

Comparative Oral Traditions

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Let me begin by sketching a map for the journey we will be taking in this paper. Our goal is to examine the place and role of oral traditions in the world's verbal art, and our "pathway" or *oimê* – and here I use the term employed by the ancient Greek oral poet Homer for the mental journey undertaken by a singer as he or she makes the song – will bring us to six continents over a time period of some 3000 years. Of course, since oral poetry dwarfs written poetry in both amount and variety, the most we can provide is a realistic spectrum of examples; an exhaustive demonstration of oral tradition's worldwide diversity and history lies far beyond our reach, not only because of its inherent variety but also because its existence long predates the invention of writing and other recording technologies. But along the way we can at least consider some real-life instances of oral poetry, which collectively should help to create an international context and background for the phenomenon of Basque oral improvisation.¹

Two Questions

To start, then, I pose two simple but deceptively challenging questions: (1) What does an oral bard really do? and (2) What is a "word" in oral tradition? For the first question, I offer as evidence the oral epic performance of a Tibetan "paper-singer," Grags-pa seng-ge, who composes his long narrative poetry over many hours while holding a sheet of white paper directly in front of his eyes at about arm's length.² Our

first instinct as highly literate people and voracious consumers of textual materials is to understand him as actually reading something from the paper, whether we imagine to include lines of poetry, notes, or some other mnemonic device. But that expectation is quickly dashed once we realize that the sheet is absolutely blank. What is more, if there is no white paper available, these bards use a piece of newspaper. It doesn't matter because they are illiterate. When asked what role the white sheet plays in his performance, Grags-pa seng-ge responded that he sees the action of his story "projected" (like a film, it seems) on the surface of the paper, and it is that audiovisual action – rather than the silent coding of a text – that he is gazing at so intently.

I offer this example of the paper-singer Grags-pa seng-ge as evidence for the inadequacy of our usual categories for understanding the dynamics and diversity of oral traditions. We customarily assume that anything held before the eyes must necessarily be the central resource for the performance; if the singer is looking at a textual surface, we reason based on our text-based culture, then it must necessarily serve as his inspiration, something he cannot perform without. But oral tradition reverses the usual hierarchy: for the paper-singer, it is the performed story that is primary, while the sheet of paper is merely a "screen" for projection of the story's action. This instance of oral poetry graphically reveals how non-universal our categories are, how we must be ready to question and revise even our most fundamental assumptions about how an oral poet makes a poem.

The second question – What is a "word" in oral tradition? – may initially seem too obvious to worry over, but a few observations will help us realize that this concept also deserves reexamination. Consider the options that our print-based culture presents us. Some of us might resort to defining a "word" as a textual unit, a sequence of letters bounded on both sides by white space (like the words you are reading now). But what

about ancient and medieval manuscripts, which join such units together, or subdivide them, according to a different logic? And that is to say nothing of living oral traditions, which in their original form use neither printing nor manuscript writing. Others of us might choose a second option: to define a “word” as a lexical unit, an entry in a dictionary, but once again this is a post-Gutenberg definition that cannot be applied to oral poetry. As a third possibility, we might consider the linguistic definition of a “word” as a morphemic unit, that is, the smallest possible unit of lexical meaning, which can in turn undergo further change by adding inflections, shifting internally, or exhibiting some other sort of morphology. But even the linguistic concept of the morpheme will fail to match what oral bards themselves say about their “words.” All three of these options are handicapped by interference from cognitive categories based on literacy.

For an insider’s viewpoint, let’s ask some experts, South Slavic *guslari* (epic singers), about their concept of the “word” or *reč* within their oral tradition. Here is an excerpt from the *guslar* Mujo Kukuruzović’s conversation with Nikola Vujnović, Milman Parry and Albert Lord’s native interpreter and assistant, during their 1933-35 fieldwork in the Former Yugoslavia:

Nikola: Let’s consider this: “Vino pije lički Mustajbeže” [“Mustajbey of the Lika was drinking wine”]. Is this a single *reč*? *Mujo:* Yes. *N:* But how? It can’t be *one*: “Vino pije lički Mustajbeže.” *M:* In writing it can’t be one. *N:* There are four *reči* here. *M:* In writing it can’t be one. But here, let’s say we’re at my house and I pick up the *gusle* -- “Pije vino lički Mustajbeže” -- that’s a single *reč* on the *gusle* for me. *N:* And the second *reč*? *M:* And the second *reč* -- “Na Ribniku u pjanoj mehani” [“At Ribnik in a drinking tavern”] -- there. *N:* And the third *reč*? *M:* Eh, here it is: “Oko njega trides’ agalara, / Sve je sijo jaran do

jarana” [“Around him thirty chieftains, / The comrades all beamed at one another”].

And now from another of Vujnović’s interviews, this time with the *guslar* Ibro Bašić from the same general region of Stolac in central Hercegovina:

Nikola: But what is a *reč*? What is a *reč*? Tell me. *Ibro:* An utterance. *N:* An utterance? *I:* Yes, an utterance; that’s a *reč*, just like when I say to you now, “Is that a book, Nikola?” “Is that a coffeepot, Nikola?” There you go, that’s a *reč*. *N:* What is, let’s say, a single *reč* in a song? Tell me a single *reč* from a song. *I:* This is one, like this, let’s say; this is a *reč*: “Mujo of Kladuša arose early, / At the top of the slender, well-built tower” (“Podranijo od Kladuše Mujo, / Na vrh tanke načinjene kule”). *N:* But these are poetic lines (*stihovi*). *I:* Eh, yes, that’s how it goes with us; it’s otherwise with you, but that’s how it’s said with us. *N:* Aha!

What quickly becomes apparent is that *within the oral tradition* a “word” is a speech-act, a unit of utterance, an atom of composition and expression. As such, it is never what we literate users of texts mean by words. For a South Slavic *guslar*, a single “word” is never smaller than a phrase, and it can be a whole poetic line, a scene or speech, and even the whole epic story. Likewise, the ancient Greek oral poet Homer describes an *epos* (literally, “word”) that is always a speech or story rather than a collection of dictionary entries, and the Old English poets of *Beowulf* and other oral-derived poems likewise speaks of a *word* as an entire unit of utterance. Examples abound from international oral traditions, and include the Mongolian concept of a “mouth-word,” once again much larger than the typographical units you are reading. The lesson is simple but profound: in the realm of oral tradition, the vehicle for expression – the “sound-byte” – is a unit

appropriate to the medium. The conventions of textual representation mean nothing; “words” as speech-acts are what matter.

How old is “literature”?

With answers to these first two questions in hand, we now turn to a third – “How old is “literature”?” Of course, the conventional assumption is that verbal art begins with ancient traditions such as Mesopotamian, Indian, and Greek, and that European literature is built upon that foundation. But such ideas mask the true history of verbal art, which begins much earlier than the various technologies of writing. The culturally sanctioned media of manuscript and print are latter-day inventions.

In revising our grasp of the history of verbal art, I start by noting the etymology of the term “literature,” ultimately from classical Latin *littera* (“letter”) via medieval Latin *litteratus* (“a lettered individual”). By definition, then, literature as we customarily conceive of it can arise no earlier than letters. This observation then raises the question of how old letters, or scripts of any kind, might be. Below is a table that summarizes the history of media by providing an approximate date for the invention of each medium; in assembling the table, I have chosen both to give the actual historical reference (e.g., 8000 BCE) and then to convert each date for placement on the calendar of our existence as the species *homo sapiens* (e.g., day 328 of 365 = November 22 of our “species-year”). This system of representation should help us to understand the historical depth involved, and specifically to appreciate how recent an invention writing really is.

Media Events in Homo Sapiens’ Species-Year

<u>Invention</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Day</u>	<u>Species-date</u>
Numeracy (Middle Eastern tokens)	8000 BCE	328	November 22

Pre-writing (Vinča signs, Balkans)	5300 BCE	338	December 2
Egyptian script traditions	3200 BCE	346	December 10
Mesopotamian cuneiform	3100 BCE	346	December 10
Semitic scripts	2000 BCE	350	December 14
Greek alphabet	775 BCE	355	December 19
Mayan & Mesoamerican scripts	500 BCE	356	December 20
Alexandrian Library	fl. 250 BCE	357	December 21
Chinese printing technology	750 CE	360	December 24
Gutenberg's printing press	1450 CE	363	December 27
Cherokee script (Sequoyah)	1821 CE	365	New Years Eve, 8 am
Typewriter (C. L. Scholes)	1867 CE	365	New Years Eve, noon
Internet	fl. 1997 CE	365	New Years Eve, 11:44 pm

A few features of this table stand out. First, note that homo sapiens spends almost eleven months or about 90% of its species-year wholly without writing. During that period oral tradition wasn't simply one of a number of competing communications media; it was the only such technology. Stories were told, laws were made, history was compiled and transmitted, and all of the other verbal traffic associated with cultural formation and maintenance was carried on without texts of any kind, and oral traditions were the sole vehicle. Second, even the most ancient scripts – Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Semitic, Greek – arise only in mid-December: this means that the works we customarily understand as the very origin of verbal art (*Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey*, and so on) were not fixed in writing until about 95% of the way through our species-year. Third, it becomes obvious that the media we most depend upon – and have a hard time imagining culture without – entered the picture just a few species-days ago: printing on December 24-27, and the all-powerful internet only sixteen minutes before the

end of our calendar year. Most crucially, for this entire twelve-month period, from the beginning of homo sapiens' life-span until this very moment in late 2003, oral tradition has been the major medium for communication and transmission of cultural knowledge. Even with the advent of other media in the final two weeks of the year, the ongoing vehicle has always been oral tradition.

Along with this revision of our media history, a few other adjustments must be made. Even when literacy of any sort arose in the ancient and medieval worlds, it was seldom if ever used as a means to record verbal art. Initially, writing was employed to keep track of commercial activities or to record ownership and holdings, and only later was it pressed into service to fossilize oral traditional performances. Indeed, comparative investigation shows that the commission of oral epics to written form has almost always resulted from the intervention of an outsider to the culture, someone external to the process who develops a reason for transferring the epic from its native medium to the new medium.³ And even when it is transferred, two related questions present themselves. The first of these – Who can read it? – speaks to the reality that reading skills were limited to very few in the ancient and medieval worlds. Scribes handled the job of creating and reading texts, and literacy was hardly a general phenomenon in any sector of the ancient or medieval societies. The second question – How user-friendly were the texts? – addresses a reality we usually ignore by anachronistically impressing our modern situation of mass paperback books with a mass readership back onto ancient Greece and medieval Europe. Consider, for example, the fact that a single book of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* – one twenty-fourth of either epic – required a twenty-foot scroll to contain it at the time of the Alexandrian Library. Along with the problem of having very few people who could read the alphabetic script, then, there is the additional challenge of the awkwardness of the written medium during these stages. It could be neither read nor duplicated without an enormous expenditure of time and energy, and there was almost no one qualified to do either

job. “Textuality” in these early days of literacy was entirely different from what we take for granted in the modern world.

How widespread are oral traditions in the ancient and medieval worlds?

Given such realities about “literature,” we next ask about the provenience of oral traditions in the ancient and medieval worlds. Most centrally, as the table above indicates, all cultures’ verbal arts began with oral tradition. From that basic fact we can derive the proposition that textual strategies of all sorts have their roots in non-textual expression. For example, many of the rhetorical figures of classical and medieval literature are traceable to compositional and mnemonic patterns that served the performance of oral traditions. Then, too, recent research has demonstrated that oral traditions and written literature are best understood not as a Great Divide of orality versus literacy, but as a spectrum or continuum with innumerable different forms that depend upon the special circumstances of different cultures and genres.

Merely as a suggestion of the richness of surviving oral-derived works – that is, *verbal art with roots in oral tradition* – consider the following (hardly exhaustive) roster: the Old and New Testaments of the Judeo-Christian Bible, *Gilgamesh* (Sumerian), *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (ancient Greek), the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (Sanskrit), *Beowulf* (Anglo-Saxon), the *Song of Roland* (Old French), the *Poem of the Cid* (medieval Spanish), the *Nibelungenlied* (Middle High German), and the *Mabinogion* (medieval Welsh). Beyond the simple recognition of the amount and diversity of oral-derived works, scholars are now beginning to explore the implications for understanding these many and various instances of oral traditions that survive only as texts. For example, in her book *Oral World and Written Word* (1996) Susan Niditch has shown how ancient Israelite texts depend on an

oral economy of language,⁴ while Werner Kelber has demonstrated the crucial importance of the oral roots of the New Testament in *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1997).

Likewise, the oral traditional background of medieval Spanish works has been explored by many researchers (see Zemke 1998 for an overview), as have the oral traditional language and background of *Beowulf* (see O’Keeffe 1997) and the Homeric poems (e.g., Foley 1999). From a comparative perspective, studies in oral tradition have reached an exciting point: not only are we becoming more aware of oral-derived texts from the ancient and medieval worlds, but we are starting to understand how a text’s roots in oral tradition can affect how we understand it. Of course, we can never be precise about such works’ actual relationship to oral tradition (since it is no longer possible to experience these traditions directly), and we should avoid the temptation to craft positivist hypotheses as substitutions for factual, firsthand knowledge. But at the same time, it becomes ever more urgent for us to take account of these still-nourishing roots and to interpret oral-derived works accordingly.

How widespread are oral traditions in the modern world?

Since it is well established that many of our most cherished texts derive from prior and contemporary oral traditions, we may go on to ask about the prevalence of still-living oral traditions in the modern world as we enter the third millennium. Is oral tradition still a common medium and technology? Again some unexamined assumptions await our attention. With the advent – at least in certain segments of the world’s population – of high-speed printing and electronic communication, many have presumed that oral traditions are universally dying out, that the new media have largely displaced the age-old technology.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Even in the most high-tech societies, oral traditional genres exist alongside books, newspapers, and the internet. And in those parts of the world where computers and mass-paperback publication have not made as much of an inroad, oral tradition remains the principal communications medium. Consider the example of China, the world's most populous nation, which includes among its ethnic groups 55 officially designated minorities (and many more that are unofficial). According to the director of the Ethnic Minorities' Literature division of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, which has recently founded an Oral Traditions Center, only about 30 of these groups possess a writing system. Nonetheless, all 55 can boast thriving oral traditions.⁵

Similarly, the African continent is home to hundreds of active and vital oral traditions, including epic, praise-poetry, folktale, oral history, folk drama, and many other genres.⁶ From India we have a striking example of oral tradition and its social dynamics in Gopala Naika's performance of the *Siri Epic* (Honko et al. 1998). In this latter case the mythology surrounding this story of a female hero involves many linked genres such as drama, work songs, folktales, and the like. Standing at the center of the social and religious organization, the myth of Siri permeates ritual and everyday activities alike.⁷ Still more examples of extant oral traditions, many of them playing important social roles, are available among many Native American and African American ethnic groups. The Mayan peoples of Guatemala, for instance, have long cultivated oral stories conveying the miraculous exploits of Brother Peter (Hermano Pedro) in both Spanish and Kaqchikel,⁸ while the non-commercialized varieties of rap and hip hop music exist as an ongoing oral tradition (e.g., Pihel 1996). Everywhere one looks, whether in third-world or high-tech societies, oral tradition remains central to human communication. On a per capita basis, there is little doubt that – notwithstanding the culturally egocentric models

of books and electronics that we scholars tend to employ – oral tradition is still the major communications technology for our species.

Orality intersects with literacy

If comparative research has taught us anything, it is that the so-called Great Divide model of orality versus literacy obscures more than it explains. Whether in the ancient and medieval contexts or in the modern world, intersections of oral traditions and texts are much more the rule than the exception. To be explicit, we have learned that orality and literacy are not at all airtight categories: they can and do coexist in the very same culture and society, and even in the very same person.

In order to understand how these interfaces can occur, we need a more diagnostic model for oral traditions against the background of other media. Linguistic anthropology has provided the concept of *registers*, that is, ways of speaking or writing that are linked to specific social situations.⁹ We can grasp the central idea of registers of language by thinking through the following experiment. Imagine that you wish to convey the very same political observation to three different audiences: a group of children, your father or mother, and a colleague. Try as you might, the three “performances” will not be identical. You will make adjustments in your *way of speaking* for each audience – simplifying in one case, deleting off-color language in another, adding details and examples in a third. Each description will contain roughly the same information, of course, but each will also be calibrated for the person or group you are addressing. Moreover, in order to be effective communicators to multiple audiences, we need not just one but a repertoire of registers, a menu of ways of speaking.

Registers in oral poetry work similarly. Each type of speech-act – whether it be *bertsolaritza*, Homeric epic, or verbal magic from the Former Yugoslavia – has its own

rules for composition (the performer's job) and reception (the audience's job), and each register is markedly different from the everyday discourse of informal talk. Within a given oral tradition, as we shall see below in regard to the ecology of South Slavic genres, each kind of oral poetry employs its own channel of communication. Once we realize that overall linguistic competence consists not simply of knowledge of the general, standard language but fluency in a wide range of registers, then it is easier to understand how cultures and individuals can and do command both oral and written modes of expression. Consider the professor from North Carolina, who holds a Ph.D. degree and yet is a primary performer of "Jack" folktales, or the many highly literate inner-city "slam poets" in North America who publish their poetry exclusively through oral performance.¹⁰ Individuals can be competent in a spectrum of oral and written registers, and oral traditions can be preserved alongside writing and print, and even *within* writing and print. It's simply a matter of fluency.

A realistic model for oral poetry

So far we have aimed at establishing two fundamental facts about the nature and provenience of oral poetry: (1) it dwarfs written literature in both amount and variety, and (2) it does not submit to a "binary" definition of oral versus written, illiterate versus literate, and so forth. In other words, oral poetry is a much larger, more complex, and more heterogeneous body of verbal art than we have often been willing to admit. From a practical point of view, it is well to remember that "written poetry" or "written tradition" – the usual subject of college and university courses in verbal art across many departments and programs – is itself tremendously various and complex; in no way does it constitute a single, monolithic collection of works. And if oral poetry dwarfs even that body of verbal art, and further if oral traditions cannot be effectively described as its

opposite, then forcing works as different as the *Odyssey*, the *bertsolaritza*, Chinese storytelling, and Native American folktales into a single category will prove impossible. The differences seem to outweigh the similarities.

But we can gain some genuine insight into the nature of oral poetry, as well as provide a framework for meaningful analogies and comparisons, by focusing not on the content or form of the various traditions but on *how they are created, transmitted, and received*. That is, we can best understand each oral poetry – and the place of each instance within the worldwide phenomenon of oral tradition – by concentrating on three basic parameters of its medium: composition, performance, and reception.¹¹ The table below represents four categories of oral poetry defined according to these three features:

	<u>Composition</u>	<u>Performance</u>	<u>Reception</u>	<u>Example</u>
#1. Oral performance	Oral	Oral	Aural	<i>bertsolaritza</i> , S. Slavic epic
#2. Voiced texts	Written	Oral	Aural	slam poetry (N. America)
#3. Voices from the past	O/W	O/W	A/W	Homer's <i>Odyssey</i>
#4. Written oral poems	Written	Written	Written	<i>Kalevala</i> (Finland)

Each of the four categories is flexible enough to contain many different kinds of oral poetry. For example, *Oral performance* can accommodate traditions as various as *bertsolaritza*, South Slavic epic, or South African praise-poetry. All that is necessary for inclusion in this first category is that the poem be composed orally, performed orally before an audience, and received aurally by that audience. Many hundreds of traditional genres, otherwise quite distinctive from one another, answer these three criteria. Correspondingly, the next category of *Voiced texts* includes those works of verbal art that are composed in writing but then performed orally for aural reception by an audience. North American slam

poetry, an oral tradition that begins when the author composes a text but which reaches “publication” only via oral performance, is one instance of this type. Somali oral poems, customarily composed via memorization in advance of performance (by creating a fixed mental text the poets are effectively using written composition) furnish another example; even though they are fixed texts, these poems reach their intended audience exclusively via oral-aural performance. Other examples include ballads, which move in and out of oral tradition, and many forms of popular music.

Category # 3, *Voices from the past*, is intended to contain the numerous ancient and medieval works that certainly originate in oral traditions but now survive only in manuscript form. These are the works that we called “oral-derived” above, and include, for instance, the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and the *Poema de Mio Cid*. On the one hand, it would be wrong to classify them along with *Oral performances* (category # 1) or *Voiced texts* (# 2), since we cannot be absolutely sure which of these oral-derived works were actually composed orally (and then transcribed), performed orally (whether with or without the support of texts), or received aurally. Some ancient and medieval poets may have mastered the special language of oral poetry so thoroughly that they could use it to create in writing, some performances may have been based on texts while others were re-creations without texts, and some of these works may have been presented live before an audience while others were read silently (or aloud) by a single individual. Given the partial nature of the evidence, it seems safest to assume that all three parameters – composition, performance, and reception – could involve either orality, literacy, or a combination of both. In this way we can treat oral-derived works as the hybrids they undoubtedly were, according them their status as oral poetry without asserting hypotheses that we will never be able to verify.

The fourth category, *Written oral poems*, is meant as a classification for works that are produced in writing, transmitted as texts, and read from books. But although every

aspect of their existence owes a debt to writing, these works also use the special language of oral poetry. Thus we can read them effectively only when we take into account their genesis in an oral tradition. Consider the example of Bishop Njegoš, a nineteenth-century cleric and scholar who was extremely well educated in the literature of his day.

Nonetheless, as a boy in a Montenegrin village he had learned the specialized language of South Slavic oral epic, and it was this register that he used to compose his poetry. Because Njegoš was in effect “singing on the page,” communicating via texts but in an oral poetic language with a recognizable structure and built-in idiomatic implications, he was for all practical purposes a “writing oral poet.” His works owed their composition, performance, and reception to the technology of literacy and publication, but they owed their structure and meaning to a tradition of oral poetry.¹² Similarly, highly literate physician Elias Lönnrot collected small poems from Finnish oral tradition and wove them into his composite epic, the *Kalevala*. Because in the process of assembling small parts into a single large whole he also personally composed brief sections to help the pieces fit together, Lönnrot has sometimes been accused of falsifying the oral tradition. But from another perspective he had learned the traditional register so thoroughly that he too could “sing on the page.” From that point of view his *Kalevala* is also a written oral poem.¹³

How does oral poetry work within a real society?

Let us now focus our investigation more closely and move from general observations about oral tradition to a specific case study: the oral poetry of the Former Yugoslavia.¹⁴ A few preliminary remarks will assist our inquiry.

First, the simple answer to how oral poetry works within a real society is *pluralistically* and *functionally*. That is, even within a single, well-defined group one very often finds more than one kind of oral poetry. Just as any speaker of a language is fluent in

many different registers, so societies can cultivate more than one genre of oral tradition; and that reality means in turn that we cannot base our idea of a culture's oral traditions on any single genre. As for function, we should be prepared to consider other roles for oral poetry in addition to those that written literature usually plays. Along with the classical functions of entertainment and instruction, oral poetry also supports the performance of rituals, contests, healing remedies, genealogies, laments, and myriad other activities. In that respect it is a much more utilitarian form of verbal art than is the more narrowly functional written literature.

Given a communications medium and technology that is so inherently pluralistic and functional, I propose the *ecology* or *ecosystem* as the most apposite model for an oral poetry. A society that produces (and actively uses) various different genres is participating in an ecology of oral poetry, wherein different "species" coexist and interact according to specific "environmental rules." For example, certain types of oral tradition may be assigned to females and others to males, some forms may be performed in groups or singly, while others may or may not require special costuming or musical instruments. Whatever the case, each species of verbal art will be unique – composed within a particular register of the language different both from the everyday language as well as from the unique registers of other oral genres. To understand the whole array of traditional forms it will be necessary to study them individually, paying attention to their specific qualities and attributes and observing how they interact. Only then can we move from one-dimensional description to a grasp of the entire interactive ecosystem of different oral-poetic species.

During our fieldwork in rural Serbia in the 1970's and 1980's, our research team (cultural anthropologist Joel Halpern, linguistic anthropologist Barbara Kerewsky Halpern, and myself) discovered seven clearly differentiated genres of oral tradition. I list the first

six in the table immediately below, citing the genre, the performer(s), and the form for each type of speech-act.¹⁵

<u>Genre</u>	<u>Performer(s)</u>	<u>Form</u>
epic (<i>epske pjesme</i>)	older men	decasyllable
lyric (<i>lirske pjesme</i>)	women of any age	octosyllable
genealogy (<i>pričanje</i>)	older men	decasyllable
lament (<i>tužbalice</i>)	women of any age	octosyllable
charms (<i>bajanje</i>)	older women	octosyllable
folktale (<i>basme</i>)	men of any age	prose

Certain rules governing the ecology of oral tradition in this area make themselves readily apparent. One is the metrical shape of the registers involved in the various genres: women exclusively use the eight-syllable poetic line, a balanced meter of four plus four syllables with a midline caesura, while men use the ten-syllable line, which consists of two parts (four plus six syllables) with a caesura in between. The only prose genre, that of folktale, is performed by men.¹⁶ Secondly, we notice that women are responsible – again, without exception – for many kinds of lyrics, for funeral laments, and for magical charms designed to heal various maladies. Men, on the other hand, are solely responsible for epic, genealogy, and folktale. Assignment of poetic species by gender is a powerful “environmental” rule within the overall ecosystem.

But the internal organization of oral poetry in central Serbia does not end there. Within the genres assigned to each gender there are additional rules for composition and expression. For example, lyric poems are themselves a system: some are performed by

groups of women, some by individuals; some poems are love songs, others are associated with particular non-calendrical rituals, such as weddings. And, although magical charms are learned by young girls from their grandmothers, these oral-poetic remedies can be put into practice only by post-menopausal females. This pattern of learning versus actual usage means a gap of perhaps 35 years or more between internalization and performance. On the men's side, genealogies are the province of patriarchs, senior members of *zadruga* (or "extended families"), and not of younger men, while epics can theoretically be sung by a male of any age.

As for interactivity among the various species that populate this ecosystem, the primary criterion is the octosyllabic versus decasyllabic formats. Phraseology that is made and re-made according to one of these meters can be translated to the other only with difficulty. If there is to be any interchange among genres, then, it must take place within either the set of female types or the set of male types of oral poetry (that is, among the genres of lyric, lament, and charm or between those of epic and genealogy). Although we do encounter some crossover within each of these two groups, the secondary criterion of function limits their interactivity. In other words, the female genres may share a common metrical pattern, but the distinctiveness of their social contributions makes their registers idiosyncratic. The primary purpose of magical charms is to banish disease and restore health, and that is a goal quite distinct from the many different functions of lyric or funeral lament. Similarly, although epic and genealogy have a decasyllabic format in common, the long narratives of mythic and semihistorical figures and events differ radically from the much briefer recounting of family lineage.¹⁷ The different species function differently, while collectively they serve the society in many ways – from the recording of personal and ethnic history and identity, through the support of rituals important to the village, to medical intervention and group counseling of the community after a loss of one of their

members. Far from mere entertainment and instruction, oral poetry is a vital, diverse, and multi-functional phenomenon that nourishes and protects the people who practice it.

As a demonstration of how rule-governed improvisation can enter the picture, I adduce the seventh genre we located in the village repertoire. There was no evidence that this momentary creation – which nonetheless depended on longstanding fluency in composition and reception – represented a formal genre in the village. Quite the contrary: it was an immediate, idiomatic response to an unprecedented situation, illustrating both the flexibility of oral poetry and its pattern-dependent resources.

Here is the example in context. We were finishing up an interview of Milutin Milojević, an epic singer (*guslar*), in his home village of Velika Ivanča, Serbia. In response to having his photograph taken as part of our documentation, Milojević, who had never seen a camera, spontaneously composed the following four decasyllabic verses in two rhymed couplets:

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

Although confronted by a situation entirely new to him, Milojević was able to craft decasyllabic lines based loosely on the patterns he used in his singing of epic narratives. From one point of view, his performance was indeed an improvisation, since it responded immediately to an experience he had not had before. From another perspective, however, he was drawing from the resources of his epic register – his epic *way of speaking* – to compose this “new” poem. Clearly, it was his fluency in the epic register that supported

his compositional dexterity; he could say something unprecedented precisely because he knew the specialized language so thoroughly. In that respect, improvisation amounts to creativity within a traditional medium.

Oral poetry on the page and beyond

As a coda to this discussion, I offer an example of oral poetry that can be read and re-experienced as *Oral performance*: the *guslar* Halil Bajgorić's performance of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey*, recorded on June 13, 1935 by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the central Hercegovinian village of Dabrica in Bosnia.¹⁸ The *guslar* is accompanying himself on the *gusle*, a single-stringed, lutelike instrument that he bows as he sings. In order to recover as much of the reality of this oral poem as possible, you may listen to the original acoustic recording of the performance at www.oraltradition.org/performances/zbm. Here is the original-language text and an English translation of the first 49 lines of the 1030-line song.

Instrumental introduction (29 secs.) 1/0:00

wOj! Rano rani Djerdelez Alija,	<u>0:30</u>	Oj! Djerdelez Alija arose early,
vEj! Alija, careva gazija,		Ej! Alija, the tsar's hero,
Na Visoko više Sarajeva,		Near Visoko above Sarajevo,
Prije zore vi bijela dana --		Before dawn and the white day --
Još do zore dva puna savata,	5	Even two full hours before dawn,
Dok se svane vi sunce vograne		When day breaks and the sun rises
hI danica da pomoli lice.		And the morning star shows its face.
Kad je momak dobro vuranijo,		When the young man got himself up,

vU vodžaku vatru naložijo		He kindled a fire in the hearth
vA vuz vatru dževzu pristavijo;	10	And on the fire he put his coffeepot;
Dok je momak kavu zgotovijo,		After Alija brewed the coffee,
hI jednu, dvije sebi natočijo --		One, then two cups he poured himself --
hI jednu, dvije, tu ćejifa nije,		One, then two, he felt no spark,
Tri, četiri, ćejif ugrabijo,		Three, then four, the spark seized him,
Sedam, osam, dok mu dosta bilo.	15	Seven, then eight, until he had enough.
vU bećara nema hizmećara,		A bachelor has no maidservant,
Jer Alija nidje nikog nema,		And indeed Alija had no one anywhere,
Samo sebe <i>ji</i> svoga dorata.		Just himself and his bay horse.
Skoči momak na noge lagane,		The young man jumped to his light feet,
Pa poteče nis kulu bijelu,	20	Then hurried down the white tower,
Strča momak u tople podrumе,		Into the warm stables the young man ran,
Do dorata konja kosatoga.		To his long-maned bay horse.
Svog dorata vod jasala jami,		He brought his horse out of the manger,
Vodi konja, do pod hajat sveza.		Led it out and tied it below the eave.
Čula svali, metnu timar gori,	25	He threw off the blanket, pressed the curry-comb on top,
Stade vaga češ'ati zlatala.		He began to comb the golden one.
vA dok dobra konja timarijo,		And after he groomed his fine steed,
vU sundjer mu vodu pokupijo		He collected water in a sponge
vA djibretom dlaku votvorijo.		And spread his horse's coat with a goatskin pouch.
Čebe preže, bojno sedlo bači,	30	He hitched up the blanket, threw on the war saddle,
vA po sedlu četiri kolana		And on the saddle four girths
hI peticu svilenu kanicu;		And a fifth of silken thread;
Sve zapuči na jednu sponicu,		He fastened them all with a single clasp,
Kad ga steže da ga ne preteže.		Then tightened the saddle to balance it.
Založi ga djemo' studenijem,	35	Then he warmed up his mount with a cold snaffle-bit,

Spučí konju pucu pod vilicu;		Attached it with a button below the jaw;
Zlat'u rešmu za vuši zabači,		He threw a golden chain behind the horse's ears
Dva dizgina na dva rama tura,		And two reins over its two shoulders,
Pjetericu metnu uz vilicu.		Placed a riding bit in its jaw.
Sam se šede dorat okretati	40	Alone the bay horse began to prance
Po avliji ji tamo vi jamo,		Through the courtyard back and forth,
Prez kandžije hi prez binjadžije.		Without a whip and without a rider.
Kako dorat potkočijo glavu! --		How proudly the bay horse bore his head! --
K'o vu brdu piški čobanica		Like a careless young shepherdess up on a mountain
vU kukulju, vu šarenu gunju,	45	Clothed in her hood, in her motley jacket,
Još kojoj je vosamn'es' godina,	<u>2/4:03</u>	Only eighteen years of age
Još koja je jedina vu mame;		And her mother's only daughter;
Pa joj mama meće vužinicu		Her mother put up a small snack for her
Da joj nje bi ščerka vogladnila.		So her little girl wouldn't go hungry.

Compositional features of the bard's craft include a highly patterned language consisting of *formulaic structure* (recurrent phrases), *typical scenes* (recurrent scenes), and *story-patterns* (recurrent tale-types). Virtually every line in this song can be located, with minimal variation, in other songs by Bajgorić and his fellow singers, as can typical scenes such as the scene of "Readying the Hero's Horse" in lines 17-49.¹⁹ The entire song follows the story-pattern of Wedding, which conventionally involves the assembly of a large and magnificent wedding party/army, the rescue of a kidnapped maiden by means of a great battle, and a culminating marriage ceremony. Moreover, each of these structural features is a traditional "word," a unit of utterance in the singers' specialized language or register. Research on such "words" indicates that they serve two important purposes in this species of oral poetry: they provide a ready *structure* for the

performance, and they carry *idiomatic implications* well beyond their literal meanings. In effect, the *guslar* – or any other oral poet in any genre – has at his or her disposal a highly coded register that both supports composition and guides audience reception.²⁰

Summary

To conclude, I will review some of the fundamental ideas developed above by citing a series of homemade proverbs, which I have coined to promote easy recall of important concepts.²¹ Each proverb will be followed by a few sentences of explanation.

1. **“Oral poetry works like language, only more so.”** It is easy to forget that oral poetry is neither an item nor a text, but a living language that is subject to rule-governed change. The major difference, in comparison to everyday language, is that the specialized registers of oral poetry are characterized by greater structure and more highly coded idiomatic meaning. Idiom is the “more so” in this proverb.

2. **“Performance is the enabling event, tradition is the context for that event.”** The mere fact of performance means that a speaker must be understood differently, and that an audience must adjust its reception to understand him or her accordingly. Tradition is the background or referent for the event; it “fills in the blanks” of each performance by relating what is happening in this performance to the audience’s larger experience.

3. **“The art of oral poetry emerges *through* rather than *in spite of* its special language.”** Special ways of speaking (and the recurrence that accompanies them) do not constrain the performer. Because registers act as familiar cues for traditional meaning, they are more expressive than everyday language can ever be.

4. **“Composition and reception are two sides of the same coin.”** In order for an audience to understand an oral poem, they must receive the transmission according to the same expressive rules that the performer used in composing it. Performer and audience must speak the same register.

5. **“Oralpoetry is a very plural noun.”** Because it dwarfs written literature and consists of so many different varieties within the four categories of *Oral performance*, *Voiced texts*, *Voices from the past*, and *Written oral poetry*, we cannot define oral tradition as simply the opposite of texts. We must be prepared to engage it in its full complexity, examining each ecosystem and each individual species on its own terms as well as by analogy.

6. **“True diversity demands diversity in frame of reference.”** Given the inherent variety of oral poetry, we need to develop a repertoire of approaches for dealing with its complexities. The three most commonly used approaches – Performance Theory, Ethnopoetics, and Immanent Art – share a concern with the special economy of language and performance (including performance on the page),²² and provide a suitably diverse set of perspectives on a challenging phenomenon.

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¹ Parts of this discussion are drawn from my *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Foley 2002), which features an internet E-companion at www.oraltradition.org/hrop/. Readers who consult this electronic resource can view and listen to video and audio performances of various oral traditions, as well as browse through an annotated version of the book's bibliography. Also available at the web site are a video of Chinese Suzhou storytelling, an E-companion to Mark Bender's *Plum and Bamboo* (2003); and a sound-file of the 1030-line performance of Halil Bajgorić's *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey*, a South Slavic oral epic (see further Foley 2004).

² A photograph of Grags-pa seng-ge is available on the cover of Foley 2002 and at www.oraltradition.org.

³ On this conversion of oral epics to books, see Honko 2000.

⁴ See also Niditch 1995 and Jaffee 2001.

⁵ Personal communication from Chao Gejin. For examples and analyses of these oral traditions, see Chao 2001.

⁶ For epic, see, e.g., Johnson 1997; for praise-poetry, e.g., Opland 1998.

⁷ See further Foley 2002: 171-77 and Honko 1998.

⁸ See Foley 2002: 153-55 and Canales and Morrissey 1996.

⁹ On registers, see further Foley 2002: 95-108 as well as Hymes 1989, 1994.

¹⁰ On Professor Leonard Roberts, see Foley 2002: 26; on slam poetry, Foley 2002: 3-5, 156-65.

¹¹ For a full explanation of this model, see Foley 2002: 38-53.

¹² For more on Bishop Njegoš, see Foley 2002: 50-51.

¹³ On the *Kalevala* as oral poetry, see Foley 2002: 51-52 and DuBois 1995.

¹⁴ I choose this set of examples because of my longstanding familiarity with many of the genres, both through fieldwork in Serbia and through examination of archival materials at the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University. See further Foley 2002: 188-218 and 2004; some of these genres are available for listening at the web site of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri-Columbia:

www.oraltradition.org/hrop/eighth_word.asp.

¹⁵ For audio and textual examples of many of these genres, visit

www.oraltradition.org/hrop/eighth_word.asp.

¹⁶ It is worth adding here that decasyllabic poetic lines (verses construed according to the men's meter) occasionally appear in these prose stories.

¹⁷ Such semi-independence among genres is not the case in the Anglo-Saxon ecology of oral poetic genres, in which all types of poetry follow a single metrical scheme and the

sharing of phraseology among registers is very common. See further Foley 2003 for comparison of South Slavic, Anglo-Saxon, and ancient Greek poetic ecologies.

¹⁸ For an edition and translation of this performance, see Foley 2004.

¹⁹ For additional instances of this typical scene, see Foley 1991: 67, 125-27 and 2004.

²⁰ For further explanation of these structural and idiomatic aspects of oral traditional registers, see Foley 1990, 1991, 1995, and 2002: 109-24.

²¹ These and other proverbs are discussed at length in Foley 2002: 125-45.

²² On the common aims of these three approaches, see Foley 1995: 1-28 and 2002: 79-124.