

Non-epic Genres of Oral Tradition

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Lecture 3

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Plan for today's lecture

1. The meaning behind the title: "Non-epic genres of OT"
2. Two living examples: contest poetry
3. Two manuscript examples: *Homeric Hymns* & Anglo-Saxon charms
4. An ecology of South Slavic oral genres

I. The meaning behind the title

- A. Prominence of the epic genre in studies in oral tradition
 1. Finland: the *Kalevala* and its cultural importance
 2. ancient Greece (and thus Europe): Homer's *Iliad* & *Odyssey*
 3. 19th-century linkage of national identity with national epos
- B. Privileging forms that become highly respected as "literature"
 - and ignoring forms that do not make the transition
- C. Results of these two biases
 1. Over-concentration on epic at the expense of other genres
 2. Extremely narrow idea of what epic can be worldwide
 - problems with African epic, e.g.
 3. Ignoring "non-literary" oral genres
- D. Today we will concentrate on non-epic and non-literary genres
 - still an imbalanced view: very large and diverse collection
 - thus we will be looking at only a few examples
 - ++ trying to demonstrate variety among genres
 - ++ trying to demonstrate variety among performers
 - ++ trying to demonstrate variety among audiences
 - ++ trying to demonstrate variety in social functions
 - if epic serves as a "charter for group identity,"
 - ++ *non-epic genres serve many diverse functions*

II. Two living examples: contest poetry

A. *Bertsolaritza*, from the Basque country

**See the special issue of *Oral Tradition*:

<http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/22ii>

1. genre of verbal dueling

- ++ cp. *flyting* in *Beowulf*: Unferth vs. Beowulf (ON *senna*)
- ++ cp. African American "dozens"
- ++ cp. dueling in hip hop and rap (Eminem)
- ++ strong emphasis on improvisation, but within rules
 - ** short period to prepare a complex poem/response
 - ** music, verse form, meter, metaphor, rhyme, etc.

- ++ object: to defeat an opponent (ritual combat & insult)
- ++ category = Oral Performance (Foley 2002)

2. performers

- ++ now changing: more young people, more women
- ++ informal apprenticeships; constant practice
- ++ new development: “*bertso* schools” (starting at 8 years old)
- ++ costume and pose while performing
- ++ highly literate group, but
 - ** literacy is irrelevant in this performance arena
 - ** oral traditional *register* = medium for poet & audience

3. audiences

- ++ cross-section of society
- ++ leans toward the politically active, esp. younger people
- ++ enormous and avid interest among all age-groups
- ++ poets are local & national heroes
- ++ highly literate group, but
 - ** literacy is irrelevant in this performance arena
 - ** oral traditional *register* = medium for poet & audience

4. social functions

- ++ everyday context: *bertso* dinners (1000+ each year)
 - ** entertainment, local group identity, Basque identity
- ++ national context: 4-year cycle for the championship
 - ** very similar to the Olympics or World Cup: sport
 - ** ritual combat with verbal heroes
 - ** national solidarity / similar to oral epic function
 - ** social criticism of non-Basque government, corporations, and rightist political causes

Example of Basque *bertsolaritza* (from the last national championship in late 2005)

The prompt given to Igor Elortza Aranoa and Andoni Egaña Makazaga, with directions for verse-form, melody, and three cycles of dueling:

“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.”

Their response (a summary in prose):

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.

More information:

Garzia et al. 2001 (summary at <http://www.bertsozale.com/liburua/ingelesa/sarrera/>.
Bertsozale Elkartea website: <http://www.bertsozale.com/english/index.php>

B. *Slam poetry*, from the Americas and Europe

1. genre of verbal dueling

- invented in 1986 by construction worker and poet Marc Smith at the Green Mill nightclub in Chicago, Illinois
- roots in “beat generation” poetry (Allen Ginsburg, etc.)
- but reaches beyond “spoken word poetry” to actual contest
 - ** using texts composed for performance
 - ** memorized, then texts are discarded
 - ** poem changes from performance to performance
- scoring by judges on 10.0 scale in formal settings
- no formal rules for verse form, but 3-minute requirement
- between individuals (2+) or between teams (2+)
- object: to earn a higher score than one’s opponent
- 50% poem, 50% performance
- Frequently asked questions about slam poetry:

<http://www.poetryslam.com/modules.php?name=FAQ>

2. performers

- most 18-35, but many older as well
- approximately equal male-female participation
- ethnicity: more minority (Afr. Amer., Caribbean, Hispanic)
- no real apprenticeships, but very frequent practice
- performers often identify themselves as poets, in non-slam activities as well
- costume and pose: no props or objects allowed
- from night-clubs (local, weekly events) to large halls (annual national competition)
- highly literate group, but
 - ** literacy irrelevant in this performance arena
 - ** oral traditional *register* = medium for poet & audience
- category = Voiced Texts (Foley 2002)

3. audiences

- cross-section of younger, left-leaning population
- best poet-performers are treated as local heroes
- audience actively attempts to influence judges’ voting
- judges are chosen from the audience at local events
 - ** seen as “people’s poetry”
- very loud, enthusiastic interaction

4. social functions

- local context
 - ** weekly ritual, developing reputation, entertainment
 - ** “social protest” themes of poetry
 - ## delivered with a range of emotions
 - ** claiming poetry as a *performance art*
 - ## contrast to university “poetry readings”

- national context
 - ** spreading a national movement
 - ## politics and art together

Example of slam poetry: Lynne Procope performing her poem “elemental woman”
Visit http://oraltradition.org/hrop/fourth_word

Published Text

I want to be some kind of elemental woman
 the original born before my time
 i have lived this life before;
 on the banks of the orinoco,
 the ganges,
 the Nile...

disbelieving the line,
 because i have struggled
 down freedom’s road and
 marched blood red streets in new york city

un-repressed by religion
 even though i have burned in salem
 and been stoned in Jerusalem
 yet still i am faithful, elemental woman

Live Performance

I know I need to be someKINDof
 ## ele^mental woman
 you know # the original
 SORTof
born before my time
 because we have
lived this life before
 on the banks of
 the Orinoco # the Ganges # and the Nile

SORTof
 DISbelieving the LINE
 because # I have
 [STRUGgled down ^{FREE}dom’s ROAD and
 marched BLOOD red STREETS in New York
 City]

TYPEof
 UNrePRESSED by religion
 because I have # BURNED in Salem
 and been STONED # in # Jerusalem
 yet # STILL # FAITHful
 # ele^mental woman

More information:

Foley 2002: 156-65 (with “Further Reading”)

Poetry Slam International: <http://www.poetryslam.com/>

III. Two manuscript examples from the ancient and medieval worlds

A. The *Homeric Hymns*

- 33 hymns, 29 of them short (5-60 lines)
- 4 major hymns (400+ lines): Aphrodite, Hermes, Demeter, Apollo
 - ++ “Hymn to Demeter” used in conjunction with Kore ritual
- most probably composed in 7th and 6th centuries BCE (possibly later)
 - ++ anonymous: multiple (conflicting) reports of authorship
- a “developing genre”
 - ++ shorter hymns: brief prayers and/or *prooimia* to epic
 - ** Thucydides the first to suggest function as prologues
 - ++ longer hymns: freestanding poems on their own

Example: “Hymn to Artemis” (9 lines)

translation from “The Online Medieval and Classical Library”
<http://omacl.org/Hesiod/hymns.html>

Muse, sing of Artemis, sister of the Far-shooter, the virgin who delights in arrows, who was fostered with Apollo. She waters her horses from Meles deep in reeds, and swiftly drives her all-golden chariot through Smyrna to vine-clad Claros where Apollo, god of the silver bow, sits waiting for the far-shooting goddess who delights in arrows. And so hail to you, Artemis, in my song and to all goddesses as well. **Of you first I sing and with you I begin; now that I have begun with you, I will turn to another song.**

B. The *Anglo-Saxon Charms*

- based on Lori Garner, “Anglo-Saxon Charms in Performance”
<http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/19i/Garner.pdf>
- manuscript survival: scattered through various mss.
- ethnic (emic) terminology
 - ++ *galan* (“cry out”), *gealdor* (the derivative noun: “charm”)
 - ++ *cweðan* (“say, speak”), *singan* (“sing”)
- some performance cues survived textualization, some did not
 - ++ directions for accompanying actions, etc.
- understanding the charms *as performance* is the key to merging
 1. science and superstition
 - ** some genuinely curative functions, others spiritual
 2. the physical and the verbal
 - ** explicit versus implicit instructions on performance
 3. poetry and prose: 2 charms against wens (boils or warts)

If wens afflict one at the heart, let a maiden go to a spring which runs east and draw one cup full, moving forth with the stream, and sing on it the Creed and a Paternoster and then pour it into another vessel and afterwards draw again, and sing again the Creed and a Paternoster, and do so, until you have three. Do so for nine days; soon it will be well for that one.

*	*	*
Wenne, wenne,	wenchichenne,	
her ne scealt þu timbrien,	ne nenne tun habben,	
ac þu scealt north eonene	to þan nihgan berhge,	
þer þu hauest, ermig,	enne broþer.	
He þe sceal legge	leaf et heafde.	
Under fot wolues,	under ueþer earnes,	
under earnes clea,	a þu geweornie.	
Clinge þu	alswa col on heorþe,	
sring þu	alswa scerne awage,	
and weorne	alswa weter on anbre....	

Wen, wen, little wen, here you must not build, nor have any dwelling, but you must go north to the nearby hill where you have, miserable, one brother. He must lay a leaf at your head. Under the foot of a wolf, under the wing of the eagle, under the claw of the eagle, ever may you diminish. Shrivell as a coal on the hearth, shrink as muck in the wall, and diminish as water in a pail....

4. Christian & pagan Germanic: syncretism (not hybridity)
 - both elements stay active
 - Christ alongside Woden
 - sacred and secular locations for performance
 - even a prayer to the Celtic earth-mother (Erce)!

IV. An ecology of South Slavic oral genres

A. Why do we use the term *ecology* or *ecosystem*?

1. because oral traditions are living species of verbal art
 - they morph in rule-governed ways
 - viewing them as objects = misunderstanding their “biology”
 - each occurrence is a member of the species
 - ++ it represents the genre or poem
 - ++ but it is not the genre or poem itself
2. because species live together and interact in social life
 - they do not exist in isolation
 - their context governs their biology
 - inter-breeding may occur

B. Our fieldwork team’s objective: a cross-section of village OTs

1. we wanted to guard against privileging a single genre
2. we wanted to understand each genre in terms of its social function
3. we wanted to understand any interactions that took place

C. Here are the species that we discovered in the ecosystem:

1. Epic (Christian subgenre): *Udovica Jana* (*The Widow Jana*)

<http://oraltradition.org/hrop/jana>

social function: group identity charter & behavioral models

** tell the story / explain its popularity **

2. Funeral laments (*tužbalice*)

- traditional speech-act in octosyllables, in the graveyard
 - ++ at regular intervals after the death, with a “meal”
- performer = nearest female relative
- audience = community at large; graveside visitors
- social function = healing the lineage & community

Example: “Lament for Milorad” (give background)

Good morning, young men,		all quietly sit, without girls or little children.	
Oj, where are you this early morn?		I can’t [go on], I lack the strength, I lack	
Early morn, where did you spend it?		the heart.	
For we had so hoped		You dug out my heart,	
that you didn’t reach here,	5	dug it out and carried it off.	15
and we had so hoped		But then to see an even worse grief,	
that our Mile was late [getting home].		flashing lightning unexpected.	
Dear luck, we all hoped,		A great, Mile, a great sorrow	
where your mother embraces a stone,		that Mile brought us grief	
a sad stone, [already] seven years.	10	because you brought [it] on yourself.	20
At your house, my Mićane,		If only we had not had sorrow	

4. Genealogy (*pričanje*)

- traditional speech-act in decasyllables
- performers = elderly men, one in each lineage
- audience = whoever is interested (including fieldworkers!)
- social function = enumerating the *zadruga* and its history
 ++ more accurate than the “official” church records

Example from Mileta Stojanović (the Stojanović family history):

Grandpa’s dear, you will sit there!		Stefan, look here, had no sons.	
Sit down so I can relate everything to you.		Come now, Vučić, he had three:	25
Long ago they, our ancestors, came;		Radojica, Andrija, Ljubomir.	
Stojan came even before the Uprising.		And Matija had only one,	
* * *		who was called Blagoje. . . .	
Ej! Old Stojan had three sons:	5	Ej! Radovan, that one from the third brother	
these were Petar, Miloje, Mihajlo.		had Petar, Miloje, Radomir.	30
Of sons Petar had four:		Now Radoje: only one, Dragomir;	
Miloš, Uroš, Nikola, and Stefan.		Radivoje: Velimir and Branko.	
Daughter, do you know my grandfather Nikola?		Pay attention, now, I’m counting my brothers!	
Of sons Miloje had three:	10	Well, Uncle Milutin had a trio:	
these were Vučić, Matija, and Lazar.		Živomir, Pavle, and Velimir.	35
Mihajlo had just the same, three:		There are no descendants from them!	
Radivoje, Radovan, Radoje.		Now Andrija: Svetozar, Velisav.	
That Miloš, he had two sons:		And by Djordje and Tanasija	
these were Milutin and Andrija.	15	only Veljko remained as a mature man;	
Then Uroš had three sons:		Dragoljub, Svetislav, and Dragoslav –	40
Tanasija, Vladimir, Djordje.		all were killed in the war.	
Like so, daughter, the eldest is Djordje,		Svetozar likewise had no luck,	
And the youngest did not remain living. . . .		nor Živomir, nor Miloš, nor Vitomir;	
My Nikola he had four:	20	by them there are no male children at all.	
Antonija, Svetozar, and Miloš,		But Dragiša, thank God, had [one].	45
and the third, Ljubomir my father –		Come now, here I am, Mileta!	
may God forgive his soul!		Then my brother Milosav.	

5. An unclassified species

- decayllabic speech-act in rhymed couplets
- spontaneous response of *guslar* Milutin Milojević to photograph

Ja od Boga imam dobrog dara.	Yes, from God I have a fine gift,
Evo mene mojega slikara;	Here comes my photographer;
Kogod ’oće, ko me lepo čuje,	Whoever wishes, whoever hears me well,
On mene lepo nek slikuje.	Let him take my photograph well.

D. Summary of South Slavic ecology of oral traditions

1. various genres (epic, both Moslem & Christian; funeral laments; healing charms; genealogies – also folktales, recipes, black magic, etc.)
2. various performers (women in octosyllables, men in decasyllables)
3. various audiences (from individuals to large groups)
4. various social functions (group identity charter, behavioral models, healing family & community spirit, healing the body, preserving family history)

5. the species co-exist in social life
 - serving a broad range of interdependent social needs
6. few interactions fostered by matches in meter & phraseology
 - limited by specialized languages for each genre
 - limited by specialized practitioners
 - an exception: prose folktale with epic verse inserted
 - an exception: the “unclassified species” with epic verses

Resources

- Foley, John Miles. 1991. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Rev. ed. forthcoming from the University of Notre Dame Press.
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- . 2002. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. eCompanion at www.oraltradition.org/hrop.
- . 2005. “Basque Oral Poetry Championship.” Internet article at <http://oraltradition.org/articles/2006/01/03/basque-oral-poetry-championship>.
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- . Special issue of *Oral Tradition*, with articles, photos, and videos. Available online at <http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/22ii> .