

Meetings and Professional Notes

Some of the meetings summarized in *Oral Tradition* will receive fuller treatment in subsequent issues. Readers are encouraged to write to the editor about notices and reports of conferences they attend.

IMPROVISED POETRY IN THE HISPANIC WORLD

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Compared to the abundant scholarly activity centered around the memorized traditional ballad (*romance*), improvised poetry has largely been neglected by Hispanists interested in oral traditional literature. Aimed at redressing such unwarranted neglect, the *Simposio Internacional de Estudiosos de la Décima*, organized by Professor Maximiano Trapero, of the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, met at Las Palmas, from December 17 to 22, 1992.

The *décima*, which originated in sixteenth-century Spain as a learned poetic form, typically embodies a ten-line octosyllabic stanza, with the rhyme scheme *abba-accd-dc*. Despite its prosodic complexity, the *décima* has become a vehicle for oral traditional poetry in many areas of the Hispanic world and, where it exists, it is often, though not always, improvised: that is to say, it is composed during performance, frequently by two oral poets (*decimistas*) in competition.

The *Simposio* brought together specialists in Hispanic oral poetry from the Canary Islands, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Spain, and the United States, who presented papers on all aspects of the *décima*, as an oral, as well as a learned or semi-learned form. Also present at the conference were a number of individual singers, as well as singing groups, from various islands of the Canarian Archipelago, as well as from other Hispanic areas: Cuba, Louisiana, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela, who participated in a *Festival de Decimistas*, offering public performances of *décima* singing on the evenings of December 17–20.

While the *Simposio* was concerned primarily with the *décima*, in its variegated popular and erudite manifestations, the meeting's emphasis on the phenomenon of improvisation offered an opportunity to survey, chronologically and geographically, available evidence for the existence of orally improvised poetry—in whatever metrical form—in the Hispanic cultural and linguistic domain. Though my conclusions must remain tentative, the first instance I could cite is embodied in a tenth-century Hispano-Arabic anecdote that clearly involves an example of improvised poetic dueling. There is good evidence for competitive improvisation—often of a highly aggressive, insulting, and even obscene character—in sixteenth-century Spain. Evidence from the nineteenth century and the contemporary tradition is astoundingly rich. Improvised poetry, in a variety of forms (in addition to *décimas*, *sextinas* [6 verses], *quintillas* [5 verses], and 4-verse assonant *coplas*) can be documented at the present time, or from the recent past, in Basque-speaking areas; in various Castilian-speaking regions: Spain, the Canary Islands, Louisiana, Mexico, Cuba, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Chile,

Argentina, Uruguay, and Bolivia; in the Portuguese-speaking domain: Galicia, Continental Portugal, the Azores, Madeira, Cape Verde, and Brazil; and also in Catalan-speaking areas, both on the mainland and in the Balearic Islands. Improvised poetry has, then, been an essentially Pan-Hispanic phenomenon up to relatively recent times and, in various areas, particularly in the Canary Islands, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Portuguese Atlantic Islands, and Brazil, the practice is still very much alive.

Any doubts that I, personally—as a specialist in memorized ballad poetry—may have had were altogether dispelled by my witnessing (and recording) the totally spontaneous, unplanned, competitive improvisation between two master *decimistas*, Bernardo Gutiérrez Viana (from the Canarian island of La Palma) and José Miguel Villanueva (from the town of Morovis, Puerto Rico), which took place on December 19, between 2:00 and 4:00 A.M., in the lobby and later in the bar of the Hotel Sansofé, in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Had these astoundingly accomplished *repentistas* (improvisers) not been obliged to participate in various performances later in the day, I had the impression that they could have effortlessly continued to improvise for many more hours—perhaps 12 or even 24 hours, such as has been reported for nineteenth-century Ecuadorean *puetas* and Argentine *payadores*. As much can be said of the two Mexican singers, who accompanied us on a two-hour bus tour on the last day of the Symposium and improvised song after song during the entire trip.

To sum up, the *Simposio* called attention to an important, though much neglected, aspect of Hispanic oral poetry, opening new horizons for future study and suggesting a great variety of problems. Particularly urgent is the need not only to achieve a panoramic view of the various forms of improvised poetry in the Hispanic world, but also to explore in depth each of the living subtraditions, as well as to record recollections (memorates) concerning the existence of improvised poetry in communities where it has now ceased to be practiced. Urgently needed and essential to future work is a meticulous analysis of the system of formulaic diction that informs the oral improvisation of *décimas* and other poetic forms. The proceedings of the conference are currently in press: *La décima popular en la tradición hispánica: Actas del Simposio Internacional, Las Palmas, 17 al 22 de diciembre 1992*, ed. Maximiano Trapero (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria).

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