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Basque Special Issue

Bertsozale Elkarte, Special Editors

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eCompanions

John Miles Foley and Mark Jarvis

In 2002, as part of an effort to promote the understanding of oral traditions as multimedia events, the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition launched the first eCompanion, created to accompany John Miles Foley's [How to Read an Oral Poem](#). This facility contains audio, video, photographic, and text-based support for that volume, and advocates using the media in an integrated fashion—with the book in one hand and a mouse in the other.

Two years later the CSOT extended the concept of eCompanions to the articles that constitute its journal *Oral Tradition*. As with the first such facility, eCompanions for *OT* presented resources that could not fit comfortably, or at all, between the covers of a printed text. Again the model consisted of adding electronic to textual media.

With the migration of *OT* to the web, eCompanions were attached to individual articles, so that the entire experience of each contribution—the pdf file and online multimedia—is available in composite, integrated form. Examples include audio and photographs accompanying a study of [Gaelic song](#), video and photographs to illustrate [Javanese dance](#), supplementary images associated with [Kabuki drama](#), and audio of an [Appalachian folktale performance](#). These eCompanions are meant to accomplish what the article by its very nature cannot: to fill in some of the background of real-life context and experience that is by convention eliminated from even the most carefully prepared textual document. Hopefully, they will help the reader to become a better, more faithful audience for the oral tradition under consideration.

Now, with this special issue on Basque Oral Poetry we are able to provide a great wealth of visual and temporal media. Photo, audio, and video resources are presented in a slideshow accompanying the individual articles. Audio and video resources are indicated by icons in the slideshow. Click on the slide to 1) see an enlarged photo, 2) hear audio, or 3) watch video. As a convenience, each slideshow includes a visual index accessible by clicking the word “index” in the upper right-hand portion of the slide. Clicking on the thumbnail image in the index will advance the slideshow directly to that resource. Each slide has a distinct URL, so links can be created directly to a particular slide. In order to provide this capability, the browser history is incremented as the slideshow progresses. This means that clicking on the browser's back button will take you to the previous slide rather than returning you to the table of contents, so we have provided a convenient link to the TOC below each slideshow.

We hope you will enjoy the new eCompanion mode and we welcome suggestions for additions, modifications, and other improvements to journal.oraltradition.org. Oral tradition is a

vast and complex phenomenon, and we need your help to make this site as useful as possible. Please send any feedback to [John Foley](#).

*Center for Studies in Oral Tradition
University of Missouri*

Editor's Column

We have decided to begin this collection on improvised *bertsolaritza* with two very different, yet at the same time complementary, points of view. In the first article, John Miles Foley offers his vision—or to put it another way, his experience—of one of the highpoints of modern-day *bertsolaritza*: the finals of the Basque National Bertsolari Championships 2005. This account reflects the most visible and spectacular part of a performance that, as Foley himself so rightly states, cannot be fully understood solely on the basis of what happened or what was said on that particular day in that particular event. Much like an iceberg, the hidden part that supports and gives meaning to this festive tradition is much larger and runs far deeper than its visible counterpart. The second article deals precisely with one of the basic pillars of this hidden part, outlining the conclusions of a sociological study carried out over recent years with the aim of exploring, in greater depth, the structure of the *bertsolaritza* audience, followed by an assessment of the phenomenon and expectations for the future. We believe that these two perspectives offer anyone striving to understand the phenomenon of sung improvisation in the Basque language an unbeatable insight into the matter at hand.

In subsequent articles we aim to explore those aspects that, in our opinion, constitute the key characteristics of present-day improvised *bertsolaritza*. The third article analyzes the sociocultural characteristics of *bertsolaritza*, located within the context of the community that sustains it—the Basque community. The fourth article aims to describe the ecology of Basque oral poetry, offering a brief overview of the genres that it contains.

The fifth and sixth articles deal with the vital task of transmitting the art of *bertsolaritza*. The first of these outlines the current situation of the *bertso-eskolak*, or *bertsolaritza* schools, while the following one explores the place that both improvised *bertsolaritza* and oral poetry in general should occupy in the Basque school curriculum. The seventh article is a summary of the history of improvised *bertsolaritza*, arranged in accordance with the parameters of the genre itself. In the next contribution, Andoni Egaña, winner of the last four national championships, offers a phenomenological insight into the process of creating improvised bertsos.

With the principal aspects of the phenomenon outlined in previous articles, the ninth article in this collection proposes the establishment of a theoretical framework specifically for improvised *bertsolaritza* and discusses some of the proposals regarding the establishment of this framework to date. Finally, we have included interviews with three *bertsolaris*, one each from the older, middle, and younger generations: Joxe Agirre, Andoni Egaña, and Maialen Lujanbio.

The Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza is extremely grateful to John Foley, not only for his trust and confidence in inviting us to compile this collection, but also for the enthusiasm with which he has received all our initiatives and for his always interesting criticisms and suggestions.

Bertsozale Elkarte, Special Editors

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Basque Oral Poetry Championship

John Miles Foley

Imagine selling 13,025 tickets for oral poetry. Imagine further an entire 6-7 hours of live performances broadcast on regional television as they happen, with excerpts, summaries, and expert commentary on national television. Imagine a one-day event—the final act in a multi-stage, four-year, Olympian drama of qualification and elimination—galvanizing ethnic, national identity to a degree unparalleled virtually anywhere in the world. Imagine the confluence of all of these phenomena and you have the [Bertsolari Txapelketa](#),¹ the national championship of *bertsolaritza*, the improvised contest poetry from Basque oral tradition, which took place in Barakaldo, Spain, on December 18th, 2005.

The [rules for competitive bertsolaritza](#) are at once straightforward and extremely demanding. An emcee reads a topic or prompt to the contestants, who then have a few seconds—usually less than a minute—to assemble an 8-12-line poem along the pattern of a prescribed verse-form that also involves a rhyme scheme. Melodies are chosen from among hundreds of traditional tunes. In other words, poets must fit their unique, never before realized ideas into a highly complex framework of rules and patterns, and they must accomplish all these tasks concurrently in extemporaneous performance. That's a lot of balls to keep in the air all at once, so *bertsolariak* must be expert jugglers. (Speaking of balls, organizers chose a rolled-up ball of paper with words scribbled on its strips as the icon for the 2005 championship.)

I heard three explanations of this memorable image, all purportedly from the mouths of the oral poets themselves. Some people saw it as a symbol of the transience of the oral poem, carefully constructed and delivered but then discarded like trash; the moment of performance was what mattered, they said. The poem lived as an experience in time, not as a timeless artifact. A second group suggested an opposite perspective on the process but a similar basic concept, namely that the ball represented a nest of ideas opened up in performance, so that individual words became actual poetry only during the process of singing—only as the ball was unrolled. The third explanation held that these balls of paper/poetry were in fact the *bertsos*, the poems themselves, tossed back and forth between dueling competitors. As we shall see, this last interpretation reflects the direct verbal combat that lies at the heart of *bertsolaritza*.

As the opening session of the championship final began, and amid energetic strains of techno-pop that flooded the arena, the eight finalists marched to the stage. To honor these heroes

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

of oral poetry-making, let me name them in an “epic catalogue” in the order they appear in the photo below (left to right):



1. Igor Elortza Aranoa
2. Andoni Egaña Makazaga (the current and three-time champion)
3. Jon Maia Soria
4. Amets Arzallus Antia
5. Sustrai Colina Acordarrementeria
6. Aitor Mendiluze Gonzalez
7. Maialen Lujanbio Zugasti (the 2001 runner-up)
8. Unai Iturriaga Zugaza-Artaza

Seven men, one woman (Maialen)—a reflection of the fact that this oral tradition has, until recently, been primarily a male genre, but also a sign that more and more women are performing, and performing very well. In this and many other ways *bertsolaritza* is adapting to and documenting social change.

To get a sense of the strong cultural underpinnings, it is important to take account of what didn’t actually occur on December 18th, but serves as the crucial background for the quadrennial ritual—the 47-month backstory, if you like. In fact, even the regional competitions that serve as the opening rounds of progressive eliminations, gradually yielding the chosen eight for the finals, themselves represent only a part of that backstory. To understand the power and presence of *bertsolaritza*, we need to realize that the art and practice of oral poetry is woven very deeply into the fabric of Basque society, in both formal and informal settings and on a virtually everyday basis. Perhaps the most intimate of such settings is the ubiquitous “*bertso*-dinner,” a city or village ritual that features a community feast followed by performances by two or more *bertsolariak*, who duel not for prizes or glory but for the enjoyment of all those present. More than one thousand of these oral poetry feasts take place each year, I was told.

When I accompanied friends to a *bertso*-dinner in 2004, I learned something of the complex, recurring context that these events provide. One of the *bertsolariak* performing that evening was Maialen Lujanbio, the sole woman among the eight performers catalogued above. She and her opponent-for-the-occasion had been hired through an agency run by [Bertsozale Elkarte](#), an organization formed in 1986 to support Basque oral contest poetry in all of its dimensions—cultural, historical, economic, academic, and whatever other aspects need attention. Before the meal began, the guest poets circulated freely throughout the gathering of 40-50 townspeople, picking up tidbits of local color and personal anecdotes that they would later use

during their performance to amuse their hosts. I found myself hoping that colleagues in Bertsozale Elkarteak would someday research and write a full ethnography of a *bertso*-dinner, from the initial arrangements many months before the event through the long-planned and much-anticipated night of performances. Such a longitudinal perspective would help us grasp the central role of oral poetry in this society.

At any rate, suffice it to say that the championship finals rest on established social practice, and that *bertsolaritza* is an everyday as well as a quadrennial vehicle for entertainment and commentary, and for declaring and reaffirming Basque national identity. It is, in other words, a continuous tradition with many diverse manifestations throughout the cultural scene.

Now back to December 18th, about mid-day, and the much-awaited entrance of the eight finalists. The ritual begins with extemporaneous improvisations of greeting, as each contestant uses the medium of oral poetry to welcome the audience—both the 13,025 in attendance and the 100,000 watching live—to the event. Their *bertsos* (“verses, poems”) range from professions of modesty (“it’s a pleasure to take part, no matter what the outcome”) to solicitations of support (“please take pity on me”) to expressions of gratitude and even to bold warnings directed toward the favorite (“Andoni, we’ve come to challenge you”). In terms of ready adaptation to variant settings, *bertsolaritza* is reminiscent of the praise-poetry of the Xhosa and Zulu peoples of South Africa, which is tailored to particular chiefs and more recently to political figures both positive and negative, and to the pre-dinner toasts I experienced during fieldwork in Mongolia, extemporaneous poems composed by oral poets and chronicling the guests, their countries of origin, and other details.

With this joint prologue accomplished, the verbal warriors turn to their jousting in earnest. For each of the specific contests that follow during the first (11:00-14:00) and second sessions (16:30-19:45), the emcee will prescribe a topic or scenario, which serves as a prompt for the *bertso*, and in addition the verse form and number of iterations. The particular melody—and some 3,000 have been recorded across the larger tradition—is in part determined by the verse form. While it’s conceivable that the greeting poems (for which neither prompt nor parameters were prescribed) could have been partially pre-composed; what follows them now couldn’t possibly be prepared in advance. What takes place from this point onward is improvisation in the true sense of the term, improvisation made possible by fluency within the multi-dimensional compositional language.

For example, the first prompt, given to Igor and Andoni, runs as follows: “You are workmates. After a labor strike of two years’ duration is finally settled, the bell rings in the locker room and you are called to work.” The emcee then prescribes the verse form (leaving each *bertsolari* to choose an appropriate melody) and indicates that they must compose competing poems for a total of three cycles (three sequences of *bertsos*). Here’s a précis of their collaborative, dueling response:

Igor: Friend, I’m not so happy to be here, but we’re two workers, so let’s be gentlemen.

Andoni: We’ve had a major struggle, and in the end achieved something—probably not enough, but let’s continue to work like donkeys and make the best of things.

Igor: Yes, we’re going back there to work for our bosses; like donkeys we bear our burden.

Andoni: Not all our objectives have been attained, but we haven't bowed down; our backs are still straight.

Igor: The union and the militants have had time enough—I don't want to end up working like a donkey on four legs.

Andoni: You're sad. I'm not completely happy either. Let's hope we can eat our sandwiches soon.

While the judges privately mark their scores based on the quality of the poetry, the performance, and the singing (no gestures are allowed in this tradition), three more pairs of dueling poets step to the microphone, one twosome after the next. The fourth pair, Maialen and Unai, both of whom will eventually finish very high in the standings, are assigned one of the most evocative topics of the competition, and they handle it with great dexterity and wit.

Here is the scenario: "You are the parents of three young children, and for the first time in a long time you have the opportunity to spend the weekend together without your children." Once again the verse form is prescribed, the melody is open (though of course limited by the verse form), and the contestants are asked to produce three *bertsos* each. A summary of their memorable exchange runs as follows:

Maialen: Not one, not two, but three! We're always thinking of how to get rid of our children, but now that we're on our own we don't know what to do with ourselves.

Unai: Yes, we had lots of money until the three children arrived. But, dear, how did we go about this sort of thing in the past?

Maialen: We start and finish with three children. My husband, you always have an excuse because of your job; you can't tell the difference because you're always busy.

Unai: Oh, I feel something warm! There goes the cell phone—I'll bet it's your mother calling us again . . .

Maialen: My mother's always calling at the wrong time. I'm not sure what's warming up—is it what you have on your shirt [the "18/98 plus" symbol associated with Basque nationalism]? I have three-plus children [her husband is also a child]!

Unai: That's how things go. My oven is boiling; you're exciting me even though you're angry.

In these as in so many other instances all afternoon and evening, the oral poets are called upon to wrestle with difficult, many-faceted scenarios that are at the same time familiar human commonplaces. Family, society, ethnicity, and politics are the favorite topics, and *bertsolariak* must give their thoughts a lyrical and appealing spin even as they navigate the demanding series of formal verse and musical requirements.

For their part, audiences leave little doubt about whether or to what degree they approve of the poets' best efforts. Sighs of delight and surprise punctuate the well-received *bertso* as it draws to a close, and each poem is accorded a clear, unequivocal evaluation, all the way from polite, unenthusiastic applause through footstamping, screaming support. And 13,000 voices can register quite an impact!

Another dimension of performer-audience interaction is especially striking. Because the tight pattern of rhythm and rhyme will dependably illuminate the horizon of the last few lines before the poet ever performs them, the audience very often sings these never-before-uttered lines in unison with the *bertsolari* even as he or she makes them. And in a show of worthy sportsmanship typical of every aspect of the event, each poet's competitors regularly do the same, with a generous smile of appreciation on their faces. As I listen to the audience and try to gauge their criteria and preferences, I remember a discussion with two colleagues, Koldo Tapia and Joxerra Garzia, about the effects of mass media on this performed oral poetry, and try to imagine what reactions are taking place across the much-expanded virtual arenas of live television and radio.

With round one behind them, the *bertsolari* now move on to improvised poetic debates that are designated formally as "polemics." Consider the first prompt, with the emcee providing the same framework as above (different particulars, but a corresponding set of parameters prescribing verse form and cycles): "Andoni, you're out late and you're hungry when you come back early in the morning. So you're eating the left-over squid in the refrigerator when your mother (Jon) walks in and catches you in the act." Of course, the situation is rife with overtones: the young man living with his parents but naturally wanting to express his individuality and keep his own hours, the mother watching her son becoming a man at inconveniently close quarters, and so forth. Here is how Andoni and Jon handle the challenge:

Andoni: What's going on in the kitchen? Oh, good evening, mother, you're wearing such a beautiful nightie!

Jon: My nightie's as black as the squid you're gobbling down!

Andoni: I think I've been sipping whiskey. But my lips are covered with ink; I suppose it's because the squid has squirted me.

Jon: Squids squirt—let's ignore that remark. Next time get out of bed in time for lunch instead of sleeping through it!

Andoni: Say whatever you want—I'm going to eat the squid now, and I won't get up any earlier than 15:30!

Jon: You want to ignore me? Well, go ahead. When your father speaks with you, things will get really complicated.

Andoni: I want to eat the squid right now. Here, let me give you a kiss Oh, sorry, I've left an ink-stain on your face.

Jon: Yes, you've stained my cheek! Next time, instead of having me work so hard [preparing food], just call Tele-Pizza!

This exchange reveals the heart and soul of *bertsolaritza* as a contest. The two poets duel, casting contrary remarks back and forth, seeking to win the bloodless war of words by out-thinking one another. And through their linked series of *bertsos* run several common threads—the nightie, the squid, the color black, the ink, the daily schedule—that each competitor tries to twist to his advantage. That is, not only must each participant obey the rules of the verse-making game as dictated by the emcee, but he also has to echo the vocabulary and images used by his opponent. This "horizontal" strategy of echoing the opponent's words, which lasts

throughout the six-*bertso* series, is reminiscent of similar tactics in other oral traditions of verbal dueling, notably the early medieval English *flyting* (verbal combat) between Beowulf and Unferth in *Beowulf* or between Byrhtnoth and the inimical Viking messenger in *The Battle of Maldon*.

Three more polemics ensue, with topics ranging widely over matters of love and seasickness, jobs and status, and friends and money, and the other six participants respond to the prompts in reshuffled pairs. There's a lot of humor involved, much of it stemming from the vivid portrayal of comically familiar behavior—problems and responses we all recognize. But there are occasional moments of unveiled social criticism, too, especially of the plight of powerless laborers in comparison to the comfortable, wealthy existence enjoyed by their bosses (at the workers' expense, of course). Like the North American contest performances known as “slam poetry,” *bertsolaritza* serves as a vehicle for lamenting the ills of the common person, a platform for raising one's voice in objection to the status quo. It often aims at exposing injustice in the hope that social maladies can be addressed and remedied.

The rest of Session One consists of “solos,” in which each competitor is given the first line of a *bertso* and required to create the rest; and the so-called “prison cell intervention,” in which the other *bertsolariak* are locked in a room so that they can't hear their competitors perform. Each person is asked to respond with three related poems on the following theme: “You hadn't cried for a long time, but tears have just come to your eyes.” Responses are predictably various, as are the farewell *bertsos* composed as a ritual closure to this opening session. The audience heads out of the arena for their mid-day meal, with Amets' bold reference to the reigning champion ringing in our ears: “I'm happy to crucify [Andoni] Egaña, though he'll soon be resurrected.”

Over lunch my table of non-native enthusiasts conducts an informal poll to determine our favorites, and specifically to select those two *bertsolariak* we expect to reach the ultimate stage, a one-on-one competition at the very end of the proceedings. Most of us had listened to a Spanish translation of the performances; I and a few others heard a simultaneous English version, provided by Alfonso Vidal and Mikel Vidal and arranged by Kaldo Tapia. Our discussion is earnest, and our criteria are applied with as much expertise as we can muster; in the end, however, our conclusions prove only about half right. We settle correctly, as it turns out, on the eventual champion, the winner of the trophy and the cap, but only one of the twelve accurately picks the runner-up.

After the two and one-half hour break, the eight competitors return to battle, this time in a different sequence in order to vary the dueling combinations during the second session. Illustrating the “horizontal” structure of the ongoing competition, Andoni's *bertso* of greeting refers back to the offhand remark uttered by Amets at the end of the first session: performing entirely within the traditional idiom, he observes that “I got off the cross because, as you understand, it's really difficult to eat in that position.” In addition to responding wittily, his poem reveals a remarkable ability to harness the traditional form for a unique and present purpose.

During this first contest of the second session the following topic falls to Unai and Amets: “One of you is an old soldier, the other a young soldier; you are about to lose the battle, and the old soldier sees that his younger comrade is disheartened.” Their response is equal parts painful realism, social politics, and metaphor:

Unai: What a cruel fate we have! Why did we become soldiers? Better to have a wounded coward than somebody dead!

Amets: Don't give me poetry when I'm in the middle of a battle—you have to carry on fighting!

Unai: What are you talking about? Everything has been decided for us in some office somewhere; we have nothing to say and nothing to do.

Amets: I have a wound, I'm bleeding—do you think that tears are better? Set aside your desperation! I prefer a white sheet to tears.

Unai: Leave the sheet—we are nobody's dinner. Lie on the ground, pretend you're dead, hold your breath.

Amets: Let's not play tricks. I want to continue. If we lose, it's because soldiers like you have no guts.

The second competition in this session involves a dueling contest in alternate lines, first one line by one poet, then the second by another, and so forth. Reminiscent of the African-American verbal games of “the dozens” or more generally of certain varieties of hip hop (especially in competitive freestyling), these duels are prescribed to continue for a maximum of four exchanges. A couple of pairs get carried away and exceed the set limit, but no one seems to regret the spontaneous overflow.

The third bout requires each of the *bertsolariak* to compose three poems on a designated topic in a verse form of their choice. Although many of these cycles are impressive, one stands out as embodying the core political concerns of *bertsolaritza*. Here is the prompt given to Andoni: “You’ve been on holiday with your friends in Madrid, but you get separated from the rest of the group. You find yourself standing in front of the steps of the High Court of Justice.” After approximately thirty seconds’ pause, he offers three *bertsos* that we can summarize as follows:

1. I was walking down by La Castellana Avenue and saw the north of the city, and all of a sudden I bumped into the steps. I may as well turn my back to the steps. I am perhaps the only Basque who has come up the steps without being summoned by the court itself.
2. Shall I go inside or not? Perhaps I could, but then the judge might issue an order and sentence me to many years in prison. But I'll go inside and make a statement, tell the judge everything because I'm “a know-it-all jester” [as the court had described *bertsolariak* some years before during a trial in which Andoni took part].
3. I step inside. Perhaps the best thing is to turn around—making a statement was just a whim. I'd better not make a statement. I'm in danger now and I need to find my friends.

At this juncture a brief intermission now interrupts the proceedings, and the tension builds as the emcee thanks the judges, naming them one by one, as well as all who supported this event either financially or through volunteerism. This includes not only officials from various levels of the government, but most immediately the local associations linked to the *bertso*-schools in which children are educated in Basque and in the art and practice of *bertsolaritza* itself.

After a few moments the names of the final two *bertsolariak* are announced. To no one's surprise, the first is Andoni Egaña; the second name, less universally expected but greeted with raucous and sustained applause, is that of Unai Iturriaga. So the final battle is set—Andoni versus Unai in a duel for the national title over a series of four challenges: two back-and-forth polemics, a *bertso* based on a “mystery word,” and a final solo on a new topic.

The first of the polemics takes shape around a popular song about Maritxu, a young woman, and her boyfriend Bartolo. The emcee gives the prompt as follows: “Unai, you are Maritxu. Your father has sent you to the fountain to fetch a bottle of white wine that has been cooling there. You happen to meet Bartolo (played by Andoni), who has discovered the wine and is very drunk.” It's worth adding that even the reading of this topic gets a lively response among the audience, who eagerly await the two maestros' comic exchange over familiar territory. Here is their encounter in paraphrase (and entirely unexpurgated!):

Unai (Maritxu): I've come because my father sent me. What a surprise to run into you! But we've missed an opportunity; you're drunk!

Andoni (Bartolo): I've been tempted by wine. I started little by little, then I drank the whole thing. But I'm still capable of “ahem”!

Unai: Look at the kind of answer I get: he's drunk but still willing to try a bit of “ahem”! You better put your head in the water first.

Andoni: You're going to make me confess; ok, I'm a bit drunk, but Maritxu, you come closer and see where I put my head.

Unai: You're randy, so we both feel like it—let's make a deal: kneel down and you'll see a rainbow.

Andoni: I got on my knees with the best of intentions to see what Maritxu had, but there was no rainbow—it was light, and then it was dark.

The second polemic is much more serious and generalized: “You have different world views: for Andoni the future of the world is bleak, while for Unai the future of the world is open and promising.” The two *bertsolariak* respond with pointed social commentary on subjects ranging from high-speed trains and shopping centers through third-world poverty and Basque politics.

Andoni then goes off-stage while the final two tests are administered to Unai. Since they will be addressing the very same topics, it's crucial that the second poet not hear the topics posed to his opponent and thus have extra time to think and compose. Both competitors handle the *bertso* on the “mystery word”—which is simply “chair”—quite cleverly: Unai voicing his satisfaction that his chair is presently empty (because he is performing in the ultimate stage of the contest and is therefore closer to the cap and trophy) and Andoni mentioning a small chair for milking cows.

The final topic treats the problem of learning Basque and keeping the language and culture alive and thriving: “You work at a night school teaching Basque language to twelve people who are very tired after a full day of work but still want to learn.” Both poets speak eloquently about the challenge before their students and the solidarity of the group, and in the

microcosm of these verses we can glimpse the outlines of a larger, comprehensive social movement.

And then suddenly it's over. After more than six hours of high-level juggling, of creatively and publicly meshing new ideas with the traditional patterns of Basque oral performance poetry, the *bertsolariak* are silent and the judgment goes to the jury. Soon the winner is announced, and for the fourth consecutive championship Andoni Egaña is victorious, this time over the runner-up Unai. Maialen places third, Amets fourth, Igor fifth, Sustrai sixth, Aitor seventh, and Jon eighth.

Fittingly, the ritual comes to a close with brief performances given by children attending Basque *bertso*-schools and by all eight of the competitors themselves. Without exception, the other seven are generous in complementing the victor Andoni, each in his or her own way. Jon asks, "What can we do if you were born to be great?" and Sustrai congratulates "baldy" and looks forward to the next championship four years hence. Maialen observes that the planets seem to have been aligned in Andoni's favor, but that the women are getting closer (she was second in 2001 and third this time) and she'll be back in 2009. Unai congratulates all of the competitors but tempers his joy by remembering "the prisoners who couldn't listen to us today."

Finally, Andoni, who receives the champion's cap from the great *bertsolari* Imanol Lazkano, past president of the association, sings his victory ode, mentioning most prominently "my children and the woman I love, with love to my mother and, with my Father's permission, the mothers of us all."

So ends an oral poetry event that is, to my knowledge, unique in the world. For the cheering thousands who came to Barakaldo, drawn by the cultural need to personally experience and co-create *bertsolaritza*, the event is manifestly fulfilling and inspiring. There is obviously great joy not only for the eight finalists, but also for their 13,000 friends. Likewise for the 100,000 more who attended this "grand war of words"—in which no one was injured and everyone behaved honorably—via their radios and television sets, joining vicariously in this culminating celebration of Basque traditional identity.

I close with a word on context and tradition, which remain immanent after this particular instance of *bertso*-making has ceased. No matter how impressive these championships may seem, and they certainly were remarkably impressive in scope, process, and outcome, their power doesn't derive solely from the grand but transient moment of the every-fourth-year festival. Not at all. That considerable power stems just as surely from the ongoingness and ubiquity of *bertsolaritza*, its long history and continuing significance in Basque culture. Whether on the "macro" scale of the filled-to-the-brim exhibition hall or within the much more modest, intimate setting of the local *bertso*-dinner, this remarkable oral poetry is simply doing what oral poetry always does: it works on behalf of society, on behalf of ethnic and community values, as an adaptive mechanism for negotiating the world. In a real sense *bertsolaritza* is the pulse of Basque culture, an index of what it means to be Basque—past, present, and future.

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A Sociological Study of Sung, Extempore Verse-Making in Basque

Alfredo Retortillo and Xabier Aierdi

Bertsolaritza: From Oral Tradition to Community Position

This article is based on a project commissioned in 2005 by the Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte and conducted by researchers from the Sociology and Political Science Departments of the University of the Basque Country. Four main surveys were developed through the course of this research, and two field studies of a quantitative nature were conducted: one with the participants of the semifinals of the *bertsolari* championship and the other with those performers who went on to the finals. In spring 2006, two further quantitative surveys were completed: one with an audience of ordinary *bertsolari* events and another with the Euskaldun population (that is, speakers of the Basque language, Euskara). The latter survey is the one upon which the present article is based because an analysis of this study enables us to better discern the relationship that exists between *bertsolaritza*—improvised Basque oral verse—and its real basis: the Basque speakers themselves. Since the spring of 2006, two further studies of a qualitative nature have been conducted: one Delphi analysis with both experts and *bertsolaris* (performers) and another based on discussion groups with different social typologies—Euskaldun and non-Euskaldun—in order to better understand how the tradition of *bertsolaritza* is regarded in the Basque community.

The Linguistic Community of Euskara: The Miracle and the Numbers

In order to put the phenomenon of *bertsolaritza* in context, it seems helpful to us to give a brief description of Basque culture and language. The Basque Country is a territory that straddles both Spain and France. Its name is derived from the fact that it possesses its own language, Euskara; Euskal Herria, then, means “the country of those who speak Euskara.” Three of its territories (Lapurdi, Nafarroa Beherea, and Zuberoa) are situated in the French Basque Country, or Iparralde; and four of them (Araba, Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, and Nafarroa Garaia) are located in Hegoalde, within the Spanish State.¹

¹ See Map 1.

As of January 2005, around 270,000 people were living in the Northern Basque Country, Iparralde, while about 2,720,000 people resided in the Southern Basque Country, Hegoalde. The development models on either side of the border have been influenced by the events of the respective states. Thus the South has experienced major economic development and a large influx of Spanish population,² and the North has seen minimal development and a high level of dependency, along with great waves of emigration, either to other areas of France or to the Americas.

Map 1. Map of the *Herrialdes*

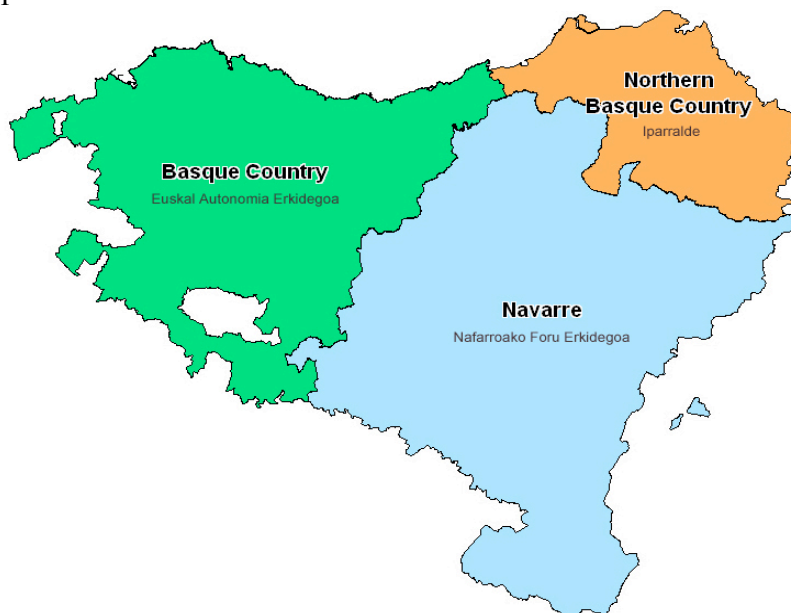


Table 1. Distribution of the population of the Basque Country (2005)

	Population (2005)		%
Southern Basque Country	Araba	301.757	10,1
	Bizkaia	1.136.569	38,0
	Gipuzkoa	688.708	23,0
	Navarre	593.472	19,8
Northern Basque Country	Lapurdi	227.754	7,6
	Nafarroa Beherea	28.835	1,0
	Zuberoa	15.514	0,5
Total		2.992.609	100

² Following periods of emigration—largely to Latin America—the direction of emigration changed and the Spanish began to migrate to the Southern Basque Country as part of a massive process of industrialization that took place in the late nineteenth century. The outcome of this immigration was that the ethnic composition of the Southern Basque Country became as follows: one-third of the population is autochthonous, one-third are Spanish immigrants, and the remaining third are descendants of Spanish immigrants or the result of intermarriage of Spaniards and Basques.

To continue with our brief summary, the main issues we must keep in mind are the following:

1. The emergence of Basque nationalism in the south of the Basque Country (in Bizkaia) in the late nineteenth century and its differing level of development (intense in the South and very weak in the North). This development bred strong nationalistic sentiment and therefore politicized the cultural landscape.
2. Basques are a national minority and lack a governmental body—or even State status. This has meant that the population has not been able, as a unit, to establish its own political and linguistic systems.
3. The high degree of administrative fragmentation (seven provinces in two states and three administrative units) and the differing political autonomy of its territories make the situation very complex. The portion of Basque country that is in Spain currently enjoys a notable degree of political autonomy and is divided into two administrative units: the Basque Autonomous Community (with its three provinces, Araba, Bizkaia, and Gipuzkoa) and the Navarrese *Comunidad Foral*, which comprises the province of Nafarroa. In France, the Basque territory has been subsumed into a higher administrative unit and is not officially recognized.³

In light of these issues, we are in the presence of a linguistic reality intersected by an extremely complex political and social situation. Nevertheless, this complexity has influenced, and continues to influence, the realities of the linguistic community, the topic that comprises the subject matter for this first section of the present discussion and the basis of cultural production through the medium of the Euskara language in general, and of the phenomenon of *bertsolaritza* in particular.

In order to further clarify the situation, we have provided demographic data for Euskara speakers below that delineate the boundaries of the phenomenon accurately. The table below shows the numbers of Euskaldun (speakers of Euskara):

Table 2. Population and Euskalduns of the territories of the Basque Country (2001)

	Population	Basque speakers	Basque speakers by territory (%)
Araba	287.928	45.312	15,7
Bizkaia	1.123.002	273.872	24,4
Gipuzkoa	673.563	337.796	50,2
Navarre	555.829	63.631	11,4
Northern Basque Country	262941	59177	22,5
Total	2.903.263	779.788	26,9

In 2001 the Basque population numbered around three million, a quarter of whom could speak Euskara (with notable variations among territories). The province of Gipuzkoa presented

³ Toward the end of 2006, the year in which this article was written, the French Parliament refused to grant joint official status to Euskara, claiming that it goes against the unity of the French people and against equality before the law, and that it may pose risks to the European Community. The French and Turkish governments are the only governments who have not signed the European Charter on Minority and Regional Languages.

the highest percentage: one in two residents of this territory can speak the language.⁴ At the other end of the Southern Basque Country lies Nafarroa Garaia, where only one out of ten Navarrese can speak Euskara. Similarly, the language is spoken by 15% of the population in Araba and by 25% in Bizkaia. Apart from other vicissitudes of history, the differing legal status of Euskara as an official or joint official language in the different territories also forms part of this picture.⁵ Although we do not have any detailed demographic data on Iparralde,⁶ we do know that the region presents an average level of 22.5%. This area also, however, has a great deal of internal variability: the two inland territories (Zuberoa and Behenafarroa) have a notably higher percentage of Euskalduns than the coastal province, Lapurdi, but these territories present a demographic trend in steady decline and currently represent only 1.5% of the Basque population.

Table 3. Relationship between Euskara and the populations of the different territories, by percentage (2001)

	Araba	Bizkaia	Gipuzkoa	Navarre	Northern
Basque-speakers	16	25	52	12	23
Passive basque speakers	25	25	20	9	13
Non-basque speakers	59	50	29	79	64
Total	100	100	100	100	100

If we consider Euskara-speaking ability by region,⁷ we arrive at something similar to what is illustrated in Map 2, which shows us in which territories Euskara is still a living reality. The region in which over 50% speak Euskara begins in the middle area of Bizkaia, becomes clustered in Gipuzkoa, passes through the northwest of Nafarroa, and reaches as far as the inland territories of the French Basque Country. This “axis” does not touch the two large regions containing the capital cities of San Sebastián and Bilbao, however, and it hardly involves any of the territory of Araba and Nafarroa or the densely populated portion of the Northern Basque Country. In these areas, Euskara-speaking ability doesn’t reach the 50% mark even in the best of cases.

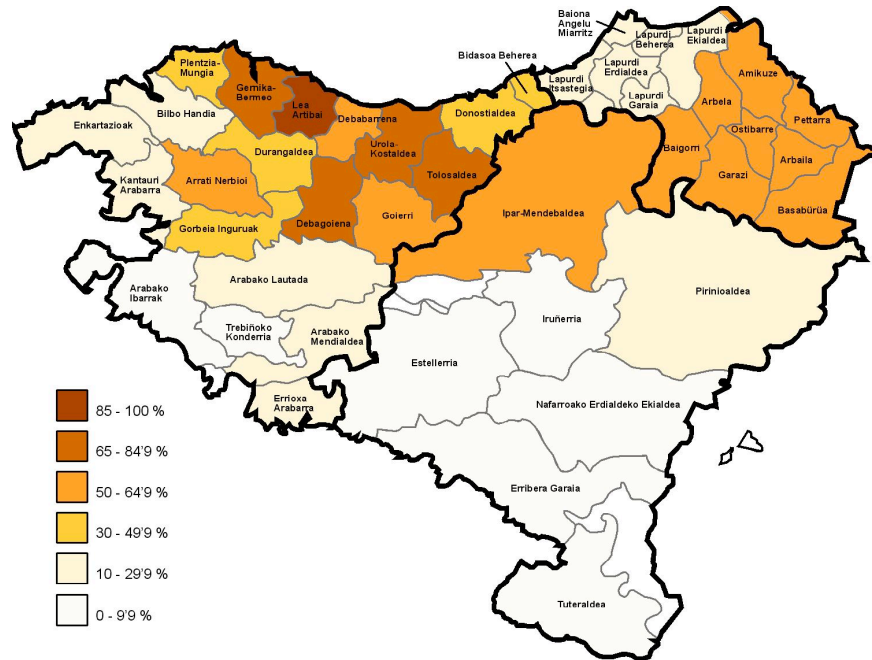
⁴ See Table 3.

⁵ In the Basque Autonomous Community, Euskara is a joint official language; in Nafarroa its status is under review, which is giving rise to a growing number of difficulties; and in the French Basque Country has not yet obtained joint official status (see note 2).

⁶ Administrative fragmentation is an obstacle when it comes to obtaining consistent data, because the functioning of each unit is very much determined by the interests of its respective administration. The most exhaustive data available are those from the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country.

⁷ The regions are divided by internal administrative boundaries of the provincial territories.

Map 2. Regions of Euskal Herria showing the percentage of the population who can speak Euskara (2001)



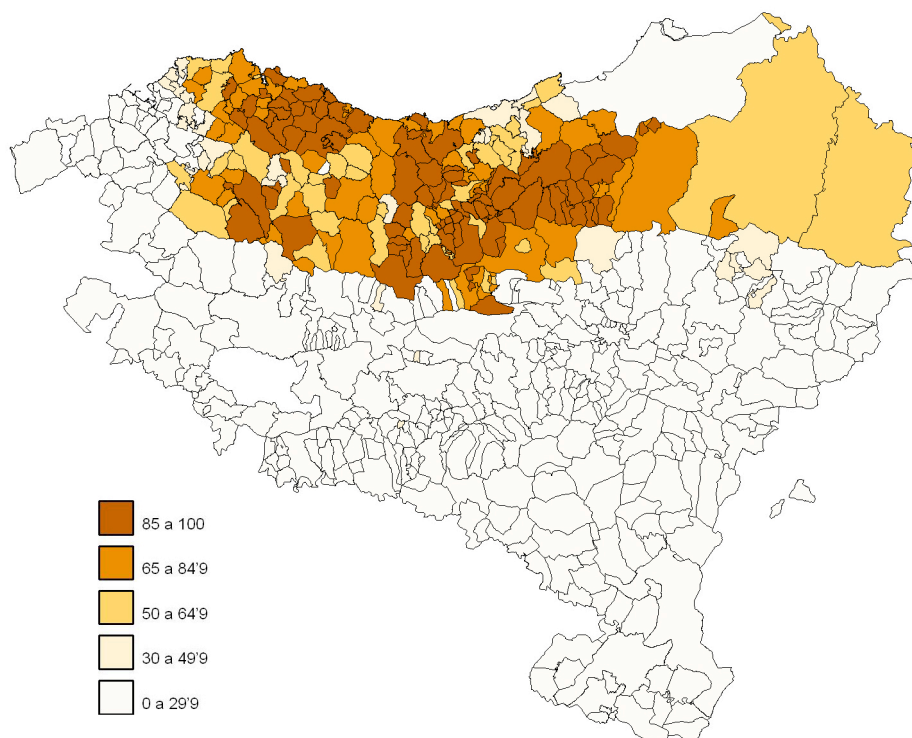
The realities illustrated by the map above are influenced by a number of different factors: the presence of the State languages, which compete with or replace Euskara; cultural marginalization processes; adverse legal frameworks; and the acceptance of marginalization by the Euskara-speaking population and the consequent abandonment of the language. This last phenomenon stems from the fact that in different phases of history, and especially during Franco's dictatorship, many families within Spain stopped speaking Euskara at home—either out of fear, or repression, or because they took the marginalization of the language to heart. In France, Euskara has never obtained official language status. Since the time when Spain recovered its democracy, the degree of sovereignty enjoyed by the Basque Country in Spain has been relatively high; as a result, policies and strategies for linguistic recovery and standardization have been put into place in the Basque Autonomous Community, although not in the Navarrese Comunidad Foral.

In spite of all these issues, it seems relevant here to note two things:

- 1) The language's survival amid two such powerful languages as French and Spanish is remarkable, and is a direct result of the attitudes adopted by Euskalduns in adverse historical contexts.
- 2) The territorialized placement of the Euskara linguistic community, thus enabling the existence of a dense network of relationships that allow a significant part of this population to live their lives in Euskara and to maintain a level of cultural production and consumption in Euskara that is far above what the data appears to suggest.

A more detailed snapshot⁸ illustrates this territorialized placement of the Euskaldun linguistic community, which sustains both the general expression of culture through the medium of Euskara and one of its most successful features, *bertsolaritza*. This ecology of Euskara enables us to observe that it is not so much the number of speakers, but rather their concentration, that generates enough critical mass to preserve Euskaldun culture within an increasingly globalized framework. To put it another way, the social reality of Euskara is far denser than the numbers of speakers indicate. It doesn't come down to purely geographical considerations, but rather, in a more fundamental way, to a social and cultural community that constitutes the sociological humus that has made it possible for *bertsolaritza* to grow and develop as a mass phenomenon.

Map 3. Municipalities of Euskal Herria showing percentage of Euskara-speaking ability



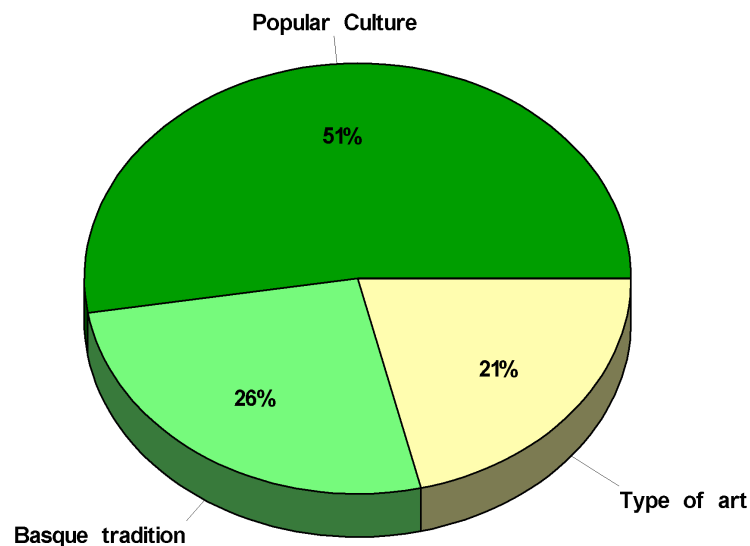
Culture in the Basque Language and Popular Culture: The Phenomenon of Bertsolaritza

When Euskalduns are questioned about their concept of *bertsolaritza*, the most generalized picture is its link with Basque culture: only two out of ten Euskalduns define *bertsolaritza* as a type of art, while the rest note its link with the Basque tradition and above all with popular culture.

⁸ See Map 3.

Culture expressed through the medium of Euskara is a culture unavoidably colored by the linguistic community that supports it; this cannot be measured using the same parameters used for more standardized languages. This “coloration” operates on at least two levels. On the one hand, it seems logical to suppose that there is no way a marginalized language can have a standardized culture. But, on the other hand, we are not dealing with an abnormal culture, but instead simply one that is of lesser magnitude. It therefore generates some products that can be compared with global standards, and other products or expressions that are more specific and confined to Basque culture; some of these latter products give form to its traditional culture, or to those elements of traditional Basque culture that are special and unique. That’s where popular culture comes in.

Chart 1. Cultural definition of *bertsolaritza*



In the context of the present discussion, “popular culture” may be understood in several ways. The first of these consists of interpreting popular culture as Basque culture of a static nature—one that doesn’t show many signs of modernity and is foreign to the current dominant cultural trends. This description may be assembled either from outside of or from within the Euskaldun linguistic community. In this case we would be dealing with a way of understanding popular culture as a phenomenon that has hardly undergone any change in its development since time immemorial and that expresses the essence of traditional Basque culture. A second way of conceptualizing popular culture in this case is to understand it as that which is expressed through Euskara; in this case, culture is defined by language, not by content. A third way of thinking about popular culture in the context of this discussion would be to conceive of it as a synthesis of the previous two perspectives. Hence “popular culture” may be considered as culture expressed through the medium of Euskara, whose origins are anchored in traditional culture but whose content does not have any one component that expresses its essence; rather, it combines elements of modernity and tradition.

According to the impression of the majority of the Euskaldun population, *bertsolaritza* is included within our third conceptualization of popular culture, and it probably couldn’t be

otherwise, given its inherent versatility—after all, one must not forget that *bertsolaritza* is pre-eminently an act of communication. Furthermore, the fact that it serves as an act of communication means that the features of modernity are automatically incorporated without any major breaks with tradition, but rather with ongoing renewal and updating processes that make it possible to transmit current cultural content using relatively traditional forms. In sociological terms, we're almost dealing with a change of system in light of the effect that has been generated by the many changes of balances of power. This process has been influenced by the recovery of a high degree of political autonomy; the subsequent linguistic standardization and recuperation; and the access of educated sectors of the population to the world of *bertsolaritza*. For its part, *bertsolaritza* has responded to the challenges that have been set before it by a public that expresses the values and customs of a highly developed society. Therein lies its success. The fact that the very nature of Euskara as a means of communication has enabled this *aggiornamento* or updating to be progressive and steady has had much to do with it as well.

Perhaps, when viewed according to more traditional parameters, it may appear that this development is taking place as a radical transformation of *bertsolaritza*, and that there are even sectors of the population who believe there has been a historical watershed in the last 20 years; hence the line joining the yesterday and today of *bertsolaritza* remains blurred. But our study indicates this line still exists, and is the result of a continuous renewal process. From this perspective, *bertsolaritza* has all the accoutrements of present-day global culture, which understands itself only in terms of permanent reformulation (and, in part, negation). In any cultural context, this permanent avant-garde status may generate the perverse effect of disfiguring that which it renews. This does not appear to have happened in *bertsolaritza*, although at times it is true that one can observe a certain obsessive desire for innovation.

Bertsolaritza appears to be detached and removed from other developments in popular culture, while at the same time its ability to organize itself is being noticed as a model to be emulated by other cultural manifestations of popular culture. Nowadays *bertsolaritza* holds such a dominant position within Basque popular culture that it is establishing a continuum between those people who, on the one hand, regard it as tradition, and those—the majority—who regard it as popular culture, as well as those on the opposite side of the spectrum who regard it simply as art. None of these interpretations necessarily rules out the others. That is to say, not only are these visions not antithetical, but they even complement one another. This is due to the fact that today the *bertsolaritza* tradition is so strong that the same fact can be christened with different names. In the present context, we are searching for the roots of *bertsolaritza*'s self-authentication in the past or in the present—an authentication that may consequently be anchored in tradition, in popular culture, or in art. More than what's said, what is important is who says what. In other words, most sectors of *bertsolaritza* culture will likely swing back and forth between regarding it as a modern art form or as popular culture. The central axis pivots, evidently, on rooting this tradition in popular culture.

Consequently, because of the vigor and autonomy that has been achieved in the process of self-definition, what is perfectly clear is the central social and cultural relevance attributed to *bertsolaritza*. The enthusiasm of the sectors of the public closest to such performances, for example, is positively outstanding. This enthusiasm is also reflected in the almost unquestioned acceptance of the transformations that have taken place in *bertsolaritza* during the past 20 years:

the higher technical standard of present-day *bertsolaris*; the fact that *bertso* (“verse”) has successfully caught on with the mass media; the central staging of the championships; the development of the art in parallel with social changes; and the fact that *bertsolaritza* doesn’t pin its last hopes on the myth of the noble savage. To put it another way, its success lies in renewal, not in “purity.”

For all these reasons, *bertsolaris* are very highly valued. They receive hardly any criticism; in fact, quite the opposite—the public emphasizes their transmission of skill from one generation to the next, their intellectual abilities, and their creative talents. Among the characteristics ascribed to them, the most prominent are as follows: they are university graduates or higher; they are very well versed in culture and are avid consumers of information; and they are multi-faceted (creators, leaders of opinion, writers, musicians, authors, and so on). Their sphere of influence is not confined to *bertsolaritza*. They have honed their intellects and, within Basque culture, they have become a strategic group with benchmark status. All in all, the *bertsolari* is an intellectual who has formed a close dialectical relationship with the society of which he or she is a part—Euskaldun society—and with society in general—Basque society.

The Community of Enthusiasts

The importance of *bertsolaritza* as a cultural, social, and linguistic phenomenon seems to suggest an especially fertile field of social research into key reproductive areas. In the context of a globalized cultural industry, we are speaking of those cultural phenomena that are heirs to tradition and popular folklore in general, and of those cultural phenomena that are located in marginalized linguistic communities in particular. Despite this fact, the phenomenon has to date received minimal attention from social researchers.

The study we conducted in 2006 in collaboration with the Bertsozale Elkartea cannot itself fill this vacuum; it did, however, succeed in illustrating what could potentially be done, and we hope it may thus serve to attract researchers’ attention. The 2006 study was largely targeted at analyzing the social context of *bertsolaritza* as a condition for the sustainability of the phenomenon—not so much from the point of view of the market demands of the modern cultural industry as from that of the premise of a transmitting audience for any and all oral traditions, an audience with whom the *bertsolari* interacts in the moment of creation and who serves as the “paper” on which the artist’s oral *bertsos* are written down.

We are thus devoting special attention to the enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* among the Basques—in other words, their *bertsozaletasuna* (a term in Euskara that more accurately expresses the audience’s emotional engagement with and ties to this verbal art). Because the potential borders of that audience lie in the linguistic community of Euskara, one portion of our study analyzed this issue in the Euskara-speaking Basque population as a whole, using a sample of 1,200 Euskalduns.

One part of the survey relates to the subjects’ own self-appraisal of their enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* on a scale from 0 to 10 points. In the chart below,⁹ we can see the percentage distribution of their responses. The results are striking: we found that there were a mere 0.6%

⁹ See Chart 2.

who did not answer the question, and that only one in ten Euskalduns gave themselves a 0 rating; in contrast, over half (58%) gave themselves a 5 or above, and a quarter of the population (27%) marked themselves as 7 or higher on the scale. One could argue that these responses might be slightly exaggerated. But that still does not detract from the fact that the answers indicate the strength of the phenomenon: no one identifies so intensely with a cultural event unless it has social prestige. Furthermore, other, more “objective” data from the survey that relate to knowledge of and/or participation in *bertsozale* events are consistent with the feeling expressed in the responses to this question.

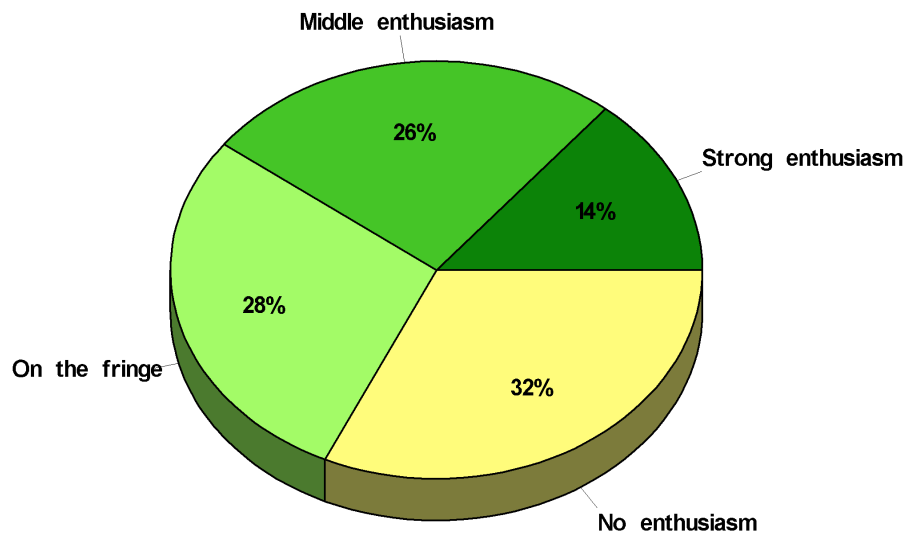
Using these data, we have developed a scoring system for the level of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza*: strong (between 8 and 10 on the scale below), relative (between 6 and 7), little (between 4 and 5), and none (below 4 on the scale). In the highest bracket are those who form the strong and stable social nucleus of the phenomenon, and in the second bracket we also find regular followers of *bertsolaritza* among whom we encounter a very diversified distribution of cultural practices—even where the language in which these practices are expressed is concerned. In the third bracket are those with limited interest who, without distancing themselves from the whole phenomenon, are much less steady in their support, although the social influence of the preceding two categories does rub off on this category, especially around festive community events such as the championships. Finally, the fourth bracket represents those who, either through socialization or through their own volition, keep to the outskirts of the phenomena.

Chart 2. Levels of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* amongst the Euskaldun population

In the following chart¹⁰ we can see the proportion of these groups within the Euskaldun population. If we simultaneously consider the strong and middle brackets of enthusiasm, overall *bertsolaritza* followers represent 40% of the population (about 300,000 people)—a far higher percentage than the third bracket, who stay on the outskirts. That sign of strength likewise corresponds to the existence of the block of people on the fringe, who are closer to the first group than to the second—at least in the collective imagination—and who represent the biggest group. The enthusiasts on the fringe still participate, but largely on a one-time basis, either through media exposure or through their attendance at specific events (championships, festivals, exhibitions at local celebrations, or other types of shows).

Looking specifically now at the regular followers of the proceedings, the proportion that reflects the existence of one strong follower for every two mid-level ones likewise expresses a clear sign of the social strength of *bertsolaritza*. The fact is, however, that into this “strong” or “middle” definition of the follower comes not only the frequency of cultural consumption, but also other considerations that have more to do with the diversity of cultural practices and types of cultural consumption. That is to say, *bertsolaritza* consumption is not always higher among strong followers than among middle ones, given that in many cases the latter tend to understate their actual *bertsozaletasuna* because they are involved with a wider panoply of cultural practices.

Chart 3. Percentages of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* among the Euskaldun population

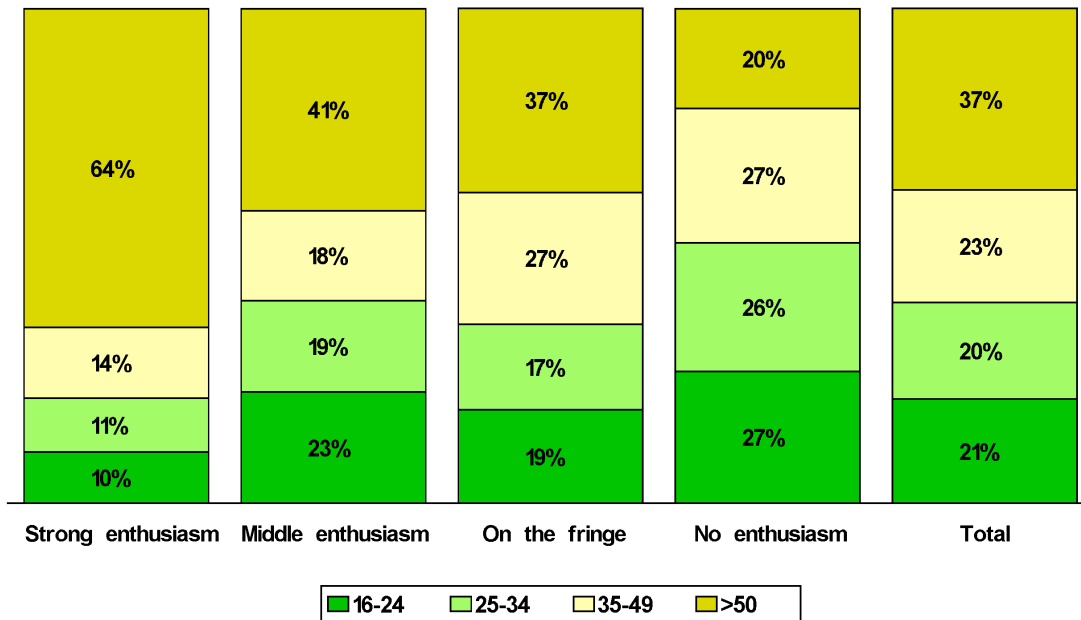


Distribution by age groups reflects in part what we have stated thus far in this analysis. Chart 4 (below) goes further in that it illustrates a certain weakness of the *bertsozale* movement that reflects issues related to aging among the active followers of *bertsolaritza*, particularly in the “strong” bracket, where two out of three followers are over 50. We shall discuss this phenomenon in the next section. For the moment what we wish to emphasize is that the relative aging of the strong bracket vis-à-vis the middle one is also in part a reflection of greater

¹⁰ See Chart 3.

heterogeneity of types of cultural consumption (and of competition between and among them) in the second bracket. Thus, when it comes to the consumption of *bertsolaritza*, those under the age of 50 tend to understate their actual *bertsozaletasuna*, and hence the proportion of these followers in the strong bracket of enthusiasm also drops.

Chart 4. Distribution by age of the differing groups of *bertsolaritza* enthusiasts



To conclude this section of our discussion, we also wish to demonstrate the manner in which this *bertsozale* feeling translates into cultural consumption practices around *bertsolaritza*. Given the heterogeneity of the types of events (festivals, performances among friends, championships, and so on), the forms of contact with the world of *bertsolaritza* (*bertso* schools, the Association Bertsozale Elkarte), and the various sources of information (the media, informal networks), it is difficult to synthesize all the information that our study attempts to address. We shall use as an example only the data relating to the frequency of attendance of two types of events: the free-style performances,¹¹ because of their abundant presence throughout the Basque area (279 performances of this type in 2005); and the championships, because of their central focus and the impact they make on the social projection of *bertsolaritza*.

¹¹ Generally speaking, “free-style” performances (in other words, without a leader) are those where the *bertsolaris* themselves (usually two) set the pattern and pace of their performance. Normally more *bertsos* are devoted to each theme (usually three per theme) than is characteristic of more formal performances, such as festivals and championships.

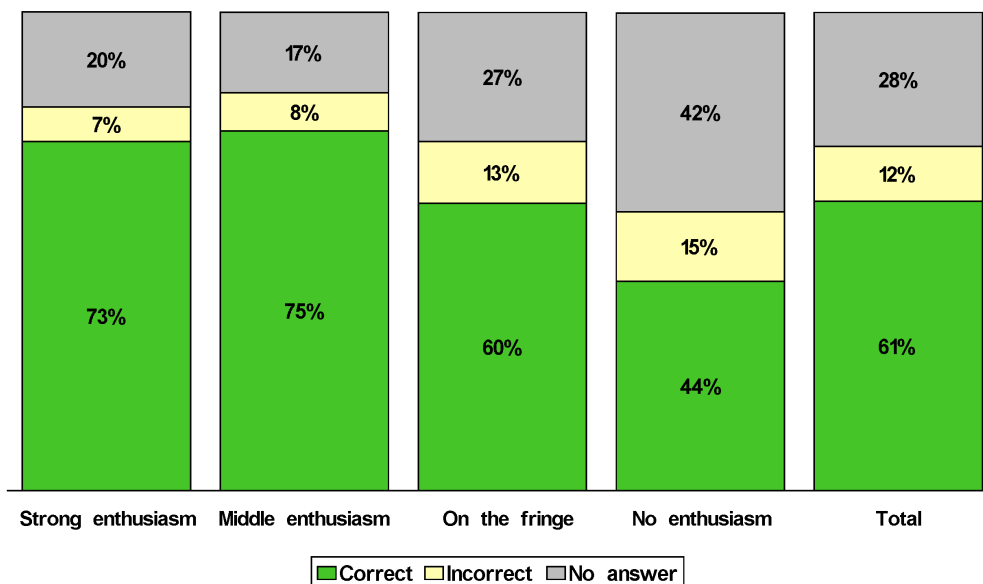
Table 4. Frequency of attendance at free-style performances and championships by brackets of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* (percentage)

	Strong enthusiasm	Middle enthusiasm	Enthusiasm on the fringe	No enthusiasm	Total
<i>FREE-STYLE PERFORMANCES</i>					
Very frequently	6.4	1.3	0.8	1.0	1.8
Frequently	39.0	31.8	16.6	9.7	21.4
Seldom	33.8	42.5	46.3	30.3	38.3
Never	19.5	24.4	36.4	58.9	38.2
<i>CHAMPIONSHIPS</i>					
Very frequently	5.8	1.1	1.0	---	1.4
Frequently	20.5	12.1	2.8	1.7	7.3
Seldom	13.2	22.1	18.1	8.9	15.5
Never	59.7	64.4	78.1	89.5	75.5
Total	100.0 n=168	100.0 n=307	100.0 n=339	100.0 n=379)	100.0 n=1200

The data in the table above in part reflect the spread of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* among the Euskaldun population. Only about four out of ten people (38.2%) have never attended a free-style performance event, and almost one quarter attend frequently. Regular attendance amounts to almost half of the strong enthusiasm, and it is only a bit less among those who express middle-level enthusiasm. On the other hand, the “pulling power” that the strong core of followers exert on those on the fringe is expressed in the low 36.4% of those who state they’ve never attended a performance. Even among those who express non-existent or scant enthusiasm, almost one in ten attends this type of event frequently (free-style performance events are of a local nature and the listener doesn’t actually travel to experience the performance; instead, the *bertsolari* performs where the public can hear).

Logically, these proportions go down when it comes to the championships, which are held far less frequently and where seating capacity is limited. Their highly important repercussions, however, stand out in the data presented in Chart 5: six out of ten people surveyed answered correctly when asked the name of the winner of the latest *bertsolari* championship, including almost half of the non-enthusiasts (44%).

Chart 5. Knowledge of the winners of the latest *bertsolari* championship, divided by brackets of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza*

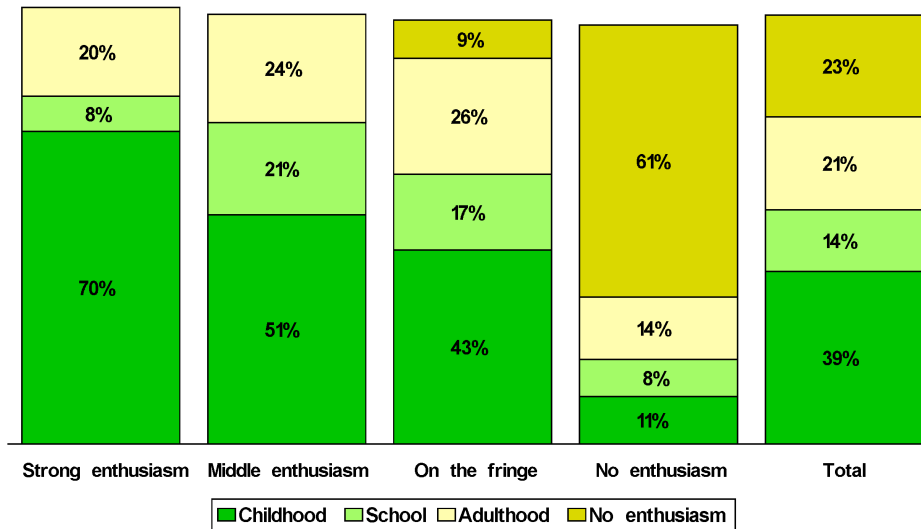


Dependent Cultural Transmission

As we saw in Chart 4, when we consider the age distribution of the brackets of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza*, we find that those brackets with the most active followers are relatively advanced in age. In the strong enthusiasm bracket, more than six in ten persons are over 50; the same goes for four out of ten in the middle-level enthusiasm bracket. On the other hand, the relatively greater youth that our study detects in those same brackets among the audience for the championship has more to do with the championship itself and its characteristics as an event than with the real composition of the social base. That being said, the data we present here relating to the Euskaldun population as a whole raises a question: could it be that enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* is falling off among the youngest people?

This factor is likewise underscored by the fact that a large majority of followers of *bertsolaritza* state that their enthusiasm stems from their earliest socialization within the family group and, to some extent, at school, as can be seen in Chart 6. Throughout the Euskaldun population as a whole only two out of ten people (21%) became enthusiasts after becoming adults, whereas 39% developed their enthusiasm in the family setting from early childhood on. This latter proportion increases with the intensity of enthusiasm, reaching 70% in the strong enthusiasm bracket.

Chart 6. Socialization of *bertsolaritza*, divided by brackets of enthusiasm



If we analyze the impact that the mother tongue has on this issue, we find that among those people raised by a Euskaldun mother half are enthusiasts, compared with two out of ten of those people raised speaking French or Spanish. Furthermore, the distribution of mother-tongue speakers of the Euskaldun population by age group clearly shows a change from one generation to the next. The youngest people surveyed are divided practically into two halves where their mother tongue is concerned: one-half were raised speaking Euskara and the other half Spanish or French. This is in radical contrast to the composition of the over-50 group—almost nine out of ten were mother-tongue Euskara speakers.

Chart 7. Enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* by mother tongue

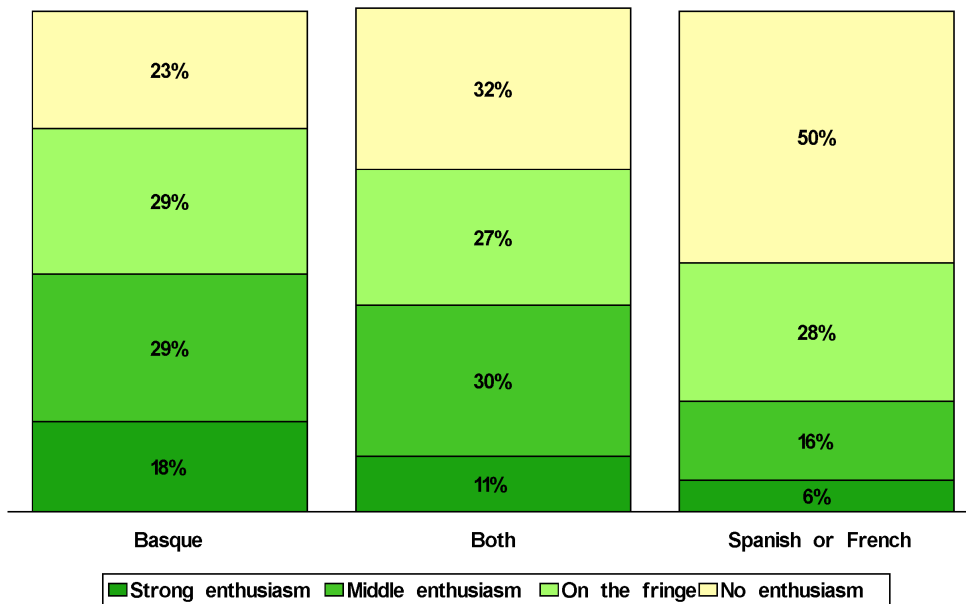
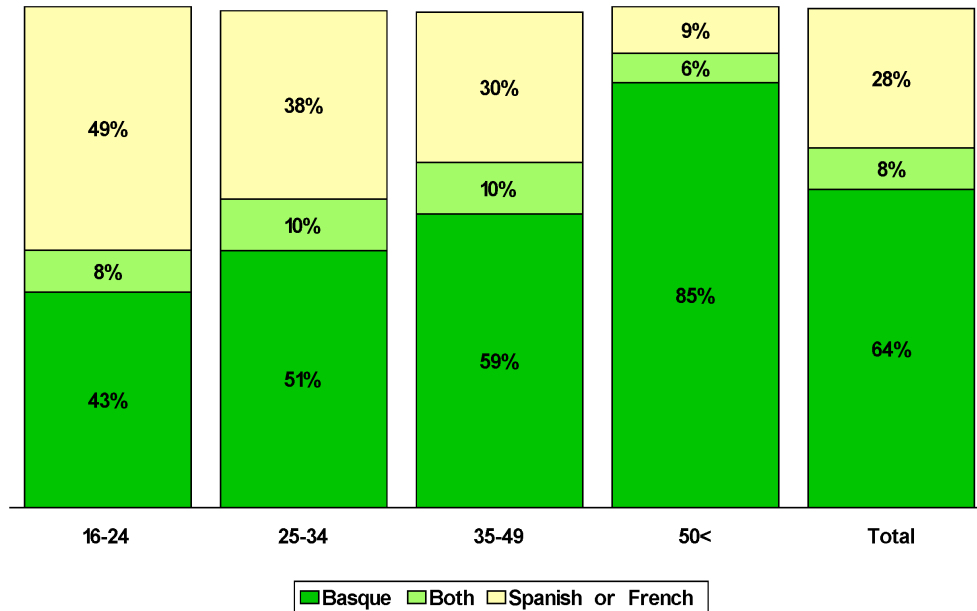


Chart 8. Mother tongue by age group

While these figures do suggest to us interesting sociolinguistic lines of thought, in the specific case that we are discussing they have a direct impact. As Table 5 shows, if we compare the enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* among the youngest and oldest, we observe that in the population as a whole non-enthusiasts represent 39.9% of the youngest age group, but that percentage is halved among the oldest age group (17.3%). That disparity diminishes when the comparison relates solely to those who were raised speaking Euskara. Thus, in the under-34 age group, the enthusiasts (strong and middle brackets) reach 40% if they were raised speaking Euskara, but their number falls to less than half of that percentage if they were not raised with the language.

Table 5. Enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* by age and mother tongue

		Euskara	Gaztelania/ Frantsesa	Biak	Guztira
16-24	Sutsuak	11,1	2,4	13,6	7,1
	Ertainak	35,2	19,5	31,8	27,3
	Periferikoak	30,6	22,0	18,2	25,3
	Ez bertsozaleak	22,2	56,1	36,4	39,9
		(n=108)	(n=123)	(n=22)	(n=253)
25-34	Sutsuak	10,8	4,5	---	7,3
	Ertainak	29,2	11,4	43,5	24,1
	Periferikoak	23,3	25,0	39,1	25,4
	Ez bertsozaleak	35,8	58,0	17,4	42,2
		(n=120)	(n=88)	(n=23)	(n=232)
35-49	Sutsuak	8,1	8,4	14,3	8,8
	Ertainak	26,9	9,6	14,3	20,1
	Periferikoak	31,3	38,6	32,1	33,2
	Ez bertsozaleak	33,8	42,2	39,3	37,6
		(n=160)	(n=83)	(n=28)	(n=274)
50<	Sutsuak	25,9	17,1	16,0	24,5
	Ertainak	28,6	24,4	32,0	28,4
	Periferikoak	29,4	26,8	20,0	28,6
	Ez bertsozaleak	15,0	29,3	32,0	17,3
		(n=374)	(n=41)	(n=25)	(n=440)

This syndrome has to do with cultural transmission mechanisms and their distortions, both in general and those that affect marginalized cultures in particular. For this reason, the relative tendency of enthusiasm to wane with successive generations merely illustrates a more general process that also affects the contemporary transformations and transmission of Basque culture. Moreover, we should point out that our study also shows that the decline in transmission within the family is accompanied by an increase at school among the youngest students. When viewed from the angle of numerical logic, the enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* may seem to have waned; but the transmission of culture as a whole, *bertsolaritza* has actually gained status, and has managed to carve out a strong niche for itself.

Along the same lines, the greater numbers of youths that our study found in the audience at the championship also appears to suggest a beneficial adaptation to modern cultural norms. This major event is no longer simply expected entertainment for a captive public that comes to the championship as a result of a pre-selection process. Instead, the championship itself—and other events or displays of *bertsolaritza* activity—provide a focus of attraction. The *bertsolaritza* movement has thus changed from former times when it was reproduced through a more primary channel of transmission.

Conclusion

In short, given that we are referring to *bertsolaritza* as a cultural expression of oral tradition, we must take as our starting point the fact that the tradition arises from a marginalized linguistic community—one that is limited even in its geographical extent, but which at the same time presents indisputable signs of life, among them:

1. The strong collective consciousness of the Euskaldun community.
2. Its limited geographical area, which promotes a much denser network of social relationships and expressions than the limited numbers of speakers (at least in comparison with the powerful languages surrounding Euskara) would suggest.
3. In spite of the administrative fragmentation and, in some places, the lack of official recognition, the linguistic recuperation policy put into place by the institutions within the area where this linguistic community is concentrated (for example, the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country) has strengthened the tradition and has furthermore acted as a driving force for speakers living in the remainder of the territories.
4. The fact that the Euskaldun community forms part of a modern and economically developed society that continues to maintain its strong sense of tradition.

This structural position of the Euskara linguistic community likely explains the cultural definition that is attributed to *bertsolaritza*: although it is expressed in terms of popular culture, it does not work against either tradition or modernity. The important thing, besides what's said, is who says it, how he or she says it, and the context in which they do so. What's more, this art form, as a cultural product, can no longer be understood as anything other than a constant renewal process with roots: the cultural success of *bertsolaritza* is based on maintaining traditional forms that work well within contemporary culture.

In short, *bertsolaritza* is an acknowledged cultural product in the present-day Basque Country, powerful in terms of both social importance and cultural prestige. The success of the latest national championship only confirms the social strength of the phenomenon. However, it is also a fact that *bertsolaritza*'s unavoidable dependency on its linguistic community of origin—with its own situation of marginalization—does generate uncertainties with regard to its future reproduction as a cultural phenomenon. The increasing fragility of the primary channels of linguistic socialization is having a weakening effect on the emotional components that this type of cultural performance depends on for its survival and development. Unlike other cultural projects that enjoy a greater degree of autonomy, *bertsolaritza* as an oral tradition simply cannot exist without its linguistic community.

In this regard, *bertsolaritza* finds itself in a curious position. On the one hand, it represents the most successful expression of Basque culture today, and its organizing ability is seen as a model to be copied by other Basque cultural expressions. On the other hand, it is often suggested that *bertsolaritza* serves as the main battering-ram of popular culture—understood here as a system—in its quest to maintain and develop the whole of the culture carried on through the medium of Euskara. Nevertheless, the fact remains that *bertsolaritza* would have a difficult task ahead of it if it attempted to go it alone in solving the structural problems involved in transmitting and reproducing Basque culture. What's more, this unique oral tradition is actually one of the expressions most dependent on the strength and geographical range of the linguistic community of Euskara. The paradoxical situation might even arise where a cultural recuperation process—which ought to be based on interdependence—results in the exclusion of the form of expression to which is attributed the ability to lead that same recuperation.

Regardless, while *bertsolaritza* is in a promising position to meet the future challenges of Basque culture, it cannot do so alone. The future of cultural expressions within the context of a marginalized language is necessarily interdependent and therefore fragile. Basque culture needs strong *bertsolaritza*; *bertsolaritza* needs a strong Basque culture; and they both need a strong and viable linguistic community to survive.

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Social Features Of *Bertsolaritza*

Jon Sarasua

Social Features of *Bertsolaritza*

[The Bertsolaritza Setting](#):¹ *The Basque Language Community*

Sung, extempore verse-making in Basque (hereafter referred to as *bertsolaritza*, as it is known in the Basque language) holds an important place in the culture of the Basque language, a speech community of about 600,000 people. This community is divided among four territories inside the Spanish state and three inside the French state; the population in these territories put together is around three million. The Basque language community is a small speech community and finds itself in a minority in its native land.

Nevertheless, we are talking about a community that goes back a long way in history. The most recent findings by a number of scientific disciplines appear to confirm its Pre-Indo-European origin, since the community of Euskara, the Basque language, is regarded as one of the oldest in Europe. It is important to bear in mind the key characteristics in the development of our speech community: a firm determination to maintain its roots and its ability to adapt unceasingly in so many eras and contexts by preserving its essential nature in difficult balances. These key characteristics and behavior are linked to the way the present and future of *bertsolaritza* is understood and, in general, to the way that the evolution of the Basque language is experienced.

Right now, the Basque language finds itself at an especially critical moment; on the one hand it is on the point of losing the battle for revival in some of its territories, and on the other it is going through a difficult normalization or development process. For the *bertsolaritza* movement, however, this situation tends to be more stimulating than dramatic and desperate. In the last 20-25 years, *bertsolaritza* has been organizing itself and adopting a sociocultural strategy; it is not possible to understand that sociocultural strategy outside of the context of the minority situation of the Basque language and the efforts being made to revive it. If it were not for this context, the whole movement might never have come about, since it is unlikely that it would have arisen through the power of improvised sung verse alone.

Bertsolaritza is one of the manifestations of traditional Basque culture that is still very much alive. A sociological survey conducted in 1993 painted a general picture of the position held by *bertsolaritza* in our speech community, while a study conducted in 2006 confirms that

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

view with updated figures. In 1993, 15% of Basque speakers regarded themselves as great devotees of *bertsolaritza*, 35% regarded themselves as devotees, and another 28% expressed a certain devotion to it. The 2006 survey provides similar figures, despite not using exactly the same categories or methods. According to these latest figures, 40% of Basque speakers are devotees of *bertsolaritza*. A further 25%, more or less, are peripheral devotees—that is, they generally keep abreast of this cultural activity from a distance, but are in direct contact with it, for example, during the championships. Finally, a third of Basque speakers, 33%, said they had no interest whatsoever in *bertsolaritza* (the survey defines this group as non-devotees of extempore verse-making in Basque). The devotees, 40% of the Basque-speaking population, are divided into two groups: those classified as strong devotees of extempore verse-making in Basque account for between 10% and 15% of all Basque speakers. The rest, those with an average interest or those who are less enthusiastic, account for the other 25-30%.

According to these surveys, devotion to *bertsolaritza* in the Basque speech community can be divided into three concentric circles. The innermost circle (the most enthusiastic one) provides a sufficient critical mass to ensure the future survival of *bertsolaritza*. In other words, the revival or transmission involving all the participants (*bertsolaris*, theme-prompters, critics, judges, teachers, organizers, committed devotees) required by *bertsolaritza* in the future takes place within this 15%. So there is a nucleus in this cultural activity that will guarantee its future.

However, it is no coincidence that in today's Euskal Herria (as the Basque Country is known in the Basque language) there is a group strong enough to ensure the revival of *bertsolaritza*. On the one hand, *bertsolaritza* has a historical basis, and its place in the Basque provinces is hardly a new phenomenon. On the other hand, its continuing existence is the result of the efforts made over the last 25 years by a generation of *bertsolaris* determined to revive verse-making and to imbue it with content of interest to today's society, and, particularly over the last 20 years, by a sociocultural strategy set in motion by a generation of *bertsolaris*, devotees, and organizers who have, as a collective, guided *bertsolaritza* through the Association of Friends of *Bertsolaritza* (hereafter referred to as the *Bertsozale Elkarte*, its name in Basque).

Levels of Expression in Contemporary *Bertsolaritza*

Today's sung, extempore verse-making in Basque appears on many levels and in many spheres of expression. It represents a section of Basque oral traditions that corresponds to the Basque language; within that section we also have a small sub-ecosystem. Extempore verse-making in Basque is not the only aspect of verbal art; we also have verse-making schools and many other activities. What follows is an attempt to provide an overview of these levels of expression, with the aim of giving a comprehensive picture of *bertsolaritza*'s sociocultural reality.

Public Show or Performance

The top level, the core of today's *bertsolaritza* is its expression in the form of a show or entertainment. Every year about 1,200 verse-making sessions are organized all over the Basque-

speaking region. These sessions do not all have the same level of formality: some take place in cinemas or theaters in the capital cities, others on Basque pelota courts or at verse-making dinners, or in town and village squares on feast days. A minimum of two and a maximum of eight *bertsolaris* chosen by the organizers from among the approximately 100 practicing verse-makers participate in these events. About 20 of these *bertsolaris* receive the majority of the requests.

We can distinguish between several different kinds of public sessions:

1. A performance guided by a theme-prompter.
 2. A free session among two or three *bertsolaris*; such sessions are led from start to finish by the *bertsolaris* themselves, without anyone proposing the topics.
 3. An after-lunch or after-dinner performance, following meals organized especially for the purpose.
 4. As sessions that complement other kinds of events: funerals, weddings, inaugurations, political events, ceremonies in honor of somebody, and many other social functions
- New formats: verse-weaving (an ad-lib session that develops a kind of screenplay proposed by the guide), and experimental sessions (monographic sessions on a single theme, others accompanied by music, and so on).

Competitive Events Adhering to Certain Rules: Championships

One special type of public performance is the *bertsolari* competitions or championships. *Bertsolaris* compete before a panel of judges who award prizes on a point basis. These competitions or championships are held at all levels: for children, for young people, for a valley or province, and so on. The highlight of all of them is the top *bertsolari* competition organized once every four years: the Euskal Herriko Txapelketa Nagusia (Basque National Bertsolari Championships). These events perform a twofold function in the *bertsolaritza* ecosystem of the last few decades. On the one hand, they have attracted media and social attention (when they became a top-level event in the Basque Country); on the other hand, they have supported quality production by *bertsolaris*.

Informal, Fun Group Activity: Verse-Making Schools and Verse-Making Groups

Another level of expression of *bertsolaritza* is the group game, an oral, fun activity organized locally at verse-making schools. At one time, this less formal type took place in cider bars, inns, and on farms, but today it is done at such schools or in groups formed especially for this purpose in cities and towns. It is the most spontaneous expression of *bertsolaritza* and lays the groundwork for preparing the players for the *bertsolaritza* of tomorrow.

If the main aim of the Bertsozale Elkarte is diffusion and transmission, the verse-making schools are the basic nuclei that carry out these two tasks at a local level. In other words, in addition to being a group that undertakes to transmit *bertsolaritza* to new generations, these schools also organize verse-making sessions in the area, perform the task of setting the topics, take on the job of informal verse-making sessions, participate in formal verse-making sessions,

and so on. Thus we could say that verse-making schools are the basic cell of the larger movement.²

There is another issue linked to the subject of schools or workshops that is interesting and raises many questions. To what extent is verse-making an activity that has to operate solely on a national level? In other words, should the sole aim of those verse-makers excluded from the national elite be to participate in this top-level circuit or do they have other spheres? As with other expressions of culture or sport, is there any point in the small provincial and regional circuits? Does it only make sense to be a national-level sportsperson or a national-level musician, or can musicians also find their local niche, playing locally and setting up a choir locally, without operating on a national-level circuit? In regard to *bertsolaritza*, could somebody be a verse-maker locally? Is it possible to distinguish between the functioning of the verse-making activity on a national level (with its own market mechanisms) and verse-making activity regionally?

With respect to these questions, it could be said that the different spheres of verse-making activity have yet to be established. This situation has led to problems in recent years. In fact, while there are more and more *bertsolaris* coming out of the verse-making schools, the number of openings for working at a national level is limited and the system is structured like a pyramid, in accordance with prestige criteria that are difficult to detect. This structure or system deprives many young verse-makers of the chance to perform at a national level, so the more modest circuits provide the main opportunity for them to sing their verses.

In any case, at a more grassroots level than either the national or local town or village circuit is the informal, group activity. This is the real seedbed for verse-making. But it is also a sphere of activity in its own right and one that incorporates a sense of fun, far removed from any public show or market.

In today's Basque society, verses have two further manifestations—statutory education and media treatment—that in a sense stem from these first three.

Statutory Education

After initial steps were taken in 1981, *bertsolaritza* has over the last fifteen years been moving into primary and secondary education. The use of *bertsolaritza* as a component of, and a complement to, the teaching of language and literature is, if not general, then certainly widespread. A reasonable range of teaching materials has been published, and new pedagogical approaches are being developed, based on the contribution *bertsolaritza* can make to school language training, in particular approaches designed to fill the gaps in oral expression that have been detected in younger generations.

In any case, we have yet to reflect on the contribution that *bertsolaritza* can make to education and to invent the strategies necessary to incorporate it into the basic primary and secondary curriculum of Basque students. I believe it is high time that this be done properly and fully. We offered one possible framework in *Bat-bateko bertsolaritza: Gakoak eta azterbideak*

² “Verse-making workshop” is perhaps a more appropriate name than verse-making school, because the word “school” is closely linked to an academy.

(*The Art of Bertsolaritza: Reality and Keys to Basque Oral Improvisation*),³ with the aim of producing at some point the groundwork we need for this purpose. A summary of this framework is as follows:

- To work on developing personal skills
 - Attitudes toward and abilities for improvisation
 - Ability to organize the act of communication
 - Ability to develop relationships with other people
 - Memory development
- To incorporate the student into our cultural heritage
- To provide complementary work on linguistic competence
- To provide complementary work on musical competence

Media Treatment

Bertsolaritza also has a place as an audiovisual subgenre through special radio and television programs. For practically the last two decades there has been a weekly television program featuring verse anthologies with commentary. For their part, radio stations have for about the last thirty years been producing similar kinds of anthologies and other kinds of *bertsolaritza*-related programs.

What Sets *Bertsolaritza* Apart in Today's Society: Essential Features

Bertsolaritza has a number of features that have little to do with the main orientation of today's mass culture. We will be referring to some of the most thought-provoking ones below.

Spontaneity or Absence of Mass Production

Mass production is one of the bases of modern culture and the market. In the past, production was unique (a homemade garment, a dessert), whereas a large portion of what we consume and what we call culture is now mass-produced. The basis of most ordinary things (books, discs, videos, films) is reproduction, and this also applies to the "goods" spread by the latest new communication technologies, whereby they can be reproduced at a specific time and place very far away from the original site of creation.

Cultural expressions that take place before a live audience are a different matter, but in most of these forms of expression there is also considerable reproduction. A song performed live will never be exactly the same as on any previous occasion, but it is the same song, the continual reproduction of something produced at another time. The same applies to other cultural expressions, such as theater.

³ Available online at <http://www.bertsozale.com/liburua/euskera/sarrera/>. See also Garzia, Sarasua, and Egaña 2001.

Bertsolaritza is one of the few public cultural expressions that is not based on any kind of mass reproduction, and therein lies its contribution as well as its limitation. For that is precisely what a verse session is; it is not the repetition of anything produced ad hoc in advance. Its essence is spontaneity, radical originality in a specific place and time. The creativity of the verse-makers cannot be repeated: the ability to create in a fleeting moment is what gives the verse meaning. Such verse draws meaning from its irreversible transience, on that narrow precipice where the person who performs spontaneously stands; this is where both the ordinariness of the straw and the miracle of the seed are created.

Audience Participation and High Level of Feedback

Audience response is important in any public performance, and in verse-making (verse sessions) it plays an indispensable role. When the show is based on spontaneity, with the unrepeatable quality of that time and place, the fact is that everything that takes place between the performer and the listener becomes vitally important.

The Live Aspect, the Group Aspect, the Street Aspect

Just as in many other oral expressions, *bertsolaritza* largely takes place live; it encourages the listener to attend a public event and participate. In today's mass society a large portion of culture is consumed individually in the privacy of one's own home. That is how we receive books, records, videos, websites, and so on. Along with performances of music, theater, and the arts, however, *bertsolaritza* brings people out of their homes. The live, group, and street aspects constitute an essential part of *bertsolaritza* and involve complicity between artist and audience, the absolutely indispensable ingredient for the spontaneous creation of verses.

Mixed Nature of the Audience

The *bertsolaritza* audience does not belong to a specific generation or to a special type of Basque speaker. To a certain extent it mirrors the heterogeneity of the Basque community, including a wide range of Basques of different ages, cultural levels, jobs, and views.

Accessibility of the Artist

Attempts to define "popular culture" generally lead to confusion. Hollywood films constitute the popular culture that is most loved and most consumed by ordinary people. So the question is not what people consume, but what people create. In other words, we need to ask whether the creator him- or herself is rooted in that nucleus of consumers, whether he or she is just another person belonging to that nucleus of consumers, without any special economic or social status. As I see it, the verse-maker is just another participant in that group of enthusiasts that consumes the own cultural creation. He or she does not enjoy a different economic status due to the mere fact of being a verse-maker, and he or she is neither physically nor symbolically far removed from the nucleus.

Topics Covered by Verse-making

In our society—modern, post-modern, industrial, keen on travel, and divided—one of the keys to the social response prompted by *bertsolaritza* is that verse-makers sing about topics that reach a heterogeneous, new audience. Basically, they can treat any aspect of social life. Naturally, they avoid topics that lack interest at a given moment and ones that society unconsciously regards as taboo (or are regarded as such by the performer). But one could say that all the subjects that may be brought up at the kitchen table, in the pub, or on radio debate programs have a place in the verse sessions. Moreover, subjects that are not developed in other ordinary circles also find expression in *bertsolaritza*, primarily because of the concern of the theme-prompters in recent years to come up with fresh subjects and perspectives.

Bertsolaritza is a kind of alternative communication circuit that provides space for rumination on what is going on at a national, state, regional, town, or world level, sometimes poetically and other times ironically or in a way that attempts to be witty.

The word rumination is apt and thought-provoking. This is rumination in the strictest sense: to chew the cud. Today, citizens in the western world swallow a tremendous amount of information from the mass media, and one of the characteristics of the (post-)modern human being is his or her inability to digest all that biased information. Through participatory, collective, artistic activity, *bertsolaritza* offers a small opportunity to ruminate or reflect on a piece of that information in a humorous tone or in a poetic as well as personal key.

One could dispute what kind of contribution the improvisation of the verse-maker makes to a current issue or a universal question. One could argue that it is paltry, and that a truly intellectual contribution requires serious scientific analysis and profound literary work. Conversely, there are those who see tremendous, unique contributions in improvisation. In any case, verse-makers play around, they mix information with poetic, fun improvisation, they enjoy themselves; and when they get it right, others enjoy themselves as well.

The special contribution of *bertsolaris*, if there is one, is that they mix ideas and levels: current social, political, sexual subjects with the references they give the audience, along with a sprinkling of personal allusions, and in competition with the message their colleagues are improvising. The originality of improvisation arises from that mixture.

In this sphere, characterized by rumination on social and personal information, the role played by the verse-maker is a cross between that of communicator and poet, leader and jester, newspaper columnist and satirical cartoonist, while at the same time he or she is also an ordinary participant in that social environment.

Media as the New Stage

As was mentioned above, *bertsolaritza* has plotted its own course in television and radio. These media have considerable affect on the perception of extempore verse-making in Basque, owing to their large and influential audience. Television can draw in a single day more people than the live verse-making sessions that take place in the open air or indoors can engage over an entire week. Television supplies the most far-reaching expression of verse-making and

influences the verse-making ecosystem. It influences the perception listeners have of specific *bertsolari* and the prestige dynamics of the verse-makers, and this dynamic has an effect when verse-makers are called to perform in towns. But there is more. The weekly TV anthologies also affect the perception that Basque speakers have of the quality criteria for the verses. Here it is important to bear in mind that verses are improvised in a specific context and that their relevance is linked to that context. If they are later broadcast on television as part of a weekly anthology, these *bertsos* lose part of their meaning. To a certain extent television distorts many features of verse-making, especially those linked to its live aspect and feedback.

Nevertheless, the *bertsolaritza* movement made a decision two decades ago to get verses televised. It was a risk worth taking, because the spirit of *bertsolaritza* is not one of “preservation” with an attitude of fear when faced with change or danger. *Bertsolaritza* finds itself in a dialectic relationship with today’s tools of mass culture, and in the sphere of television as well it has tried to deal with both its potential and its risks. Television has tremendous potential for spreading verse-making, but the movement has conceptualized it as a kind of “nuclear energy”: used properly, it can be beneficial; used inappropriately, it can be highly dangerous.

The condition set by Bertsozale Elkarte has always been that the television program should be monitored by the Association itself in conjunction with the public television broadcasting corporation. In actual fact, the natural aim of a television channel is to achieve media success and large audiences, but Bertsozale Elkarte is keen to preserve verse for the long term and knows that television successes can “burn up” anything very quickly. The *bertsolaritza* movement sees verse as “fragile” with respect to the market logic of mass media. Aware of this fragility, the movement strives to see that verse appears in a dignified and measured way in the media.

As far as radio is concerned, this medium is perhaps uniquely suited for giving verse-making the most refined treatment. Radio offers ideal conditions for playing with different elements: verse anthology with commentary, monographic programs, critical comparisons, interviews, thematic sections, historical analyses, and so on. The fact is, even though the public and private radio stations have been broadcasting verse sessions constantly over the last 30 years, there has been little success in developing this potential offered by radio for a variety of reasons. It could be said that, despite numerous broadcasts, there is today no radio program on verse-making that has become an obligatory reference. It is a gap that the movement needs to fill.

Chronicles and verse session reviews have their place in the written press, too, mainly in connection with the championships, because when these events take place they arouse the greatest social curiosity and following. It remains to be seen what kind of potential *bertsolaritza* may have with respect to the communication opportunities offered by the Internet. Recently, we have seen the appearance of websites that provide an opportunity to read and listen to verse sessions, but as yet no experience or data has been obtained on their success or effect.

The Vitality of *Bertsolaritza*: Balances and Challenges

Over the last two decades the *bertsolaritza* movement has acted on intuition, facing the challenges posed by the new era; maintaining a dynamic balance will develop *bertsolaritza* in today's culture without ignoring its own instincts. We can summarize these various aspects as follows.

Recognizing Our Values

The intuition that has guided our movement, and an important source of its merit, has been attention to our values. These can be enumerated as follows:

- Spontaneity
- Absence of mass production
- Accessibility of the artist
- Audience participation
- Absolute importance of feedback
- Mixed nature of the public, collective, and live aspects

We value these attributes because they have worked for us. And taking them as a starting point, we have gradually reflected further: it is true that these features are not mainstream ones in today's cultures. We may give the impression of being eccentric; we may not have a bright future, we may be hypertrophied, and some people may find us ridiculous, but these attributes work for us; they are valid and they help us to live, to enjoy ourselves, to create art, and to communicate. Recognition of these values has given us the confidence to go forward and to start experimenting. As we gather speed in today's cultural channels, we are always aware that increased velocity can pose dangers on any curve, but the fact is we want to continue at the speed we consider appropriate.

To Live, Not Just Survive

The *bertsolaritza* movement does not hold all characteristics of mass culture contemptible, nor does it demand that the idealized characteristics of *bertsolaritza* have to be maintained. This is not the attitude at the heart of the Basque language and its culture, which have survived for so many centuries. In fact, with such an attitude it is unlikely that either *bertsolaritza* or the Basque language would have survived so many conquests and influences. *Bertsolaritza* is strongly committed to the present, to today's reality as well as tomorrow's.

Is it possible to strike a balance between the reigning trends and conditions and still maintain *bertsolaritza*'s unique personality? Where is the point of equilibrium between adaptation and tradition? This is an eternal question and one that constantly needs to be readdressed, at least by cultures that, though not very large, nonetheless have deep roots.

The question of the point of equilibrium between adaptation and tradition effectively highlights one imperative: to go on creating or to have a creative attitude. The fact is that if you fail to create you copy what is done by mainstream cultures; you try to be more like them (as Euskal Telebista—the TV network of the Basque Autonomous Community’s broadcasting corporation—does in most of its programs, for example). But if you paranoically defend your own culture, you turn it into something sclerotic and quaint. In my view, there is only one way of breaking out of that circle of dependence, particularly for small cultures like our own or in oral expressions like ours, and that is to create. When you create, you change; you mix your own tradition and the opportunities that today’s society offers. When you mix, you are creating and following a tradition. Tradition is not something that has to be clung to; it is the accumulation of creations. Tradition itself is constant adaptation or adjustment. And the only way to be loyal to the accumulated creations is to go on creating.

Accepting the Risk of Development

Verse-makers, and those engaged in this movement in general, have favored trying out new places and formats, getting involved with television, and seeking out spheres and forms formerly untouched by *bertsolaritza*. This set of initiatives has led to numerous contradictions, risks, and distortions. The *bertsolaritza* movement has, to a certain extent, engaged these distortions. For example, as we mentioned in the section on the media, exposure on television through a program that enjoys strong audience ratings—buoyed by the weekly broadcast of a verse anthology—generates great enthusiasm for verse, but that enthusiasm involves risks.

Aware of such risks, the *bertsolaritza* movement has been keen to wage the struggle in that very sphere. The movement wants to keep *bertsolaritza* alive by facing the changes associated with new ways, by maintaining the essence of sung spontaneity, and if possible by developing that essence as never before—in its modesty, its nakedness, and its authenticity of improvisation. Along with doubts and contradictions, the reality of *bertsolaritza* is compelling if one contemplates the indicators at different levels: the number and quality of performances, the authenticity of improvisation, the organizational capacity, the social reception, the renewal of young artists, and expansion of the art through school instruction or programs.

Some Keys to Development

I shall now highlight some of the key factors in this development—not all of them, but certainly those that have been particularly significant and that help to explain the way *bertsolaritza* has developed over the last two decades:

Self-confidence

Verse-makers themselves have to develop their self-confidence alone on stage; they perform spontaneously and can never be absolutely sure that they won’t make a fool of themselves. To be

sure, verse-makers create verses, they improvise. Yet at another level the *bertsolaritza* movement itself is to a certain extent improvising, even as it endeavors to discover channels for its cultural heritage when faced with the challenges of mass culture. This collective improvising has to be developed with the same self-confidence displayed by the individual improviser, and I would say—admittedly looking at it from the inside—that this is what, to a certain extent, has been done until now. This confidence in the *bertsolaritza* movement manifests itself on different levels:

- Self-confidence when faced by voices from the intellectual and literary world that accuse us of hypertrophy in oral production and of mediocrity with respect to written production.
- Self-confidence about what we are and what we want. Self-confidence when facing the difficult challenge posed by the survival of our language and culture.
- Self-confidence when facing political pressures of different persuasions and in the long political strife that our people have suffered, which has also influenced cultural activities.
- Confidence to forge ahead along a path that has had to be invented without any external reference, in the absence of any signpost along the way or any benchmark against which to measure ourselves.

The Intergenerational Transmission Instinct

The instinct for transmission began to germinate before the establishment of Bertsozale Elkarte, and before verse-making began to be taught in verse-making schools as well as in mainstream schools. This imperative is most likely linked to a deep-seated attitude. In other words, as a small culture we have spent many centuries striving to survive; the unusual situation we are experiencing now has awakened in us this instinct for transmission. Languages have been obsessed with expansion and space, whereas we Basque speakers have been obsessed with surviving rather than expanding. The Basque-language community in its smallness, and enmeshed in difficulties imposed by having no power apparatus, seems to instinctively create transmission mechanisms, and *bertsolaritza* is no exception.

This whole movement began with transmission, and over the last two decades the *bertsolaritza* movement has put its faith in younger generations to continue the process. One could say that transmission has almost turned into an obsession. We have set up verse-making schools and new verse-making groups, and entered mainstream schools; each group of verse-makers has unconsciously taken great care to prepare the way for the next generation and to transmit all their knowledge. Because of this obsession with transmission, special (on occasions excessive) attention has been paid to youngsters who have displayed the required talent for verse composition.

Bertsozale Elkarte: The Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza

The key that has made these developments possible has been the creation of the Bertsozale Elkarte, an association that has brought together the movement surrounding *bertsolaritza* and supported this cultural activity at all levels. Around 1986, the world of verse-

making adopted a special strategy: it decided to organize and manage itself. The aim was to create a meeting point for those who felt in some way involved in *bertsolaritza*, and to work with a single project in mind and avoid leaving the future to the mercy of external factors. The Association's project can be summed up as follows: to lay the groundwork for breathing new life into *bertsolaritza*.

General Characteristics of the Organization

In 2006 Bertsozale Elkarteak had approximately 1,800 members.⁴ The organization brings together all those involved in *bertsolaritza* (verse-makers, verse-setters, theme-prompters, judges, teachers, organizers, committed devotees of verse-making, and so on), whose aim is to work together to design strategies and undertake initiatives in different spheres: the running of the Documentation Center, negotiations with the media and organizations, championships, special events, coordination of the verse-making schools, research, publications, international relations, and many other activities and programs.

Throughout the 20 years of its existence, this movement, which revolves around the Association, has gradually been designing its cultural project, and certain clear references have been established. The aim of the Association, the *bertsolaritza* cultural project, has three aspects: generational transmission, the organizing of its expansion, and documentary research. In addition to these, there is a fourth area that binds together the other three: territoriality. In other words, the idea is that the project should cover the entire Basque-speaking territory, without relegating to a secondary level those provinces that are experiencing the most critical threat to the survival of the language.

One of the most important goals of Bertsozale Elkarteak is to find a way of uniting verse-makers and verse devotees alike in the organization, and, on the other hand, to explore how the verse-makers themselves can reconcile their nature as artists and as members, activists, militants, or voluntary workers in the movement. Initially, the title adopted was Bertsolari Elkarteak (Association of Verse-makers), but that name did not reflect the true nature of the association. From the very start it was clear that it was an association of devotees, and that it was devotion to verse-making that brought us together, rather than aspirations to be verse-makers in the strictest sense. The association has been promoted by devotees who are not verse-makers, and they have borne—and still bear—a large portion of the weight of the activities.

Yet it is also true that many *bertsolari* have been willing to combine the two profiles. They are verse-makers onstage, but offstage they have been building a sociocultural movement: organizing, holding meetings, negotiating fund-raising, and so on. What was important was to get a large group of verse-makers involved, and it was also significant for people to see that many poets who had been at the top were totally committed to the organization. In this respect, the Association has taken on another meaning; it is a unique organization, because the artists themselves on the one hand, and the devotees of the art on the other, have over the last 20 years merged or fused together into a single association, a single project. It is very likely that if some

⁴ The Association is decentralized throughout provinces of the Basque Country; an affiliated group operates in each of the provinces, together making up the association of the Basque Country.

of the verse-makers had not been so deeply committed to the movement, the Association would not have had sufficient moral strength to enable the devotees to give their all to the movement. So the qualitative participation of the poets has been crucial, and must be in the future as well if the movement is to remain healthy.

Essential Points of the Bertsolaritza Culture Project

In the course followed by the Association, a more consolidated project has gradually emerged from the initial one aimed at promoting verse-making. Its meaning, aim, and direction can be summed up in three topics: nurturing, expanding, and transmitting *bertsolaritza* to the new generations. This project has in most aspects been a dream that has gradually turned into reality. As stated above, this project has three main areas: transmission, compilation-research, and expansion, with an additional concern, territoriality. Let us briefly examine these different areas:

- *Transmission*: The aim is to guarantee the transmission of *bertsolaritza* to the new generations. This sphere has two main aspects: first, the monitoring of *bertsolaritza* introduced into statutory education; and second, the verse-making schools or workshops. The Association conducts research and offers didactic communication about the contribution that has to be made by *bertsolaritza*, and in the broader sense by artistic oral creation, to education in the Basque Country. Outside statutory education, the coordination of the verse-making schools calls for a special effort; in fact, these verse-making schools, which are scattered all over the Basque territory, constitute the center and the seedbed for the *bertsolaritza* movement of today and tomorrow.
- *Compilation-research*: The aim of the second area is to bring *bertsolaritza* into the sphere of research and documentation. Steps have already been taken to gather the results of *bertsolaritza*, not in a widespread but in a systematic way, and this field of culture is starting to be included in present and future lines of research. The Xenpelar Documentation Center is the main facility for turning *bertsolaritza* into something that can be analyzed. There is no doubt that this has been and continues to be a strategic step taken by the Association.
- *Expansion*: The goal is to bring about an ongoing and balanced expansion of *bertsolaritza*. It is not a question of merely spreading verse-making under the slogan of “the more, the better,” but to consolidate enthusiasm in a manageable and sustainable way. This requires that a number of fronts be taken into consideration: watching over the presence that *bertsolaritza* may have in the media, promoting *bertsolaritza* on a province-by-province basis, organizing special sessions of symbolic importance, holding championships, bringing out publications, and in general launching initiatives linked to expansion.
- *Territoriality*: the territory of *bertsolaritza* is that of the Basque language. From the very outset, people from the whole of the Basque Country have been involved in Bertsozale Elkartea. Separate organizations have been set up in the Northern Basque Country (the part

of the Basque Country under French administration), and in Gipuzkoa, Araba, Bizkaia, and Navarre (the four provinces under Spanish administration). At present EHBE (Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte, the Association of Friends of *Bertsolaritza*) is the umbrella organization for these five associations. In fact, right now the five associations—the Bizkaiko Bertsozale Elkarte, Arabako Bertsozale Elkarte, Nafarroako Bertsozale Elkarte, Iparraldeko Bertsozale Elkarte, and the Gipuzkoako Bertsozale Elkarte—make up EHBE through a federation. Aside from organization, the concept of territoriality is always present in our aims: it is up to Bertsozale Elkarte to make special efforts and investments in the places where the health of the Basque language is poorest, because we want *bertsolaritza* to be a tool for breathing new life into the Basque language.

The Self-management of Bertsolaritza: A Type of Societal Activity in the Cultural Field

In addition to developing a cultural project, the *bertsolaritza* movement has put its faith in self-management. The following are the bases of its policy:

- Voluntary participation of those involved
- Absence of limits for ideological reasons and recognition of internal diversity
- Participatory and democratic organization
- Respect for the processes developed by each town and province
- Culture of debate and development of different attitudes: agreement by consensus beyond the majority-minority game
- Combination of voluntary and professional work

It has been 20 years since Bertsozale Elkarte was founded. Now that the *bertsolaritza* movement is reaching maturity, it seems that the time has come to make contact with other forms of improvised singing traditions that are alive in other parts of the world, in order to become a more active node in a global network of improvised singing.

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Basque Oral Ecology

Joxerra Garzia

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.

our contemporary information society. To this end, what is most needed is research. We must actively investigate this treasure trove of oral tradition that we have inherited in order to find the keys to building our own ecosystem of oral traditions, our own oral poetry firmly rooted in the era in which it is our fate to live. We still have time, but as the proverb goes:

Ardi galdua atxeman ditaike; aldi galdua ez.

A lost sheep can be found; time lost is lost forever.

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Verse Schools

Ainhoa Agirreazaldegi and Arkaitz Goikoetxea

The Term

The term *bertso-eskola*, or “[verse school](#),”¹ consists of two words, *bertso* (verse) and *eskola* (school). To understand the nature and work of these verse schools, it is best to consider the concept behind each of these words. *Bertso* does not refer only to lines of verse and the rules of versification, nor when we say *eskola* do we mean simply a place where classes are given. The *bertso-eskola* should not be thought of as a mere school.

The Basque word for verse, *bertso*, evokes above all two closely linked ideas: *bertsolaritza*, the Basque cultural phenomenon of traditionally improvised verse; and verse creation as a form of creative communication. *Eskola* conveys the pedagogical notion of a place for the cultivation of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed in human development, while at the same time attempting to teach the importance of teamwork and to constitute a group of friends united in a leisure activity. The purpose, then, is to go beyond the level of imparting knowledge towards a fuller sense of education, underlying which are four central concepts: learning to know, learning to do, learning to coexist, and learning to be.

Essential to the *bertso-eskola* approach is what we could call an “ecological educational model,” wherein the immediate context and social life inside the classroom are both basic day-to-day principles. This methodology is founded on constructivism; verse school methods have always been based on meaningful learning and the construction of knowledge.

History of the Verse Schools: Origin and Development

It is hard to say exactly when the *bertso-eskola* movement started, since it did not begin as a single, united movement at all. Verse schools began to spring up independently in different parts of the southern Basque Country, responding to the features of society at the time. (For the purposes of this article, 1980 has been chosen as a convenient starting point from which to analyze the development of the verse schools.)

Only a few years after the death of the dictator Franco, the Spanish state and the countries it ruled were in the middle of a transition period. The Basque Country bore the scars of a 40-

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

year-long dictatorship: its language and culture were in serious danger, neglected and despised, and almost entirely excluded from the school system of the time.

Feelings that had long been smothered rose to the surface after Franco's death, and one idea in particular took on great force: many, many parents, seeing that the schools in this period denied their children a Basque-language education, set out to create alternative structures of their own. This was the origin of the *ikastola*, the Basque-language education movement.

The emergence and spread of verse schools was almost an automatic consequence of the birth of the *ikastolak*. It was only natural for the *bertso* tradition to flourish in a school system centered on Basque language and Basque culture. Verse enthusiasts saw their chance and began teaching Basque oral poetry to boys and girls as an after-school activity. That was how the first children's verse schools got started more than 25 years ago.

In the early 1980s, as society evolved so did the place of *bertsolaritza*, making the leap from its original rural setting in taverns and cider houses to the stage. In this new environment, transmission to future generations was no longer a foregone conclusion. Thus began the earliest courses for adult verse lovers. Groups met in every town; fueled by their passion for the Basque language and verse singing, they gathered to learn traditional verses and to discover and study their techniques. From the courses organized by these large and varied groups arose the adult verse schools.

Thus the verse schools did not come into being for the purpose of manufacturing or producing *bertsolariak*, but simply to have fun with verses and to pass on this folk tradition to the next generation. But it wasn't long before the first new *bertsolari*s started to emerge, particularly from the children's verse schools. The motivation and dedication of *bertso* teachers and the theoretical and practical literature published during the period had a lot to do with this phenomenon. Xabier Amuriza and Juanito Dorronsoro made important contributions to teaching methodology and provided teachers and students with written materials, as did the subsequent Ikastola Association.

From there on the road ahead lay open. Guided by intuition and common sense, the verse schools have been growing since the 1980s. Their goals are the enjoyment of verse, learning to make verses, and the transmission of the *bertsolari* heritage to new generations. Over the years, each of the country's schools has pioneered its own development and evolved its own mission and function. It has to be remembered that the schools have been built on a foundation of volunteer work; usually it is a local group of verse enthusiasts, making up the verse school's kernel, who have taken the trouble to search for one or more teachers and have assumed a shared responsibility for the school's administration. Hence, the verse school phenomenon is not so much a single, structured movement as a range of independently run individual *bertso-eskolak*.

The Verse Society (Bertsozale Elkarte) has played a significant part in the schools' recent development. The Society has always treated the transmission of *bertsolaritza* as one of its chief concerns, and has consequently given priority to the verse schools. It has made great efforts to provide them with teaching resources, to train teachers, to create and maintain a communication network and relations among schools, and to get verse schools started in areas where there were previously none.

The outward profile of the verse schools has not greatly changed over the past 25 years. There are verse schools for adults, youth, and children. Different schools and groups each have

their own character resulting from their particular background. Some are more informal, while others adopt the specific aim of preparing and training future *bertsolaris*. While some are fully independent, others depend more on the initiative of the teacher, and still others have been established under the auspices of the Verse Society. Yet internally there has been change—or perhaps not so much change as evolution, particularly in teaching approaches. The verse schools themselves have made substantial progress in the area of pedagogy; moreover, society has become more and more demanding in this regard, and there is a growing call for professionalism in the management of verse schools.

In the wake of this trend, another concept related to the *bertso-eskola* that has been making headway of late is that of verse-making as a leisure activity. The verse school is increasingly seen as a place and activity for people's free time. This new perspective entails a need for such schools and promoters to adapt their structures, organization, and resources to the new demand. Of course, this must be done without losing sight of the special nature of their activity, continuing to serve as a center for the practice and enjoyment of verse improvisation as a group activity and a central pillar holding up the cultural dynamic centered on the tradition of *bertsolaritza*.

Verse Schools as Centers for the Transmission of *Bertsolaritza* and Culture

The countrywide *bertso-eskola* movement represents one of the most important initiatives in *bertsolaritza* throughout the Basque Country in recent decades. Culture and language are basic to a people's identity, and if we know how best to pass these on to coming generations we shall have sown our people's future. In the Basque Country, *bertsolaritza* has been an important cultural manifestation permanently linked to the country's language and folk culture. But many cultural manifestations are commonly affected by a generation gap, and *bertsolaritza* is no exception. This is even more notable in the case of a minority culture, and the culture that surrounds the Basque language is precisely that. The Basque language community is small, with only 600,000 speakers, but the main difficulty is that the Spanish and French states apply laws and policies that are constantly creating obstacles to the advancement of Basque culture. That is why, from the viewpoint of the Basque language and cultural movements, it is so important to support initiatives such as the verse schools, whose goal is the preservation and continuation of Basque cultural expressions.

Nowadays the verse schools involve many of those who will be centrally responsible for *bertsolaritza* in the future: *bertsolariak*, experts, masters of ceremonies, organizers, *bertso-eskola* teachers, judges, and promoters. Of the 38 *bertsolaris* competing in the 2005 Championship, only one had not been to verse school, and most of the participating judges also had verse-school connections. These institutions are the cornerstone of the contemporary edifice of *bertsolaritza*, whereby youngsters can learn, have fun with, and absorb the art of singing Basque verses in a context of teamwork and play, leading to and consolidating affective, cultural, social, and professional engagement. In the verse schools two-way transmission ultimately takes place—while youngsters learn to love and come to participate in the verse tradition, by doing so they also incorporate *bertsolaritza* into their own contemporary lives and culture.

Map of Verse Schools and Plans for the Future

After 25 years of growth and development of the movement in response to contemporary social needs, there are currently about 90 verse schools across the length and breadth of Euskal Herria's seven provinces, with an enrollment of about 800. As a faithful reflection of the present sociolinguistic and political situation, there are naturally more verse schools in those areas where the language has the most support.

		Araba	Bizkaia	Gipuzkoa	Nafarroa	Lapurdi	Nafarroa beherea	Zuberoa
Verse schools		5	15	45	20	6	1	2
Students	Men	13	75	235	74	22	8	11
	Women	17	39	186	83	32	1	0

Looking toward the future, we face two big challenges. One of these challenges is the very continuation of the verse tradition and its transmission, and this now depends on the verse schools. Even in the present age of globalization, it is to be hoped that future generations will still have an opportunity to be acquainted with and enjoy the rich heritage that minority folk traditions and cultural movements represent.

The second challenge is also a response to social realities. The original pattern of volunteer work in the verse schools is now starting to give way to salaried posts. There are two reasons for this change: an increasing demand for trained teachers, and the apparent crisis of volunteer work in our society. This is precisely the challenge; we see the verse schools as a grassroots movement in the present and future, since that is where their greatest contribution lies. To maintain the movement's rich diversity and quality in the future, a balance must be found between militancy and paid work. Forcing the verse schools into a top-down organizational structure would threaten the richness, vitality, and value of each *bertso-eskola* and end up quashing their individuality and weakening the movement in the long run.

The major short- and medium-term challenges, however, are pedagogical. There is a very important project underway, under the aegis of the Verse Society, to develop a verse school curriculum. Improving the quality of the verse schools is a day-to-day task calling for constant thought and reflection, which involves, among other things, developing such a curriculum, as well as allowing for ongoing teacher training, the creation of new teaching materials and resources, innovations in methodology and content, and the promotion of new research.

Bertsolaritza in the School Curriculum

Joxerra Garzia

Introduction: [Orality and the School](#)¹

The institutions that traditionally have shouldered the burden of passing on the ethical and aesthetic standards of the individuals in a community appear to be in a permanent state of crisis in the so-called developed societies. The family, and the social networks closest to the individual, are breaking down, and these networks do not seem able to perform the function that was almost exclusively theirs up until recent times.²

And so it happens that this job of transmission is increasingly being handed over to the two most universal and important institutions that developed societies have at their disposal: the media and, above all, the educational system. Many teachers say they feel crushed by the increasing responsibility that developed societies are delegating to the school system. Another outcome is that the school, as an institution, is very far from being a prestigious establishment. The young, as Simone aptly puts it (2001), perceive school as something outside of the real world. On the other hand, the patently obvious authority crisis is causing increasingly serious and frequent problems that do not seem easy to resolve.

Many varied factors are responsible for the present situation. This article cannot possibly provide an adequate forum for discussing the complexities of the situation, so I shall confine myself to mentioning just one of the factors that, as I see it, discredit today's educational system and make it inefficient in developed societies. The factor to which I refer is related not so much to the actual educational content delivered as to the way in which that knowledge is transmitted. Generally speaking, the school is still anchored in the primacy of the written word—although that primacy is, of course, a matter of degree.

If I only touch on the two major school systems from which the Basque Country takes its benchmark, it is a demonstrable fact that the French system pays far more attention to orality than the Spanish one. Given that the Basque educational system does not enjoy full autonomy, the situation of orality in schools in the Basque Iberian Peninsula (that is, in the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre) is far more precarious than on the Basque European Continent (in Iparralde, in French territory).

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

² See, for example, Barham 2006.

The precarious situation of orality in the school system manifests itself in two major ways. Where content is concerned, the various expressions of Basque orality appear only, even in the best of cases, as mere exotic anecdotes devoid of relevance. When Basque pupils finish their compulsory education at the age of 16—even those who have been taught through the medium of Euskara (the native term for the Basque language)—they are far more familiar with the figure of Don Quixote than with that of Fernando Amezketarra or Maixu Juan. Naturally, it is not a case of condemning familiarity with Quixote (an essential figure whatever way you look at it) but instead of feeling troubled that the Basque community's own literary figures aren't better known.

The second aspect of the neglect of orality in schools relates to the methods of transmitting knowledge: namely, the fact that the written word is still usurping the prime position. Let's not beat about the bush: the typical pupil in our educational system is often ignorant. Meanwhile, the experts all point out that the ability to communicate effectively is, without a doubt, the most sought-after and valued skill in today's so-called "Information Society."

Things being as they are, one should not lose sight of the fact that the general aim of the Western educational system is none other than to prepare its "customers" as well as possible for playing their role in the society to which they belong. From that point of view, it seems clear that our school system is very far from being a suitable instrument for the accomplishment of its main purpose. In light of this fact, a complete integration into the school system of that conglomerate that J. M. Foley calls the "ecology of oral traditions" (2002:188-218) would not only be an act of justice for the Basque cultural heritage, but would also contribute, to some extent, to easing some of the problems that currently beset our educational system.

For the integration of orality into the school system to be really complete, however, and not a mere cosmetic job, one needs to have a broad and deep understanding of the phenomenon, both in its historical aspect and in its projection toward the future. The importance of theoretical research thus comes to the fore once more, because only by understanding the phenomenon of orality in all its complexity will we be able to work it more fully into the school curriculum. The proposal that follows is just a first approximation of the essential integration of orality and curriculum—in this case, centered specifically on *bertsolaritza* and commissioned by the Federation of Ikastolas.³

Importance of the Subject

To analyze in depth the importance that improvised verse might have in the context of the Basque curriculum, we should start by taking a look at this subject from several different perspectives. Multiple viewpoints are more likely to ensure that we will be able to establish the basic minimum level of knowledge that anyone living in the Basque Country should be required to have—especially anyone who has completed compulsory schooling. Of course, this minimum level

³ See Garzia 2004.

of knowledge does not refer only to content, but also includes the verbal strategies to be mastered, including improvised verse.

It is my opinion that this procedure will also provide us with a more exact idea of the cultural significance of the subject that concerns us here. In what follows, I will treat the central aspects of the topic at hand.

Improvised Verse as our Literary Heritage

The view from literary heritage is perhaps the most obvious perspective on Basque oral traditions and also probably the only one that current curricula bear in mind (albeit problematically). As Koldo Mitxelena has observed, written Basque literature (or “highbrow,” as it is also called) well into the twentieth century is limited, anachronistic, and almost always a response to aims that are not strictly literary. On the other hand, Basque oral literature is at least as rich and varied as any other tradition.

In the context of Basque oral literature, Basque verse definitely holds a prestigious place, both in its improvised form and its non-improvised or written form (*bertso-paperak*). Spanish speakers feel and express a logical admiration for the verse forms in which most Spanish poetry has been written (romance, ten-verse poems, sonnets, and so on). In the Basque Country, Basque also has its favorite stanza patterns, and it seems reasonable for us to learn and appreciate them properly: the *kopla zaharra*, the major and minor *zortziko*, the stanza found in the ballad known as “Iparragirre’s,” the nine-rhyme stanza (*betroiarena*), and so on. If Basque poets have preferred these models it is undoubtedly because they allow them to express—with greater ease, precision, and power—what they wish to express in each case. It is of course well known that each language has its own internal dynamic, and that each language favors certain stanza patterns over others. Thus knowledge of the stanza patterns that Basque seems to favor should form part of the minimum required knowledge that we are trying to define.

Improvised Basque verse, however, deserves special mention. Experts say that improvisation is a universal phenomenon, in the sense that it was a practice that existed in all cultures and all languages. Nevertheless, at the present time, oral improvisation appears to have disappeared nearly everywhere, perhaps due to the predominance of written culture since the Enlightenment. In this sense, it can be said that the fact that mass literacy in Basque occurred so late may have allowed for the survival of oral improvisation among us, confirming the saying that “every cloud has a silver lining.”

I have just claimed that oral improvisation has disappeared almost everywhere; this is a claim that needs to be qualified, because oral improvisation may be more alive than one might first think. During the last few years, Basque scholars have had the opportunity to learn about improvised forms of expression from other countries, and as our research has advanced the world map of oral improvisation has become more comprehensive, to such an extent that it seems that there really is no corner of the globe in which we cannot find some trace of oral improvisation. Many of these traces are marginal; Basque improvised verse, on the other hand, has not only survived but is one of the mainstays of modern Basque culture. Today Basque verse is, above all, improvised verse, and it is undeniable that it holds a great deal of prestige in modern Basque

society. It is not just part of our heritage; it is also one of the most successful popular cultural activities in our society at the present time.

In any case, this initial perspective on improvised verse as literary heritage has shown us that Basque improvisational verse has enormous value as part of our cultural heritage. And it is not just a Basque heritage, of course, but the intangible cultural heritage of the whole world, as UNESCO itself has recently acknowledged.⁴

Basque Improvised Verse as a Means of Communication

Those who know nothing of Basque improvised verse cannot claim to know our own reality properly, because Basque verse is not just a subgenre of oral literature but also a means of communication—or, if you prefer, a means of communicating with each other. At many important historical moments, for example, it was the only medium the Basque-speaking community had. Official Basque history is written, with a few rare exceptions, in Spanish or French, whereas the popular version of historical events has been generally narrated and sung in Basque, almost always in the form of *bertsos* (“verses”). Getting to know these verses is also vital from this point of view, since otherwise it is impossible to acquire a complete vision of important events. The burning of Mondragon, the Carlist wars, the great wars of the twentieth century, the Spanish civil war—none of these events can be fully understood, in a Basque context, without turning to the relevant verses. However, Basque verse not only deals with great historical events; it also reflects the day-to-day life of our ancestors, methods of production, fiestas, religion, and so forth. These are social realities that can be only partially understood if we completely ignore Basque verse.

Oral history is currently in vogue around the globe. It finally seems that the most seasoned historians are ready to acknowledge that oral sources are a vital tool, without which historical chronicles would always lack something. There have been undeniable methodological advances connected with the analysis and treatment of oral documents. In the case of the Basques, however, the fact that many of these documents are written in verse seems to put scholars off, as if dealing with folkloric materials like these might prove less than “academic” enough. This is not because of a lack of models that combine a thoroughly academic approach with an appreciation of Basque oral poetry; consider the vast work of Father Antonio Zavala or of Jesus Maria Leizaola, among others. That is simply the way things are, and it is difficult to guess why Basque verses are not appreciated for the historical data they contain. It may be that, as in so many other cases, we tend to overrate what comes from somewhere else (in this case, anything that comes endorsed and approved by Spanish and French culture), and to think that a small local culture cannot produce anything significant.

⁴ There is an initiative in progress for UNESCO to declare Basque improvised poetry a part of the protected heritage of humanity.

Basque Verse: An Effective Model of Communication

Modern “developed” societies entertain a paradox with serious consequences. On the one hand, scholars agree that communication is the very core of our societies in the twenty-first century.⁵ The most commonly used terms (“information-based society,” “communication society,” and so on) all point in the same direction. What is paradoxical is that, given this situation, individuals’ ability to communicate is dramatically declining (regardless of the language being considered).

The most plausible of the various explanations for this phenomenon, in my opinion, comes from Gabrielle Simone. Simone claims that in the last decade of the twentieth century the convergence between telematics and new media has led to the beginning of a new era in human knowledge. The family and school, the two institutions that for centuries almost exclusively performed the task of transmitting knowledge, are demoted to a secondary role in this new era. The fact that schools still continue to treat written work as an absolute priority, when in the real world oral communication (together with images) is predominant, is certainly a peculiarity. In any case, this is one of many clear symptoms of the dysfunction from which our educational system is currently suffering.

All we need to do is to look back at the media that increasingly support our capacity to communicate to note the central role that orality plays in communication, and as a result in cognitive processes, in modern societies: telephone, cinema, radio, and television all function using the voice and the spoken word. As for the new internet-based means of communication that are emerging (chat lines, e-mail, virtual worlds, SMS on mobile phones, and so on), it is clear that they merely blur the boundaries between written and oral procedures. On chat lines, for example, and also in e-mail, the message is created (at least up to now) using writing, but they need to be structured orally for this discourse to be most effective. The day doesn’t seem far off when these new media will be completely oral, because the advances in voice-recognition programs suggest that these messages will soon be personally dictated into the computer.

Having reached this point, I would like to qualify the claim I have just made. I stated above that communication performs an essential core function in our “information society.” I would now like to add that this communication is increasingly oral and that everything points to its becoming even more oral in nature in the future. This trajectory means, among other things, that the capacity for oral communication is a prerequisite if we want to succeed in today’s society.

Note that I have used “information” and “communication” here as if they were synonyms. Here is another of the prejudices (the first was the absolute supremacy of writing over oral communication) to which the Enlightenment gave rise—the fallacy of believing that communication is merely an exchange of information. In actual fact, leading researchers have long since abandoned this kind of reductive thinking. It is still odd that it was precisely specialists in analytical philosophy, led by Wittgenstein, who were the first to question the enlightened-reductionist viewpoint. Nowadays, there is not a single important figure in any of the many academic disciplines that deal with communication who dares to claim that language is

⁵ See, for example, Manuel Castells’ work.

essentially a mere conglomeration of norms and paradigms. Language, as all disciplines recognize, is a tool to create things. The purpose of each and every one of our language activities is none other than to produce an effect (including emotions in ourselves and others, creating new worlds for us to live in, and so on).

In the Basque Country we have and enjoy a highly prestigious form of oral expression that transmits both emotion and tradition effectively and economically. As we have discussed, the capacity to communicate, especially orally, is vital in contemporary society. Thus it seems important to emphasize that Basque improvised verse has proven to be a highly effective tool for achieving just this goal, a tool from which our modern “information society,” in my opinion, could learn quite a bit.

Selection of content

Facts and concepts that one should know	Procedures that one should be able to carry out and skills one should acquire	Values and attitudes that should be adopted
<p><i>History of improvised Basque poetry</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Origins of Basque improvised verse: myth and anti-myth ▪ First documents: Old Charter of Vizcaya, Gorosabel, Iztueta ▪ <i>Bertso-papera</i> period; function, dissemination ▪ Predominance of improvised Basque verse: Basque verse in the twentieth century ▪ Oral improvisation in other cultures: past and present; similarities and differences with Basque improvised verse. ▪ Periods in the history of Basque improvised verse. Major Basque improvising poets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use of relevant documents and references ▪ Managing oral documents: oral history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Universal nature of the phenomenon of improvisation ▪ Appreciating the importance of Basque improvised verse ▪ Noting the very different nature of oral societies
<p><i>Genres of Basque improvised verse</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Basque improvised verse and literature: other genres of oral literature (<i>kopla zaharrak</i>, ballads, lullabies) ▪ Main stanza patterns in Basque verse: <i>kopla</i>, <i>zortziko</i>, <i>hamarreko</i>, <i>bereziak</i> ▪ Basque verse and journalistic-historical chronicles: wars, sport, <i>bertso-paperak</i> on various events ▪ Basque verse and rhetoric: subjects in modern Basque verse; approaches, etc. ▪ Verse anthologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Distinguishing between the different genres of oral literature ▪ Knowing how to use the main stanzas ▪ Clarifying events using Basque verse (subjects dealt with in other subjects) ▪ Learning how to classify and codify the subjects in Basque verse (capacity for synthesis, documentation) ▪ Learning Basque verses by heart and singing them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appreciating the artistic components of language ▪ Discovering the importance of Basque verse as a chronicle of events ▪ Appreciating the pleasure of singing
<p><i>Communicative strategies of Basque improvising poets</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Correct, pure, and suitable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying the resources found in Basque verse to other kinds of discourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing attention on what is appropriate, not on what is correct • Internalizing the importance

<p>Basque</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communicative purpose and the audience ▪ The verse: text, co-text, and situation ▪ Figures and tropes ▪ Non-verbal resources (tune, facial and body expression) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying to build up suitable arguments around a specific theme • Forming a suitable discourse • Formulating the arguments you have chosen properly • From the written text to the written oral text • Learning how to manage non-verbal aspects properly: speed of diction, intonation, pauses, silences; always in order to try and achieve your rhetorical aim • From the written oral text to the improvisation 	<p>of your communicative aims and of the audience in each case</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introspection • Becoming aware of the importance of extra-textual aspects in oral communication • Overcoming your embarrassment about speaking in public, self-confidence
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History of Improvised *Bertsolaritza*: A Proposal

Joxerra Garzia

Historical Antecedents

As Joxe Azurmendi (1980) points out,

A curious contradiction arises. On the one hand, a myth surrounding the origins of *bertsolaritza* has been gratuitously created, trying to date it from time immemorial; on the other, in these dizzy times where all myths are opposed with such ardor, a counter-myth, just as gratuitous as the myth it claims to combat, has arisen: that *bertsolaritza* in the Basque Country is a phenomenon more or less modern, with its origins about the beginnings of the nineteenth century.

According to Azurmendi, the myth of the immemorial origin of *bertsolaritza*¹ comes from Manuel Lekuona, the first real scholar of *bertsolaritza* and of other manifestations of Basque popular literature. In Lekuona's work, we find a number of references to the "neolithic" or "prehistoric" character of the artistic activity. According to him, the origins of *bertsolaritza* have to be looked for in the times of pastoral farming. Azurmendi states that all subsequent references to the remote origins of *bertsolaritza* owe a debt to the position held by Lekuona. And Azurmendi produces some evidence in the form of quotations, which can give us an idea of the tone of the arguments over the remote origin of *bertsolaritza*. So, for example, it is stated that "All Basques sing; the whole people sing . . . from the earliest times which prehistoric science managed to penetrate, the Basques have shown examples of their poetic activity" (Gorostiaga 1957). Another formulaic statement on the same theme is the claim that "*bertsolaritza* is as old as Euskara itself."²

The counter-myth, at the same time, has a considerable tradition among us. On the one hand, the list of those expressing their reticence—or even their scorn—towards *bertsolaritza* is well stocked with famous names. The fact is that when the first recorded mention of *bertsolaritza* occurs (towards the end of the eighteenth century), it is referred to as a phenomenon of

¹ For photographs and audio/video associated with this article, click on link.

² See, for example, Jautarkol 1958 and Onaidia 1972.

considerable age and, what is more important, the documents clearly treat *bertsolaritza* as a cultural expression that has a high degree of maturity in its forms and in its social roots, judging by the references to the verbal combats between *bertsolaris* and the social importance that such ad hoc compositions appeared to have had at the time.

Luis Michelena, distancing himself equally from the two extremes, states that, “the tradition [of the *bertsolaris*] is very old, and dates at least from the *damas improvisadoras (improvistraces)* of fifteenth-century verse whom Garibay talks about” (1960:25). J. M. Leizaola and other scholars have also held the same opinion. Azurmendi’s work on this question is of great importance because it involves two references from the Ancient Charter for Bizkaia, put down on paper in 1452. These are undoubtedly the oldest written records of *bertsolaritza* and irrefutable proof that, as early as the mid-fifteenth century, improvised verse singing, or some manifestation thereof, was sufficiently common and deep-rooted to merit its express banning. First, Title 35, Charter Law VI:

. . . hereafter, when one wishes to mourn for a defunct person in Bizkaia or outside the same, by sea or on land, no person in any part of Bizkaia, in town or village, shall dare make lamentations, pull their hair or scratch their head, nor shall they make singing lamentations . . . under pain of payment of one thousand coins for each person acting in contrary and every time.

In addition to these “mourners,” there is a second mention in the Ancient Charter for Bizkaia, even more significant, about the sung improvisation of the period. It appears in Title 8, Law I:

Regarding those cases where arrests can be made without delinquents seeking sanctuary under the Tree of Guernica. First, they say: there are Common Law rights . . . sanctuary . . . and as regards the Women, known for being shameful, and agitators of peoples, they make couplets and songs in an infamous and libellous manner.

The Charter Law refers to these women as “profanesses” who, in all probability, can be regarded as the direct ancestors of modern-day *bertsolaris*.

Despite this record, the reality of these adlibbing women is that we can do little more than confirm their existence. To find a corpus of *bertsolaristic* literature of any substance we have to wait until the end of the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century is better documented, both regarding names and biographical data as well as regarding actual preserved pieces (*bertsos*). Nevertheless, these refer more to non-improvised, written *bertsos* (*bertso jarriak*). It is known, from cross-references, that the *bertsolaris* who wrote these verses also improvised, but the number of *bertsos* (entire improvised sung poems) of which we have knowledge is quite scant and we can say little about their characteristics.

Not until the mid-twentieth century did the use of recording technologies become widespread, thus allowing the guaranteed preservation—and subsequent faithful transcription—of the *bertsos* improvised by the *bertsolaris* in town squares and at village crossroads. If we subscribe to the point of view of Michelena, Leizaola, and Azurmendi about the origins of improvised *bertsolaritza* and consider the forms used and the end-product of the ad

hoc *bertsolari* improvisers, we can see that it is only from the 1960s onward that we have a corpus of improvised *bertsos* worthy of the name. Before that time, what survives is a collection of fragments and anecdotes that do not provide sufficient material on which to base thorough research. Those who are considered “classical” *bertsolaris* (Etxahun, Xenpelar, and Bilintx in the nineteenth century; Kepa Enbeita, Txirrita, Pello Errota, Udarregi, and others between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) were, according to all accounts, great improvisers. But the status they enjoy within the world of *bertsolaritza* is almost entirely due to their written or dictated—rather than improvised—*bertsos*. The fact that the *bertsos* that make up most of the creative corpus of these classical *bertsolaris* are “conceptually” oral (some of the poets quoted did not know how to write) should not blind us to the fact that, given the forms of reproduction, these *bertsos* belong to a genre more akin to ballad sheet culture than to improvised *bertsolaritza*.

The Transformation of *Bertsolaritza* in the Twentieth Century

However it may have come about, the reality is that throughout the twentieth century *bertsolaritza* underwent a progressive and radical change. Although the name is the same, *bertsolaritza* at the beginning of the century has little to do with that at the end. Far from being superficial, change has affected practically every aspect of the artistic activity.

Among other things, written *bertsolaritza*, the most important format at the beginning of the century, ceded primacy to the improvised form. By the end of the twentieth century, it was the people improvising their *bertsos* before the public who were seen as the true *bertsolaris*.

It is difficult to determine the point at which the two forms of *bertsolaritza* met, one on the way up and the other in decline. Nevertheless, some of the causes for the change can be outlined:

- The defense of oral poetry by Manuel Lekuona in Bergara in 1930 produced a change in the way in which the Basque intelligentsia evaluated the phenomenon of improvised *bertsolaritza*. As a consequence of this shift, what can be seen as the first-ever *bertsolari* championship was held in 1935, and then repeated the following year. The organization of both competitions was the responsibility of Euskaltzaleak, which was closely linked to Basque political nationalism.
- After the civil war and the harshest years of Franco’s dictatorship, the Basque Language Academy, Euskaltzaindia, assumed responsibility for the organization of the third championship in 1960, with hugely successful results. Three more competitions followed in 1962, 1965, and 1967.
- The advent of radio as a popular means of communication, and the attention that a few broadcasting stations afforded *bertsolaris* from the outset, provided almost the only form of Basque language not prohibited at the time.
- After the death of General Franco, the Academy once again began organizing *bertsolari* championships, the first one being held in 1980. The idea was to hold the competition biennially, and indeed the next one took place in 1982.
- The 1985 competition gave rise to a heated confrontation between the organizers and the group of *bertsolaris* (or at least the most active among them), which resulted in the creation of the

Association of Bertsolaris of the Basque Country.³ This Association then assumed responsibility for organizing the championships on a quadrennial basis; the 1985 contest was held (finally) in 1986 and, since then, three more have taken place: in 1989, 1993, and 1997. Moreover, each of the seven provinces (four in peninsular Euskal Herria and three in the continental Basque Country) holds its own championships, and there is no dearth of school and youth events. Self-managed within the Bertsozale Elkarte, oral artistic activity has become a touchstone for other aspects of Basque culture.

– The improvised *bertsos* in the championships were recorded, both in writing and in audio-visual format. The transcriptions of the *bertsos* of the 1935 and 1936 championships are still precarious, but from 1960 on each contest (or at least the final) had its own recorded edition. We have, therefore, for the first time in the history of *bertsolaritza*, a corpus of improvised *bertsos*.

– In 1989, the Association published a book with an anthology of the improvised *bertsos* from the various events held during 1988, under the title *Bapatean 88*. This book was the first in a series that has been published uninterruptedly ever since; in total, eleven books containing the best moments of improvised bertsolaristic events, including the championships. At the Xenpelar Archive Center, the Bertsozale Elkarte continuously files and catalogues this entire corpus of material, placing it at the disposal of any interested researcher. The Center's new website, <http://www.bertsozale.com/english/xenpelar/xdzl.htm>, aims to make access to the archives ever quicker and easier.

– In 1988, the program *Hitzetik Hortzera* made its appearance on the first (exclusively Basque language) channel of the autonomous Euskal Telebista broadcasting corporation. Consisting basically of an anthology of *bertsolari* events around the country, it coincided with the boom in popularity of *bertsolaritza*, the high point of which can be situated in 1991. The audience for the recordings of the impromptu performances reached hitherto unheard-of, even unimaginable levels.

– Festivals and events of all kinds multiplied, particularly from the 1990s onward. The topics became more diverse and more concrete. In order to acquit themselves well at a difficult verbal juncture, *bertsolaris* had to be aware of what was happening in the world. References to fictional characters, films, literature, and so forth—anything and everything could become the object or the butt of this improvised singing. Not only the content but also the dynamics imposed by the theme-prompter or the opponent became increasingly diverse, sophisticated, and, consequently, difficult. Just one example among the many that could be given: a *bertsolari* is asked to improvise two characters, one for each microphone. The singer therefore has to predict what each one would say in response to the other with regard to the topic imposed—and imitate the register that each would use! It is clear that this goes far beyond the definition of what, according to experts, are the universal features of oral poetry.

– The *bertsolaris* at the end of the twentieth century are young, mostly university students or graduates, and are also involved in written literary creation in all its forms. At the beginning of the new millennium, the presence of female *bertsolaris*, competing on a par with their male counterparts, is now commonplace.

³ The Association changed its name in 1996, and since then has been known as Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte (the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza). The change of name aimed to reflect the reality of the Association more faithfully, since the number of actual *bertsolaris* was no greater than 15% of the total membership. Hereafter, we will refer to this association as the Bertsozale Elkarte, or by its initials, EHBE.

– For the first time in history, it is the *bertsolaris* themselves who provide the most novel and interesting reflections on the art that they perform. Even though these thoughts may in principle be merely intuitive, they have nevertheless firmly established that it is wise to treat improvised *bertsolaritza* as an oral genre in a class of its own.

In short, although evidence exists to suggest that improvised *bertsolaritza* was a deeply rooted activity much earlier, the documented history of the art dates from 1935. Up until this date, the only records we have are of challenges and a series of individual *bertsos*, preserved in the collective memory of the local people. Consequently, there is little we can say about improvised *bertsolaritza* prior to this time.

Histories of popular *bertsolaritza* generally begin at around 1800 and establish a series of long periods, each dominated by one or more major figures. Juan Mari Lekuona,⁴ for example, establishes the following eras, which have been more or less generally accepted by later historians:

Period	Years	Key <i>bertsolaris</i>
Pre-romanticism	1800-1830	Fernando Amezketarra, Zabala, Txabolategi, etc.
Romanticism	1839-1876	Etxahun, Otxalde, Xenpelar, Bilintx, etc.
Pre-renaissance	1876-1935	Pello Errota, Udarregi, Txapel, Zepai, Kepa Enbeita, Txirrita, and so on

While I firmly believe that Lekuona has been and continues to be a key reference in the field of research into *bertsolaritza*, this classification fails to satisfy for two fundamental reasons. First, as stated earlier, he mixes up two clearly separate genres: improvised *bertsolaritza*, whose corpus from these periods is practically non-existent, and non-improvised *bertsolaritza*. Second, the names of the periods themselves refer to external categories that have nothing whatsoever to do with improvised *bertsolaritza*.

I therefore propose a new series of eras in the history of *bertsolaritza*, with the following basic characteristics:

- They concern only improvised *bertsolaritza*.
- The eras for which there is no acceptable corpus of improvised *bertsos* are all considered as part of the pre-history of improvised *bertsolaritza*.
- The criteria used for establishing the periods stem from the nature of improvised *bertsolaritza* itself.

In accordance with these criteria, the following chronology can be identified in the history of improvised *bertsolaritza*:

⁴ See Lekuona 1982:111-22.

Period	Years	<i>Bertsolaris</i>
Pre-history	from its origins until 1900	Pernando Amezketarra, Etxahun, Xenpelar, Bilintx, etc.
From marginal <i>bertsolaritza</i> to the first championships	1900-1935	Txirrita, Kepa Enbeita
Time of silence	1936-1945	
Survival <i>bertsolaritza</i>	1945-1960	Basarri, Uztapide, Lasarte, Joxe Lizaso, Agirre, Lazkano, Lazkao Txiki, Mattin, Xalbador, etc.
Resistance <i>bertsolaritza</i>	1960-1979	Azpillaga, Lopategi Uztapide, Basarri, Joxe Lizaso, Agirre, Lazkano, Lazkao Txiki, Mattin, Xalbador, etc.
From singing to the people to singing to the public	1980-1998	Amuriza, Egaña, Sarasua, Peñagarikano, Sebastián Lizaso, etc.
Multi-polar <i>bertsolaritza</i>	1999-	Maialen Lujanbio, Unai Iturriaga, Igor Elortza, Amets Arzallus, Sustrai Kolina, etc.

Of course, in each period, and particularly the more recent, there are many more *bertsolaris* worth mentioning than those included in the table. This is, nevertheless, a brief outline of the way in which I shall organize my overview of the history of this art, and the reader has only to consult the section referring to a specific period in order to find a more comprehensive list of prominent *bertsolaris*.

From Marginal *Bertsolaritza* to the First Championships: 1935-36

During the years leading up to the Spanish Civil War⁵ another priest, Ariztimuño'tar Jose, alias Aitzol, an enthusiastic supporter of nationalism and literature, felt obliged to intervene in the world of *bertsolaritza* on account of its having been marginalized. There were many *bertsolaris* in the Basque Country, and *bertsolaritza* was a thriving and diverse movement, an activity with no set rules or regulations that had not even the tiniest inkling that it was in fact an asset of strategic national importance. *Bertsolaritza* had not fallen silent; rather, what had happened was that the *bertsolaris*, particularly in Gipuzkoa, moved in areas far removed from all official activities. Bizkaia had Kepa Enbeita, a nationalist activist and one of the fathers of the Basque movement, alongside Evaristo Bustintza, alias Kirikiño. But no disciples arose.

⁵ The so-called "Spanish Civil War," that is, the fratricidal war provoked by the coup d'état led by Francisco Franco against the legitimate republican institutions, began on June 18, 1936, and ended on April 1, 1939, giving way to 40 years of dictatorship (1936-75).

Aitzol must have engaged in tremendous private arguments with other intellectuals of his period. Although all were looking for a cornerstone on which to base the “renaissance of Basque culture,” they disagreed openly regarding the role that *bertsolaritza* should play in this renaissance. In Aitzol’s opinion, it was important to find and train good *bertsolaris*, in order to ensure that “popular poetry would flow out over the joyous flower-covered countryside and the throngs of Basque people lit up by the bright rays of a vigorous renaissance.” Moreover, the following year, in another paper on the subject, Aitzol aimed to dress the figure of the *bertsolari* with appropriate clothing, stating that he should be “discreetly attired with archaic garments” in order to present the appearance of a “romantic troubadour with golden locks.” He also aimed to lend a certain mobility to his declamatory body language and radically change the somewhat prosaic décor.⁶

These measures were never adopted, but the quotes make it quite clear that the value being assigned to *bertsolaritza* was, even in the best of cases, instrumental rather than intrinsic. In other words, the art was appreciated only in so far as it could serve as a vehicle for achieving the much-desired renaissance of Basque culture, an undertaking that was far from easy given that the majority of the population was illiterate in their own tongue. Since written poetry by the great poets of the period (Lauaxeta, Lizardi) served only to alienate the ordinary people, some, like Aitzol, believed that a form of “cleaned-up” *bertsolaritza* could serve their purpose.

A poor imitation of a competition had been organized some years earlier in 1877 by the Consistory of Floral Games, and had been repeated every year since then in San Sebastián’s Teatro Principal on Saint Thomas’ Day. However, Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship (1923-31) did away with any trace of Basque culture and the Basque language itself was prohibited.

In 1930, a tribute to Toribio Alzaga, the first director of the School of Declamation, was arranged, and was attended by Txirrita, Lujanbio, Telaetxipi, Zabaleta, Agirre, and Bitoria. It was an attempt to entice the *bertsolaris* out of the cider houses, the “university of *bertsos*,” and into the theater. The initiative, however, was not followed up, and then later, during the Republic, the possibility of taking direct political action relegated the establishment of a set of official rules for *bertsolaritza* to second place. At a cultural level, the efforts of the Euskaltzaleak centered for various years around the Olerti-Eguna, Umeen-Eguna, and Antzerti-Eguna. During the middle of 1934, Xabier Lizardi, Luis Jauregi, Antonio Labaien, and the *bertsolaris* Erauskin and Jose de Ariztimuño, alias Aitzol, met in the Alegia mill. They enlisted the help of the barber from San Sebastián, Iñaki Uranga, who had sat on the judges’ panel in the meeting organized by the Consistory, and thus the first proper championship of *bertsolaris* arose, with its rules, judges’ panel, and prizes. The youth organization of the nationalist movement, Euzko Gaztedi, was enlisted to copy the *bertsos* for subsequent publication. Although the system was not completely reliable, it nevertheless gave us the first proper document in the field of improvised *bertsolaritza*.

⁶ See Aitzol 1931.

The Paradigm of Classic Bertsolaritza: Txirrita

During the first 30 years of the twentieth century, improvised *bertsolaritza* was dominated by the imposing figure of the Hernani-born poet Jose Manuel Lujanbio, alias Txirrita (1860-1936), who, at the beginning of the 1900s, was one of the key figures on the oral scene. A corpulent man who had an acute aversion to doing anything other than singing verses, Txirrita himself is today somewhat obscured by his status as a legendary hero, a status shared also by other *bertsolaris* from earlier eras, such as Etxahun, Pernando Amezketarra, Bilintx, and Xenpelar.

In comparison with these *bertsolaris*, however, quite a few of Txirrita's improvised verses have survived, all linked to anecdotes illustrating his crafty, cheeky nature. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that all the improvised verses attributed to him were in fact really improvised. The most striking, due to its excellent quality, is the verse he is supposed to have composed in San Sebastián upon seeing the widow of the then recently assassinated Cánovas del Castillo.

Gorka Aulestia records and translates the first of the two verses supposedly improvised by Txirrita on that occasion as follows:

*Ill da Canovas, fuera Canovas,
pikaro gaizki eziya,
galdu zituen gari-zelaiak,
gallendu zaio sasiya;
galdu zituen ipar garbiak,
gallendu trumoi nasiya,
galdu zituen fueruak eta
Jaungoinoaren graziya,
galdu zituen bizilekuak,
galdu du bere biziya.*

(Cánovas is dead, / out with Cánovas, / rude villain, /
he destroyed the wheat fields, / the burrs have vanquished him; /
he chased away the fresh breezes, / he drew the dark storm, /
he lost the *fueros*⁷ and / the grace of God, /
he destroyed homes, / he has lost his life.)⁸

Although much of the force of the original verse is lost in translation (particularly the anaphoric use of the verb *galdu*, which in Euskara means both “to lose” and “to destroy”), it is hard to believe that it was really improvised.

General incredulity is even greater with regard to the second verse attributed to him:

⁷ The *fueros* are a traditional set of Basque rights and privileges.

⁸ Taken from Aulestia 1990:116, trans. by Lisa Corcostegui and Linda White.

*Hiru reloj, hiruna kate,
hiru mailakin bakoitza,
buruan hiru korona eta
petxuan hiru orratza;
amodioa hiru dobletan
tximixta bezain zorrotza,
hiru tirokin utzi zizuten
zuri senarra hilotza,
hiru ezpatak zulatzen dute,
señora, zure bihotza.*

(Three clocks, three chains, / three links in each, / three crowns on his head / and three needles in his breast; / love in three folds / sharp like lightning, / three shots turned / your husband into a corpse; / three swords pierce / your heart, madam.)

The distribution of the resources and the density of the figures all indicate that this piece is in fact a written verse, or, to be more precise, a dictated one, since Txirrita did not know how to write. As for the rest of Txirrita's *bertso-paperak*, they are in no way inferior to those quoted above. And it is on this corpus of *bertso-paperak* that either explicitly or implicitly, the model of classic *bertsolaritza* is based.

Juan Garzia has carried out a literary analysis of the style and resources that underlie the verses dictated by Txirrita.⁹ At the end of the day, what has become known as "Txirrita's style," the paradigm of classic *bertsolaritza*, can, according to Garzia, be described as "a small number of poetic-rhetoric resources admirably used in accordance with the expressive requirements of each moment."¹⁰ The accumulation, antithesis, precision, and graphic expression, all integrated into a syntax dominated by parataxis, constitute the cornerstone of "Txirrita's style." Metaphor, on the other hand, is used little.

The figure of Txirrita is omnipresent throughout the last 25 years of the nineteenth century and the first 30 years of the twentieth century. We find him in the first *bertsolari* championship, in which the then young and unknown Basarri sang the "verse of the little dove," winning the competition against all expectations. Txirrita had to make do with winning the next one, held in 1936, just a few months before his death.

It is in these two competitions that Txirrita's true talent as an improviser becomes apparent, since the remainder of the improvised verses attributed to him are simply individual snippets. If we study the verses composed during the competitions, another aspect of Txirrita's style is revealed, an aspect that renders it fiercely modern: its ingenuity. The *bertsolari*'s wit is revealed in his ability to come up with responses to even the most difficult dialectical situations. In Basque, these witty and unexpected responses or remarks are known as *ateraldi*.

⁹ See Garzia 1997.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Juan Garzia.

Let us return, then, to these first championships. Txirrita was mainly used to singing in more informal atmospheres. It has become a bit of a cliché to describe the *bertsolaritza* of that era as “cider house *bertsolaritza*,” since these traditional-type eating houses were his most frequent, and preferred, venue for the performance of his art, although he did participate in the somewhat sporadically held competitions. The championships, however, were a solemn occasion, a kind of rite, and the audience was also different, in that the Basque intelligentsia (who had recently begun to view *bertsolaritza* as a vehicle for achieving the much-desired “renaissance of Basque culture”) were also present, alongside the usual spectators. Txirrita had trouble adapting to the competition. Far from being dazzled by the importance of the occasion, his self-assurance bordered on disrespectfulness.

We will never know how Aitzol reacted when Txirrita unexpectedly sang the verse quoted below, pointing at Aitzol, who was sitting on the judges’ panel, as he pronounced the last part of the poem:

*Larogei urte gainean ditut
nago hanketako minez,
Donostiara etorria naiz
herren haundia eginez.
Bi bastoiekin txit larri nabil
pausorik eman ezinez.
Euskera ia ahaztu zait eta
erderarikan jakin ez,
maixu batekin eskolan laster
hasi behar det latinez.*

(My eighty years weigh heavily on me / and my legs ache, /
I have come to San Sebastián / limping heavily all the way. /
I hobble along with two walking-sticks / unable to take a step. /
I’ve almost forgotten my Euskara / and I cannot speak Spanish, /
soon I’ll start learning Latin / with a teacher at school.)

He was not 80—just 75. A bachelor, reveller, and uncompromising with regard to work, Txirrita was the prototype *bertsolari* denigrated by the majority of the educated classes, particularly the Spanish-speaking ones.

During the 1936 championships, which were performed to a full house in the Victoria Eugenia theater, and while the other contestants moralized about the evils of war in five-rhyme verses, Txirrita sang this four-rhymed poem:

*Zenbait errezo egin izan det
nere denboran elizan
ta pozik nago ikusirikan
pakean nola gabiltzan.
Ni naizen bezin kobarderikan*

*inor ezin leike izan
semeak gerrâ ez joateâtik
mutil zahar gelditu nintzan*

(I have prayed several times / in my life / and it makes me happy to see / that peace has come. / No one can be / more cowardly than me: / because my sons did not go to war / I remained unmarried.)

We can easily imagine the audience's reaction: Txirrita was not exactly known as a frequenter of churches, and he had sung on more than one occasion of his disastrous love affairs in a humorous tone, promising to organize a bullfight with Machaquito and Bombita on his wedding day, and so forth. With the same characteristic irreverence, he expressed his gratitude for the stick he was presented with during a ceremony held in his honor just a few months before his death, as follows:¹¹

*Hirurogeita hamasei urte,
garaia det umiltzeko,
bultza beharrik ez nadukake
goitik behera amiltzeko;
bi makil hoiek aski nitun nik
munduz mundu ibiltzeko,
hirugarrena andregaiari
arkakusoak hiltzeko.*

(I'm seventy-six years old, / I suppose it's high time I swallowed my pride
I don't need to be pushed / to fall flat on my face; / these two
sticks are all I need / to walk wherever I want, / this third one I'll use
to kill / my girlfriend's fleas.)

The Bizkaian Tradition: Kepa Enbeita, or "Urretxindorra"

Although it is often said that there was no tradition of *bertsolaritza* in Bizkaia prior to Kepa Enbeita, alias "Urretxindorra" (1878-1942), this affirmation now needs to be revised following the recent work of Xabier Amuriza and others.¹² Gipuzkoan centrism, justified in part by historical events, now needs to be reviewed and corrected in light of these and other

¹¹ The ceremony was held on March 22, 1936, and Txirrita died on June 3rd of that same year.

¹² Over recent years, Xabier Amuriza has done admirable fieldwork, compiling an enormous quantity of oral pieces, especially *coplas* or verses. In addition to recording them in 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, providing also a wealth of information about their content and context. A series of publications has arisen out of this work under the collective title of *Bizkaiko Bertsogintza*.

findings—findings that clearly demonstrate that, although Gipuzkoa was undoubtedly the center of *bertsolaritza*, it was by no means the only place in which the art was practiced.

Indeed, Kepa Enbeita's father had himself been a *bertsolari* of a certain standing. He was nicknamed “Txotxojeurei” and seems to have been rather like Txirrita himself, if not physically then at least as regards his eccentric, amusing, and clever nature. Unfortunately, not enough documents survive to enable us to explore his character and work more closely.

As things stand, then, Kepa Enbeita is the first Bizkaian *bertsolari* whose work can be analyzed in any detail. Born in the Areatza district of Muxika (Bizkaia), he is the first in a long line of *bertsolaris* that continues right up to the modern day: his son Baldendin (1906-86); his grandson Jon, son of Balendin; and his great-granddaughter Oihane, daughter of Jon and a leading member of a generation (our generation) in which the sight of a female *bertsolari* is no longer cause for astonishment.

Two phases are generally distinguished in the poetic activities of the founder of the Enbeita dynasty.

Early phase: 1897-1904

During this period, Kepa Enbeita first made a name for himself as a popular *bertsolari*, with a quick and able style and an ingenious mind, comparable to Txirrita himself. In 1903 he won a competition held in Las Arenas-Getxo, in which he competed against Txirrita and other leading *bertsolaris* of the era, including Pello Errota, Frantses-Txikia, and Aizarna.

Second phase: 1905-36

After being exposed to the doctrine of Sabino Arana, Kepa Enbeita's *bertsolaritza* changed radically. Abandoning the simple, direct style of his earlier period, he attempted to apply Arana's linguistic teachings to the art of sung verses. The result was a loss in the freshness and vigor of his verses, which became more artificial, elaborate, and ideological. Kepa Enbeita participated in nationalist rallies and his verse speeches were a huge success. However, he almost stopped taking part in “normal” *bertsolaritza* sessions altogether, nor did he participate in the 1935 and 1936 championships.

The following two *bertsos* may serve to illustrate the radical nature of the change his poetry underwent. Although the first was sung in competition or banter with another *bertsolari* and the second is a non-improvised piece, both deal with the same element that remains one of the archetypal elements of rural *bertsolaritza*: livestock (in this case, cows) as a primary source of nourishment.

The *bertso* from his early period is a *zortziko txikia*, a four-rhyme stanza (eight verses: the odd ones containing 7 syllables and the even ones, which are rhymed, containing 6). It is the *bertso* that opens the session:

*Komedi tokia da
gure okoilua:
behiak adarrak dantzan*

ta hik akuilua.
Bi alditan hor habil,
mutil kankailua,
esnez bete ezinik
heure katilua.

(Our stable / is quite a sight! / the cows toss their horns /
 and you toss your prod. / You're so clumsy, / even after two tries, /
 you still haven't managed / to fill your bowl).

The title of the session is also significant: *Behi zaharraren bertsoak* ("The verses of the old cow"). When Enbeita returns to the figure of the cow during his second phase, he turns it into a symbol rather than a real animal. In fact, a cow used to appear to the *bertsolari* in his dreams, hence the rather ambiguous title: *Behi zaharraren ametsa* ("The dream of the old cow"). This *bertso* is a good example of Urretxindorra's second phase:

Atzo goizian amets ein nuan
ai, ha zan amets ezia!
Ikusi neban behi nabar haundi
eta ganera luzia,
Euskalerrian muturra daula
eta Madrilen erreperia;
hemen jan ta jan, han zirri-zarra
erasten esne guztia.
Behin aurrian euzko mutil bat
errimia ta gaztia,
esku batian makila daula
ta bestian idazkia.
Idazki hartan idazkun hauxe:
"Kendu behi honi askia,
emon egizko gosia,
hauxe dalako lotsabakoai
ein bihar jaken gauzia."

(Yesterday I had a dream, / oh, what a sweet dream! / I saw an enormous cow / yes enormous and very long, / it had its nose in the Basque Country / and its udders in Madrid; / here it ate and ate, there it was milked / right down to the last drop. / Suddenly, a Basque lad appeared, / young and strong, / he had a prod in one hand / and a piece of paper in the other. / The paper contained the following legend: / "Take this cow's trough away, / let her find out what real hunger is, / this is the only thing / those scoundrels deserve.")

We hope that even in translation (always a somewhat treacherous act) the difference between these two ways of making verses is clear. In purely formal terms, the four-rhyme stanza of the first verse becomes, in the second, a nine-rhyme stanza. The meter, before 7/6, is now 10/8. The first *bertso* is a gibe, a graphic comment about a specific situation; it does not require much space to make its point. The second *bertso*, on the other hand, is a fable, a parable in the true sense of the word; hence the need to lengthen and broaden the format. All this results in a sensation of artifice, of moving forward with difficulty, as opposed to the fluidity of the first *bertso*. Doubtless, expressions such as *euzko mutil* (“Basque lad”) and above all *idazkun* (“legend or inscription”), both clearly inspired by Sabino Arana’s theories, do nothing but accentuate the contrast and the sensation of artificiality with which the *bertso* is imbued.

Whenever the process that took *bertsolaritza* out of the cider houses and into the theaters is talked about, Basarri is usually identified as the sole architect of this change, and people often forget that Kepa Enbeita had already started down this path before the war. Basarri knew Kepa Enbeita, since in the few “normal” *bertsolaritza* sessions in which Urretxindorra participated at the end of his second phase, he was often accompanied, among others, by the then very young Basarri.

Another indisputable merit of the founder of the Enbeita line, closely linked to the one stated above, is that he turned *bertsolaritza* into a functional means of communication. The *bertsolaritza* of Kepa Enbeita’s second phase played a propagandistic role in the promotion of nationalist ideals. Enbeita knew exactly how to make the most of the emotional elements of his art (melody and voice) in order to reach out effectively to a public who enthusiastically applauded him during the rallies in which he participated.

However artificial the *bertsolaritza* of his second phase appears in his texts, Kepa Enbeita is in this sense a modern *bertsolari*, the precursor of the *bertsolaritza* of our era, not so much as regards style and ideology, but definitely in relation to intentions and objectives.

Time of Silence: 1936-45

It would be a patent oxymoron to dwell in detail on the improvised *bertsolaritza* of a period that we have termed the “time of silence.” Following the horrors of the war, the post-war period was no less horrendous, especially in regions such as the Basque Country, which had been declared “traitorous” by the insurgents.

Juan Kruz Zapirain was an illiterate *bertsolari* who sublimated the horrors he had experienced by dictating to his wife the verses he composed while trying in vain to fall asleep. His brother, Joxe, was left widowed with nine children, the oldest of whom was fourteen and the youngest less than three months. A few months earlier, his sister-in-law had died of influenza. The two brothers were widowed almost simultaneously, and both composed *bertsos* expressing their pain. Tradition has it that Joxe Zapirain would go out into the street with the baby in his arms, so that the local women who were still nursing their own children could feed it on their way to the San Sebastián market.

I can think of no better description of this period than the clamorous silence of this *bertso* by Juan Kruz Zapirain:

*Sentimentu asko dauzkat nerekin
 orain kontatu beharrak
 ez dakit nola zuzenduko 'iran
 egin dituzten okerrak,
 pazientzitik ez naiz atera
 Jaungoikoari eskerrak;
 leku askotan jarri dituzte
 tristura eta negarrak,
 lehen hamar lagun ginan etxean
 ta orain hiru bakarrak.*

(Many feelings overwhelm me / and I have to sing them, / I don't know how all the evil that has been done / will ever be remedied; / I have not yet lost patience / thanks be to God; / they have brought sadness and weeping / to many places, / before there were ten of us at home / now there are only three.)

Survival *Bertsolaritza*: 1945-60

Key figures: Basarri and Uztapide

After three years of exile and another three of forced labor in the disciplinary battalions, Basarri finally returned to Gipuzkoa in 1942. Together with Uztapide, he began singing at town and neighborhood festivals in the province. Years would pass before they started singing in Bizkaia or Navarre. They sang as if nothing had happened, ignoring many things both past and present. Of his experience as a woodcutter in Les Landes, we are left with one of Basarri's most accomplished *bertsos*:

*Halabeharrez sartu ginen behin
 Landesko pinu artera
 eguneroko ogi zuria
 irabaziaz jatera.
 Hogei euskaldun bagera baina
 hau da guzision galdera:
 nere famili edo sendia
 gaur zer modutan ote da?
 Gorputzak hemen arkituarren
 gu beti han bizi gera¹³*

¹³ The Unzurrunzaga family carried out invaluable work during the harsh years of the dictatorship, both in their printer's workshop and through their collection *Kulixka Sorta*. Indeed, it was this collection that restarted literary publication during the post-war period, with Salvatore Mitxelena's *Arantzazu* (1949) and Orixe's *Euskaldunak* (1950).

(Fate brought us / to the pine forests of Les Landes / in order to eat white bread bought with our wages. / There are twenty of us Basques / and all of us wonder: / how is my family doing? / Our bodies are here / but we live there with them.)

Iñaki Eizmendi, alias Basarri, was born in Régil (1913), but spent most of his life in Zarauz, located just a few kilometers from his place of birth. When he returned from exile, he worked incessantly. As an improvising *bertsolari*, he visited almost all the towns in the Basque Country, first in Gipuzkoa, and then later in the other provinces also. His habitual companion was a young man from Cestona, Manuel Olaizola, alias “Uztapide” (1909-83), who had also participated in the championships of 1935 and 1936.

Uztapide’s *bertsolaritza* was more simple and popular in style than Basarri’s. Despite not sharing Basarri’s intellectual concerns, Uztapide was, nevertheless, the ideal complement to the Régil-born poet. Today, older *bertsolari*s who had occasion to practice their art alongside Basarri and Uztapide remember that the dynamics of the pair’s performances were always the same, with Basarri marching ahead, clearing the path, deciding when and how to deal with each theme. Needless to say, these performances were carried out without a theme-prompter, meaning that it was the *bertsolari*s themselves who decided which themes to sing about and how long to dedicate to each.

Basarri’s *bertsolaritza* was basically more intellectual. As Lekuona (1998:364-79), points out, it all formed part of a well-defined project. Average *bertso*-lovers, however, tend to prefer Uztapide. Crouching behind Basarri’s initiative, Uztapide lost no opportunity to hit the ball deftly back into his companion’s court, answering every comment with adroitness. In addition to being a *bertsolari*, Basarri was also a journalist, working for both the written press and the radio, and also a great composer of written verses. Uztapide, on the other hand, is remembered mainly for being an accomplished improviser and a talented narrator. His memoirs, published in Auspoa by Father Antonio Zabala, are a monument to popular prose and a great lesson on good narration. The quality of his written verses, however, rarely matched that of his improvised ones.

But Basarri and Uztapide’s merit goes far beyond the texts of their verses. In an era in which *bertsolaritza* was practically the only activity carried out in the Basque language that was tolerated by the regime, they managed to ensure the continuity of their art, laying the foundations for its later development. This period, in which Basarri and Uztapide constructed the foundations for the subsequent evolution of *bertsolaritza*, is poorly documented, at least as regards improvised verses. Since tape recorders were a prerogative of the moneyed classes, all that is left from that period are the testimonies of listeners and the most veteran of the modern-day *bertsolari*s. However, things changed significantly from 1960 onwards, thanks to the initiative of Euskaltzaindia—the Basque Language Academy.

The Rebirth of Bertsolaritza in the Continental Basque Country: Teodoro Hernandorena

Historical circumstances were, needless to say, very different in the continental Basque Country. At the end of the Second World War, an exiled physician from Gipuzkoa, Teodoro Hernandorena, began going from town to town throughout the three continental Basque

provinces in search of *bertsolaris*. After a couple of attempts in Donibane Lohitzune, which drew only very small audiences, he began to organize festivals and competitions, often contributing not only the sweat of his brow but money from his own pocket as well.

The first festival-competition organized by Hernandorena was held in 1946 in Donibane Lohitzune and was attended by a large group of *bertsolaris*, some of whom eventually became part of the *bertsolaritza* elite during the sixties and seventies, and not only in the continental provinces. Contestants included Xalbador, Mattin, Zubikoa, Intzabi, Iriarte, Etxahun, Larramendi, Aintziart, Errexil, Etxexuri, Meltxor, and Goikoetxea. After the qualifying round in Donibane, the final was held in Hazparne, the winner being Etxahun, from Iruri (Zuberoa), a famous *xirula* player and songwriter who had already made a name for himself in the field of popular Basque songs. However, it was the two *bertsolaris* mentioned first, Xalbador and Mattin, who years later took improvised *bertsolaritza* from the continental Basque Country to its height, and they did so in the company of other *bertsolaris* not present at this first competition, who appeared out of the woodwork little by little thanks to the tireless work carried out by Hernandorena: first Xanpun, and then later the Ezpondas, Mendiburu and Alkat, and so on.

Soon *bertsolaris* from both sides of the River Bidasoa (the river marking the border between the peninsular and continental Basque Countries) began performing together, both in festivals held in the northern zone and those organized in the zone subjugated under the military boot of Franco's regime.

Bizkaia: Alfontso Irigoien

In 1948 Alfontso Irigoien, a philologist and scholar from Bizkaia, made use of the protection afforded by his position as a member of Euskaltzaindia, the Basque Language Academy, to organize (under the shadow of the Academy, needless to say) the first *bertsolaritza* championships in Bizkaia, timed to coincide with the Bilbao city festivals. The competition was won by Balendin Enbeita, son of Kepa, who performed alongside the following *bertsolaris* (listed in order of the scores obtained): Juan Ormaetxe, Jose Alberdi, Asensio Bidaurreaga, Eusebio Zubiaga, Pedro Kastrejana, and Florencio Zarraga.

The second championships, held the following year in 1949, were won once again by Balendin Enbeita, who on this occasion competed alongside a number of *bertsolaris* who were not present at the previous year's event: Basilio Pujana, Deunoro Sarduy, and above all Jon Azpillaga, who would later become a key figure in the *bertsolaritza* of the final years of Franco's regime and the first years of the transition, alongside Jon Lopategi. This same year, 1949, also saw the arrival of Jon Mugartegi, one of the most important figures in Bizkaian *bertsolaritza*.

Resistance *Bertsolaritza*: 1960-79

At the end of the 1950s Euskaltzaindia took on a huge task, going all over the Basque region in search of *bertsolaris* and encouraging them to perform in public, organizing provincial championships as preliminary rounds for the Basque national championships. The result of these efforts, in which the work carried out by the academic Irigoien proved especially decisive, was

the *bertsolari* championships of 1960, arranged by the Academy. As stated above, provincial championships had been organized as preliminary events, with the winners being those who competed in what can be considered as the third national championships in the series begun in 1935, before being interrupted by the war. In Gipuzkoa the first *bertsolari* championships were not celebrated until 1959 and took place in Eibar during the tribute ceremony to the writer Juan Antonio Mogel.

The championships were arranged by Euskaltzaindia as qualifying rounds for the Basque national championships, and were attended by seven *bertsolaris*: Uztapide, Manuel Lasarte, Jose Lizaso, Zepai, Txomin Garmendia, Jose Agirre, and Jose Joakin Mitxelena. The absence of Basarri is telling, since this *bertsolari* always did have a somewhat complicated relationship with formal competitions.

A major controversy arose towards the end of the competition. The organizers had stated that each *bertsolari* should sing a nine-point stanza, a *bederatzi puntukoa*. Uztapide refused to do so, and all the other competitors followed suit, except one. The judges' panel, made up by leading figures from Basque literature and culture (Arrue, Mitxelena, Bordari, Antonio Zavala, Juan San Martin), were forced to back down. Basarri, who had already spoken up against the exercise, recounted the events as follows in his newspaper column the next day:

Given the complicated mechanism of the nine-point stanzas, this demand was totally unreasonable. Only one *bertsolari* sang the nine points, and he did so without any obligation, since the judges had revoked the order and had announced that they should sing “verses in four points.” And the only one who dared to take on the nine-point stanza did actually manage to start and finish it, but without mentioning the given topic and without endowing it with *effective content*.¹⁴

I have emphasized “effective content” because I believe that this is the key to understanding what actually happened. On the one hand you have the *bertsolari*, whose only aim, as stated above, is to be effective, in other words to provoke some kind of emotional reaction in his listeners. And on the other hand, you have the competition organizers, learned and distinguished scholars who, it seems, hoped to glean from the *bertsolaris* something that for the latter was totally secondary—an elaborate, complicated, and, if possible, brilliant text. This pretension of finding in *bertsolaritza* something that in no way corresponds to its essence is something that characterizes the recent history of *bertsolaritza* as well. And although not all its effects have been negative, it has nevertheless given rise to a perhaps unnecessary amount of tension.

Whatever the case, the first champion of Gipuzkoa was Uztapide, who alongside the runner-up Jose Joakin Mitxelena represented the province in the Basque national championships held in 1960. After their corresponding qualifying round, held in Bilbao on November 9th, 1959, the following *bertsolaris* represented Bizkaia: Jon Mugartegi (champion) and Jon Azpillaga (runner-up). A provincial championship was also held in Navarre in order to select the contenders for the national competition. After the qualifying rounds held in Lekunberri and Elizondo, the final was held in Lesaka on September 25th, 1959, with two *bertsolaris* being

¹⁴ Taken from Etxezarreta 1993:160.

selected: Andrés Narbarte (champion) and Juan Perurena (runner-up). The contenders in this first championship of the second era also included Xalbador and Mattin, from the continental Basque zone (who were chosen directly, without a qualifying competition, as a result of their being the two most well-known trans-Pyrenean *bertsolaris*); and Basarri, who was also excused from having to participate in any of the qualifying rounds.

As expected, Basarri was proclaimed champion. However, the next championship was won by Uztapide, and, following a complex controversy in the press, Basarri never participated in the championships again, although he did take part in other competitions. Without Basarri to contend with, Uztapide triumphed again in 1965 and 1966, thus becoming the *bertsolari* with the most championships to his name in the history of *bertsolaritza*.

Auspoa: “*The Bellows*”

The driving force behind *bertsolaritza* during the 1960s was without doubt the championships, although *bertsolaris* continued performing at the sessions organized in the various towns and villages. The verses improvised during the finals were published in *Auspoa*, a collection created by Father Antonio Zavala in 1964, based in Tolosa and a true treasure chest of *bertsolaritza* and oral literature in general. Well over 200 volumes later, Father Zavala still continues to publish his collection, nowadays in association with the Sendoa publishing house from Oiartzun. The name of the collection has proved much more than a mere metaphor. *Auspoa* means “bellows,” and the collection has indeed been and continues to be a true bellows, constantly reviving and strengthening the flame of oral literature.

The Four Championships of the Sixties

It was in these four championships that the *bertsolaris* who would sustain *bertsolaritza* throughout the whole of Franco’s regime and the first years of the transition emerged: alongside the famous duo formed by Uztapide and Basarri, as well as the aforementioned Xalbador, Mattin, Jose Lizaso, Jose Agirre, Garmendia, Mitxelena, Mugartegi, and Azpillaga, a number of other, younger *bertsolaris* such as Lazkao Txiki, Lopategi, and Gorrotxategi began making a name for themselves. There are also some other *bertsolaris* from this era who, despite not participating (or participating only very sporadically) in the championships, nevertheless carved for themselves a niche in the history of *bertsolaritza*. The most eminent of these was Manuel Lasarte. Born in Leiza in 1935, he settled in Orio and was much loved and admired among enthusiasts. Lasarte’s *bertsolaritza* was based mainly on fine expression, the extremely elaborate appearance of naturalness with which he imbued his rhymes and fitted his phrases into the corresponding molds. His verses are therefore extremely difficult to translate, at least as regards conveying the charm that they held for his avid listeners.

During the sixties and to a certain extent in the seventies also, *bertsolaris* sang for audiences with whom they shared a certain way of looking at the world and a certain set of fundamental values. The cornerstone of this context was the sense of oppression under which the Basque people and their language lived in light of this situation, any element that seemed to ensure the survival of the language evoked an emotion that had no need to manifest itself in

rousing texts or resources. Not being free to directly express Basque sentiments, topics, and values (particularly religion) enabled *bertsolaris* to evoke powerful emotions in their listeners through very simple *bertsos*, merely by referring to traditional ideas. Even in the championships, rarely were stanzas of more than four rhymes used. And we have already seen what happened when those outside the genre attempted to force the *bertsolaris* to sing longer stanzas.

Anyone hoping to find works of great poetic density among the texts of the improvised *bertsos* from these championships will be disappointed. The topics proposed to the contenders consisted mainly of clichés and archetypes. *Bertsolaris* knew that the mere reaffirmation of all things Basque, no matter how veiled, would produce intense emotions among the audience in the almost liturgical context of the performance. *Bertsolaris* knew that their listeners shared their Christian faith and their traditional values—mother, work, and honesty.

In the 1967 championships even the ritualized greeting *bertsos* had their own specific guidelines. Thus Alfontso Irigoien invited each *bertsolari* to direct his address to a specific person. The following are some of the people the *bertsolaris* were asked to greet:

- The many Basques who are in exile or have emigrated, and who are not present here today.
- The mothers and wives who have stayed by the hearth.
- Young people, asking them to learn to love *bertsolaritza*.

When Xalbador's turn arrived, he was not given a specific target. Instead, he was asked to say in his verse that “a bad peace is always better than a good war,” and so forth. Gorrotxategi was told not only to whom he had to address his verse, but also what he had to say: “the holy father Paul VI has been praying for peace for many years. Mention the holy father in your greeting, while at the same time greeting all those gathered here today.”

A typical *bertso* from these championships is that sung by Txomin Garmendia in 1967. He was told to sing, alone, three *bertsos* “to a guitarist.” Here is the last of the three:

*Neure zorion maitekorrena
zutzat, Lurdes Iriondo;
euskaldunaren biotz apalak
ukuttu dituzu ondo;
zu aingeru bat etzeranikan
inork ez baidu esango,
gure Jainkuak mundu ontatik
ez al zaitu eramango!*

(My most heartfelt congratulations / to you, Lurdes Iriondo; / you have managed to move
/ the humble heart of the Basques; / no one can deny / that you are an angel, / I only hope
that God / does not take you from this world!)

In an era in which the Basque language seemed condemned to disappear, since it was given hardly any channels for development and expression, the *bertsolari* finds hope in the figure of

Lurdes Iriondo, a singer-songwriter who at that time performed frequently at festivals. For the *bertsolari* and his listeners, Lurdes Iriondo was proof that, despite everything, Euskara was capable of conquering new fields, especially one as important as that of modern music, due to its capacity to attract the younger generations.

We cannot argue against those who claim that the text of the *bertso* itself is not exactly a literary jewel. Nevertheless, there is a great difference between this kind of evaluation and denying that the verse was capable of moving the audience within the context of the *bertsolaritza* session and the worst years of Franco's dictatorship. Nor are all the *bertsos* from this era guilty of this low level of textual relevance. Indeed, there are two *bertsolaris* in particular who stand out for the textual quality of their verses, despite the fact that each has different strong points. One of these is Lazkao Txiki, and the other Xalbador.

Lazkao Txiki

Jose Miguel Iztueta, known as "Lazkao Txiki" (Lazkao, 1926-93), is without doubt, and already was by the last years of his life, a mythical figure of improvised *bertsolaritza*, on a par with Pernando Amezketarra, Txirrita, and so forth. He shares with Txirrita his confirmed and somewhat clichéd bachelorhood, which, combined with his short physical stature, gave him the appearance of a rogue that was nevertheless very different from that offered by the more corpulent poet from Hernani. Like both Txirrita and Pernando, Lazkao Txiki was above all a *bertsolari*. His wit and ingenuity are now proverbial, and these attributes, combined with his short stature, innocent and fragile voice, and melodious way of singing, made him extremely popular in his lifetime and sorely missed after his death. In addition to his verses, he left us with a wealth of anecdotes about his life—again another similarity with Pernando and Txirrita. It is hardly surprising that these three *bertsolaris* have each starred in their own cartoon series, broadcast with resounding success by ETB (the Basque broadcasting company).

Like various other *bertsolaris* of his generation, Lazkao Txiki knew how to change with the times, and for that reason was always in demand. One of the unforgettable instances of his *bertsolaritza* was his performance at a *bertsolari* dinner organized by the program *Hitzetik Hortzera* in 1989. The topic was a hand-mirror, with which he was presented by the theme-prompter of the session at the appropriate moment. Without taking his eyes away from his reflection in the mirror, Lazkao Txiki improvised three memorable verses, two of which are transcribed below:

*Aizak nik hiri bota behar dit
bertso koxkor bat edo bi,
bebingoan jarri geranez gero
biok aurpegiz-aurpegi.
Neri begira hotik daduzkak
alferrikako bi begi:
hik ez nauk noski ni ikusiko,
baina nik ikusten haut hi.*

(Hey, since we're face to face / for a change / I'm going to sing you a verse, / or perhaps even two. / I don't know what you're doing looking at me from there / with those useless eyes: / because, of course, you won't see me, / but I can see you.)

*Neri begira jarrita, motel,
zertako hago honela?
Ta pentsatzen dit aspalditxotik
ezagututzen hautela:
mutilzarraren moko horrekin
ez dek ematen motela,
azal zimurtzen ari haiz, motel,
Lazkao-Txiki bezala.*

(What on earth are you doing, / with your eyes on me? / I get the feeling I've known you / for a long time: / with that bachelor's face you've got /you don't seem completely stupid, / and what's more, you're getting wrinkles, lad, / just like Lazkao Txiki).

Throughout his life Lazkao Txiki had to put up with the clichéd characterization of being a small, funny, ingenious, bachelor *bertsolari*. Many of the topics given to him at the festivals were related to this cliché, and the poet knew exactly how to make the most of them. However, attempts to combat the characterization by affirming that Lazkao Txiki also had a more sentimental (or lyrical) facet have themselves become more of a cliché than the one they strive to do away with. At the end of the day, the majority of fans tend to prefer the ingenious Lazkao Txiki to the lyrical one. And indeed it seems a wise choice.

Xalbador

The story of Fernando Aire Xalbador (Urepel, 1920-76) is completely different. Perhaps the influence of his dialect, which was so different from the basically Gipuzkoan model that the majority of listeners were used to hearing, had something to do with the fact that, although he was much admired during his lifetime, he did not manage to touch his audience's hearts to the same extent as did *bertsolaris* such as Uztapide, Lazkao Txiki, or Martin Treku Mattin, his inseparable companion and a kind of Lapordi-style Lazkao Txiki. Despite this peculiarity, or perhaps because of it, the texts of Xalbador's improvised verses are those that have best withstood the passing of the years. In other words, they are the ones that sound most modern to our current-day sensibilities.

Given that he was by profession a shepherd in his hometown of Urepel, the poetic refinement of his verses is particularly striking. His book of written verses, *Odolaren mintzoa* (*The Voice of Blood*), is a wonderful work and a first-rate anthology.

In addition to his written verses, many of which have now been turned into songs, Xalbador was also an outstanding improviser, gifted with extraordinary poetic sensitivity. In the 1965 championships, he was asked to improvise two verses on the following theme: "To the dress of your deceased wife." The two resulting pieces were of exceptional quality:

*Pentsa zazute alargudu bat
ez daike izan urusa,
dolamen hunek, oi, ez dezala
anitz gehiago luza!
Orai urtea ziloan sartu
andreñoaren gorputza,
haren arropa hantxet dilindan
penaz ikusten dut hutsa.*

(Know that it is impossible / for a widower to be happy; / Let this
suffering / not last for long! / A year ago we placed / her body in the
niche; / her dresses swing now / empty before my sorrowful eyes.)

*Geroztik nihaur ere nabila
guzia beltzez jantzirik;
ez dut pentsatzen nigar eiteko
ene begiak hesterik.
Ez pentsa gero, andre gaxoa,
baden munduan bertzerik
zure arropa berriz soinean
har dezakeen emazterik.*

(Ever since then I too / have worn black mourning; / I will not close my
eyes / to my tears. / Don't worry, my poor darling, / there is no other
woman in the world for me / who may wear / one day your dresses.)

The recognition that Xalbador enjoyed during his lifetime, and the merit awarded him today, was earned on the basis of *bertsos* of this quality, since his voice, unlike Basarri's and Uztapide's, was nothing unusual nor was his charisma on a par with that of Mattin or Lazkao Txiki.

We stated earlier that Xalbador's language prevented his listeners from fully appreciating his verses. The most telling example of this phenomenon occurred during the 1967 championships, when the judges announced their verdict, choosing Xalbador to participate in the final round alongside the reigning champion Uztapide. After the decision was announced the audience began to protest, jeering at either Xalbador or the judges—we do not know precisely which. The booing and hissing was extremely loud and went on for a very long time. At one point, Xalbador walked over to the microphone and began singing a verse, which could hardly be heard over the din:

*Anai-arrebak, ez otoi pentsa
ene gustura nagonik;
poz gehiago izango nuke
albotik beha egokik.
Zuek ez bazerate kontentu,*

errua ez daukat ez nik . . .

(Brothers and sisters, do not think / that I am happy; / how much better would I
feel / looking on from a corner! / If you are not content / it is not my fault . . .)

At that moment, the whistles and catcalls turned into applause and cheers for Xalbador, who was hardly able to finish his *bertso*:

*. . . Zuek ez bazerate kontentu
errua ez daukat ez nik:
txistuak jo dituzute baina
maite zaituztet orainik.*

(If you are not content / it is not my fault: / you have whistled at me /
but I still love you.)

Largely as a result of this scandal, the Academy stopped organizing *bertsolari* championships. Soon the bitterest years of repression arrived, alongside ETA's first victims and the Burgos trials. With the exception of the odd fleeting reprieve, the state of emergency was for years the norm in the Basque Country.

Xalbador died on the very same day that the world of *bertsolaritza* arranged a tribute to him in his hometown of Urepel, on November 7th, 1976. He left behind a book few can ever hope to better as well as a memory, as an improviser, that only grows more powerful as the years go by.

Before and After Franco: Lopategi and Azpillaga

During the seventies, with both Basarri and Uztapide practically retired from the *bertsolaritza* circuit, attention turned to those *bertsolaris* who had appeared on the scene during the championships of the previous decade. As the imminent end of the dictatorship became increasingly apparent, so the need to say things more directly became more pressing, with or without the permission of the governing authorities.

A more directly political and protest-based *bertsolaritza* gradually emerged, resulting in not a few *bertsolaris* being punished for daring to say what the public demanded. Two *bertsolaris* especially stand out from this era: Jon Lopategi and Jon Azpillaga, both from Bizkaia, the former by birth and the latter by adoption.

In 1997 these two figures described the *bertsolaritza* of that era as follows:

*Animu asko ez zan izaten,
pertsekuzino ugari,
baina bihotzak hala aginduta
ez ginan ibili nagi.
Zazpi probintzi pasa genduzen*

*bertso ederrez kantari,
ze egun eder gozoak haiek
Euskadiren pregoilari.*

(Too few good spirits, / too much repression, / but our hearts prompted us / not to remain idle. / We went around the seven provinces / singing beautiful verses; / how happy those days were / in which we proclaimed the Basque Country of the future.)

*Deitzen euskuen leku danera
botatzen gendun pausua;
alaitasunez jartzen genduan
herria eta basua;
arrazoitzako berba genduan,
arma moduan bertsua,
gaurko moduan eskatzen gendun
Euskal Herri bat osua.*

(We always went / wherever we were called; / we took happiness / to towns and villages; / words were our reason, / verses our weapons, / we called for then, as we do now, / a single, unified Basque Country.)

*Honek premisak joten zituzten
eta konklusinoak nik,
ez zan hain gatxa sentimentua
argumentutzat izanik.
Asko ez ziren kontuan jausten
abertzaleak ziranik,
baina bihotza zabaltzen jaken
“hau Euskadi da” esanik.*

(He gave the premises / and I drew the conclusions: / it is not so difficult when argument / is based on feeling. / Many did not realize / they were nationalists, / but their hearts were filled / when they heard us say: “this is the Basque Country.”)

*Askok pentsatzen ez badau ere,
kristonak paseak gare,
Euskadi eta euskerarentzat
badegu hainbat bondade.
Atzetik hainbat polizi ziran
eta gu gogor hala ere,
hamaika multa pagatu gendun*

*batere kulparik gabe.*¹⁵

(Although many do not know it, / we have been through hell; / such was our loyalty / to the Basque Country and its language. / The police followed us everywhere, / but we remained firm, / how many fines we had to pay / without being guilty of anything!)

Following the death of Franco, a climate of optimism and hope spread through the Basque Country, punctuated by outbursts of rejoicing occasioned by each conquest made: the first releases from prison, the legalization of the *ikurriña* (the Basque flag), the amnesty, and so on. Although the political climate was radically different, *bertsolaris* continued performing for a public who shared their dearest hopes. It is for this reason that we have included the first years following the death of Franco in this section entitled “resistance *bertsolaritza*,” since the contextual conditions in which the *bertsolaritza* of the first years of the transition existed were more similar to those present during the dictatorship than to those of later times, when disappointment and division arose in the public, most of whom were nationalists belonging to different parties.

Although the first symptoms of disappointment and conflict had already appeared, the passing in 1979 of the Statute of Gernika marked the turning point at which *bertsolaritza* started to face an audience very different from that before which it had performed during the years of Franco’s regime. This new public was basically divided into two sectors: the one that took the Statute as its principal line of strategy, and the one that rejected the Statute and demanded self-determination for the region. Far from being purely ideological, this conflict went very deep. Friends turned against friends, and people who had known each other all their lives stopped greeting each other in the street. It is clear that in this new context *bertsolaris* could no longer achieve their objective merely by mentioning certain values, since said values were no longer shared by all.

From Singing to the People to Singing to the Public: 1980-98

Amuriza

After an interval of 13 years, Euskaltzaindia finally decided to organize another *bertsolari* championship, the final stage of which was held in San Sebastián on January 6th, 1980. The overall situation (the *bertsolaris*, the way in which the verses were composed, and so on) did not seem to have changed greatly since the last championships in 1967, during which the audience had booed Xalbador. Some of the eight finalists (namely Garmendia, Azpillaga, and Gorrotxategi) had been finalists in 1967. They were accompanied on this occasion by Patxi Etxeberria and Angel Larrañaga, two *bertsolaris* from Gipuzkoa with a simple, direct, and popular style. Also competing was Xanpun, as a representative of the continental Basque Country (Xalbador had passed away by this time, and Mattin, who was to die the following year,

¹⁵ Taken from *Bapatean* 97:184-86.

hardly ever appeared in public anymore). The novelty of the 1980 competition was provided by two *bertsolaris* from Bizkaia with a different, more elaborate style: Jon Enbeita, grandson of Kepa and son of Balendin, and, above all, Xabier Amuriza, precursor of modern-day *bertsolaritza* in practically all facets.

Born in Zornotza-Etxano in 1941, Xabier Amuriza had formerly been a priest and had spent time in prison, along with other members of the clergy associated with the fight for Basque liberation. He had also been one of the judges in the 1967 championships. During his time in prison, he spent many long hours thinking about *bertsolaritza* and composing written verses.

From a theoretical point of view, Amuriza's greatest achievement is, without doubt, his *Errima-Hiztegia (Dictionary of Rhymes)*, which was written while he was in prison and published some years later. He was not content simply to compile lists of rhymes; he also arranged them according to grammatical categories, in order to aid the composition of improvised verse. Later on, he published *Zu ere bertsolari*, a method that, as its title indicates, put an end to the myth of the "innate *bertsolari*," offering anyone with normal linguistic skills the opportunity of learning how to dominate the art of improvised verse. This method has had an enormous influence in *bertsolari* schools, which adopted it straightaway as both a guideline and a basic reference. Although from our perspective the method may seem overly mechanical, since it places emphasis mainly on the more formal aspects of the art of making verses, it cannot be denied that its publication was an enormous step forward.

Amuriza was also one of the first people to try to return relevance and social functionality to non-improvised verses. In this sense, his performances in various towns throughout the Basque Country, with musical accompaniment, were of great importance. Prior to the performance, Amuriza collected information about the situation in the town that had requested a performance, memorizing a great many different political, geographic, and social references. Once he had collected enough information, he wrote the corresponding verses, integrating them all into a script. Thus he was able to sing about the idiosyncrasies of each town, to mention their most popular figures and refer to their best-known legends. Amuriza is also a great writer, having produced novels, essays, poetry, and newspaper articles. However, his greatest and most decisive contribution to Basque culture is the work he has carried out in the field of improvised *bertsolaritza*.

But let us return to the championships of 1980 and Amuriza's participation. Even during the qualifying rounds, the style of this *bertsolari* from Etxano had surprised his listeners. It was, however, during the final that he truly demonstrated his peculiar way of understanding the art of *bertsolaritza*. That competition was the first of those won by Amuriza, following a tie-break with Jon Enbeita. Two years later he won again, this time after a dramatic tie-break with another *bertsolari* mentioned earlier: Jon Lopategi (b. Muxika, 1934), one of those who adapted most adroitly to the new era, and who himself became champion in 1989 with a brilliant, deep, and highly elaborate verse.

Much has been said about the revolution initiated by Amuriza in the 1980 championships. The following are some of the aspects that are generally mentioned:

- For the first time ever, a *bertsolari* composed his verses in Euskara *batua* (standardized, unified Basque).

- He used rhymes that had never been used before.
- Amuriza's imagery, which was of great poetic depth, is matched only by the improvised verses composed by Xalbador.

However, from the new (more rhetorical than poetic) perspective that we advocate here, Amuriza's greatest contributions to the field are, in addition to those mentioned above, as follows:

- Over and above the unusual nature of the rhymes, their arrangement in accordance with a set of predetermined communicative strategies.
- The strategic use of oral resources for a new purpose.

With regard to this last aspect, particularly noteworthy is the use Amuriza makes of what is known among oralists as "formulas," that is, contents expressed in metrical molds that can be easily inserted into the narration. Far from using them as a mere technical support in the expression of somewhat hackneyed situations or values, Amuriza gives them enormous poetic-rhetorical power, bestowing on them great communicative importance in his verses.

Among his best work are those verses he composes during solo performances, when the action is totally in his hands. During the final of the 1980 championships, when he was given the topic "Bihotzean min dut" ("I have a pain in my heart"), Amuriza improvised three verses. However, the same can also be said of many of his other verses, such as, for example, the two transcribed below, which were improvised during the same championships. Here Amuriza was asked to sing solo about the following theme: "Man cannot live on bread alone." Here are the first verses:

*Gai horrek badu mamia
baldin ez banago gor;
hainbat jende gizaseme
ikusten ari naiz hor;
ogiaz gain gizonari
anitz gauza zaio zor,
bestela mundu hontara
hobe ez gintezan sor:
ogiakin justizia
behar dugu derrigor;
hau sinisten ez duenik
ba al da hemen inor?*

(Either I'm deaf / or this theme is quite tricky; / I see before me / a lot of men; / as well as bread / man needs justice / otherwise / better not to have been born; / Is there anyone here / who does not agree?)

*Nik ez dakit ogi-puskak
indarrik baduenentz
baina beste zerbaitekin
bart egin nuen amets;
esperantza zuri daukat,
nahiz etorkizuna beltz;
ogi hutsez bizitzerik
nik ez nezake sinets;
gizon batek hortxe ditu
bihotza ta bi saihets;
zuek ezetz esan arren
nik esango dut baietz!*

(I don't know whether a piece of bread / has strength enough, / but
yesterday I dreamed / about something very different; / my hope is radiant
/ despite the black future; / I cannot imagine a life / in which bread is
everything; / a man has both his heart / and his two sides; / however much
you deny it / I will continue to insist!)

Amuriza began a trend towards the use of verses with more than four rhymes, a trend that gradually became more and more accentuated during subsequent championships. Furthermore, in addition to traditional melodies, he also used ones of his own making. This practice, now fairly common among modern-day *bertsolaris*, provides the singer with a variety of different melodies to call upon. Some adapt better to narrative-type themes, others are more efficient for lyrical registers, still others are best for evoking a more solemn atmosphere, and so on.¹⁶ This tendency to extend the verse appears to be related to the need to produce texts with greater poetic-rhetorical consistency, a need that in turn is related to the loss of a single, shared context, as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere.¹⁷ Without doubt, Amuriza is, even in the opinion of the very latest *bertsolaris*, the precursor of almost all the aspects of modern *bertsolaritza*.

From Amuriza to Egaña

The figure of Amuriza dominates practically the whole early eighties. Little by little, the other *bertsolaris* started integrating some of the innovations made by the two-time champion into their own improvisations, although they often copied only the most banal aspects such as exotic rhymes, verses with more rhymes, and so forth. As stated earlier, Amuriza won his second championship in 1982, after a tie-break with Lopategi. We have also mentioned the controversy that arose around the next championships, which were proposed for 1986 and were organized by

¹⁶ The best collection of *bertsolaristic* melodies is Dorronsoro 1997, a monumental work that includes and comments on over 3,000 different melodies. It can be consulted over the Internet at <http://www.bertsozale.com>.

¹⁷ See Garzia et al. 2001.

the Association of Bertsolaris (now called the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza). The first two championships organized by the Association marked a period of transition. Following the major upheaval brought about by Amuriza, few important contributions were made during these years.

The 1986 championships were won by Sebastian Lizaso (Azpeitia, 1958), son of another *bertsolari*, Joxe Lizaso, who was mentioned earlier in this discussion. It is interesting that Sebastian Lizaso should have won this contest, since he is not the type of *bertsolari* who usually stands out in this type of event. His natural habitat is really festivals, *bertsolari* dinners, and open-air performances. His powerful voice is coupled with an incredible gift for expressing himself in verse and an almost proverbial ability to find the right argument at the right moment and to come up with brilliant responses to his opponent's statements. Extremely quick on the uptake, Lizaso also has an innate ability to make use of the resources or strategies employed by other *bertsolaris*. During the nineties he was, alongside Andoni Egaña, the *bertsolari* who gave the greatest number of contracted performances year after year. His performance is dialectic and direct, exploiting the most common oral resources to their fullest. In order to put his strategies into motion, he does not need verses with a large number of rhymes, and indeed it is in this type of *bertso*, which is so popular and well rewarded in championships, with which he struggles most. On the other hand, few of his fellow verse-makers can match him when it comes to arguing and singing for hours in front of an audience.

The 1989 championships were won, as mentioned earlier, by Jon Lopategi, another of the major figures of modern-day *bertsolaritza*. However, one year earlier, in 1988, a television program called *Hitzetik Hortzera* had begun to be broadcast. Following an almost clandestine start due to lack of funds and a certain lack of confidence on the part of the directors of the autonomous broadcasting company, ETB, this program became a factor in the revival enjoyed by *bertsolaritza* at the beginning of the nineties.

Basically an anthology of the verses sung in different town squares, this program was only one of a number of driving forces behind the boom. The main factor, without which all the others would have been rendered ineffectual, was the emergence of a new generation of *bertsolaris* toward the end of the eighties.

Up until the advent of the program *Hitzetik Hortzera*, the championships were the best (and almost the only) platform for *bertsolaris* to make a name for themselves and to present their new proposals. This was certainly the case with Amuriza, whose verses would almost certainly have gone unnoticed if they had merely been sung at a village festival. From the moment the program started to be televised on a regular basis, it became the most effective medium for *bertsolaris* to present and disseminate their proposals. The verses sung at normal festivals now reached the ears of a hitherto unreachable audience, and they did so on a weekly basis. Little by little, the main purpose of the championships began to be undermined, and in this context it is not hard to understand the critical stance adopted by Jon Sarasua during the Gipuzkoa championships of 1991. Today, we can safely say that *bertsolaris*' most important contributions and innovations are presented mainly during normal events, outside the championships.

Given this development, one would be forgiven for thinking that the appearance of the television program heralded the decline of the championships. Nothing, in fact, was further from the truth. The championships continued to be organized and were attended and viewed with great

enthusiasm by both the public and the press. What happened was that their function changed radically, and they were forced to rethink their approach in order to adapt to a new purpose. In any case, this change happened gradually rather than overnight.

In 1986, the finalists, in addition to the reigning champion Sebastian Lizaso, were Jon Enbeita, Xabier Amuriza, Jon Sarasua, Jon Lopategi, Angel Mari Peñagarikano, Iñaki Murua, and the young *bertsolari* from Zarautz, Andoni Egaña. Some of these, such as Enbeita, Amuriza, and Lopategi, were already very well known. Others, such as Peñagarikano and Murua, had been performing in town squares for years. Sarasua was a member of the first generation to graduate from the *bertsolari* schools, in whose competitions he had shared first prize almost always with Xabier Euzkitze from Azpeitia, who failed to reach the final that year. The only unknown, about whom no one had heard anything, was Egaña, whose name would be on everyone's lips a few years later.

Nothing much changed through the 1989 final, in which the reigning champion Jon Lopategi competed again with Jon Enbeita, Andoni Egaña, Sebastián Lizaso, and Iñaki Murua. The only new faces were Imanol Lazkano, chairman of the Association since its foundation, and Mikel Mendizabal, another *bertsolari* from the same generation as Murua and Lizaso.

As we can see, the majority of the young *bertsolaris* in the top rankings were from Gipuzkoa. In Bizkaia, the veterans Lopategi, Amuriza, and Enbeita were still going strong. Another popular *bertsolari* was Gregorio Larrañaga, alias Mañukorta (Larruskain, 1944), who became a great hit among the public at large when the television programs first started broadcasting, due to his way of singing, his gestures, and his Txirrita-style stereotypical image of a confirmed bachelor and joker. However, the generation that was currently in their thirties found itself unable to access the highest echelons of *bertsolaritza*, and ended up abandoning the art.

This situation is clearly reflected in the provincial championships of 1991, in which the finalists in the Gipuzkoa competition had an average age of thirty, with none of them being more than six years above or below the mean. In Bizkaia the average age of the finalists was also 30, but in this case the mean was achieved by the participation of, on the one hand, *bertsolaris* aged around 40 or above and, on the other, those under the age of twenty. Thus the members of the younger generations in Bizkaia were forced to assume certain responsibilities much earlier than their Gipuzkoan counterparts. Igor Elortza and Unai Iturriaga were the two most noteworthy young Bizkaian *bertsolaris*. Both were disciples of Jon Lopategi. (We should clarify that, for the purposes of the championships, Araba and Bizkaia were considered a single region.)

The Navarre championships were celebrated annually and were attended also by *bertsolaris* from the continental Basque Country: Alkat, Ezponda, Mendiburu, Xalbador II, and Laka shared center stage with Manolo Arozena, Bittor Elizagoien, and other more veteran *bertsolaris*. The situation at the beginning of the nineties was, however, rather worrying, due to a lack of upcoming young talent to take over the reins. This was the situation at the beginning of the decade, then; unlike in previous championships, by the time the 1993 contest was held the *bertsolaris* had become household names. Children asked them for autographs in the street, they were constantly being invited to appear on all kinds of television and radio programs, and no social event was complete without a *bertsolaritza* session.

Thanks mainly to television, fans knew exactly what each *bertsolari* had to offer, and the odds were overwhelming: Andoni Egaña was to be champion. This generalized forecast, based

on the *bertsolaris*' prior performances in non-competitive situations, was proven correct, and Egaña's victory ushered in a new era.

The Bertsolaritza of Distancing: Andoni Egaña

Andoni Egaña is an atypical and self-taught *bertsolari*. Born in Zarauz in 1961, he earned a degree in Basque philology and was formerly a civil servant at the Vitoria City Council until he left in 1993 in order to pursue his creative activities. In addition to participating annually in over 200 *bertsolaritza* sessions, he also composes written verses, both on paper and in other formats. Novelist and habitual collaborator in almost all the Basque media, he is the linchpin of a new way of understanding the art of *bertsolaritza*.

Egaña freely acknowledges that it was Amuriza's impressive performance in the 1980 championships that prompted him to become a *bertsolari*. He spent several years training almost in secret and his first, very surprising public performance was at a local competition in which he won first prize, beating other fairly well-known *bertsolaris* and astounding the members of the judges' panel, who could not even begin to imagine from where such a phenomenal talent had sprung.

Even before being proclaimed champion in 1993, Egaña had been hailed by fans and fellow performers alike as the new star of *bertsolaritza*. As an indication of the prestige that *bertsolaritza* enjoyed at the beginning of the nineties, it is telling that on the day of the championships, which were held just a few meters from the Velodrome in the then recently opened Anoeta stadium, the public broke into applause when the electronic scoreboard on the playing field announced Egaña's victory. The players' astonishment at this impromptu ovation can easily be imagined, especially since the ball was nowhere near either of the goals at the time. We should add, however, that the Real Sociedad fans also had another reason for applauding the result as they did, a reason that had nothing whatsoever to do with their love of *bertsos*: the game was in its final minutes and Real Sociedad was beating Real Madrid 2-0. The match ended in victory for the local San Sebastián team.

Having talked about a new way of understanding and practicing *bertsolaritza*, and having mentioned Egaña as the key figure in this new model, I feel we should clarify things somewhat. Egaña has contributed much to the style of the *bertsolaris* of his generation, but he would not be what he is today without the contributions made in turn by his fellow verse-makers. Other key figures in this generation include (at the very least) Jon Sarasua (Aretxabaleta, 1966), Sebastian Lizaso, Xabier Euzkitze (Azpeitia, 1966), and Peñagarikano (Anoeta, 1957). Although there are many others also worthy of merit, these five represent almost all the trends and styles of their generation, which, needless to say, would not have developed to the extent that it has without the influence of the more veteran *bertsolaris*: Amuriza, Lopategi, Enbeita, Lazkano, Agirre and Lazkao Txiki, and so forth.

If we had to highlight just a couple of characteristics of this new *bertsolaritza*, which was the foundation upon which the boom rested, we would mention first the distancing of the topics dealt with and second the ingenuity of the improvisation.

The first characteristic, distancing, is to a large extent due to the division present among the audience itself. Egaña describes this phenomenon as follows:

Basarri and Uztapide commented more than once on how sordid it was in Franco's era not to be able to say what you wanted. It must have been awful, as must the punishments inflicted on Azpillaga, Lopategi, Lazkao-Txiki, and others simply for saying what they felt. But what occurs nowadays is even more painful: a doubt here, a detail there. Here the meaning, there the desire to say something! How simple it must have been when the "others" were on the other side of the Madrid wall, or the secret police were hidden among the audience! How distressing now to know that the "others" are right here, that these "others" are none other than ourselves. Politics has divided us into two different groups . . . our upbringing has served only to deepen the ravine separating us . . . and language, although the same at the end of the day, has broken us.¹⁸

When faced with a divided public, the possibility of kindling common emotions merely by mentioning a set of shared values is considerably reduced. What pleases some will almost certainly make others uncomfortable. In light of this situation, distancing became a method, albeit a method that required another complementary quality: ingenuity—the ability to find an *ateraldia* (a witty, effective response) to any topic, however compromising or complicated.

Only distancing and ingenuity enable *bertsolari*s to emerge victorious from the battlefield dealing with certain topics before an audience. Furthermore, in Uztapide's time, a *bertsolari* could repeat the same *bertso* in two or three town squares without almost anyone being the wiser. Now, however, such events are broadcast on the radio and on television, and the best *bertsos* are published in anthologies. And if we also consider that the number of performances has increased drastically, we can gain some idea of the pace and degree of originality demanded nowadays from top performers.

The topics proposed are increasingly sophisticated and less archetypal, and require *bertsolari*s to have a much greater level of knowledge about both the Basque Country and the world at large. During the early nineties, due in part to the presence of television cameras at many sessions, the topics became increasingly complicated in form as well as content. *Bertsolaris* were asked to play both parts in a debate, singing each role into a different microphone; instead of being given the topic in word form, they were presented with a garment of clothing, for example; they were asked to associate their colleagues, one by one, with different animals, or to imagine what they would be like in the future, or to paint an aural portrait of each one. It was sometimes forgotten that the topics proposed by the theme-prompter were really only bridges designed to aid communication between the *bertsolari* and his or her audience. If the topic (or the garment that substituted for it) were too brilliant in itself, then the *bertsolari* would have trouble adding anything original to the effect that the mere proposal of the theme (or the presence of the corresponding garment) had already provoked in the auditorium.

Furthermore, the dissemination of the *bertsos* through television required each verse to have a force of its own, something that often had a negative effect on the session as a whole. It is rather like what happens with football fans who, accustomed to seeing the highlights on television, become bored when they actually go to a match and find out that great shots and exiting moments are more the exception than the rule. Having become accustomed to a certain

¹⁸ This was taken from an as yet unpublished translation of Egaña and Sarasua's 1997 text, *Zozoak beleari*.

level of intensity, they are unable to enjoy the quieter strategies that, at the end of the day, are the cornerstone and the determining factors of these culminating moments. Under such circumstances, then, Andoni Egaña leads a generation that has somehow managed to combine in its *bertsolaritza* the best of the oral tradition with the contributions of literature, comics, film, and so forth.

Nor should we forget also that Euskara, or the Basque language, still continues to spread to hitherto inaccessible areas of life. As the language normalization process advances, *bertsolaris* (and writers as well) find they have an increasingly wide range of resources at their fingertips. For example, the growing social use and awareness of specialist jargon and registers enables both their utilization and their parody. As a result, the improvised *bertsos* of our era have, without doubt, reached the highest quality level ever in the history of *bertsolaritza*.

The main defining characteristic of modern-day *bertsolaritza*—distancing—involves the adoption of a distanced, ironic, or, to put it in a better way, almost cynical attitude toward the majority of themes, although it is true that for the external observer the overall impression may perhaps be of a discourse closer in nature to that of the left-wing nationalists.

Distancing and ingenuity are, in fact, the two major contributions made by Andoni Egaña to this art form. As in the case of Amuriza, these contributions have been made consciously. Never before have *bertsolaris* reflected so much on their art. Following the example set by Amuriza, modern-day performers get together after their sessions to discuss their respective performances. Many of the strategies they use are developed in advance. They cannot, obviously, prepare the verses beforehand, but they can and do prepare a series of strategies that can be employed for a number of different possible themes. The conscious use of strategies and resources is evident in all types of *bertsos*, but it is in the stanzas of more than five rhymes where they appear most clearly. Egaña has, on occasion, called upon musician friends to compose melodies based on a metrical structure pre-established by the *bertsolari* himself in accordance with the strategies that he plans to use in each part of the verse. In verses with many rhymes, says Egaña, it is important to know where it is best to use metaphor, where to use exclamations, and where to just stick to presenting your arguments.¹⁹

It would be impossible to describe here all the resources of this new *bertsolaritza*, which we have centered around the figure of Andoni Egaña, the only *bertsolari* to have won four national championships (1993, 1997, 2001, and 2005). However, any interested readers are invited to consult other essays in this special issue of *Oral Tradition*, which contain a number of examples.

¹⁹ Egaña himself talks about these and other related aspects in his contribution to this collection of essays for *Oral Tradition*, as well as in Garzia 2000.

Multi-polar *Bertsolaritza*: the Latest Generations (1999-)

The *bertsolaritza* of the post-Egaña generations is surely too recent a phenomenon to be analyzed properly at this moment in time. I will therefore confine myself to outlining what I believe to be the basic characteristics of improvisation of recent years:

- The social context in which the youngest generation of *bertsolaris* have had to develop their art is basically the same as that described by Andoni Egaña: a divided and conflicting public, lack of strongly shared values, and so on.
- The majority of top *bertsolaris* are university graduates, a circumstance that results in a greater diversity of aesthetic and cultural references.
- For modern-day fans of *bertsolaritza*, the art of improvised poetry is only one of many means of cultural consumption.

As a result, contemporary *bertsolaritza* is characterized by the wealth and variety of its proposals.

With a split audience, and without a common context of shared values, the texts of verses have taken on great significance. This performers' development is further intensified by the fact that the media tend to reward precisely those verses that are able to hold their own outside the context in which they are sung. This does not mean that all modern-day *bertsolaritza* works in this way. On many occasions, a small-scale, homogeneous improvisation arena enables another type of more contextual, less text-dependent verse-making. Such, for example, is the case with *bertso* dinners, or thematic sessions, used by some *bertsolaris* for developing certain aspects of their art that would be difficult to cultivate in normal sessions. Thus erotic, black humor, or absurd *bertsolaritza* sessions are organized, as well as ones in which, rather than proposing the topics, the theme-prompter improvises a script that the performers bring to life by taking on the role of the various characters that appear. These kinds of sessions are generally held in small venues, bars, or pubs. However, the *bertsolaritza* that sets the mainstream trends continues to be that practiced in open sessions, particularly festivals, since they are the venues that attract the most media attention.

At the dawn of the new millennium, the *bertsolaritza* scene was more varied than ever before. Igor Elortza (Durango, 1975) and Unai Iturriaga (Durango, 1974)—the Bizkaian *bertsolaris* who were forced to shoulder the responsibility for ensuring the survival of *bertsolaritza* at a very young age—have now matured and become key figures in the youngest generation. Fortunately, both Iturriaga and Elorza were able to decide not to participate in the 2006 Bizkaia championships without fear of shaking the very foundations of Bizkaian *bertsolaritza*. The new generation, among whom we can highlight Arkaitz Estiballes, the Paia brothers (Fredí and Xabi), and Iratxe Ibarra, among others, have demonstrated that they are more than ready to step to the fore. In Araba, although there are, as yet, no *bertsolaris* of the same level, there is a certain degree of coordination and an ongoing promotion campaign that will no doubt bear fruit in the future. In Navarre, the annual championships continue to be the best platform for promoting the art in the region. Fortunately, however, a new generation has arisen to take up the torch, with young *bertsolaris* like Xabier Silbeira (Lesaka, 1976) and Estitxu

Arozena (Motriku/Lesaka, 1975) occupying center stage. In the continental Basque Country, following the retirement of the Alkat, Ezponda, Laka, and Mendiburu generations, two young *bertsolaris* have emerged as new members of the elite: Sustrai Kolina and Amets Arzallus, both finalists in the 2005 national championships. In addition to these, Miren Artetxe is also a bright new talent, and many younger *bertsolaris*, currently still at school, look extremely promising.

Gipuzkoa continues to breed many extremely able *bertsolaris*, with Jesus Mari Irazu (Larraul, 1972), Jon Maia (Zumaia, 1972), Maialen Lujanbio (Hernani, 1976), Aitor Mendiluze (Andoain, 1975), and others proving their worth again and again. Coming up behind them, the new generation, currently led by Jon Martín from Oiartzun, appears no less gifted.

The new *bertsolaris* openly acknowledge their admiration for the generations led by Amuriza and Egaña. Moreover, inter-generational dialogue is more fluid today than possibly ever before in the history of *bertsolaritza*. In addition to performing together in *bertsolaritza* sessions, both generations freely recognize each other's merits, and the art's commitment to self-management, represented by the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza, is a common undertaking.

ETA's truce and the Lizarra-Garazi agreements as well as, to a lesser extent, the new ceasefire declared by ETA in March 2006, returned a sense of unity once again to *bertsolaritza* audiences, although even before the events mentioned above had occurred, evidence of a new change in attitude was already evident. It is difficult to predict what course *bertsolaritza* will take during the twenty-first century, or whether or not contextual strategies will once again gain supremacy over textual ones. For now, however, *bertsolaris* are increasingly persistent in their preference for simple, four- or five-rhyme stanzas, over and above the more complex ones that proved so popular during the most intense years of the revival.

It seems that *bertsolaris* now feel able to deal with topics that were taboo just a few years ago. It is telling that it was, in fact, a *bertsolari* himself who dared to propose one of the latest deadly terrorist attacks perpetrated by ETA as a theme for improvisation. The *bertsolari* in question was Jon Sarasua, who was acting at the time as a theme-prompter rather than a performer. The session was being held in Zarauz, where one month earlier terrorists had killed Iruretagoiena, a local politician and member of the right-wing PP party. The exact theme proposed by Sarasua was: "Less than a month ago a man was killed here in Zarauz." The *bertsolaris* to whom this topic was addressed were Andoni Egaña and Jon Maia. This is the verse with which Egaña opened the debate:

*Hilabete bat oraintxe dala
nago pentsatzen hasia;
holakoetan geratzen zaigun
itxaropen exkasia!
Pentsatzen degun besteren lepo
doala erru guzia;
pentsamentua izanagatik
pertonaren askazia,
ideia denen gainetik dago*

*pertsona baten bizia.*²⁰

(I am thinking about / what happened a month ago: / how little margin is left for hope / when such things occur! / We believe it is always someone else's fault; / and although thought is / the essence of all people, / a person's life must come / before all ideas.)

We quote this verse here because it gives us an idea of the importance of contextual changes in improvised *bertsolaritza*. However, *bertsolaris* continue to sing about all kinds of topics, and verses referring specifically to the situation in the Basque Country are usually the exception rather than the rule, unless something out of the ordinary occurs.

We would like to conclude with two *bertsos* that illustrate a number of other characteristics of the *bertsolaritza* of our era. They were composed by two of the *bertsolaris* at the forefront of the movement to integrate women into the *bertsolaritza* circuit. Now that we have finally come through the consolidation period, when their mere presence of women was apt to become a topic for improvisation, female *bertsolaris* draw the same crowds and sing about the same themes as their male counterparts. The first of the *bertsos* we will quote here is by Estitxu Arozena, who had been given the role of the girlfriend of her partner for the debate (Aitor Mendiluze), and the task of breaking the news to him that she was planning to go and live with another woman:

*Badakit zaila dela denentzat
holakoak ulertzea;
neskak neskekin edo mutilak
mutilekin ibiltzea.
Baina halere ez zait iruitzen
horrenbesteko trantzea
zuri gustatu izan zaizuna
neri ere gustatzea.*

(I know it's hard for all of us / to accept this kind of thing: / girls going out with girls / or boys going out with boys. / But even so I don't see / that it's so very strange / for me to like / exactly what you've always liked.)

The other *bertso* is by Maialen Lujanbio, the first woman ever to reach the finals of a national championship (indeed, she has done so three times in a row—in 1997, 2001, and 2005; in 2001, she finished second, after a hard-fought battle with Andoni Egaña). Although at first she was known almost exclusively for the self-confidence with which she dealt with the themes proposed, Lujanbio has managed to free herself of this stereotype and develop her own individual style, characterized by a great capacity for observation and detailed explorations of both feelings and experiences.

²⁰ Taken from *Bapatean* 98:64.

The path chosen by Maialen Lujanbio is not easy, but it is extremely representative of the *bertsolaritza* of the youngest generations, in which each *bertsolari* strives to find his or her own register. Lujanbio's register, in my opinion, borders on the strictly literary, and although in the final of the 2005 championships this caused her certain problems, it is without doubt an effort well worth making. This verse, sung during the 2001 final, is a good example of her style. It is the second of three that she was asked to improvise alone in her titanic struggle against Egaña. The theme, based on a recent event, was as follows: "A close friend died last week in the Himalayas. Today you received a postcard that he had sent you before his death." This is Lujanbio's second verse:

*Negar egin nahi dut baina
ez egitea hobe da,
malkoak jausiko dira
bestela postal gainera,
ta corritu ta borratu
hemengo muxu ta zera . . .
Intzirika hasi nahi baina
nihoa aguantatzera.
Imajinatu dezaket
kanpo-base hartan bera . . .
Bere ilusio ta amets
guzia jua da gainbehera,
ikurrinarekin jua nahi
zazpi milako batera,
ta orain Makulun dago
heriotzaren bandera.*

(I would like to cry / but I'd better not, / otherwise my tears might / smudge the kisses / and caresses on the post card . . . / I would like to burst into tears / but I know I must contain myself. / I can imagine the base camp / and my friend there in it . . . / His hopes and dreams / have all come tumbling down. / He wanted to plant the *ikurriña* [Basque flag] / at the summit of a seven-thousand-meter high mountain, / and now only the flag of his death / flies from Mount Makalu.)

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The Process of Creating Improvised *Bertsos*

Andoni Egaña

Improvised verse is, above all, and as its name indicates, an act of improvisation.

“To improvise” is a verb that often has negative connotations in present-day society. Used in the negative sense, it is the last recourse of those who are unable to plan or build on what might have been planned; it is last-minute, “everyone for themselves” desperation, the result of which is always imperfect and ephemeral. The positive perception of “improvisation,” on the other hand, is common in the sporting context, when an athlete has been capable of improvising a move here or a strike there, or a manager has been able to solve a problem on the spot, undoubtedly due to his great capacity and genius for “improvisation.”

As far as *bertsolari*s are concerned, the act of improvisation has nothing to do with either of these attitudes. The *bertsolari* does not improvise for lack of ability to plan, nor because (s)he is necessarily an extremely talented person. For the *bertsolari*, improvisation is a way of expressing his or her ideas and feelings; it is a form of cultural expression that goes way back in time and is part of the cultural heritage in which the *bertsolari* has been immersed from childhood. For *bertsolari*s, improvisation is a pre-established framework of entertainment wherein their relationship with themselves and their surroundings can be resolved dialectically.

The [improvised bertso](#)¹ has something magical about it and, although it is in no way magic, this is what the public expects, waiting in expectation for the white rabbit to appear out of the hat, knowing full well that the top hat does not have a false bottom, unless it is the linguistic and dialectic skill of the *bertsolari*. Improvising *bertsos* is neither trickery nor necessarily the fruit of an extraordinary genius.

It may seem paradoxical, but improvisation for the *bertsolari*s is very much a thought-out act. They have continuously lived out and practiced analogous situations to those they may have to face, at any given moment, on the stage of their extemporaneous art. They have learned to work the oral and mental skills of this art according to the rules of improvised *bertsolaritza* (the melody, rhyme, meter, and so on) in such a way that what may seem to the outsider to be restrictions are, in fact, aids that enable them to improvise more freely. They have become used to soaking up everything that may, at some later time, come in handy at the moment of improvisation.

It is a labor of management and logistics. The idea is to keep the store well stocked and

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

then to put everything in order so that, at the right moment, the most complete and attractive presentation of the product can be given. It is known that pure improvisation does not exist; nobody improvises anything starting from scratch. So where does the beauty of improvised *bertsolaritza* lie? It comes from the fact that it is one of the few cultural expressions wherein the moment of artistic creation and its exposition to the audience are one and the same. The *bertsolari* improvises and, as (s)he does, the audience listens.

When the interspersing of certain English words into everyday conversation became fashionable, the term “performance” caught our attention quite powerfully. We thought at first that this must be something very unusual or innovative . . . until we realized that it was no less and certainly no more than what we, as improvising *bertsolaris*, had been doing for years and years.

Formal Aspects

To construct an improvised *bertso* a number of formal aspects must be considered. A *bertso* consists of sung, rhymed, and measured discourse. Thus, independent of the content of such discourse, the tune, rhyme, and meter are inseparable elements of improvised *bertso* singing. We can say that a person who can sing and construct a *bertso* with the chosen meter and rhyme has the minimum skills required of an improvising *bertsolari*. But this is just the technical aspect of the profession. The true quality of the *bertso* depends on the dialectic, rhetorical, and poetic values of the constructed verse.

The Melodies

Unlike other improvisers (Cubans, Mexicans, Majorcans, Colombians, and so on) the improvising *bertsolari* always performs without musical accompaniment; but the *bertsolari*'s discourse is always sung.

The melodies used are generally traditional airs; the majority are anonymous and have survived through the centuries. Other tunes are modern ones composed by Basque or foreign songwriters whose compositions coincide with the meter normally used for improvisation, or airs composed by musicians at the request of the *bertsolaris* themselves. Thus, there are three sources that the *bertsolari* uses as a supply store of melodies:

- traditional melodies
- modern melodies coincidental in meter
- expressly commissioned melodies

As for the number of existing melodies, we can say that Juanito Dorronsoro, the main researcher on the subject, has managed to collect an impressive total of 2,775 tunes, although the truth is that the actual number of melodies used in public performances is far lower, with *bertsolaris* from each period tending to use the favorite melodies of the time.

In a discourse without any musical accompaniment, the voice of the *bertsolari* is essential

for communicating the content of the discourse. Up until the mid-twentieth century, it was necessary for *bertsolaris* to have both a potent and graceful voice, so that they could be heard in any open-air space. With the advent of the microphone, however, this requisite became a secondary consideration.

Nowadays, more than having a powerful or perfectly modulated voice, *bertsolaris* have to be able to sing in a way that is in harmony with the subject matter of the moment. The success or failure of the communicative act depends greatly on the *bertsolari*'s choice of a suitable melody, more than on the quality of his or her voice.

From among the 2,775 melodies mentioned above, some are more suitable for transmitting the feelings associated with an epic poem; others are more suitable for narration; others are pertinent to drama; and others are more suitable to the purely descriptive. An appropriate choice of melody is an important factor in the success of the *bertsolari*'s art.

Meter

Bertsolaris compose their *bertsos* in accordance with a definite meter or meters. Each verse contains a pre-established number of *puntus* and these, in turn, consist of a particular number of syllables. We are not going to enter into the interesting oral improvisation debate about whether or not *bertsolaris* share the same concept of what is a syllable. As Luis Michelena (1960:64) observed, "leaving aside the oldest singing, with its irregular meter, later verse-making, as in the case of the clerical canto of the Middle Ages, was normally based on the number of syllables and rhymes."

Although there are studies that question the syllabic character of Basque verse, most subscribe to Michelena's thesis, which is confirmed by *bertsolaris* themselves. It is certainly true that the *bertsolari* never spends time counting syllables while improvising. It would be hard work and, moreover, a waste of time. The *bertsolari* knows perfectly well to which meter the chosen melody belongs. If (s)he sings without forcing the melody, it is clear that the artist is complying with the syllabic rules. If, on the other hand, the tune is forced by either cutting it short or prolonging it, it is clear that the singer is not complying with the rules of meter for the verse in question.

The question of meter is one the greatest challenges facing the improviser. Though issues of quality are slightly less important in terms of melody and rhyme, there are no acceptable or allowable variations regarding the meter. It is either correct or incorrect, with no gray area in between. Moreover, it is meter that is the most difficult element facing the *bertsolari* when preparing for a performance. While rhyme, melodies, lexicon, and even the content of distinct subject matters may be stored, ready to be retrieved later at the appropriate moment, the *bertsolari* always has to accommodate the meter. And, although constant use and practice brings self-confidence, the act of improvisation always brings certain metrical slip-ups that mar any composition, no matter how ingenious. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the most commonly used meters in *bertsolaritza*.

(1) *ZORTZIKO HANDIA*

----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A

The *Zortziko Handia* is a composition of four *puntuak*² in which the odd lines have ten syllables and the even ones have eight; it is these even lines, moreover, that have to rhyme with each other. The coincidence in the use of the eighth syllable by improvisers from other cultures is striking. Those from Alpujarra (Granada), like those from the Canary Islands, Cuba, and so on, improvise in *décimas* that, as we know, consist of ten verses of eight syllables each.

(2) *HAMARREKO HANDIA*

The *Hamarreko Handia* have the same structure but with an added *puntu* and, as such, have a fifth couplet, with all the difficulty that this entails. This meter is, perhaps, a paradigm more appropriate for elaborate discourses than the previous one, given the greater space for the text.

-----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A

(3) *ZORTZIKO TXIKIA*

In the *Zortziko Txikia*, the structure of four *puntus* comprising eight lines is kept, as is the rule of rhyming, at the end of the even lines, but the number of syllables in each verse is modified. Given the fewer syllables and the more compact discourse, this type of meter and its corresponding melodies are more given to humorous, purely dialectic situations, rather than epic

² Usually defined, except in the continental Basque Country, as a couplet or pair of lines.

or dramatic discourses; however, this last tendency is by no means an immutable rule.

```

----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A

```

(4) *HAMARREKO TXIKIA*

This form is identical to the previous meter with the addition of an extra rhyming *puntu*.

```

----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A
----- 7
----- 6 A

```

Other Paradigms

In addition to the four forms noted above, there are four other paradigms. They are generally shorter or longer than the examples given here but nevertheless coincide in regard to the number of syllables in a *puntu* and the fact that the even-numbered lines rhyme.

Thus we have the *koplak*, originating from medieval romantic ballads and used for centuries for creating popular sung ballads of many kinds. The *koplak* structure is as follows:

KOPLA HANDIA

```

-----10
----- 8 A
----- 10
----- 8 A

```

Or alternatively:

KOPLA TXIKIA

-----7
 ----- 6 A
 -----7
 ----- 6 A

These are, then, just half of a *Zortziko Handia* and half of a *Zortziko Txikia*, respectively.

There are also many more recent meters, often created by the *bertsolaris* themselves in a championship; these are generally more complicated. The greater the number of *puntus*, the greater the number of rhyming words, and thus the greater the danger of falling without a safety net. Yet, on the other hand, the greater the success if the *bertso* is truly well performed. And not only that—the longer form is a response to a modern tendency wherein the improviser needs sufficient textual terrain in order to demonstrate his or her originality, the complexity of the argument, the proximity to the proposed theme. Nowadays, with context being less all-important than before, it is to a great extent the text that bears the burden of communicative success. And this is why the trend is toward longer texts.

Here are some examples of recently created meters:

ZAZPI PUNTUKOA

-----10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A

NAUFRAGOARENA

-----10 A
 -----10 A
 -----10
 ----- 8 A (repeat)
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 8 A

----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A
 ----- 10
 ----- 8 A (repeat)

BEDERATZI PUNTUKOA

- -----7
 - -----6 A
 - -----7
 - ----- 5 A
 - -----7
 - -----6 A
 - -----7
 - -----6 A
 - -----6 A
 - -----6 A
 - -----6 A
 - -----6 A
 - -----7
 - ----- 5 A

In addition to these, we could cite other paradigms, but those at hand suffice to illustrate some general principles:

- The *puntu* is almost always of the same group (A) and always has consonance. The difficulty lies, therefore, in finding the right number of words that rhyme together, without repetition. If the rhyming word or foot is repeated, it is said that the *bertsolari* has committed *poto*, the technical error most penalized by both the public and the jury.

- The meter may vary but the oral segments must always be similar: ten syllables, or eight or seven, or six or five. This means that the improviser has to fit his or her thoughts into segments of ten syllables, eight, seven, six, and so on, and not into any others, either greater or smaller.

- The greater the number of *puntus*, normally, the longer the text. The desire to take risks in championships has encouraged the proliferation of *bertsolaris* who venture forth with long and difficult *bertsos*. The risk is not always worthwhile. The sails of the text have to be trimmed to the discourse and the discourse to the idea created from the proposed topic. An improviser who has no idea what to sing is always anxious to complete the chosen long paradigm that (s)he has started. Even if they manage, technically, to complete the verse, the equilibrium of the constructed text is far from the ideal and, as a result, the

communicative performance suffers.

The only paradigms in which *bertsolaris* are obliged to combine different kinds of rhymes are those that involve a particular melody. They are, therefore, rare exceptions in improvisation.

In summary, in regard to meter, we can say that approximately 90 percent of the art normally produced in *bertsolaritza* limits itself to those paradigms outlined earlier in this article: the *Zortziko Handia*, *Zortziko Txikia*, *Hamarreko Handia*, and *Hamarreko Txikia*. The *kopla* are usually used for singing informally, as well as in championships and festivals. In reference to the rules for the use of meter, the use of caesura must be highlighted. In the segments of ten syllables, the line has to be constructed, as a rule, in a 5 + 5 syllable combination, and in no other. This involves an additional difficulty: it is not enough simply to fit an idea into a meter of 10/8 syllables—the *bertsolari* must fit it to one of (5 + 5)/8. And, as on many other occasions, for the experienced improviser this limitation provides a kind of advantage. Deep in the artist's mind, (s)he is used to thinking in this meter, and what does not fit with it, apart from being technically damaging, is an obstacle in the thought processes to the extent that a failed caesura can bring the whole structure of the *bertso* tumbling down.

Rhyme

For many, rhyme is the formal essence of a *bertso*. Without rhyme there is no *bertso*. The rhyme, as we have seen, is always of the same family or group and its level of consonance is greatly valued. We can appreciate that, for example, *burua* (head) rhymes with *ordua* (hour or time). But this consonance is relative, limited as it is to the last two syllable-vowels of each word, and is thus regarded as a poor rhyme. *Elizan* (in the church) and *gerizan* (sheltered) make up a better quality of rhyme: both the suffix (-an) and the preceding fricative (z-) rhyme, as does the vowel preceding this fricative (-i-) and even the vowel forming the first syllable in each word (-e-). So, from the classical point of view of distinguishing rich from poor rhymes based on their consonance, we would have to say:

Burua / *ordua* is a poor rhyme;

Elizan / *gerizan*, on the other hand, is a quality rhyme.

Nevertheless, the level or quality of consonance is not the only factor when considering rhyme. Rhyme is perhaps an aspect that goes beyond mere formality for the improviser when (s)he is constructing a *bertso*. It may seem that both meter and rhyme are technical difficulties, formal laws to be abided by that restrict the *bertsolari*, and indeed they are. But this does not mean that the improviser could construct better texts, with improved content, greater reasoning, and so on if (s)he did not have such constraints. Moreover, due to force of habit and mental training, what is a restriction for a non-improviser is an advantage for the improviser. The improviser creates using these rules. And the *bertsolari* feels more comfortable when constructing her or his discourse corseted by the rules of the game than in a vacuum created by a total lack of norms.

So, in one sense, the *bertsolari* never says what (s)he wants to say, but rather what is

permitted by the meter and the rhyming words that (s)he has stored and can, at the opportune moment, retrieve. There are no *bertsolaris* who say exactly what they want to say at the same time as rhyming and using a set meter, although some do come very close to doing so.

From this viewpoint, rhymes are not considered good or bad only in regard to their consonance. Upon commencing the construction of the *bertso*, the improviser tries to choose the most appropriate final rhyming word (*azken puntua*) with which they plan to conclude the discourse. This is because the artist has to find, within that mental store, others of the same rhyming family and have, on the tip of his or her tongue, a sufficient reserve of suitable responses to the theme that has been proposed.

Moreover, the rhymes, apart from being formally “good” or “bad,” are elements that are closely connected with the discourse itself. The *bertsolari* fits the content of what (s)he is going to say around the available rhyming words. Thus, the work of storing, ordering, and retrieving of such elements from the memory is of importance.

Bertsolaris may have a certain number of words from this or that group in their heads. For example, they have 20 terms that end in “-ina.” But if they store them in a disorderly fashion, they cannot use them in the most effective way for one type of discourse or another. For example: *sorgina* (witch), *egina* (done), *ahalegina* (attempt), *grina* (passion), *ezina* (impossibility), *panpina* (doll), *zina* (oath), *osina* (nettle), *kriskitina* (crackle), *okina* (baker), *jakina* (evident), *bina* (two for one), *zezina* (a dried meat), *erregina* (queen), *mina* (pain), *arina* (light), *dotrina* (doctrine), *irina* (flour), *latina* (Latin), and *pinpirina* (coquette).

In principle, there appear to be more than enough rhyming words available for any meter, given that, as we have seen, mostly only four or five rhyming words are used, the use of a form with nine rhyming words being extremely rare. And it is true that, with this number (20) of rhyming suffixes, nearly everything can be said. But the quality of the composition is of course greater when the rhyming words used are appropriate to the theme that is being sung. So, an efficiently ordered group of *puntus* will result in a more exact and effective discourse. The aforementioned *totum revolutus* requires ordering.

All *bertsolaris* carry out this mental ordering in their own personal way, either consciously or unconsciously. Each *bertsolari* has her or his ordered place for each rhyming word, although with time this may change, either because some have been forgotten or because those rhyming words that are most used in one particular period are not used in another. A form of ordering, not the only nor necessarily the best one, may consist of several factors:

- Frequency of use
- Polyvalent nature of certain word-rhymes
- Division into grammatical categories
- Greater or lesser degree of consonance
- Words borrowed from other languages

If we take into account all the aforementioned factors, the mental ordering of the rhyming words in each group may be seen in the form of a daisy in which we store the most commonly used words and those of greatest polyvalence at the central core, and then arrange the rest of the words on different petals according to their semantic or grammatical value, origin, and so on.

An example of mental ordering with the group of words ending in “-ina” could be as follows:

1	5
GRINA	ZINA
AHALEGINA	OSINA
EGINA	ZEZINA
EZINA	
ATSEGINA	6
	LIFTINA
2	PUENTINA
PANPINA	PIERZINA
ERREGINA	
SORGINA	7
KRABELINA	MINA
PINPIRINA	SAMINA
	SUMINA
3	8
ARINA	KRISKITINA
DUINA	IRINA
FINA	OKINA
4	
DOTRINA	
LATINA	
JAKINA	

In this way, the improviser knows that the most used and polyvalent rhyming words are those in group 1; group 2 has a series of substantives that can easily be associated with adjectives; group 3 contains only adjectives; group 4 has words of the same semantic field; group 5 contains words that share great consonance; and petal 6 contains words borrowed from Spanish or English, and so forth.

What the *bertsolari* does is to alternatively combine words from one petal with those from another. S/he may start by rhyming *mina* from petal 7, then continue with *puentina* from petal 6, then use *jakina* from petal 4 and finally, take up *atsegina* and *egina* from petal 1.

The ordering of the rhyming words offers a methodological and practical advantage. It is methodological because, by combining words from different grammatical categories, the oral structures needed to exhaust them will be different and will give the constructed text more life. This, in turn, ensures variety and avoids monotonous discourse. The method is practical because it makes it easier to avoid repeating a rhyming word. Remember that this is one of the technical faults (*poto*), one that is most harshly penalized by both the audience in general and by the juries, in particular, in contests. *Poto* is simply the repetition of a rhyming word in the same *bertso* (in the same discursive unit). Given that in *bertsolaritza* all the rhymes are of the same family (A),

the skill of the *bertsolari* consists of looking for many words from this group without repeating any of them. *Poto* can occur due to carelessness or to reflexes that are not fast enough to hit upon, in a split-second, the appropriate rhyming word from that mental store that every *bertsolari* carries around with him or her. The ordering explained above minimizes the risk of carelessness and helps those pre-fixed rhymes spring to the surface of the improviser's mind at the appropriate moment.³

Thus melody, meter, and rhyme constitute the formal aspect of the *bertso*. The person who sings, rhymes, and constructs the *puntus* around the chosen meter is constructing a *bertso*. As in football, there is a big difference between being able to kick a ball and being a footballer. In the *bertsolari*'s case, technical skill is no more than this: technical skill. It is the transmitted content that is the primary factor in connecting with the audience. And when this subject matter is being constructed, each *bertsolari* creates a world unto him or herself. It is true that with a larger cultural and linguistic corpus, it should be easier for the artist to find suitable subject matter for the proposed theme. But the analysis of content takes us into a difficult research field. What all *bertsolari*s do have in common is a strategy to get their message across to the public. Our aim, in the following pages, is to explain this strategy.

Principal Strategy in the Construction of the Improvised *Bertso*

The sung *bertso* lasts for approximately 20 seconds (*kopla*) or one minute (*bederatzi puntukoa*), although these times always vary somewhat, depending on the *bertsolari*. Thus, for both the transmitter and the audience, these are small doses of discourse in time. Both parties identify the *bertso* as the unit of discourse. In other words, in each *bertso* of approximately 40 seconds, the transmitter has to be able to create a text that is self-sufficient and that manages to touch the heart and soul of the audience with its grace, depth, brilliant dialectic deduction, and so on.

The main way in which the *bertsolari* carries out his or her art is through the mode of improvised oral confrontation—in other words, a verbal duel with a fellow artist. One defends his or her role or person with his or her own arguments and tries to rebut those of the opponent. In strict turn, they exchange a set of three, four, six, or ten *bertsos* in order to make a more plausible argument than their opponent. Each *bertso*, nevertheless, stands on its own as a complete discursive unit.

When the *bertsolari* sings alone on any given theme, the same sort of thing happens. If the artist sings three *bertsos*, for example, it is important to maintain the common thread of the discourse in such a way that one *bertso* does not contradict the content of the previous one. Even so, it is the individual *bertso* that has to be perceived by both creator and listener as the principal discursive unit.

³ We should point out that if the repeated rhyming word is polysemous and takes on different meanings in each of its uses, it is not considered *poto*.

General Strategy: The Sting in the Tail

The essence of the problem lies in how the artist can manage, in 40 seconds, to attract the attention of the listener and focus it on the *bertso*. To this end, the *bertsolari* has a basic strategy that is used in a systematic way: think up the end first. This may seem a platitude, but it is not. How many times have we witnessed various kinds of discourses that failed to connect with the audience because the transmitted content was not organized in a suitable form? The *bertsolari*, on hearing a proposed theme, turns on his or her mental machinery. This is carried out within parameters that are very close to those of classical rhetoric, as other articles in this collection attempt to show. The *bertsolari*s think about what they are going to say and intuitively plan the order in which they are going to say it, keeping the most potent and elaborate verbal strategy for the end. The artist starts to sing and, as (s)he goes along, tries to express the subject matter in a poetic, dramatic, or epic way, or in whatever form is most appropriate to the situation. All of this is supported by memory to ensure that the oral punch line at the end (thought up at the beginning) has not been forgotten and to ensure that the content is transmitted with the greatest possible impact on the audience.

This fundamental strategy—keeping what was thought up at the beginning for the final discourse—gives the artist two advantages:

- *Methodological*: if the *bertsolari* knows from the start where and how the *bertso* is going to end, the path to be followed to get there is that much clearer.

- *Communicative*: a well-rounded discourse is synonymous with success in any performance. It is better to start lamely and finish off reasonably well than the other way around. Moreover, the audience perceives the *bertso* in an inverse manner to that in which the *bertsolari* conceives it: the artist knows how the *bertso* is going to end but the audience starts to hear it, logically, only from the beginning. They are waiting, expectantly and anxiously, for the end. It is not magic, but they feel as if it were. The coincidence of the attention of the transmitter and the recipient should be avoided. The *bertsolari*'s mind, upon opening his or her mouth, is focused on the final lines of the *bertso* while the audience is concentrating on the first words uttered by the artist. This is why they are so joyfully surprised when the *bertsolari* constructs a text that rises in crescendo to the potent finishing touch—the sharp punch line that the *bertsolari* thought up before uttering a single word.

Methodologically, the *bertsolari*, before starting to sing in those few seconds that elapse between the theme being proposed and the recital of the discourse, thinks out an ideational and verbal plan, chooses a melody, and fits the plan to the chosen meter and melody. Or, alternatively, the artist chooses a melody of a specific paradigm because (s)he has fitted the plan to a concrete number of syllables. This is always the first step. The *bertsolari* has already constructed the plan for the end of the *bertso* and has fitted it around a specific number of syllables.

*Practical Example 1:*⁴ “*The Dilemma of Designer Drugs*”

Let us take the case of the following topic: “A good friend of yours has offered you some pills that will guarantee you a better performance on many fronts. You are hesitant about taking the” This was proposed to Aitor Mendiluze at a festival in Elgoibar in 1997. His task was to construct three *bertsos* by himself. We will now look at the process of this creation for the first *bertso*.

On hearing the proposed theme, Aitor looked for an argument that reflected his own opinion about designer drugs. The first argument to enter his head was the following: *hobetuko naiz, baina neu izan gabe* (“I would be better, but I would not be me”). He then mentally fit this idea and sentence around a meter of 10/8 syllables.

Hobetuko naiz, baina orduan 10
ni izan gabe, ordea!!! 8 A.
 (I would be better, but I would not be me).

It should be taken into account that, on fitting this argument to this number and arrangement of syllables, Aitor had other possibilities open to him to say the same thing, but in a different way. For example:

Hobetuko naiz baina tamalez 10
neu izateai utzita. 8 A

or

Hobetuko naiz baina orduan 10
ni neroni izan gabe. 8 A

He had many alternatives to choose from linguistically, but Aitor chose what he did for its impact and because he knew that a group of words ending in “-ea” has a sufficient and suitable lexicon to enable the construction of a discourse that will take him and his *bertsos* to the successful conclusion that he had decided upon from the start. If he had had a different idea, he would have had to change the formulation and adopt one of the other alternative *bertso* lines.

So Aitor has found his thesis-argument. He has formulated it around a specific metrical formula and fashioned the phrase in such a way that the final *puntu* gives him room to maneuver with enough rhyming words, and he has chosen the melody that he is going to use on the basis of the meter to which the final *puntu* and the type of subject matter to be transmitted are molded.

Some 15 or 20 seconds have passed since the theme was proposed. The audience waits in anticipation, not knowing what is going on inside Aitor’s head during these seconds. Aitor starts to sing . . . he knows where and how he has to go. He knows that he has to look for rhyming words in his mental store. He knows what path he has to follow until he reaches the final line that

⁴ For audio and/or video associated with this topic, click on link.

he thought up at the start.

Half a second before starting to sing and in a moment of inspired lucidity, Aitor remembered the word *hobea* (“better”). It will serve him well in keeping up the common thread of the argument in the final sentence. And he starts to sing, “*Ene laguna . . .*” (“My friend . . .”). From this moment on, all his discourse, until reaching the previously worked-out conclusion, will be pure improvisation.

Ene laguna- - - - 10
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 10
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 10
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 8 A
 - - - - - 10
 - - - - *-hobea* 8 A
hobetuko naiz baina orduan 10
ni izan gabe ordea!!! 8 A

The part of the discourse that Aitor constructed before starting to sing is more or less that which appears in words above. The part constructed as he actually sings is represented by discontinuous lines.

Aitor knows what he is going to sing at the end. But to arrive at that point he has to travel the road and construct the greater part of the discourse in such a way that the final *puntu* makes sense and achieves the maximum effect. He starts to search through his storage-retrieval system or “daisy” of rhyming words and he finds the word *noblea* (“honest”). It works for him. He starts to sing:

Ene laguna uste zintudan,
jatorra eta noblea...
 (My friend, I believed you / to be faithful and honest . . .)

The audience waits in expectation. Aitor has opted to talk directly to this imaginary friend of his, who has suggested taking the tablets. What will he decide to do? In which direction is he going? Aitor knows. The audience does not. At most they can make a guess.

The next rhyming word that Aitor draws from his storehouse is *gordea* (“kept hidden”). It is not bad; it comes in handy for constructing the discourse.

Ene laguna uste zintudan
jatorra eta noblea . . .
zuk ere alde ilun, triste bat
nonbait bazendun gordea.

(Apparently you, too, / have a hidden, sad side.)

He has found a way to express in the *bertso* the contradictory situation in which he has been placed, constructing the *bertso* with the chosen meter and rhyme. He has a bosom buddy he thought to be faithful and honest, but this friend has a dark side. And he is telling him just that! The expectation of the audience is growing all the time: yes, he has explained the contradiction to his friend. But what now? What decision will Aitor make?

The next rhyming word retrieved from the store is *dotorea* (“nice”). Given that the word carries with it a great dose of value-judgment, this is exactly what the artist begins to transmit: “*Egin didazun eskeintza ez da uste bezain dotorea*” (“what you’re offering me is not as nice as it might appear”).

*Ene laguna uste zintudan
jatorra eta noblea
zuk ere alde ilun, triste bat
nonbait zenukan gordea
egin didazun eskeintza ez da
uste bezain dotorea . . .*

The artist has set out the initial contradiction—he has made a value-judgment. The next stage is to reinforce this by example. And so he trawls until he finds the rhyming word, *umorea* (“mood”) and then *doblea* (“double”). For the logic of his discourse, they suit him very well. He sings, “*Emango dit umorea*” (“It will improve my mood”) and then, “*ta abildade doblea*” (“and double my skills”).

Thus, he manages to arrive at the point he had initially thought up for the conclusion. He is doing fine. Up to now, the content expressed is the following:

I thought you were an honest and faithful friend.
But even you have a hidden, dark side.
Your offer is not as nice as it might appear.
It will put me in a better mood.
And I will increase my skills two-fold . . .

Aitor has constructed a coherent and interesting discourse. Nobody knows how it is going to end up, except Aitor. His memory is honed to retain the idea that he initially thought up. And, despite the fact that much mental energy has been expended during improvisation (recalling and retrieving the best rhyming words, placing them in suitable meter, trying not to commit any linguistic error, and so on), he still remembers the oral segment thought up 40 seconds earlier:

*Hobetuko naiz baina orduan
neu izan gabe, ordea!!!*

He knows that if he can manage to get to this point, success in connecting with the audience with this *bertso* is assured. He also remembers that he has reserved the rhyming word *hobea* (“better”) for hooking onto the final point of the argument. Only the last *puntu* is left to construct. It is this *hobea* that will provide him with the opportunity. He sings:

Hartu ezkerro izan naiteke
Naizena baino hobea . . .
 (Once taken, I would be / better than I am)

The discourse has come to an end. Aitor has told his erstwhile loyal friend that he thought him loyal, but that he has a dark, hidden side. The offer is not as great as it might seem. It will put him in a different state of mind and double his skills, and if he takes the drug he will be better than he really is. What the audience has heard up to now is the following:

Ene laguna uste zintudan
jatorra eta noblea
zuk ere alde ilun triste bat
nonbait zeneukan gordea
egin didazun eskeintza ez da
uste bezain dotorea . . .
Emango dit umorea
ta abildade doblea . . .
Hartu ezkerro izan naiteke
naizena baino hobea . . .
 ----- 10 A
 ----- 8 A

The audience knows only that part of the discourse that its creator did not know upon starting to sing is the part of the discourse that the creator had previously anticipated (and that the privileged reader also knows). When Aitor concludes with “*hobetuko naiz, baina orduan ni izan gabe, ordea,*” the act of connecting with the audience reaches its climax.

A Number of Exceptions

Thinking up the end and starting at the beginning is, therefore, the most common formula that the improviser calls upon when faced with the construction of a *bertso*. The improvising *bertsolari* looks for the final argument and, adhering to a plan very close to that of classical rhetoric, continues along the road to the end. But it does not always have to be like that. There are exceptions to this way of doing things and we have defined them as being due to either a) internal conditions, or b) external conditions.

A) Internal Conditions

The first exception to the general strategy refers to the improviser being unable to find any idea or argument in a reasonable period of time. The artist has to improvise alone or in improvised oral confrontation with another *bertsolari* on a theme proposed by the theme-prompter. Seconds pass and the improviser just cannot find a reasonable idea, due to lack of skill, concentration, or whatever. Time is running out, the public is impatient. The *bertsolari* is incapable of finding new ideas or even of repeating old, already used ones. Time ticks on. Although there is no rule about the number of seconds allowed before answering, the improviser knows (s)he has to start. The *bertsolari* does not have an end, but still has to start! This is a case where the usual strategy does not operate. It is a kind of a leap in the dark, starting without having a clear idea where one is going.

This is a situation in which all of us, as improvisers, have found ourselves on more than one occasion. The audience does not know that the improviser has started without a concrete idea about how the *bertso* is going to end and must now construct a sufficiently well composed one to cover up this serious fault. It is very difficult to finish with flying colors under these conditions. Trying to build without a blueprint always is. Here the improvisation is, without a shadow of doubt, “pure.” Not because the improviser preferred this situation, but because (s)he has failed—due perhaps to lack of skill—to think up a final line before starting the *bertso*.

Another exception is when memory fails. The improviser has found the end and has begun to sing in accordance with the rhyme of this final line. The artist knows this and is relatively comfortable. Then, in a split-second, (s)he realizes that (s)he does not remember what had only a few seconds before been constructed for the final line. The *bertsolari* tries to recall it, but it is not that easy when you are concentrating on the construction of a *bertso*. If the forgotten line is not recovered very soon, the artist will be obliged to improvise the end as well, and that would be a shame. The initial seconds creating a good end-argument will be wasted and a last-minute improvisation now will have to be employed, and it will not be at all easy to achieve one of the same quality as the first. This is an example of the failure of the usual strategy.

We have outlined two cases of atypical *bertso* construction. The usual equilibrium between the “thought-up part” and the “improvised part” is in both cases broken for different reasons. But the rupture is always in favor of the “improvised” part. In both cases, due to conditions of an internal nature—pertaining to the *bertsolaris* themselves—there is more improvisation than in the *bertsos* constructed following the usual strategy.

The opposite case can also apply. The *bertsolari* constructs the *bertso* thinking holistically and hardly improvising the delivery at all. This can occur in several situations: greeting ceremonies, presentations, *bertsos* of praise, and so forth. In general terms, we can say it occurs in those cases where there is sufficient time to “think up”

everything.

It could be the case of a young *bertsolari* who, due to a lack of self-confidence, “thinks up” the whole *bertso* before starting to sing. Or even a professional in an event (mass, a meeting, a tribute, and so on) in which there is more than enough time to construct one or more entire *bertsos* before appearing before the public.

Here, the “thought-up part” is infinitely greater than the “improvised part,” and this is how it is perceived by the audience. Logically, the quality of the *bertso* should be that much greater. But, as paradoxical as it may seem, the risks are also that much greater. The *bertsolari* who, instead of improvising a *bertso* as (s)he goes along, constructs it in his or her mind’s eye and then reproduces it in sung form, is taking big risks. During the moment of the performance, the mental effort is limited to remembering what has been thought up and the slightest slip-up may bring the entire *bertso* crashing down. This is because the improviser is not concentrating on resolving the small problems that crop up all the time. As a general rule, and as advice usually given, it is said that the best *bertso* is one that is made up as one goes along, improvising it as it is being sung.

B) External Conditions

One of the most traditional formulations is that of *puntuari erantzun* (“imposed start-up”). It is, from the perspective of the construction of the *bertso*, a form completely different from any other. The public may not perceive it as such, but the improviser does. In this form, the theme-prompter starts a *bertso* and the *bertsolari* has to finish it. So, both the proposed theme and the rhyme to be used are set by someone other than the *bertsolari* and, to make matters worse, the response has to be immediate and pertinent to the theme, both in its form and in its rhyming. The *bertsolari* does not have sufficient time to think about the final *puntu* as well as to start answering the question or suggestion thrown at him or her, as well as to attempt to finish in the most coherent manner possible! In this format, there are no valid strategies. Improvisation here is the purest of any branch of *bertsolaritza*.

Another very common format are the “running rhymes” (*puntuka*), where a *bertso* is constructed between two or more *bertsolari* in such a way that each alternatively sings a *puntu*. Given that the discursive unity is constructed between two or more people and that one never knows what the other is going to say, again there can be no single, valid strategy. It is reflexes and the artist’s capacity for pure improvisation that count here.

Thus, due either to failure at the key moment or because of the demands of a different “format,” we may again find ourselves with *bertsos* not constructed according to the usual strategy. Moreover, to show more clearly what that strategy entails, we have referred only to *bertsos* sung by *bertsolaris* alone. However, in oral performance by *bertsolaris*, as in other analogous phenomena in oral improvisation, it is the improvised oral confrontation that is the most genuine and most frequently performed.

The Soul of *Bertsolaritza*—Improvised Oral Confrontation

In improvised oral confrontations, one *bertsolari* faces another and they weave a performance of a greater or lesser number of *bertsos* between them. It might be that the improvisers have no theme-prompter as such, so the two have to generate the discourse, taking into account the circumstances of the place where they are performing, the day, the audience, the characteristics of each *bertsolari*, and so on. Or it is possible that a theme-prompter imposes a role for each, in which case each will have to find the optimal arguments to defend his or her characterization while at the same time attacking the opponent.

In the improvised oral confrontation format, the aforementioned principal strategy does not vary at all: the improviser thinks up his or her argument, keeps it in mind for the end, and starts singing from the beginning. Thus the construction of the *bertso* is developed in a manner identical to that when the *bertsolari* sings alone.

In improvised oral confrontation, skillful management of the time available for improvisation plays a primary role. When singing solo, the improviser thinks up the conclusion in the smallest number of seconds possible and then starts to sing. Once a *bertso* is sung, (s)he immediately does the same again; in other words, (s)he thinks up the end and starts to sing. And so on, successively. The argumentative thread of the discourse is moreover uniquely that of the solo *bertsolari*, obliging the artist to be that much more coherent in what is going to be sung. Improvised oral confrontation, however, involves two people and, accordingly, both improvisers sing alternatively. We therefore have two variables that up to now have not been considered:

- The arguments of the rival
- The available time for thinking, while the rival sings his/her *bertso*

Thus the improviser has to respond to what the rival has said. This is quite obvious. An improviser who does not respond to a well-constructed argument of a rival is not properly defending his or her role. However, it is not enough just to defend oneself: at the same time, one has to go on the attack. There is a sufficient amount of time to prepare for thinking up the response when it is the rival's turn to sing a *bertso*.

I have used the term “thinking up,” and this is the reality. Wasting precious seconds not thinking at all is not a good strategy, but neither is it a good strategy to devise an argument while listening to and assimilating the rival's *bertso*, and then pertinently respond with what may have been prepared seconds before, regardless of the content of the rival's *bertso*! In many cases, a “halfway” formula is adopted—in other words, responding to the opponent while at the same time adding the argument thought up while the rival sings.

General Strategic Possibilities in Improvised Oral Confrontation

The format for improvised oral confrontation of defending, attacking, devising an argument, and responding to the rival's attack at the same time is not an easy one. One can say that there are three ways of approaching the problem:

- A. Devise an argument while the rival sings and performs, regardless of what (s)he might say;
- B. wait and listen until the whole of the rival's *bertso*-discourse is over and then, in a very short time, respond to it; and
- C. devise an argument while the rival sings, listen to the argument, and opt for mixing what was devised with a response to the rival.

The major drawback of Formula A is that the thread of the improvised oral confrontation may be lost. If one says only what one wants to say, without reference to the rival's line of argument, the discourse can break up. In *bertsolaritza*, improvised oral confrontation is, deep down, an act of cooperation, though it may seem the opposite. It is difficult to perform a great work of oral art if the other *bertsolari* performs badly. This formula has the advantage in that at least each *bertsolari* presents his or her arguments with clarity.

Formula B has the disadvantage of leaving little time to prepare the response. Moreover, when the rival's argument turns out to be weak or faulty and thus not susceptible to an answer, one is obliged to depend on his or her own argument with the added difficulty of having to do so spontaneously. And if one limits oneself just to responding to the rival's *bertso*, he or she does not contribute much original thinking to the improvised oral confrontation. The verbal battle always takes place in the opponent's field.

In any case, one can always fall back on thinking up an argument before hearing out the rival's *bertso* but then discard it completely in order to respond more pertinently to that *bertso*, even though this procedure may mean some loss in terms of quality. One well-known *bertsolari* complained about the way another artist—known for his unusual form of argumentation—performed in improvised oral confrontation. The latter would wander from the point or look for any *sui generis* argument, pertinent or not. The former concluded, "To sing three *bertsos* with him, one has to think of six!" By this, he meant the three thought up while the other *bertsolari* was singing and the other three *bertsos*—the sung ones—improvised while listening to the rival's arguments. However, this is the formula that facilitates a greater level of improvised oral confrontation. When two improvisers become entangled in a dialectic involving a brilliant response to a well-constructed argument, improvised oral confrontation is at its qualitative best.

Formula C is perhaps the most commonly used. The lines are not thought up in anticipation, as such, nor does the *bertsolari* wait until the rival's *bertso* is finished. Instead, both strategies are combined. While the rival sings, some form of argument is thought up and then, depending on what the rival has performed, the reply involves what was previously thought up in combination with some form of mini-response at the beginning of the *bertso*. For the audience at large, C is the formula that is most similar to B, but for the expert or the performer, it is nothing more than a cleverly disguised form of A.

Which formula is best? That is difficult to answer. The purest, without a doubt, is B. But it has a drawback in that rarely do two improvisers get to perform an improvised oral confrontation using this schema (assuming that the performer who starts always does so with the A formula, as (s)he does not initially have to respond to anyone). A schema of the type A-B-B-B-B-B would be ideal, but difficult to respond to with only one *bertso* and this, in turn, is more

difficult to follow with an argued reply.

Although there is no single valid strategy for all occasions, we would venture to recommend one. In an improvised oral confrontation that has to be sung with, for example, four *bertsos* for each performer, it would not be a bad thing if one *bertso* were type A, another C, and a couple were type B. In this way one can be assured that one's own argument will be heard with A; with B one is able to respond to the rival's arguments; and C allows one to do a little of both. However, it could perfectly well be two A's and two B's, or one A and three B's, and so on. As has been stated above, there is of course no one, single strategy.

The most difficult thing about taking part in improvised oral confrontation is the decision regarding the best moment to use A or B. Imagine that a brilliant idea has occurred to us while our rival is singing. But our rival's idea has also been brilliant. This obliges us to respond with another idea and discard the first. A brilliant *bertso* ends up being discarded and it is possible that there will never be another occasion to use it. When we have a brilliant idea and our rival does not oblige us to respond in a different manner, then we may introduce A. But the decision has to be made in a split second. The improviser does not always opt for the best solution.

Dealing with improvised oral confrontation, I have gone into much technical detail. In reality, the improviser does not work along the lines of A, B, or C or with any theoretical "script." (S)he acts according to instinct and to the dialectical skills available and lexicons recallable at the time. Moreover, this species of dissection of the act of improvised oral confrontation applies more to those improvised oral confrontations with a set theme (championships, festivals, and so on) than to those without a proposed topic.

*Practical Example 2:*⁵ "*The Debate about Wind Farms*"

The theme imposed on Lujanbio and Peñagarikano during an improvised oral confrontation was the following: Lujanbio is a hill walker who has traversed the surrounding hills for many years. In the knowledge that a wind farm is to be shortly installed on Mount Elgea, she takes to the hills for one last time before the change. She walks up and starts chatting to Peñagarikano while they are eating their packed lunches—until she realizes that he is no other than the chief engineer of the wind farm project! Lujanbio starts to sing:

*Ez nuen uste, a ze sorpresa
holakoa zinenikan!
diru mordo bat ta proiektu bat
ei dezu zure patrikan;
Bizi guztian mendirik mendi
gabiltzanak hain pozikan,
ez degu ulertzen, ta ez degu nahi
burdinezko zuhaitzikan.*

(I don't believe this is happening! This is too much! / You with a wad of banknotes and a

⁵ For audio and/or video associated with this topic, click on link.

blueprint / in your pocket; / Those of us who have happily / walked these hills all our
lives / Don't understand and don't want / trees made of iron!)

Lujanbio constructs an A-type *bertso*. She has to, since she has started the improvised oral confrontation and is not replying to anyone. She does so in an evocative manner, pertinently comparing the wind towers to “trees of iron.”

It is Peñagarikano “the engineer’s” turn:

*Aizu neskato, postura hortan
hizketan ez zaitez hasi;
honek pagoa eta haritza
ezin bait ditu berezi.
Eolikoak jarriko dira,
inork ezin galerazi...
edertasunik ez du galduko
ta gauza asko irabazi.*

(Hey, lassie! / Don't give us that patter / (She can't tell / a beech from an oak). / Nobody
is going to stop / the installation of wind farms / Natural beauty won't be lost / and there
is much to be gained).

Peñagarikano opts for a type-C *bertso*. He answers Lujanbio's argument in his first two *puntus* and he does so in a *sui generis* manner: by means of hyperbolic demeaning of this lover of nature (“She can't tell a beech from an oak”). Then he reveals, in the final *puntu* of the *bertso*, what he had thought up while his opponent was singing (“Natural beauty won't be lost / and there is much is to be gained”).

Lujanbio replies with the following:

*Itxuraz gure mendi kaskotan
mila errota egoteak
utziko ditu gutxi batzuren
patrikak ondo beteak.
Gogoan daukat ze amets zitun
La Manchako arloteak . . .
amets gutxi ta interes asko
oraingo Don Quijoteak!!!*

(With our mountains covered / with thousands of towers / The pockets of a few / will be
filled with a lot / It reminds me of many dreams / of that poor Man from La Mancha /
Today's Don Quixotes / have few dreams and many interests.)

Lujanbio again sings a type A *bertso*. With the idea she had in mind, it was not worth considering another type. She knows that her new idea is unsuitable for answering her opponent

point by point. She has the idea of comparing the wind towers and their builders with Don Quixote and his windmills. Antonomasia plays an important role here. When she talks of the poor man of La Mancha, we all know who is being referred to, and we all know the main attribute of Cervantes' character: that of the altruistic dreamer.

The linking of so many ideas is not easy, but Lujanbio does it in a brilliant manner, using contrast at various moments in the *bertso*:

A few (people) / a lot (of money) /
 Don Quixote: many dreams / . . . Today's Quixotes (the engineers):
 many interests / few dreams.

Peñagarikano responds:

*Ekolojista omen zara zu
 eta guztiz nabarmena
 inolaz ere ez duzu onartzen
 eoliko ta antena.
 Ni Quijotekin parekatu nahi
 horrek ematen dit pena . . .
 ni Quijote bat izan ninteke
 baina Panzaik ez duena.*

(It seems you are / quite the ecologist / You won't ever accept
 / wind towers / Your trying to compare me with Don Quixote /
 hurts me somewhat / I could be a Quixote / but without a Panza.)

Peñagarikano makes a type B *bertso*, answering Lujanbio's parting shot with his own final *puntu*. That verbal blow from his opponent was such that he was left with no other choice. And he does so with what is a very common ruse in oral improvised oral confrontation: mixing the character-role with the person of the *bertsolari*.

Peñagarikano is known for his extreme thinness and is stereotyped as such by the public. He uses this reality to the full to turn Lujanbio's argument around; in normal situations this kind of reversal is unbeatable. The engineer represented by Peñagarikano fits perfectly into his own persona. And the polysemy of the word (Don Quixote's servant, on the one hand, but also a term meaning beer-belly) comes in handy to proclaim the integrity of his work. He is not an engineer who has grown fat at the expense of Mother Nature. Lujanbio:

*Don Quijotea zarela esan det
 itxuraz Panzarik gabe,
 Panza beharrik ez daukazu zuk,
 ederki beteta zaude!
 Holako gizon interesdunik
 maiz izan det parez pare*

*dirua atera nahi liokeena,
baita haizeari ere!*

(I said you were Don Quixote / by the look of things without a Panza / Neither do you need one / you're full enough as it is / I've known plenty of cute ones / with interests like yourself / Able to extract money / even from the air itself!)

Lujanbio constructs a Type C *bertso*. She answers her opponent in the first two *puntus*. Then she adds a new idea to show, in a hyperbolic way, the engineer's love of money ("able to extract money, even from the air itself").

A new idea has been introduced and one that is brilliant and difficult to counter. Peñagarikano sings:

*Txakurrarekin ibiltzen zara
sarri hona eta hara
ta txakurrari eman diozu
hemen kristoren pasada;
Ta diozunez hondatu leike
mendi hontako patxada
Aizu! papel hoi jaso lurretik
hain garbizale bazara.*

(With this dog here and there / you're all over the place / And the poor animal / is tired / You say the tranquility of these hills / will be upset / Hey! Pick that litter up from the ground / if you're such a lover of nature).

Peñagarikano's *bertso* is type A. Lujanbio's argument is so difficult to counter that he has had to look for an escape route. He invents the figure of the dog subjected to the whim of his owner, and he invents the litter on the floor in order to test the hill-walker's true love of nature. Lujanbio:

*Bere morala ukitu det ta
harrotu egin da berriz,
proiektuaren defentsan ozen
hitzezin du mila aldiz.
Orain papera jaso dezadan
harrosko egiten dit hitz
asko esan gabe jasoko zuen
bilette bat baldin balitz!*

(I've touched a raw nerve / and he's gone all haughty again / He hasn't stopped talking / in favor of his project / He now haughtily tells me / to pick up that paper / He would have picked it up himself without saying anything to me / if it had been a banknote.)

This is a Type B *bertso*. Lujanbio does not limit herself to answering the new theme introduced by her opponent, but disarms his argument by reaffirming the view she has held from the beginning, that the engineer is tight-fisted. It is a strategy of using the force of the opponent's argument in order to—by a half-turn more of the screw—emerge victorious from the improvised oral confrontation. Peñagarikano sings:

*Zuk diozunez lasaitasuna
laister izango da murriz
ta ez omen da hemen izango
ez pago eta ez haritz;
Ta orain berriz hain lotsagabe
zergatik egin dezu hitz?
berak lurrera ez zun botako
biletea izan balitz!*

(According to you / soon tranquility will be lost / Nothing will be the same / no beech no oak / And now, once again, so brazenly / you go on, Why? / You would never have thrown the paper on the ground / had it been a banknote!)

The last *bertso* of the improvised oral confrontation is also type B. Peñagarikano withstands the onslaught from Lujanbio and sets the improvised oral confrontation in the terrain of the bank note, but only to claim that it was the mountaineer who dropped the paper because, if it had been money, she would never have done so. To reinforce the fact that he has withstood the attack, Peñagarikano uses the same group of *puntus* and some of the rhyming words from Lujanbio's *bertso*. The schema of the improvised oral confrontation, referring to the *bertso* paradigm, is A-C- A- B- C- A- B- B. The skill of both improvisers in their roles is, perhaps, significant. At first sight, Lujanbio plays a more pleasant character, the mountaineer having a thousand reasons to oppose the installation of the wind farm on the mountain. Peñagarikano, the engineer, does not have it so easy; it is difficult, in his situation (on the mountain and eating a snack beside the hill-walker) to find good reasons to justify the project. And the improvised oral confrontation meets the expectations raised. Lujanbio finds brilliant arguments to oppose the wind farm. Peñagarikano finds sufficient excuses to withstand the weight of those arguments.

Not in all improvised oral confrontations is it important to defeat one's opponent on the basis of the quality of one's own arguments. In *bertsolaritza*, there are often improvised oral confrontations of a collaborative kind where the most important thing is to create an attractive and coherent discourse between two *bertsolaris*, without one having to outdo the other.

Improvised Oral Confrontations without an Imposed Theme

In improvised oral confrontations without an imposed theme, the two improvisers mount the stage to weave together a performance on a theme not imposed from the outside. The extempore artists themselves have to “look for” different topics of improvised oral confrontation according to the place, the day, the reason for the event, the characteristics of the audience, and

so on. It is in this modality that the work of cooperation in an improvised oral confrontation can best be appreciated. After stepping down from the stage, one will not hear a *bertsolari* commenting that (s)he has performed well. Whether they sung badly or well, whether they managed to transmit the message or not, everything is done as a team. Either both do well or neither does.

For a good performance it is important for both *bertsolaris* to pre-arrange a route to follow for the next hour that the performance lasts. They talk with each other and decide on a schema. For example: we will start talking about the town, then we can talk about the Saint's day, and then we can introduce the current municipal problems affecting the listeners, and so on. Then, changing the melody, we will go on to the political situation, then have a go at each other, and finally, changing the air again, I will set you up about your approaching wedding day.

This is obviously a schema that can vary from place to place and from *bertsolari* to *bertsolari*. The more experienced the *bertsolari*, with the greater number of engagements and performances, the less time they may have to construct a minimum schema. At times, they may go up on stage without an idea in their head as to how to start. Only their skills and experience give them the wherewithal to be able to make it up as they go along.

Normally the division of functions between *bertsolaris* is primary. One of them will take the responsibility for putting up arguments for the improvised oral confrontation: looking for themes, opening up new ideas, changing the melody. The other tries to follow the "script," sticking to the theme, arguments, and melody, trying to respond accordingly and to the best of his or her ability, always remembering that the most arduous work falls on his or her companion.

Experience plays a key role here. Maybe there are no themes, but there are always motives for singing. It is a question of keeping one's eyes peeled and ears well tuned. Knowing what theme to bring up, when the public is enjoying this or that theme, when a theme has spent itself and when to move on, and when to partner with a companion so that the joint effort will be that much better are all very important, far more than merely knowing how to construct a *bertso*.

In collaborative improvised oral confrontations, the discursive value of each *bertso* loses importance. It is the overall performance itself, in its totality, that is important. That is why it is possible for a *bertsolari* to "sacrifice" the quality of a *bertso* in order to keep focused on the near future, in order to achieve the best end result.

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Toward True Diversity in Frame of Reference

Joxerra Garzia

Introduction

On May 16th and 17th, 2003, the first symposium on Basque orally improvised poetry was held in Reno, Nevada, organized by the University of Nevada's Center for Basque Studies. At the symposium, Andoni Egaña, Jon Sarasua, and I gave a presentation about our book, *The Art of Bertsolaritza: Improvised Basque Verse Singing* (2001).

Following our presentation, I had a friendly and, at least for me, highly profitable private conversation with Professor John Zemke, who, among other things, asked me "against whom" the book was written. The question surprised me, but I must admit that the mere fact that it was asked revealed John Zemke's extraordinary insight in having been able to perceive in our book something that the authors themselves had overlooked.

Professor Zemke is right: our book does have a certain air of protest, something perhaps not so common in the academic world, and, needless to say, not something we purposefully set out to achieve (so unconscious was it on our part that we had not even realized it was there until he pointed it out). In fact, the tone of the book is determined both by the nature of the research from which it arose, and by the context in which it was published.

Regarding the nature of our research, it is, to say the least, heterodox. First, and although I work at the University of the Basque Country, our investigations were not carried out under the auspices of any research organization, but rather in collaboration with the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza, the Bertsozale Elkarte.

Second, our research was mainly informal and was carried out "from within." Indeed, for approximately ten years now, I and my two fellow authors have been personally involved with improvised *bertsolaritza*—Sarasua and Egaña as *bertsolaris* (*bertso* performers) and myself as a theme-prompter at festivals and the head of the television program about *bertsolaritza*, *Hitzetik Hartzera*.

It was never our intention to create a theory about *bertsolaritza*. Rather, it was our active participation in all kinds of performances that raised the following questions (or, if you prefer, working hypotheses): Why do certain details seem out of place in the traditional vision of *bertsolaritza*? What are the advantages and disadvantages of *bertsolaritza*'s adaptation to the media? What were the reasons behind the boom in *bertsolaritza* at the beginning of the '90s? What are the consequences of widening and renewing *bertsolaritza*'s audience? What role should *bertsolaritza* play within the small yet complex Basque cultural scene?

In short, our research was based around these and many other questions, always asked on the basis of our direct experience with the art of *bertsolaritza*. Many initial responses to this type of question often arose during the long, passionate, informal gatherings held after performances, or at the countless meetings of the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza. Our method was as follows: to share our questions and sketch out (always provisional) answers, taking what we deemed most appropriate from each theory. Little by little, the pieces of puzzle began to fall into place,¹ and the book we presented in Reno reflects our position at the beginning of this decade.

Meanwhile, the “official” authorities continued to cling to the old way of seeing things, and *bertsolaritza* continued to be considered as a sub-genre of Basque poetry. In regard to orality, the most modern references were those of Marcel Jousse (1925) and Walter J. Ong (1982). In this context, I believe that the somewhat protest-like tone of our book is, if not excusable, at least understandable.

The enthusiasm with which our presentation was received by the participants of the Reno Symposium was a source of great satisfaction, and an even greater relief; all our work had been worth it, and our intuition had taken us to the same terrain in which figures as imposing as John Miles Foley, James W. Fernández, Samuel G. Armistead, Joseba Zulaika, and even John Zemke himself focused their research. Of course, this does not mean that we agree about everything, but the mere confirmation that we speak the same language, use the same parameters, and share the same vision of the phenomenon of oral poetry is, for us, reward enough.

Since that symposium in Reno, we have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to continue discussing thoughts and questions with some of the more prominent figures present at the meeting, in particular with Professor Foley.²

Among many other things, we have learned that many of the points of view that we expressed in a critical or demanding tone in our book (the inability of written poetry to understand *bertsolaritza*, the need to overcome the extreme perspective of the so-called oral-formulaic theory, and so on) were postulates accepted as completely normal by leading researchers in the field of orality, including Professor Foley, whose work *How To Read An Oral Poem* (2002) is obligatory reading for anyone interested in keeping abreast of the latest thinking with regard to oral poetry.

In light of this situation, I believe that to simply repeat that which was expressed in both our previous book and at the Reno Symposium would not be an honest contribution on my part, and I have therefore decided to write this article on the theory of oral poetry as a dialogue with Professor Foley’s book. I will attempt to “rethink” John Foley’s work from the point of view of its adaptation to improvised *bertsolaritza*.

Before I begin, I would like to make one last preliminary observation: nothing that is written below should be taken as a criticism or disparagement of Professor Foley’s stimulating

¹ Some earlier publications that we drew from in our own research include Egaña and Sarasua 1997, Garzia and Sarasua 1998, and Garzia 2000.

² Professor Foley was one of the speakers at the Intercultural Meeting, “Oral Improvisation in the World,” organized by the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza and held in San Sebastián in November 2003. The idea of compiling this collection of articles on *bertsolaritza* for the journal *Oral Tradition* arose during the week of this event, for which we are extremely grateful to its editor, John Foley.

work. In fact, it is quite the opposite: my reflections arise from my immense gratitude to and admiration for both the work and its author, and I hope no one will feel the need to ask me, as did Professor Zemke in Reno, “against whom” this chapter is written.

The Common Substratum for Oral Poetry Genres

In my opinion, one of the most important contributions of the many made by *How to Read an Oral Poem* is its proposal for a four-section taxonomy, a “system of media categories” (Oral Performances, Voiced Texts, Voices from the Past, and Written Oral Poems), whose aim, in the words of the author himself, is to offer “a reasonable middle ground: a set of models that together offer a rough outline of various media possibilities, a flexible taxonomy that can boost our understanding by organizing myriad individual cases under a few meaningful headings” (39).

The value of such a proposal is immediately evident. On the one hand, as Foley himself says, interpreted with due rigor and the necessary flexibility, this taxonomy “can serve as a sort of filing system for the diverse collection of oral poetries from around the world and from ancient times to the present” (39).

In this sense, Foley’s proposal specifies and visualizes the overcoming of the Great Divide. Where before there was a categorical divide between written and oral poetry, we now see the advent of what we could call the Great Continuum: a progressive grading of phenomena and manifestations of differing degrees of orality, in which there is much overlapping between genres and a fair degree of fusion between orality and writing. This is, without a doubt, a much more appropriate instrument with which to analyze the complex reality of oral tradition in modern-day, developed societies, due to a large degree to the influx of new media channels.

Oral Poetry: From the Ecosystem to Genres

The identification of this substratum common to all genres does not free us from the need to analyze in depth each individual genre. This need is expressed clearly and precisely in the last of the ten *proverbs* in which Foley sums up his belief that “true diversity demands diversity in frame of reference” (141-44).

I do not believe it is a coincidence that this proverb has been placed last. In fact, I am convinced that by placing it at the end, Foley is suggesting that its contribution is merely a starting point in itself, and that there is still much out there waiting to be discovered.

Indeed, in *How to Read and Oral Poem*, Foley provides us with the substratum common to all genres of oral poetry. From here on, it is up to us to delve deeper into each one, always bearing in mind that oral poetry genres do not tend to flourish in isolation; instead, they make up what Foley calls “an ecology of oral poetry” in each situation and in each culture. Foley also proposes an analytical method for carrying out future research. It is a method that brings together the best contributions made by three great disciplines: Performance Theory, Ethnopoetics, and Immanent Art. Strictly applied, this method enables an adequate exploration of the diverse ecosystems that make up oral poetry in different cultures.

In my case, after having barely sketched the main outlines of the ecology of Basque oral poetry, I shall now attempt to explore in more detail the characteristics of improvised *bertsolaritza*, the central theme in this issue of *Oral Tradition*.

The Place of Improvised *Bertsolaritza* in the Taxonomy of Oral Poetry Genres

There can be no doubt that, as other authors in this collection have also asserted, improvised *bertsolaritza* is located within the category of Oral Performances. This category, however, continues to be too heterogeneous for us to draw any specific conclusions regarding each of the genres included within it.

Indeed, the Oral Performances category includes, on the one hand, Grags-pa seng-ge, a Tibetan paper-singer whose image illustrates the cover of *How to Read an Oral Poem*, and on the other hand, Andoni Egaña, the champion of the last four *bertsolari* championships (1993, 1997, 2001, and 2005), whose creative process is described by the poet himself later on in this special issue.

Any comparison between these two genres reveals, in my opinion, more differences than similarities. My aim, however, is not to question the validity of the taxonomy, which fully complies with the objective for which it was established, but rather to move on from it towards an individual understanding of the diverse genres it contains—in our case, improvised *bertsolaritza*. In this sense, the aim is to identify both those traits that improvised *bertsolaritza* shares with other oral performance genres and those that differentiate *bertsolaritza* from them.

It is clear that improvised *bertsolaritza* has many traits in common with the other genres in its category: oral method of composition and performance; aural mode of reception; its own clear and well-defined register; its own way of “creating meaning”; its subjection to the here-and-now, the context in which the performance takes place, and so forth. Nevertheless, I believe it would be more interesting in the context of this article to explore the traits that differentiate improvised *bertsolaritza* from the other genres in its category, such as the Tibetan paper-singers or the Cuban improvisers.

A *Bertsolari*'s Oral Mode of Production

If we compare a *bertsolari*'s mode of production with, say, that of a Tibetan paper-singer, the first thing that stands out is the different degree of improvisation involved in each. Despite not knowing how to read, Tibetan paper-singers need a piece of paper on which to fix their eyes in order to be able to project in this format, rather like a film, as the story develops during the performance. In some ways, we could say that their minds already contain a kind of pre-script, which their memory projects onto the paper and their voice converts into a story.

Modern-day *bertsolari*s, on the other hand, despite often being university graduates, have no need of any physical support during their performance. If we think about it, this is hardly surprising because *bertsolari*s have nothing to project, largely because they do not even know the theme around which they will have to construct their verses until the last minute.

If I am not mistaken, this basic difference in the mode of production (improvisation vs. projection) can be found at the heart of most of the aspects that make improvised *bertsolaritza* a genre very different from all the others. In this sense, the difference between oral production and written production needs, in my opinion, to be complemented by other additional criteria. The following sections are an initial overview of those aspects that set improvised *bertsolaritza* apart from the other genres in its category.

What is a “Word” in Contemporary *Bertsolaritza*?

Based on the declarations of various *guslari*, Foley warns that, unlike what occurs in the writing-based mentality, “a word in oral poetry is a unit of utterance, an irreducible atom of performance, a speech-act” (13). This “extensive” concept of the oral word recalls the so-called formulae of oral-formulaic theory, although the meaning of both is clearly different. In any case, neither the formulae nor this conception of a “word” seem to fit in with what the *bertsolari* Andoni Egaña says in his article included in this collection.

If we take Egaña’s explanation seriously (and I see no reason to give more credibility to the words of some witnesses than to others), then it becomes clear that the words used by *bertsolari*s during their creative process are ordinary, common words, understood in the same way as they are understood in the culture of writing. See, for example, the category-based organization of different rhyme-words or the highly conscious way in which the poet attempts to make an idea, and the rhyme-word associated with it, fit into a grammatical sentence that complies with the metrical requirements of the corresponding stanza.

In short, *bertsolari*s improvise with the same mental categories as those who choose the path of written production (perhaps this also explains the abundance and success of so many *bertsolari*s as newspaper columnists). Of course, improvised *bertsolari*s use wider units than the word in the strictest sense of the term, but they do not do so to any greater extent than we ourselves do in our everyday language, or if they do it is with a specific, conscious, rhetorical-communicative purpose. In any case, these supra-lexical units do not seem to be a basic element in the *bertsolari*’s improvisation.

The fundamental thing about the *bertsolari* is not the formulaic repertory, but the capacity to continually create new formulae, such as the capacity to fit any cognitive content, however new or complex, within the most common metrical structures (currently those of 5-5/8 syllables and 7/6). Part of this work may be carried out prior to the improvisation, but as has been made clear elsewhere, a large part of this work of fitting together the *bertso* is carried out by means of improvisation.

Understood in this way, the formulaic nature of *bertsolaritza* does not, in any way, impede its capacity for analysis and in fact acts as an analytical tool. In reality, the task of the improvising *bertsolari* is basically one of a double formulaic skill. On the one hand, the *bertsolari* has to be able to improvise convincing and suitable formulae as he or she goes along. Second, he or she has to astutely manage the rhetoric of the formulae that have been previously mentally constructed.

The prior and conscious construction of formulae to be used seconds or minutes later in the sung improvisation is, perhaps, one of the distinguishing aspects of present-day *bertsolaritza* with respect to the art as practiced in the past. Another is the rhetorical use that the modern *bertsolari* makes of these more or less pre-constructed formulae.

In this last aspect, as in so many others, the case of the *bertsolari* Xabier Amuriza is paradigmatic. Far from using formulae as mere technique to help express platitudinous situations or values, Amuriza charges them with a great sense of poetry and rhetoric, whereby the formulae acquire great communicative importance in the *bertsos* when sung, and are used to reinforce ideas and content that are in no way platitudinous or commonplace.

His solo performances are outstanding when the event is totally, as it were, under his control. In the final of the 1980 championship, when he was lucky enough to have the theme *bihotzean min dut* (“my heart aches”), Amuriza improvised three *bertsos*, two of which I have included below.

We have seen how *bertsolaris* are accustomed to placing the key of their rhetorical strategy. And it is precisely here that Amuriza places his formulae, full of expressive force. The formula is frequently a direct appeal to the public:

*Sentimentua sartu zitzaidan
bihotzeraino umetan,
geroztik hainbat gauza mingarri
ikusi mundu honetan.
Euskalerriaz batera nago
bihotz barneko penetan;
anaiak alkar hartu ezinik,
etsaiak su eta ketan,
esan dudana gezurra bada
urka nazazue bertan. (bis).*

(Emotions entered / my heart as a lad, / since then, I’ve seen much suffering / in this world. / My heart goes out to / that of the Basque Country; / we can’t be as brothers / as the enemy beats us black and blue; / if what I say is a lie, / hang me here and now.)

At other times, it is an emotional reinforcement of something previously said:

*Sentimentua nola dugun guk
haize hotzeko orbela,
mingainetikan bihotz barnera
doa herriko kordela;
esperantza dut zerbait hoberik
bearbada datorrela,
mundu hontara sortu zen bati
bizitzea ere zor dela;
bihur bekizkit hesteak harri*

*hori ez bada horrela (bis).*³

(Our emotions are like / leaves in the cold wind, / the thread of our people runs / from the tongue to the bottom of the heart; / I like to think / better times are coming, / that which has come into this world / deserves a life as well; / may my guts turn to stone / if this not be true.)

It seems clear that the last two lines of the *bertso* could well have been prepared by Amuriza before the start of the championship. In effect, they are applicable to any theme with epic/tragedy in mind. Their function is not to develop the theme but to reinforce what has been stated beforehand. This, far from being a demerit, is perhaps Amuriza's greatest virtue. It involves, among other things, the conscious use of rhetorical strategies. Amuriza does no more than make maximum use of the most typically oral resources, adapting them to the new expressive needs.

Another example of modern formulaic use, applied in this case to a much more playful and less serious theme, is the following *bertso* by Andoni Egaña, improvised in one of those new-style exercises or assignments. In this case, Egaña was asked to imagine what the infancy of his fellow *bertsolaris* had been like. One of the other artists was Mañukorta, a *bertsolari* whose public image is that of the eternal bachelor with a natural sense of humor that could not have been taught in school:

*Mañu eskolan ikusten det nik
sarri ezin erantzunda:
eme ta a, ma; eme ta i, mi;
letzen ikasi nahi zun-da.
Eme ta i, mi; eme ta o, mo;
arrotz zitzaion burrunda;
mu bakarrikan ikasi zuen
etxeko behiei entzunda.*⁴

(I can see Mañu at school now / unable to answer the questions: / em and a, ma, em and i, mi; / as Mañu wanted to learn. / Em and i, mi; em and o, mo; / it all sounded strange; / the only one he learned was mu, / he had heard it at home from the cows.)

It would seem evident that, in order to improvise this *bertso*, Andoni Egaña would have had to experiment with the names of the letters beforehand, trying to fit them into groups of five syllables. This evidently reveals a capacity for analysis and a conception of a "word" much closer to the written mentality than to the oral one.

³ See *Txapelketa* 1980.

⁴ *Bapatean* 97, Donostia, EHBE, 1998, 101.

The Role of Tradition in Contemporary *Bertsolaritza*

Tradition is something increasingly heterogeneous and diaphanous in modern-day society, and improvised *bertsolaritza* is by no means immune to this effect. Indeed, I would say that today the role played by tradition in the production of meaning during *bertsolari* performances is becoming increasingly irrelevant.

As the *bertsolari* Jon Sarasua says, just a few decades ago *bertsolaris* sang for the people. Today the perception of *bertsolaris* is that they no longer even sing for a single public, but rather for diverse publics that make up the audience present at each performance. The one feature that characterizes all these different publics is their different values and perspectives—in other words, their different traditions. This situation forces the *bertsolari* to become more broad in scope, to speak more generally in order to accommodate the great diversity of these audiences. It is this “distancing” that is precisely the principal feature of today’s improvised *bertsolaritza*.

In the championship where Egaña was declared champion for the first time, he had to play the part of a father who had lost his young son, his only child, through illness. In contrast to the dead child’s mother (played by Jon Enbeita), who found some consolation in her religious faith, the father (Egaña) is afflicted with all kinds of doubt:

*Bizitzaren merkatua...
nago neka-nekatua;
ez zen handia, inola ere,
haurran pekatua.
Zein puta degun patua:
gure ume sagratua...
lotan al zeunden, ene Jaungoiko
madarikatua?*⁵

(Life is but a marketplace . . . / I can’t go on; / so great / was the child’s sin? / Fate is a damned joke: / our adorable child! / Were you sleeping when it happened, / damned God?)

That was the *bertso* that started the improvised oral confrontation. And this is Egaña’s third and last *bertso*:

*Sinimentsu dago ama,
haurra lurpean etzana;
nola arraio kendu digute
hain haurtxo otsana?
Hossana eta hossana,
hainbat alditan esana!*

⁵ Bertsolari Txapelketa 1993, 223.

*Damu bat daukat: garai batean
fededun izana!*

(The mother persists in her faith, / the child lies buried below; / why the hell did you take
/ our innocent child? / “Hosanna, hosanna!” / so many times intoned! / I now regret /
having once been a believer!)

It might be thought that the distancing in religious themes is due to modern society’s more relaxed attitude toward religion. But *bertsolaritza* is not free of thoughts that were unthinkable (or unutterable) only a few decades ago. The following are two *bertsos* improvised by Sarasua and Egaña at a dinner in Arantza (Navarre) in 1992. Egaña is defending the need to continue singing until the listeners say stop. Sarasua is trying to finish the session as soon as possible. Sarasua sings first:

*Honek jarraitu egin nahi luke
ene, hau da martingala!
Aitortzen dizut azken-aurreko
nere bertsoa dedala.
Ta honek berriz eman nahi luke
oraindik joku zabala,
hau begiratu gaur erizten dut
lehen beldur nintzen bezala,
bertsolaria ta prostituta
antzerakoak dirala.⁶*

(This one wants to go on, / my, what a to-do here! / I’m telling you / this is my last *bertso*
but one. / And this one wants to carry on / dragging out the improvised oral
confrontation, / when I see him now I’m confirmed / in what I feared from the beginning,
/ that *bertsolaris* are / nothing more than prostitutes.)

*Sarasuaren aldetik dator
ez dakit zenbat atake,
errez salduko naizela eta
hor ari zaigu jo ta ke;
lantegi honek berekin dauka
hainbat izerdi ta neke,
bertsoalriek ta prostitutek
sufritzen dakite fuerte,
baina gustora dauden unean
gozatu egiten dute.*

⁶ *Bapatean* 92, Donostia, EHBE, 1993, 216.

(You see that Sarasua / doesn't stop attacking me, / maybe he thinks / I'm easily bribed; / in this art of ours / there is sweat and tears, / both *bertsolaris* and prostitutes / know what suffering is, / but they also have moments / of great satisfaction.)

In Aretxabaleta in 1994, Egaña improvised in the following *bertso* about the death (a presumed suicide) of the cyclist, Luis Ocaña. This *bertso* is also a good example of the strategic complexity of *bertsos* with more than five rhymes:

*Geure buruen txontxongillo ta
sarri besteren titere,
ustez antuxun ginanak ere
bihurtzen gara titare;
Luis Ocaña hor joana zaigu
isilik bezin suabe:
pistola bat parez pare,
zigilurik jarri gabe,
ez lore ta ez aldare;
baina inortxo ez asalatu,
egin zazute mesede,
askatasunak mugarik ez du
heriotz orduan ere.⁷*

(At times we are but a replica of ourselves / at others, puppets pulled by the whims of others, / Luis Ocaña has gone from us, / discreetly saying nothing: / a pistol to the temple, / the safety catch off, / not a flower, not an altar. / But let nobody be scandalized, / do me this favor, / freedom has no limits / not even at the moment of death.)

It would not be particularly useful to give more examples. We can say, in conclusion, that the “distancing” that oral theory regards as exclusive to written literature is the prime characteristic of improvised *bertsolaritza* as practiced since the 1980s: a distancing with respect to cultural/textual values, untouchable previously, but also in regard to other, more situational elements.

Rhetoric and Oral Poetry

Whether we like it or not, it is clear that *bertsolaris* improvise with categories that do not seem to fit into our preconceived notion of orality. The same can be said of Cuban improvisers. In general, the more developed an oral art, the further it tends to be from what appear to be the

⁷ *Bapatean* 94, Donostia, EHBE, 1995, 216.

universal postulates of oral poetry. And, inversely, this typically oral mode of production (based on extended words and formulae) seems to mesh better with less developed manifestations.

To resolve this aporia, the easiest thing would be to deny the reality that seems to contradict our theory. How much more productive it would be, however, to try to enrich the theory in order to enable the observed phenomenon to fit comfortably inside it. In this sense, I believe that rhetoric may prove a valuable tool when trying to adapt the general framework provided by Professor Foley in *How to Read an Oral Poem* and attempting to follow the path that leads from the general aspects of oral poetry to the specific aspects of each genre.

Elsewhere,⁸ we defined improvised *bertsolaritza* as “a rhetorical genre of an epideictic, oral, sung and improvised nature.” As we know, classical rhetoric, more than a purely theoretical construction, is a critical and meticulous description of the mechanisms and procedures of the orators of the time. We are not trying to apply these instruments and procedures in a mechanistic way to improvised *bertsolaritza*. It is more a case of constructing our own critical description from the direct observation of the tasks undertaken by today’s *bertsolaris*. It is here that classical rhetoric can offer us a methodology that has admirably proven itself to be both fruitful and effective. Furthermore, “the study of rhetoric, most seem to agree, is essentially the study of rhetoric’s five canons They provide a structure that allows rhetors and rhetoricians to analyze and study separately the various parts of a complete rhetorical system” (Reynolds 1993).

In the case of oral poetry, it is best to analyze how these five canons of rhetoric are developed in each genre. This would, among other things, enable us to perceive and systemize the differences between the different genres, thus compiling a comparative study of the diverse ecosystems of oral poetry. For example, an exploration of the first canon, *inventio*, would reveal the different degree of improvisation in each genre; *elocutio* would clarify the degree of formularity; and *actio* would, quite naturally, integrate the contributions of Ethnopoetics.

In summary, my proposal would be to incorporate rhetoric into the group of instruments that Professor Foley proposes in *How to Read an Oral Poem*, so that rhetoric would join Performance Theory, Ethnopoetics, and Inmanent Art as a theoretical paradigm.

General Bibliographic Note

Although some progress has been made over recent years, any non-Basque-speaker wanting to study *bertsolaritza* in depth is still faced with a severe lack of bibliographic material. Despite the fact that, in our explanation, we say that *bertsolaritza* is currently living through a golden age, we must also admit that the study of *bertsolaritza* is by far its least developed facet. In an era in which orality is so fashionable, the scarce attention paid to *bertsolaritza* by the academic field seems paradoxical.

It is the more technical aspects of *bertsolaritza* that have been studied in most depth. Patri Urkizu, Patxi Altuna, Pello Esnal, and Juan Mari Lekuona, among others, have conducted and published a series of interesting studies on the metrics and stanzas used by *bertsolaris*. This

⁸ See Garzia, Sarasua, and Egaña 2001.

technical part of *bertsolaritza*, however, falls outside the purposes and objectives of this present work.

There are also a relatively large number of descriptive works focusing on the history of *bertsolaritza*. The ones consulted most in the Basque language are those by Joanito Dorronsoro (1981 and 1988) and Juan Mari Lekuona (1982). Xabier Amuriza has published a brief history of *bertsolaritza* (1996), and the Elhuyar publishing house released a CD of *bertsolaritza* performances (Bertsoen Mundua) containing information regarding the history of the championships, biographies of key *bertsolaris*, a large anthology of *bertsos*, and an enjoyable and educational application based on improvised pieces. Dorronsoro is also author of a catalogue of around 3,000 *bertso* melodies (1997), complete with their corresponding sheet music and comments—a monumental work of enormous value. The melodies can be accessed online at <http://www.bertsozale.com/>.

In Spanish, the most popular works on the history of *bertsolaritza* are those by Zavala (1964) and Aulestia (1990), both of which are descriptive in nature. The work by Father Zavala fails, for obvious reasons, to encompass the more recent changes that have taken place in *bertsolaritza*, and Aulestia, for his part, hardly pays the *bertsolaris* who came after Amuriza any heed at all. Perhaps the most comprehensive history of the art form is that written by Patricio Urquizo (2000).

Since 1988, an annual anthology in the form of a book has been published of all the *bertsos* improvised each year. The collection is issued by the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza, and is entitled *Bapatean*.

The publications corresponding to the *bertsolari* championships, on the other hand, form a heterogeneous series. The publication on the first championships and challenges is as interesting as it is chaotic.⁹ The works focusing on the last two championships (2001 and 2005), however, were published by the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza and are much more ambitious and consistent in nature, offering an excellent portrait of contemporary *bertsolaritza*.

Both the books in the *Bapatean* series and the works focusing on the most recent championships are published with their corresponding CDs, where listeners can hear the transcribed verses. The majority of these texts can also be viewed online in the catalogue of the *Xenpelar* Documentation Center's digital library, which is the property of the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza. Access to these digital texts of the different publications can be found online at <http://www.bertsozale.com/>. This website also offers a wealth of information in four languages (English, Basque, Spanish, and French) about everything related to *bertsolaritza*. The journal *Jakin* has published three monographic issues on *bertsolaritza* (see *Jakin* in the complementary bibliography). Another magazine, *Bertsolari*, offers a more journalistic vision of *bertsolaritza*, although it also contains materials of enormous interest, such as, for example, articles on genres similar to *bertsolaritza* in other parts of the world.

The greatest lack is in that area related to the more theoretical aspects of *bertsolaritza*. Up until a few years ago, all of the most interesting studies were published in Basque. In fact, our book, *The Art of Bertsolaritza* (2001), is nothing more than a rather blatant effort to address this

⁹ See Etxezarreta 1993.

lack. Some years earlier, the Cuban improviser Alexis Díaz Pimienta (1998) published a book that represented a giant leap forward in the way in which we approach the study of improvised oral genres. The minutes of the First Symposium on Basque orally improvised poetry, organized by the University of Reno's Center for Basque Studies, took us a little further down this path. These minutes were published in 2005 under the title *Voicing the Moment: Improvised Oral Poetry and Basque Tradition*, edited by Samuel G. Armistead and Joseba Zulaika. The publication contains a wide-ranging and excellent bibliographical section.

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Interview With Joxe Agirre Esnal

Laxaro Azkune

Joxe Agirre Esnal (Oranda) was born in an Oranda country house in the outskirts of Azpeitia on April 13th, 1929 into a family with six siblings. Esnal is now married and has four children of his own. Throughout his life he's worked as a farmer, cart-maker, stonecutter, and *bertsolari*, among other professions. His first performance as a *bertsolari* occurred on the balcony of a bar in 1952. Since then he's traveled throughout the Basque region, improvising *bertsos* and adapting continuously according to the four generations with whom he has shared the stage.

As a *bertsolari* with substantial technical proficiency, Esnal has been recognized largely for his keen instincts as an improviser. Although he's earned important prizes, championships have generally not been his strong point. Despite this fact, he has won the affection and admiration of the *bertsolari* community and a book has been written based on his life and work.¹

What are some of your memories from childhood?

As a child I had very bad health, to the point that my family once thought I had died and left me in the cradle, but after a while, by chance, I began to recover. The first memory I have from my childhood, from when I was about three, is that I had to learn how to walk again. I remember my uncle grumbling at me, asking me to do things in order to make me walk. That's the earliest memory I have.

How large was your family?

After the war there were 13 people in our house—six brothers and sisters, my parents, grandparents, two uncles, and one of my mother's sisters. At the time of the great hunger, there were 13 mouths to feed.

¹ The book, entitled *Mozketaren maixua*, was written by Joxe Agirre.

What kind of friends lived nearby?

In the closest country house, Oranda-Goika, in Abeta, which is a little further down . . . we used to play with several of the kids. We didn't have any toys compared to children nowadays, and we would do whatever possible to enjoy ourselves. Wooden bicycles and so on.

Did you have time to play?

Yes, we used to play. But when we were around nine or ten years old, we had to help a lot with the housework. I was very young when I started to cut the grass with a scythe.

What kind of games were you used to playing?

Catch and go, blind man's buff, and other games that usually consisted of us covering our eyes while the rest would hide Another of our favorite games was to look for birds' nests. We used to climb trees better than they do now

Did *bertsos* have a special place in your games?

I've been an enthusiast of *bertsos* since I was little. My grandfather had some special *bertsos* he had composed during a hard winter that killed several sheep and left those still alive really damaged. He composed around 12 or 14 *bertsos*, in *minor bederatziko*.² He didn't like to sing his own *bertsos*, though; he used to sing *bertsos* created by Udarregi and others that he knew by heart. By that time I already had some interest in the *bertsos* and I would ask him to sing whenever he played with me, but he never sang his own *bertsos*. I feel sorry not to have remembered them. According to what I've been told, they were really good, but since he didn't know how to write he neither wrote them nor taught them to anybody at home. They were lost. He died when I was 12. He suffered so much his last years; he lost his mind, he would cry for fear of hell. He said that if the priests were right he wouldn't find salvation.

What were your school days like?

I mostly hung out in Lasao, a neighborhood of Azpeitia. I started school when I was nine and left at 11. Mine was a quick career. And during those two years I didn't attend class half of the time. At that time we already had to help at home and there was a lot of work to do, like taking care of the sheep

What memories do you have from your school?

As I recall, it wasn't that bad at all. I had a good memory and I was good at learning by heart. Mr. Justo, the priest of our neighborhood, was our teacher and, although there were older

² Translator's note: *minor bederatziko* is a strophe composed of nine parts.

people than me at school who had been there longer, he once asked something—I don't recall it right now—something we had to learn by heart, and I was the only one to recite it correctly. I remember he told me once, “it's you—not the rest—who should attend school.” At the end of my school years I took my First Communion on Ascension Day. My birthday is in April and I remember I was about to turn 11. From that point on, I was entitled to work, so that was the end of my schooling.

At that age you don't usually think that school will be necessary for the rest of your life and since your parents didn't think much of it, either—and there was so much work to do—anything else was more important than school. In those days, work meant everything, to learn how to work and to be educated through work. When I was 11 I remember I spent an entire day cutting hay with my father, in a field close to our house. I worked at that country house until I got married. After getting married I started to work in the quarry.

Any more memories from your youth? Any entertainment?

We didn't have much time to have fun. We only had one day a week free—Sundays—and more than once we had to work on a Sunday because my father said so. He would simply say there was work to do and we would do it without complaint. Everything was different then. When we had enough time to have fun, we had a place near home where a pilgrimage would take place every Sunday; there was a cottage there and that was our meeting-point. There was one kid in our group, Mario, from a country house called Abeta, who still lives in Arrona and who played the accordion a little. He would play the accordion and we would dance . . . that was our way of having fun. We also used to go to other places nearby where other pilgrimages took place, like Koostite, Villa Plata, and others. And as I mentioned before, this only happened on Sundays and we were really happy when we could celebrate, since it wasn't possible every time.

What were some of the most common jobs that you had to do in the country house?

Tending to wheat, hay, fern . . . one after another. Apart from that we worked a lot with the oxen driving a cart. For almost ten years I worked as a cart driver, sometimes hauling logs of wood and other things . . . from Izarraitz to the country house called Badioleitxo. During winter we always worked as cart drivers. Normally we had a couple of oxen and sometimes we had a third one just in case one of the oxen got injured. Besides that, we also transported a lot of firewood for the bakery, from the backside of Izarraitz. There were no paths like today. From Izarraitz we'd go down to the country house Gallegi and from there to Azpeitia on the road, carrying everything we were able to. But we were always afraid of getting fined, since our carts had very thin wheels and if it was hot they would make furrows on the heated asphalt, which we could be punished for. Besides that, the road wasn't the best place to go with the oxen . . . Really, I've made so many trips like those that I'll never forget.

What about pilgrimage places, dances, *bertsos*?

I used to dance and also to sing *bertsos*. One of our friends in our group came from Abalzisketa, and he worked as a servant in the country house Bentaberri. We both worked as cart drivers and, since he was as enthusiastic about the *bertsos* as myself, we used to sing during our work—he would propose a “forced starting” and I would answer.

Did you like listening to other *bertsolaris*?

In Azpeitia, around Saint Thomas’ Day, an important festival always took place where the best *bertsolaris* would perform. Uztapide, Basarri, Zepai, Txapel . . . and later Lasarte and Lizaso also joined up. I was still too young.

That would have been after the Civil War.

Yes, I was seven when the war started. During those years festivals were forbidden. That would only happen later. In those days, loudspeakers didn’t exist and I remember that Txapel didn’t have much of a voice but you could still hear him perfectly when he sang from the Town Hall balcony. There was total silence, you couldn’t hear a fly. By then, every *bertso* I heard I could learn by heart.

I was still young but the *bertsos* attracted me so much. In those days the *bertsolaris* used to have dinner in a bar in Azpeitia—it was frequently the Bar Tomasena. After having dinner they would start singing and we would listen as if hypnotized. Those were different days. After a festival today the *bertsolaris* normally return home, but it didn’t happen that way before; they would stay in the town and sometimes they would put on a much better act than the one they had already given. It was that way in those days.

You started publicly singing verses on Saint Agueda’s Eve, correct?

Yes, for many years I sang verses on Saint Agueda’s Eve, up until I got married. I got married on January 31st, and the following February 4th we were still on our honeymoon, so that was the first performance I missed. There have still been only a few times that I’ve missed them. The last ones have been just in these last few years, due to exceptional reasons.

My first performance in public was with a person called Mandiolatza who could also sing *bertsos*. I didn’t dare sing alone, I was too shy. I remember later that I sang with a person from Loiola, Ignacio Errementari, but the rest of the time I just went along with my group. Then I took part in one or two performances in nearby neighborhoods: Madariaga, Aizpurutxo, Martirieta . . . There were no more than four performances in public a year. Then I attended—or more correctly, my friends forced me to attend—the *bertsolaris*’ championship in Aguinaga. I was lucky enough to win and later I started to take part in more festivals. In just one year I did more than I had performed in my whole life. You have to consider that I wasn’t that young, since I was already 29.

When you were young, you were also enthusiastic about sports, *aizkolari* (wood-cutting) . . .

I was preparing myself for a career. One of those decisions you make in the moment. People in the Landeta neighborhood challenged the Izarraitz neighborhood to a race, and my uncles who were there accepted the bet, putting some money on the Korrale bar. The candidate from Landeta was some fellow called Lesaka, who is now a Jesuit. I began to prepare myself to compete as well. But they wouldn't give me water when I was thirsty, since they thought it was harmful. I wasn't that fat, and, together with the weight I lost, I became a skinny thing. What suffering! Then, Lesaka's family didn't let him bet since they thought it wasn't good to get into the habit of gambling. The bet was suspended.

I also spent some time as an *aizkolari*, doing some exhibitions during the pilgrimages we made to the Izarraitz neighborhood with Errekartetxo, Jáuregui, and so on. I also took part in some bets on *aizkolaris* in the bull-ring of Azpeitia, against Xagua, Bildotxola I was really enthusiastic, but I lacked strength.

If I'm not mistaken, in one of those bets you also met a person who later would become your best friend as a *bertsolari*, Imanol Lazkano . . .

I was around 24 or 25 and there was a challenge from the group Landeta against the group of Izarraitz. Imanol was with the Landeta group and I was with the Izarraitz group. Imanol was around 17 or 18 years old. I think it was in San Sebastián or somewhere nearby, and it was a holiday in Azpeitia. We met face to face in the Etxezuri bar, as if we were two rams. We did what we could. The best part is that we ended as friends and it was a lasting friendship. We promised each other that if either of us received an invitation to sing, we would call each other, and so we started to sing together. How many times have we sung together since then!

Do you remember your first performance as a *bertsolari*?

I believe the first time was from the balcony of the Arrona bar. José Lizaso used to sing with José Blanco, but Blanco couldn't do it at the last minute. They knew I used to sing and so they called me . . . probably that was my first official performance. And later I think it was in Madariaga. Then, together with Imanol, they would call me to perform for lunches at the Brotherhood of the Third Order. I don't think they paid much, but they demanded a lot.

Do you remember being nervous during that first performance?

Time helps you to forget things, but I'm sure I was pretty nervous. I had a bad time during all championships, but I think that my worst moment as a *bertsolari* happened in Asteasu. I'll never be able to forget that! We just had our youngest daughter and we didn't know if she was healthy or if perhaps she had some kind of deficiency. The festival conductor didn't know anything about this, I'm sure, but it happened that he gave me the following theme: "two *bertsos* for a subnormal child." I didn't have a good time at all. I was out of my mind! That was the

worst moment I've had as a *bertsolari*. Later I had to sing similar things more than once, but you get over it with time.

We can say after Aguinaga's championship that you were officially a *bertsolari* . . .

That's right. After that Imanol Lazkano and I have traveled together to many places to perform. José Lizaso is two years older than me, but he started to sing with the best *bertsolaris* much earlier than I did. He used to sing mostly with Uztapide, Lasarte, and the rest of that group. I also used to go to Lizaso's bar, and sang with him more than once. He even invited me many times to sing together, but I didn't dare. I could have started much younger if I hadn't been such a coward. I wouldn't have gone to the Aginaga championship if it hadn't been for my friends who registered me without saying a single word . . . when the date arrived I couldn't say no. They just put me in the car and said, "let's go sing!"

Those performances you didn't dare to do when you were younger are being done now . . .

It will be difficult to overcome what wasn't done before.

Do you think your family and friends have helped you become a *bertsolari*? Have you felt restrained at any point by them?

At the beginning I got some reprimands at home. My mother didn't usually scold us too much, but whenever I got home later than midnight on any Sunday, she would turn really serious. "You've returned home really late tonight," she would say. "I'm sure you've been singing *bertsos* and those silly things. We will not raise our children that way." That's what she would tell me.

I just remembered that during my first official performance, from the balcony of Arrona bar . . . that day had many ups and downs. It was the harvesting period. I remember the day before I was cutting wheat with a scythe—that's how we used to do it at home—and I remember it was really hot and I was exhausted. The performance at Arrona bar was the following day, and I remember my father telling me when I got home that one of his friends, a man who lived in a country house near ours, had asked about me. My father answered that I had left to sing some *bertsos*, and this man replied, "Have you let him go to sing *bertsos*? I don't think it is good idea that the son of a country house family goes to sing *bertsos*." That was what they thought of the *bertsolaritza* movement in those days.

Then one day I had to sing with Uztapide. That was my first performance with Uztapide, and it took place in Olaberri. After we sang, some of the people on the festival committee approached us and asked Uztapide, "How much was it, Manuel?" "It will be five hundred *pesetas*, and the tip as you wish," he responded. Do you realize how much five hundred *pesetas* was in those days? I returned home so happy. It was normal that we gave all our money to our mother if we ever earned anything, which was difficult. The following morning I gave my mother all of the money and she asked: "so this is what you made singing *bertsos*?" I said yes,

and she said, “I wish you had to go every day to sing!” That’s true. My mother used to reprimand me much more than my father.

Your brothers and sisters, your friends . . . they have supported you?

A lot. Brothers and sisters, friends . . . a lot of people have cheered me on. The hardest people were at home.

When you were younger, do you think the *bertsos* helped you to get attention from girls?

I don’t know if they have helped much; there were people much quicker than I in those matters.

Your wife has always accompanied you along the way as a *bertsolari*.

She’s never said anything against it. On the contrary, she also liked *bertsolaris* and it provided a good income for our family, so it was really necessary. I’ve always accomplished all the promises I’ve made to her. We had a day each year in which most of the *bertsolaris* would meet with our respective wives. We wouldn’t ever agree to sing anywhere else on that day; that was a sacred day.

Your sons and daughters are also proud of their *bertsolari* father.

Completely.

How were you able to combine your job with *bertsolaritza*?

Those years when I worked as a stonecutter, I always worked part-time since I worked for a country house. Sometimes, when they needed a lot of help and it was really necessary, I didn’t go with the *bertsolaris*, but this happened only a very few times. On days like that the owner would say to me, “since it is we who pay you this time, it is better for you not to go.” This happened sometimes, but not often. In those days, after spending two days singing I returned to my job and the owner told me, “You have to sing today too because Mitxelena has called asking for you to go.” I turned around and said, “Let’s sing!” At that time I didn’t have a telephone at home and I used to get the messages at the quarry.

And who was in charge of the work at the country house?

When I started to work at the quarry there was less work to do than at the country house . . . the cattle grazed freely and, although there were things to do, it wasn’t too heavy. I’ve said there was less work, but it was always too much. Then you had to go home and start all over again with the work there, feeding cattle and so on. The same as in the morning, since I had to feed them before I left for work. The day was very long.

Has religion influenced you in any way in being a *bertsolari*?

I'm sure it did at the beginning, but fortunately for me in my *bertsolari* life I've always had priests who have supported the *bertsolari* movement a lot. In the town of Azpeitia, Mr. Jose Larrañaga ("Txortena"), Mr. Juan Bautista Ezeizabarrena, and others, they all were very enthusiastic. We also used to go to the monastery in Markina town. The Lekuonas, Aranaldes, and others have been very good friends of ours.

As a *bertsolari* you've had to sing in all kind of events—festivals, verses, after big celebrations, championships In which have you felt more comfortable?

In those performances following large-scale dinners I've always felt the most comfortable. Saint Agueda's Eve is very hard work. More than once I have gotten back home and said, "no more," but the following year I've gone back there again, since you tend to forget the bad things, fortunately. I've always felt more confident in those events after such dinners and nowadays it's the same.

Why is that?

That's how I am. I've always felt uncomfortable and nervous in town squares. In the events after those group meals I'm more relaxed. There's no other reason.

Regarding those *bertsolari* performances, it is not the same performing in a festival in the town square as it is in a theater or *pelota* court. I've participated in all kinds, but it depends a lot on the mood you are in on that particular day.

Does it have anything to do with your partners or colleagues?

Are there any bad partners or colleagues? They are all great, both men and women; I get along perfectly well with everybody. When I think about it, I probably feel most comfortable with youngsters.

But in spite of everything, you feel better with those partners with whom you sing more often. During one particular period I used to sing a lot with Imanol Lazkano, and right at the beginning of the song I would know where he was heading. That eases things a lot, gives you more time to think about it. It is worse not to have a clue where your partner is heading and to find yourself blank. That's really hard.

Who are the *bertsolaris* with whom you've sung most?

As I've mentioned before, for a long time it has been Imanol Lazkano. After the championship in 1982, and since there were a lot of festivals with eight finalists, I sang with José Lizaso more than with Lazkano. I've sung with Lasarte, Azpillaga (a very good partner to sing with) . . . I've sung a lot with Lazkao Txiki, too. He began performing in public very late, the same as me.

What has *bertsolaritza* meant in your life? How much time have you devoted to creating *bertsos*?

It was more time before than nowadays. I used to sing while milking the cows and doing work.

I'm sure that whenever you are alone your mind starts to sing.

Once in a while, you're right.

Are there any ways you have tried to improve? How did you learn?

By listening to the others. You may hear good rhymes by someone, you might hear a certain sentence by somebody else . . . all those things remain in your mind. Not only among the *bertsolaris* but also among the public. You can find a pearl from any conversation, that's why you need to be alert at all times. In our days we didn't have schools to become *bertsolaris*; we learned by always paying attention to what's being said. During the festivals, due to my limited knowledge level, my greatest worry has always been, "let's see if I don't get a theme I don't know anything about"

Maybe you don't read enough?

Almost nothing at all, and what I read doesn't stay in my mind for as long as what I hear. It was the same then. What I read I quickly forget, what I hear lasts longer.

How did you learn *bertso* technique?

In order to sing comfortably you have to think about the last strophe and then you need to lead the *bertso* toward that final sentence. If the last strophe is powerful enough, it will be fine. If you get the two last strophes instead of just one, it's even better. But it has happened before that I had to sing without any last strophe. We all have certain bad days in which you don't get anything in your mind, but since your partner has finished you have to start, and do the best you can! But it can also happen that after those bad moments, the most brilliant ideas start to come. This work is that special.

What's your most difficult exercise?

Without a doubt doing the theme-based series alone is the most difficult for me. I feel contest is much easier. I've even heard Uztapide say more than once that he also thinks that theme-based exchanges were his most difficult work. He used to say, "we're used to answering our partner and therefore this is the hardest for me as well."

Why do you feel so comfortable with the *punto corrido*?³

In our case—Imanol and me—it's because it's an exercise we've practiced a lot and we know each other very well. Imanol is a very good partner for the *punto corrido*. Two persons are better at doing that exercise. At one point in time it was very popular to do it with three, but it's tricky. The person who starts lets his partner know how he wants to finish in order for him to open the path for the final goal to be made by the first person, instead of finishing it himself. If he went ahead and finished, he would impede his colleague saying what he had already planned and therefore the partner would feel betrayed. When this happens with two people, you have to answer each prompt coming from your partner and I like that better.

What's a good *bertso* for you? What's essential?

Good rhyme and an exact meter, and if you can also say things pretty well that's even better. If the rhyme is bad, that can't be a good *bertso* for me, no matter how much content it has. The first things for me are the good rhyme and the exact meter.

How do you explain that your presence is still requested alongside the young *bertsolari*? What's your secret?

Well, I don't know. I don't do anything special, I always do the same things, I do what I know and what I can. I'm really glad they call me. Even more, if they are youngsters who call me to go together to a festival, that makes me even happier. At my age I don't really feel comfortable when driving; my eyes, as well as the rest, are not at their best. As a driver I've never been good and now, with all those roundabouts on the road I feel lost in places I know well. When somebody calls me to go someplace together I feel enormously happy.

We still can see you feel comfortable singing *bertsos* . . .

Not really; it is easier for me now to forget things. Not every day is the same, though. I don't always get it right, but what can I do? One of two options—either I retire completely or I just go where I'm being called to go. There's no other choice.

In your life as a *bertsolari*, it's probable that you've had to experience several changes. What do you think has changed most?

Mostly those theme-based performances done alone with *bertsos* with many strophes. We got that trend from Bizkaia. I never heard either Uztapide or Lasarte sing longer *bertsos* than the major *hamarreko*,⁴ unless required, no matter how good they were. In one of the championships

³ Translator's note: *punto corrido* involves leaving the line open for a partner to follow the *bertso*.

⁴ Translator's note: the major *hamarreko* is a strophe composed of ten parts.

he was obliged to sing in minor *bederatziko*, and he also had to do a *poto*.⁵ He wouldn't sing unless required. Those famous *bertsos* sung to the Mother were also sung in minor *hamarreko*. He wouldn't go over ten strophes when intervening alone. There's been a radical change in that sense. On the other hand, the *bertsolari*'s own work has changed a lot. I remember I spent three days in Huizi town, in Nafarroa; two were spent with Mitxelena and one with Lopategi. That's not good, either. In those little towns it's always the same people you sing to. I still remember what I saw then—pigs grazing right in front of our eyes while singing.

You have probably sung to everybody in your life—to the country house world, to everyday people, to the priests . . .

The best for me are the little towns. The majority are people from country houses, like myself, and I've always felt comfortable in that world. It's always been easier for me to sing themes for them. I've always been worried about not knowing anything about the theme I was to sing, more than the *bertso* itself. What do you say if you don't know what the theme is about?

Have you changed your technique of singing *bertsos* in any way?

Not me. And how could I start to do new things now?

Have you ever trained in the minor *bederatziko* on your own?

Why should I practice that if I know I'm not good at it?

You've told me before that your grandfather composed in minor *bederatziko*.

That's true. I've also composed some and I've sung them on Radio Loiola. But I know I'm not good at it.

You've also noticed a change in the Euskara language, am I right?

I've lived through the unifying of Euskara, the new standard. Youngsters nowadays are better prepared than us because they learn at school. We are what we've learned at home. But when singing, everybody uses the most standard Euskara, more than when we talk. It's always been that way.

How do you define the work of the *bertsolari*?

Some contest ought to exist, some opposition. You lose interest if you don't say anything. During Uztapide's times, everybody would pick on him if he was in the group, but he always defended himself perfectly. It doesn't consist of only picking on someone. To be honest I have to

⁵ Translator's note: a *poto* is a repetition of the same rhyme with the same meaning.

say it's easier for me to contradict than to say something favorable. Some listeners nowadays claim that we're too nice to each other.

Who have been your idols?

I've always liked Lasarte very much; his rhyme and his exact meter were enviable. I've also liked Uztapide a lot. Basarri would say many things; he didn't have such an exact rhyme as Lasarte, but he wasn't bad either. He had a technique of rhyming two by two—he'd put a distance between the first two and the last two, but not too much.

How have you worked the rhyme out?

That comes naturally. Not even those who learn at the bertsolari schools have the same ability. I've thought more than once when hearing somebody else that "the one I'm thinking about is perfect," but he used another one that I thought was worse . . . but that depends on each one. Amuriza worked the rhyme a lot and I guess I have that somewhere in my mind, but I've never worked on that material.

On the other hand, some awful rhymes have been proposed in some championships. As some people say, on a certain occasion Basarri sat down without singing at all since the rhymes were so difficult they made it impossible to create a bertso. You need guts to do that in public. If that happened to me, I would have insisted on answering and I would have done something pathetic. Basarri realized it was an impossible task.

Interview with Andoni Egaña Makazaga

Josu Goikoetxea

Andoni Egaña Makazaga, born in 1964, is without a doubt one of the greatest *bertsolaris* (Basque oral poets) of our time. A three-time winner of the Euskal Herria¹ Championship and an expert on the art of improvisation, Makazaga also has a degree in philosophy and is the author of numerous books and scripts. He is a person of great shyness, and, similar to many other great timid people, he hides his shyness behind a courageous and playful exterior. In a way, he is like Zarauz, the village he was born in on the coast of Gipuzkoa, which shows its kindest and sunniest side to all visitors but requires more time to reveal its inner side, its history, and its everyday life.

You live in Zarauz, the place where you were born. Are you comfortable there?

Zarauz is a very practical place to live. And I need very little public life here: I work at home, I'm not a person who likes to go out a lot, I don't even go downtown with my family (my wife and children) on a Sunday afternoon. That's not my way of life.

In spite of living in a village on the coast, you're not much of a sailor . . .

Our father was born in a country house and our mother on the boundaries between the city and the country. This background has affected us, so we were never really sea people.

In Franco's days, you were one of the first students at the *ikastola*² in Zarauz. You studied almost entirely in Euskara³ when this wasn't easy at all.

¹ Euskal Herria refers not only to the politically defined Basque Country, but also to the cultural Basque Country, which geographically includes the Nafarroa, the political Basque provinces (Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, and Alava), and the three provinces in the south of France, making a total of seven provinces.

² An *ikastola* is a Basque primary school.

³ Euskara is the native name for the Basque language.

It was difficult, mostly for my parents. People in the village had the suspicion that we only sang at the *ikastola*. They also thought that children studying at the *ikastola* would have no future, that we were fools. At the beginning of the '70s, many people thought that way and very few took risks.

What kind of child were you?

I was a good boy. Maybe nowadays the concept of “being a good boy” has changed. We spent most of the time on the streets and only once in a while did we break a shop window playing soccer. If a boy does something similar now, we would crucify him. Some time ago even the good boys did things like that, so just imagine what the bad boys could do! I was also a good student until I was a teenager, but those were very difficult years. From when I was thirteen until I turned seventeen I had a bad academic history. There were continuous strikes and I didn't like some of the subjects, like math, physics, and chemistry.

Do your former teachers make comments about you? Do you think they expected something from you?

Maybe. But I'm pretty sure they didn't expect I would become a *bertsolari*. The *bertso* (verse) wasn't believed to be a channel of creativity. The general opinion was that *bertsos* couldn't encourage creativity. On the contrary, they believed singing, poetry, or literature could. Practicing the *bertso* was a very personal decision. Just have a look at Basarri,⁴ who lived 300 meters from my childhood home. His society⁵ was 50 meters away, but I wasn't conscious of that. I wasn't conscious of the *bertsolari* phenomenon, although I knew of its existence through the radio, listening to my grandfather, and also because Joxe Agirre⁶ would spend the night at our home once in a while, after he had finished his verse serenade on Saint Agueda's Eve, very late at night.

I know you had very good teachers . . .

Yes, Imanol Urbietta⁷ was the person who made the biggest impression on us. We began with Imanol when we were ten, and he remained as our teacher for four or five more years, but I believe he's been our spiritual tutor for many years after that. His way of life, his ideology, has always been based on creativity: you are free as long as you create, so create! You realize all this after turning 20, and then you think: “well, I've been lucky!”

⁴ Basarri was a famous *bertsolari*.

⁵ “Societies” were meeting place for groups of men.

⁶ A *bertsolari* from Azpeitia.

⁷ A Basque musicologist.

You mentioned the old times before. Those were very hard times with regard to politics.

But they were also very good times. Ever since I was thirteen, I had a political consciousness. If I watch a 13-year-old boy nowadays, I think he's very immature. And in fact he is. In June '75, when I was still fifteen, Txiki was killed⁸ . . . he lived in my neighborhood. We used to play soccer with him and his brothers, and I think that from 1975 on any neighbor from Zarauz had less chance of being racist toward immigrants. Until then we used to call them "Koreans" or *mantxurrianos*⁹ . . . and then they killed Txiki, and Txiki was from Zalamea (in Extremadura).¹⁰ Humans learn from everything, and we learned this lesson pretty well.

Was *bertsolaritza* well known in your family surroundings?

Once a year my parents brought a tape home. That tape contained some *bertsos* from Jose Agirre and Imanol Lazkano.¹¹ My parents and their group of friends used to organize a banquet each year (and still do), and they invited Agirre and Lazkano (and still do) to sing. I was eleven or twelve years old. I listened to that tape in which the *bertsolaris* would kid my parents and their friends, my uncles and aunts, and I could understand everything. Once a year I was delighted to listen to that tape. I realized that the *bertso* wasn't only something you could hear on the radio, it was something everybody could sing. I also understood it was a mechanism used to joke about my parents, or my uncles and aunts, or an old bachelor fellow.

What led you to begin improvising? More than once you have mentioned the 1980s championship, Amuriza's¹² performance, and the fact that his *bertsos* were filled with complex content. Nevertheless, your background wasn't the best: a youngster from Zarauz with a leftist ideology . . .

I believe a lot of factors played a part in this situation. On one hand, regarding Amuriza's concept of *bertsolaritza*, I was already studying philology at the university. One of my teachers was Juan María Lekuona,¹³ who taught classes on oral literature. He was another great teacher I had. The year before I had decided I wanted to study, mostly because during the previous

⁸ Txiki is the nickname for Juan Paredes Manot, a historical activist and member of the armed organization, ETA.

⁹ *Mantxurrianos* is a disdainful term used for people coming from La Mancha, a region located in the middle of Spain.

¹⁰ Extremadura is a region located below La Mancha, so people from this area were also disparaged with disdainful terms.

¹¹ Imanol Lazkano is a *bertsolar* from Azpeitia. Until recently, he was also president of the Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte (Friends of the Verse Association in the Basque Country).

¹² Champion in the 1980s and a historic figure in *bertsolaritza*.

¹³ An academic in Basque language studies and a researcher of Basque oral literature.

summer seasons I used to help my father at his work. He sold furniture, and I didn't like that. It wasn't physically hard, but I felt useless and I hated feeling that way. My father would say, "hand me the sander" or "give me the screwdriver," and then he would say, "that's not the screwdriver, those are the pliers!" Well, when I was 16 I realized I wasn't good at manual work, but I was a good student—I could pass all the exams with no problem. I think this is an important factor relating to the *bertsos*. At the end of secondary school, when we had to do an exercise on *bertsos*, I realized I could do it faster than the rest—even though I didn't have any knowledge on the matter—and I probably did it much better. In those moments you think, "see, I'm good at this." Besides, when you are 17 you ought to know what you are good at and what you aren't. And, if possible, you should like what you are good at.

How did you start to improvise *bertsos*? What was the original preparation?

I don't remember, but it must have been a very basic concept. I recall two of Amuriza's books, *Hitzaren kirol nazionala* ["National Word Sport"] and *Hiztegi errimatua* ["Rhymed Dictionary"]. I needed support and I started from there. I also analyzed *bertsos* from previous years, mostly from the championships in the '60s. I stole those books from the public library . . . well, I didn't really steal them, I borrowed them but never gave them back. I still have them at home. Imanol Murua, the former mayor, admitted that the theft was worthwhile and believed I would give them back to the inhabitants of Zarauz some day.

This is a land where people love betting on anything, for any reason and at any time, and you have always liked that. Was this a bet made on your own, to be able to perform by improvisation, to be brave?

I don't think so. I remember that from the beginning I used to think I wasn't prepared to perform in public, that I would go blank once I heard the theme, being by myself with the microphone. But as I was learning more and more, I hoped maybe one day I would become a kind of Professor Lekuona, or even the judge in a contest. That was also of great attraction to me, and I sincerely believe it is not a bad starting point for any youngster nowadays. Of course, I was full of doubts; *bertsolaritza* schools—*bertso-eskolak*—didn't exist . . . they were just starting to be established then. And I didn't understand to what extent the strength of being able to stand face-to-face with the public was something innate or something learned, and also the serenity you need to perform any proposed theme.

Your next step was to register in the Lizardi contest.¹⁴

I sang at my cousin's wedding. That was my first performance in public. In 1982, unlike before, I decided to take all my exams in June. This way I would be able to prepare for the Lizardi contest. I am a little chaotic in everything I do, when preparing for high goals . . .

¹⁴ An improvisation competition in Zarauz.

That meant a whole year of planning . . .

Yes, that's true. I remember I had passed all exams in the summer of 1982; I was a youngster in Zarauz, I worked every morning with my father; maybe I would go to the beach at midday, then I would hang out for a while in the bars. I would have a nice siesta and then I would work on a series of rhymes. I suppose I thought it was a foolish investment. I didn't know for sure while I was practicing if I would be brave enough to register my name in the contest.

But you registered yourself and won the prize. Did you already feel like a *bertsolari*?

No, no way. These days any kid can improvise better than we did those days. But I won and then I left to work in Vitoria. I won that prize a month before Felipe Gonzalez won the general elections. After a few months I attended another contest (with a bit of apprehension, of course) and I was lucky enough to win it, too. Ever since then I began to feel serious about it. I was still nobody, but I wasn't nothing, either.

When did you feel like a *bertsolari* from head to tail for the first time?

I think it was in the 1986 Euskal Herria championship, during the semi-finals in Bilbao. Until then I wasn't sure at all. After winning my second prize, I started to perform here and there, I got a job in *La Voz de Euskadi*¹⁵ as an editor, and later the army called me up. But I didn't waste my time. I had two clear objectives: the first one was to go on with my training as a *bertsolari*, and I would do it by myself. The other objective was to finish my military service. While the rest of the boys went to the canteen, I would remain alone, studying or singing *bertsos*.

You participated in the 1986 championship. You got to the finals and there were several people of the same generation as you. That was impressive.

I think the importance of the 1986 championship lies in its origin. During the spring of 1985, the *bertsolari*'s association didn't yet exist and it was then that some people started to take the first steps. They felt frustrated with the organization of the previous championship (which the Basque Language Academy was in charge of), mostly because of the division made between *bertsolari*s of type A and *bertsolari*s of type B. Our first meeting took place. It was a very strong hook for me. We thought that self-management was possible, and therefore the organization of the following championship relied on us.

What was your way of improvising, your singing style?

I guess it was very similar to today's. The style was less purified. But I wouldn't dare to define my way of improvising in those days. I guess it was similar to the present way.

¹⁵ A Basque newspaper.

What did you feel in the Velodrome in San Sebastián, in the presence of 10,000 people?

It was an incredible feeling. I think we all felt the same. It was our first time singing there. In those days, *bertsolaritza* needed a quality improvement in the communication media. We had to add the self-management to it. With all these factors, and with a great dose of self-confidence, we decided to do the final in the Velodrome. And there we were, as if in a cloud, troubled by emotions, each and every one of us. We were wondering what we were doing to get so much attention from so many people.

What was that *bertsolari* collective like, and the people close to you who organized that championship?

I felt comfortable with them from the very beginning. I can't recall when everything began. We organized several meetings in order to found an association and I met a lot of people in the same situation who were starting to get moving. Jon Sarasua was four or five years younger than me, he was around 20, but I could see that whatever he wanted to do wasn't bad at all. The same happened with Koldo Tapia's incentives. I also very much liked what other *bertsolaris* wanted to do. I enjoyed those meetings very much, listening to different anecdotes from my colleagues, and that also helped me to fill myself up, while I was assimilating things. I could see it was something real. And something I have never seen, and I haven't seen yet, is jealousy.

When the Bertsolari Elkarte, later known as Bertsozale Elkarte, emerged, a lot of people thought it was a *bertsolari* syndicate. Later it was proven to be something else.

As I already said, this association emerged due to the 1986 championship. When it was created, we knew perfectly well what should and what shouldn't be. After the championship's success, there was this temptation of creating a *bertsolari* enterprise in order to organize, for example, competitions among the most famous *bertsolaris*. But we could see two things very clearly: that first, it wouldn't be a lucrative enterprise, and second, we wouldn't create a syndicate to defend the *bertsolaris*' rights. Just the opposite, we would be a cultural association. I identified myself with that project, but I had to wait until I returned to Zarauz to involve myself directly with the management. This association has been of great instruction to those of my generation. On several occasions we have had strong discussions, but only very few times did we have to appeal to the voting stage. This meant we learned to be flexible, in order to obtain a consensus. Personal satisfaction played an important part in this as well—vital satisfaction, I mean. Working in the association means a way of locating yourself within a social construction. It requires a great volunteer effort, but you get a lot in exchange: what you learn, what you feel once you see your objectives fulfilled How can you compromise yourself in a society, Basque society, which lives immersed in conflict, holding out the temptation of being unnoticed, which is always easier than taking part? You can do that if you locate yourself in your own space, where you will be able to work comfortably, and you won't sneak away. The association has provided us with that space.

What was your working plan? Did you have everything well planned or did you work by intuition?

It was always done by intuition. When we decided to attempt a sociolinguistic analysis on the social support of *bertsolaritza*, for example, it wasn't easy for us to explain why we did it, or when we thought it was essential for our future if we had a documentation center, or even the championships. Or when we decided to introduce ourselves in the media. For many, TV was a deceptive medium, but others understood we needed that step in order to continue to exist in 20 years' time. Nevertheless, we managed everything ourselves, with the support of our people. Those were important decisions and had a great degree of intuition.

In the following championship in 1989, you were already a consecrated *bertsolari*.

We were lucky. If you do something really showy in a championship, people will remember you. Peñagarikano and myself sang a series of quite showy *bertsos* in '86, and the rock group called Negu Gorriak added them to their first record—a song called “*Bertso-hop*.” That gave us, both Peñagarikano and me—and also *bertsolaritza*—a great push. Now we could reach the youth.

How did you prepare for the 1993 Championship? You've mentioned more than once that preparation is very important; what do you base it on?

Right before a championship, and even before performing anywhere, *bertsolari*s know that they're about to improvise and that there's a risk of being ridiculous, and that's the reason why they should prepare themselves carefully. The target is to try to avoid the maximum amount of ridicule. With that in mind, everything else arrives with no problem. But much too often you work too hard on the technical part, the mechanical, and then you lose the punch. If you work the rhyme, the meter, the melody . . . everything comes out mechanically and you wouldn't surprise even yourself, so you won't the public, either. People can perceive this through the way you are looking, through your way of singing. But the opposite can also happen: if you don't work the technique enough you may have very good ideas, but it's easy for you to make mistakes any minute.

Those days belong to the period of increased success of *bertsolaritza*. What is the lesson we can extract from those moments?

Personally, it brought about a change in my life. From 1988 to 1990 I had around 100 performances a year. From '91 to '92 I had around 150, and from '94 to '95 I had around 180. My whole way of life changed. I didn't need two salaries any more. That's why I left my job as state official in Vitoria and chose to investigate my artistic possibilities 100 percent.

A proliferation of *bertsolaritza* on TV took place at some point. What did this mean to the *bertsolaris*, specifically the program on *bertsolaritza* called *Hitzetik Hertzera*? After that, you were famous people.

Like nowadays, we were famous in a very discreet way, and people are very respectful.

But it's true that you are so affable that anyone can go to your house and ask for any reasonable favor, which is not very common in other places.

Very few years ago, before we met the improvisers from all over the world, we didn't have any external reference. We aren't musicians, and we don't have any Michael Jacksons or Miguel Bosés among us; we are *bertsolaris* and we react as our body requires, in a very natural and close way. And if all this affects you, you can do an easy thing: go home.

But you must go through periods of crisis, either through saturation of performances, or by singing without stopping, day after day...

Yes, but maybe this is because we exhibit ourselves so much in public, and there's a very simple reason for that: we're so normal, sometimes too normal. I know myself very well, I watch myself every day in the mirror. Do people expect a political opinion from me? I haven't got that kind of capacity for synthesis. Just because I can sing in 10/8 syllables doesn't mean anybody can ask for a complex opinion. It is at this point where the crisis takes place. I might be able to give an opinion in a showy linguistic way, but that's all.

Nevertheless, you express an opinion when asked for it.

Of course, you can't say no. I'm not skeptical. It's not that I don't mind, either. But I don't see myself as a political analyst or as a philosopher. Not even as a poet.

What is the "automatic pilot" for *bertsolaris*?

This expression is more of a saying than the truth. Theoretically, the meaning of "automatic pilot" is to improvise without much interest but with a lot of professionalism. It means thinking that in a given place you don't have to think much, since you will get through the performance singing the same topics as always. We say this more than we do it, and if we ever do it is due to incapacity. As soon as we get to the stage, and after watching what kind of public we have, figuring out the whole context, we learn to realize that a very well sung topic is better than an original idea that many of them wouldn't understand.

"Automatic pilot" means professionalism more than laziness, then.

That's it. Last Monday we performed in Getaria at noon. The public in Getaria is not too exigent. We had to sing from the town hall balcony, after the people had drunk more than seven

txacolis.¹⁶ It is quite clear that in that situation you need a “heated” performance; you can’t start in a very slow way, pampering the concepts or, even worse, doubting. But there are several ways of singing very normal things. Therefore, before getting to the balcony, you have to review everything you know regarding Getaria: “Let’s see, Juan Sebastián Elcano was born here, he went around the world, his statue is a few meters away, but we mention it every single year . . .” and then, on the way to the town hall you can see a picture hanging on the museum door and . . . “Ah!, Balenciaga, the great tailor! Balenciaga was born in Getaria.” You get it in your mind and keep it. You should never start your performance saying “Here we are, in Elcano and Balenciaga’s birthplace . . .” Too easy. That day, my partner was Sebastián Lizaso, and he more or less started singing like this: “Here we are, in January, the *txacoli* was excellent, it is a very nice day, the sun is hot; well, you are very pale. Quite the opposite, you are red as a tomato but your color doesn’t come from the sun, it’s due to the cider bars in Astigarraga . . .” and we got to a moment when the sun was really hot where Sebastián mentioned his shirt and also mentioned I was wearing too many clothes; then I could sing that that was my little homage to Balenciaga. That is what people most appreciate. And then you can start with the “automatic pilot,” relying only on your professionalism, with no previous schemes, and when you get to this point you start to feel the satisfaction of a job well done. It is called automatic pilot, but when watching Balenciaga’s picture and keeping it in my mind, I knew that 99 percent of the public would know whom I was talking about.

So the *bertsolari* should focus on the public code.

Yes, that is the most important. What’s the difference between poetry and *bertsolaritza*? A long time ago this was a recurrent question. People used to think that poetry talked about high-level concepts and that the *bertsos* only talked about mundane matters. That’s not true. The difference is, where poetry leaves an open space for interpretation and the reader has to close it, in the *bertso* the message given is 99 percent straightforward. Of course, there is also no possibility that you can hear a *bertso* one more time, once it’s sung.

Have you ever found yourself thinking that the public wasn’t at your level?

No, no way. It is not a cultural concept, it refers to cultural references. Therefore, if you notice that the public you are singing to belong to a world far away from yours, you must adapt yourself to them. If you go on with yours, and if the communication fails, it would be your fault. You can use it once in a while as a pose, to reinforce the stereotype that people have over you, but not in the global speech of the performance.

Have you ever seen an older *bertsolari* feeling uncomfortable in the opposite situation? Let’s say one of them is performing at a university, for example.

¹⁶ *Txacoli* is a new dry white wine typical in the Basque country.

He may be worried before starting, worried by the subjects they could propose. But this is also a fiction. Even though he might not know anything about the subject given, the *bertsolari* always has an answer and it is simply: “ask about something else because, sincerely, I don’t have a clue on that,” and that’s exactly what people are expecting from him. For this reason, the championships are very hard. People expect a lot from each and every one of the *bertsolaris*, and since the subjects are given out in a raffle, sometimes what is sung is not that good.

Does the championship standardize all *bertsolaris*?

No, the only difference is that what you can forgive in a normal performance is not forgivable in a competition.

You were the champion in 1993. Did you expect it?

I never had the sensation of “well, I will win the *txapela*.”¹⁷ I’ve always attended the championships thinking, “they’re going to see what’s good.” Of course, in order to think this way you have to be prepared. And I think that way about the audience, believing they are going to enjoy their time with me, that they are going to be amazed. The rest is not important: the judges, the punctuation, how well your colleagues can perform With that prospect, the championship shouldn’t make you feel afraid, and that’s what is most important.

What are the benefits and drawbacks of being a champion?

Not too much on either side. I felt comfortable between ‘86 and ‘93, as if I was levitating, and enjoyed all performances. And there were many performances before winning the championship. I haven’t felt I’ve benefited in that sense. And regarding the burden, it’s been as heavy as I could bear. And I assume that burden with pride: all the compromises and the meetings . . . it doesn’t occur to me not to attend only because I’m the champion. It’s a personal compromise that you accept with great pleasure. For the whole society I represent the *bertsolari* in a certain way. Therefore, since I’m the champion, I have to behave as a “good boy,” and that might be a small disadvantage when improvising, since I’m more of a bad boy than what I have proven to be in these last years. I would do, and will do, bigger, crazier things when I’m on stage. And I’ve already done some.

In 1992 and ’93 a new generation of *bertsolaris* emerged: Maialen Lujanbio, Unai Iturriaga, Irazu How did you welcome them? What were your expectations when listening to them?

I believe that if we ever made any mistakes, they wouldn’t have been done out of mistrust or not wanting to support the new arrivals in a proper way. We might even have been too paternalistic, but with the best of intentions. That was precisely our biggest error. And even more

¹⁷ *Txapela* is a black beret of a bigger size that is normally given out as a prize in all kinds of competitions.

if we refer to women, certainly in regard to Maialen. But it was wonderful to see all those new people coming. And they have fulfilled all our expectations, both as a generation and individually.

Is it true that you had a small disappointment during the finals in 1997, since contestants didn't perform as was expected?

Yes, it's true. But now I realize that was normal. They did exactly the same as Sarasua and I did back in '86. Exactly the same. They didn't watch the place they were about to sing. They arrived at the place and got excited—to be there was enough for them. When you first come to such an important event, you don't feel obliged to excel, but at the same time you feel beside yourself with joy and think, “how wonderful, how grateful I feel for being here,” and the day passes by. In order to improvise you need to keep the balance between your emotions and your mind, and that's really difficult in a championship. On the other hand, I would feel disappointed by a *bertsolari* who didn't feel excited the first time he was there. Later, in the second or third final, everything is different. You ought to give everything and forget everything else.

I'd like to know about the state of mind of the improviser when improvising. What does he see? Does he see the public or does he focus on the microphone? What kind of images fill his mind?

Different things each time. Sometimes you don't see anything, or you look at your colleagues seated behind you and you see them blurred. Or you focus on somebody in the audience and you don't see anything else, you may be nervous and can't look anywhere else but at your colleague or your own leg. It is an uncontrollable feeling.

How do you visualize the *bertso* itself? Can you see the words, the rhymes, or are they just images?

In my case they aren't images. I see lines. I can see the end of the *bertso* and that *bertso* runs way down. And depending on the structure of the *bertso*, I see the way the point can change into a narrowing path. That's the key: to look at it from a distance, even though you don't do it on purpose. I have to get to that point with strength, but first I have to figure out the distance I should start from. If you start from a point very close to the end, you will lack ideas to base the *bertso* on. On the other hand, if you start from too far away, the connection with the end will be too long. Of course, this is only theoretically speaking. When improvising, the appropriate distance emerges naturally. The ideal would be the absence of doubt: “I will finish this *bertso* this way, this is what I want to say.” But usually this does not make the most satisfactory *bertso*. And the *bertsolari*'s ambition is measured through each *bertso*. There are different ways of confronting a *bertso*. You can shoot an idea for each line or you can “elaborate” the initial idea. If you tend to shoot several ideas, your stress increases immediately, since you have to adapt to

the rhyme and respect the meter, but you have to think about the following idea at the same time. Sometimes you're not inspired and you make mistakes, but when it works out

What has been your experience these last years? What has your evolution consisted of?

I guess this is related to your way of life. I'm the champion of the *bertsos* and I have become at the same time a person with a good reputation—never mind if it's only because I'm older! I've been offered work from everybody, but never a job! Therefore I continue improvising. This is normal; who would dare to offer me a job? Anyway, I'm well placed. But on the other hand, that generation of *bertsolaris* you have mentioned, who are in their thirties, are already people with a certain status, and by their forties will have an enormous reputation, but they might not have a cent in their pockets.

Does this perspective wear you out?

I don't think so, because we like what we do. But if we observe the history of *bertsolaritza* we will see that each one of us who's chosen it as our profession has no other choice than to continue it, just the same as the worker in the factory. I haven't had severe economic problems, but Amuriza says he has. And the next generation will have to continue with this because it's their only source of income. And this situation makes me think. On one side we have an enormous reputation, but on the other side it means an enormous obstacle if we still want to be creative. I believe I have to say that I was lucky. As Patricia Highsmith said, "you should only work from your twenties to your thirties." I already did that. And that gives you a sense of security. When I was 30 and said I couldn't see myself improvising when I was 40, I was serious. I could see the accumulation of shows, a lot to eat, a lot to drink, a lot to smoke . . . but you can stand all of it, because it's also gratifying. Do you realize what good times you have being a *bertsolari*?

You haven't been a big traveler. But you've been to Veracruz in Mexico back in 1996. What was all that about?

It was our first attendance at an international meeting on improvisation. We didn't know each other, and they didn't know any of us. We were strangers to them. Those were the Tenth Latin American Encounters and of course everybody improvised in Spanish. I did it in Euskara. Koldo Tapia was translating my *bertsos*. They couldn't believe I could improvise in a language different to theirs, that even though I spoke Spanish I wouldn't improvise in Spanish. What for? I was sure I would do worse than them! Until that moment we all had the idea that our way of improvising was unique to the whole world. During these last eight years we've realized that there are many forms of Latin American improvisation and many other ways of improvising. The fields are opened. Now we know ourselves much better. When you have to explain what your work consists of to somebody else, it is compulsory to meditate on your profession, to get yourself in front of the mirror. You get to know little things from other people, and also big things. I always ask the rest of the improvisers, be it in Mexico or in Cerdeña, if they ever start

from the end. And yes, they do start from the end. It's surprising. And if all these different ways of improvising, so far away from each other, have come to this common point, this means it is possible to transfer it to other arenas.

In general, we have two kinds *bertsolaritza*: those with proposed themes and those without. Which type do you feel most comfortable with?

Normally, before starting I feel relaxed if I know it will be about proposed themes. It is curious to realize we feel steadier with proposed themes than without. With the free or open type, if you have an impetuous day or perhaps if your mind is clear, it conditions the improvisation a lot. But honestly, satisfaction is much higher in the performances without imposed themes. It is difficult even for a *bertsolari* to figure out how he or she began that day's improvisation.

Theater or *pelota* court audiences and the general public are two different types of audiences, I guess.

Distances are different. Performances in smaller venues usually work better: it's you, Jose María, or you, Pedro Miguel, or you, the butcher. This situation doesn't happen in a bigger theater. What we do on stage is not natural because of the microphone. We are the only ones that joke about our partner without even looking at him. We look up front, toward the audience.

And in spite of facing the audience, the audience does not know exactly what you will do.

Yes. The communication phenomenon is very difficult, very strange. And we don't know why. If I know beforehand that the night's audience will be really enthusiastic about *bertso* and will have enough time to listen to us, most surely we will start with a minor tone, not really explaining what we want to say, but suggesting ideas instead. Why? Because those who really like the *bertsos* are interested in the suggestions made as much as the explicit reasons. The line of the *bertso* continues and the public thinks, "he's going to get there." If he's not a real fan, if the distance between me and the listener is too big, well, I wouldn't start with a minor tone, but a higher tone instead; I would like to wake them up, attract them to me.

In what moment do you realize that what you're doing really works? Or are there ups and downs?

Ups and downs continually exist. The championship is the best example. But in any performance, after having dinner, in a theater, you need to learn that you'll never touch bottom, not even if it's not your best day. You need to fight and you'll find a theme with which you'll be able to communicate. And if you're doing really well, then don't get tired, go on! It is hard to find that connection point with the audience, but it is very easy to break at the same time. You should be alert at all times.

You give great importance to the way *bertsolaris* sing. Also to the gestures. Is it a matter of cadence, like the one Lazkao Txiki¹⁸ possessed?

Lazkao's style was extraordinarily exaggerated. What he spoke he would accompany with his body, his soul, his gestures, everything. I like that, because you prove you are creating at the very same time that you are expressing yourself. Now I say this, later I say another thing. It's a way of overtaking the *bertso*. There are other ways, of course. Lizaso, for example, clears it away, he lightens the *bertso* itself, but at the end, there it goes, an important idea. And, well, he sings in a way that accompanies what he improvised: he sings without even blinking until he gets to the end and then he accelerates, or he gives his voice more power. I think *bertsolaris* are all very conscious of their abilities and when singing they tend to reinforce them. The young *bertsolari* may be more preoccupied in seeing the *bertso*, in singing in a more proper way, but once you overcome the technical barrier you start to give each expression its own color.

There is an infinity of occasions on which you travel to the same places over and over again. What do you talk about during the trip? About your job, perhaps?

Matters related to *bertsolaritza* take up maybe 20 percent of the total time, since we talk about anything and everything. On our way back home, it is really possible that we comment about the theme we didn't succeed with, or we did succeed with, which themes have cleared a path without previous schemes. Maybe the whole clue for it to work is friendship. Probably Lizaso, Peñagarikano, and Sarasua have been those whom I have paired with the most frequently in free-style performances, and they are all my friends. It's a different friendship in every case. It's curious, but I think that we haven't once dined all four of us together. I know I could never get really mad at them, nor them at me, and I'm also positive that if there was any kind of problem we could make it work the following day at the latest. This situation allows you to breathe and improvise, to be relaxed.

You don't like it when your partner makes a mistake in the improvisation . . .

No, and it is not because of our big hearts, but because we are practical people. It is almost impossible for you to perform correctly if your partner makes a mistake. I don't know if it's about empathy or communication. And the mutual respect is very important. For example, we have two *bertsolaris* improvising in a controversy with a free theme—one of them carries the baton, the other one follows him; so here we find ourselves with two different kinds of loyalty and each kind of loyalty has to play its part. He who carries the baton bears the whole weight by proposing two themes, but he also enjoys the freedom to propose whatever theme he feels like. Well, this *bertsolari* should propose a theme and squeeze that theme into a series of *bertsos*. If he changes the theme rapidly, the *bertsolari* that follows will get lost in a continuous, pure, and hard improvisation. That's why each theme should be kept for a while. But the *bertsolari* who follows the trail should also show his loyalty: he should answer and not sneak away, no matter how

¹⁸ Emblematic figure of twentieth-century *bertsolaritza*.

uncomfortable or detached he is from the proposed theme. Everything gets complicated in a festival, with a large group of *bertsolaris*. Nevertheless, it is frequent that the *bertsolari* who's not performing at a certain moment "throws ideas," whispering to the one improvising at that moment. And that *bertsolari* gets those ideas and sings them. I think this is the nicest interchange that can take place on stage. The scene consists of a market of ideas. We don't stop talking and it's very necessary. If you close yourself down you will crash over the microphone. I know very well when my good day is: when I hear the theme proposed to the others and I think of a good *bertso*, and right away I tell it to my partner. Whenever that happens, by the time you are behind the microphone you know you'll always have something in your mind.

How do you manage with the following generation of *bertsolaris*, with people younger than you?

I've worked with all of them, but only once in a while. It has always been a very good relationship. But here's the problem: I have trouble when starting off. With *bertsolaris* of my own generation, like Lizaso, Peñagarikano, it's not important to me to open the way or, on the contrary, to follow the trail—that's a conceptual job. But I prefer that my partner sing the first *bertso*. Should I make all these people listen in order for me to sing any triviality? I still can't get that idea out of my mind. And with younger *bertsolaris*, it is I, due to my age, who should start. And that's hard for me.

One of them is Maialen Lujanbio, a legend in *bertsolaritza*, and not only for being a woman. You've observed her evolution.

When she excelled, people admired Maialen from a masculine view. When she was 15 she improvised pretty well, she was hard, and people claimed, "What big balls she's got!" It was something really sexist, she was judged by supposedly masculine attributes: her temper, her impulse, her starting off . . . later she evolved without losing any of the previous attributes. She's managed to build her private vision of life, she's managed to create from using her own specific language. It's impressive.

You found yourself face to face with her in the 2001 finals. At the end of the performance you hugged each other, which moved the audience—people stood up when you won for the third time.

In that final it was very clear for me if I wanted to win or not. I almost didn't want to win, but I wanted to do a very good performance. I don't like the face-to-face act, and when only Maialen and I were left I didn't want to win, I wanted her to win. But I couldn't do it badly either. I felt trapped.

To be a *bertsolari* requires continuous contact with the people before, during, and after each performance. They are always exposed. Regarding this reality, what are the qualities a *bertsolari* should have?

One shouldn't become arrogant, that's for sure. We're not that good; we simply measure words and make rhymes. And I guess that, further from that point, each one of us needs certain qualities, different for each case. But there's something we all have in common and this is the feeling that we are in a certain linguistic community that belongs to a minority. This is something essential. I can speak in Spanish and communicate in Spanish when required, but my way of expressing my life day after day is the same as when I'm onstage. It wouldn't work any other way. The audience wouldn't believe it.

How does your family handle your profession as a *bertsolari*?

Well, I believe I've been lucky with that, although I also sought out this situation. I never liked mystifying things, and today my own sons aren't interested at all in my public life. My wife is not "a wife behind her man," and she wouldn't accept that, either. Others would.

Would you like your son or daughter to become a *bertsolari* some day?

That's a frequent question. We could have three options here: they could be bad *bertsolaris* (and we wouldn't have any more problems), or they could be mediocre (and we would have a little problem, because they would like to be good), or they could be really good (and I know what it means to be a good *bertsolari*). For all this, I'd like them to just work out the ability to improvise, because this would allow them to excel in other areas. My daughter is 16 and one day she confessed she might want to become a lawyer. I told her then that it would be appropriate for her to register in a *bertso* school, where she could learn how to confront an audience—she would learn how to express herself and to refute ideas.

What are your hobbies? You're a well-known long distance runner.

I always played sports. When I was 16 I started to practice marathon running. I love everything epic, and a one-mile race is not epic at all, it's simply a race. I feel a marathon is an adventure.

What kinds of things do you read?

I love the physical experience of reading newspapers every morning. I prefer it to the radio or TV. Regarding the rest, I've read novels just because I enjoyed it so much, but I think these days I'm going through a phase where I'm hooked on literary essays. I usually read with a sponge mentality, willing to learn what I read. I don't get obsessed, but I know that everything I absorb I can use later in my improvisation. The more consciously you read and learn, the easier it will be for you to use it while improvising. I believe all information we absorb in different ways stays in our brain in different stages.

What makes you happy and what do you hate?

Lately it's hard for me to decide what makes me happy. I live so balanced . . . I've grabbed the measure of the day-to-day life. I do work, but I don't feel it is work. *Bertsolaritza* offers me much happiness. What do I hate? I'd need to look deeply . . . I hate the absence of empathy. I hate those persons who see somebody else suffering and they don't suffer themselves. I can't stand the feeling of property, I hate that tendency people have to make up "necessities." That dependence on e-mail, on mobile phones, on having a dog with a pedigree! I love freedom. I like people who simply know how to behave, and also people who know how to handle situations. That's beautiful. But they also need to be good at both.

Where do you place *bertsolaritza* in our actual society?

It is difficult to specify. *Bertsolaritza* shows at least one feature: we can manage an activity without having a plan beforehand. This doesn't mean that there's no elaboration, but in a society where everything is planned, with previous reports, we are people who improvise. And maybe we are admired for this reason.

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Interview With Maialen Lujanbio Zugasti

Estitxu Eizagirre

Maialen Lujanbio Zugasti was born in Hernani (Gipuzkoa) in 1976. She started to sing *bertsos* when she was a child and won several prizes in championships: the children's level of the Inter-school championship twice; the Osinalde Prize; the Euskal Herria National Championship finals in 1997 and 2001 (she ended second in 2001); the Gipuzkoa Championship in 2003. Lujanbio performs around 100 times a year and is one of the most solid representatives of the young generation.

Lujanbio is not only a successful *bertsolari*; she also has a degree in Fine Arts and does some work in creative writing. She served as the screenwriter for the film *Ilargiaren skretua* (*The Secret of the Moon*), as well as some short stories. She publishes editorials in newspapers regularly.

Lujanbio was also outstanding in sports when young. She played handball from beginners to junior levels, and she played for the Euskadi National Team in 1991-92.

How did you start singing *bertsos*?

There's one opinion that holds that *bertsolaritza* is transmitted through the family, that we carry it in the blood. That wasn't my case. We didn't live in a *bertsolari* environment; when I was little I didn't hear *bertsos* at home. My father and grandmother had a passion for *bertsolaritza* but kept it to themselves, and when I started to sing they began to sing those *bertsos* they already knew. Since I didn't get that influence from home, I started to sing *bertsos* at the *ikastola*¹ at the age of 11, like so many others of my generation. I remember watching a neighbor when he started to write and sing his first *bertsos* at the *ikastola*. I was curious, but it wasn't really all that important to me at that time. And then, without knowing why, I also began creating *bertsos* on my own. I didn't know the rules or the logic of the *bertso*, nothing, but somehow I did it.

There were another two kids who had a passion and talent for *bertsolaritza* at the *ikastola*, and we all began singing our *bertsos* in class: one day one of them would sing a *bertso*

¹ The *ikastolas* are Basque schools created at the end of Franco's dictatorship. The education is in the Euskara language and the schools transmit Basque culture and history. They are official schools nowadays.

to me, the following day I would sing the answer, and so on. They might not have been “real” *bertsos*, but at least we wanted them to be. When our teachers realized our enthusiasm, they proposed the founding of a *bertso-eskola*² within the *ikastola*. From there, we started to learn the basic technique at the *bertso-eskola*, refining what we had previously done on our own.

Up to what level did you learn at the *bertso-eskola*, and where and how did you learn afterwards?

It’s never been intentional; it has happened without being really conscious of what I was doing, mostly without thinking about the next step, with no intention of getting anywhere.

I went to the *bertso eskola* because I’ve always liked the language very much and I liked the whole process. On the other hand, it was also due to the group environment that we had. At the *ikastola* we learned the basic techniques, as well as the culture surrounding *bertsolaritza*: old *bertsos*, things about other *bertsolaris*, and so on. The *ikastola* gave us the language and the *bertso* in all its scope, and through this a bigger interest in tradition and the Euskara language emerged. It gave us the context in which we could start singing; it was the initial push.

But my evolution as a *bertsolari* has been pretty peculiar. I didn’t come out to the town square after being taught at the *bertso-eskola*—I started to sing in public much earlier. Therefore, I’ve learned things from both places . . . or maybe more from the town square. For example, when the *bertso-eskolas* at the *ikastolas* got together and the municipal *bertso-eskola* was created, I hardly attended. Sometimes due to laziness, other times due to lack of motivation. The group had an excellent environment, but I wasn’t motivated to go into that white classroom in the culture hall every Tuesday evening; I felt a little strange doing that.

If you didn’t sing *bertsos* at the *bertso eskola*, what did you really get from it?

I’ve always identified with the group at the *bertso-eskola*. It’s given me the human part of it, the possibility of doing things as part of a community or group. The week of the *bertso*, the parties, the performances . . . it was a group of persons who had the same enthusiasm, and we shared our feelings about the *bertsos*. It was a group with whom you could talk about *bertsos* and performances . . . it was more a bunch of friends than a place to learn for me.

What were the *bertsolaris* like when you were little?

I didn’t know any *bertsolari*, I didn’t have any idols. It isn’t that way nowadays. Today *bertsolaritza* is an activity with prestige, and is fashionable; most of the *euskaldunes* (people who speak Basque) know us because they see *bertsolaris* on television and other places.

When we started, just 15 years ago, the *bertsolaris* wouldn’t appear on TV, they didn’t have any prestige. It is almost the opposite now. Children used to make fun of us at the *ikastola*

² *Bertso-eskolas* are extracurricular classes within the *ikastola* that teach how to create *bertsos*. Most of the *bertso-eskolas* were created first at the *ikastolas*, and after that most of them became the town’s *bertso-eskola*, where children from all schools could attend.

because we sang *bertsos*. Singing *bertsos* used to be more of an adult thing, something for old men, something traditional and out of fashion that belonged to the *baserritarras* (peasants). The tendency to call *bertsolaris kaxeros*³ seems to be a thing of the past, but that's not true; we're called that now because we sing *bertsos*. Our friends couldn't understand why children like us loved doing those "old people" things.

Some years later a spectacular revolution took place; *bertsolaritza* was in fashion, and some of us youngsters came onto the scene. We changed from being seen as "country people" to being seen as modern and fashionable.

The Interschool Championships⁴ created the big push to sing in public. You've said that in those days you didn't have any references or intention of becoming a well-known *bertsolari*. What kind of advantages does that background offer?

When I started, I didn't even want to become a *bertsolari*. When you attend a championship, you do things the best you can, but the push to get to the town square was also by inertia: we got in during high tide and the flow took us from stage to stage.

I think the lack of ambition helped me later. It wasn't important to realize there were places where I couldn't sing. I didn't need to get anywhere, and therefore I've been doing things without a certain path. Those paths have emerged as I've continued.

How do you remember your great jump into the town square?

It was something really forced and being a woman helped a lot. There were some *bertsolari* women before me. I knew from the beginning that Arantzazu Loidi was one of them and that she won the Interschool Championship, although nobody told me about it. Perhaps that helped me unconsciously, that I was the only girl in the Interschool Championship. While I was getting to the finals and they saw I was singing *bertsos* in a mostly correct manner for my age, everybody started talking. I remember some newspapers called me in order to interview me when I was just 12 or 13. By then, the little girl who sang *bertsos* was a great character.

I remember one of the first calls I got was the key to get into the *bertso* world. I was called from the town of Hondarribia to sing on Women's Day. They needed two women and two men, but there weren't many *bertsolari* women then. That's why they called me, though I was only 15. When I was told I had to sing with Egaña and Lizaso, I answered that that wasn't possible. I had great difficulty in completing the *bertsos*, and I said I thought it was too much for me. Their response was the following: "If you're into this, there's no backing out." I didn't know what to say, and I couldn't refuse. That performance was the beginning of the town squares phase. Why? Because it was transmitted on TV. Television has had great influence in the process of entering the town squares and making us become public people. That performance ended

³ *Kaxero* is a kind of insult given to the *baserritarras*; there are very few *baserritarras* nowadays in *Euskal Herria*, and people had a tendency to despise them.

⁴ The Interschool Championships are competitions in which girls and boys of school age could participate. Many people and media attended to see the finals. Maialen won this championship twice.

pretty well, and it was shown on a program about *bertsolaritza* called *Hitzetik Hortzera*. From that point on, I started to be known by everyone.

I was asked to sing in other places and it was really difficult to avoid all the different performances: how to say yes or no and to whom. Since I was 15, I couldn't perform with the best *bertsolaris* because I had problems finishing a *zortziko txiki* (the smallest strophe, with four rhymes). That's why it was so forced—they had put us on a level where we didn't belong. It was something new to see a young girl singing *bertsos* surrounded by all the great *bertsolari* men.

At the beginning you were practically the only woman. What was that like?

It wasn't so unnatural for me. I've always been really enthusiastic about sports and I was used to playing with boys. Estitxu Arozena, Iratxe Ibarra, and I all started at the same time and we used to talk a lot about our situation. Relationships among girls and boys were very natural in our generation since we had been together for so long at the *bertso-eskola*.

I've always received acceptance and support from the veteran *bertsolaris* because they felt comfortable with new people. There are many other activities where new generations may be considered as competition, but not in our case. We had heard that *bertsolaritza* was about to disappear, so the arrival of new young people was welcomed. I think the veterans' attitude was exemplary. I would love to have that capacity for being so receptive with future generations. But they could also be paternalistic and protective of the tradition. I guess the new situation was difficult for them as well, singing together with a teenage girl. When the young people sang *bertsos*, we were a bit aggressive, but the older singers made an effort not to be too aggressive in exchange. Our part was difficult, but theirs wasn't easy either.

The public, even the women, had a hard time accepting women singing in public, or believing that their words would be of any importance. Many thought it was surprising, and others probably thought it was just a passing fad, and that we would leave just as we had come. One of the first comments was, "she did it well in spite of being a girl!" This wasn't a joke; they hadn't seen a girl sing *bertsos* and they were surprised to see that I did it well. What we can conclude from this is difficult, of course. Some would say they would never get used to listening to a girl singing *bertsos*; they thought it wasn't the same. We've heard all kinds of comments, and I feel that I've heard too many bad things. In general, I believe listeners ultimately accepted us because the *bertsolaris* themselves had accepted us. In that sense, I will always appreciate the protective attitude from the veteran *bertsolaris*, even when they were overly protective.

You've said you were invited to sing many places because you were a woman. What was your attitude toward this?

We took advantage of the opportunity we had been given. We were invited because we were special, and wherever we went we tried to sing *bertsos* the best we could. It's been hard work. "I'm not going to shout, I'll be silent, but with time you will accept that I can sing good *bertsos* and you will listen." That has been our logic. It has been a very smart and very female strategy. I believe that it has been the right path.

When you were 18, you went to Bilbao to study Fine Arts.⁵ What happened in Bilbao?

My time spent in Bilbao was my student phase—those days when you leave your parents' house and share a flat or move in with friends. It is you who has to impose rules upon yourself. Everything is a discovery . . . it's wonderful. I live in a small town, and Bilbao is a city. There you can see things you won't see in small towns: the cosmopolitan environment, all kinds of people, all kinds of ideas . . . it is very enriching if you're receptive. You meet old rockers and new people, there are many more experiences to be had. Things happen and you do things that aren't possible in a small town, and since you're anonymous, you discover new aspects of yourself.

I was already singing *bertsos* from town to town by then. Bilbao in general hasn't been so Basque-oriented and enthusiastic about *bertsos*, and since I was anonymous there I was more relaxed.

After the initiation years, you reached the growth years. When and how did you improve your skills?

Just moving ahead gives you the opportunity to improve. The training of our generation has come only after long practice. After performing so often, your skin hardens, you learn the tricks to being on stage, you go to many towns and meet a lot of people . . . all this enriches the *bertsolari* and gives us the chance to think.

But I believe that personal improvement of the *bertsos* is linked to the different moments in time. When you're 15, you are not at the same point in your life as when you're 25. You have more experience, your ideologies develop in the widest sense, you're becoming more and more of a person, and that's reflected in the *bertsos*, without a doubt. After all, when singing *bertsos* you are also talking, it comes out of your mouth, from your perspective and from your experience.

When we were younger our way of making up *bertsos* was probably more limited regarding the themes, with fewer dimensions, more direct, more consistent, and perhaps even more rebellious. As time goes by, you start to see things in a different way and your way of singing *bertsos* changes: you have more dimension, it's more complex, more subtle.

How has your way of singing *bertsos* changed as time has gone by?

At the beginning I would take advantage of the situation of being a young girl in an adult man's world. In those days, besides what I could do, the context conditioned everything. Since *bertsolaritza* is a dialectic dispute or argument, we youngsters had to appear to be prouder, stronger, and more stable than we really were in order to be up to the level of those great and veteran *bertsolaris*. That provoked us to develop a more aggressive way of singing *bertsos*.

⁵ It is said that Bilbao is the only city in Euskal Herria, because half of the two million inhabitants in the entire Euskal Herria region live there, and therefore the city has a very cosmopolitan atmosphere.

People were surprised because we maintained that stereotype for several years, and people thought we really were that way.

As you mature and you feel more and more comfortable with the *bertsos*, you have other necessities. You need to talk a different way, about other things, with other tones. And you also try to intensify your way of singing *bertsos*. I started out very generally, but little by little I started to modify my image and my *bertsolari* persona, getting closer and closer to where I am now. Maybe the most evident indication of that evolution was the Euskal Herria Championship in 2001.

What exactly was the change that took place in the 2001 Championship?

It was a very conscious change. I used that championship as a platform to show the people a process I had been carrying out for a long time, in order to break away from my persona and say: “I can do better than singing answering *bertsos*, or funny, provoking, and insolent *bertsos*.” That was a bet I had with myself, but the process came from long before. I wanted to take my way of singing to other dimensions.

I did it consciously, but the problem is that people expect something from you, which corresponds to who they think you are. People don’t think it is credible nor do they like it when you change. In general, people accept what they expect and they can’t accept what they do not expect. My feeling was that by trying to change my expected persona I was sacrificing the people’s approval. I actually heard less clapping. But that was what I wanted, that was my choice. I had already drowned in my stereotyped persona, so I didn’t always want to do what people expected from me. I was also more mature and wanted to move on to other things.

I made a great effort to demonstrate to myself and to the rest of the people that I could also perform more serious subject matter well; that what I might say could also be interesting, or even that I had something to say; that I could also sing softly, and could sing *bertsos* directly from the heart; that I could sing with other dimensions, and get out some other aspects of my personality I did all this to open myself.

I began to try to change my performance style. For example, the logic in my way of singing up until then was quite stressed: I would leave the reason till the end. For example, I gave the final reason first and then I would add everything on top of it. In that championship I tried not to put everything at the end, or to finish the *bertsos* in such a radical way—so serious, but softer and suggestive. I tried to balance the load of the *bertso* in another way.

That year you left with an expedition during which you saw a lot of the world. How did it influence you as a *bertsolari*?

I don’t know up to what point it influenced my *bertsos*, but although you’re not conscious of it in the moment, all personal experiences are kept inside yourself. I went seven months without singing. That hadn’t happened to me since I started. I returned motivated to work hard, fresh and willing to sing.

That tendency of the *bertsolaris* to go on holiday is new, since most of the performances are done during the summer, when the rest of the people are on holiday. Until now *bertsolaris* have lived for the *bertsos*. You, on the other hand, like to get out for a while. Are you looking for a new way of life for the *bertsolaris*?

I can't understand things as the rest of the *bertsolaris* do. I don't feel things the same way and I don't want to live them that way. Some *bertsolaris* went on holiday before I did. But there's also a saying that in a certain way, "you are at the people's service" (since the *bertsos* promote Basque culture, language, and the freedom to express yourself, since we were oppressed for so many years). When you were called to perform, it wasn't well accepted if you said no. Even accepting tradition up to a point, I believe that taking a break every once in a while is better for everyone, since they will return in better shape and will sing better.

Until now the *bertsolaris* have had a *bertsolari* way of life. They are *bertsolaris* whether they are singing *bertsos* or not. I think I would get exhausted if I did it that way. I don't see myself doing that. I sing *bertsos*, that's my profession nowadays, and also my greatest passion, but I have another life besides *bertsolaritza*. Although both lives are intermingled, "I improvise *bertsos*" more than "I am a *bertsolari*."

Regarding your personality, how do you think *bertsolaritza* has shaped you?

My mother says she was shocked when I started to sing *bertsos*. She said, "how can you get yourself in front of the public being so shy in your private life?"

I don't know to what extent *bertsolaritza* has shaped me, or if it was just myself singing *bertsos*. The only objective data I have is that I am 28 now and that I've been singing *bertsos* for 17 years, of which I've spent 13 years in the circuit going from town to town and being well known. I can't imagine my life without it. When I was younger, while discovering the world, I was already a *bertsolari*. My life rotates around this. To be known and to sing in front of people molds your character.

How important is personality in being a *bertsolari*?

I think it's important to have certain features; one of them is being secure in oneself, since you're getting on stage in front of the public to express your opinions. I don't think there has to be a special way of singing *bertsos*. That wouldn't be interesting. Fortunately, we never know how we become *bertsolaris*. Maybe those who expect less from it are the ones who succeed. You need charisma so the public listens to you, to attract people, to communicate . . . and fortunately, no one has found any chemical formula to produce this yet.

Nowadays there are many *bertsolaris* with good personalities and good stage presence, more than there are offers to sing. And I think natural selection will be driven more by personal qualities than by the technique used. In my opinion, those who are more charismatic will go on; those who have a special personality, those who have something special to say, or even those who have a special way of saying it, a particular way of seeing the world, or a special sense of humor.

What kind of work does the *bertsolari* have to do off of the stage?

Although it may seem you're not working, you are always alert, like a microphone or a tape recorder. The basic training consists of stocking everything useful in your head. You're always thinking about everything. What I do during the year isn't done for the *bertsos*, but at the end it serves for that too; I'm aware of the news, I think about things that are happening, I define where I am with regard to the events But you really prepare yourself consciously for the championships.

Those of us who sing *bertsos* have a natural enthusiasm about the language, and we have a special attitude with regard to a nice sentence, a joke, or a new word. When we hear a song we listen in a special way.

What are your sources of inspiration?

Books, television, movies . . . and also the street. When we walk on the streets we are alert, we watch, we try to see things, what kind of details can awaken some interest in our minds That fieldwork is very nice: when I am out of my familiar context, or in another city, I see new things and I describe them.

The sceneries fill you up a lot, but do they also empty you?

On one hand, going from performance to performance is a real physical beating. On the other hand, nowadays *bertsolaris* are known in the Basque world; they are a reference, they are well known. That's not just because of being famous (in fact, the Basque community is very small and the *bertsolaris* are not that well known in the Spanish-speaking world), but you are a known face. That's satisfying, but also tiring.

Besides that, the Championship also involves getting into the media world and it also means everyone has to be in charge of the right measures to follow. Right at this moment, I'm in a crisis with the media. I don't feel like appearing on TV or in newspapers. Maybe it's because TV and newspapers are like this: they make you become a star and people only know you because you appear on TV. I don't feel the need to say anything at this moment. I don't feel like being seen by the whole Basque Country, or appearing on TV or becoming famous. I don't want to become a public person, although in fact I am one because I sing in front of the public. I accept what's expected from me, but from that point on I try to control it: if I'm being interviewed, I try to say interesting things. I try not to appear in the thousands of insubstantial programs on television, because they require you to do silly things.

And this is the contradiction: our activity is in the public eye, but at the same time I try to hide among people who also appreciate discretion.

Last year you participated in the opinion section in the *Berria* newspaper.⁶ I guess that added to your exhaustion.

Yes, lately I've been giving everything of myself daily. It has been exhausting and now I feel like hiding. Every morning I've shown my face to the people. But it has left me with a very good feeling. It has forced me to work day after day, to write everyday, and writing is similar to singing *bertsos*: it is creative, it involves mastering the language, word games, ideas, and ideologies Although they are two different activities, deep down they are very similar things. They force you to think about themes and to elaborate upon your point of view. It has been very enriching for me.

“Language” is a word that has come out frequently. How does a performer actually *feel* a language? Does the fact that the Euskara is a language spoken by the minority limit your production?

No matter if many or few people speak it, the language belongs to me. I can't conceive the language as something external, as a tool used to write or to sing *bertsos*. I *feel* in Euskara. Euskara is my way of understanding the world, my way of behaving, my first language, my sense of humor, my way of feeling, my way of speaking. It comes out spontaneously. It's not an ideological matter, it isn't something external. It comes from inside; that's how I feel it and that's how I do it. Now, when we are starting to go abroad, you may think we can't go far with Euskara, but I can't imagine myself working with another language. It's our way of singing, and the main feature of our identity. Why can't we go abroad? What can we do—shall we start singing in English? That doesn't make any sense. The objective isn't to become one in this world, it is to be ourselves, and to let our identities become known, but always in our way, not transforming things into another language.

The *bertsos* have connected you with tradition. Are they a modern instrument at the same time?

As we have explained, there was a change in a very short period of time. We *bertsolaris* were considered part of the tradition, and then we started to appear on TV. We were a bunch of youngsters who were aesthetically very different from the previous *bertsolaris*. Ideologically our world, our musical references, and our hobbies were very different and very modern. Also our problems were very real: drugs or even the way we dealt with our relationships. It was a small revolution.

I'm more a product of our time. The older *bertsolaris* are more of their time. That has been one of the loveliest things that has happened in the *bertsolaritza* these last years: we have passed from a world that seemed very closed and traditional into a world in which we are able to

⁶ The *Berria* newspaper is the only newspaper published in the Basque language and distributed throughout the whole Basque Country region.

demonstrate that *bertsos* can adapt to any context, since they are something verbal and improvised. That's one of the biggest values of the *bertsos*.

We might be asked to sing in a little rural town any weekend, where we can be asked to sing on their themes and we sing mostly for elderly people. The following day we might have to go to a squatter house in another town, with their youngsters It's very important, because we can demonstrate that *bertsos* adapt to all different situations. Within two days you can sing in a tavern in a city and in the festivals in a little town.

You won the Gipuzkoa *bertsolari* championship in 2003. Who did you dedicate that triumph to and why?

I dedicated it to the women, mostly those who have stopped half way from their objectives, those women who didn't see their dreams accomplished due to societal pressure. Why? Because in order for me to win that championship many other women have sung *bertsos* before me, opening a path, and maybe they never won any championship nor had any success. They did silent work, daily, invisible, getting no praise or appreciation at all.

How do you see the situation for *bertsolari* women today?

More and more girls are joining up And what pleases me most is that the issue is more present among us: how women feel in front of the public, what kind of importance the words of women have, what credibility for people, how they feel aesthetically in front of the public I think this will all help us analyze and go forward. We all have a great deal of subconscious values and attitudes, although we don't realize it. Those are values that are very present in our society, since the *bertsolari* world is a model of society. And without noticing, those values are conditioning us, they are restricting us. It would be good for everyone—not only women—to have the necessary attitude to detect those things in our subconscious.

How does the *bertsolari* dress up to appear on stage?

One of the features of *bertsolaritza* is we that don't have specific clothes for the stage. The *bertsolari* normally has a drink in the bar before performing, and gets to the stage with the same clothes, with that shirt and jeans. I think it's an interesting phenomenon, since it shows our proximity to the public: it says, "I'm one of your kind." When the performance has ended, the *bertsolari* doesn't go to the dressing room; instead, he mingles with people and has a drink with friends. Although that can be a little hard on certain occasions, it is also interesting that such a successful phenomenon is so close to the people. Although by their activity *bertsolaris* are artists, they're not characters; they are close to everyday people.

We don't even pay close attention to the stage very often, which is often very crude or simple. There is a tremendous contrast between the success that *bertsolaritza* has and the treatment it receives; we don't dress up just because we might be on TV. That would mean that globalization has absorbed us. Following what's fashionable, or the standard, or what's on TV is not interesting. We have to preserve our own features.

The importance of the clothes is that they agree with each *bertsolari*'s persona. People listen to your *bertsos*, that's true, but they also watch you. Depending on the clothes you're wearing, you may not feel like yourself and then you won't sing comfortably. Besides, it can happen that with a certain message given out by your *bertsos* your clothes might not be believable or coherent. We all think about how to dress for the performances. Those who wear worn-out jeans don't do so by chance or because they're careless; they wear those clothes because they decided to do so. That means that behind those clothes there's an implicit message, a contrast, that at the end you find interesting.

With the actual performances, and since TV began to take part, I understand that there are aesthetic matters that need to be taken care of. It's a matter of moderation.

You're collaborating with Bertsozale Elkarte⁷. Why?

I think the majority of us identify with Bertsozale Elkarte⁷ and we feel it as our nucleus. I also feel indebted to them, because we're singing and there's a lot of people working in the Bertsozale Elkarte⁷, and I have also started to participate. I agree with the project. We define what we want our world to become and we are using certain strategies in order to obtain that. Things have been done right so far, and there's a lot of work left to do, mostly due to the special situation we have here in the Basque Country. There are three languages and Euskara is the minority language, so it's in danger of extinction. The constant political conflict affects the *bertsolaritza* tradition.

⁷ Translator's note: Friends of the Verse Association in the Basque Country.