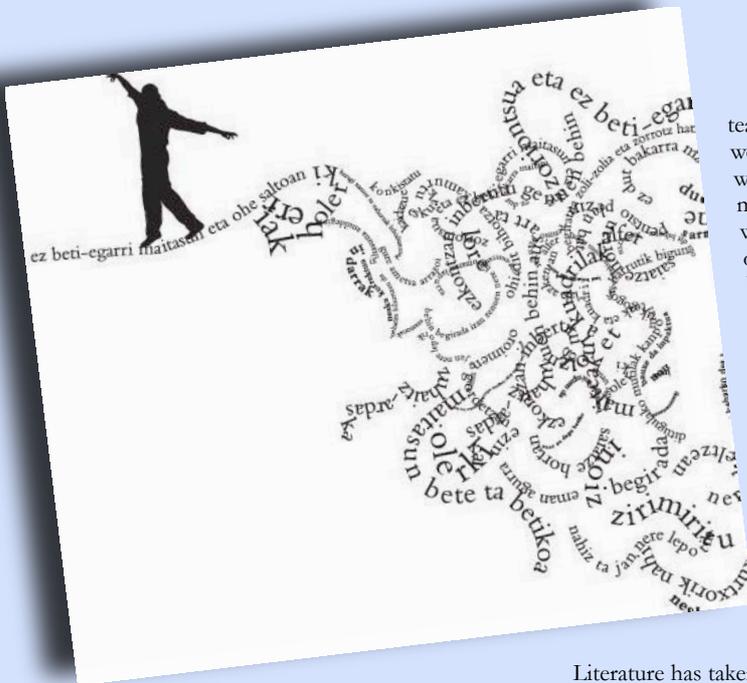




# Basque Writing 8

## Bertsolaritza, Basque word



### BERTSO: AS MOMENTARY AS ESTABLISHED

The reason why I made my way in literature, journalism, research or teaching, was, to a large degree, because I learnt the pleasure of playing with words from a young age. Some of us assimilated the importance of the Basque word at home, some others at school, but the fact that it is not solely for communicating, but also for enjoying, playing, teasing... an instrument which lives within life, we got that from the bertso. And with that, we've had our press, our literature, several other artistic expressions; but for many, the bertso has been the cause of it.

Xabier Amuriza, the person who promoted the greatest advancements bringing the bertso from its traditional field to the city and the teaching, called it the **Word's National Sport**. After that, the bertsolaris (bertso singers) and bertsozales (bertso fans) hit the target with the organization. A friend who works as a bertso teacher told me how many students who are not doing well in other subjects enjoy this class that requires no paper or pens. You only need voice and words, nothing else; afterwards your imagination and bravery come into play, and the kind of things you learn playing with the language: literary records, the attitude in front of the audience, the way of singing, etc. In fact, words connect us with literature, but it is easy to find connections with theatre, performances, and music, too.

Literature has taken many things from bertso, and at the same time it hasn't been far from reluctance, in the same way the elite looks at popular success. While each gender takes its way and strength, strengthening euskara itself, one could think each has its own field. But today's bertsolari can easily handle other fields of the word, from novels to journals. Out of the thousands of youngsters who are learning bertso, more than will grow up to be literary authors. In oral poetry, the jump from a friendly environment to the literary-genders is a road that many have taken over recent years.

Today we know we are not the only ones doing this in the world. Most of the countries that have prioritized the oral expression over the written one have similar formulas, some have combined them with writings, and have brought them from their traditional manner to hip hop tunes or other urban poetries; the improvised word is mighty today. Of course, in the technological era, in the time of short, precise, and fast text messages, the naked word has a great power.

Unlike the writer, the bertsolari didn't have to make his way out, trying to spread this literature to the world through translation. But he also chose the road of multiculturalism a long time ago. Today people come from all over the surface of the Earth to the Basque Country to examine this phenomenon. We wanted to make this little contribution here too, in order to inform about one of the richest and most successful expressions in Basque language. Being thankful to all those who have helped us here and there, starting from the Association of the Friends of Bertsolaritza, following with Etxepare Institute (which has a very interesting items at network) and ending with the pictures sent to us from the northern lands of the 'Sami' Stein Torger. Oral literature, spontaneous poetry, wrapped in the following pages, for the writers in the PEN centers around the world, one of our most brittle treasures in our opinion –the word, the voice, which was sung and lost-, with the intention of showing the evolution of one of our strongest cultural expressions.



**Urtzi Urrutikoetxea**  
President of the Basque PEN



# The bertso, alive and kicking in the 21st century

In the trial which he was subjected to for refusing to do compulsory military service, the Jon Sarasua had to explain, at the request of the judge, what exactly the profession of bertsolari was. According to court records, the judge deduced from Sarasua's declarations that bertsolari must be "kinds of know-all minstrels," a definition one should clarify in certain aspects.



In the first instance, the profile of bertsolari would resemble more that of troubadours than minstrels, given that they do not sing things composed by other people (or by themselves previously), but instead they create and sing bertsos as they go along, in a pure form of improvisation. In any event, and this is much more important, defining contemporary bertsolari as minstrels or troubadours might lead us to think of this as an old-fashioned phenomenon that, for some mysterious reason, has survived down to the present in the same way it was practiced centuries ago. If this were the case, we would thus be speaking about a relic, an object as admi-



nable as it was impractical, like the first aeronautical models or typewriters of the nineteenth century.

However, nothing could be further from the truth. Improvised bertsolari is today a powerful and highly prestigious reality in those geographic areas where Euskara continues to exist. Indeed, the strength and importance of bertsolari in the Basque-speaking community is clearly reflected in several sociological studies.

Another way of demonstrating the vitality of bertsolari is to observe one of its largest expressions: the Main Bertsolari Championship Final, a competition held every four years. In 2005 the final was held in Bizkaia, and specifically in the BEC (Bilbao Exhibition Centre). It was the

first time the final had been held outside the most Basque-speaking province, Gipuzkoa, which was a major challenge for the organisers. The result was spectacular. Approximately 15,000 people attended the event (with many others following it on the radio and television). And it was a similar story during the 2009 edition.

• It is not easy to explain why 15,000 people are happy to spend over six hours attending an event which is, in essence, the antithesis of the pop video •

In this image-driven society, with an ever dizzying rhythm of life, shorter attention-spans and fleeting messages, it is not easy to explain why 15,000 people are happy to spend over six hours (divided up between morning and afternoon sessions, with a break for lunch) attending an event which is, in essence, the antithesis of the pop video; bertsolari is singing a cappella, standing solemnly and taking refuge behind microphones;



the stage design is reduced to a minimum, and the rhythm of the event is defined by the content of the bertsos.

The importance of bertsolari in contemporary Basque society is not just a product of chance, but instead is the result, in many ways, of a commitment to overhaul the phenomenon during the last 25 years; a commitment framed in a sociocultural strategy deployed by a generation of bertsolari, enthusiasts and organisers who have taken the helm of bertsolari as a collective, organizing themselves around the Bertsozale Elkarte (Association of the Friends of Bertsolari).



**Joxerra Gartzia**  
Researcher on Bertsolari



## The key to success: organization, Bertsozale Elkarte

The keys for Bertsozale Elkarte to not only survive, but to be one of the most successful Basque activities are many. One of them is attached to the development it has had historically, adapting to society, people, and the situation of each moment and singing to it. It might be more brittle than any other activity, as it happens with non-material patrimonies: in order for it to live, it is essential that the conditions which allow it are met. But as Bertsozale Elkarte shows, just like it has some barriers, it can also be an agent. In few words: the Bertso, for instance, needs Euskara, without fueling and strengthening



**euskal herriko  
bertsozale  
elkarte**

the Basque language Bertso won't last long. But the Bertso itself may have a role in Euskara's survival, and indeed it does.

In the molding of Bertsozale Elkarte into society, there have been several figures, moments and decisions. The name of Xabier Amuriza prevails compulsorily, from the first deep theorization about the Bertso, since he surpassed many old beliefs and brought new ideas: instead of using the dialectic Euskara from home, he showed that a unified

The key to success: transmission, promotion and eta research. And hybridization with no complexes

and literary Euskara was possible, and furthermore, he showed that the Bertso wasn't necessarily a gift from nature or God, but an activity which could be learnt through a technique. That is how the 'bertso-eskolak' or schools of Bertso were created, in places where although the Basque language itself didn't have much power, there were groups supporting Euskara. The neighbor 'Santutxu' of Bilbao was an example of that. The school is still ongoing. In the next decades the 'bertso-eskolak' spread throughout Araba as well, until they became the most important 'breathing spots' for the Basque language, and the columns of the movement for Euskara. Almost the same happened in North Euskal Herria. Hence, it is not surprising to see 'Bertsolaris' or Bertso singers from these regions in associations for Euskara, where besides the Bertso activity they also take part as Euskara's supporters.

Since the second half of the 80s decade, the 'Bertsolaris' began to organize themselves, and in 1987 the 'Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte' (Association of Bertso singers of the Basque Country) was founded, which is today's 'Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte' (Association of Friends of Bertsozale Elkarte). Nowadays the 'Bertsozale Elkarte' has become one of the most organized, strong and active movements regarding the

Basque language. Its duty is to organize the main championship every four years, as well as the regional one. But along with that, it has 70 workers performing many tasks, such as teaching thousands of children to sing Bertso all over the Basque Country. The Association has three main activity fields, distributed in several committees:

**Transmission.** Some are professional cyclists and some others only take a ride every once in a while, but just as everyone can learn to ride a bike, it is long proven that singing Bertso is within everyone's reach. That is why one of the main keys of transmission has been ruled in the 'bertso-eskolak'. In



general, they are friends who gather to sing Bertso, in multiple towns and neighbors of the Basque Country. There are many types: those who go around singing square by square, those who only do among friends, and endless possibilities, younger groups, elders... Transmission also has some more keys. On the one hand, in Formal Education 14,000 children and youngsters work on Bertsozale Elkarte and the oral project. On the other hand, the Association of Friends of Bertsozale Elkarte offers leisure and summer camps every year.

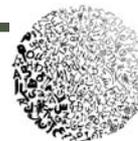
**Promotion.** Its main duty is the spreading and publishing of the Bertsozale Elkarte.



Its oldest and best known activities are the Bertsolari Championship and the show 'Hitzetik Hartzera' on the Basque Television, as well as the Bertso Day that is celebrated in January. Today, it also manages the audiovisual

and multimedia fields, such as [bertsoa.com](http://bertsoa.com).

The enterprise Lanki is also in this committee in order to boost Bert-



solaritza's infrastructure; it handles culture events that have Bertso as their base, always respecting the organization of the popular movement.

**Research.** It takes over the data collection, its examination and development. In the year 1990 the 'Xenpelar Dokumentazio Zentroa' was created by the 'Bertsozale Elkartea', with the purpose of gathering the patrimony of Bertsolaritza: recording of Bertso events, Bertso papers, pictures, press news, posters, books... The collection job of the Xenpelar Documentation Center is carried out mostly through the work of the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza (Bertsozale Elkartea) and the donations of the Bertso fans.

Besides those three activity fields, the Communication Department has also had a great importance historically, both in inner communications and external, from the web page to the relations with the media. In 2008 the 'Genero Taldea' (Gender Team) was founded too, within the Elkartea and in order to promote parity in the rest of branches. That way, they developed the formation of

agents, speeches, workshops for formation and sensibilization, and initiatives for socializing.



### HYBRIDIZATION WITH NO COMPLEXES

We already talked about the relations it has with literature in another chapter. But for the introduction of Bertsos in society, with the ability to adapt to each moment, the Bertso has jumped into other fields with no complex at all. Sometimes in fields it might have relatively close, around music for example, and notably further in other cases.

Bertsolaris have been in medical congresses, in front of international experts, among rap and hip hop artists, in several fields of art, in television and radio, in twitter as well as any other social network. The individual activity has been brought to groups too. Because in essence, organization is the key for the acceptance that the Bertso has gotten.

Two thousand members, 70 workers, over a hundred people volunteering, thousands of students and dozens of schools, and an organization from the bottom up in the Associations of all five regions (Bizkaia, Araba, Gipuzkoa, Nafarroa and North Basque Country) that compose The Association of the Basque Country. Due to the work of all those, from the Direction Committee to the regular member, there have been years with over 1,600 events. The economical crisis has affected Bertsolaritza and the organization too, but still, apart from the spectacular Bertso-finals, every day roughly 4 events are carried out in the Basque Country. Fruits of their well done labor.

## Bertsolari Txapelketa

**John Miles Foley** (1947-2012) from the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition University of Missouri took the right amount of distance when explaining the dimensions of the Main Bertsolari Championship:



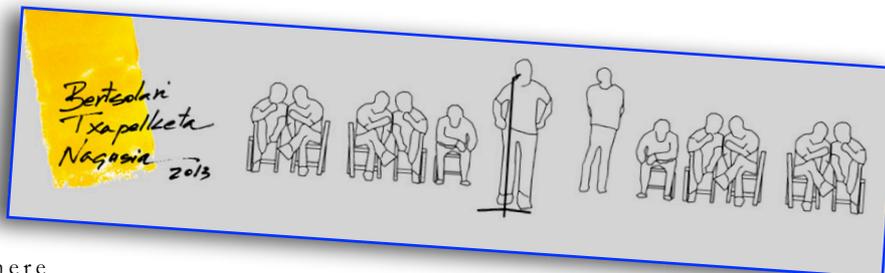
"Imagine selling 13,025 tickets for oral poetry. Imagine further than an entire 6-7 hours of live performances broadcast on regional television as they happen, with excerpts, summaries, and expert commentary on national television. Imagine a one-day event—the final act in a multistage, four-year Olympian drama of qualification and elimination—galvanizing ethnic, national identity to a degree unparalleled virtually any-

where in the world. Imagine the confluence of all of these phenomena and you have the Bertsolari Txapelketa, the national championship of bertsolaritza, the improvised contest poetry from Basque oral tradition". Since Foley wrote these words another two championships have gone on, and the foam has kept increasing, instead of calming down. When there was over a month left before the final, all 15,000 tickets were already sold out. "An oral poetry event" says Foley, "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

*"An oral poetry event that is, to my knowledge, unique in the world".*  
John M. Foley

and inspiring". A live audience of almost fifteen thousand people and more than 300 thousand people following the event on television.

The path initiated on 2005 has taken firm leaps. Besides the usual bertso fans, many other Basques were drawn to the bertso championship a long time ago, people who despite not being the most passionate, don't want to miss the every-fourth-year appointment. By the year 2005 many connections were made worldwide with other cultural expressions that worked on oral improvisation, as well as with the investigators of such phenomena. **John Foley** (1947-2012) was the most important. And he was probably the best ambassa-





dor that the bertso had outside the Basque Country, in addition to the bertso singers who have travelled to America several times, of course. But he was missing one field: the Spanish speakers who live within the Basque Country. We made a special effort with the Spanish-speaking media or the media which barely use the Basque language, from written to audiovisual. The results are as many as the challenges of each moment, as seen in the last championship of 2013: all the media have paid attention to it and followed it, they have given it more importance than ever. Often, performances that touched us or were very special to us Basques did not even reach Spanish-speakers. Now, there is hardly going to be anyone who has no news of the ‘bertso txapelketa’. And we could say, despite his dry and naked aspect, that the Spanish-speaker realizes the bertso has to have some magic to it in order to inspire laughter, cry, thrill and many other emotions in thousands of people for so many hours.

“The rules for competitive bertso 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”.

An hour and a half before eleven o’clock in the morning, the celebration in the BEC (Bilbao Exhibition Center) was amazing, meeting point for old friends, gathering place for thousands of people who would witness a great day. More international experts than ever, coming from the USA, Cuba, Mexico, Wales, Sardinia, Norway, Catalonia... the investigators from all around the globe, aware of the obstacles that the immediate translations might provide to the poetic creations, want to enjoy the day too.



The protagonists come out like stars, just like the Bertsolari documentary stated. And they sang and sang, about the thousands of worries and roles of society, about the hope that the end of the armed conflict brings, but the hopelessness brought by the deep economical crisis, taking the prisoner’s role, the torturer’s, the role of the victim who has had a relative killed, the one who lost his home, the unemployed, speaking from the mouth of an exiled poet... the bertsolari and the microphone, the word paints the performance, and the fans help with their silence, their repetitions, applause and breathing, they do not need anything else to depict the poet in his role, whether he is a prostitute, an alcoholic, a divorced, a syndicalist, an immigrant, or a couple that turn their role into a comedy, a working couple... There is no need

to wear a red nose, as soon as he says he is a clown, that’s what the bertso fan sees.

The hours go by and the emotions finally burst. It is a poetic event, but it is also a lot more than that: North and South, it is a meeting point for all Basques, a shot of hope for a language-community that does not always get good news, it becomes the mirror of a country that needs to strengthen every four years. Or that is the way the bertsozale feels it, at least.



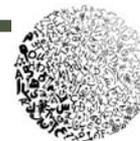
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is how the championship bursted a little before 8 o’clock in the afternoon. Braver than ever political wise, and with the least controversy there has ever been, the Basques from here and there in great harmony. The fact that Maialen Lujanbio wore the ‘txapela’ in 2009 was marvelous. Lujanbio’s way of bertso-ing got the largest amount of points, but she explained the transcendence in the farewell: “I remember the beret that grandmothers used to wear over a cloth on their heads, I remember yesterday’s grandmother, today’s mother and daughter...” Yes, the woman wore the beret, just like one can represent all, and all can see a representative in one person.

This year the winner was Amets Arzallus. Arzallus’s hometown Hendaye is not even half an hour away from Lujanbio’s Hernani, and the customs inspection disappeared long ago. But the border is there in Basque people’s mind too, we are constantly reminded that our country is divided into two states. And that the Basque language faces a tougher situation in the North, within the domains of France. And this is where Foley comes in again, summarizing bertso’s job and duty:

*“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 bertso, 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 bertso is the pulse of Basque culture, an index of what it means to be Basque—past, present, and future.”*

The foam of the bertso-final lasts long, very long. The boys and girls that usually sign up for bertso-schools after Christmas are an immediate effect, both young and adults. It’s an enjoyment for Euskara and for us Basques, hope. And for the Spanish-speakers too, the feeling they are missing something, Euskara would open the door for a wonderful show for them, as well as another way to express themselves in their everyday lives. The performance that is carried out every four years is gone. But until the next one comes, there are going to be about five thousand performances, big and small, in the towns and cities of the Basque Country.



# Looking at the world, a world looking

Euskara is a special language. Even though dozens of investigations have been carried out, nobody has proven any

*In this year's bertso-final there were over twenty foreigners listening to the performance with the aid of immediate translation.*

connections with any other language, it appears as isolated. For a long time, the bertsoaris have thought something like that about the bertso, they thought it was a phenomenon that happened nowhere else. This is true, in a sense, the bertso has shown that it has unique

characteristics, in the organization of the bertsoaris, in its capacity to renew, in the hybridization, in renovating itself without breaking up with the tradition... but the improvised oral poetry exists in several places worldwide.

The Association of the Friends of Bertsoaritzta created the project ARGO to conduct that international investigation. The investigated forms of expressions have been mainly in Spanish, in Spain and specially in Latin America (Cuba, Mexico, Argentina...), along with the activities in other romance languages: Galicia, Sardinia, the Catalan Countries...



In some conferences in 2003 Georgia, North Africa and Kurdistan were also topics to discuss, and it is a phenomenon that is present in many other places where orality is strong. It has been related to tradition, in the places where the oral communication has had a greater significance than the written, but the orality has post-literary fields too, on the internet, in chats, and in several other acts. There is improvisation in the rural areas, as well as in the authors of Jamaica or New York.

Unlike the conventional literature, the bertso, in its essence, doesn't have translation as one of its major goals. But it has also made its way out, without any complex, and has got the attention of the improvisers and investigators around the world. In this year's bertso-final there were over twenty foreigners listening to the performance with the aid of immediate translation. We collected some of these people's declarations here. It is the result of the last 10-15 years, which is, among others, the reason why the webpage of the Association of Friends of Bertsoaritzta is translated into so many languages, as well as other material. The latter were achieved by the Etxepare Institute, and can be obtained for free by downloading them from the webpage: A very interesting little book by Joxerra Gartzia about Bertsoaritzta (2012), and the Anthology of Basque Oral Literature, a large tome by Xabier

Paya, published this year, in 2014. As its author says, the book is an attempt to gather "what wasn't gone with the wind".

## Stein Torger Svala

1.- (a Sami from Norway): I've been meaning to come for a long time, I had the chance this year and here I am. I've seen it on television before, I know how people come here, their hearts full of enthusiasm and joy. The way the Basques are. We have the 'joik', a very old form of improvisation, which has some similar features.

## Christian Simelio

2.- (Catalonia): In Catalan we call it 'corrandista', I improvise. The Basque one is very famous internationally, it is a reference for all those who work in improvisation. I know this day is very different from what we do in Catalonia, compared to our meetings, I see people are very moved emotionally, it looks like a football game, and I hope to bring all this experience back to our country. The Catalan tradition has been kept in the islands, specially in Mallorca and Menorca, somewhat in Valencia too. In Catalonia the 'corrandista' figure existed in some towns, at festivals, going from village to village with no attachments, and about ten years ago, influenced by the Basques, we started to collect melodies, creating the association, organizing events and competitions from town to town... it has been introduced to schools, there are doctoral theses about it, and we are making progress.

## John M. Zemke

3.- (USA, University of Missouri, director of the Center of Studies in Oral Tradition): In connection with professional obligation, that was initiated 10-12 years ago with the Center of Studies in Oral Tradition, I wanted to continue that particular relationship with Bertsoaritzta and Bertsozale Elkarte. I wanted to come and see what bertsoari is. This is very, completely overwhelming, I wouldn't imagine the possibility for 12,000 people to come within the poetry. I don't know of so many people at one time unless it is a religious festival. What I know is this, there is a tremendous voluntary effort amongst the people who is interested in bertsoari that makes all this possible, that is very impressive when you have the public making his own time available to further particular cultural expression. It is very impressive.

## Ana Zarina Palafox

4.- (Mexico): I am astonished, this is the work of many years. I had heard about bertsoaris, the improvised singing exists in many places, but not with these dimensions and power, you walk in the streets and people are aware of it. In Mexico we have about 20 different types of improvisation, in several regions. Now we are in a Renaissance, but the tradition has decreased due to emigration.

## Paulu Zedda

5.- (Sardinia): I had been to the Basque Country before, but this is my first time in the final. It was amazing, awesome, great; the love the people have towards the singers is touching. The way a whole country unites symbolically, a culture... it is hopeful for the future. We have an important tradition in Sardinia, but unfortunately our language isn't as healthy as yours. We have a poetic history of many centuries, there are still many events, but elder people are basically the only ones who go to them. The children learn very little Sardinian, though it is theoretically an official language.

## Elin HG Jones

6.- (Wales, director of the Mercator Institute): The bertso-final is spectacular, it's so



big, so many people, so many subjects, so many different things. It was an awfully good experience. In our country poets are important; verses or poetry are very popular. We do have massive celebrations, but not as special, the one called *Eisteddfod*, for example. Poets in our nation have an important role as well, and they are often the voice of the people.

**Sonia Perez Cassola**

7.- (Cuba, musicologist): The bertso-final is great, we are still absolutely moved, so many tears and laughs, it was tremendous.

There are improvi-sers in Cuba too, a lot of them are very good, but the crowd that's come together here... bertsolaritza's

power is amazing. Unfortunately there are less fans in our country, it is still thought to be a rural thing, so young people don't care much about it. That is one of the reasons why we wanted to come here, because we had heard about the strength it had here, and we got several plans and ideas to bring back to Cuba.

Seeing a woman on the top level was very thrilling, and despite the fact that we needed translation, I was really into the melody because of musicology. Singing transmits a lot, the rhymes are easily caught, and thanks to the topics we got to picture Amets Arzallus singing to Mandela perfectly, or singing with Maialen Lujanbio in the role of a clown.

## Singing with purple glasses

As it has been remarked in this issue of Basque Writing, *bertsolaritza*, without abandoning its traditional scope, has succeeded to become one of the Basque cultural expressions with the highest centrality. Thanks to its capacity to organize itself, for the bravery to renew and mix, and the ability to accommodate to each moment. The biggest boost in this

*Maialen Lujanbio's victory at the Basque National Championship of 2009 was probably the most remarkable hit.*

way has come from the hands of the women bertsolaris. They started singing in the 80s, or should we say they returned to sing, since many researches have clarified that they have acted historically, and that therefore this public space has been stolen from them the last decades or centuries. "I used to get warm rounds of applause" said Kristina Mardaras, the first woman to take part in a championship in 1985, in the weekly Gaur8. "However, there were all kinds of situations, I also triggered some concerns in other bertsolaris. Until then they had been used to singing about women in a very light way, and my presence there limited it somehow. Thus, I was also a problem, I could feel it".

Processes need milestones sometimes, and Maialen Lujanbio's victory at the Basque National Championship of 2009 was probably the most remarkable hit. Or at least the most visible. But the debates, researches and meditations are even more effective, and feminism is influencing bertsolaritza in a very interesting way. Often it does this the way Lujanbio mentioned, as Ainhoa Agirreazaldegi has remembered: "Maialen's and many others' strategy was to disappear as women, to somehow mimetize with the environment. The first woman generation, unconsciously, covered their bodies, because they knew they would fall into subordination if they displayed their body on stage. When we compete merely intellectually the differences are much smaller. But when the body enters the competition, the woman always ends up subordinated. Covering the



body has been a very common strategy in every field, and doing whatever needs to be done as a man. But this has some downsides, for instance, along with the body, women's sexuality, desire, and emotions have been covered for a long time. This first generation succeeded to move forward thanks to the hiding of their bodies, and therefore it enabled a new generation to come in, which had their bodies more present. But when you make the body visible, other issues arised: you face the dichotomy between subordination and genders, and you have to learn to manage it.

Agirreazaldegi claims a third way, since women still do not have all the chances on stage, they have to be "either a drag queen or a doll": traditionally these are the two entrances to men's world: being a drag queen, by acting with male values, body gestures and attitudes, or else being the doll, the woman who does not disturb patriarchy. Because this is the issue about the doll, wearing the corset of properness, always having to adapt: shameless but not too shameless, strong but not violent, sweet but not too corny, always trying to keep the balance. I spent about four years singing bertsos that way, and it was exhausting for me, always having to fit in, keeping the balance". So, what is this third gate? "The gate that will allow the entrance of us all, not measured by men's eyes.(...) We know that we all have a little bit of everything in us, nobody is just a drag queen or just a doll. This third gate is for the person. The same thing happens

*Women still do not have all the chances on stage, they have to be "either a drag queen or a doll".*



with men, the judge is not the man as a gender, but this hegemonic manhood. Many men do not feel comfortable there either”.

The following anecdote belongs to Uxue Alberdi, remembering when, during a bertso-dinner with Jon Maia, they pulled out a vibrator: “we were singing very easily, and people were laughing: we all take very well the penis-related humor. We are used to it. At one point, however, I sang “we will be really free when we make as many jokes about the vagina as we

*The proposal is clear: to look at the world “with purple glasses”.*

make about the penis”, and the whole audience went quiet, they began to move awkwardly on their seats. After the performance, Jon Maia himself told me: “I have been singing for 25 years, and today was the first time I said the word “vagina”. That highlights the whole problem: we sing all the time about men’s sexuality and desire; women’s desire is always the object”.



The proposal, hence, is clear, as it has been claimed before in journalism: to look at the world “with purple glasses”. Alberdi proposes some questions: “I would say that all women started singing *bertsos* thinking we were neutral, but the stage is a magnificent place to realize about our building and about what society expects from us. Why are always “woman topics” proposed only to women? Why are men asked to sing about politics?

Why are women assigned the role of the desired and men the role of the desirer? Why do I feel more comfortable singing alone rather than giving quick responses? Why am I asked to sing about maternity in every performance but the same doesn’t apply to Andoni Egaña? Why do I feel ashamed to say how much I earn (and why do I leave

to the man the role of speaking about the price?) Why are woman-only performances only on March 8<sup>th</sup> and November 25<sup>th</sup>? Realizing about the building that I and we collectively have as women, the feminist consciousness, have offered me tools to understand and transform many things, and the stage is a great place for experimentation”.

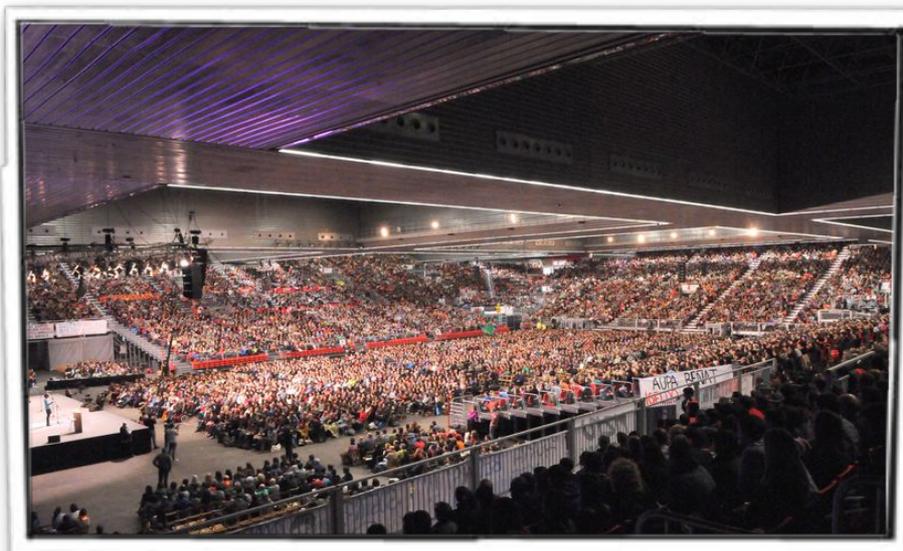


W o m e n

have come a long way singing since the 80s. Now, far from self-complacency, Uxue Alberdi, Ainhoa Agirreazaldegi and others, bring a proposal from feminism’s watchtower to deconstruct the gender and overcome inertia. “Bertsos that have made their way” is a booklet published by the director of ARGIA Estitxu Eizagirre, collecting *bertsos* and *bertsolaris*, “left out of the books and the memory of the next generations by the sloth and deep prejudices”.



Alberdi said “our generation can make the contribution of feminism to the bertso-creation”. And Eizagirre’s work, in its simplicity, puts it clear: “it is in our hands to keep in mind and teach to our successors, these bertsos that have not come to us from our predecessors. This way, we will have a more complete and richer collective memory”.





# Bertso and Censorship

“Bertsolaritza is the joy of the Basques: above or under all tries of domestication, in this ironic and sharp manner only the people knows how to do, the bertso has enabled us to be free and critical” said the Basque poet **Koldo Izagirre**. Orality, specially being improvised, have had this feature: this uncontrollable identity. A tendency to tease and a place for the critique. Smile and whip the powerful, they both come together in the bertso.

Even in the darkest ages of the Basque culture, though, the bertso managed to find its place, as it was reminded by **Jose Lizaso**: “Because of the tradition, bertsolari-performances were organized in many places but they told us that there would be “no word here about that thing you like so much” and things like that. Very often you stepped out to the balcony, the bertso came all the way to your mouth, but you swallowed it and had to sing something different”. In the dark years of the Francoism, bertsolaris who had to go to the Police station were quite a common thing: “We were taken to the barracks for any minor thing... it was so tiring. We were told that someone had sued us, but I think it was them, Guardia Civils, who did it.

Besides, you could not explain anything to them, even if you told them they would not believe. **Lazkao Txiki** and I went once to Getaria (...) that Police! As we were going in:” Where are you going!” “Well we are going to sing bertsos”, “But, what are you going to sing?” and Lazkao Txiki: “we do not know yet”. And that man who was most certainly from Southern Spain: “well what a fucking singer then!” Try to explain them what a bertso is!”

**Xabier Amuriza** has remarked the bravery of the organizers, like Alfontso Irigoien, always “managing to escape the censorship”: “they had to tell the governor what they would sing in advance. He did not understand that bertsolaritza is an improvised activity. So, we used to send him songs by the Basque singer Benito Lertxundi, translated into Spanish”. If there is one person that suffered the repression, it was Amuriza who used to sing wearing his cassock, due to the fact that he served seven years of imprisonment in Zamora with the rest of the priests. From that experience, there came some ideas that would renew the bertso, like the opening of bertso-schools, so the bertso could make its way to the city and the streets.

After those dark years, previous censorship doesn't exist in the Basque country anymore, but the improvisation, teasing and critiques are still not always welcome by everyone. In 1993, when the then-teenagers but nowadays-consagrated-bertsolaris were on TV, their performance was stopped, for a graffiti they had done while singing.

There have been more serious issues, when the bertso has been linked to the political conflict or when bertsolaris have taken part in political events. This 2014, the young bertsolaris Jagoba Apaolaza and Iker Pastor were tried in the Spanish National Court in Madrid, and demanded a conviction for a year and

a half in prison. They both took part in the popular festivals of the Old Town of Vitoria-Gasteiz in 2012, and were summoned by the judge for singing in a parade in homage to the relatives of the Basque prisoners. According to the prosecutor, having used the expression “political prisoner” is enough evidence to prove they had “praised terrorism”.

The Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza has denounced the case: “This situation is not new, bertsolaris have always sung on contemporary topics of every moment and place, expressing their feelings and thoughts. Due to this, their activity has been prosecuted many times in history, not so long ago, specially during the Francoism times. This is something well remembered by any bertsolari. This direct attack against the bertsolaris, this undemocratic step, arrives when we expected that age to be over”.

“The threat to be imprisoned for a cultural activity is really serious, totally unacceptable, and we want to denounce it firmly. If culture has to be free, it is essential for the artist to be able to express his or her feelings and thoughts freely, and the trial process itself conditions, the freedom of speech. Without freedom of speech there is no future for culture. With this note we want to express our solidarity to the two bertsolaris awaiting trial, and demand their acquittal without any charges. We will not accept this kind of threats, censorship and punishment. Freedom for the bertso, freedom for culture”.

Basque PEN has also offered total support to the bertsolaris, and has informed PEN International about the case.

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# Ametz Arzallus

*“We’re going against the grain, we play with empty voices and words”*

Ametz Arzallus is the champion bertsolari of the Basque Country, since the bertso-final in December of 2013. He got the bertso at home. He is from Hendaie, the first bertsolari to win the title who is from Northern Basque Country. And a journalist, who has made several interviews and reportages in Europe, Bolivia, or Palestine.

**First of all, congratulations for the championship. Due to both bertso and journalism, you have often been abroad. How would you explain the phenomenon of the bertso?**

In Basque, we express with many words that we don't say, it is hard to say it in other languages with those unspoken words. Without the understanding of the Basque language (Euskara), its country and its situation, we don't even know how many things we would have to explain in order to make them comprehend such a simple thing, austere, that often goes against the flow of the world, and that has such a big social dimension. The work of teaching bertsolari is partially for that, so the family of the bertso has enough brightness and strategy to organize itself, through the Association. That explains the phenomenon.

**In fact, the words, the meters, the way of singing, the communication... it has all those things and more that need an explanation, but the thrill, or moreover, the communion, is not that easy.**

Jon Sarasua explains how the bertso and its tension are so attractive. Perhaps because us Basques, as a community of speakers, as a people, are on the edge of a cliff. The bertso is also that, maybe it brings a union.

**Foreigner investigators were in the final. We saw they were truly touched too, even though they don't know any Basque.**

That means the translators did a great job, we probably did it difficult for them. I would say there is a reality in our country that stirs. While in the rest of the world there is a tendency to make things big, we are going against the grain, we play with empty voices and words, a game that is played in that simple self-sufficiency. A game played acting as if it were a competition.

**Explain that last thing: how does the championship almost not look like a competition?**

The bertso can't be understood from a sport, even with all the conditions of the Championship. There is certain rivalry, but the bertso is made in cooperation. If you want, we have a parody of a competition, it does have a real sense of competition in it, but the game between us prevails. That relationship among us is real, and it proposes another matter, away from today's violent competitiveness. We are looking at another fire.

**The bertsolari of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has jumped into every field of the word, from literature to journalism, he has made all those registers his.**

**That line was crossed, it can be both popular and educated, if you put it this way?**



I am not a big fan of the elitist bertsolari parties, or praising the intellectuals too much. It is not a lie, but you have to relativize, improvisation makes you think and sing in poor conditions, and that always has its limits. But that tension adds up something it subtracts from it, and it seems more than what it really is, the texts are not so dense. However, there is a tradition in bertsolari, and it has reached today's street or university based bertsolari, without breaking up with the first one. That is an interesting phenomenon. Look how Joxe Agirre, with his age and a point of view from his time, was with us; that doesn't happen many times, both worlds have married very well, without being conscious of your level of innovation or traditionalism. It has reached today's bertsolari without stopping; making it innovative while not breaking up with the old one. In the final there are both young and elder people, and nobody is uncomfortable. Joxe Agirre could sing bertsos with a youngster today. That doesn't happen in other

guilds. Perhaps the bertso makes you search those minimum complications before that vertigo and tension, and makes you join the things you don't share with someone.

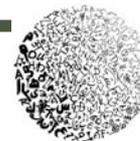
**You are right, but more than the bertso texts, I was talking about the bertsolari. The artists of the word, who are involved in many other fields, just like you are in journalism.**

The bertso is mental exercise, beyond the esthetics it is a search for one's self; although measured, rhymed and sung. But even taking those three conditions away, it is a game of words, thought, the same happens. The bertso helps with that, you get some reflexes, you become more fluent in playing on words. When I worked as a journalist, even in other languages, the bertso is always helpful. The muscle, it opens your eyes, it sharpens your tongue. They are games around words, and the bertso is a learning method for all those.

**The first champion from Lapurdi. You have said that in order to strengthen the bertso, the Basque language needs to strengthen itself. But we have seen, in Araba for example, bertsolari, the schools, the bertso-environment, have been helpful to boost up the language.**

We don't need the language merely for endurance, we need it to live and to play if it can be used for that. If it can't be used for it, saving a language only for the patrimony is not saving a language, it's something else. The bertso, besides its playful side, keeps the language alive. Anyway, the language's fight for survival comes from before. It is necessary for the bertso to live, but the fact that the bertso lives helps the language remain alive, and it can fuel that fight which is a matter of life and death.

Giving the 'txapela' (winning prize, which is symbolically a beret) to someone from Lapurdi, can be analyzed from an interesting point of view: the fight for a language can be exhausting at times, for example, the situation I currently have in the school of Hendaie. I hope the 'txapela' is useful to renew the dreams there.



# Bertsoa and Literature

Is Bertsoaritzza a form of literature? It is a question about a close but blurred relation. There have been people who claimed that the concept of oral literature is self-contradictory, since "literature" comes from "litera", which means letter, so it must be written. Anyway, whatever its etymology, oral literature is an used and investigated concept, and as we say in Basque, "what has a name exists".

Among the bertsoaris too, there have been several shades. Bertso has the word as its base, of course, but the sudden nature of this word completely changes the creation-work. It has also been claimed that besides with literature, Bertso should be matched with journalism, advertising and today's immediate multimedia genres. There appears an element that is essential for Bertso: communication. And as a creation, communication needs immediateness as well, it needs to have an effect right away, in a few seconds at most, without the need of turning back to the text.

There are many, without a doubt, claiming that it is the most important branch of Basque poetry. Koldo Izagirre summarized: "Since it is an expression through words, Bertsoaritzza is a form of literature. It is a special genre, because it is sudden, and that is the key. (...) We don't have to compare Txirrita with Lizardi, or Xalbador with Mirande, they are artists of different fields. But Bertsoaritzza has had a huge impact in our poetry. The most important work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is *Harri eta Herri*, Aresti's poem book. Well, to a large degree, we owe that book to Bertsoaritzza, on the one hand, because Aresti put into practice what Lekuona thought long ago, using old verse techniques to give a modern message, and on the other hand, because its images and moulds are based on the patrimony of Bertsoaritzza. If Gabriel Aresti updated our poetry, it was more likely because of the effect of Bertsoaritzza than because of the effect of cultivated poetry of the time".

In 1963 the bertsolari **Inazio Eizmendi Basarri** and **Gabriel Aresti** had a well known argument in the magazine ARGIA. Aresti, one of the most important figures in Basque poetry said: "I can only say one thing to Basarri, bertsoaris are poets too, farmer poets, (a good friend of mine says that the bertsoaris are the only social poets, truly) poets without schools, but in my opinion, the best Basque poets, better than any poetaster. And I am a 'poetaster'...".



And Basarri responded: "Gabriel Aresti says that bertsoaris are poets too. He has many praises for them, he positions them on the top (...). Lizardi, Orixe,

Loramendi, Emeterio Arrese, Jauregi, Jakakortajarena, Loidi and the rest did not try in vain. Saying that you don't like the Euskara

they used or the way they moulded the bertso is forgiveable, but saying that there is less poetry in their works than in the bertsos of the town-bertsoaris, is like saying the moon gives off more light than the sun...".

"At midnight the moon gives off more light than the sun. Has Basarri not noticed?" answered Aresti. "Yes, Basarri, the sense of poetry has changed, and it doesn't seem like you noticed. You despise Txirrita's school, and you separate from it. You have turned to poems, but they have nothing to teach you. You have gained nothing in exchange. But the future will judge."



Here's what **Andoni Egaña** said about this discussion: "The atmosphere itself is exciting to me, as it is the reflection of the change and the will of development that the Basque culture had in the early 60s, and it comes from the hand of two of our most important men culturally. ". The new generation that grew up reading Aresti's poetry didn't reject the bertso either. Koldo Izagirre himself, Bernardo Atxaga, and Joseba Sarrionandia often use these bertso-shapes in their poetry.

You can't hide, however, that the relation between the bertso and literature has been often close, but blurred sometimes. Just like in many other cultures, the competition between popular tradition and the educated form has existed for a long time. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the discussion has taken some other fields: the bertsolari nowadays is, to a large degree, urban and well-educated; the language he employs wasn't taken solely from the "people", he drinks from literature, and frequently, he works in other fields of the word, such as the written word: in the press, investigation and, of course, in literature as well.

Ten percent of the members of the Basque PEN have a direct relation with the bertso: investigators, topic-setters and also bertsoaris. And with the experience, there will be more in the future. I am in the jury for a literature competition for

*Ten percent of the members of the Basque PEN have a direct relation with the bertso: investigators, topic-setters and also bertsoaris.*

youngsters every year, and often times we argue about whether bertso-papers are poetry pieces or not, and how to examine them next to free poetry works. In the essence, there is a relation of two opposed activities: literature's creation-work is individual, unappreciative

many times, and the bertso has in itself the public nature, and the immediate response from the audience. As many as the differences are, though, we can look for similarities too, for example, in a poetry performance. The thing is, though, there are two thousand more kids and youngsters learning bertso nowadays, and training for it. It isn't surprising, therefore, that many



of the youngsters who participate in the young poetry competitions do so with bertsos, instead of conventional poems.

But this has another side to it: the bertso is often the first step to play with the word in Basque, and for many, this later led to journalism or literature. Besides the person who signs this text, Julen Gabiria, Unai Elorriaga (winner of the Spanish Literary Award), and many others started playing with words through the bertso.

Half of the people who sang in the bertso-final of 2013 have published at least a book, almost all of them write articles occasionally, in newspapers or magazines, or contribute on the radio, writing scripts... and along with the pure bertso-creation fields, they perform with actors, musicians, painters and many other artists today. More and more, binding bertso and literature. There's *Kafka's chair*, a project initiated by Uxue Alberdi and Harkaitz Cano, and the magazine *Gabriel Aresti ikuskaria*, a project that has united the artist Alain Urrutia, the musician Rafa Rueda, the poet Oier Guilan, and the bertsolari Andoni Egaña, with their friends in several places, in honor of the poet from Bilbao.

Uxue Alberdi, member of the Basque PEN, is a



cial  
case

of the jump from bertso to literature done the other way around. Going from literary-creations to signing up for bertso-schools is not the usual way. But she has gotten her own important voice in both roads. This is what she said in the magazine ARGIA: "Looking from the outside, it may seem like I do many different things, but since two and a half years ago, when I quit journalism, I have focused on two things: writing and bertso. I am one, but inside me they are two very different activities, they touch each other, but they

don't go inside each other. I always say that during the week I am more of a writer and more of a bertsolari in the weekend, as well as I am a bertsolari during summer and a writer in winter." And she admits the difference between both genres: "I don't look for tales. It's like when you are driving and suddenly you come up with the ending of a bertso. You decide to start a bertso-collection from there, you know that try is not going to take too long. It is like a game, with all of its importance, it doesn't mean I do it without trying".

Andoni Egaña closes this article, with his thoughts about the Bertso-Day in 2012: "I bet Bertsolari's basic transmission is well backed up. Bertsolari's future is mandatorily within the survival and development of Euskara. And that does worry us, for that would leave us without tools, with an

empty mouth, if the language was weakened. Besides, we are not the only ones in our ecosystem, and we wouldn't want to be the only ones. In the last decade we have turned to other Basque cultural expressions without even trying. Today, we had a lot more Basque musicians, actors, painters, writers, dancers... among the public than in other times, enjoying the party. In addition to being an honor, I would say this is the road to follow. The same road Basarri and Aresti were looking for half a century ago through their argument. Today too, between armchairs, on the table, or in barrels, I bet we created some of the sparks that consist of building our country through the Basque language and Basque creation, that thing we called "Basque culture making"..



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