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:
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

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
## elemental 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 FREedom’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
# elemental 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”)
  ++ cwēdan (“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.

* * *

Wenn, wenne, wenchichenne,
her ne scealt þu timbrien, ne nenne tun haben,
ac þu scealt north onenê to þan nihgan berhge,
þer þu hauest, ernig, enne broþer.
He þe sceal legge leaf et heafde.
Under fot wolues, under uþer earnes,
under earnes clea, a þu geweornie.
Clinge þu als wa col on heorþe,
sring þu als wa scerne awage,
and weorne als wa weter on anbre….

Wenn, 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. Shrivvel 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,
Oj, where are you this early morn?
Early morn, where did you spend it?
For we had so hoped
that you didn’t reach here,
and we had so hoped
that our Mile was late [getting home].
Dear luck, we all hoped,
where your mother embraces a stone,
a sad stone, [already] seven years.
At your house, my Mićane,
all quietly sit, without girls or little children.
I can’t [go on], I lack the strength, I lack
the heart.
You dug out my heart,
dug it out and carried it off.
But then to see an even worse grief,
flashing lightning unexpected.
A great, Mile, a great sorrow
that Mile brought us grief
because you brought [it] on yourself.
If only we had not had sorrow
from this accursed war;
we had just begun to get settled again.
But then to see an even worse grief,
another grief unexpected.
Oj Mićane, my hero,
speak out, my happiness!
Look, your sister has come.
“My beauty,” she says,
I want, mother, to see [where my brother lies].”
You, Miško, did not stay at home,
at the hearth, your heart.
Darinka looks after the house for you
and after your grieving parents.
Your sister has come to beg you
to give her in turn your blessing.
Here some letters are destroyed;
who destroyed this?
May God destroy his luck
as [He destroyed] you, my Mićane!
Your name is destroyed
and it’s a sorrow, son, for me
and for our young people.
The young people lead the kolo;
they permitted and saw
that the letters were destroyed.
Woe is me, my Mićane,
who destroyed the letters?

Woe is me, my joy Miško,
the officials here told us
that they will repair this.
I, poor one, did not know
where it was greatly destroyed.
But Darinka says to me,
“It isn’t, mother, all that much but just a little,
and [some] letters are fainter [than others].”
Milorad, my wonderful joy,
this hot sun is burning,
but for you it is not hot.
Your youth is destroyed,
and the branch cut off.
And, Miško, I want to ask you:
Has Peko arrived [there]?
Does his wound ache terribly?
Tell me, householder, household head --
have his orphans remained?
Have your companions, Miško,
returned to their homes?
Did the young Polekšić fellow
die? Woe to his mother!
O my Suljo, my “live wire”!
Into the marshes, suffering,
into icy dark water,
the “live wire” is killed!

3. Magical healing charms (bajanje)
-- traditional speech-act in octosyllables and 4-line stanzas
-- performers = women past menopause
++ learned before puberty; part of dowry
-- audience = person to be healed (others may hear)
-- social function = healing the body

Example: a charm against erysipelas
Out of there comes the red horse,
the red man, the red mouth,
the red arms, the red legs,
the red mane, the red hooves.
As he comes, so he approaches,
he lifts out the disease immediately;
he carries it off and carries it away
across the sea without delay –
where the sheep don’t bleat,
where the goats don’t low,
where the priest doesn’t come,
where the cross isn’t borne,
so that ritual bread isn’t broken,
so that candles aren’t lit.

* * *
Into the wolf’s four legs, fifth the tail,
Out of my speaking has come the cure!

Visit http://illumination.missouri.edu/spr05/fol1.htm# and click on the Flash feature.
Or visit http://oraltradition.org/hrop/eighth_word and click on “Play the audio clip” under
the heading “Bajanje: A healing charm to cure erysipelas”
Text and translation of two versions at http://oraltradition.org/static/hrop/hc.gif
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!
Sit down so I can relate everything to you.
Long ago they, our ancestors, came;
Stojan came even before the Uprising.

* Ej! Old Stojan had three sons:
these were Petar, Miloje, Mihajlo.
Of sons Petar had four:
Miloš, Uroš, Nikola, and Stefan.
Daughter, do you know my grandfather Nikola?
Of sons Miloje had three:
these were Vučić, Matija, and Lazar.
Mihajlo had just the same, three:
Radivoje, Radovan, Radoje.
That Miloš, he had two sons:
these were Milutin and Andrija.
Then Uroš had three sons:
Tanasija, Vladimir, Djordje.
Like so, daughter, the eldest is Djordje,
And the youngest did not remain living. . . .
My Nikola he had four:
Antonija, Svetozar, and Miloš,
and the third, Ljubomir my father –
may God forgive his soul!

Stefan, look here, had no sons.
Come now, Vučić, he had three:
Radojica, Andrija, Ljubomir.
And Matija had only one,
who was called Blagoje . . . .
Ej! Radovan, that one from the third brother
had Petar, Miloje, Radomir.
Now Radoje: only one, Dragomir;
Radivoje: Velimir and Branko.
Pay attention, now, I’m counting my brothers!
Well, Uncle Milutin had a trio:
Živomir, Pavle, and Velimir.
There are no descendants from them!
Now Andrija: Svetozar, Velisav.
And by Djordje and Tanasija
only Veljko remained as a mature man;
Dragoljub, Svetislav, and Dragoslav –
all were killed in the war.
Svetozar likewise had no luck,
nor Živomir, nor Miloš, nor Vitomir;
by them there are no male children at all.
But Dragiša, thank God, had [one].
Come now, here I am, Mileta!
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 ’oče, 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


