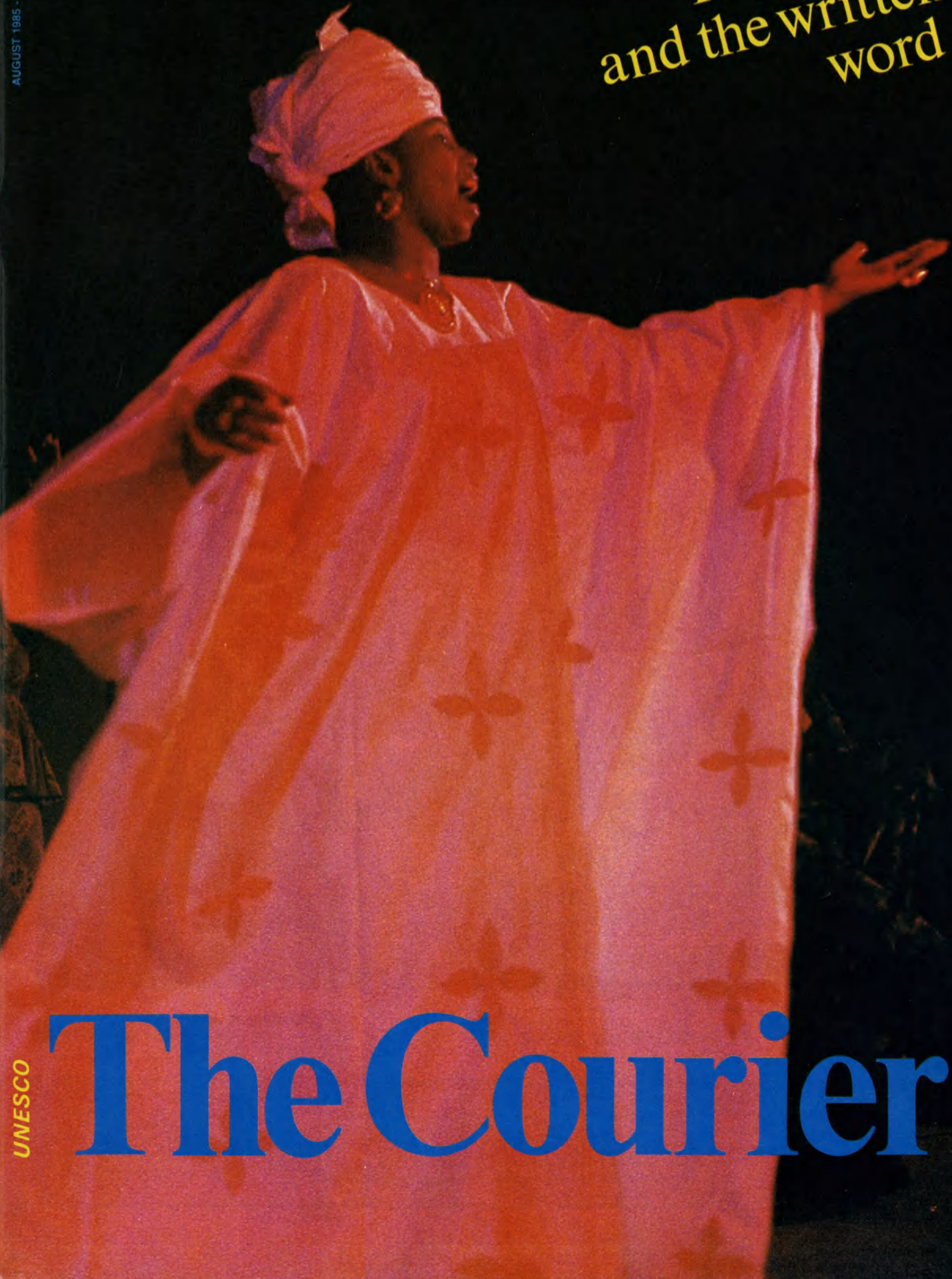


The spoken
and the written
word



The Courier



A time to live...

37 Brazil

Open-air gold mine

In the 18th century, the Brazilian economy was dominated by gold and diamonds. The exploitation of gold and other mineral deposits led to the development of the *Minas gerais* ("general mines"), the name of the State in southeastern Brazil which is still the country's chief mining region. Today Brazil is the world's fourth most

important gold-producing country. The open-cast Serra Pelada mine, above, is located 400 km south of Belém, which lies at the mouth of the Amazon and is the capital of Pará State. Some 20,000 workers exploit the mine, which produces a ton of gold each month.

Editorial

IN modern times the art of writing has assumed such importance that literature today seems inseparable from the written word. Even though many cultures are known to be articulated around, and transmitted by, the spoken word, there is still a strong inclination in contemporary thinking to discount oral literature as the expression of folklore, which is often regarded with a certain condescension.

In the present issue of the *Unesco Courier* we hope to correct this false vision of the relationship between the spoken and the written word. To see these modes of expression as locked in a fundamental antagonism, both as forms and as aspects of different civilizations, today increasingly seems to be an inadequate, overschematic analysis of the situation. As Paul Zumthor shows in his introductory article, there has never been a watertight barrier between the two forms of expression; exchange has been constant. Even in the literature and sensibilities of the Western societies which have been the most active in raising the status of the written to the detriment of the oral, traces of the interdependence of oral and written are far stronger than might appear at first glance. And in the West, for all its fascination with the written word, the once-stifled voice may be making a comeback at this very moment.

To show the force of the spoken word, we highlight a number of major texts which are both national epics and poems of universal significance. The origins and destiny of each of these works form original variants of the relationship between the spoken and the written word, but they are all primarily texts in which a people can find its roots and identify itself, or else—as in the case of the *Chronicle of Michoacán*—the final testament of a civilization.

Elsewhere in the issue, in the field of Arabic, Japanese, Basque, Chinese and Indian cultures, we have tried to convey through specific examples, synopses of stories and poems, and personal reminiscences, the spiritual attraction and inspirational force of works which, transmitted by word of mouth and in many cases relayed by writing or image, live on and echo in the minds of individuals and beat in the hearts of communities.

But this spiritual treasure, which belongs to the heritage of humanity, is under threat. Unesco is contributing to its preservation, especially since it is a vehicle of identity. Essential though it is to record this heritage on tape or in writing, such measures do not go far enough. The ultimate goal must be a redefinition of the concept of cultural communication which recognizes the creative value of the spoken word in every community.

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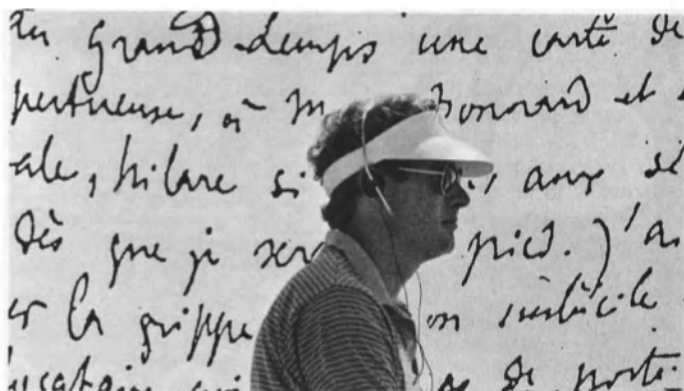


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Photo © P.F. Mele, Bardo Museum, Tunis

The living voice

by Paul Zumthor

NO one today questions the importance of the part played by the voice in the preservation of human societies, although it was long discounted by historians who paid little or no attention to anything but the written word. What is known as the oral tradition of a social group is a system of vocal communications bound up with attitudes that are more or less rigidly codified, the prime function of which is to ensure the continuity of a conception of life and the experience of a group without which the individual would be a prey to the vicissitudes of his solitary state, if not to despair.

This seems obvious enough if we are thinking of primitive civilizations or some of the marginal cultures of the world today. But it is harder for us to realize that our own rational, technological culture of the late twentieth century is imbued with oral traditions and would find it hard to survive without them.

In this article I shall consider only one aspect, that of "poetry" in the broadest meaning of the term, that is, an art which arises spontaneously from language and the perpetuation of which is a constant of history, so much so that it could be called one of the factors by which man can be defined. But while everyone thinks it natural that African or Amerindian ethnic groups should have their own treasure-house of poetry which is maintained by oral tradition, we have to strain our imagination to detect more than traces of such poetry in our own civilization—a still active presence, when the stage of moribund folklore has been passed.

Statistics show that ten thousand songs a year were being composed around the year 1980 in France alone. Allowing an average of three minutes for each song,

that makes five hundred hours' listening, or one hour and twenty minutes every day! Even if we do not count failures—the effects of selection before the works are performed—there is still a considerable mass of them. I use the word *mass* deliberately, because this is clearly a phenomenon of "mass culture", the main form of poetry that is alive and functional at a group level in the 1980s. There is no reason to suppose that France is exceptional in this respect.

We have to make an effort to admit that this is so. For love of the "live" word died out long ago in our Western societies, being gradually excluded from the interests of intellectuals and also from our "basic personality." Owing to a prejudice that has been part of Western mentality and tastes for centuries, we are unwilling to accept what is produced by any art derived from language unless it is in written form. The one exception we make is for the theatre. This is why we find it difficult to acknowledge the aesthetic validity of anything which, in intention or in fact, is not written down. In the last five or six centuries all the countries of Europe first, next those of America, then—starting from different premises—those of Asia, refined the techniques of writing to such a degree that our sensibility automatically rejects what seems to be the immediacy of vocal expression.

Is this merely a matter of historical circumstances that affect only the surface of things, or is it a shift in hidden structures that govern our perception and our thinking? The Canadian Marshall McLuhan examined this question as early as 1962, and in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, a book that attracted much attention, opened up a path for sociological and phil-

"Through the voice, the word becomes something that is exhibited, a gift (...) In extreme cases, the meaning of the words ceases to matter and the voice of itself captivates us because of the self-mastery it indicates, as the Ancients taught us with the myth of the Sirens." Above, mosaic from the Bardo Museum, Tunis, illustrating the story of Odysseus and the Sirens, a famous episode in the Greek poet Homer's epic The Odyssey. The Sirens were mythical creatures, half-bird, half-woman, who lured sailors to destruction by the enchantment of their singing. Homer tells us that Odysseus escaped this danger yet heard their song by stopping the ears of his crew with wax and having himself tied to the mast so that he could not steer the ship off its course.

osophical reflection which has been effectively prospected by a number of research workers since then. As we know, the principle they observe is that a message is more than what appears to be its content. It has another content, which is latent and which stems from the very nature of the medium by which it is transmitted. The introduction of writing into a society and its subsequent adoption by everyone therefore entails a mutation in the mental, economic and institutional spheres. Thus, in McLuhan's view, two types of civilization—that of oral culture and that of written culture—confront each other. In a world based on oral expression, man, who is directly in touch with the cycles of nature, interiorizes his experience of history without conceptualizing it. He perceives time in the circular patterns of a perpetual return, and consequently his actions are inevitably determined by group norms. But the practice of writing implies disjunction between

thought and action, an abstraction which weakens the very power of language, the predominance of a linear conception of time, individualism, rationalism and bureaucracy.

Research workers today hold that a dichotomy of this nature cannot be maintained except in a very general way, in theory, and only insofar as it throws a contrasting light on concrete reality, which is nearly always situated in a median position between extremes. The latter reveal differences which, as a rule, are actually only differences of degree, since every cultural situation has a different proportion of the various characteristics concerned.

Yet these differences, slight though they may be in practice, are categorical rather than historical in nature. In most societies men of the spoken word and men of the written word are to be found side by side and working together, in any period of history. It is true that some civilizations have known nothing of the written word—at least that is what we are told. But perhaps these civilizations have been less numerous than one might think. For what is writing? Symbolic marks, masks, tattooing and the various social emblems—are they writing or not? And other things could be added to this list.

With these reservations, it is possible to suggest a general typology of "situations of orality". There are many such situations, and the distinction between some of them is unclear, but broadly speaking there are four kinds:

- *primary* orality, which has no contact with any kind of writing;
- *mixed* orality, which exists alongside writing in a sociological context in which

the influence of writing is partial, external, and slow to take effect;

— *secondary* orality, which is actually reconstructed from writing (the voice utters what has been written or what has been thought out in terms of writing) in a context in which the written word takes precedence, in both action and imagination, over the authority of the voice;

— *mediatized* orality, which we experience today through the radio, gramophone records and other media.

The only context in which primary orality has flourished is in archaic communities which have long since vanished. Even today it is found here and there in the tropics, among "primitive" cultures which are dying out. The vestiges of primary orality that ethnologists have found mean little to us except as evidence—touching evidence it is true, but incomplete and problematical. Mixed and secondary orality break down into an infinite number of shades of meaning, as many as there are degrees in the dissemination and use of the written word, depending on the diver-

sity of societies and levels of cultures. Mediatized orality is found today side by side with the third or the second form of orality, and even with the first, in a few remote regions.

Typically, primary orality is characteristic of a civilization based on the voice. The latter is a fundamental dynamic force, whose function is both to create and to preserve common values. A number of books have been published on this role of vocal activity, especially in African traditional cultures. But the phenomenon is universal. The difference between the poetic forms produced in this way and written poetry is that the former do not provide either those who hear them or historians with material that can be slotted into watertight lists and categories. When an ethnologist records such poetic forms, whether he intends to publish them in a book or not, the very fact that he has recorded them in a sense modifies the nature of what has been recorded, just as a photograph of a person is not the same as his face.

Even if writing is widely practiced in a society, primary orality remains alive in that society, and may evolve for a considerable time in accordance with its own laws. Again a good example of this can be seen in Africa, which has experienced this kind of thing at least twice in the course of its history—first with Islamization and the introduction of the Arabic alphabet among the educated section of the population, in the tenth century, and then with colonization, in the nineteenth century. More generally speaking, today, where a community has both a national language with a written form and local languages or dialects which exist only in an oral form

Considered by the ancient Egyptians to be of divine origin, writing was reserved to a privileged caste, the scribes. Below left, Old Kingdom (Vth Dynasty, c.2494 to c.2345 BC) painted statue of a seated scribe, Louvre Museum. The nomadic Tuaregs of Africa still use a traditional form of writing, the tiffinagh, but their history and their literature are rooted in the oral tradition. Below right, a Tuareg singer from Algeria with an imzad (a single-string violin). Tuareg women are the guardians of the collective memory of their people and their songs recount the feats of their ancestors.





Drawing © Erdebea, 1962, Buenos Aires

"The partition that appears to separate oral poetry from written poetry (...) has never been watertight (...) Many tales, poems and songs which were written down (...) became part of the oral tradition and in some cases have remained so much a part of it that their origin has been lost sight of." *Martín Fierro*, by José Hernández, one of the great national poems of Argentina, published in 1872 and a classic of Hispano-American literature, is a masterpiece of the literature of the gauchos. This written work, which is both erudite and popular in inspiration, quickly became part of the repertoire of the payadores, the wandering singers of the Rio de la Plata, who improvised poems to the accompaniment of the guitar. Left, drawing of the gaucho Martín Fierro by the contemporary Argentine artist Juan Carlos Castagnino.

"Some civilizations have known nothing of the written word—at least that is what we are told. But perhaps these civilizations have been less numerous than one might think. For what is writing? Symbolic marks, masks, tattooing and the various social emblems—are they writing or not? And other things could be added to this list." Below, symbolic bark-painting by the Australian aboriginal artist Daodi tells us how the "man-crocodile" and the "man-lizard" first succeeded in producing fire and how the "man-crocodile" subsequently stole it (see the Unesco Courier, January 1980).

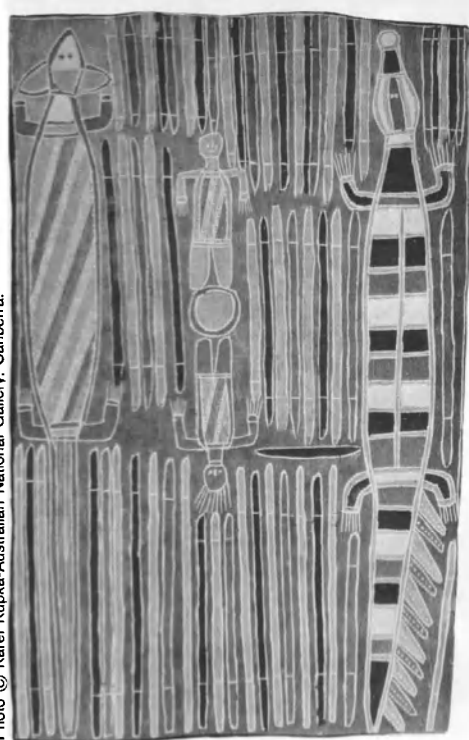


Photo © Karel Kupka-Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

► or are no longer written, tension often arises between a written national literature, an oral poetry that employs a patois to some extent, and attempts made by regionalist movements to bring in a literary (and therefore written) version of the local speech.

In France, in the last century and a half, the example of *Occitan* has shown the extent of the various implications of such a development; but great tracts of Africa, Asia and even America are in the same situation today, with more dramatic effects.

Besides, the fact that tales or poems (or even poetical genres as such) which have hitherto been part of the oral tradition are committed to writing does not necessarily mean the end of that tradition. A two-tier system may emerge—we may have a reference text (or textual model) which may give rise to a body of written works, and also to various oral versions that continue to be produced at different times and places. The history of European cultures (perhaps from the time of ancient Greece) provides plenty of illustrations of this process. When Elias Lönnrot published the *Kalevala* in 1835, the oral tradition continued to flourish so vigorously that a second *Kalevala*, published fifteen years later, was twice as long as the first! Other examples are the Russian *byliny*, the Anglo-Scottish ballads, the Spanish *Romancero* and the Japanese *Tale of the Heike*.

The African Shaka cycle is a noteworthy case in our own day. Shaka, who founded the Zulu empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century, became the hero of epics which are today part of the oral tradition. But a novel based on these epics was written in 1925, and from it emerged a pan-African literary tradition to which we owe a number of important works in English, French and even in the vernacular, which have been produced in a wide variety of regions, from the Republic of South Africa to Zambia, Congo, Guinea, Senegal and Mali.

It sometimes happens that oral poets are influenced by certain stylistic usages or thematic trends that belong to the written tradition. Such mutual influences are the rule today; but the partition that appears to separate oral poetry from written poetry that is part of the literature has never been watertight, and in many cases it has not kept the two apart. Many tales, poems and songs were written down and based on a substantial literary tradition but, either because their authors intended it to be so or because of some accident of history, became part of the oral tradition and in some cases have remained so much part of it that their origin has been lost sight of. This was true of most of the "popular" or folk songs of Europe and America.

On the other hand, of course, some of the world's greatest writers have linked up with an oral "popular" tradition from which their art has derived part of its power. When a work produced in this way belongs to the past, it is therefore sometimes marked by an ambiguity which historians and specialists in poetics find very difficult to resolve. Well-known examples are the Russian *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*, the German *Song of the Nibelungen*, and probably most of our medieval "literature".

Yet even when such admixtures appear to be inextricable a real difference remains, which cannot be eradicated. One text may be intended to be absorbed visually (as a rule, by one person and in silence) by reading; another may be intended to be heard (so that the listener will hear sounds, which means, as a rule, that it is to be heard by a group of people). The first text is a tangible thing—a sheet of paper or a book. The second is a vocal action. If we consider—as I think we should—that a work attains its consummation, its peak of perfection, the form which shows us its innermost nature and the original intention of its author (not necessarily consciously felt, but determinative) at the moment when it is communicated to another person, then we have two entirely different works,



Photo © Professor Jean Bazin, Paris. Taken from General History of Africa, vol. 4, Unesco

according to whether the text is read or spoken; and this is so if the same text is both read and spoken. It becomes two works, which have only the form of the words in common. Half a century after the death of Dante, the *Divine Comedy*, which was intended to be read, was on the lips of the ordinary people of Florence, who sang its *terzine* as they walked along the streets. Was it the same work? Of course not.

Written works have their own values, on which European and American critics have concentrated in the last twenty years. But the voice brings to the fore other values, which in the course of a performance become part of the meaning of the text that is being transmitted. They enrich it and transform it, sometimes making it mean what it does not say. For the voice is more than speech. Its function is greater than that of conveying language. It does not convey language; rather language is conveyed through it, and the physical existence of the voice hits us with the force of a material object. The voice is a thing; its qualities can be described and measured—tone, timbre, range, height, register. Most civilizations have attached a symbolic value to each of these qualities, and in everyday relations between persons we judge people by their voice and (with a bad conscience sometimes) we apply this judgment to the value of what they say.

If I am listening to oral poetry, such considerations determine my aesthetic perception. And more than that—there can

“In those days when writing was virtually non-existent in parts of Africa, the task of memorizing and recounting history had to be entrusted to a particular social group. It was thought that the successful transmission of this history required a musical background, and so the oral transmission of history was confided to the griots, the musicians’ caste,(...) which thus became the repository of the collective memory of the peoples of Africa. Griots are also poets, actors, dancers and mimes and they introduce all these arts into their performances.” [The Senegalese griot Lamine Konte, during a recent interview with French journalist and musicologist Marc Kerjean] Above, the Kama-blon, the sacred hut of Kangaba, Mali, the roof of which is ceremonially rebuilt every seven years. This ceremony is the occasion for a great gathering to hear the griots recount the genesis of Mali and to recall the exploits of the epic figure king Soundiata Keita. Within the framework of one of its major programmes, Unesco is actively working to help preserve the non-physical elements of the world’s cultural heritage. In Mali, a pilot project has been launched which aims to revitalize the knowledge embodied in the oral tradition so that it can contribute to the development of communities of whose cultural expression it is a key element.

Lat Dior (1842-1886), king of Cayor (in present-day Senegal) fought to the death against the colonial invaders. His heroic exploits, long part of his people’s oral tradition, have now been recorded in the written history of Africa. Below, Lat Dior as portrayed on a modern Senegalese postage stamp.



Photo © Alpha Diallo, Senegal

be no doubt that the voice is an archetypal form in the human unconscious, a primordial, creative image, a force and a configuration of characteristics that predispose each of us to particular experiences, feelings and thoughts. When we hear poetry spoken, this force is reactivated in us, in a more or less confused way, but sometimes with great violence (as in the case of certain rock music festivals). A human form is there, and speaks to me, being represented by the voice that emanates

"The come-back of the voice is not only due to media technology. Through the media (...) we are witnessing a reawakening of the vocal powers of mankind, after a period when public opinion had devalued them." Below, people walking around listening to portable cassette-players are an everyday sight today.

from it. Through the voice, the word becomes something that is exhibited, a gift that is virtually eroticized, and at the same time an act of aggression, a determination to conquer the other person, who submits because of the pleasure he derives from hearing it. In extreme cases, the meaning of the words ceases to matter, and the voice of itself captivates us because of the self-mastery it indicates, as the Ancients taught us through the myth of the Sirens.

At least, all this was true in the past. Is it true in 1985? Certainly, there are still many traces of this sort of thing. Many of us feel nostalgic, others want to retrieve values that may have been lost, by challenging the power of the ever-dominant written word. Since the beginning of this century there has been a movement for poets to recite their poetry. Yet the fact is that today the poetic voice comes to us mainly in its mediated forms—and this leads to ambiguity. The time when we hear a poem (when we are listening to a record

or the radio or watching television) is the moment when the "work" is created. But the medium has been displaced; it now occupies a space slightly removed from both the written word and the voice. Electronic media are comparable with the written word in three ways:

— they do away with the presence of the speaker;

— they have nothing of the purely present nature of a recital, for the vocal message that they transmit can be repeated indefinitely in exactly the same form;

— owing to the manipulation made possible by highly sophisticated recording systems, they tend to obliterate the spatial associations of the live voice, and artificially reconstruct the environment in which it is used.

However, the media differ from writing in one vital respect: what they transmit is heard, and therefore cannot be read (apart from the television or film image), that is, it cannot be deciphered as the codified signs of language can. This explains the belief, widely felt in recent years, that the triumph of the media is a kind of revenge taken by the voice after centuries of repression under the dominance of the written word. This is true, but the come-back of the voice is not only due to media technology. It is through the media, and perhaps by virtue of the false idea that most people entertain of them today, that we are witnessing a reawakening of the vocal powers of mankind, after a period when public opinion had devalued them. Evidence of this reawakening can be seen in many spheres, from the indifference of many young people to the pleasures of reading and the revival of the art of singing throughout the world in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

What does all this add up to, in the long run? At all events, what we have completely lost with the advent of the media is bodily presence—the authority, the warmth and the visible volume of the body, of which the voice is but an extension. And this produces in the person to whom the medium is addressed (and perhaps also in the person whose voice is transmitted by it) a special kind of alienation, a disincarnation of which he is probably not completely aware, but which is certainly to be found somewhere in his unconscious. We may well wonder what inner disturbances are now being produced, unknown to us, by such repression.

It is, I think, inevitable that the live voice should experience a pressing need to *speak out once more*, to use an expression whose full meaning should be restored. And this is probably the best way to ensure the survival and the renewal of the traditions of the living poetic voice, which are in such jeopardy today. ■

PAUL ZUMTHOR was born in Geneva, Switzerland, and now lives in Montreal, Canada. A specialist in medieval literature, he has for many years made a particular study of oral poetry in the contemporary world. He is the author of many works, including *Essai de Poétique Médiévale* (*Essay on Medieval Poetry*, 1972) and *Introduction à la Poésie Orale* (*Introduction to Oral Poetry*, 1983).

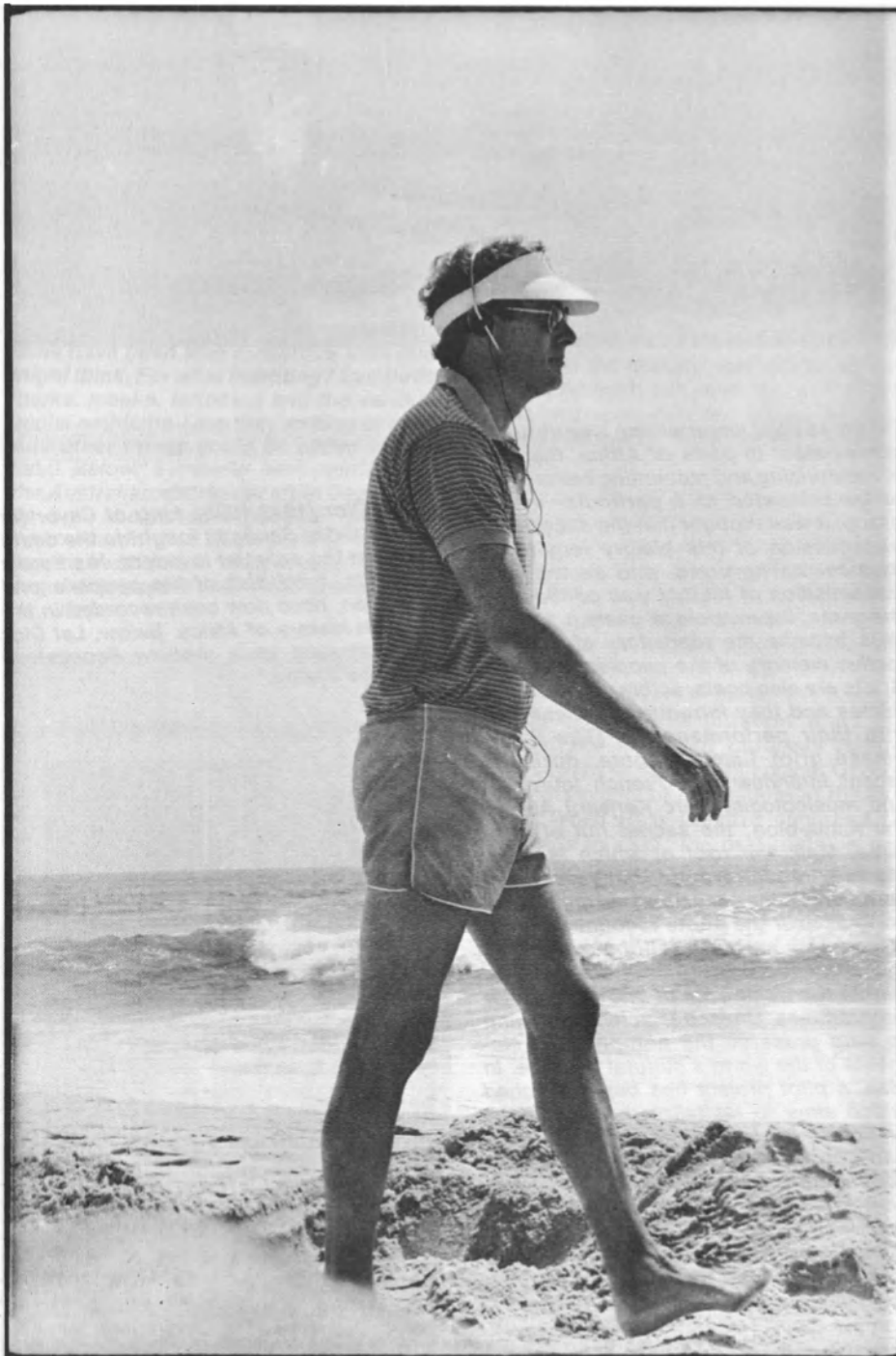


Photo Richard Frieman © Rapho, Paris

The birth of Finland's national epic

The *Kalevala*

by Lauri Honko

THE origins of epics based on folk poetry are usually clouded in mystery. We can only guess at the genesis of such treasures as the *Mahabharata*, the epics of Homer and Virgil, *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Edda*. The *Kalevala*, the national epic of Finland, which was first published in 1835, is an interesting exception.

We know that the *Kalevala* (Kalevala is the name of the mythical land in which the epic is situated) was compiled and edited by Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884), a doctor who for twenty years was district physician in Kajaani, in north-eastern Finland, and who later became professor of Finnish language and literature at the University of Helsinki.

We know, line by line, the sources of the *Kalevala*, those folk poems that Lönnrot collected during the eleven journeys he made to the eastern and northern provinces during the period 1828-1844, as well as poems recorded by dozens of other collectors which were included in the second and final edition published in 1849.

We also know Lönnrot's working methods; his compilation work is illuminated by his travel accounts and newspaper articles, by the method he used in handling his poetic raw material and by the five editorial phases which preceded the final published version. Since the original recorded poems have been preserved and published (1908-1948) in the thirty-three-volume *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* (Ancient Poems of the Finnish People), and since other documentary evidence abounds, we are able to follow in the footsteps of the compiler of the epic. It is as if we were looking over his shoulder as he sat working at his desk.

The story of the genesis of the *Kalevala* began in the 1760s. It was then that Henrik Gabriel Porthan, professor at the Turku Academy, began publishing his treatise on Finnish poetry (*Dissertatio de Poesi Fennica*, 1766-1778). It was not until Porthan's day, and largely thanks to him, that it was realized that folk poetry, maintained in oral tradition, was a more valuable part of the Finnish-language literary heritage than any previous Finnish literature, which had been predominantly religious and economic in nature.

A second turning point came with the

treaty of Hamina (1809) which severed the ties between Finland and Sweden (which went back nearly seven centuries) and attached her as a self-governing Grand Duchy to the Russian Empire. The far-advanced assimilation with Sweden was

broken, doors were opened towards the Finno-Ugric tribes in eastern Europe, and the first Diet planted in the minds of Finns an image of a Finland which was more than a few provinces belonging either to Sweden or to Russia. ▶



Caricature drawn in 1847 depicts Elias Lönnrot, the author/compiler of the *Kalevala*, tirelessly travelling the country in search of the ancient songs of his people.



Anttilien seurue, Kuitijärvi

There are no known pictures of the great singers interviewed by Lönnrot, and it was not until the 1890s that photographers and artists began to retrace his footsteps. In 1894, I.K. Inka, the pioneer of Finnish photography, made a journey to north-eastern Karelia from which he brought back some wonderful portraits and landscapes. Photo shows Inka (right) and his travelling companion K.F. Karjalainen (left) with peasants from the region during a halt on the shores of Lake Kuitijärvi.

and his unassuming manner won the respect of both learned men and ordinary people. His natural make-up and social background coupled with his training as a doctor gave him an understanding of and an insight into the lives of ordinary people and helped him to withstand the rigours of his strenuous journeyings.

His interest in folk poetry aroused by Reinhold von Becker, his teacher in the Finnish language at the Turku Academy, Lönnrot began his collecting expeditions in 1828. These took him first to Finnish Karelia and then to Archangel Karelia beyond the border, where the Karelian dialect was very close to Finnish.

What did Lönnrot find on his journeys? He found poems, their singers and the living environment in which the poems formed an interlude to daily toil and the high point of festive occasions. The variants known from collectors' manuscripts now became a living stream of poems flowing from the lips of tens and later hundreds of singers. In a word, Lönnrot stepped into a world of living epic poetry and his mind recorded not only the content of the poems but also the whole varied but strictly restricted verse language in which that poetry lived. Without his mastery of that language the peculiar genesis of the *Kalevala* would not have been possible.

Lönnrot collected approximately two thousand variants of poems, all in all some forty thousand lines of poetry sung in the ancient Finnish metre. This constituted only a fragment of his collection in its entirety since he also recorded fables, riddles, proverbs and dirges as well as material connected with local mores and, above all with the language.

Lönnrot's journeys were comparatively short, of only some weeks', at most months', duration, and most of his time was spent in travelling from one place to

another. He appears not to have stayed long in any one place and it seems that he did not record the entire repertoire of any singer of note. There is no evidence that Lönnrot was deeply interested in the context in which the poems were performed or in the lives and fate of the rune singers. As a rule he did not even record the names of the singers in his notebook. Thus there remained a considerable cultural distance between Lönnrot and the rune singers.

The fact that Lönnrot did not identify with any area or community that he encountered was both understandable and important—understandable in that Lönnrot was not primarily interested in modern folk life but in the ancient Finnish society of which it still possibly bore traces; important in the sense that he was freer to create a poetic world of his own which represented the entire tradition as conceived by himself and not a system of tradition as conceived by one singer or a single family of singers.

Judged by the norms of our day, the methods he used might be considered unscientific; yet Lönnrot knew subconsciously that he needed time for the process of integration to take place. In his relations with the most important singers he met Lönnrot maintained the attitude of an apprentice almost to the end, until the first edition of the *Kalevala* was published.

From the point of view of general comparative epic research the question of the authenticity of the *Kalevala* is very interesting. How well does the epic reflect the folk poems preserved in oral tradition, that is, how genuine is it as a folk poetry epic? What were Lönnrot's goals in compiling the *Kalevala* and how well did he attain these goals with the poetic material at his disposal? The endeavours of traditional singers to combine tales of Väinämöinen, for instance, have produced a few minor epic cycles, which could be called folk epics, but which are less than a thousand lines long. There is no reason to believe that the situation had been any different in former centuries or that the poems had originally been part of larger entities. Thus the entity and structure of the *Kalevala* represent Lönnrot's solution to the problem upon which he may have deliberated most during the compilation—what was the time sequence of the events described in the narrative poems? His interpretation involved no reconstruction, only creative form-giving.

Study of the verse material reveals that the proportion of Lönnrot's own compositions is very small, three per cent according to one calculation. Thus he managed with lines that he and other collectors had found; this means that, if the criterion is the authenticity of single lines, the *Kalevala* is a very genuine folk poetry epic.

How about the remaining ninety-seven per cent? Did they come straight from the original poems? Some fifty per cent of the *Kalevala* verses have been changed by Lönnrot either in spelling, language or verse. From the beginning of the *Kalevala* process Lönnrot had been of the opinion

Elias Lönnrot represented the common man in this group. He was a poor tailor's son whose schooling was frequently interrupted for want of money. His talent helped him to get ahead, his diligence encouraged him to undertake great projects at which others would have balked

that differences in dialect or other inconsistencies must not be too disturbing for the reader, since the public consisted not just of scholars but the whole nation. Fourteen per cent of the verses have no identical equivalent in the poems but were combined from popular elements by Lönnrot. Finally, thirty-three per cent of the lines are exactly as found in the original recordings.

The statistics show that Lönnrot never aimed at poetic freedom where individual lines were concerned. The liberties he took

lay elsewhere. Due to his working methods the *Kalevala* contained few of the longer sequences of lines to be found in the original variants. Thus the context of most lines had changed, not necessarily to a less genuine one, but to a different one from that in which they were found in oral tradition. This also means that the poems have no place of origin, since lines from variants found in different regions are intermingled. This technique contributed to the emergence of a pan-Finnish and not a regional epic. Whether or not this was Lönnrot's conscious aim is not clear, for

the actual function of this freedom was to give form to the plot.

Lönnrot also tried to find a geographically defined place for his vision and found it south of the White Sea, where, according to one contemporary view, the Finns could have originated. As regards time, this idea presupposed a time span of almost one thousand years. In outlining this quasi-scientific view of antiquity Lönnrot ended up developing a fuller insight into the world of the *Kalevala* than we can imagine. As a scholar he wanted to take account of all

'The land of heroes'

THE *Kalevala* is a vast anthology of the Finnish popular poetic tradition. In its definitive version it consists of fifty poems, totalling 22,795 lines, painstakingly collected between 1828 and 1849 by Elias Lönnrot from the mouths of folk singers from Karelia, a remote district in northern Finland where the traditional songs of the Finnish people had retained all their original purity and freshness.

Ancient Finnish poetry did not rhyme, but it made great use of alliteration and, above all, of "parallelism"; each thought or topic had to be repeated in different terms in two or three consecutive lines. These stylistic devices, which are often to be found in the oral tradition, imbue the *Kalevala* with a bewitching fluidity, as witness the following lines from the first poem of the epic. They describe how two singers would recite a poem, sitting face to face, holding hands and rocking gently backwards and forwards, each reciting alternate lines.

*Beloved brother, dear companion,
Dear comrade of my youth,
Come straightaway sing with me,
Since we are reunited,
Come close and sing with me (...)
Stretch out your hand to my hand,
Entwine your finger with my fingers,
Come sing our finest songs
Come spin our finest tales (...)*

Then follows an account of the creation of the world and the introduction of the great heroes whose exploits, loves and hates make up the framework of the epic. These are the native sons of Kalevala, the "land of heroes", the mythical cradle-land of the Finnish people.

Reminiscent of the ancient pagan deities, these larger-than-life characters with supernatural powers fight for possession of a magical object, the *Sampo*. A mill or lid with miraculous powers, the *Sampo* was made for Louhi, mistress of Pohjola, a cold northern region, land of magicians and of darkness.

To Pohjola go three aspirants to the hand of Louhi's beautiful daughter—Väinämöinen, an aged bard whose wisdom is his strength and who can charm the elements with his words, Lem-

minkäinen, valiant warrior and fickle seducer, and the dynamic, enterprising blacksmith Ilmarinen.

After welcoming him to her castle, Louhi, mistress of Pohjola, makes the following proposition to Ilmarinen:

*"O mighty Ilmarinen,
Eternal blacksmith,
Canst thou forge a Sampo? (...)
My daughter shall be thy payment,
The recompense for thy labours."
In this fashion did Ilmarinen
The blacksmith, reply to Louhi:
"Yea I can forge a Sampo.
With feather of swan,
With milk of cull cow,
With grain of barley
And a tuft of lambswool,
I can fashion the ornate lid.
Did I not hammer out the sky,
Forge from nothing, not the merest scrap,
The great cover of the heavens?"*

Thus Ilmarinen made the *Sampo* and married "the maid of Pohjola". But after the death of his wife, the *Sampo*, for possession of which a furious struggle had erupted between the peoples of Kalevala and Pohjola, was broken in the course of a violent sea battle. Its remnants brought happiness and prosperity to the people of Kalevala, but, from that time on, their chieftain Väinämöinen had constantly to guard them against the vengeful sorceries of the mistress of Pohjola.

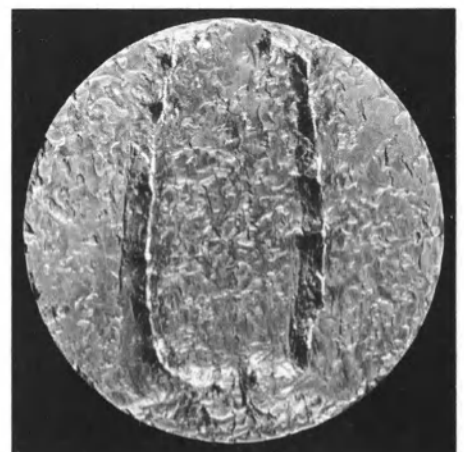
These two great adventures are interspersed with countless mythological and traditional episodes, such as the theft of the sun, of the moon and of fire, as well as other parallel intrigues involving such vital and engaging personalities as the unfortunate Kullervo, condemned to a life of slavery to satisfy the hatred and desire for vengeance of others.

In the final poem, Väinämöinen yields pride of place to a Messiah-like hero, born miraculously of a virgin, and disappears, leaving to the Finnish people the echoes of his *kantele*, his world-renowned harp.



Photo Unesco Courier

Bronze medal by the Finnish artist Pekka Pitkänen has been struck this year on the initiative of the jubilee committee for the 150th anniversary of the publication of the first edition of the *Kalevala*. It is being awarded to persons who have helped to make Finnish culture more widely known. The jaws and teeth of a pike featured on one side of the medal are a direct allusion to the epic. They were used by Väinämöinen, the central figure of the *Kalevala*, to make the first *kantele*, the harp which is the national instrument associated with Finnish lyric poetry.



► the research findings that could throw light on the Finns' past; as a poet he wanted to recount the past in the words of a folk poem, as if calling the folk singers, the first receivers of the poetic messages of the past, to bear him witness. For him the ancient times of Kalevala were a phase in history.

Seen from this standpoint it is easier to understand the astonishing fact that at times Lönnrot speaks of the *Kalevala* as a source of scientific research which sheds light on life in the ancient society. This indicates that he underestimated the significance of his own input and overestimated the value of the *Kalevala* as an historical and ethnographical source.

No poet can announce in advance that he is going to compile a national epic. The decision as to whether a work is a national epic or not is made by the reading public. Nevertheless, expectations were high with regard to the *Kalevala* and the first speeches hailing it as a national epic were made even before it reached the bookshops. No one had cause to regret making these speeches and very rapidly, both at home and abroad, the *Kalevala* came to be recognized as a valuable addition to both Finnish and world literature. The builders of the new Finnish national identity drew new belief in the future from the epic which seemed to restore to the nation both its literature and its history.

This enthusiasm focused naturally on the future and not on the past. The epic was commented on and translated even before people had had time to study it in depth. In fact there was no need to know what the *Kalevala* contained, only what it was.

It was not until the mid-1870s that critical folk poetry research began and the *Kalevala* was rejected as a source and original recorded poems began to be studied. Kalevala research became part of research done on Finnish literature and general epic literature.

The *Kalevala* as a symbol of national identity, however, belongs to the history of Western thought and to cultural history. The message that Elias Lönnrot wanted to convey to the nation with the epic is to be found in the mystery of the *Sampo*. In Lönnrot's hands this magic object, which mills all material wealth and which is fought over by the people, is transformed in the *Kalevala* into the symbol of mankind's cultural development. ■

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The *Kalevala* and the flowering of Finnish art

by Heikki Kirkinen

THE *Kalevala* was born in the European atmosphere of National Romanticism stimulated by the struggles for national autonomy. At the time it was published Finland was a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. The official language was Swedish, a heritage of more than six centuries of Swedish rule before Russia invaded Finland in 1809. In none of the schools was Finnish the language of instruction and few educated people understood Finnish. Over eighty per cent of the population of one and a half million were Finnish-speaking, but Finnish literature consisted mainly of religious prose and hymns.

At first the *Kalevala* was much admired but little read. The 500 copies of the first edition, published in 1835, took twelve years to sell. During the nineteenth century eight editions of the *Kalevala* were published, whereas in this century there have been over sixty editions, including six in the Soviet Union and four in the United States.

The poetic beauty of the *Kalevala*, its dramatic elements and its depiction of popular yet mythical characters have always been a source of inspiration to artists and poets.

The themes most favoured by artists have been the creation of the world, the evidence of the magical powers of the great sage Väinämöinen, the forging and theft of the luck-bringing magical object the *Sampo*, the adventures, death and revival of the faithless lover Lemminkäinen, and the tragic fate of Kullervo, who had been raised as a slave.

During the 1850s, the first paintings and sculptures on Kalevala themes were in the Romantic style and were the work of Swedish artists. R. W. Ekman created idealized images of Väinämöinen and other Kalevala scenes, whereas J. Takanen used the refined lyricism of neo-Classicism in his sculptures. The stylistic schools of Italy and France also had an effect on Finnish, which began to shift from Classicism to Realism. Up to the 1890s, then, Kalevala art, like Finnish culture in general, was searching for its own individual forms of expression.

The same search was also evident in literature and music. Themes taken from folk poems or the *Kalevala* were already

present in the Swedish-language literature of the early nineteenth century, but full-scale cultivation of the Kalevala spirit in literature began later. The year 1869 saw the performance of Z. Topelius' play *Prinsessan av Cypern* (The Princess of Cyprus), which combined the adventures of the Kalevala heroes and the world of ancient Greece. The overture composed for it by F. von Schantz is one of the first compositions for an orchestra in the mood of the *Kalevala*.

Aleksis Kivi, who was to become the Finnish-language national writer, won the best play award with his *Kullervo*, but conservative critics demanded changes and it was not performed until 1885. The language and metre of the *Kalevala* was a stimulus to Kivi's poetry, although his prose works are classed as Realism. H. J. Erkkö and many other poets favoured Kalevala themes, but on the whole the rise of political and language issues temporarily weakened interest in the *Kalevala*.

A turn in the tide of cultural development occurred in 1885 at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the *Kalevala*. That year saw the publication of J. Krohn's *Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Historia* (History of Finnish Literature) in which the *Kalevala* occupied a central position.

After a period of maturation the *Kalevala* and the cultural tradition behind it reached a peak as sources of national culture between the 1890s and the achievement of independence in 1917. During this period Finnish culture became internationally known, both in Europe and America, thanks largely to artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1933), composer Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) and poet Eino Leino (1878-1926).

Gallen-Kallela, who had studied in France, started out as a Realistic painter, but after spending a long honeymoon in Karelia in the traditional folk-song regions, he developed a new style of depicting the *Kalevala*, bringing decorative and symbolistic elements as well as monumental ruggedness into a realistic representation of Nature and the mythical heroes.

The Paris World Exhibition in 1900 brought Finnish culture and the Finns' desire for independence to international



Photo-portrait of the blind kantele-player Stefan Jänis, taken in 1915 in the village of Hanhiseikä, to the north of Lake Ladoga. The kantele, or Finnish harp, was traditionally used to accompany Finnish lyric poetry.

consciousness. Gallen-Kallela painted four Kalevala-inspired frescoes for the Finnish pavilion whose monumental art and ideological message created a world sensation. Finland had created her own culture and was defending it, as if it were the luck-bringing *Sampo*, against the attacks of Mother Russia on Finnish autonomy. This message was further confirmed by Sibelius' symphonic poem *Finlandia*, which was also performed at the World Exhibition.

Sibelius studied in central Europe, but he had early grown attached to the mood of the Kalevala. He visited the great rune singer Larin Paraske to learn the way the traditional folk poems were sung. He also made several trips to Karelia. In 1892 he conducted the first public performance of his *Kullervo* symphony, which demonstrated that he had penetrated deep into the mythical spirit of the *Kalevala* with his original tone language. This impression is reinforced by his *Karelia* and *Lemminkäinen* suites.

Eino Leino was of Karelian origin and had been inspired by the *Kalevala* when still a student. He developed its themes and stylistic devices in his poetry in the spirit of neo-Romanticism, Symbolism and hero-worship. One of his earliest poems, *Tarina Suuresta Tammesta* (A Tale of the Great Oak), was a symbolic description of the growth of the Finnish nation from the shade of a foreign power into light. The *Kalevala* blossomed out in his collection *Helkavirsia*, published in 1903. In a sophisticated adaptation of the folk poem metre he depicts the mythical characters in his ballads as reflections of the ideological trends and goals of his own time. The poems convey the bitterness of threat and revenge but also the spirit of love. The second *Helkavirsia* series expands the themes to general humanistic and even cosmic visions of the liberty of the human spirit and the limits of life.



Reading room in the Folklore Archives, Helsinki. This institution which specializes in the collection, study and publication of the oral heritage, contains over 3 million manuscripts and some 10,000 hours of sound recordings. The Archives form part of the Finnish Literature Society, an extremely active research centre founded in 1831. The Finnish folklorist Urpo Vento was director of the Folklore Archives from 1964 to 1972.

Finland won her independence in 1917 in the turmoil of the Russian revolution. The great dream had come true and thus began a new phase of material and cultural reconstruction. Typical of the works of the first young artists of the independent nation to be inspired by the themes and moods of the *Kalevala* were the sculptures of W. Aaltonen, the lithographic illustrations of the *Kalevala* by M. Visanti, U. Klami's orchestral suite *Kalevala* and L. Madejota's composition *Väinämöisen Soitto* (Väinämöinen Playing). The celebration of the centenary of the *Kalevala*, in 1935, was the climax of the consolidation of the position of the national epic.

In the aftermath of the Second World War Finland lost part of the Kalevala regions of Karelia, settled the evacuees in Finland and began developing a modern industrialized society on a democratic basis. Artists began to experiment with the use of modern stylistic devices in the treatment of Kalevala themes. U. Alanko painted a cubistic Aino figure and J. Sievänen an abstract figure of Lemminkäinen's mother. T. Sakki won a Kalevala sculpture competition with his wave line sculpture depicting the rhythmic metre of the *Kalevala*.



Photo-portrait of the famous woman singer Larin Paraske, better known as Paraskeva Nikitin, taken in 1892. Some 32,000 lines from her rich repertory of verse were recorded.

In poetry the impact of the *Kalevala* was at first an unfocused striving to find the riches of the Finnish language through new forms; there was the juxtaposing of the themes of the *Kalevala* with those of modern times as well as the use of the metre of the *Kalevala* in modern poems. L. Viita introduced it into the rugged rhythm of *Betonimylläri* (Concrete Mixer) and S. Selja into her sensitively feminine mood poems. M. Rossi wrote a delicate lullaby in Kalevala metre and A. Turtiainen used it in his idealistic social poems *Leivän Sampo* (The Bread-bringing Sampo), dedicated to metalworkers.

The renaissance of the *Kalevala* in the arts culminated in the works of P. Haaviko. His collection *Kaksikymmentä ja Yksi* (One and Twenty, 1974) uses both the Kalevala metre and modern verse forms in portraying a phantasy of some Finns journeying through Russia to Byzantium to steal the Empress's money-making machine, the *Sampo*. After concentrating on modern themes for a while he created *Rauta-aika* (The Iron Age, 1982), which is a profound and individual analysis of the main events in the *Kalevala*. Kalevala themes have also been used in plays and, this year, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the *Kalevala*, the whole epic will be portrayed on stage in Karelia.

All in all, the *Kalevala* and Kalevala-style folk poetry have undergone a revival in Finnish cultural life. They have inspired the Finns to express their own tradition in a modern language in nearly all fields of culture. ■

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Relaçion de las Cerimonias y ritos y poblacion y gobernaçion
de los yndios de la provincia de Mechuacàn heccha
al yllustrisimo s.^r don antonio de mendocã virrey y go-
bernador de esta nueva españa por su m.^r e.^r

1541

JV. C. S.



Photos Jean-Loup Charmet © The Real Biblioteca de El Escorial and Ediciones Aguilar, Madrid

Presentation to the Viceroy of New Spain of the Chronicle of the Ceremonies, Rites, People and Government of the Indians of the Province of Mechuacàn ("The Chronicle of Michoacàn"). In the preface, the anonymous Spanish cleric who compiled the Chronicle declared that it was prepared by the elders of the city of Mechuacàn "and by myself, in their name, not as author but as interpreter". This illustration and the others accompanying this article are facsimiles of a document dating from 1541 which is preserved in the Escorial Palace.

In the sixteenth century, Michoacán, which in the Nahuatl language means "the place of fish", was the name of the Indian town of Tzintzuntzan, the capital of the Porhepecha. We should know nothing about this vanished civilization of Central America were it not for the Chronicle of Michoacán, which can rightly be said to be its testament. The book was written in Spanish around 1540; it describes the history of the Porhepecha people, their beliefs and their faith, and gives the names of their gods and heroes. It was written at the

request of the viceroy of New Spain, by an unknown scribe, to whom the last Porhepecha nobles dictated it when their civilization was nearing its end. It is a purely Indian work, and its verbal and poetic power is such that it stands with the greatest epics of world literature. The French writer J.M.G. Le Clézio has published a French translation of the Chronicle of Michoacán (La Relation de Michoacán, Gallimard publishers, Paris, 1984). In the following text he evokes this legendary tale of the one-time glory of the Indians.

The Chronicle of Michoacán

Testament of a people

by J.M.G. Le Clézio

THE great stories of history tell us about beginnings: the creation of the earth, its first inhabitants, and the coming of the gods and of the beings they created. They recount these events simply, as if the world extended no further than a particular land that was bound up with a particular people, and beyond its frontiers there was a different kind of life; a different time, too, unreal and fraught with danger, as dreams are.

Examples of such stories are the first tales of the Iranian people, the epic of the giant Gilgamesh, the founding of the people of Israel, and the Greek and Scandinavian legends. These sacred texts are the foundations of history. They show how the emergence of a nation, a language, a religion or a government is related to the most ancient of myths. They also tell us of the primal creation of the world, for they show us how places were given names. By naming mountains, rivers, springs and forests, men rescued them from non-being, and found in them the rudiments of what were later to be towns and temples. This appropriation of the earth is the real source of history, a magical invention of the moment when men and the gods met.

The *Chronicle of Michoacán* is one of the few texts—the books of the *Chilam Balam* of the Mayas of Yucután and the *Popol Vuh* of the Quiché Mayas are others—which tell us about these beginnings. Thanks to the Western system of writing, it catches the verbal magic of the fabled past of the people of Michoacán when, after centuries of wandering amid tribal warfare, there came the first signs of the destiny of a nation which played a vital part in the civilizations of Central America.

Yet in this case the writing is of secondary importance. It merely transmits a message to posterity, and it gives the text its strange, almost dreamlike quality—that of the testimony left by a people before its death and of which we understand very little. The anonymous sixteenth-century writing, which is jerky and full of redundancies, and the naive illustrations—a combination of Indian symbols and the tradition of illuminated manuscripts dear to the monks of the Renaissance—are the ultimate attempt to halt the flight of time and to preserve an evanescent glory. The writing is the work of a copyist; it may

be a translation of texts written in the Porhé language, compiled by an obscure monk who reconstituted in Spanish the message of the last priests of Michoacán, in some cases dictated to them by Don Pedro Cuinierengari, the son of a *Petamuti*, as the priest-historians of the court of the *Cazonci*, or sovereign, were called, and a witness of the last days of the reign of the Porhepecha.

What disturbs and moves us is the sacred character of this profoundly Indian book. This legendary story, handed down from generation to generation by *petamuti* priests, is a solemn tale, with the same oratorical beauty as that of the religious and military colleges of Tenochtitlán (Mexico City), which Bernadino de Sahagún (1500-1590) used when writing the "General History of the Things of New Spain". But it also reminds us of the epics that survive today among peoples that have no written language—the Tule of San Blas, the Inuit of Greenland, the Dogon of equatorial Africa, and the Tiwi of Oceania.

The Cazonci, or sovereign of the Porhepechas, seated on his throne in presence of the Uri, the representatives of the main guilds of the kingdom (artists, fishermen, hunters, etc.).



One of the most powerful and most orderly kingdoms in Indian America, that of the Porhepecha, was whole-heartedly dedicated to the supernatural forces that brought it into being, and was unable to survive the fall of its gods. Only the representatives of Curicaueri, the god of fire, and Xaratanga, the moon goddess, had any power in this hierarchical religious society. But the faith that was the strength of men in the early days of the Conquest, when the two Chichimec brothers Uapeani and Pauacum, the founding heroes, wandered with their warriors in search of a promised land and a dwelling for their gods, the faith that inspired Tariatari, the founder of the empire, and his nephews when, village by village, they conquered the domain of Curicaueri, their master—this same faith now rendered the Porhepecha powerless in their superstitious fear of omens, and condemned them to annihilation.

Stricken in its vitals, with its temples in ruins, its gods overthrown and, worst of all, the one incarnation of their god Curicaueri, the Cazonci Tangaxoan Tzintzicha, fallen and enslaved by the Conquistador Nuño de Guzmán, the Porhepecha Kingdom was unable to put up a fight. The men of this warlike people were struck motionless by a holy dread, and fighting was out of the question. "Where are they from, these newcomers, if not from heaven?" said the Cazonci to his nobles. "People say that these stags (horses) that they bring with them come from the place where the sky meets the sea. Who can they be?"

The Indians sent these new gods offerings by way of greeting. The Cazonci sent skins with colours from the four corners of the world, as he would have done to their own gods. And he ordered gold to be placed in the middle of the court for the chief god, Hernán Cortés.

But the Indians were soon to realize that these "gods from heaven", the terrifying messengers from the other world, had not come to bring the answer to their prayers and receive their offerings; they had come to fulfil the doom-laden sayings of the oracles.

The news of the destruction of the opposing empire of Tenochtitlán brought no solace to the Cazonci; it perturbed him even more. "Who are you?" he asked Montaña, the first Spaniard to set foot on his



The priests who offer up incense in the temples, the curituechas, gathered round the High Priest, or Petamuti, who bears the insignia of his rank—a lance and a gourd set with turquoise. "And they declared that they bore the whole nation on their shoulders."

territory. "Where are you from? What are you seeking? For we have never heard tell of men such as you, nor seen such men. Why have you come from such distant lands? Is there neither food nor drink in your native land, that you have come to make the acquaintance of peoples unknown to you? And what had the Mexicans done to you, that you annihilated them when you were in their city?"

The apprehensive questions of the Porhepecha people were soon to be answered. Motionless and powerless, the men stared at these new gods. Already the old gods—Xaratanga, Curicaueri, the mother Cuer-auaperi, Hurendequaecara, the guardians of the grottoes and the mountains, the spirits of the springs and the lakes, the gods of the four corners of the earth and of hell—had all returned to nothingness. The newcomers wanted gold, the "excrement of the sun", the symbol of divine power. Their lust for gold was not sated by the spoils of war handed over to them by the Cazonci; they wanted more and more, so they sacked the temples and profaned the tombs of the most illustrious kings.

The impregnable frontier city, Taximaroa, had already been reduced to ashes by the new victors. Disease—influenza, smallpox and measles—decimated the inhabitants and wiped out villages. Foreseeing the terrible fate that awaited him, in the solitude of the end of the world that

the gods had deserted, the last king of the Porhepecha could not hold his peace. "They are coming," he cried. "Must we therefore die?"

Already Timas, the captain of war of the Cazonci, knew that death was the only way. "My lord, order copper to be brought, and we shall put it on our shoulders and drown ourselves in the lake; so we shall reach our end more quickly, and join those who have already died."

With the fall of the gods the empire of the Porhepecha came to an end. The newcomers first destroyed the enemies they feared most, just as they had done at Tenochtitlán: the statues were cast down from the temples and lay crumbled into dust, before the eyes of the Indians. "Why are the gods not moved to wrath? Why do they not curse these men?" But the gods remained silent. Defeated without even offering any resistance, they had left their dwelling places and their temples and had gone back to the mysterious realms from which they had come, under the earth in volcanoes, at the bottom of lakes or in the depths of the forest, in the warm lands where perhaps they were born.

With the fall of the gods of the Porhepecha another kind of conquest of Michoacán began, a conquest in which the goal was not the glory and power of the ancient Chichimec gods, but possession of the land, power over men, and gold. Everything vanished when these conquerors approached, everything grew silent, as the soothsayers had prophesied. On the banks of a river, at the ford of Nuestra Señora de la Purificación (probably near the town of Purnandiro, on the frontier of what is now the Mexican State of Guanajuato) in the year 1530, the last



Arrival of the first Spaniards in Michoacán. In his residence at Tzintzuntzán, on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro, the Cazonci Tangaxoan orders gifts of food, copper axes, jars of wine and hides of every colour to be taken to the strangers who were thought to be gods, for "from whence could they have come, if not from the heavens?" At his feet can be seen the round plaques of gold and the half-moon-shaped sheets of silver in their greed for which the conquistadores would pillage the kingdom.

Cazonci was tortured and slain by the conquistador Nuño de Guzmán, after a parody of a trial. So ended the glorious line of the Uacusecha, the Eagles, who had built up the empire, and also the reign of the god Curicaueri, whose last incarnation on earth the Cazonci had been. Another form of speech, another conquest were about to begin, covering over the silence of the Indians.

All that is left today as a legacy, thanks to the anonymous *Chronicle*, is the memory of that greatness, the legend, both touching and true, of a past era, when poetry and history were one, and when the kingdom of men was like the dwelling place of the gods. ■

JEAN MARIE G. LE CLEZIO is an essayist and novelist of Franco-Mauritian origin. In addition to his translation from Spanish into French of the *Relación de Michoacán* (*The Chronicle of Michoacán*, 1984), his many published works include French translations of Mayan texts, such as *The Prophecies of Chilam Balam* (1976), and novels such as *Le Chercheur d'Or* (*The Gold-Seeker*, 1985). Since 1973 he has made several trips to Mexico and is a part-time research worker at the College of Michoacán.

The Lay of Igor's Campaign

by Igor Shkliarevsky

THE barbarian hordes flooded across the steppes, breaking like waves against the wooden walls of the cities of ancient Russia.

From his post atop the ramparts the sentinel raised the alarm: "The Khazars!"

His son in turn cried out: "The Pechenegs!"

His grandson echoed: "The Polovtsy!"

And again and again their descendants would take up the cry. Such was the nature of things...

With no roof but the sky, no shelter but the light of day, southern Russia was a tempting, easy prey. Unwelcome guests

One of a series of engravings by the Soviet artist Vladimir Favorsky (1886-1964), Lenin Prize winner in 1962, illustrating a re-edition of The Lay of Igor's Campaign issued in 1954. It depicts a scene towards the end of the poem when Prince Igor's wife Yaroslavna begs the powers of heaven to bring Igor back to Russian soil:

*Yaroslavna weeps in the early morn
On the walls of Putivl walling:*

"Wind, O wind!

*Why blow, my lord, such a stormy
blast?*

*Why do you bring on your wings so
light*

*Pagan arrows down on my lover's
host?*

Were you not sated with blowing

High up under the clouds,

*And with rocking ships upon the blue
sea?*

*Why have you scattered my joy, O my
lord,*

Over the feather grass?"

hammered at the gates of Pereyaslav, of Chernigov, of Kiev with their heavy sling-stones. Burning arrows flew. Walls crumbled. A grassy shroud covered and recovered the charred ruins.

Nor was the suffering any the less when inflicted by kinsmen, when the people of Novgorod marched against Kiev, or the people of Kiev took up arms against Chernigov.

*For brother spoke to brother
Saying,*

"This is mine,

And that, too, is mine!"

And the princes began

To call small things great,

To forge feuds

Among themselves...

to the despair of chroniclers over the centuries...

Whose was the hand that recorded *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*? Did he live to be an old man? What happened to him after he had written *The Lay*? Nobody knows, but he was certainly a man of rare courage, proclaiming out loud what others dared not think. For a prince has his armies and his ramparts, but a poet is without defence...

He foretold the misfortunes that would strike the land of Russia over many centuries. With a prophetic ear to the ground he heard the muffled, drumming hoofbeats of the Mongol horsemen, whose thirst for conquest could have dried up whole rivers. He could not know that far across the steppes Genghis Khan was forging his empire, but he had the political intuition of a great poet.

A heavy sense of brooding anguish permeates *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*. The Russian town of Glebov has been sacked, its defenders hacked to pieces. As though a fiery brand from Glebov in flames had set light to his raiment, Igor Svyatoslavich, Prince of Novgorod, burns with shame. The state of the roads at winter's end has prevented him from joining the other Russian princes who have taken up arms against the Polovtsy.

Igor is racked with fear that the princes will doubt the sincerity of his will to join the expedition. He is tortured by his ambition and his desire to prove his valour and to make amends for failing to answer the call of the motherland. Hastily he prepares to venture forth alone on the Polovtsian steppe.

At dawn on the day of battle the enemy seemed to Igor's men like a great forest advancing upon them. The enemy leader Khan Konchak had mustered all his troops. Another chronicler recounts that the princes could still have forced their way through the enemy and galloped to safety, but they would not desert their foot-soldiers and common men-at-arms. Igor ordered the horsemen to dismount and fight on foot.

This defeat of a prince of Novgorod, which was to be of little consequence in the history of Russia, is transformed by the poetic genius of the author into a great moral victory. A great poetic epic is born.

Plains, forests, steppes, the whole Russian landscape becomes a living presence in *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*. Stretching out to the horizon can be seen the rapids of the Dnieper, the sandbanks of the Don, ▶



Photo © APN, Moscow



Left, two scenes from a performance at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre of Prince Igor, Borodin's famous opera inspired by the great epic of ancient Russian literature *Slovo o Polku Igoreve* (*The Lay of Igor's Campaign*). Written during the 12th century and rediscovered six centuries later, *The Lay* recounts an incident that was of only minor importance in Russian history—Igor Svyatoslavich's ill-fated expedition against the Polovtsy in 1185. Despite doubts that have been expressed by some as to its authenticity as a medieval document, this epic poem, some 3,000 words in length, is universally recognized as a masterpiece of world literature. For the Soviet expert on Slav culture Andrei Nicolayevich Robinson, the originality of *The Lay* lies in its rich symbolism and its powerful nationalist undercurrent. He writes: "*The Lay of Igor's Campaign* occupies the middle ground, in the geographical, historical and poetic senses alike, between the epics of West and East, and also between two periods, the archaic (pagan) and the feudal (...). The poetic originality of *The Lay* derives in part from its author's use of ancient Russian folk poetry (...). The basic symbols of the heroic poetry of the Middle Ages can in many instances be traced back to a distant myth-making epoch characterized by an animistic attitude to nature and its interaction with human beings (...). Through the force of his poetry the author of *The Lay* tried to take a stand against the feudal division of Russia (...). The inspired idealization of reality in the lyrical epic, combined with an uncharacteristic criticism of that reality, are recognizable in a large perspective as that civic sense which is an important feature of Russian literature."



▶ the grass-covered *kurgans* (burial mounds), the wooden walls of Novgorod, Polotsk and Kiev—the entire expanse of twelfth-century Russia. Above this expanse, like a man with winged sandals, his face reddened by wind, soars the author of *The Lay*.

The original manuscript of *The Lay*, discovered by Count Alexei Musin-Pushkin (1744-1817), perished in the burning of Moscow in 1812. The words of *The Lay* writhed in the flames like living things. A little of the soul of Russia perished with them. All that remained was the copy made by Musin-Pushkin for Catherine II, as well as the poignant saying: "Manuscripts never burn completely".

Doubt has been cast on the authenticity of the text, yet the more one reads *The Lay* the more evident it becomes that even a poet of the stature of Pushkin could not have composed it. How could anyone have

imitated the language and rhythms of the twelfth century or captured with such immediacy the excitement of the happenings of the period.

If *The Lay* was really written early in the eighteenth century, how are we to explain the author's hostility to the Polovtsy, six hundred years later? Only a contemporary who had witnessed their incursions and who had known the smell of fire and blood in the air could be capable of such intensity of feeling. The Polovtsy have long disappeared, fused in the great melting-pot of peoples. Even during the twelfth century, in times of truce and peace, blood links had been forged between the Russian princes and the Polovtsian khans. As *The Lay* itself tells us, marriages "between steppe and forest" were not unusual.

Behind the anonymous author of *The Lay* an entire people stands revealed. The poet has achieved a great exploit. Tau-

tening his genius like a bow, he let fly across the centuries the courage-tipped arrows of his thoughts. In this poem, now eight centuries old, all is movement, all is life—the fighting men, the clouds above, the birds, the wind, the grass and the words. *The Lay* is an integral part of our language. It is in the air we breathe and in the blood that flows in our veins. It teaches us to love our country, but also to maintain a wide perspective, to be forgiving and to respect other peoples. ■

IGOR IVANOVICH SHKLIAREVSKY, of the Soviet Union, is the author of fifteen volumes of poetry and a book of short stories entitled *The Shadow of a Bird*. He has also translated into modern Russian such important classics as *The Lay of Igor's Campaign* and *The Saga of the Battle of Mamaev*.

Shaka

by Mazisi Kunene

IN the African world the family is an all-inclusive social phenomenon involving a large number of individuals who may be linked by a common ancestry. The ideals that are celebrated within such a large family unit are those that emphasize continuity, participatory activities and fulfilment through wider circles of relations. The implication of these factors on the nature of the literary idiom and form cannot be over-emphasized. They mean that literature, as a social product, must be celebratory and public, and above all focus on group participation and performance. Literature, if it is to be meaningful in such a society, must utilize the oral language and group action (drama, song, mime, dance) to heighten its meaning.

Looking at Zulu literature in particular, it is important also to emphasize that the heroic poem or epic is integrally linked to events as they happen in society. Its focus is on the extent to which such events exemplify the social ethic. The very process of selecting what to celebrate is a serious one which engages the poet's integrity and intellectual perception. The poet in this sense is viewed as a thinker, as the high priest whose status is inviolable.

His poetic statement must incorporate the highest social truths. He not only reports events, but, after careful selection, uses them to affirm the ideals of the society. There is nothing deeply personal in his praise for the hero. His statements of approval or disapproval celebrate the permanence of the social order. He is a performer whose utterances must always be directed at a public audience, a philosopher who must link the particular with the universal, and a historian whose knowledge of detail must be attested by a highly attentive and critical audience.

What political factors led to the major heroic period that brought about the flowering of the Zulu heroic epic?

From about the middle of the seventeenth century, the African peoples in southern Africa went through a period of extensive land crisis. This was due to population growth which led to crowding in that part of the continent, to the mounting pressure arising from colonial wars and slave raids by the Portuguese and the Boers, and to the fact that the economic life of the African people centred on animal husbandry and agriculture. The impact



The legendary exploits of Shaka (1786-1828), founder of the Zulu empire, gave rise to a number of epic poems which rank among the finest in the literature of southern Africa and are still a source of inspiration to many African writers. In his dramatic poem Shaka, which he dedicated to "the Bantu martyrs of South Africa", the philosopher-poet and former President of Senegal, Leopold Sédar Senghor, put these words into the mouth of the famed warrior-chief:

*"It is not hate to love one's people.
I say there is no peace under arms,
no peace under oppression,
No brotherhood without equality. I
wanted all men to be brothers."*

Above, Shaka portrayed by the Senegalese artist Alpha Diallo.

of these factors was to destabilize the whole region. It was a period during which many national States emerged, each boasting an heroic leadership by a particular individual or family. One of these was the Zulu State.

At first it was a small State, often forced to pay tribute to more powerful States such as the Ndwandwe. At other times it was part of a loose confederacy. Its decisive period came with the emergence of Shaka as its political leader. Through outstanding military genius and astute political leadership, he subdued and integrated many once-powerful States within just over a decade, from 1815 to 1828.

Shaka not only initiated unique styles and methods of warfare, he also evolved a type of leadership that sought to reinstate the social law, which had been violated by selfish leadership. This social law was, according to Zulu thought, embodied in the Sacred Codes of the Ancestors.

Shaka's leadership was patterned on the idea of service in which the leader himself took equal risks with the rest of the population. One of the greatest doctrines that characterized the Zulu State became that of selflessness in rendering service to the community. This was coupled with the notion of merit as a criterion for leadership at all levels.

the Great

An analysis of the impact and the influence of the Shakan epic is inevitably an analysis of the transformation of Zulu society and its affirmation of the Law of Selflessness. While in other societies this may be viewed in moral terms, in Zulu society, influenced by Shaka's ideas, it became a law. Punishment for disobedience of this law ranged from ostracism by the community to, in extreme cases, death.

It is natural that the Shakan heroic epic should have celebrated these virtues. The celebration was woven around a specific series of events; it ceased to be a didactic and moralistic statement. The poetic style underwent a dramatic change to convey a sense of urgency. A new technique evolved that was deeply concerned with projecting the social message. The very selection of metaphors and symbols is testimony of a society concerned with high achievements and high goals. Courage and initiative were relevant not only to wartime situations but to all social occasions.

Thus the first part of the Shakan heroic epic is a cosmic address to all forces, real and imaginary. The hero is depicted as breaking through all obstacles. He is possessed with the spirit of his forefathers, symbolized in Ndaba. He is the will of the Ancestral powers. He is ferocious in battle; he has subdued nation after nation. He has attained his fame, the poet says, through his wisdom and his skill on the battlefield.

*Wild one! Restless power, son of Ndaba
You who were the whirlwind of the Mbelebele brigade
Who raged among the vast villages of men
Until morning they tumbled down one
after another.
You whose fame spread effortlessly, great
son of Menzi!
Shaka the Invincible, who is not subdued
like water
Great battleaxe that flashed over others
by its sharpness
Shaka! I fear to call you by name
Because you were the ruler
Who counted multiple feats of battle
Whistler who responded like a lion
You prepared for battle in the thick of
the forest
You were the madman who was the spectacle
in the eyes of men!* ▶



Descendants of the Nguni people, the Zulus were given their name by their warrior-king Shaka. In a famous book on Shaka, the well-known author Thomas Mofolo (1877-1948), of Lesotho, who wrote in the Sotho language (belonging to the Bantu linguistic group), recounts that a soothsayer suggested to Shaka that he should rename his clan. Looking up to the stormy sky above him, Shaka cried out "Zulu! Amazulu!" (The sky! The clan of the sky!). Then he spoke to his men, saying: "Today you have vanquished all your enemies and this is why I have chosen for you a worthy name." Left, a kraal, or village, similar to those in which Shaka and his contemporaries would have lived. A kraal usually houses a family group and consists of a number of huts arranged in a circle around an enclosure for cattle.

► In the elaborate poetic restatement and dramatization of Shaka's life the numerous episodes are carefully selected for their national and public significance. They serve not only as points of historical reference but also as affirmations of commitment to public service. The leader has acquired the right to leadership, not by virtue of his birth, but through communally approved social actions.

Throughout the epic there is no reference to Shaka's personal appearance. Instead, events assume a primary symbolic significance; their meaning, scope and variety are built up in a series of dramatic statements. Whereas pre-Shakan poetry had concentrated on the person of the leader, the poetry of the Shakan period ignores the leader and concentrates on the event. Persons are only mentioned in order to stress socially significant events.

It is unfortunate in a sense that evaluation of this great heroic epic is today based purely on recorded material. The heroic epic of the Shakan era was never meant to be read but to be verbalized, acted, dramatized and heightened in meaning through public performance. The highly skilled use of ideophonic sounds, for instance, is lost on the silent page. What we read therefore is only a skeletal part of the epic. Besides, the epic must be performed before an active and appreciative audience; its "private" form cannot fully convey its public meanings.

It should not be assumed that the Shakan heroic epic is a piece of archaic literature. Ever since its inception it has exercised enormous influence on Zulu literature. Virtually every African child in South Africa is taught to recite one or more excerpts from it, and by virtue of its highly sophisticated style, it has influenced the compactness of the Zulu poetic idiom and guaranteed that performance of the heroic poem shall not die. Many public gatherings in modern South Africa feature performances by poets who model their public mes-

sages on the heroic epic of the Shakan period.

Since the advent of Christianity, some communities have taken to public dramatizations of the achievements of Jesus Christ, which are invariably modelled on

A military genius of the highest order, Shaka created the powerful fighting machine that would later offer stern resistance to colonial occupation. He divided the army into regiments based on age groups and distinguished by special markings on their shields and various combinations of headdress and ornamentation. His soldiers went barefoot, "because sandals prevented them from marching fast" (Mofolo); they were equipped with large shields and armed with short stabbing assegais which meant that they had to fight at close quarters.



the Shakan epic. This is not to say that before the Shakan epic there was no powerful Zulu heroic poetry; there was. But never had there been a heroic epic as elaborate, as powerful, as idiomatically complex or as intrinsically geared to the public event. The Shakan epic has permeated all subsequent poetry to the present day. Its impact has even been felt in poetry composed for children. All Zulu literature since that time has specifically focussed on the event rather than the individual.

Many Zulu poets whose works today are in written form have taken the great heroic verses of the Shakan period as their model. The influence of these verses on the work of Vilakazi, the outstanding modern Zulu poet, is particularly evident in his successful volume *Amal'ezulu*. My own epic, *Emperor Shaka the Great*, was deeply influenced by the idiom and style of the Shakan epic. Indeed, I consider Magolwane and Mshongweni, the great Zulu poets of the Shakan era, as my true masters. The combination of the Shakan heroic idiom with the discipline of converting oral literature into written form has created a new and original challenge to a type of poetry that had become precise and technically correct, but dead. ■

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The glory of the spoken

by Salah Stétié

ARABIC is a verbal reality, and something more—an act. Before they were embroidered in golden letters on the walls of the Ka'ba, then the temple of three Meccan divinities, the seven—or ten?—great odes of pre-Islamic Arabia, the celebrated *Muallaqat* (literally “suspended”, in allusion to the way in which they were disposed on the walls of the sacred precinct) had long been an intense oral experience, the glory of the poetic discourse whereby the cultural identity of each tribe was redefined, revitalized by the word of the poet and poised to challenge, not without pride and panache, other tribal identities assembled around their own messages.

A major verbal feat, indeed, was the *Qasidah*, the great inspired poem, whose theme was nevertheless rigorously pre-established, and which was the banner of the group and the impressive expression of its existential challenge. It was for each spokesman, and the tribal bard was in a sense the admirable spokesman of his community, to bring to a pitch of excellence a subject prescribed by a rhetorical game whose roots ran deep. For memorative and commemorative populations, the *Qasidah* was an act of remembrance.

Every year in *jāhilite* (“pagan” or “ignorant”) Arabia before the coming of Islam, from the four corners of the peninsula and beyond the shadeless horizons people came to Suk-Ukaz, the market or fair of Ukaz, where they stayed, exchanging on the public square, through the mediation of poets who held tumultuous, ecstatic audiences spellbound, verses impregnated with frenzy and wisdom,

“I firmly believe that the first, the most ancient language was born in resistance to the desert (in resistance to all deserts, however they may be defined), and that it was born as a primitive enterprise for safeguarding and salvation.”

desire and serenity, triumph and invective, with despair and the greenness of hope, with a lover's attachment to a mare or she-camel, or with the tearful refusal to accept the loss of a woman or girl who was the acme of presence before being transformed into utter nothingness. All this, the glory of the spoken, the fabulous opera of the word, was enacted against the splendid and virtually unadorned backcloth of the desert: sand and wind, solar oven, arena for vast, formless protagonists. The utterance of man is here the only form; the word empowers him to confront the elemental.

I firmly believe that the first, most ancient language was born in resistance to the desert (in resistance to all deserts, however they may be defined), and that it was born as a primitive enterprise for safeguarding and salvation. The working of primordial magic, a talisman, a form of sacrament. This and other reasons attest to the antiquity of Arabic; which is one of our mother languages and which, before Massignon⁽¹⁾ but largely due

(1) Louis Massignon (1883-1962), French Orientalist, author of major works on Islamic mysticism.

to him, is better known as an immemorial matrix. The immemorial is also memorial. The Arabs, inventors of genealogical chains, recited. The others, the descendants of Abraham, the Jews and the Christians with whom they lived in familiar proximity were, solely through their use of the written text, sufficiently exceptional to be defined by this unique and enigmatic characteristic as “People of the Book”. One day the Arabs too would fall into the same category when they received, through the Muhammadan revelation, the supremely sacred deposition of the Book.

But so deep was the groove traced in them by archetypal pure orality, that it was by ear that the illiterate Muhammad apprehended the Book dictated by the Angel Gabriel and entrusted to him, the Prophet, to be communicated to men. This Book he would himself transmit by recitation, sequence after sequence, verse after verse, surah after surah, with those astonishing silences between one verse and the next, which seem intended to highlight the miraculous way in which the word erupts in the circus of sound; yes, verse after verse, silence after silence, surah after surah, the Prophet verbally transmitted the spoken message to those who, in their turn, would transmit it until scribes and writers, those who knew and practiced the art of writing as well as the science of sacred conservation, commit the word of God to writing.

And so the Qur'an would retain for eternity the sign that it is deeply rooted in orality: Qur'an, that is, “reading”. The Qur'an certainly gave to writing, in the Arabo-Islamic world, its patent of nobility. It is the meta-



Photo © Lucienne Saada, Paris

Immensely popular throughout the Arab world, the Hilali Saga is an epic poem which recounts the historic migration of the Banu Hilal, a nomadic Arab people whose travels took them from the Arab Peninsula to Egypt and the Maghreb. The epic is thought to have been composed around the 11th century, but certainly not later than the 14th century since the Arab historian and traveller Ibn Khaldun (1332-1402) quotes a number of verse passages from it in his writings. A variety of written versions of the Hilali Saga are current throughout the Arab world, but oral versions transmitted by narrator poets or singers have all but vanished. French researcher Lucienne Saada of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), Paris, has recently published a French version of the Saga as she heard it from the lips of Mohammed Hisni, a story-teller from Sfax, Tunisia. This version consists of some 3,700 lines of verse interspersed with long sequences of narrative prose. Above, this painting on glass depicts Jazia, one of the great heroines of the epic.

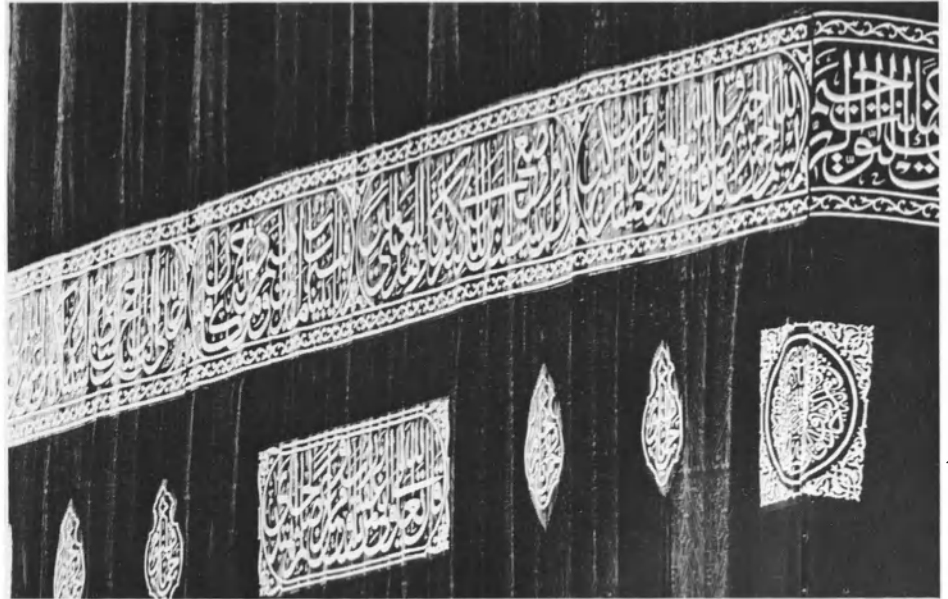


Photo Robert Azzi © Cosmos, Paris

► physical—and physical—articulation which takes the entire cultural process from one phase to another with its visible dynamism and invisible potential. Beginning with the Qur'an—the Mother of which, the absolute matrix, pre-exists in all creation and in every formulation or emanation of existence, eternally established spirit and letter, in the very eternity of God—the text acquires density, and orality, without ceasing to be creative fervour and multiplicatory fermentation, is entrapped, as it is refined, in the symbolic snares of the page, line after line. After the Greek library, the Arab library, heir of all those which preceded it but pregnant and fertile in its own right, would become one of the richest and, when ransacked, would give birth to many another library according to the law whereby a constellation is formed. Why should we deny Borges⁽²⁾, to cite only him, the right to be the descendant of Maimonides and Averroes, since he considers himself to be such? He has also often recognized his debt as a story-teller to the *Thousand and One Nights*.

Narrative too is above all a verbal fact. The story and the novel came much later, benefiting from the qualitative and quantitative contribution of printing, as they established themselves as distinct forms. In Arabic narrative the story comes from a mingling of remote times and places. The Arab world established itself on the dust of the oldest empires in which Sumer and Babylon mingled, as well as that which came one day from Athens and Alexandria, and that which came from Central Asia and China, and that which came from India and Persia, and stories and legends which circulated on the shores of the Mediterranean before Islam. In addition to the ferment, on the Arabian peninsula itself, of men and jinns, spirits and ghouls and all kinds of strange fancies and often cruel imaginations mingled in prodigious disorder in the vast empty phantasmagoria of the desert. The oral tradition of the Arab tale is at the confluence of all these influences and all these interferences.

And so it is not unduly surprising to find, for example, in the *Kalila and Dimna* of Ibn al-Muqaffa' (c.720-c.756), beside the old Indian backcloth of animal stories by Baydaba (the Bidpai of the Europeans) such and

"Yes, verse after verse, silence after silence, surah after surah, the Prophet verbally transmitted the spoken message to those who, in their turn, would transmit it until (...) those who knew and practiced the art of writing as well as the science of sacred conservation could commit the word of God to writing. And so the Qur'an would retain for eternity the sign that it is deeply rooted in orality: Qur'an, that is, 'reading'. The Qur'an certainly gave to writing, in the Arabo-Islamic world, its patent of nobility." Above, detail of the Ka'ba, the most holy shrine of Mecca. The Ka'ba is covered with a Kiswah, or vesture, made of black cloth with gold lettering, which is renewed every year.

such an evocation from Aesop or some other fabulist, possibly Chinese, whose name has disappeared, to the advantage of a "story" whose meaning still enriches us. Nor is it surprising that in the *Thousand and One Nights*, beneath the characteristics of Sindbad the Sailor and in many of his adventures it is possible to make out an episode from the *Odyssey*, the ingenuity and mischievous wisdom of Ulysses. Even more enigmatically and more profoundly in the vortex of time, it is perhaps possible to recognize in stories which are set in rediscovered and lost places, forbidden thresholds, magic uncrossable frontiers, living and reviving springs, miraculous trees, offensive or defensive genies, yes, in these stories which trace the extraordinary history of the Babylonian quest of Gilgamesh in search of his friend En-Kidu, perhaps it is possible to recognize some fundamental features of the collective Semitic imagination of which we are all, thousands of years later, to a greater or lesser degree the heirs.

Even today the theme of the initiatory journey is a recurrent theme of the contemporary Arabic novel. Thus, between the oldest store of legend which gave rise to the myths of an antiquity which disgorged its substance in other myths through the mediation of stories transmitted orally from generation to generation and the inspiration of some of the most significant writing today, there is a link which nothing has snapped, neither the modification of structures of thought nor the evolution of men in history. It must be admitted

(2) Jorge Luis Borges, Argentine writer born in 1899; author of poems, short stories, novels and essays.

that the Orient remains a place of unique magnetism for all those for whom man is, at some point in himself, wounded by the invisible. Man, says the Orient, is—also—invisible. Whence it follows naturally that the apparent history of men and of their civilizations is only an equivocal and illusory advance from an absolute anchoring point, a central well in which the eternal is manifested, if it reaches the surface, and if one cares to slake one's thirst in it. In many stories, legends and episodes of Oriental mystagogy there is a well. A well or a waterhole. It is often there that the ghouls, the voracious ogresses of the old Arab tales, wait for their prey—the wretched man to whom, like the sphinx over whom Oedipus triumphed, they ask the absurd question which will cause him to die.

I shall only cite as examples two sacred wells: it was into a well that Joseph was cast by his brothers, and it was at the well of Zemen, miraculously opened for the thirst of the child Ismael, that the pilgrims of Mecca slaked their thirst at the end of their pilgrimage.

But let us return to poetry. Borges affirms that if, according to Greek tradition, Homer was blind, this was a way of stressing the priority of the lyrical, that is the musical and the verbal, over the visual. There is in the purely verbal a power of concentration that limits the imaginative content inevitably confined within the very frontiers of the image. The system of images of classical Arabic poetry seems to me, even when unexpected, unusual and precious, strangely constricted—firstly by a deliberate codification of themes, signs and symbols, then by a quasi musical decantation of an ontological experience in which everything is perceived in reference not only to the constellations of the language according to a mode which is already almost Mallarmean, but also, somewhat mysteriously, by allusion to some original shaking of the sensibility, on a cosmic scale, of which the poet's own sensibility, put into words, would only be an epiphenomenon.

Thus the archetypal and the highly singular combine at the level of the collective unconscious in classical Arabic poetry. This does not fail to accentuate the abstracting effect of this poetry, through a corporality which is often insistent through the evocation of the most natural and, if required, of the most denuded and raw. The projection of the word in a declamatory orality strongly marked by the rhythms of short and long syllables, not so much compensates for this as, on the contrary, and paradoxically, broadens it concentrically. The Arabic chant is incantation; it is that above all, like magic. One could even go so far as to say that the *Qasidah* is a blueprint for a universe. It is centration, it is the equivalence of a universe grouped around its leading impulses, love and nostalgia, destruction and glory, desire and its exaltation in phantasm, the exaltation of the festival as an expression of community, space and the known yardstick of space: this highly strung horse, that she-camel as young and beautiful as a beautiful young girl, which are for the poet one of the possible names for his identification with his most intimate solitude, horse, mare or she-camel being for him a confidence granted to himself, destiny of his becoming, diverted magnification of a more secret identity. I add that if space is everywhere present in the *Qasidah*, time,



The book *Kalila and Dimna*, a celebrated collection of moralistic animal stories, is a translation by Abd Allah Ibn al Muqaffa (7th century AD/2nd century of the Hejira) of the Indian Fables of Bidpai. Above, illustration from a 15th-century Arab manuscript of an episode from *Kalila and Dimna* in which the lion falls into the trap prepared for him by the hare.

that eternal point, without being really absent, only presents itself in the light of a timelessness without figurative form: it is, essentially, that which was, far more than that which is or that which will be; it is a fixed reference.

Thus the orality of the *Qasidah* is, invisibly, one of the arches of its ontological structure and, confronted with the space crystallized in the imaginary world of the word, it is the temporal dimension of this word. Hardly a simple orality, then. Orality on another level. The Arabs, before becoming the people of the Book, had thus foreseen what one day, much later, Joë Bousquet⁽³⁾ would admirably formulate in another language after a quite different experience: "Poetry is the word of the word."

(3) French poet (1897-1950)

Did Labid (560-661?), a poet who lived at the meeting point of two ages and was converted to awakening Islam, have this intuition? His celebrated *Mu'allaqa* opens with the following lines on which Jacques Berque⁽⁴⁾ has made this comment: "The return to the mass is also a return to the original."

*Now that they are gone the houses of Nina
The halting places and the places of sojourn
Rijam and Ghawl return to the permanences
like the slopes of the Rayyan
whose imprint is denuded to the mass
as the stone contains an inscription.*

Berque notes that: "The birth of the poem coincides here with the dynamic of its contents. Circularities."

(4) Jacques Berque, born 1910, French sociologist and Orientalist. A specialist in Arab culture.

SALAH STETIE, Lebanese ambassador to The Netherlands and formerly for many years his country's representative at Unesco, is one of the leading contemporary poets and essayists of the Arab world. His works include three books that deal more particularly with aspects of Arab culture, *Les Porteurs de Feu* (*The Bearers of Fire*, 1972), *La Unième Nuit* (*The First Night*, 1980) and *Firdaws* (1984), a study of Islamic gardens.

The *Tale of the Heike*

Japan's long-running medieval saga

by René Sieffert



Photo © NHK, Tokyo

The chief of the Heike clan clasps in his arms the wife of his worst enemy... This scene is from a television series made in Japan during the 1970s and adapted from a "cloak and dagger" novel, *Shin Heike Monogatari*, which the author, Eiji Yoshikawa (1892-1972) built around the characters in the Tale of the Heike, one of the most popular works in Japanese literature.

In the 1320s, "monks with the *biwa*" began to appear on the highways and byways of Japan. (The *biwa* is a four-stringed lute which reached Japan from the Middle East by way of China.) Most of them blind, wearing monks' robes, they travelled from village to village, from castle to castle, chanting the exploits of the heroes of the great conflict which in the 1180s had opposed two important clans of the Imperial House, the Taira and the Minamoto, in an implacable struggle for power.

They were in many ways similar to the rhapsodists, the reciters who spread the Homeric epics through Greece, judging from the countless variants and interpolated episodes which feature in the hundreds of

known manuscripts of the chief of these epic stories, the *Heike Monogatari* ("Tale of the Heike"). The shortest version is in six "books" (*maki* or rolls), the most extensive in forty-eight.

The strange thing is, however, that this epic, apparently a monument of oral literature, emerged in Japan after some five centuries of highly developed written literature which produced among other masterpieces, the *Man yō-shū*, an anthology of largely scholarly poetry (8th century), and the *Genji Monogatari*, a veritable psychological novel which might be called "Proustian" had it not been written almost a thousand years before *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

However, the paradox is only apparent. It seems to be accepted that there was originally a written text of the *Tale of the Heike*, a kind of chronicle whose author is unknown although various names have been proposed over the centuries, usually those of monks. This original *Heike*, in three books, was probably the third part of a trilogy, the first two parts of which have survived almost in their original form.

This is an original instance, in a country with an advanced civilization, of the formation of an oral, popular epic literature on the basis of a written work. Furthermore, this came about near the capital, in a part of Japan where there was a high rate of literacy.

Courtiers, administrators and monks from big monasteries displayed rare curiosity about and interest in what we should today call the "popular arts" or "folklore". In a profusion of stories, chronicles, essays and diaries, they have left us descriptions of the way in which the new culture developed and took root, largely through the diffusion of epic stories. They also recorded in writing the successive forms of the texts. Thus we can follow more or less from the fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth century the chequered fate of what was to become the quintessential *Book of Japanese national culture* until the last century.

At the end of the sixteenth century, a "definitive" printed version appeared of this work which had until then been collective and malleable. It circulated in a society in the throes of explosive urbanization, becoming the all-time best-seller of Japanese publishing, Japan's most imitated book and the one best adapted to new forms of expression, especially the theatre.

One of the first printed editions of the *Tale of the Heike* was published at Nagasaki in Latin characters to help Iberian missionaries learn the Japanese language. The choice is significant. What better model could be imagined for those wishing to preach the gospel to the greatest number than this text known to everyone, literate and illiterate.

For the "Heike monks" or *Heiké-hōshi*, continued their itinerant activities as musicians and reciters, as they still do today. In the last few years, recordings have been made of stories told by the last chanters of *heikyoku* (epic song), which are not more or less arbitrary reconstitutions but reflect a way of story-telling transmitted from master to pupil since the Middle Ages.

And through a new paradox in its history, this form which the modern media once seemed to dismiss out of hand, is today experiencing—thanks to the media and to Japan's rapidly developing leisure civilization—an unexpected revival and extraordinary popularity: a single singer, through a recording or a TV performance can today reach an

The Tale of the Heike is an epic based on an actual historical struggle for power in Japan between the Taira (Heike) and Minamoto (Genji) families during the second half of the 12th century. After an irresistible rise to power, the Heike family held absolute sway until the death in 1181 of their leader Taira no Kiyomori. The Genji finally succeeded in crushing their rivals and their leader, Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199), established himself as Shogun of Kamakura. Below right, painted wood statue of Taira no Kiyomori preserved in a Buddhist temple in Kyoto. Below left, statue of Minamoto no Yoritomo in a Shinto temple.

audience a hundred or a thousand times bigger than that which his predecessors could hope to reach in a lifetime.

Furthermore, these survivors of an art thought to be moribund (thirty-odd years ago there were only three or four singers left) have not only found successors who will carry on the tradition in far more satisfactory material conditions, but more and more young people are studying under their supervision, just as others attend schools run by *nō* actors (some two million active amateurs at present) or indulge in the pleasures of *haiku* (ten million), flower arranging and other classical Japanese arts.

This brief account of the extraordinary fate of the Japanese epic and the continuous exchanges between the written and the oral of which it is the focus, may overlook the essential fact that all forms of Japanese literature and the performing arts have constantly borrowed from it for seven centuries. The classical *nō*, *jōruri* (*bunraku*) and *kabuki* theatre as well as the novel, with the very recent vogue for cloak and dagger stories draw on the epic cycle for themes, characters and inspiration. More than anything else the constant use of the epic in advertising in the media is a sign of its unfading popularity. ■

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Who's Who in the *Mahabharata*?

by Lokenath Bhattacharya

JARATKARU or Jamadagni? Or was it Jayadratha, or Jarasandha? There are so many names beginning with J in the *Mahabharata* that I confuse them. Who was who? Who did what?

A group of trekkers and pilgrims, just arrived at Bhaironghat after covering on foot the nine-kilometre distance from Gangotri near the source of the Ganges, we had crowded into the only tea-stall at the halting-place before embarking the next morning on the two-day bus journey to Rishikesh from Lanka, on the other side of the Ganges.

It was already evening and shivering cold, and the mountains all round, at that altitude of about 3,000 metres, stood like giant sentries obstructing the view on every side. The singing-ringing-roaring river down below drowned our whispers like so many nothingnesses in an all-engulfing ocean of silence.

Our chit-chat, to pass the time as we fought against the cold with chipped cups of hot tea, had started with a casual question: who was the king whose name began with J and who conducted that great sacrifice in the course of which the *Mahabharata* story was recounted for the very first time by a sage?

While we were making wrong guesses, the answer came from the owner of the tea-stall, a middle-aged man of great simplicity, whose face, smile and voice had a touch of the age-old India. No, he said in a Hindi which we Bengalis, South Indians and others of the group had no difficulty in grasping—no, it was Janamejaya, King Parikshit's son, who, in the course of a sacrifice conducted by him, requested the sage Vaisampayana, a leading disciple of Vyasa, the author of the epic, to narrate the story.

And Jaratkaru? Well, he was the father of the sage Astika who intervened to save the life of the serpent Takshaka when Janamejaya, while making his great sacrifice of serpents, was determined to persecute the serpent race.

Then the tea-stall owner took up one by one the other Js we had mentioned—Jamadagni, Jayadratha, Jarasandha, and so on—and described in detail who they were or what they did.

Time passed as we sat enthralled, imagining ourselves to be the assembly that had gathered in the court of Janamejaya, with the tea-stall owner, an unlettered man, a replica of the sage Vaisampayana. In a cor-

ner of the stall, in the dim light of the lamp, the silhouette of a man, perhaps a *sadhu* (holy man), could be seen standing on one leg. We were told that he had taken a vow to remain standing in that posture for one full year without interruption and that he would have completed the year on the next day. Looking like a figure from the *Mahabharata*, he fitted well into the surroundings and as a backdrop to our discourse. Transposed into a space without time, we felt possessed by the truth of the saying that what is not in *Bharata* (the *Mahabharata*) is not in *Bharata* (India). Just as we carry the Ganges in our veins, so the battleground of Kurukshetra, the scene of the eighteen-day war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, lies in our heart. And that battle is our inner battle with ourselves. And doesn't the *Mahabharata* story almost start with the Ganges? Wasn't it Ganga the goddess who, in fulfilment of a curse, assumed human form to become the wife of King Santanu, to whom she bore eight sons, the youngest of whom was Bhishma?

The *Mahabharata* is a story told to be heard which continues to be told and heard by countless millions throughout the length and breadth of the country during festive occasions, dramatized in performing arts such as *Kathakali* or *Yakshagana* or the puppet plays of different regions. No one, whether educated or illiterate, is immune to its overwhelming attraction and impact. Children learn it at their grandmother's knee, and village evenings are enlivened when, their day's work done, villagers gather in the temple or under a tree to listen to these stories being read. Even to this day, in cities like Calcutta, busy market-places are magically transformed in the evening when people gather in clusters in any open space they can find and listen as someone recounts and explains an episode from the *Mahabharata*.

The orality of the *Mahabharata* has a sanctity all its own. How many could read it in India where the literacy rate is around 37 per cent? But ask any passer-by who Arjuna was, for example, and listen to all he has to say.

The name of Arjuna brings back another memory. As a child, on a visit to Mahabalipuram with my father, I remember making some stupid remarks about the famous rock-sculpture known as Arjuna's Penance. Seeing Arjuna standing there on one leg, much like the *sadhu* we later came across in the tea-stall at Bhaironghat, I laughed at

The great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata provides the inspiration for Pandavani, a form of oral literature current in a wide area of central India. Teejan Bai (right), one of the best-known contemporary Pandavani singer-narrators, belongs to one of the two main streams of Pandavani, the Kapalike school. The performer recites and sings several episodes from the epic whilst playing the tambura, a long-necked, three-string lute with a sound-box made of half a gourd covered with the skin of a salamander. The instrument is usually made by the performer himself or herself. The performer is accompanied by two tambour players and a harmonium player. A second singer maintains a dialogue with the principal singer and beats out a rhythm on the Changuri, a kind of tambourine.

what I then considered to be the futility of making so much fuss about a person who had perhaps never existed. My father's rejoinder was prompt and sharp. If Arjuna does not exist, who does, you or I? We come and go; Arjuna remains. He has a vital existence in us and lives in our imagination. He is much more real than the so-called reality of the factual world.

Composed several thousand years ago, the *Mahabharata* possesses in a supreme manner all the characteristics of a true epic, and remains an unfailing source of spiritual strength to the people of India. Generations of gifted writers have added a mass of material to Vyasa's original, giving the work its present form of ninety thousand couplets, which makes it by far the longest epic in the world. All kinds of historical, legendary, geographical and philosophical material has been added to the original over the centuries. To writers in these fields, especially when printing did not exist, the *Mahabharata* was like a national library, inclusion in which was a token of their enrichment of the national heritage. The immediacy of its grandeur lives in the hearts of men, more than in a book. ■

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Liu Jingting, prince of story-tellers

by Yao Zhenren

LIU Jingting (1587-1670), the originator of the modern art of Chinese story-telling, lived during the tumultuous period of Chinese history when the Ming Dynasty was supplanted by the Qing Dynasty.

A native of Taizhou, Jiangsu Province, Liu's original name was Cao Fengchun. When he was fifteen, he had a brush with the law and fled to escape punishment. He travelled to the Xuyi area, where he became an apprentice story-teller in order to earn a living, eventually embarking on a career which was to last over sixty years. One day, distressed by his misfortunes and probably in an attempt to shake off his pursuers, he changed his name to Liu Jingting. He was a man of plain features, and since he had black moles on his face people nicknamed him "Pockmarked Liu".

He sought advice from an elderly and respected scholar, Mo Houguang, who had made a profound study of the theory of story-telling. Mo held that apart from basic skills, a good story-teller should first of all familiarize himself with the lives of all social groups, be conversant with different dialects, know the customs and habits of different parts of the country, and absorb all kinds of trivia. Even more important, Mo said that the story-teller should live each part—man, woman, hero and clown—in a story instead of simply acting as a mouthpiece for the characters. In addition he should imitate the characters' gestures and emotional expressions so that he could draw his audiences into the world depicted in the story. Mo's ideas were quite similar to Western theories of realistic drama in the nineteenth century. After arduous study, Liu finally understood the quintessence of story-telling and was able to move his audiences even before he uttered a single word.

He travelled to Yangzhou, Suzhou, Hangzhou and other places to make a living as a performer. Finally he came to Nanjing, known then as the capital of six dynasties, where he began to win overwhelming admiration from audiences who were entranced by his brilliant artistry.

Contemporary descriptions give some idea of his outstanding performing manner. Zhang Dai, a scholar of the late Ming Dynasty, depicted Liu telling the *Water Margin* story. "At the climactic point of the story, thunderous shouting and brawling breaks out,



Discovered in a Han Dynasty tomb at Tianwei, Sichuan Province, this dancing figurine, drumstick in hand and a big smile on his face, creates a vivid image of the art of popular story-telling. It dates from the later years of the Eastern Han Dynasty (second century BC) and is now in the collection of the Chinese History Museum. Similar wood or pottery figurines have been found in other parts of Sichuan and Jiangsu Provinces.

Wang Shaotang (1889-1968), descendant of a family of story-tellers from Yangzhou, began his own story-telling career at the age of 12 and perfected his art during his 60 years on the stage. His original interpretation of a story called The Water Margin was so popular that people began to call his oral version The Water Margin of the Wang Family. In 1959, an 800,000-word book was published, entitled Wu Song, which was based on Wang's interpretations of popular stories.



and the whole house seems to be shaking and collapsing. When Wu Song gets into the wine-shop and finds nobody inside, he lets out a mighty roar, making all the empty pots and urns inside drone in resonance."

Another writer also described a Liu performance: "From time to time, his voice changes from thunderous booming to melodious murmuring; his expression changes from tears to laughter. The characteristics, voices, behaviour and gestures of each role are so vividly rendered that his listeners feel as if they are in the story with the characters while the story-teller has silently faded away from the scene."

Liu became widely renowned as a master story-teller and for about three years became deeply involved in the political and military affairs of the Southern Ming régime. Around the sixteenth year of Emperor Chongzhen's reign (1643), he was invited by the then-powerful military governor of Wuchang and Marquis of Ningnan, Zuo Liangyu, to perform at his army headquarters. Subsequently he began to serve as a close aide to the governor, helping to mastermind plans and draft documents.

These were palmy days for Liu. However, after Zuo Liangyu's causes were lost and the Southern Ming Dynasty collapsed, he had to return to the street and to story-telling. He wrote and circulated an epic about Zuo, at a time when "current affairs" story-telling seemed most likely to appeal to audiences. His story was not just an account of what he had seen and heard; it was mainly an expression of deep grief over the fall of a nation and the break-up of countless families.

In the first year of Emperor Kangxi's reign in the Qing Dynasty, Liu Jingting, then a grey-haired man in his late seventies, came to Beijing by way of Tianjin. But his old age apparently did not dim his lustrous talents; he could still vividly portray the valour of warriors as well as tender feelings between young lovers.

Sadly, Liu led a miserable and dreary life in old age. It is said that he died of frost-bite and starvation, but even today nobody knows exactly when and where this master's story ended. ■

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Photos © Chinese edition of the Unesco Courier, Beijing

The only known portrait of the famous 17th-century story-teller Liu Jingting. It is the work of Wang Su, an artist of the late Qing Dynasty. This radiant portrayal of Liu, with his flowing grey hair, square headdress and fan, and costume typical of the period, almost exactly matches the description written by Zhang Dai, a scholar of the late Ming Dynasty, in an account entitled *Recalling the Dream at the Tao'an Hut*.

Tibet's *Ge-sar* epic

by Mireille Helffer



Photo © Musée de l'Homme, Paris. Mireille Helffer Collection

Recent Tibetan wood-cut depicting Ge-sar as the warrior-god.

FROM the land of the Burushaski in the west to Mongolia in the east, in all the regions where Tibetan civilization prevails, the oral as well as the written tradition has preserved the name of a hero, Ge-sar, whose exploits fill an epic cycle (*sgrung*) which has many ramifications.

The name "Ge-sar" of course brings to mind the title of the Caesars in the Mediterranean world and Byzantium. But there may also have been a historical Ge-sar, whose existence is doubted by Tibetologists, although coins recently discovered show that there was in the ninth century a certain Phromo Gesaro, who is thought to have been

one of the sovereigns of Gandhara (in what is now northwestern Pakistan). Chinese and Tibetan documents also mention a Gru-gu Ge-sar, possibly a reference to the Turkish tribes of Central Asia, and a Ge-sar of Gling, who was connected with the kingdom of that name to the east of Tibet. The latter term, *Gling*, could be understood as an abbreviation of 'Dzambu-gling, which means "the world" in Tibetan.

In any case, the Ge-sar of the epic appears in turn as a king of armies, a universal sovereign who overcomes the demons of the points of the compass, and a god of war to whom worship is paid, and even a Buddha.

The many episodes that illustrate the exceptional qualities of Ge-sar include the miraculous birth of the hero, who was the son of a celestial father and a mother who was the daughter of a divinity of the underworld; his unhappy childhood; his accession to the throne of Gling and his marriage, after a horse-race; his victorious combats with Klubtsan, the demon of the north, Gur-dkar king of the Hor, Shing-khri king of the Mon, and Sa-tham king of the 'Jang.

In addition to these main episodes there were others, in an order that is not clear—the conquest of the Stag-gzig, Kashmir, China, and the four great and eight small

castles, and indeed of the eighteen castles, and the descent into hell.

We have manuscript or wood engraving versions of most of these episodes, which take up tens of thousands of pages. A printed version, which is in Mongolian but is based on a Tibetan original, appeared in Beijing in 1716. And around the middle of the nineteenth century Tibetan scholars contributed much to the development of Ge-sar and the production of a version of the epic.

Tibetans today are again becoming interested in the man they regard as a national hero, and their interest has been stimulated by the many re-editions brought out in India and Bhutan as well as in the People's Republic of China.

The dissemination of the epic in written form did not put a stop to the oral tradition, which remained alive thanks to the singers of epics who were known as *sgrung-mkhan*. Some of these singers were thought to have been possessed by one of the characters of the epic; sometimes they went into a trance and maintained that they knew the epic without having learned it, by direct inspiration. Others took lessons from teachers; and yet others, who were mere amateurs, used books that they had obtained or that someone had read to them.

If we examine the sound recordings that have been made in the last forty years, we can see that those who sang the praises of Ge-sar, whatever training they had had and wherever they came from, alternated prose tales, rapidly recounted, and strophic songs composed of lines containing seven or eight syllables, in which, in accordance with immutable conventions, the characters introduce themselves, state where they are, and describe the situation, pronouncing many adages.

Few *sgrung-mkhan* now sing the praises of Ge-sar in Mongolia and Bhutan, but there are quite a number of them in Ladakh, and according to information obtained in August 1984 they had recently held a meeting at Rtse-thang, in the Autonomous Region of Tibet. One of the twenty participants, who attracted special attention was an illiterate young woman of twenty-five, a native of Byang-thang. She knew by heart some sixty chapters of the epic, which she had learned from her father, who had died in 1968.

This confirms, if any confirmation were needed, the vitality of the epic of Ge-sar in the Tibetan context, and gives us reason to hope that a systematic study of the ways in which it has been handed down can be undertaken in the near future. ■

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The Tibetan srung-mkhan (epic singer) Rin-chen Dar-rgyas, photographed in 1956.



Photo © Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark.

The love-story of Hir and Ranjha

by Hakim Mohammed Said

PAKISTANI culture has known writing from a remote past, and its oral traditions were committed to writing at different periods, although the mode of their transmission has always been oral. Each of the four provinces of Pakistan (North-Western Frontier Province, the Punjab, Sind and Baluchistan) has a number of folk-stories which have been transmitted from generation to generation in this way. Expressed in poetry, almost all of them were meant to be sung to the accompaniment of local musical instruments.

Hir and Ranjha is a favourite folk-story of the Punjab, a vast fertile plain watered by five rivers (the Indus, the Jhelum, the Chenab, the Ravi and the Sutlej). Sir Richard Temple, an authority on the legends of the Punjab, wrote that "Hir and Ranjha are commonly said to have flourished 700 or 800 years ago, but some other scholars assign them to the time of the Moghul emperor Akbar the Great, in the sixteenth century AD." The version which is regarded as a classic was composed by the poet Waris Shah in 1766 in Punjabi, one of the mother-languages of Urdu, the national language of Pakistan.

The story, according to Waris Shah's version, is simple, symbolic and dramatic. It opens with the following line:

Praise be to God who made love the foundation of the world.

The poet refers to the sacred relationship between God and man based on love, and glimpses of this humanized philosophy are seen throughout the long narrative, which may be summarized as follows. "Takht Hazara was a pleasant place on the banks of the River Chenab. The chief land-owner of the place had eight sons. He loved his youngest son Ranjha the most, so Ranjha's brothers hated him. On his father's death, Ranjha's brothers turned him away. He journeyed through wild forests and wastes and came to the River Chenab. He found a barge on the bank but the boatman refused to let him in. To kill time Ranjha played his flute which attracted the boatman, who allowed him onto the barge where he soon fell asleep. A little later he was awakened by a noise and to his great surprise he found a beautiful maiden by his side. She was Hir, the daughter of the chief of the Sial family of the town of Jhang. When she stepped on the barge she was furious to see this stranger, but when she took a close look at Ranjha she fell in love with him.

"She took him home and by some contrivance persuaded her father to employ him as a herdsman. She met him daily when he went out into the forest to graze the herd. Their clandestine meetings were soon discovered, Ranjha was banished, and Hir was



Photo © Adairs, Karachi

Hir and Ranjha, heroine and hero of a traditional Pakistani love story that originated in the Chenab Valley of the Punjab, probably during the 16th century, as visualized by Ustad Allah Bux, a well-known contemporary Pakistani artist.

given in marriage to Saida, to whom she had been betrothed while still quite young. Saida belonged to a family of Rangpur. Hir was not happy living with her husband and missed Ranjha badly.

"Ranjha left Jhang, disguised himself as a beggar, and went to Rangpur. On his way, he visited a Hindu guru and begged for his help. The guru blessed him. Ranjha came to Rangpur and somehow managed to get in touch with Hir. After a time they escaped, but they were pursued, caught, and brought back. They were taken before a judge who ordered Ranjha into exile.

"Unfortunately, immediately after this incident Rangpur caught fire. The people attributed this misfortune to the forced separation of lovers. Ranjha was called back and Hir was handed over to him. They went back to Jhang to Hir's home. But Hir's family had taken it as a disgrace. The family planned a stratagem. Ranjha was asked to go home to make preparations for his formal marriage to Hir. Meanwhile Hir was told that Ranjha had been murdered, whereupon she fell down unconscious. While in this state she was given a poisonous drink and she died. A messenger was sent to Ranjha to inform him of her death. He came and was straightaway taken to her tomb. The shock was unbearable and he fell dead at the tomb of his beloved."

This story, reminiscent of that of Romeo and Juliet, has a symbolic and esoteric significance. It is a protest against the ills and vices of the feudal system prevalent at the time it was written by Waris Shah. Hir is a symbol of protest against the exploitation of women. Ranjha symbolizes protest against the social system and the inefficient institutions of his time.

The story of Hir and Ranjha is still as popular as ever. Dr. Mumtaz Hasan has noted how "Buffaloes and cowherds are still the same in the old Punjab where wandering minstrels to this day sing the familiar poem, just as the bards of ancient Greece used to sing Homer. And when the ploughmen gather together in the village *Dara* (meeting place) at the end of the day's toil, it is remarkable how readily they turn to Hir and Ranjha to soothe and refresh their tired spirits. A man who can recite Hir well is always in demand. Nor is the popularity of the poem confined to villages. City audiences take just as much delight in Hir recitations broadcast by radio."

HAKIM MOHAMMED SAID, of Pakistan, is president of the Hamdard Foundation and editor-in-chief of the Foundation's magazine Hamdard Medicus and editor of the Urdu edition of the Unesco Courier.

Basque literature and the oral tradition

by Juan Mari Lekuona

THE oral and the written tradition are intimately intermingled in Basque literature. For those who know it well, there is not a shadow of a doubt that Basque literature is as rich and varied as that of any other people, that it is just as fertile in original, authentic literary forms, and that the oral tradition is the vector of the essence of Basque culture.

Coupled with this keen awareness of the oral tradition is a realistic appreciation of written literature, which is seen as being a late-comer, neither very abundant nor fully representative, yet, at the same time, essential to the very survival of the language and to its adaptation to the demands of modern life.

Although this state of affairs is today widely recognized, this was not always the case and a glance back at the past may help us to appreciate better the present complementarity of these two forms of Basque literary expression.

Under the impetus of the Renaissance and the religious trends of the time, the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries witnessed the publication of the first texts in the Basque language. The output was very small and was virtually confined to the northern or French-Basque region, as it was called; this region was socially less developed than the Spanish-Basque area where, at the time, published material was virtually limited to catechisms for parish use.

At that time oral expression was predominant. Books containing religious texts and texts for religious instruction were usually read aloud in church to the congregation. In preparing these books, their authors, bearing in mind the instructional purposes to which they were to be put, deliberately adopted the forms and styles of oral literature.

These texts, which were both written and spoken, became part of the collective memory, colouring even popular forms of expression; they were transplants grafted, as it were, on to the language by educated religious minorities.

The first written collections of oral texts, gathered in both of the Basque regions and consisting of old songs, refrains and popular sayings, also date back to this period. Apart from their inestimable value in tracing the linguistic and literary development of the language, these collections also bear witness to the vigour of the poetic forms and the quality of the literary tradition from the Renaissance to the Baroque period.

During the two following centuries the links between oral and written literature underwent a transformation in the southern provinces

of Guipúzcoa, during the eighteenth century, and Vizcaya, during the nineteenth century. Literature flourished and the production of published works outstripped that of the northern region.

The increase in the proportion of non-religious books, accompanied by a rise in the cultural level and a more pronounced taste for the classics in the creation of oral works, led to a new relationship between the two forms of literature. Written literature was obliged to turn to oral forms as the prime source of literary structures and techniques, whilst the oral tradition, particularly during the Enlightenment, had to conform more and more to the rules of written literature if it was not to lose its topicality or even to disappear altogether.

It was at this point that written transcriptions of oral literature began to appear. These publications, ranging from fly-sheets of poems by popular poets to magazines, periodicals and collections of folk tales, were written versions of what was formerly transmitted by word of mouth. Forced to adapt to the rhythms, the norms and the mechanisms specific to written literature, oral creation was obliged to become more precise, to adopt more complex structures. In so doing it gave birth to a special branch of Basque literature, born of the oral tradition but pre-

Taken in 1936, at Renteria, in the Basque province of Guipúzcoa, this photo shows a group of the finest Bersolaris (improvisers of poems) of the day, gathered together to pay tribute to one of their number, the renowned Txirrita (seated centre, with walking-stick).



Photo © Basque edition of the Unesco Courier

served and brought up to date in the written word.

Those forms that could be safeguarded in written form gradually declined, finally disappearing during the twentieth century. These included ballads, romances, *coplas*, lyric songs, choral and festive compositions, short plays and other quasi-theatrical forms which together had made up traditional literature.

Modern life has led inexorably to the adoption of writing as the means of expression and of preservation of literary works. Yet, in the Basque language, written output has not yet achieved the volume, the quality or the popularity necessary for it to fulfil the functions that are attributed to literature in the societies of today. The oral tradition remains an inexhaustible source of means of expression which still has a base broad enough to allow the universal to be derived from the particular and to embody the complexity of the modern world as perceived by the collective personality.

Thus the twentieth century has witnessed the forging of a new interdependence between these two literary traditions. It is clear that Basque literature can no longer escape the written form and that it must seek to achieve the level of the best national literatures around it, taking quality as its only criterion. As knowledge of it grows deeper, Basque oral literature will become an essential reference point for the creation of a modern national literature.

In the period just before the Spanish civil war, the lack of popularity of erudite, minority, lyric poetry, as compared with the success of improvised verse, popular theatre and folk narrative, indicated the need for a redefinition of cultural policy and a search for a rapprochement with majority forms of expression more firmly rooted in oral literature.

This trend was maintained in the post-war period. The oral style, with its functionalism and its specific rules, became a field of research for writers seeking to create a new aesthetic form which would enable them to make the transition from the specific to the universal on the basis of the fundamental elements of their own cultural truths. ■

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Unesco Newsroom



A new edition of the Unesco Courier

We are pleased to announce the launching of a Thai edition of the *Unesco Courier*, published under the auspices of the Thai National Commission for Unesco. The first number appeared in January 1985, bringing the total number of different language editions of the *Unesco Courier* up to 32, in addition to the quarterly Braille selection.

Unesco Courier readers' clubs launched

The *Unesco Courier* has decided to establish a network of readers' clubs in as many countries as possible. Exhibitions, which may be organized with technical assistance from Unesco headquarters and the *Unesco Courier*, and discussions of topics receiving coverage in the magazine are among a wide range of club activities envisaged with the aim of stimulating a dialogue between cultures. *Unesco Courier* readers' clubs already exist in Bulgaria and Egypt, where they have been established within existing unions of writers and artists, and in Tamil Nadu, where they have autonomous sta-

Since its inception in 1948 the Unesco Programme for the translation of literary works has sought to contribute to a broader international appreciation of the world's literary heritage by promoting the translation and publication, mainly in English or French, of representative works of literature written in the less widely known languages. In addition to scholarly editions of basic philosophical, religious and historical texts, the "Unesco Collection of Representative Works" includes anthologies of national literatures, epics, sagas, legends, fables and romances, drama, novels and short stories, as well as many works of poetry. A selection is given below.

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Translated from Chinese

Anthology of Chinese Literature from Early Times to the Fourteenth Century. Comp. and ed. by Cyril Birch. Associate editor Donald Keene. New York, Grove Press, 1965; London, Penguin Classics, 1967.

Translated from languages of India

The Mirror of the Sky (Songs of the Bauls from Bengal) (Bengali). Trans. with introduction and notes by Deben Bhattacharya. London, Allen and Unwin, 1969. (U.S. edition published as *Songs of the Bards of Bengal*. New York, Grove Press, 1970.)

The Parrot and the Starling (Hindi). Trans. by K.P. Bahadur. Delhi, Varanasi and Patna, Motilal Banarsidass, 1977 (Folk tales).

The Wisdom of the Tamil People (As Illustrated by Translated Selections from their Ancient Literature) (Tamil). Trans. by Emmons E. White. New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1975.

Translated from Japanese

Tale of the Disorder in Hogen (Hogen Monogatari). Trans. by W.R. Wilson. Tokyo, Sophia University, 1971 (Historical novel).

Translated from languages of Pakistan

Waris Shah. The Adventures of Hir and Ranjha (Hir Ranjha) (Punjabi). Trans. by Charles Frederick Osborne; ed. by Mumtaz Hassan. London, Peter Owen, 1973. (See article page 32).

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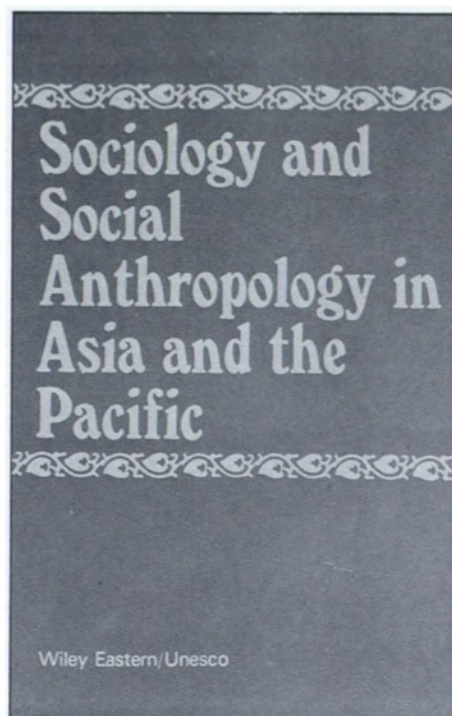
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