

## Pan-Hispanic Oral Tradition

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We are concerned here with the oral traditions of Hispanic or Iberian peoples: speakers of Spanish (Castilian), Portuguese, Catalan, and Judeo-Spanish, and also various Spanish and Portuguese creoles in South America, Africa, and Asia. Basque, as an indigenous language of the Iberian Peninsula, should also definitely be counted as part of the Hispanic world. Oral tradition involves any manifestation of folk culture that includes the use of language. Creativity, ongoing evolution, and chronological depth are also essential factors. The Hispanic oral tradition comprises not only the “classic” genres of folk literature: narrative poetry (ballads, *corridos*), lyric poetry, orally improvised poetry (*décimas*, *puntos*, *bertsoak*), children’s rhymes, riddles, proverbs, folktales, and folk theater, but also local legends, memorates, jokes, folk prayers and incantations (*ensalmos*), cumulative songs, counting-out rhymes, curses and blessings, folk comparisons, calls to animals, tongue-twisters, formulaic phrases, baby talk, thieves’ jargon, microtoponymy, folk beliefs, and, indeed, language itself, in all its diversity, as a constantly changing and consistently creative manifestation of folk culture. Traditional music must, of course, also count as an essential part of the oral tradition.

In the modern Hispanic oral tradition, specific traditional forms, individual text-types, and expressions can still be directly and genetically related to medieval antecedents and even to preliterate congeners. Some local legends, now being recorded and studied for the first time, exhibit astounding connections with classical and pre-Christian traditions. Hispanic toponymy and microtoponymy include various pre-Roman elements: note the Spanish hydronym Deva, which echoes the Celtic belief that each river had its own particular goddess. Some calls to animals clearly date from a time when Arabic co-existed with Hispano-Romance: the Algarvean shepherds’ call *ad-ji!* “come!”; compare Moroccan Arabic *aji*.

In Iberian communities and their overseas extensions, oral and written traditions have constantly and intricately interacted, from the very first vernacular use of writing down to the present day: medieval epics, ballads,

lyric poetry, riddles, proverbs, curses and insults, and folktales (exempla) were all, at least occasionally, written down during the Middle Ages; children's games and rhymes, jokes and anecdotes, and the vocabulary of thieves' jargon all were extensively recorded during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; handwritten family ballad and song books, proverb collections, and liturgical drama texts have continued in use almost down to the present. Numerous ballads printed on broadsides have made their way into oral tradition. Brazilian *cordel* (chapbook) poetry, in some cases traceable to medieval archetypes, straddles written and oral tradition.

New directions? Recently we have seen renewed efforts toward classifying the vast corpus of Hispanic folk literature that was brought together during the twentieth century. We now have numerous catalogues and type- and motif-indexes of epics, ballads, lyric poetry, proverbs, and folktales. There are pathfinding new studies on children's rhymes and on improvised poetry. Clearly, these efforts have coincided with an intense awareness of the progressive disappearance of many forms of oral tradition. All the same, outstanding collecting efforts are still going forward on various fronts. Particularly dramatic is current work on local legends in Spain, on *corridos* in Mexico, and on improvised poetry in Spain and Spanish America.

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