

## **Some Reflections on the “Poetry Slam of Radivoje Ilić”: Thoughts on the Interplay of the Oral and Visual**

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As a retired academic anthropologist, I recently have spent much time trying to put together some archival fragments of my professional life. In this connection I came across some dozen photos taken in the village of Orašac, Serbia. My wife, Barbara Kerewsky Halpern, a linguistic and medical anthropologist, and I, a sociocultural anthropologist, have spent approximately fifty years studying this community, beginning in 1953.

Our last visit was about ten years ago. This particular series of photographs was taken in 1975, at which time we shared our researches with John Foley. The photographs were of a *guslar* or oral bard, Radivoje Ilić, in which he, by means of a series of graphic gestures, was proceeding to explain his role in conveying the traditions of the oral epics.

There is now a very considerable literature on this topic thanks to the generations-long efforts of Milman Parry and his successor at Harvard, Albert Lord. These names are well-known to the readers of this journal, not least through the publications of John Foley. There is thus little need for me to expand on their research here. But what struck me in reviewing these photos, now more than a quarter of a century old, is the way they pace the oral recitation—just as, in a similar way, the Poetry Slam photos on the Oral Tradition Web site ([www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)) pace these more recent recitations.

To say that the spoken word goes with the visual image is merely to remark on what has been most obvious during the century that we have had motion pictures and, before that, still photographs (now approaching two centuries). But there is, of course, a grammar to the moving image and even to the analysis of the still photograph just as there is a linguistic order to the recitation, preserved in the edited texts. But going from these obvious coexistences to the complex ways in which oral tradition is communicated not only through the spoken word but through the visual image, the gesture, can be a most complex matter. Still photographs, of course, freeze the moment while film or video introduces movement. I would hope that in the

future we can place more emphasis on these interrelationships between the visual and the oral. In doing so we need, of course, to pay close attention to the audience as well as the performer. The audience is sometimes part of the performance, but they are also, especially with traditional oral bards, quiet and receptive and this can be seen on their faces.

A favorite photo of mine, derived from my fieldwork and which I placed on the cover of one of my books, depicts a grandson listening entranced to his grandfather, the *guslar*, reciting an oral epic. In my view, the two merge into one in this photo. Unfortunately, this once-key bond has now been severed in too many cultural settings. But hopefully the student of oral tradition can also become a kind of archeologist by reconstructing what once was with a composite strategy—not only by listening to old recordings but also by carefully examining those photos, drawings, and paintings that still exist. I hope that the interrelationship between them may interest future researchers.

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