

Basque Oral Ecology

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Overview of [Basque Oral Ecology](#)¹

In today's world, where so many languages disappear every day, the survival of Euskara, the Basque language, is extraordinary. In fact, until just a few decades ago, Euskara was never used in any official context, confined to mere private use by the Basque-speaking community. Furthermore, it has suffered diverse periods of explicit repression, such as the 40 or so years of Franco's dictatorship. In addition to this external repression, however, we must also take into account the indifference shown to the language until very recently by the ruling classes of the Basque Country itself.

By a twist of fate, this situation of marginalization is perhaps one of the key factors behind the extraordinary revival of oral genres in contemporary Basque society. Indeed, although the first book written in Euskara was published in 1545,² the Basque-speaking population has largely been illiterate in their native tongue, since teaching was always done in one of the dominant languages (Spanish or French). Until well into the twentieth century, written Basque literature was essentially religious, and consisted for the most part of voiced texts (sermons and texts intended to be spoken or sung), rather than written literature intended to be read in silence.

The standardization of Euskara, an essential process for any advancement of the language, officially began with the Congress of Aranzazu in 1968, although the initial steps had already been taken as early as 1919 with the creation of Euskaltzaindia, the Basque Language Academy.³

However it happened, I can safely say that Euskara has survived as an oral language, and until recently its only area of use was in the private, everyday life of native Basque-speakers. As far as I know, nobody has ever studied this topic in depth, and what I set out here are therefore mere intuitions, and should be taken as such.

The vitality of oral genres among Basque-speakers is remarkable. Voltaire described the Basques as "a people who sing and dance at the feet of the Pyrenees," and it is no coincidence that Basque improvised contest poetry—*bertsolaritza*, as it is known in Euskara—is one of the

¹ For photographs associated with this article, click on link.

² See Detxepara 1545.

³ See Mitxelena 1970 and Villasanta 1970.

best-known examples of sung improvisation in the world, in regard to both the quality of the compositions and its social roots. Why has a genre that was once common to all cultures disappeared from the majority, while it has flourished among the Basques with such vigor? It is reasonable to speculate that the late advent of written Basque is a key factor.

The widespread campaign to ensure literacy among the Basque population, which has been extremely successful over recent years, has nevertheless had an undesired side effect: younger generations' basic ability to express themselves orally in Euskara has declined noticeably. Those who have attended Basque-language schools generally have no trouble expressing themselves in that language when talking about academic matters, but it seems that Euskara is now insufficient for many basic and vitally important speech-acts, such as expressing enjoyment, sublimating feelings, teasing or insulting, and so on. In short, the problem now is exactly the opposite of what it was a few decades ago: Euskara is now used for studying and working, but is proving unsatisfactory for living.

Leaving conjectures aside for the moment, however, I now turn our attention to a somewhat superficial and provisional description of the set of genres that make up the admirable ecosystem of the Basque oral tradition.

Methodology and Corpus

First, it is necessary to define as precisely as possible the objective of this present study on the corpus of Basque oral poetry and the methodology that will be used for our description. In all basic matters we will, once again, be following the criteria established by John Miles Foley.⁴ I will therefore try to specify those oral manifestations that, within the Basque oral tradition as a whole, constitute separate genres. In order to characterize, classify, and present each genre, I will primarily use non-textual criteria, that is, the way in which each genre is produced, transmitted, received, performs its social function, and so on. This is no easy task and I am aware that my efforts will, even in the best of cases, result in nothing more than a mere sketch of the more complex reality. I hope, nevertheless, that they may serve, if not as a basis, then at least as an incentive for subsequent research—scholarship that I imagine will be as extensive and complicated as it will be necessary and stimulating.

The first obstacle to overcome is to specify which phenomena can be considered genres of oral poetry and which cannot. One possibility is that outlined by Foley (2002:116), who says that all genres have a special register and that these registers “are more highly coded than everyday language.” At the same time, Foley warns that “we won’t be limiting our selection of poetic forms or genres to those that later get ratified as literature,” something that we shall not be doing either. Another possibility is that offered by Juan Mari Lekuona’s definition of oral literature,⁵ which states that oral literature is everything that is first spoken and then committed

⁴ See Foley 2002.

⁵ See J. Lekuona 1998.

to memory. Both visions of oral poetry genres are in fact fairly similar, and in any case are definitely complementary.

The second major difficulty stems from the uneven nature of the corpus at our disposal. Some genres continue to thrive (that is, they are still produced and consumed), although their degree of social validity differs (*bertso-paperak*, masquerades, pastorals, and so on), while others are little more than a relic of the past—they are still consumed to some extent, but no new pieces are produced, at least orally (old *koplak*, ballads, and so forth). It is sometimes difficult to specify whether or not a genre is still alive. Old *koplak*, for example, which I described above as relics of the past, still abound in written Basque poetry, and some of them have even become quite popular when made into songs.

All in all, however, I believe it is worth including a spectrum of forms in the analysis, because oral poetry genres can survive in different ways, not all of which hold the same interest. For example, one genre of oral poetry may survive as a mere fossil from the past, in which case it will be valued and extolled as part of the community's cultural heritage, while lacking any functional purpose. Much more interesting, on the other hand, are those genres that, while retaining their essential nature, have nevertheless adapted to modern society and continue to flourish.

This is the case with improvised *bertsolaritza*, whose popularity I illustrate in this article. However, I believe that the true survival of a genre depends not on factors intrinsic to the genre itself, but rather on the attitude and, at the end of the day, on the cultural policies that a community articulates to foster the development of the genre. Thus, *bertsolaritza* did not achieve the status it enjoys today because it is intrinsically better than other genres, but because it was managed in the right way. Similarly, sayings and proverbs are often reduced to mere lists that form part of the school curriculum, historical curiosities that one must learn about because they form part of one's cultural heritage. Properly understood and used, however, they can also be a goldmine for professionals working in the field of communications in general, and for journalists and advertisers in particular, since it is hard to imagine a better or more abundant source of models for eye-catching headlines and slogans.

The majority of Basque oral poetry genre classifications proposed to date are based on formal, textual parameters. Here, however, I propose a new method of classification based on the criteria outlined in this section. I hardly need add that this classification is totally provisional, and in no way aims to replace any other method. It is merely an initial draft that will, no doubt, require subsequent development or, if necessary, correction or replacement. What is clear is that subsequent research must consist of an exhaustive and systematic rereading of the information we currently possess on each genre, in light of the most recent advances in the theory of oral poetry and using a methodology suitable for each specific genre. Until this has been done, everything is provisional, including the following table, which aims to offer an approximate overview of the current status of Basque oral poetry.

Basque Oral Poetry: Provisional classification of genres

Genre	Classification OP=Oral Performance VT=Voiced Texts VoP=Voices of the Past WOP=Written Oral Poems	Degree of improvisation	Degree of vitality
1. Improvised <i>bertsolaritza</i>	OP	Total	High
2. <i>Koplak</i> Old <i>koplak</i> Processional <i>koplak</i>	VT / VoP OP /	Uncertain Variable	Uncertain Medium
3. <i>Bertso-paperak</i>	VT???	None	Low
4. Epic-lyrical genres 4.1. Popular lyrical poetry 4.2. Tales and legends 4.3. Songs 4.3. Ballads / romances	WOP WOP? VT VT/VoP	None Uncertain None None	Uncertain Low High? Fossilized
6. Theater genres 6.1. Masquerades 6.2. <i>Astolasterrak</i> 6.3. Pastorals 6.4. Carnival tragicomedies	VT VT VT VT	Minimum Minimum Minimum Minimum	High in the Northern Basque Country
7. Ritual genres 7.1. Natural cycles 7.2. Healing 7.3. Work 7.4. Spells and curses 7.8. Prayers	VT VT VT VT / OP VT	None None None None None	None None None None ???
8. Educational pastimes 8.1. Children's games 8.2. Lullabies 8.3. Riddles	VT? VT? VT?	Variable Low None	Medium Medium Low
9. Applied genres 9.1. Preaching 9.2. Theater 9.3. Radio 9.4. Film 9.5. Television	VT VT VT / OP VT / OP VT / OP	Variable Minimum Variable Variable Variable	Low Medium High Low High
10. Everyday genres 10.1. Jokes 10.2. Sayings and proverbs 10.3. Witticisms	VT VT / OP OP / VT OP	Minimum Variable None? High	Medium High Low Variable

This classification does not offer any groundbreaking new information, dealing as it does with genres already amply explored by others. What is new, however, are the criteria used for selecting and arranging the genres. Moreover, in its simplicity, this classification effectively highlights the vast area that still remains to be explored.

It is not possible here to investigate, even superficially, each and every one of the genres listed in the table. I will therefore confine myself to sketching the basic outlines of what, in my opinion, requires further research. By way of example, I shall explore a few genres in limited detail; in all other cases, I shall offer the minimum information required for identification purposes. Before beginning my overview, I would like to pay tribute to those who, through their hard work and efforts, prevented the Basque oral poetry system from becoming little more than a series of empty names.

The Precursors

The available corpus of Basque oral poetry is fairly large. After having collected together all the documents, subsequent efforts have focused on textual and formal aspects; contextual information and data relating to the creation, dissemination, and reception processes of each genre is scarce. Thus, for example, there are many detailed editions of the texts of ballads, yet we still know little about their social consumption. In light of this situation, it is laughable that so much effort is still expended on finding the umpteenth version of a single ballad, while our global understanding of the processes of creation, dissemination, and reception of this genre as a whole remains so limited.

Even so, the current situation would have been much worse if it were not for the admirable compilations carried out during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by certain individuals who were not afraid to swim against the tide. As Xabier Amuriza demonstrated,⁶ there is still much to be collected, but the main body of the corpus would have been lost beyond recovery were it not for the efforts of a few discerning scholars.

In general, popular literature, like Euskara itself, was held in low esteem and hardly considered worthy of analysis. And as is only natural, what is not appreciated is neither collected nor preserved for posterity. As we all know, Romanticism proved a key factor for the survival of popular genres. Herder, for example, wrote the following around 1784:

We hope that soon, the language, customs, and history of such an interesting and active people [the Basques] will become better known to us; and what MacPherson did for the Gaelic races, a second Larramendi will, no doubt, do for the Basques, bringing together the remains of their national genius.

⁶ Over recent years, Amuriza has carried out admirable fieldwork, collecting an enormous number of oral pieces, especially *coplas* or *bertsos*. In addition to committing them to writing, he has also written a play in which, with the help of a group of musicians, he interprets some of the *coplas* he has gathered, also providing a wealth of information about their content and context. Two publications have arisen out of this work: 1996a and b.

According to Patri Urkizu, and following Mitxelena, Wilhelm von Humboldt must have read Herder's works, and it seems this was one of the reasons for his decision to journey twice to the Basque Country in search of such relics:

One of the principal objectives that I set myself on my journey to the Basque lands was to search for any remains that may still exist of the most remote history and the oldest state of the people, either through old traditions or ancient national songs.⁷

Although von Humboldt clearly states that he in fact found very little, his influence proved a decisive factor in the conservation of popular Basque literature. As often happens, an outsider needs to assess heritage in order for its true worth to become apparent. And indeed, after Humboldt a succession of other foreign scholars of Basque language turned their attention to Euskara and its various manifestations.

I should highlight the important contribution made in the middle of the nineteenth century by Francisque Michel⁸ and Charles Friedrich Mahn,⁹ who focused mainly on collecting songs, although they also explored and recorded other ethnographic and linguistic-literary aspects of the Basque culture.

However, as Urkizu rightly notes, the most important of these precursors was the French scholar Julien Vinson. Vinson carried out a more systematic and structured study than his predecessors and gathered together various types of popular literature from "all nations," including the Basque nation, to which he dedicated a whole chapter.¹⁰ In this work Vinson cites another scholar, Wentworth Webster,¹¹ expressing his thanks for his collaboration.

The work of these and other eminent Basque scholars could not completely do away with the generalized opinion regarding the worth of popular genres. When Gorosábel's famous compilation, *Noticia de las Cosas Memorables de Guipúzcoa*,¹² was published at the end of the nineteenth century, Carmelo de Echegaray, then Official Chronicler of the Basque Provinces, took advantage of the final volume to launch a virulent attack against *bertsolaritza*:

Village gossip and ridiculous belfry rivalries won the honors of song and popularity. Rarely were the names of the authors of these travesties remembered, and it was better for their good name that they be forgot, since in this way at least the fame of their artistic ineptitude was not perpetuated.

⁷ Quoted in Urkizu 2000:27. The first chapter of this text, "Literatura de tradición oral" (pp. 25-107), is especially relevant.

⁸ See Michel 1857.

⁹ See Mahn 1857.

¹⁰ See Vinson 1883.

¹¹ See Webster 1879.

¹² See Gorosábel 1899-1900.

In terms of the nature of the subject matter, the dismissiveness with which they were treated, the crude descriptions, and the language plagued with Spanish words and influences, *bertsolaritza* epitomized prosaic virtues. But better that than it be lost forever. Nor was Echegaray the only one who held this opinion. In fact, his words are simply a reflection of one train of popular opinion. The low esteem in which popular poetry was held was hardly a new phenomenon. Indeed, in 1857 Francisque Michel, described above as a pioneer in the recovery and compilation of popular Basque literature, was prompted to write the following:

You may perhaps wonder whether the Basques possess any popular poetry like the majority of nations, even though it be scarce and of little interest. Certainly they do not lack for songs, ballads, and *koplak*; but none of these are of a nature worthy of the name poetry.

This assessment, made by one of the last people one would imagine capable of it, highlights an ingrained prejudice that took a very long time to disappear. When Michel asserts that none of the songs, ballads, and *koplak* “are of a nature worthy of the name poetry,” he is imposing the rules of the written mentality, and above all he is demanding something from the oral genres that they simply cannot and do not aim to offer. He is judging an art by external parameters that have nothing whatsoever to do with it. For this reason, the French scholar described the Basques as a singing, rather than a poetic, people. What he saved from the popular genres was this simple *kopla zahar*:

Itsasoak urak handi
Ez du hondorik ageri;
Pasako nintzake ni handik
Maitea ikusteagatik.

(The waters of the sea are deep / the bed cannot be seen; /
 I would pass through them / to see my love.)

We now see moral purism and, to a great degree, the linguistic purism being added to the opinions outlined above. Today, the attitude of those intellectuals who criticized, in Spanish, the poor Euskara of their countrymen—incapable themselves of providing a correct model that would serve as an example—seems unbelievably contradictory. And the texts written in Sabinian Euskara, plagued with ludicrous neologisms, lacked meaning for ordinary people, who simply did not understand it. It is therefore hardly surprising that the distance between the ordinary people and the intellectual class, or at least its more nationalistic wing, became insurmountable. But not everyone shared the same opinion and some voices were raised in favor of the reviled *bertsolaris* (singers of Basque improvised *bertsolaritza*).

In 1919, Father Donostia, an educated, cultured man who had little patience for moral flippancy, expressed his admiration for the art of *bertsolaritza*:

Bertsolari sessions will not easily be forgotten by those lucky enough to attend them. How amusing the responses, how clever the singers are to “return” the ball so deftly to their opponent’s court! (. . .) With words and allusions, sometimes veiled, sometimes not so veiled, the *bertsolari*, the popular poet, manages to say or to insinuate everything he wants.

Luckily, his was not the only voice raised in support of popular literature. The work of various folklorists from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is also worth mentioning, for their efforts and determination preserved many forms of popular oral literature that otherwise would have been lost forever. Two priests, Father Azkue and Father Lekuona, are without doubt the most important of these figures.

To Resurrección María de Azkue we owe the most comprehensive collection of popular genres—the result of his tireless investigation and compilation work. The master work of this priest, who was also the first chairman of the Basque Language Academy, is his impressive *Euskalerraren Yakintza*,¹³ an almost exhaustible volume that deserves, in addition to the praise already heaped upon it, a more thorough and in-depth investigation, as suggested by the writer Anjel Lertxundi in his revealing work *Letrak Kale-kantotik* (1996). In that work, Lertxundi explores the different oral genres, focusing especially on how the said genres respond to the communicative needs of our modern era.

While Azkue stands out for his work in gathering and compiling texts, the young priest from Oiartzun, Manuel Lekuona, became a key figure in the recovery of popular oral genres. Father Lekuona had been publishing partial works in the magazine *Eusko Folklore* for years when he spoke at the Fifth Conference on Basque Studies, held in Bergara in 1930. At that conference, he described popular poetry, offering examples, systematizing the mechanics of *bertsolaritza*, classifying its genres, and so on. In short, he gave a master class that laid the foundations for the subsequent scientific study of *bertsolaritza*. One of the most important contributions made by Lekuona during that conference was related to *kopla zaharak* (old *koplak*), which leads us on to a more detailed explanation of this genre.

Koplak

Some of the elements Manuel Lekuona highlighted in relation to old *koplak* are: perfect form; speed at which the images move; pregnant elisions and constructions; omission of linking elements; logical order and special chronology; supra-logical cohesion of poetic images; and rhythmic artifice. After listening to him, the intellectuals of the period must have found it much easier to appreciate the incredible beauty of “trivial” *koplak* such as the following:

Hau haizearen epela!
Airean dabil orbela . . .

¹³ See Azkue 1935-47.

*Etxe hontako jende leialak,
gabon Jainkoak diela.*

(What a warm wind! / The fallen leaves float in the air . . . /
May God wish good night / to the noble people of this house.)

As may be seen, the reasons put forward by Lekuona in his vehement defense of popular oral genres focus almost exclusively on textual aspects; this omission of other aspects is an oversight against which we still struggle today. No one has surpassed Lekuona's analysis of the old *koplak*, yet still almost nothing is known about their creation, dissemination, and consumption. As stated above, old *koplak* survive today only as written poetry and in the songs of singer-songwriters and other musical groups.

Processional *koplak*, on the other hand, remain alive in many parts of the county, thus making it easier to describe their characteristics in more detail. In general, they are usually sung on special days, such as the eve of Saint Agatha's Day (February 4) or New Year's Eve. All evidence suggests that the Saint Agatha's Day *koplak* are those that best reflect what seems to have once been a much more widespread genre.

Saint Agatha's Day *koplak*¹⁴

This event takes place as follows: a couple of *koplaris* (*kopla* singers) perform as soloists, accompanied by a fairly large chorus of followers and some type of musical accompaniment (generally one or more *trikitixas* or small accordions and the same number of tamborines). At twilight, the procession leaves from a point in the town where the event has been organized. Throughout the evening, they sing *koplak* at the different farmhouses in the area.

Once the procession has arrived at a farmhouse, the *koplak* are sung to all the inhabitants in turn, starting with the person of highest rank. The inhabitants, who have been awaiting the moment as if it were the highlight of their week, offer the members of the procession a reward, usually either food and drink or money. If the procession judges the reward to be insufficient, the *koplaris* will make their audience's ears burn by singing satirical *koplak*, full of reproach.

Their repertoire contains *koplak* for all tastes and occasions. The *koplaris* sing one or two *koplak* and then the chorus sings the refrain, beating time by hitting the ground with their *makilas*, or walking sticks. Today, all the members of the procession generally wear their traditional farming attire.

Not all the *koplak* now sung figured in the traditional repertoire, since these days the *koplaris* tend to be improvising *bertsolaris* also. Having sung their *koplak* outside one farmhouse, the *bertsolaris/koplaris* make the most of the walk to the next farmhouse in order to gather information about the people who live there: how many there are, what they are like, if any event worth mentioning has happened there, and so forth. In short, they seek to learn about anything that may serve to help them improvise *koplak* later on.

¹⁴ For audio and/or video associated with this topic, click on link.

Needless to say, the new *koplak* lack the stylization and finesse of some of the older ones, which suggests that the old *koplak* themselves were not the direct result of improvisation but rather were thought out and written down in more peaceful circumstances. Who wrote them and how they did so is not known. Nor do we know whether they were ordered to be composed or were composed through the author's own initiative.

The presence and popularity of processional *koplak* differ from one region of the Basque Country to the next. Processions are generally organized by one or more local groups from the town in which they are held. It is likely that in former years these processions were an important element for the communication and social cohesion of the marginalized Basque-speaking community. And perhaps they continue to be so today as well. Whatever the case, their use has now also spread to the cities, albeit in a more or less folkloric format.

***Bertso-paperak*: [Written bertsos](#)¹⁵**

According to Antonio Zavala (1996), during the first third of the nineteenth century *bertso-paperak*¹⁶ first began to appear. In general, this genre is seen as the Basque version of the so-called *literatura de cordel*, or “string literature” (pamphlets or booklets that hang from a piece of string [*cordel*] in the places where they are sold). In the opinion of Patri Urkizu (2000), the idea of printing sheets of *bertsos* originally sprang from the more cultured sectors of society, although they quickly became very popular. Their use remained widespread from 1820 right up to the 1960s, and it is not unusual to find people still today who remember when they used to buy and read them.

On 20 September 1931, *Bertsolariya*, a weekly *bertso-paperak* magazine, was published in Rentería. The magazine featured *bertso-paperak* of all kinds, by both contemporary and classic *bertsolaris*, one eminent contemporary *bertsolari* being Txirrita, a habitual collaborator. The driving force behind the magazine was Juan José Makazaga, born in Alza in 1887 and owner of a printer's workshop in Rentería that carried his name, from where he published *Bertsolariya*. Although the magazine lasted only one year, it was widely read and extremely popular. Many people collected the various issues with the aim of compiling a large volume of *bertso-paperak*. Once the project was complete, Makazaga distributed a series of elegant covers so readers could bind the 300 or so published pages.

Father Antonio Zavala acknowledged the importance of this publication with the following words: “It would be no exaggeration to say that *Bertsolariya* constitutes one of the five or six principal Basque works published so far this century.” Although more than 30 years have passed, that assessment by this eminent compiler and scholar of Basque oral literature still rings true today. As regards the *bertso-paperak*, there can be no doubt that their value transcends that of their texts. For more than a century, *bertso-paperak* were the main (and practically the only) means of communication for the Basque-speaking community.

¹⁵ For e-companion material associated with this topic, click on link.

¹⁶ A *bertso-papera* is a composition that generally consists of at least six written *bertsos*, usually printed on three 22 x 25 cm. sheets that are easily collectible and sold for the modest price of 15 cents per issue.

The variety of the subjects dealt with by the *bertso-paperak* is astounding: sporting exploits, events from distant wars, whale-hunting, love affairs, mythological genealogies, and so on; everything that concerned or mattered to the community was reviewed in the written *bertsos*. Together the corpus of *bertso-paperak* constitutes a comprehensive manual of oral history, and in this sense it is an obligatory reference for anyone not content to settle for the official version of events.

The *Auspoa* (Bellows) collection, started in 1964 by Antonio Zavala and still going strong today, is full of books formed almost exclusively by *bertso-paperak*, grouped according to either *bertsolaris* or themes. It was the second Basque president, Jesús Maria Leizaola, who did the most to record this chronicle-type facet of popular literature.¹⁷

The process of writing the *bertsos* that make up the *bertso-paperak* is as varied as it is complex. Indeed, within the genre of non-improvised *bertsos*, we can define two sub-genres: those dictated or written to be sung, and those written to be read (that is, written without the express intention of being sung). Txirrita did not know how to write and therefore dictated his *bertsos* to his nephew, Jose Ramón Erausquin, who transcribed them. Even today, some *bertsolaris* compose their *bertso-paperak*¹⁸ by memory, using exclusively oral procedures. Only when the work is completely finished do they transcribe it or have it transcribed. This is the case, for example, with Imanol Lazkano (Azpeitia, 1936), former chairman of the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza, whose written *bertsos* are a true model of oral strategy.

Not all authors of *bertso-paperak* were also improvising *bertsolaris*. Some, such as the *bertsolari* Pedro Maria Otaño, despite having amazing improvisational skills, never performed as an improvising poet because he lacked the appropriate singing voice. And a good voice, in the days before microphones, was an essential quality for any aspiring *bertsolari*. The creators of *bertso-paperak* also include a large number of anonymous or unknown authors. Therefore, the only difference between creating an improvised *bertso* and creating a *bertso-papera* was, in certain cases, the time available. Once again, we must remind ourselves that the oral/written binary is insufficient to describe the creative processes involved in the production of a piece of oral poetry.

Bertsolaris wrote their *bertso-paperak* either on their own initiative or to order. Once written and printed, sometimes the *bertsolari* himself distributed the leaflets and other times he delegated this task to another person. Either way, *bertso-paperak* were sold only in specific places on specific occasions (after mass, at fairs and markets, and so on). To sell them, the “seller” would sing the *bertsos* out loud, making the verses themselves their own best publicity.

It seems that many buyers, who were—like the sellers—mainly men, were capable of memorizing *bertsos* after only one hearing. Indeed, many of those who listened to the *bertsos*, despite being illiterate in Euskara, nevertheless ended up buying the *bertso-paperak*. We must suppose that, after the buyer returned home, the *bertsos* written on those pages would be orally passed on to the other members of the family as well.

¹⁷ See Leizaola 1961.

¹⁸ Each piece generally contains about a dozen *bertsos*.

Today there are many *bertso* writers, and the quality of their compositions is very high, but written *bertsos* are no longer a functional vehicle for communication. Nowadays, *bertso-paperak* are produced almost exclusively thanks to the competitions that continue to be held. The winners of these competitions usually receive a monetary prize, but the publication of the winning *bertso-paperak* generally leaves a lot to be desired and the *bertsos* themselves have practically no social relevance. Although attempts have been made to imbue written *bertsos* with the social functionality that they enjoyed at the beginning of the century, the results have been far from satisfactory.

Over recent years, various attempts have been made to revitalize the genre of written *bertsos*, trying to increase their social relevance by changing their format, leaning more towards performances with musical accompaniment, over and above the traditional *bertso-papera* format. On some occasions, these initiatives have resulted in albums, such as Andoni Egaña's *Tximeletak sabelean* ("Butterflies in your tummy"); Unai Iturriaga and Igor Elorza's *Zazpi eskale* ("Seven beggars"); and Jon and Aitor Sarasua's *Fauna txiki bat bertso berritan* ("A small fauna in new *bertsos*"). The precursor of all these attempts was the one made by Xabier Amuriza, *bertsolari* champion of 1980 and 1982. Another *bertsolari* from Bizkaia, Jon Enbeita, has also done much in this field, sometimes performing with his daughter Oihane, and on other occasions with the *bertsolari* Ireneo Ajuria. Mikel Mendizabal and Xabier Euzkitze have not been idle either, attempting to imbue the *bertso-paperak* genre with meaning and relevance by substituting the historical 22 x 25 cm. sheet format of *Bertsolariya* for other formats more in keeping with our ever-changing modern society. Some sections of the media (*Euskaldunon Egunkaria*, *Euskadi Irratia*, *Herri Irratia*, ETB, and so on) have also made attempts to modernize and revitalize this non-improvised *bertso* genre that proved so important throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

Despite all these attempts, however, modern *bertso* writers who do not engage—at least in public—in improvisation have no option but to send their *bertso-paperak* to one of the numerous organized competitions. The monetary prize awarded to the winners of these competitions is the only recompense for their excellent work, since the competitions themselves contribute little or nothing to the dissemination of the *bertso-paperak* and, since the authors, like their *bertsos*, occupy a marginalized place in the Basque cultural arena, halfway between written poetry and improvised *bertsolaritza*. Curiously enough, improvised *bertsos*, on the other hand, began the twentieth century in a marginalized position and finished it as one of the most deeply rooted manifestations of Basque culture.

Theater Genres

Given that, by their nature, theater genres are difficult to reduce to mere texts, it is in this field that research is more in keeping with how the study of oral poetry should proceed.

Additionally, this field has never been the exclusive heritage of philology, with many anthropologists and even performing arts researchers expressing interest in these theater genres.¹⁹

Masquerades

The oldest reference to the masquerades is that made by Chao in his trip to Navarre during the Basque uprising of 1830. These performances still survive today in the province of Zuberoa (Soule).

According to some authors, from a sociological point of view the masquerades were a kind of representation of society with the twofold function of classifying the social continuum and sanctioning a system of values. Performers danced through the streets of the town, each one playing his own role, and upon arriving in the square they engaged in a joyful dance with the townsfolk and displayed their skills to the public. The whole event ended with a generally festive atmosphere. In accordance with Chao's description, the characters were as follows: the Shepherd, the Bear, the *kukulleroak* (carriers of sticks bedecked with ribbons), Zamalzain (the horse), Juan (the lord) with his sword, Laboraria (the farmhand) and Etxekoandre (the housewife). Following these came the bohemians, the tinkers, the bishop, and various beggars.

This dance contains three basic theatrical performances: the fight between the shepherd and the bear (who dies), the castration of Zamalzain the horse (who revives), and the performances of the representatives of various trades (blacksmiths, tinkers, chimney sweeps, and so on). The main function of this mix of popular festival and theatrical performance is to make the audience laugh and, through the expression of these theatrical elements in the Basque tongue, to ensure the survival of social values.

Astolasterrak

Astolasterrak are farces or public criticisms performed at the second nuptials of a member of the community. Known as *charivari* in French, *cencerrada* in Spanish, *esquellotada* in Catalanian, and *calhabari* in Occitan, they have other names also in Basque.

Some *astolasterrak* were farces based around the age difference between a newly married couple, as well as the many other couples in the town. Specific societies existed to organize them, and their director sometimes went by the title of *abbas* ("abbot"). Needless to say, *astolasterrak* were condemned by both the civil authorities and the church, and functioned as a social condemnation of second marriages for widows and other social taboos. It was not the actual couple that suffered the sanction directly, but rather the actors accustomed to theatrical performances who parodied the relationships responsible for provoking the scandal.

Rather than the feats of the powerful on which the pastorals focused, *astolasterrak* were based on everyday life, with all its needs, annoyances, and infidelities; no one escaped criticism. The themes (and also the language) are what distinguish these performances from the pastorals.

¹⁹ In this overview of theater genres I will follow, almost to the letter, the exposition of Enrique Aramburu, which can be found online at <http://juandegaray.org.ar/fvajg/portadas/inicio>. For a broader and more in-depth view, see Urkizo 2000.

The use of language is very interesting, with Latin being used for priests and lawyers (the former being portrayed as gluttons and womanizers, with their Latin expressions being distorted), French for *gendarmes* and notaries, Spanish for the *satanak*, and Bearnés for insults and as a cryptic language. The vocabulary is, in general, free and somewhat crude; but according to Father Lafitte it at least has the advantage of being taken from everyday Basque.

Pastorals²⁰

The word “pastoral” has undergone a semantic change, no longer meaning a nativity play as it does in French literature. In simple terms it means a serious play, such as a tragedy, as opposed to the *astolasterrak* that, as stated above, were farces on a comic theme. Although pastorals share some characteristics with the common theatrical genre, they also possess others that make them closer in nature to the *mystères* or *farces* of medieval French literature.

In 1665, Arnaud d’Oyhenart reported that Jean d’Etchegaray had written a pastoral (using this word) entitled *Arzain gorria* one hundred years before. And according to Urkizu (2000), there are a number of traits that identify specific Basque theatrical forms as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Pastorals generally represent actions of the state, the doings of emperors and kings, with actors of both sexes being coached by others, often the authors of the text, who are generally townsfolk (the *errejentak*) themselves. This figure is known as the *instituteur*, much as in the *tragodid skalos* of Greek theater, and serves as director, prompter, and author. *Instituteurs* are more than just theater directors, however, since they give the orders for the actors and musicians to enter the scene, direct the rehearsals, and prepare the stage. They are also the keepers of the *cahiers*, the notebooks in which the texts were copied, recopied, and reworked, thereby preserving them for posterity. Young people, all grouped around the figure of the *errejenta*, choose the subject (protagonist), the *satanak* (chosen for their dancing skills), the Turks (the fiercest ones), and the *ngeles* (young boys aged between 10 and 12). The actors have no formal training but they do have good, sometimes even exceptional, memories.

There was once a fixed repertoire of almost 100 pastorals, which were gradually developed and refined over the centuries. Of these, according to Urkizu, only 59 still survive today. Many remain unpublished and the manuscripts are, for the most part, held in the Bordeaux Municipal Library.

The world represented in the pastorals is divided into two bands: the Christians, who are blue and good, and the Turks, who are red and evil. The color symbolism is particularly interesting, and even animals such as sheep are distinguished with a ribbon to show to which band they belong. Performances once lasted maybe up to ten hours at a time; today, however, they run around three and a half hours.

²⁰ For audio and/or video associated with this topic, click on link.

Carnival Tragicomedies

This is an intermediate genre, supposedly derived from a medieval dramatic game based on the battle between *Pansart* and Lent. Only three plays now remain: *Bakus*, *Phantzart*, and the *Trial and Condemnation of the Carnival* (of which only the prologue survives). Urkizu (2000) describes them as Carnival comedies with resources similar to the pastorals (they feature the *satanak*, for example).

A Brief Comment on the Remaining Genres

Before concluding this provisional overview of Basque oral poetry, I would like to add a few words on the classification system and the remaining genres. The table that summarizes the ecosystem of Basque oral poetry includes improvised *bertsolaritza*, *koplak*, and *bertso-paperak* (all of which have been described above). Under the heading “epic-lyrical genres,” I list a wide-ranging collection of four different genres: popular lyrical poetry, tales and legends, songs, and ballads/romances.

Popular lyrical poetry, tales, legends, and the sung genres (songs and ballads) are basically the same as in other cultures. However, I would like to add that I am fully aware that both the classification and the names used are unsatisfactory, since they fail to respond to the criteria I have attempted to apply in this chapter. Furthermore, the use of formal-textual criteria often leads to continuous confusions because lyrical poetry, unless identified only by the presence of measure and rhyme, may be confused with epic or narrative texts. My only consolation is that merely including them in the same section may serve to highlight the provisional nature of the classification. Only further research will provide the knowledge required to establish other classification criteria.

By locating this set of genres early on in the table, I indicate that they are manifestly different from the plain, pure oral tradition. They are genres with a clearly defined register, and their communication involves the awareness of experiencing “something special” rather than an everyday occurrence. The genres located further down the table—jokes, sayings, proverbs, and witticisms—are often created and communicated without either the author or the listeners being aware that they are engaged in anything out of the ordinary (hence the term “everyday genres”).

Moving farther down the table, after the epic-lyrical genres are the theater genres alluded to above. Immediately beneath them are the “ritual genres,” a name that I find much more satisfying. There are a number of excellent publications featuring texts of this type, but without a doubt, the best and most comprehensive continues to be the monumental work by Azkue.²¹

I am also pleased with the term “educational pastimes,” which encompasses children’s games, lullabies, and riddles. In general, this genre has often been labeled “decorative poetry,” a term that seems most unsuitable because it suggests that said genres have no social function or use. The best collection of educational pastimes is again the work by Azkue mentioned above,

²¹ See Azkue 1935-47.

while Manuel Lekuona²² and his nephew Juan Mari Lekuona²³ have carried out an admirable study of the formal aspects of these types of texts. Juan Mari, who in addition to being an eminent researcher is also one of the finest Basque poets of the twentieth century, went through an early phase in which his poems re-created precisely this type of “oral poetry.” Some Basque singer-songwriters, particularly Mikel Laboa, have used pieces in this style as lyrics for their songs.

Mikel Laboa

Special mention should be made of the reasons that prompted me to include in my overview of Basque oral poetry the set of genres that I have, with reluctance, termed “applied genres.” By including these forms, I aim to suggest that research into the oral tradition in general—and oral poetry in particular—should also deal (if not primarily) with those oral genres that have arisen in the context of the modern media. Religious preaching has been immensely important in the Basque Country, and many more works akin to the pioneering study carried out by Belen Altuna²⁴ are required.

The section entitled “everyday genres” includes those forms located on the line that separates the merely oral from what can be classed as an oral poetry genre. Jokes and witticisms (*ateraldiak* in Basque) are exchanged daily between speakers of any language. Jokes once enjoyed immense popularity in our society, with joke-tellers being awarded an almost professional status. It seems, however, that our general estimation of the genre, which is closely linked to the recovery of the language, has dropped sharply. As regards witticisms, some of the “classic” *bertsolaris* are better known for their wit than for the *bertsos* they sung (this is the case with Pernando Amezketarra, one of the best known *bertsolaris* from the beginning of the nineteenth century).

Since this last section also includes proverbs, I would like to conclude this exposition by talking a little about them. There are numerous collections of proverbs, both old²⁵ and new. Among the most recent, those compiled by Mokoroa, Garate, and Zavala are particularly worth mentioning.²⁶

We thus have thousands and thousands of proverbs at our disposal. It is up to us to decide whether to let them continue to slumber peacefully in books or to revitalize them and turn them into a remedy for our declining communication skills and a key element in the education of new generations—generations who will need to be good communicators in order to make their way in

²² See M. Lekuona 1978.

²³ See J. Lekuona 1982.

²⁴ See Altuna 2003.

²⁵ See, for example, Oihenart 1657.

²⁶ See, respectively, Mokoroa 1990, Garate 1998 (with CD and translations into four languages), and Zavala 1985.

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