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The Bertsolariak Championship as Competitive Game and Deep Play¹

Jexux Larrañaga Arriola, PhD

1. Introduction

The objective of this article is to give an anthropological description of a ritual performance which has survived from the past and which has taken a renewed vitality during the past decades. It begins with the paradox which Joseba Zulaika discussed in his book *Bertsolariaren jokoa eta jolasa* (The Joko and Jolas of the Bertsolaria)(1985), where he distinguishes between the *joko* (competitive game) and *jolas* (play) dimensions of the bertsolaria's performance. The first question is therefore whether the competition between the *bertsolariak* (improvisational poets) can be situated in a wider cultural context. Even more, could it perhaps be situated at the very center of cultural creativity and community production? Here we get to the core of the paradox: the *bertsolariak* do engage in a competitive game, yet winning the championship is not what matters most. This needs to be seen in the duality of mutually opposing perspectives that are accepted by the audience as reinforcing each other. This is an approach inspired by what Deleuze called "the gift of meaning" (1989). For this, beyond the more obvious

¹ The history of the National Bertsolaritza Championship can be divided initially into three periods: the championships before the Spanish Civil War (1935-36); those organized by *Euskaltzaindia* (The Royal Academy of the Basque language) (1960-1982); and those organized by *Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarteak* (The Basque Country Bertsolaritza Association), from 1986 onwards. Nowadays, the championship finals are held once every four years and singing performances are held all over the Basque Country during the previous three months. An audience of around 15,000 people gathers together to listen to the final championship performance and a further 200,000 people watch it on television. All future references to "championship" in this article refer to this competitive cycle.

competitive dimensions of the championship, we need to inquire into what constitutes communal activity and what is the appropriate context for such a cultural event. The historical perspective is crucial to understand its primary meanings and its remarkable recent evolution.

We also need to look at the subjective dimension of the phenomenon, as this very argumentative and rational activity evokes deep emotion in the audience. The imaginary aspects of the songs improvised in public are essential and deserve a very specific attention.² Finally, the analysis of verbal play will lead us to the study cultural identity.



ONLINE SOURCE: http://www.naiz.eus/media/asset_publics/resources/000/036/034/original/bertso_goiko.jpg?1381488511

2. Diachronic: The world of words in the past

During the first period of the championship (1935), the *bertsolariak* praised the Basque language and the Basque homeland. The religious influence of the Catholic Church was very apparent in their words. At the time, traditional values were closely linked with the world of Christianity.

We should also take into account that a cultural movement labelled the “Basque Renaissance” that took place at the turn of the twentieth century that led to an increased interest in and enthusiasm for Basque culture, and that it was influential in setting up the championship. Aitzol was a key figure in this movement.³ The

² Basque character is something continually constructed in terms of character, identity and identity movements. So identity is not something static or lost in the past. The ecosystem of relationships around the championship is alive and demonstrates that identity is a living and changing reality.

³ Jose Ariztimuño Olaso, whose nickname was "Aitzol", was a writer, journalist and man of the church (1886-1936). He promoted an initiative designed to help rescue the Basque language from its precarious situation and requested it be given official status. In 1930 he was appointed chair of Euskaltzaleak (Association in Favour of Basque Culture Association). While he was chair, he organised the "First Bertsolari Day" – along with Lizardi, Labaien and other Basque culture enthusiasts – at Poxpolin Theatre in Donostia. He also founded the journals *El Dia* and *Yakintza*. At the beginning of the Fascist rising in 1936, Donostia was taken by Franco's troops and Aitzol was captured in Pasaia. He was imprisoned at Ondarreta Prison in Donostia. The day after his arrest he was shot at Hernani's cemetery.

traditional lifestyle on the Basque farmsteads, the native Basque language called *Euskara*, and Basque homeland were key themes extolled by the *bertsolariak*.

Bertsolaritza (the art of singing bertso) became a cultural institution for protecting a traditional language and lifestyle which was under threat of extinction. The central features of that tradition, the love of the Basque language and homeland that was central to that tradition became quintessential to the *bertsolaritza* as well. The image of the Motherland (Mother Earth, Mother Tongue) became the movement's central metaphor imbued with deep emotional significance. The Basque language itself became the primordial means of articulating the basis of an identity threatened with extinction. The bertso strophes or verses that follow, sung in the 1935 championship, are expressive of this cultural constellation.⁴ The theme requested by the jury of the competition was this:

(...) *euskal hizkuntza galtzen ari da
ta galtzen bada euskera,
Euskalerriko seme guziak
betirako galduak gera*

(...) the Basque language is getting lost
and if we lose the *Euskera*,
all the children of the Basque Country
we are lost forever.



SOURCE: http://www.eitb.eus/multimedia/images/2013/11/21/1236294/aulkiak_foto610x342.jpg

⁴ ZUBIMENDI, J(1935): "Lehengo bertsolari eguna". * The First Bertsolari Day *Yakintza* III, 141-154

The *bertsolaria* Basarri replied with this song:

*Itsas ertzetik entzuten dira
ama euskararen antsiak
'ta bai direla ilun tristiak,
ene! bai negargarriak.
Nola kanpoan ala etxean
Non-nai badauzka etsaiak,
hau odolztuta malko trinkotan
betetzen zaizkit begiak
bera hiltzen bada ez du askorik
paltako Euskalerririk!*

From the seaside we hear
the cries of mother Euskara
and how sad and ominous they are
oh, how pitiful.

Whether from outside or from inside the home
all she has is enemies from everywhere,
seeing her bleeding to death
my eyes are filled with tears.
If she dies it will not be far
the death of the Basque Country.

*Entzun zaidazu gizonezko horrek
entzun emakumezkoa;
ikur handiak agurtutzea
ez da izango naikoa.
Ara nolatan mintzatzen zaigun
gure Yauregi zintzoa:
Euskalerria euskararik gabe
bai dela herri gaixoa,
mahasti horitsu ederra baiña
mahatsa alerik gabekoa!*

Pay attention to me you men
listen to me you women;
it will not be enough
to worship great symbols.
Look how today it speaks
of our venerable tradition:
A Basque Country without Euskara
what a sick country will it be,
a golden beautiful vineyard
but a vineyard without grapes.

*Galtzen badegu gure mintzaira
galdua dago guzia,
esaidazute anai arrebo,
ez al da lotsagarria?
irakasleak bezela daukat
nik ere aitortu nahia,
hau esanikan yoan zitzaigun
Arana Goiri haundia:
“Hil naiago det ikusi baiño
Aberriaren amaia!”*

If we lose our tongue
everything will be lost,
tell me brothers and sisters
wouldn't it be a shame?
Like the teacher
I also want to confess,
saying this is how
the great Arana Gori departed:
“I would rather die than see
the end of the Mother Country.”

The themes elaborated by Basarri can be summed up thus:

- The strophes sung by the *bertsolaria* are strongly linked to a desire for preserving an identity threatened with extinction.
- The Basque language is the key structuring element in such a primordial identity.
- The traditional *baserriak* (farmsteads) provide the basic values of such Basque-speaking traditional society.
- The religious order provides a central axis.
- The Mother Goddess, Motherland and Mother Basque Tongue are the cultural conceptualizations used archetypically in *bertsolaritza's* discourse.



Inazio “Basarri” Eizmendi Manterola (1913-1999) was a writer, journalist and bertsolari. He won championships in 1935 and 1960.

3. Synchrony: Cultural symbolism in the contemporary championship

Bertsolaritza is predicative and the ritual action of the championship itself becomes a "predicative event" (Ricoeur, 1995). First, the predication takes place in a particular, ephemeral moment which is linked to the people in a given performative context. Second, the predicative's subject positions itself amongst the pronouns—it is self-referential. The key predications are based on the pronoun "we". Third, the predication is always about something and the world is its theme: its symbolic meaning reveals, expresses, and imagines the world we want. Lastly, those predications help construct the existence of a group: they influence the embodiment of the group. The argument here is that the cultural dynamics created around the championship helps embody the group's identity. This is an identity which makes of *Euskara* its central axis, which does not put tradition aside but rather builds on it and renews it: it is a performative, relational identity. That identity gives continuity and revitalizes the cultural tradition, as illustrated by the following strophe by Maialen Lujanbio:

*Gaur da finala, zabal begiak
ta ikustazu alaba,
lehengo egoera latza orain da
zorionaren balada;
begira zenbat gazte datorren
gaur bertso saioetara;
denak elkarren lagun gera gaur,
batera herri bat gara.
Mikrofonoari begira hara
hamar mila begirada;
isiltasuna eta ondoren
zuen txalo zaparrada,
zorionaren irrifarrak ta
emozioan dardara...
Alaba, hementxe herri bat dago
ikusi nahi dunik bada.⁵*

Today are the finals, look out
see what is around, daughter,
before it was tough, look now
this ballad of happiness;
today we are all friends

⁵ 2001 Championship. Size: 16ko handia; melody: Haizea dator Iparraldetik II. Rhyme: 10 / 8A / 10 / 8A / 10 / 8A / 10 / 8A 10 / 8A / 10 / 8A / 10 / 8A (hg) | 18A / 18A / 18A / 18A/18A / 18A / 18A / 18A (ip)

together we are one country.
Look there ten thousand people
fixated on the microphone;
silence and then your applause,
the laughter of happiness
and the force of emotion. . .
Daughter, here there is a country
For anyone who wants to see it.

Predicative action and ritual action give words new meaning beyond the ordinary. A given emotional context may amplify such meaning.⁶ It is for this reason that common references to group life pass into the collective memory more easily when they come from the *bertsolariak*. The performative context of the *bertso* singing displays the following characteristics:

- First, ritual action has the potential to anchor memories. The event demonstrates the structure of a proposition and the predicate which derives from it; it becomes anchored in the collective memory; it is the work of endlessly rewriting the creation of memory.
- Second, there is a social dimension to the performance. Its validity for communication and its social success are connected with the ritualized form of its "scheme of play". This scheme is key to its social success.
- Third, the ritual action goes beyond its own production and the new predicative event creates contextual conditions for recreation. If in the past this action had a certain transcendent value, currently we have to emphasize its pragmatic and constructive value.
- Fourth, the ritual action is completed by the sum of the chain of reactions. So the cultural reality is established by new words and new relationships between words. Deep down, the goal of the ritual action's cultural communication is to give continuity to the world derived from it: in other words, to reconstruct the emotional and conceptual reality of the group.

⁶ As we have said, this summit of Bertsolaritza is organized every four years and this long period of waiting gives the context a particular strength. Our attachment to that particular context, the audience receives the bertsolaris' words full of metaphorical meaning. The kingdom of words said aloud in front of people becomes metaphorical, a being of words full of self-reference: it tells us about the community and becomes the community's mirror too.

4. Silence and the word

At present, the opening in the voice of *bertsolaritza* goes from the words to the world; it is the voice which ties the song to a particular land. The most prominent characteristic of its voice is its ability to recreate a possible world and its capacity for transformation. That is its ability to recreate the world in words: it produces the world it treads on by endlessly weaving reasons together. It is a creation of thought in itself; it folds together in an endless “argument of images” (M. Lekuona, 1918; Zulaika, 1985, Peirce, 1988).

In the ritualized performance of *bertsolaritza*, speaking and doing is the same event taking place on the stage: images of the past are restored in today's new aesthetic reality. Creating and explaining a way of being in the world come together. It has the firm attitude of a particular aesthetic's position. The *bertsolaria* projects an iconic image through its voice, its posture, its entire body. This is how Miren Amuriza described it:

*Ahots bat besterik ez naiz,
ta ukitzeko bihotz mintzak,
doinuak eta ideiak
besterik ez darabiltzat.
Euskara besterik ez naiz
gure izen ta aditzak
mundu global hontan dute
ondar ale bat herritzat.
Erretzen dira aroak
aurrera egiten bizitzak
zahartzen berritasunak
eta forma anitzak
ta mendeetan barrena
isiltasunak ta hitzak
ahoz aho egiten du
geroa bertsolaritzak.*

I am but a voice
and to touch the heart
melodies and ideas is all I have.
I am nothing but the euskera
our names and verbs
in this globalized world
they have as country a grain of sand.
Periods of time go by
lives move ahead
in old age comes the new
and the many forms

and through the centuries
there is silence and words
mouth by mouth bertsolaritza
creates its future.

When the *bertso* songs are being created, the group goes through an experience of collective silence. Silence is the community's creative attitude. It is from silence that it creates its words and during the time of creative silence the group becomes aware of what is at stake. The awareness derives from "being there" and from the sense of collective existence. The time of awareness is amplified by feeling (pathos) and reason (logos): it could not be created by only one of them. Sometimes it is human desire which points out that there are no divided realities, and on that basis we understand that the *bertsolaria's* word arises in connection with group existence. From the silence emerges the word, and the moment of creative silence ignites collective consciousness. The verbal play consists of examining life: it tries to renovate cultural reality.

The *bertsolaria's* songs have been guided by a constant ethic until present: their purpose is to create a community of words. When a voice and body are being created, the entire projection of the "aesthetic subject" takes hold of the culture. The subject shows us something which is true. So we can see that the mention of its predicative action comes together with the metaphorical root "to exist": it is a metaphorical predicate bestowed on the pronoun "we".

We have brought together three discursive axes. First, the axis of existence which confirms the reality of a being and shows us its particular value: it demonstrates the existence of the community. For example:

*(...) alaba, hementxe herri bat dago ikusi nahi dunik bada*⁷

(. . .) daughter, here there is a country for anyone who wants to see it.

Second, the axis of knowledge: knowledge of a community's existence, the value for a way of life:

*(...) izango dugu ahalmena, ta beharrezko den dena
beste noranahi eramateko, hemen batu gaituena.*⁸

(. . .) we will have the power and everything that is needed
to carry wherever is needed what has united us all here.

⁷ Daughter, there is a community here for whoever wishes to see it.

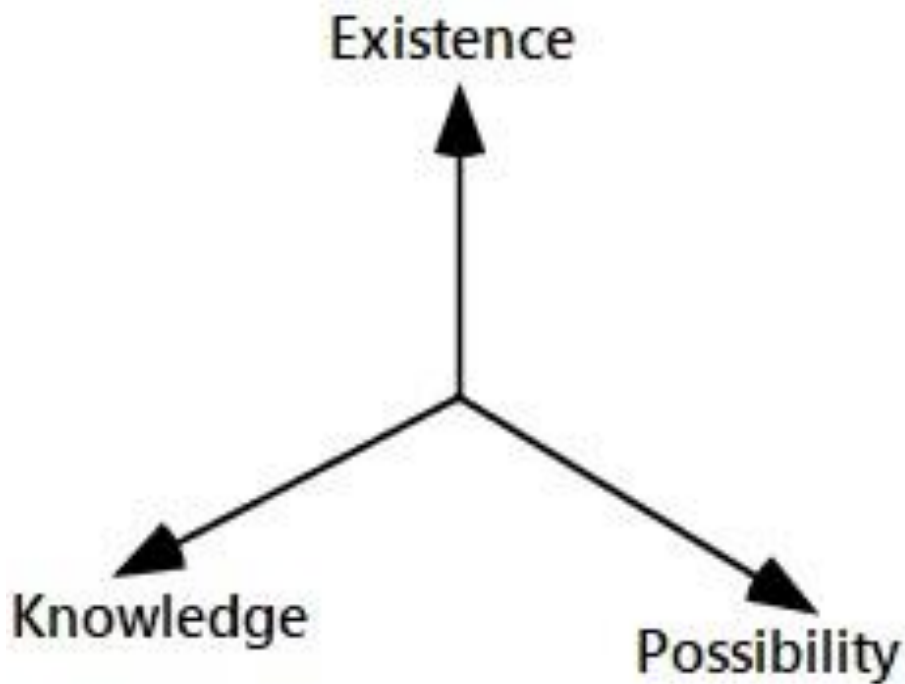
⁸ We will be able and have all that's needed to take in another direction that which has brought us together here.

Third, the axis of possibility, which is based on the option of existence and the "aesthetic subject"s capacity to decide:

(...) herri hau sortzen jarrai dezagun euskaratik eta euskaraz.⁹

(. . .) let us continue creating this country from the Euskara and in Euskara.

The reason for the song becomes the paradigm of self-creation in the direction of cultural production.



5. A living community

The way to belong to a particular society in the contemporary conceptualization of identity is not a final, firm category, let alone still less an essence. It is not adequate to say that being Basque is something essential within each person; it is rather something based on a collective form of being. As Bauman (2010) tells us it is a duty. So it is clear that Basque identity is not a fixed place or something within each person. More than anything else, identity is something we have to create continually, an endless process of production along the lines of an anthropological narrative. The direction of the production of cultural identity consists in looking deep into each person's roots and having the cultural flexibility to go back and then bring values from the past forward once again. It is there we must place the compass of the stimulus of identity which *bertsolaritza* contains. Nowadays, the reasoning behind the production of subjects has placed women, in value and words, at the very center of the arena provided by the *bertsolaria*. This is how Maialen Lujanbio sung after she won the championship, the first for a woman:

*Gogoratzen naiz lehengo Amonen
zapi gaineko gobaraz
gogoratzen naiz lehengo amonaz
gaurko amaz ta alabaz.*

*Joxei ta zuei mila zorion
miresmenaren zirraraz
ta amaituko dut txapel zati bat
zuek guztiontzat lagaz.*

*Gure bidea ez da errex
bete legez, juizioz, trabaz...
Euskal Herriko lau ertzetara
itzuliko gara gabaz*

*eta hemen bildu dan indarraz
grinaz eta poz taupadaz
herri hau sortzen segi dezagun
euskaratik ta euskaraz.*

I remember the grandmothers of old times
With their washing basins over their heads
I remember those grandmothers
And today's mothers and daughters.

To Joxe¹⁰ and to you¹¹ a thousand congratulations
With the trembling of admiration
and I will leave a piece of my beret
for all of you.

Our road is not an easy one
Besieged by obstacles, trials, and laws.
This evening we return
To the four corners of the Basque Country

And with the energy, passion and
Heartbeats of joy gathered here
Let us keep re-creating our country
From Euskara and in Euskara.



<http://www.eke.eus/es/kultura/bertsolarismo/maialen-lujanbio>

*Maialen Lujanbio, the first
woman bertsolari champion.*

The aesthetic subject created in the arena of *bertsolaritza* is a deep-rooted one, a relational subject, that is communitarian and collective. This type of subjectivization precludes an isolated social atom, or an individual with a mechanical identity; it is rewritten as the consequence of communal action. Group awareness is essential for it to happen. To the extent to which it is produced as part of group awareness, it appears as a subject nourished by a system of relationships, its native rootedness pushed towards an opening into the world. That type of subject becomes a benchmark against the isolated, atomized individual of contemporary society in which the sense of a globalized world has worn away collective identities. Currently, cultural models for such traditionally embedded modern identities are lacking.

¹⁰ Joxe was the old generation bertsolaria who had just place the beret of champion on her head.

¹¹ Meaning the bertsolariak standing behind her.

The imaginative arena of *bertsolaritza* obtains its values through another type of aesthetic: it draws the anchor of what we are in the song and this helps us define who we are. This arena looks for what is desired and for what is possible. As a result, we see a new type of relationships between the people and the coordinates of traditional culture; the renewed cultural subjectivization goes hand in hand with a renewed community. What we are today is expressed and put into images in the song. The arena of singing shows us that, in order for there to be a transition towards a renovated subject, it is necessary to plant the seeds of flexible collective values.



The 2013 champion Amets Arzallus. SOURCE: <http://www.bertsozale.eus/eu/bertsolari-txapelketa-nagusia-2013/portadakoak/amets-arzallus-txapeldun/@images/0759f71e-73d6-4b1b-9572-62fe38d6f508.jpeg>

6. Conclusions

This essay shows that the ritualized arena of *bertsolaria* championship provides a cultural model that paradoxically combines elements of both *joko* (competitive game) and *jolas* (verbal play) (Huizinga, 1972; Zulaika, 1985). This field of play provides an imaginative terrain for cultural invigoration and community production. The result of such verbally risky play is the formation of a more flexible cultural identity. The competitive dimension of the entire phenomenon partakes of the culture of spectacle and media-driven globalization. This essay sees the championship's performance as being far more than just a competition; it is, rather, an axis which springs from a cultural identity whose influence results ultimately on collective action and subjectivization. We have mentioned the collective meaning of the ritual action and, at the same time, placed it in the context of a cultural matrix. This essay's main task is to demonstrate *bertsolaritza's* ritual performance's symbolic influence in terms of identity.

On the basis of what has already been said, the event's paradoxical "gift of meaning" can be summed up thus: the bertso championship offers a cultural game for collective identity, and that game's poetic power and collective emotion gives meaning to the competition.

In short, we reach the conclusion that group identity and culture are closely linked together in the life of a community. We construct our identity by using the cultural intermediaries that are available to us. As Claude Levi-Strauss wrote: we have to make our identity real with what there is. The ritual action shows us that there are emotional attachments at the center of social experiences which define us. Nowadays, when partial, chosen identities predominate, no single ground for identity defines a collective identity in its entirety. We could say that, having realized that former ideas of the world have become problematical, there is no individual or social group with a single identity. This makes imagining new collective identities more urgently necessary. Identity thus becomes a mechanism for subjectivization which must be continually nourished and adapted throughout a group's life cycle.

Seeing identity in this way, there will be no need to transmit a dead object from the past. On the contrary, today's Basque identity is, as shown by the extraordinary resurgence of *bertsolaritza*, very much alive and producing new content. Basque identity, which we achieve through movements of identification, will require continued renovation. The work of creating narrative and explaining through song who we are will be a necessary aspect of that renovation.



SOURCE: <http://www.diariovasco.com/noticias/200912/13/Media/A3-5739329--647x255.jpg>

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