénégalaise*. Paris: Publisud.
- Dieng 1997 Samba Dieng. *El-Hadj Omar: La perle de l'Islam: Réalité historique, dimension mystique*. Dakar: Nouvelles éditions africaines du Sénégal.
- C. A. Diop 1960 Cheikh Anta Diop. *L'Afrique Noire pré-coloniale: Étude comparée des systèmes*



*politiques et sociaux de l'Europe et de l'Afrique Noire, de l'antiquité à la formation des états modernes*. Paris: Présence africaine.

- T. M. S. Diop 2017      Thierno Mouhammad Said Diop. *Enseignements de Shaykh Abass Sall: Traduction et commentaires en français du poème en Wolofal intitulé Sullamul Muhtadi wa Alamul Muqtadi* (Voies d'ascensions et repères pour l'aspirant à la guidée et au Bien). Dakar: L'Harmattan-Sénégal.
- Finnegan 2012      Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Literature in Africa*. World Oral Literature Series, 1. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers. <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/download/book/169>
- Foley 2002      John Miles Foley. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Gonzales 2017      Antonio Diego Gonzales. "A New African Orality? Tijani Sufism, Sacred Knowledge, and the ICTs in Post-Truth Times." Paper presented at the Workshop of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study: New Directions in the Study of Islamic Scholarship in Africa.
- Graham 1987      William A. Graham. "'An Arabic Reciting': Qur'an as Spoken Book." In *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 79-110.
- Hill 2016      Joseph Hill. "'Baay Is the Spiritual Leader of the Rappers': Performing Islamic Reasoning in Senegalese Sufi Hip-Hop." *Contemporary Islam*, 10.2:267-87.
- Hill 2017      \_\_\_\_\_. "A Mystical Cosmopolitanism: Sufi Hip Hop and the Aesthetics of Islam in Dakar." *Culture and Religion*, 18.4:388-408.
- Irele 1990      Abiola Irele. "The African Imagination." *Research in African Literatures*, 21.1:49-67.
- Jeppie and Diagne 2008      Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, eds. *The Meanings of Timbuktu*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Kane 2004      Oumar Kane. *La première hégémonie peule: Le Fuuta Tooro de Koli Ténjella à Almaami Abdul*. Paris: Karthala.
- Kane 2016      \_\_\_\_\_. *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- C. T. Lo 2018      Cheikh T. Lo. "Storytelling and Public Communication: Uses of Wolof

- Anecdotes in Cheikh Tidiane Sy's Religious Talks." *Western Folklore*, 77.2:171-200.
- M. Lô 1993 Mamadou Lô. *Aspects de la poésie "wolofal" mouride*. M.A. Thesis, Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar.
- Lord 2019 Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. by David F. Elmer. Cambridge, MA: Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature.
- Lüpke and Bao-Diop 2014 Friederike Lüpke and Sokhna Bao-Diop. "Beneath the Surface? Contemporary Ajami Writing in West Africa, Exemplified through Wolofal." In *African Literacies: Ideologies, Scripts, Education*. Ed. by Kasper Juffermans, Yonas Mesfun Asfaha, and Ashraf Abdelhay. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars. pp. 88-117.
- McLaughlin 1997 Fiona McLaughlin. "Islam and Popular Music in Senegal: The Emergence of a 'New Tradition.'" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 67.4:560-81.
- Ngom 2010 Fallou Ngom. "Ajami Scripts in the Senegalese Speech Community." *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 10.1:1-23.
- Ngom 2016 \_\_\_\_\_. *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajamī and the Murīdiyya*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ngom 2017 \_\_\_\_\_. "West African Manuscripts in Arabic and African Languages and Digital Preservation." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. Ed. by Thomas Spear. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 1-28.
- Ngom 2018 \_\_\_\_\_. "Ajami Literacies of West Africa." In *Tracing Language Movement in Africa*. Ed. by Ericka A. Albaugh and Kathryn M. de Luna. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 143-64.
- Niane 2016 Seydi Diamil Niane. *La voie d'intercession du Prophète dans la poésie d'Elhadji Malick Sy*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Niang 2010 Abdoulaye Niang. "Hip-hop, musique et Islam: Le rap prédicateur au Sénégal." *Cahiers de recherche sociologique*, 49.63-94.
- Ogunnaike 2016 Oludamini Ogunnaike. "The Presence of Poetry, the Poetry of Presence: Meditations on Arabic Sufi Poetry Performance and Ritual in Contemporary Dakar." *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 5:58-97.

- Ogunnaike 2020 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection: A Study of West African Arabic Madīḥ Poetry and Its Precedents*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society.
- Okpewho 1990 Isidore Okpewho, ed. *The Oral Performance in Africa*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Ong 1982 Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen.
- Parry 1971 Milman Parry. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Ed. by Adam Parry. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Samb 1972 Amar Samb. *Essai sur la contribution du Sénégal à la littérature d'expression arabe*. Mémoires de l'Institut fondamental d'Afrique noire, 87. Dakar: IFAN.
- Seck 2013 Mamaram Seck. *Narratives as Muslim Practice in Senegal*. Society and Politics in Africa, 22. New York: Peter Lang.
- Seydou 2008 Christiane Seydou. "Genres littéraires de l'oralité: Identification et classification." In *Littératures orales africaines: Perspectives théoriques et méthodologiques*. Ed. by Ursula Baumgardt and Jean Derive. Paris: Karthala. pp. 125-75.
- Stetkevych 2010 Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych. "From *Jāhiliyyah* to *Badʿiyyah*: Orality, Literacy, and the Transformations of Rhetoric in Arabic Poetry." *Oral Tradition*, 25.1:211-30. [https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/25i/13\\_25.1.pdf](https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/25i/13_25.1.pdf)
- Sylla 1989 Assane Sylla. *Les prophètes: Seydina Limamou Le Mahdi et Seydina Issa Rouhou Lahi*. Dakar: Saint-Paul.
- Şaul 2006 Mahir Şaul. "Islam and West African Anthropology." *Africa Today*, 53.1:3-33.
- Tandia 1999 Aliou Kissima Tandia. *Poésie orale soninke et éducation traditionnelle*. Dakar: Nouvelles éditions africaines du Sénégal.
- Ware 2014 Rudolph T. Ware III. *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Weidman 2014 Amanda Weidman. "Anthropology of Voice." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43.1:37-51.

Wright 2015

Zachary Valentine Wright. *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niasse*. Islam in Africa, 18. Leiden: Brill.

Zumthor 1990

Paul Zumthor. *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*. Theory and History of Literature, 70. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

This page is intentionally left blank.

## About the Authors

### George Eugene Dunkel

After studying Greek, Sanskrit, and Comparative Indo-European Linguistics in Paris, Philadelphia, and Erlangen, George Dunkel taught in the Departments of Classics at Johns Hopkins University (from 1975) and Princeton University (from 1978). He then served as chairman of the Indogermanisches Seminar of the University of Zurich, with responsibility for Latin, Greek, Vedic, and Comparative Indo-European linguistics (1986-2013). He is the author of the *Lexikon der indogermanischen Partikeln und Pronominalstämme* (2014) and of the forthcoming *Ṛgvedic Family Grammar*. Other research interests include inherited phraseology and poetics, nominal composition, and verb morphology.

### Gabriel McGuire

Gabriel McGuire is an assistant professor in the Department of Languages, Linguistics, and Literature at Nazarbayev University in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, where he teaches classes on world literature, folktales, and the oral literature of Central Asia. He holds an M.A. (2007) and a Ph.D. (2013) from the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University. His dissertation research involved a study of mobile pastoral practices in rural south Kazakhstan. His current research focuses on the oral literature of the Kazakhs and on the intellectual history of folklore study in Soviet Kazakhstan.

### Andrew Cowell

Andrew Cowell is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Colorado. He focuses on linguistic anthropology, language shift and revitalization, language documentation, and oral narrative. He has published extensively on the Arapaho language and is currently working on grammars of A'aniih (Gros Ventre) and Coast Miwok. He has published two bilingual anthologies of Arapaho oral narratives and co-published a third volume on Gros Ventre narratives.

### Larraitz Ariznabarreta Garabieta

Larraitz Ariznabarreta is an assistant professor at the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. Her fields of research deal with the analysis of various expressions of Basque culture and their relationship with power structures. Larraitz is the author of the books *Martin Ugalde: Cartografías de un discurso* and *Notes on Basque Culture: The Aftermath of Epics*. Most recently she has edited the books *Memory and Emotion: Basque Women's Stories* and *Exilio y Humanidades: Las rutas de la cultura, ochenta años después*. A *bertso* aficionada since her childhood years, Ariznabarreta remains politically committed to the normalization of Basque culture.

**Richard K. Wolf**

Richard K. Wolf, Professor of Music and South Asian Studies at Harvard University, has conducted research widely in South and Central Asia over the past forty years. He is the author of two monographs, editor of three collections, a performer on the South Indian *vina*, and an ethnographic filmmaker. His work has concerned social-cultural “style” in South Indian music, music and space-time in Kota tribal society, music in Islamic contexts in India and Pakistan, theory and analysis of rhythm, and emotion. Among recent honors, Wolf was the recipient of a Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Award from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and was named the Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation Fellow at the National Humanities Center in 2018-19.

**Cheikh Tidiane Lo**

Cheikh Tidiane Lo is currently an Assistant Professor of English for Specific Purposes at the Department of Applied Foreign Languages, University Gaston Berger of Saint-Louis. He holds a Ph.D. in Folklore, with a minor in Anthropology, from Indiana University (2019). After several fieldwork trips in Saint-Louis, in his dissertation he examined the impact of UNESCO’s World Heritage Listing on Senegal’s Island of Saint-Louis, focusing on intangible heritage forms. Parallel to this primary work, Lo’s interests include expressive cultures in Senegal, particularly public celebrations as a technology of memory and identity politics. He also studies Wolof oral literature through their occupational, initiatory, and religious songs and narratives.