

The Interaction between Orality and Literacy in the Basque Country

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## **Abstract**

In the last decades, many authors have started choosing Basque, originally an oral language, as the language in which they write their literary works. Basque culture prizes oral manifestations, like improvised verses, legends and storytelling. The value placed on orality has an influence on recent texts written in Basque in a variety of manners, as authors use the same techniques that are usually utilized in spoken language, insert oral traditions or orature in the written works and get ideas for them from stories they were told orally. At the same time as oral traditions are influencing written texts, higher levels of literacy among verse improvisers is impacting many aspects of oral manifestations. Therefore, we can say that while oral tradition has an influence on novels written in Basque, literacy affects Basque oral manifestations. The Basque culture has traditionally been perceived as a rural and uncivilized one, partly due to the fact that it has been a predominately oral culture. In present day Western societies, literacy tends to be linked to civilization, whereas orality is often associated to lack of it. While some forms of Basque oral traditions and forms of orature started having prestige only when their performers began to be educated, Basque writers often use their literary works to undermine this polarized idea about literacy and civilization and orality and lack of it. Even though it has not always been like this, nowadays, Western societies rely on the written text in order to store and transmit information, as it is seen as permanent and invariant, while the oral text would be invariable and ephemeral. Basque forms of orature, oral traditions and written literary works often show us that the written word can easily disappear, while the oral word can remain over time. In conclusion, we cannot understand orality and literacy,

civilization and lack of civilization, and permanence and impermanence as opposed to each other, as all these concepts interact with each other.

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## **Introduction**

This dissertation studies how the Basque Country has evolved from a predominately oral society into one that privileges writing. Throughout this process, oral traditions remain present, influencing written production, while, at the same time, those same oral traditions are influenced by the written word. Thus, we cannot understand orality and literacy as mutually exclusive. As Finnegan affirms:

[...] ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ are not two separate and independent things; nor (to put it more concretely) are oral and written modes two mutually exclusive and opposed processes for representing and communicating information. On the contrary, they take diverse forms in differing cultures and periods, and are used differently in different social contexts and, insofar as they can be distinguished at all as separate modes rather than a continuum, they mutually interact and affect each other, and the relations between them are problematic rather than self-evident. (175)

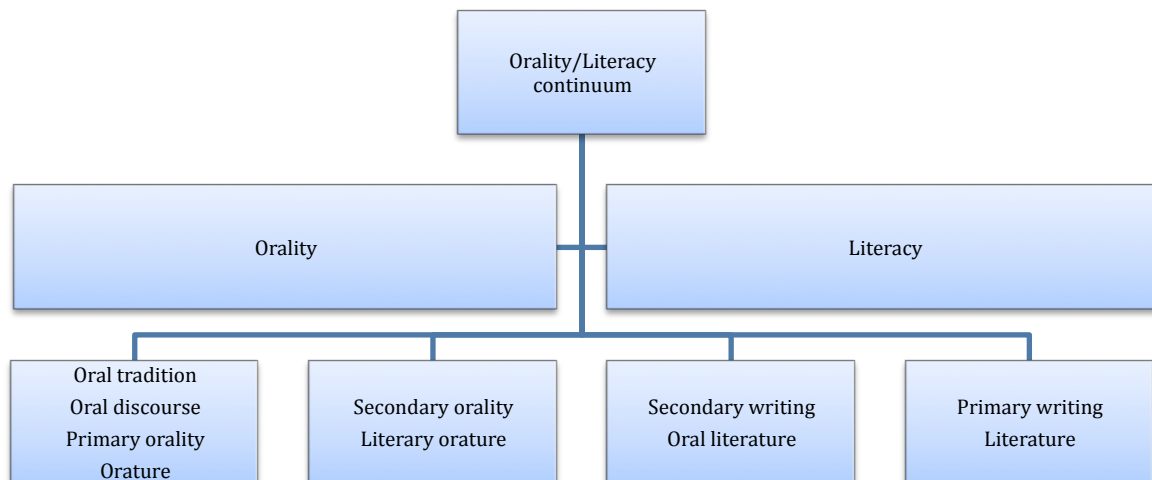
The present day Basque Country exemplifies how orality and literacy, far from being two independent poles, inevitably interact with each other, as I study in my dissertation. I also examine how both Basque oral traditions and literary works written in Basque reflect on certain assumptions related to primary oral cultures, often undermining them. Among these assumptions, there is the widespread idea that peoples who privilege orality are culturally inferior, lacking the capacity for abstract thinking. Finally, I also study how certain assumptions about the characteristics of both oral discourse and written

texts are questioned in literary works written in Basque. In order to approach these issues, it is necessary to define some terms.

### **Definition of Terms**

Before starting my discussion about the interaction between orality and literacy in the Basque Country, I find it necessary to define and discuss some terms and concepts that are related to orality and literacy as they have been discussed by various critics. These terms can be placed at different points of the literacy/orality continuum, some closer to literacy, others closer to orality, and some in the middle. In the pole of orality we find oral tradition and oral discourse (which need to be distinguished, as we will see later), primary orality and orature. In the pole of literacy, we find primary writing and literature. Closer to orality, we find secondary orality and literary orature. I believe they are closer to the pole of orality because, even though they are influenced by writing, they are still oral manifestations. Closer to the pole of literacy, we find secondary writing. I consider that this term is closer to the pole of literacy because, although it has some influence from orality, it is a written manifestation. The term oral literature is a problematic one, as it is used by some critics to refer to different and sometimes contradictory things. For example, some critics believe that it is an adequate term to refer to a written art form that is performed orally, while other critics are aware that this is a contradiction. Since I choose to understand this term in the same way as Pio Zirimu, that is, as “orature reduced to literature” (Zirimu 76), I place it closer to the literacy pole. Below, I will explore the different definitions that various critics have provided for all these terms. To begin with, however, I will present a diagram:

Figure 1: Orality/literacy continuum



First of all, I need to define what I understand by “orality.” In his dictionary, Chris Baldick defines it as “[...] the state of dependence on the spoken word in oral cultures [...]” (178). Walter Mignolo states that “both oral interactions and their conceptualization constitute orality” (“When Speaking was not Good Enough” 333). In *La oralidad escrita: sobre la reivindicación y re-inscripción del lenguaje oral* ‘Written Orality: On the Recognition and the Re-inscription of Oral Language’ (1997), Jorge Marcone uses Carlos Pacheco’s words in order to define “orality”:

Dentro de una natural diversidad de objetos y enfoques, podría decirse que quienes se dedican a ella [el estudio de la oralidad] coinciden en concebir la oralidad como un fenómeno sociocultural que va mucho más allá de la exclusividad o el predominio de un medio comunicacional sobre otro. La oralidad es entendida más bien como una particular economía cultural

capaz de incidir de manera sustancial no sólo en los procesos de adquisición, preservación y difusión del conocimiento, sino también en el desarrollo de concepciones del mundo y sistemas de valores, así como de particulares productos culturales tanto históricos como presentes, desde los poemas homéricos ... hasta las cosmogonías guaraníes o las coplas improvisadas de un *contrapunto* en el llano venezolano. Se trata de procesos, concepciones y productos que difieren de manera significativa de los observables en culturas donde se han arraigado y difundido sucesivamente la escritura, la imprenta y la tecnología comunicacional. (Qtd.in Marcone 34)

Within a natural diversity of objects and approaches, it could be said that those who study it [orality] agree in considering orality as a sociocultural phenomenon that goes beyond the exclusivity or the predominance of one communication media over another. Orality is understood as a particular cultural economy capable of influencing in a substantial manner not only the processes of acquisition, preservation, and diffusion of knowledge, but also the development of world views and value systems, as well as particular cultural products, both historic and current, from the aforementioned Homeric poems to the Guarani cosmogonies or the improvised stanzas of a *contrapunto* in the Venezuelan plain. It has to do with processes, conceptions and products that differ in significant manners from the ones we can observe in cultures where writing, the printing press and communicational technology, successively, have settled and spread.

I find Pacheco's definition of orality very useful for my study, as I believe that orality does not only refer to privileging the use of oral language over written language, but to a manner of acquiring, organizing, storing and transmitting knowledge.

Baldick defines "oral tradition" as "the passing on from one generation (and/or locality) to another of songs, chants, proverbs, and other verbal compositions within and between non-literate cultures; or the accumulated stock of works thus transmitted by word of mouth" (178). He points out that "ballads, folktales and other works emerging from an oral tradition will often be found in several different versions, because each performance is a fresh improvisation based around a "core" of narrative incidents and formulaic phrases" (178).

In Mignolo's opinion, "both alphabetic written interactions and their conceptualization constitute literacy" ("When Speaking was not Good Enough" 333). In the same way as I understand orality as the dependence on the oral word in oral cultures, I consider "literacy" as the dependence on the written word in literate societies. Again, literacy and orality do not exclude each other. Thus, some cultures rely on writing while also resorting to the oral word. We can use the idea of a continuum to understand how today, in most societies, orality and literacy appear hand in hand. In some, orality has more importance than in others, while some societies depend more than others on the written word, but it is very hard to find a society that lacks either of these two entities.

According to Walter Ong, there are two different types of orality: "primary orality", that is, "the orality of cultures untouched by literacy" (6), and "secondary orality" or "the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence" (3). He notes that nowadays, there are not many cultures where we

can find primary orality, as most of them have been touched by literacy to some degree (11). However, he does recognize that “[...] to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambience, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality” (11). This mind-set of primary orality would be the dependence on oral language to transmit information, and a communal sense, that is, the feeling by a given society that their oral traditions and forms of orature belong to everyone.

In the same way as Ong, Paul Zumthor, in *Oral Poetry: an Introduction* (1990), is aware that in many cultures orality and literacy interact, and he believes that orality does not exclude literacy (17). Finnegan also believes that “orality and literacy, far from being mutually contradictory poles, can interact and support each other” (110). In the same way, Marcone affirms that “... la categoría de ‘cultura oral’, en el sentido de un sistema de signos y códigos a través de los cuales seres humanos procesan, intercambian y conservan o acumulan información, no tiene que ser pensada en oposición a “cultura letrada y/o escrituaria” ‘The category of “oral culture”, in the sense of a system of signs and codes through which human beings process, exchange and conserve or accumulate information, does not have to be thought of in opposition to a “literate and/or written culture”’ (45).

Next, it is indispensable to engage in a discussion about the term “oral literature,” which is a problematic one, due to the origin of the word “literature”. As Ong states,

We have the term “literature”, which essentially means “writings” (Latin *litteratura*, from *litera*, letter of the alphabet), to cover a given body of written materials – English literature, children’s literature – but no comparably satisfactory term or concept to refer to a purely oral heritage,

such as the traditional oral stories, proverbs, prayers, formulaic expressions (Chadwick 1932 – 4 *passim*), or other oral productions of, say, the Lakota Sioux in North America or the Mande in West Africa or the Homeric Greeks. (10-11)

Thus, in his opinion, we cannot refer to artistic expressions of oral tradition as “oral literature”, as it would be contradictory. He states that “it appears quite impossible to use the term ‘literature’ to include oral tradition or performance without subtly but irremediably reducing these somehow to variants of writing” (12). In addition, he points out that we cannot describe a phenomenon in terms of a subsequent one (14). In his opinion, oral language is prior to written language, being the former a natural form of communication, present in every society, while the latter would be a technology, something not present in every society, not natural: “by contrast with natural, oral speech, writing is completely artificial. There is no way to write ‘naturally’. Oral speech is fully natural to human beings in the sense that every human being in every culture who is not physiologically or psychologically impaired learns to talk” (Ong 81). However, he goes beyond this idea to affirm that “technologies are artificial, but – paradox again – artificiality is natural to human beings. Technology, properly interiorized, does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it” (Ong 82). This somehow goes hand in hand with Finnegan’s idea about the assumed naturality of oral language:

Oral communication looks at first sight unproblematic and “natural.” But, like literacy or, indeed, computer technology, its use too rests on social and cultural conventions and on a man-made system of communication – in this case the remarkable system of human speech. It is, certainly, a

technology that we take for granted, just as human beings always do with *established* systems which seem too natural and self-evidently human to need any explanation, in sharp contrast to the newer (and thus apparently “intrusive” and “unnatural”) technologies. (4)

I agree both with Ong’s idea that artificiality is natural and with Finnegan’s idea that even if we consider oral language as natural, it is, in fact, social. The fact that every society has oral language does not mean that it is natural, and in order to support this statement, we need to remember that the use of language follows different rules and conventions in different cultures.

Despite Ong, in Ruth Finnegan’s opinion, it would not be inappropriate to talk about “oral literature”. According to her, it makes sense to consider artistic production that relies on the oral language as “oral literature.” She affirms that “when one reads – or better, hears – some of the oral literary forms in such contexts [oral contexts] one cannot help but admit that expression of insight and understanding by no means necessarily depends on writing” (64). In her opinion, the differences between oral and written literature are not that clear:

When trying to describe the basic characteristics of literature<sup>1</sup>, there is no clear distinction between cultures which use the written word and those which do not: these differences are not related to the presence or absence of literacy. So in both cases, it seems appropriate to talk about “literature”. We cannot keep considering illiterate peoples as people with no aesthetic insight or intellectual probing. (Finnegan 77)

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<sup>1</sup> She is referring both to written literary works and orature.



She admits that there is a generalized assumption that the function of oral literature differs from that of written literature, according to which the former “may have a practical, magical, or religious purpose, or that it satisfies a psychological need in mythic terms” (76), which would contrast with the “art for art’s sake,” which would be a characteristic of written literature (76). However, it is not that clear that all written literature is “art for art’s sake.” In fact, there is a lot of written literature that has practical, magical or religious purposes, so this is not a way to prove that orature and literature are different. Breaking with this assumption, she affirms that there is no reason why we should believe that oral literature has a more practical purpose than written literature. In fact, in her opinion, the functions of literature are different in each culture, but not necessarily depending on their oral or written nature (77).

While I agree with the fact that we cannot consider illiterate people as “people with no aesthetic insight or intellectual probing” and that we have to undermine the extended assumption that illiterate people are not capable of producing “valuable” artistic production, I do not think that using a term other than “oral literature” implies that their artistic production is less valuable than that produced by literate people.

Thus, I find Pio Zirimu’s terminology extremely useful, as I do not think that the term “orature,” which he uses to refer to artistic production that relies on the oral word, implies that that art is less valuable than written literature, and it avoids circumlocutions:

The art of words can be manifested entirely and wholly through the oral mode of human linguistic communication: this art could be referred to as *orature*, spoken verbal or linguistic art. At the other extreme it could be communicated through the written mode, thus being known as *literature*,

the art of letters. The reduction of orature as a written graphic form and the rendering of literature into a spoken form produce a verbal art which could be referred to as *oral literature* which, Janus-like, partakes of the qualities of both orature and literature, but with un-identical features. To avoid the ambiguity of oral literature, we could reserve this term for “orature reduced to literature” and suggest that *literary orature* refers to “literature transmitted into orature”, with critical reservations. (76)

It is important to analyze in more detail Zirimu’s definitions of these terms. At one end of the continuum, we would find purely oral or verbal art, while at the other end, we would find literature, which would be a written art. However, between the two ends of this oral-written continuum, we can also find oral literature, which would be the transcription or oral art forms, and literary orature, which would be written literature read aloud, and performed. Interestingly enough, it could seem that Zirimu has a higher appreciation of orature or oral art forms, since he describes “oral literature” as “orature *reduced to literature*”, while the term he uses for describing literary orature (*transmitted*), is completely neutral. However, it may not be that he holds orature in higher esteem, for it is possible that he is just aware that when orature is translated into literature, several features are lost, such as the voice, the intonation, the gestures, the relationship between the performer and the audience, etc. In general, I find Zirimu’s terminology extremely useful, as he provides terms for purely oral, as well as written art forms, and everything in between. That is, he provides useful terms for the whole range of cultural products emerging from the process whereby literature is affected by orality and orality is affected by writing. Therefore, I will use this terminology throughout my dissertation.

Joseba Gabilondo, Basque literary and cultural critic, is also aware of the presence of oral elements in written texts. In the same way as Ong distinguishes between primary and secondary orality, he distinguishes between primary and secondary writing:

Ongen terminologiari itzuli bat egingo bagenio, zera esan genezake, Derridak aztertzen eta defendatzen duen idazketa, *idazketa primarioa* dela, eta globalizazioak ekarri digun beste idazketa hirudimentsiodun hau, *idazketa sekundario* dela halaber, idatzizkotasuna eta ahozkotasuna hibridatzen dituen “ahozko idazketa sekundarioa”. (7)

If we twist Ong’s terminology, we could say that the type of writing that Derrida examines is *primary writing*, and the other tridimensional writing that globalization has brought to us is *secondary writing*, that is, the “secondary oral writing” that mixes literacy and orality.

This notion of secondary writing, which means that orality and literacy appear hand in hand, is similar to what Zirimu refers to as oral literature. The difference is that Gabilondo’s term does not understand this in terms of something oral “reduced” to writing, but is more neutral. This term of “secondary oral writing” is extremely important, as it shows Gabilondo’s awareness of the existence of a type of writing that is not purely literate, but in which orality is also present. Thus, this is in agreement with my statement that orality and literacy do not exclude each other, but inevitably interact with each other, and intersect each other.

The next term that needs to be analyzed is oral discourse, which is different from orature. While the latter refers exclusively to the use of oral language to create an artistic form, the former refers to the use of oral language in general, not necessarily with artistic

value. Ong mentions some characteristics of oral discourse when he says that “in an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration” (23). Adam Parry understands “formulaic” as “referring quite generically to more or less repeated set phrases or set expressions (such as proverbs) in verse or prose, which, as will be seen, do have a function in oral culture more crucial and pervasive than they may have in a writing or print or electronic culture” (qtd. in Ong 25-6). Ong gives an example of how people from oral societies organize their thought in a formulaic manner: he was telling his niece, who is described as “still a tiny child young enough to preserve a clearly oral mindset (though one infiltrated by the literacy around her)” (66) the story of the “Three Little Pigs.” When he said: “He huffed and he puffed, and he huffed and he puffed, and he huffed and he puffed,” his niece corrected him, using the formula she had heard before: “He huffed and he puffed, and he *puffed* and he *huffed*, and he huffed and he puffed” (66).

Ong is also aware of the circular nature of oral discourse, as he thinks that it has a “formulaic tendency to repeat at the end of an episode elements from the episode’s beginning” (Ong 27). This would contrast with the type of oral discourse we could expect from someone literate, who “organizes the plot of narration as climatic and linear” (Ong 139).

Another characteristic would be its variability, depending on the context: “oral memorization is subject to variation from direct social pressures. Narrators narrate what audiences call for or will tolerate” (Ong 66).

Ong also mentions the rhythmic nature of oral discourse:

Protracted orally based thought, even when not in formal verse, tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall, even physiologically. Jousse (1979) has shown the intimate linkage between rhythmic oral patterns, the breathing process, gesture, and the bilateral symmetry of the human body in ancient Aramaic and Hellenic targums, and thus also in ancient Hebrew. (34)

Ong mentions the importance of narrative in oral cultures, which is, in his opinion, a fundamental part of them, although it is also found in literate cultures:

Although it is found in all cultures, narrative is in certain ways more widely functional in primary oral cultures than in others. First, in a primary oral culture, as Havelock pointed out (1978a; cf 1963), knowledge cannot be managed in elaborate, more or less scientifically abstract categories. Oral cultures cannot generate such categories, and so they use stories of human action to store, organize and communicate much of what they know. (Ong 137)

Second, narrative is particularly important in primary oral cultures because it can bond a great deal of lore in relatively substantial, lengthy forms that are reasonably durable – which in an oral culture means forms subject to repetition. Maxims, riddles, proverbs and the like are of course also durable, but they are usually brief. (138)

While I agree with him regarding the importance of narrative in predominately oral cultures, I do not believe that people from these cultures cannot manage knowledge in elaborate, abstract or scientific manners, as I believe that this is an extremely

Eurocentric way of understanding the mechanisms through which knowledge is acquired, stored, organized and transmitted. I will examine this point in more detail in the third chapter.

Manuel de Lecuona describes the main features of what he calls “oral literature:” rhythmic artifice of the language (reversible rhythm, rhyme, music and dance to help memorization, at the same time, aesthetic value); consequent development of the memory of the active (the person who performs) and passive subject (the listener) of that literature (this capacity of memorization is lost after the invention of the print); speed of movement of the images in the literary work of oral style (they sing to be listened in a moment, that is why they pay less attention to details than when someone writes to be read); improvisation in the mode of production of the work (10-11). I agree with this description, but I do not believe that there is an active and a passive subject. For instance, in *bertsolaritza*<sup>2</sup>, the audience is not passive: as we will see later, they play a fundamental role in the process of producing *bertsoak* (improvised verses), as they interact with the performer, sometimes even guessing what he or she is going to improvise and singing along.

Finnegan also lists some theories and assumptions about what she calls oral literature:

1. *“The text of oral literature is variable and dependent on the occasion of performance, unlike the fixed text of a written book.”*

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<sup>2</sup> A Basque form of orature that will be analyzed later in the chapter.

2. *“The form of composition characteristic of oral literature is composition-in-performance, i.e. not prior composition divorced from the act of performance.”*
3. *“Composition and transmission of oral literature is through the process mentioned above [the performer does not always use the exact same words, but they vary depending on the context and the audience] and not (as we once thought) through word for word memorization.”*
4. *“In oral literature, there is no concept of a ‘correct’ or ‘authentic’ version.”* (Finnegan 88-9)

After mentioning these assumptions, she uses the counter-example of oral literature from the Pacific (where she says that oral literature plays a very important role), which does not fulfill the aforementioned assumptions: some of it is composed beforehand, there is a fixed and memorized version, and it involves the idea of a “fixed” “correct” text (Finnegan 90). She mentions the Christmas hymns that are composed by a group in the Cook Islands, and then memorized, but this is far from “communal creation”, because it comes from a small select group (Finnegan 98). She recognizes that Pacific Islanders have had contact with European cultures and acquired a “literate mentality”, so even though they don’t write their verbal art forms, they compose them in a literate manner (Finnegan 105). This would be the case of the Basques, too, as they have been in contact with Spanish language, and have been writing both in Spanish and in Basque for several centuries.

She does mention some differences between oral and written literatures:

1. Literature's dissemination: in the oral context, it happens as *performance* and as a sequence of words. The audience sees the author. We miss something when we read a text that was created orally. There is a visual element. The audience of an oral culture is essential for transmission.

2. The style can be related to the form of delivery: it may seem repetitive, formulaic, with runs, highlighting of certain dramatic episodes when oral literature is read.

3. The audience: in oral literature, the audience is essential, unlike in written literature, where there is an audience too, which is in the writer's mind, but s/he composes on *paper* rather than directly to his/her audience. In the media, although there is an audience, it is not directly implied, not face to face, no direct and immediate impact on the poet.

4. Degree of verbal flexibility: variability seems to be the norm in oral cultures, in contrast with the fixity of the written word. But even in literate cultures there can be flexibility. Here, printing would be a more important factor than writing. (78)

In fact, when talking about the changes that came as a result of writing, we do not only need to take into account the difference between orality and writing, but also the difference between manuscript and printed writing: with manuscript writing, there is still some flexibility, as every copy of a written word is different for the others (the words do



not take the same space and are not in the exact place of the page in every copy). In addition, there is more room for “mistakes,” that is, variations, from copy to copy.

In conclusion, the terms that I consider essential for my study are “orality” and “literacy”, which I do not understand as two opposing entities, but as the two ends of a continuum where the oral and the written word interact with each other. Zirimu’s terminology (“orature”, “oral literature” and “literary orature”) is also essential for my research, as I study verbal art forms that are purely oral (orature) but also some that are oral art forms put into writing (oral literature) and verbal art forms that were originally written and then translated into oral language (literary orature). I consider orature *bertsoak*, legends, folktales and songs, as they have an artistic function. I do not consider orature the verbal forms that do not have artistic functions, such as proverbs and old sayings. Thus, I consider them oral traditions. In addition, “primary orality” and “secondary orality” are also essential terms for my study.

### **Can We Affirm that Basque Culture Privileges Orality over Writing?**

The act of privileging the oral word over written texts is a characteristic shared by many cultures that, for different reasons, could be considered minorities. In Spain, certain regions, like Galicia, the Basque Country and the Canary Islands, which are not the cultural or political center, have strong oral traditions. This is also common among indigenous groups from Latin American countries, and other postcolonial nations. These could be considered minorities not only because their cultures were erased and their History has been written by their colonizers, but because they were seen as uncivilized by their oppressors, in many cases partially due to the fact that their languages lacked alphabetic writing.

Writing has been part of the Basque culture for a long time, as it has been in contact with Spanish, a language that has a long tradition of writing. Even Basque has been written for a long time, although it has not been until recent times that conventions for orthography have been established, as I will explain below. In fact, as Xabier Irujo Ametzaga notices:

The first archaeological vestiges found until the moment in which inscriptions in Basque appear correspond to the period of the Roman colonization of the Basque Country. Concretely, a multitude of mortuary tablets and Basque inscriptions with names and place-names have been found in the Basque Country, including the territories of Errioxa (Rioja) and the Landak (Landes, Aquitania). Also, tablets with inscriptions in Basque have been found scattered by the routes and battlefields crossed by the legions of Rome, in the ancient Britannia, Italia or Gallia, since there were numerous militiamen or mercenaries of Basque origin in the Roman legions. (31)

The first written sentences in Basque go back to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when a monk of the monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla wrote glosses in Basque in a religious document. The two Basque texts written by the monk are indeed the two first complete sentences we know about, till now, in the Middle Ages: “Guec ajutu ez dugu” ‘we have not thrown’ and “izioqui dugu” ‘we have lit’ (qtd. in Irujo Ametzaga 33).

Taking into account that Basque has been written for a long time, although we only conserve short inscriptions from the time of the Roman conquest and two sentences from the Middle Ages, it could seem unsuitable to understand the Basque Country as an

oral society. As Larrañaga Odriozola affirms, “in the Basque case this oral culture coexists with a literate culture, so that it may be more correctly described as a ‘residually oral culture’” (“Ubiquitous but Invisible” 62). That is, a culture in which, in spite of the fact that writing has been incorporated, primary orality still has a central role. According to Walter Ong, as we mentioned above, “today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects. Still, to many degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high technology ambience, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality” (11). This affirmation can be applied to the Basque Country: even if highly influenced by writing and technology, it still maintains an oral mindset. In order to support this statement, I can say that the Basque culture still maintains many legends, old sayings and songs from a long time ago. In addition, we can find formulaic patterns, circular and rhythmic form in orature and literature.

Because of the presence of writing, Basque speakers no longer rely only on their memory for storing and transmitting knowledge: the idea of the permanence of the word that comes not only with writing, but also with technologies like television, CDs and computers has been present in this community for a long time. However, the written language and technologies have been used mainly in Spanish, while Basque has been used mostly in what Ong would refer to as a primarily oral manner. For example, there was not a television channel or a radio station in Basque until the early 1980s. Then, we can affirm that in spite of this coexistence between literacy and orality in the Basque Country, we can still refer to this society as a “residual oral culture”, as I take into consideration that there have always been oral manifestations in Basque language, while,

until quite recently, there have not been a great number of written works. In addition, it was not until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the normativization of the grammar was completed, so it was not until that moment that there was an agreement on how Basque should be written. Therefore, while literary works were being produced in Spanish, not many authors were writing in Basque, thus giving place to a situation of diglossia, as I explain below. Joseba Gabilondo agrees that Basque culture could be considered a “residual oral culture:”

Ahokotasun primarioaren azken aztarna bezala Ongek “ahokotasun primario erresiduala” (11-13) bereizten du, zeina idazketak oraindik ere erabat gainditu ez dituen gizarteetan geratzen den; alegia, oraindik ere kantuak, esaera zaharrak, ipuinak, eta abar bizirik dauden talde eta herrien egoera izango genuke. *Sensu stricto*, Euskal Herria ere hemen sartuko litzateke, ahokotasun erresidualean, behintzat Batasun Europarrean osoki integratu aurreko (hego) Euskal Herria, hor nonbait 1990ko hamarkadan desagertu zen Euskal Herri aurre-digitala. (“Euskal poesiaren historia postmoderno baterantz” 2)

As the last trace of primary orality Ong distinguishes “residual primary orality” (11-13), which happens in societies in which writing is not still predominant; in fact, it would be the situation of the groups and peoples whose songs, old sayings, tales, etcetera are still alive. *Sensu stricto*,

Euskal Herria<sup>3</sup> would also fit here, in the residual orality, at least the southern part of Euskal Herria before its complete integration within the European Union, the pre-digital Euskal Herria which disappeared sometime during the decade of the 1990s.

As we saw above, Ong, Zumthor, Marcone and Finnegan believe that literacy does not exclude orality. This can be applied to the case of Basque culture, as until quite recently (after Franco's death in 1975) many Basque people could read, but only in Spanish. Therefore, even though writing has formed part of this society for such a long time, it has been used mainly in languages other than Basque. In addition, even for those who knew how to write and read, oral language was still a fundamental part of their culture.

Although affected by writing, Basque society still conserves several characteristics of a culture in which oral tradition plays an important role: it has several art forms that rely mainly on the oral language, such as improvised verses and popular songs. In addition, the great number of old sayings and legends reflect the dependence of this culture on oral language in order to give explanation to certain facts and advice about various matters.

Regardless of all the historical circumstances (from the Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula to Franco's dictatorship from 1939 to 1975) the Basques have managed to maintain alive not only their language, but also their oral traditions, such as *bertsolaritza* (improvised verses), stories, legends, popular songs and old sayings. This

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<sup>3</sup> Euskal Herria is the term used to refer to the Basque Country (which includes Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Araba) and Navarra in Spain, as well as Benafarroa, Zuebroa and Lapurdi in France.

also confirms that oral language has played a very important role in this society, since both the language and the cultural manifestations were kept alive for centuries without being written.

Another fact that allows us to refer to the Basque culture as one that relies on oral language is that even after reading had been interiorized, this activity was still considered a public act, which, according to Zumthor, is a characteristic of oral societies (28). In fact, an early poet would need to picture himself reciting a poem in front of an audience while attempting to write it (Ong 95). Even during the manuscript and early printing period, reading was seen as a social activity (Ong 131). In “Bertsolariak and Writers: An Old Tale of the Fathers and Sons”, Joseba Zulaika gives the example of his father reading the newspaper aloud and affirms that his “father’s generation’s mentality was oral. Their sense of communication, identity, norms, and community hinged fundamentally on the centrality of the word. Reading, thinking, communicating, and praying were for them primarily oral processes that needed to be verbalized and spoken” (251). Thus, he supports the idea that, until quite recently, Basques have been a predominately oral society even if writing and reading were part of their culture.

In addition, the Basques have relied on the oral word in order to pass on knowledge and information from generation to generation: “son frequentísimas en la literatura vasca los casos de improvisaciones cuyas estrofas han quedado perpetuadas en la memoria de las gentes aun de una generación en otra, sin que el improvisador las dijese más que una sola vez, cuando las improvisó” “There are many cases in Basque literature of improvised verses whose stanzas have been perpetuated in people’s memories, even in posterior generations, even if the improviser did not say them more than once, when he

improvised them' (Lekuona 52). This capacity for memorization (although, as mentioned above, this capacity has already been lost today) is another characteristic of societies that privilege the oral word over the written text: not possessing a permanent text to go back to, their people need to rely on their memory to transmit information to others. Besides, there are also many stories, legends, songs and old sayings that have passed from generation to generation orally and are remembered today.

Thus, if we take into consideration the number of oral manifestations and the fact that they have been kept alive without being written, we can state that Basque society places a great amount of importance on oral traditions, as well as on the spoken word. However, the written word is becoming more and more present in this culture, leading to alterations in the way of organizing information (nowadays, we lack the capacity to memorize as easily as in the past) and the way in which it is transmitted (now we rely on the written word or the forms of orality that come with new technologies). Therefore, we can affirm that Basque society still privileges oral traditions such as *bertsolaritza*, storytelling, legends, popular songs and old sayings, but that these have been influenced by literacy and the new technologies that came after it. In addition, these oral traditions also have an influence on the written text. Ruth Finnegan affirms that the binary typology of orality and literacy is not useful for describing the majority of cultures:

For how useful is this binary typology when it turns out that most known cultures don't fit? In practice a *mixture* of media (oral and written) is far more typical than a reliance on just one, with writing being used for some purposes, oral forms for others (and in recent cases electronic media playing a part too). (Finnegan 141)

Thus, the Basque Country, which until quite recently has privileged orality over literacy, is now an example of Finnegan's statement about how literacy and orality, rather than being two entirely separated spheres, complement each other.

### **Basque Oral Traditions and Orature**

Examples of artistic productions that do not depend on written language would be several Basque oral traditions, like *bertsolaritza*, legends, stories, old sayings and songs, which were traditionally transmitted orally. They compensate for the non-existent written literature in Basque until 1545 and the scarce production of it until the last few decades. Gorka Aulestia is aware of this, as he points out that "*bertsolaritza*, an oral literary phenomenon arising from the popular culture of a closed sociolinguistic community, has made up for a limited written literature that (until the last few decades) has had no popular roots and scant social relevance" ("The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium" 227-8).

While some forms of orature have disappeared like, for example, oral poetry from the Middle Ages (Sarasola 35), others have managed to survive until the present day. The clearest example of this would be the art of *bertsolaritza*, which consists of improvised verses (*bertsoak*) sung in Basque, and whose origins are uncertain. This tradition of improvising verses is not exclusive to the Basque culture; actually, similar types of oral expression are present in other places of the Iberian Peninsula, as well as in several Latin American countries. Examples of this would be the Chilean *payas* and the Ecuadorian *contrapunto*. There are also examples of improvised verses in numerous Eastern countries. Although these forms of improvised versification vary from place to place, they do have several characteristics in common, the most obvious one being their oral



nature. In addition, it is important to take into account that they are produced by groups that could be considered minorities: in Spain, we find them in places like Galicia, Asturias and the Canary Islands. I refer to these areas of Spain as minorities because none of them are part of the cultural center of Spain, which would be Castile or the political center, which would be Madrid. Furthermore, many of these regions have a minority language that is co-official with Spanish. In the case of the Canary Islands, even though there is no minority language, the variety of Spanish spoken there differs from standard Peninsular Spanish, or Castilian. In some Eastern cultures, the art of improvising verses has been used by what could be regarded as a minority group, women, in order to rebel against the dominating group of men, as will be shown in the second chapter.

It is hard to find an accurate definition for *bertsolaritza*, as Gorka Aulestia has noticed. It could be roughly described as the art of improvising rhymed verses about a given topic following a melody. Traditionally, it was performed in social events, such as weddings, family reunions, bars and cider houses, mostly by illiterate people from rural areas. Nowadays, starting in 1935, there are *txapelketak* (contests) in which two people improvise *bertsoak* (verses). After defining what a *bertsolari* (verse improviser) is not (a poet or a singer), Aulestia quotes Xabier Amuriza (a *bertsolari*) to define it as “a kind of sport that involves singing lyrics with rhythm and rhyme” (*Improvisational Poetry* 21). *Bertsolaritza* could be considered as a sport in the sense that there is competition: one *bertsolari* improvises and the other one has to respond to the *bertsoak* improvised by that person. In fact, Zavala compares it to Basque traditional sports:

Aquellos primeros bersolaris tenían del bersolarismo una concepción  
homérica y caballeresca, como si se tratara de un torneo, o – si se prefiere

– deportiva, como si fuera otro cualquiera de sus deportes atléticos.

Hoy tenemos los campeonatos de bersolaris, pero esto no es propiamente un desafío. Es posible que, desde entonces a nuestro tiempo, haya disminuido entre los bersolaris el espíritu de desafío y pugna. (*Bosquejo* 83)

Those first *bertsolariak* had a Homeric and chivalrous conception of *bertsolaritza*, as if it were a tournament, or – if preferred – sportive, as if it were one more of their athletic sports. Now, we have *bertsolaritza* championships, but this is not exactly a challenge. It is possible that, from then until our time, the spirit of challenge and fighting among *bertsolariak* has diminished.

Trapero notices that *bertsolariak* use a variety of meters, follow a song pattern (either a traditional melody or an improvised one), and do not use any musical instruments (52). Zemke states that *bertsolaritza* can be seen as a “poetic phenomenon that makes a social claim to Basque identity” (93), *bertsolariak* being “spokespersons for a unique social collective” (93). This is important, as *bertsolaritza* serves the function of creating a collective identity. In terms of the topics that are treated in the *bertsoak*, they could be about anything, from a traditional event to the most current issue. They can also vary from the local, such as anecdotes from a village and local customs (Fernández 111) to topics like “politics, the economy, emotional relationships, drinking and driving, gambling addiction, homosexuality, and the classic confrontation between the young woman and the old bachelor with money” (Mallea-Olaetxe 242). In fact, the topics of *bertsolaritza* have changed to adapt to new realities: they have traditionally been related

to “religious and historical themes as well as different aspects of daily life, such as sports, culture, social relations, nature, God, death, the world, and love” (Aulestia *Improvisational Poetry* 35). Changes in daily life, society, and the world, as well as the new type of *bertsolariak* and audience, have led to changes in the topics, which are now more urban and related to contemporary social issues.

*Bertsolaritza* entails a relationship between the *bertsolari* and the audience, who does not just play the passive role of an observer, but participates actively, as Lekuona notices:

El bertsolarismo es un complejo de bertsolari que canta y pueblo que le escucha, compenetrado éste del propio espíritu y de la misma inspiración de aquél hasta tal grado de sintonización, que no son infrecuentes los casos en que el pueblo, adivinando el final de una estrofa que el bertsolari va improvisando, lo improvisa también él y lo corea a una con el bertsolari... (Lekuona 63)

*Bertsolaritza* is a combination of the *bertsolari* who sings and the people who listen to him, who understand him so well and have the same inspiration, to the point that it is not uncommon to find cases in which the people guess the end of the stanza the *bertsolari* is improvising and improvise it too, as they sing it along with the *bertsolari*...

However, there is another form of *bertsolaritza* in which this relationship between the *bertsolari* and the audience is lost: the *bertso-paperak* or *bertso-jarriak*, that is, *bertsoak* that are written and then distributed in paper. This form of *bertsolaritza* started

in the eighteenth century and became popular after the first Carlist war. Zavala makes a distinction between improvised and written *bertsolaritza*:

El bersolarismo tiene ahora [en 1964] dos facetas: la oral y la escrita. En la oral, el bersolari, en la plaza o en la sidrería, casi siempre alternando con otro bersolari, canta sus estrofas haciendo las delicias del auditorio. En la escrita, el bersolari escribe o hace escribir sus estrofas para ser publicadas en hojas volantes, en “bertso-paperas”. (50)

*Bertsolaritza* has now [in 1964] two facets: an oral and a written one. In the oral, the *bertsolari*, at the square or the cider house, almost always alternating with another *bertsolari*, sings his strophes, satisfying the audience. In the written one, the *bertsolari* writes or makes someone else write his strophes in order to be published in flying sheets, in “*bertso-paperak*.”

This form of *bertsolaritza* does not involve improvising, or a direct interaction between the *bertsolari* and the audience. According to Joxerra Garzia, this reduces the *bertso* to mere literary text, which adulterates the purpose of *bertsolaritza* (284). However, it was very common to buy *bertso-paperak* in order to read them out loud, so in that way, orality still plays an important role. In addition, “these texts imitate the oral model. It is no coincidence that they were frequently dictated to others because the authors were illiterate “(Larrañaga Odriozola “Ubiquitous but Invisible” 62). In addition, even the act of selling *bertso-paperak* involved orality:

Este oficio [de vendedor de *bertso-paperak*] requería tener buena voz. Se distinguió por ello el bersolari Fermín Imaz. Se colocaban en un lugar

estratégico [en ferias, mercados y fiestas] y comenzaban a cantar las estrofas de la hoja que ponían a la venta, las cuales se las sabían ya de memoria. Acudían los compradores y hacían las dos cosas a la vez: cantar y vender. (Zavala *Bosquejo* 57)

This occupation [of selling *bertso-paperak*] required the person have a good voice. The *bertsolari* Fermín Imaz excelled at this. They would stand at a strategic place [at fairs, markets and celebrations] and they would start singing the strophes from the sheet they were selling, which they already knew by heart. The buyers would go to them, and they would do both things at the same time: sing and sell.

This form of *bertsolaritza* is still practiced now. It is important to be aware of the fact that improvised oral *bertsolaritza* is also still alive, as it has adapted to the necessities and characteristics of present day society in several ways. It is now open to a larger audience, thanks to the new forms of technology, such as television, CDs, digital recorders and the Internet (Armistead 41). Technology has been said to have a negative influence on oral traditions: traditional oral manifestations have lost some audience to the new forms of orality. However, this has not been the case with *bertsolaritza*, as this oral manifestation has benefited from technology: *bertsolaritza* contests are now televised, so they reach a larger audience.

Nevertheless, new technologies do not always have a positive impact on *bertsolaritza*. As White points out, recorded or televised *bertsoak* do not provide the audience with the real art form. She does admit that “watching a performance on video tape is the next best thing to attending a live competition, although the interactivity

between *bertsolari* and audience cannot be fully experienced in this way (“Orality and Basque Nationalism” 11). This would support Zumthor’s idea that the radio is destroying oral poetry. Nevertheless, in the case of *bertsolaritza*, in general, in spite of this fact, technology has had a positive influence overall on the survival of this cultural manifestation as television, CDs and the internet bring *bertsolaritza* to a sector of society that would probably not attend live *bertsolaritza* contests.

Apart from *bertsolaritza*, there are other forms of oral traditions that have been present and still survive in Basque culture. For example, there are several popular songs. In his *Cancionero popular vasco* ‘Basque Popular Songbook’ (2007), José Ignacio Ansorena claims that Basque people are famous for being fond of music. He cites the saying “tres vascos, un orfeón...” ‘three Basques, a choral society’ (15), and sustains that the Basques have manifested their lifestyles through songs (12). He reviews the polemic about the existence of Basque popular music, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, debated by Francisco Gascue and Azkue. According to Gascue, there really is no Basque popular music, since many of the melodies used in Basque popular songs are of foreign origin, and thus, Basque popular music would be just a copy of Celtic music (Ansorena 16). However, in Azkue’s opinion, this does not mean that Basque popular music does not exist, since all musical traditions have foreign influences (Ansorena 16-7). Andoni Egaña (a *bertsolari* and writer) writes a “Nota Breve” ‘Brief Note’ at the beginning of the songbook, where he affirms that:

Los cantos populares son el mejor espejo de los modos de vivir y de sentir de un pueblo. Los vascos, por fortuna, disponemos de cientos, de miles de canciones populares. A menudo, desconocemos quién las compuso. No

conocemos la letra con precisión, o, aunque la sepamos, no sabemos muy bien lo que estamos cantando. Pero no por ello dejan de ser nuestras. (Ansorena 9)

Popular songs are the best mirror of a society. Fortunately, the Basques have hundreds, thousands of popular songs. Very often, we do not know who composed them. We do not know the exact lyrics, or, if we know them, we do not know very well what we are singing. But that does not mean that they are not ours.

In Egaña's opinion, then, Basque popular songs belong to Basque people. It does not matter that they do not know who composed them, or even that they do not understand them. He does not even mention the foreign melodies, which may have to do with Ansorena's claim that for the Basques, the lyrics are more important than the melody (20). Ansorena thinks that a Basque popular song must be sung in Basque. In his opinion, what makes a song a popular song is the fact that it has been adopted by a community, no matter if they know who the author is or not, and it has been transmitted orally (11).

Egaña pays attention to the relationship between popular songs and the sense of community, of belonging to a group. He claims that, as a *bertsolari*, he has been deprived of the opportunity to sing with his friends around a table (Ansorena 9), as the *bertsolari* is separated from the audience, taking a central place, not the same place as everybody else. Thus, for him, popular music also implies a sense of community, of sharing, of everybody singing at the same time. In that sense, even if *bertsolaritza* gives place to a

sense of community, as we have seen, singing a popular song gives more sense of community to the singer than improvising a *bertso* does to the *bertsolari*.

Apart from *bertsolaritza* and popular songs, we cannot forget about the great number of legends that form part of Basque oral tradition, which have been transmitted from generation to generation orally. Being part of Basque oral tradition, there are often several versions of the same legend. Some of these legends have also been written down by authors like Resurrección María de Azkue and José Miguel Barandiarán, in a process that produces oral literature, or orature translated into literature. Examples of mythical creatures of these legends are the Tartar or one eyed giant, cyclope; the *Herensuge* or dragon; the *Basa-Jaun* and *Basa-Andre*, or “el hombre y la mujer salvajes de la mitología vasca” ‘the wild man and woman of Basque mythology’ (Webster 57); the *laminak* who are “auténticas hadas, que no difieren del tipo general del hada celta más de lo que las hadas escocesas, irlandesas, galesas y las de Cornualles difieren entre sí” ‘authentic fairies, who do not differ from the general type of Celtic fairy more the Scottish, Irish, Welsh and those from Cornualles differ from one another’ (Webster 57-8). Like the *laminak*, any of these mythological creatures form part of the legends of other cultures, too, but they are adapted to Basque culture.

There is also a huge amount of *atsotitzak* (old sayings, proverbs), many of which are still used today. *Textos arcaicos vascos* ‘Basque Archaic Texts’ (1964), by Koldo Mitxelena, is a compilation of “las muestras del vascuence medieval, conservadas por tradición oral y sólo más tarde consignadas por escrito” ‘examples of Medieval Basque language, conserved by oral tradition and only later written down’ (6). In a section of this book, he includes loose sentences and proverbs:



Atean usso, ychean otso; ala vicicaria gaisto.

De fuera paloma, y en casa lobo: assi viuir es malo. (176)

Outside dove, inside wolf; living like that is bad.

Mitxelena compiles these sentences and proverbs from different sources, like Isasti's collection (1620) and *Refranes y sentencias* 'Proverbs and Sentences' (1596).

In conclusion, as shown by the examples of *bertsolaritza*, legends, popular songs and old sayings, we can affirm that even if Basque literature did not start until a relatively recent time, we cannot say the same about orature, as there are several examples of orature that started a long time ago and still form part of present day society.

Nevertheless, it is essential to mention that there are examples of legends, old sayings and popular songs in every culture, but we do not refer to them as "oral cultures." What is different in the case of the Basque Country that allows us to consider it an oral culture is that all these oral manifestations have not been written until very recently. In fact, as has already been mentioned, Basque language was not used for writing until quite recently, as Spanish had this role. In addition, it has *bertsolaritza*, a form of orature that happens only in that region.

### **Dialects, Normativization and Co-official Status of Basque**

Although spoken by a very reduced number of people in a very small territory, Basque has several dialects, as we will see below. The standard dialect of Basque, known as *Euskara Batua* (Unified Basque), is now used in official communications, in the media, and in textbooks and classrooms; it is also the variety used in education. At the same time, many people, including native speakers of Basque who are educated in *Batua*, often speak one of the other non standard dialects at home. There are many other dialects,

so it is difficult to come to an agreement on how to classify them. Another thing we need to take into account is that there has been no literary production in some of them:

Varias han sido las clasificaciones de los dialectos vascos. Entre ellas sigue gozando de preferencia la que a mediados del pasado siglo hiciera Louis-Lucien Bonaparte, primo de Napoleon III. Bonaparte, verdadero fundador de la dialectología vasca e impulsador de sus estudios, distinguía ocho dialectos: vizcaíno, guipuzcoano, altonavarro meridional, altonavarro septentrional, labortano, bajonavarro occidental, bajonavarro oriental y suletino. De estos dialectos, cuyos límites no coinciden con los provinciales y que, en el caso de los seis últimos, están a caballo de la frontera franco-española, hay cuatro que han tenido cultivo literario: el vizcaíno, el guipuzcoano, el labortano y el auletino. (Knör 146)

There have been various classifications of the Basque dialects. Among them, one of the preferred one continues to be the one that Louis-Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon III's cousin, created toward the middle of last century. Louis-Lucien Bonaparte, the true creator of Basque dialectology and promotor of its study, distinguished eight dialect: Biscayan, Guipuzcoan, Southern High Navarran, Northern High Navarran, Labortano, Western Low Navarran, Eastern Low Navarran and Suletino. Of all these dialects, whose limits do not coincide with the limits of the provinces and that, in the case of the last six straddle the border between Spain and France, only four of them have had literary production: Biscayan, Guipuzcoan, Labortano and Suletino.

The normativization of Basque (the creation of rules for writing it and a unified grammar) began towards the middle of the nineteenth century, with the definition of the alphabet and orthography (Knörr 149). This process was carried out by some writers, academics and politicians, such as Sabino Arana, the creator of the Basque Nationalist Party. The process of normativization continued in the twentieth century, with the creation of the *Esukaltzaindia* (Academy of the Basque Language) in 1918 (Knörr 148), and ended with the creation of a unified grammar in 1968, a task that was carried out by members of the Academy. This unified grammar takes elements from some dialects, while leaving others out. There was (and still is) much criticism about this unification of the different dialects of Basque, as *Euskera Batua* is seen as artificial (Knörr 151). In addition, it leaves out some dialects. Even though the creation of a unified dialect of Basque has these negative consequences, White affirms that, “the need for a standard written language has been manifest in Basque circles since Bernart Dechepare wrote and published the first book in Euskara in 1545” (“Orality and Basque Nationalism” 4).

The creation of a unified variety of the language, as well as the definition of the alphabet and the orthography, helped authors decide to write in Basque. Furthermore, we need to take into account that Basque became the co-official language, with Spanish, after Franco’s death, so its prestige increased. It is now mandatory to study Basque in schools, as well as to show proficiency in this language when applying for a job in any public organization. This has created the necessity for a literary creation that fulfills the needs of the new audience, consisting mostly of the children that learn Basque at school, as well as the adults whose first language is Basque but are being alphabetized in this language for the first time, as well as those who are learning Basque as a second or third

language. This would be the case of, for example, the immigrants that went to the Basque Country from other Spanish regions for work reasons during Franco's regime, or the people who, in spite of being originally from the Basque Country, never learned Basque during Franco's regime. In addition, this new status of the Basque language as co-official with Spanish has done away with the aforementioned stereotype that associated the Basque language with illiterate farm workers and with Basque speakers' perception of themselves as inferior for language and literacy reasons.

Although, as we have seen, the creation of a standard dialect of Basque has had some positive consequences, the use of this variety in the government, the administration, the media, education and literature has turned it into a grapholect<sup>4</sup>, which has given place to another stereotype: perceiving the other dialects as inferior.

Then, while the situation of diglossia that existed between Basque and Spanish (Toledo 175) is disappearing, a situation of diglossia between *Batua* and the other dialects of Basque has started. I understand diglossia in the same way as Ferguson, who affirms that there is diglossia when "two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play" (325). However, this term could also be applied to the cases in which two different languages are spoken in different situations within the same community. In fact, after Ferguson's definition of diglossia, there have been some studies that deal with a situation in which diglossia is not

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<sup>4</sup> According to Walter Ong, "writing and print develop special kinds of dialects. [...] Often, as in England or Germany or Italy, where a cluster of dialects is found, one regional dialectic has developed chirographically beyond all others, for economic, political, religious, or other reasons, and has eventually become a national language" (105).

between two varieties of a language, but between two languages, which would be the case of the Basque Country, where diglossia has always been understood in relation with two languages. Another example in which diglossia is understood in relation with two languages would be the article “Rethinking Diglossia”, Pedrasa, Attinasi and Hoffman talk about the situation of a Puerto Rican girl in New York, and find that Spanish and English are in a situation of diglossia in which English is the high language, used in education, and Spanish the low language, used at home.

In a situation of diglossia, there is a “high” (H) and a “low” (L) variety of the language (Ferguson 327). Ferguson affirms that “in all the defining languages the speakers regard H as superior to L in a number of respects. Sometimes the feeling is so strong that H alone is regarded as real and L is reported ‘not to exist’” (329-30). He gives a sample listing of which variety is used in which situation: the high variety would be used for sermons in churches and mosques, personal letters, speech in parliament and political speeches, university lectures, news broadcasts, newspaper editorials, news stories, captions or titles, and poetry. The low variety would be the one used for giving instructions to servants, in conversations with family, friends and colleagues, in radio soap operas, and in folk literature (329). Interestingly enough, only one of the situations he relates to the low variety implies writing: folk literature. Therefore, it is clear that the high variety is predominantly used in writing, while the low variety is mainly used in oral contexts. In addition, the variety used in folk tales would be the low variety of the language, which would be one of the reasons why this type of artistic production is seen as inferior: as folk tales created in the low variety, they are seen as a lower type of artistic creation, in contrast with the written literature for which the high variety of the language

is used. Even though they can be written, originally, they form part of orature. In fact, he observes that “even where the feeling of the reality and superiority of H is not so strong, there is usually a belief that H is somehow more beautiful, more logical, better able to express important thoughts, and the like” (330). Therefore, the fact that the low variety or language is used in folk literature reflects the way in which people perceive both the low variety of the language or language and folk literature: less logical, less beautiful and less able to express important things. However, when there is a large body of written literature in the high variety of a language or in the high language, this is very esteemed by a community, and then the high variety or language “serves as the standard variety of the language” (Ferguson 331).

Ferguson also observes that:

In all the defining languages there is a strong tradition of grammatical study of the H form of the language. There are grammars, dictionaries, treatises on pronunciation, style, and so on: There is an established norm for pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary which allows variation only within certain limits: The orthography is well established and has little variation. By contrast, descriptive and normative studies of the L form are either non-existent or relatively recent and slight in quantity. Often they have been carried out first or chiefly by scholars OUTSIDE the speech community and are written in other languages. There is no settled orthography and there is wide variation in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. (331-2)

This is true in the case of Basque: the norms for pronunciation, orthography and grammar of *Batua* are well established. However, there are variations among the other dialects, due to the lack of established norms on how to write and pronounce them.

As mentioned above, in the Basque Country, the situation of diglossia has evolved from Spanish being the high language and Basque the low one, to *Batua* being the high variety and the other dialects being the low ones. In the French Basque Country or *Iparralde*, the situation of diglossia between Basque and French is even more prevalent than in the Spanish side or *Hegoaldea*. The Academy of the Basque Language (*Euskaltzaindia*) was aware of this new case of diglossia, as we can see in the declaration approved in 1986, whose third point was:

Ha de incrementarse la lucha contra el mal empleo de la lengua, sobre todo en la escuela y en los medios de comunicación. Al mismo tiempo, ha de cuidarse y apoyarse el paso sin deterioro de la lengua de una generación a otra, y eliminarse el injustificado complejo de quienes hablan bien la lengua, cualquiera que sea el dialecto. (Qtd. in Knör 157)

The fight against the bad use of the language must be increased, especially in schools and in the media. At the same time, the transmission of the language without deterioration from generation to generation must be supported and the unjustified complex of those who speak the language correctly must be eliminated.

This statement confirms the fact that those Basque speakers who speak a dialect that is not *Batua* tend to have the idea that their variety is inferior. At the same time, it suggests that *Euskaltzaindia* assumes that the average Basque speaker of whatever dialect

uses this language incorrectly, meaning that they do not follow the new rules imposed by its members.

Today, most authors write in *Batua*, even if they speak another dialect. One example of this would be Kirmen Uribe, who is from Ondarroa, a coastal town in Vizcaya, where a variety of Vizcayan is spoken, but he writes in *Batua*. In the prologue to *Meanwhile Take my Hand*, a bilingual collection of poems (in Basque and in English) Elizabeth Macklin, the translator, explains why Uribe chooses to write in *Batua*:

People in Ondarroa speak a variant, thick and intact, of Vizcayan, one of the seven dialects of Euskera, as Basque is called by the six or seven hundred thousand people who speak it. In Ondarroa a *tripi-trapu* is a hopping creature that can be either a toad or a frog. In Lekeitio, the next town to the west, just ten miles away, the same kind of creature is an *ugaraixua* (an *x* is a *sh* sound in Basque). In Euskara Batua, or Unified Basque, a standardized amalgam of dialects that was doggedly cobbled together in the 1960s and is now taught in the schools, “frog” is *igela*, and “toad is *apoa*, or *zapua*, or *txantxikoa*. In “The Language of the Animals” Uribe opted for Ondarroa’s *tripi-trapu*. But in a schoolroom once, speaking to adults in an intermediate Basque class, he didn’t think twice before he answered one of the questions. “If Vizcayan is your own dialect, how come you write in *Batua*?” a student asked. His immediate answer: “So people will understand me”. (Uribe xii-xiii)

Therefore, at least in this case, it is clear that there is a conscious decision on the part of the author to write in this dialect. Authors are aware of how different from each



other all these dialects are, and in addition, a large part of the new audience for their books is made up of people who have studied *Batua*, but do not speak any of the other dialects.

However, even when they choose the unified dialect to write their work, sometimes dialogues are presented in other dialects. For instance, in Joxean Sagastizabal's *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel* 'Show me the way, Ixabel', the action is narrated in *Batua*, while the family who lives in the farmhouse is presented as speaking another dialect: *Guipuzcoan*. For example, in the following example, they use the auxiliary verb "dek", which is the equivalent of the *Batua* form "duk:"

– Hau eskuaria dek, eta hau sardia; beste hori sega, ezautuko dek. (38)

This is the rake, and this is the hayfork; and that other thing, the scythe, you must know what that is.

The use of two varieties of the same language is present in other examples of literature produced by minority groups. For example, "African American Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) offers the language of the community, and of storytelling, set against that limiting, oppressive, dehumanising language of the slavecatcher, setting up a polyphony in this dialogic novel" (Wisker 133). Nevertheless, in the case of Basque literature, the fact that two varieties of the same language are present within the same text has to do with the author's intention to be understood by as large a number of people as possible, while making the characters' conversations sound like oral language. This presence of diglossia in written literature would also be an element of oral language within a written text, as authors imitate oral language to make their dialogues seem more realistic. Apart from being an example of the presence of oral language in written

literature, this is also a reflection of the situation of diglossia between *Batua* and the other dialects, which thus is visible both in spoken language and in written literature.

### **Basque Written Literature from 1545 to the 1960s**

Unlike what happens with Basque oral traditions, which, as I mentioned above, have been and still are abundant, there has not been a great amount of literature written in Basque until the second half of the twentieth century: Basque written literature began late and was scarce until recently. As Kirmen Uribe points out in *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*:

Euskaldunok beti pentsatu izan dugu literatur tradizio txikia dela gurea.

Eta egia da, euskaraz argitaratutako liburuak zenbatzen hasten bagara, ez direla gehiegi. Gure literaturak ez du eraginik izan kanpoan, ez dugu sekula erreferentea izango den literatur lanik sortu, ahozko tradizio aberatsa izan arren. (223)

The Basques have always thought that our literary tradition is small. And it is true, if we start counting the published books, that they are not too many. Our literature has not had any influence outside the Basque Country, we have never created a literary work that will be a referent, in spite of the fact that our oral tradition is very rich.

In his *Historia social de la literatura vasca* ‘Social History of Basque literature’ (1982), Ibon Sarasola compares the lack of a medieval literary production written in Basque with the other languages and nations that have also been “absorbed” by other majority cultures and have a corpus of literature from this period. According to Sarasola, this will have effects on the production of later Basque literature:

En lo que atañe a la literatura vasca, sin embargo, el proceso es diferente al que ocurre en las literaturas de otras nacionalidades absorbidas: mientras que las demás literaturas marginales podrán, al llegar en el siglo XIX la hora de los “Renacimientos”, encontrar sus raíces en la Edad Media, la literatura vasca no podrá contar con semejantes raíces medievales, dado que el pueblo vasco de entonces no había utilizado su lengua ni en la literatura ni en los documentos oficiales. (36)

In what refers to Basque literature, however, the process is different from the one that takes place in the literatures of other absorbed nations: whereas the other marginal literatures will be able to find their roots in the Middle Ages, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Reinassances” Basque literature will not count on those medieval roots, since the Basque people of that time had not used their language in literature or in official documents.

In fact, there is no literature written in Basque until 1545, when the first book written in Basque, *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae*, by Bernard Dechepare, was published. It was a book of poems. The author, aware of the extended assumption that Basque language is not appropriate for writing, stated in the prologue to his book: “todas las demás naciones piensan que no se puede escribir cosa alguna en esta lengua, de la forma que todas lo hacen en la suya” ‘all the other nations believe that nothing can be written in this language, as they do in theirs’ (qtd. in Sarasola 37). Then, we can see that Dechepare was aware of the general perception of Basque as a language that is not suitable for writing. Thus, by choosing to write in this language, he is making a conscious attempt to break the stereotype of Basque as a solely oral language.

As Ibon Sarasola has noticed, Spanish and French were considered the languages of culture after the sixteenth century, which gave place to the absence of a large corpus of literary works in Basque.

... en los siglos que van desde el XVI hasta el término del XIX nos hallamos con una literatura que no cuenta con apenas otra cosa que una colección de libros devotos, es decir, una literatura religiosa práctica que no se interesa más que por unos objetivos muy limitados y que, salvo excepciones, no presta atención al problema lingüístico. El resultado de tal estado de cosas es la escasa herencia con la que se encontraron las generaciones del siglo presente, junto con la falta de una tradición literaria valiosa, un atraso de dos o tres siglos en el cultivo de lo que no son materias devotas, una gran diversidad de dialectos literarios, y una lengua marginal y con increíbles deficiencias culturales. (36-7)

... from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we find a literary production that does not have anything but a collection of devout books, that is, a practical religious literature that is only interested in very limited objectives and that, except for a few exceptions, does not pay attention to the linguistic problem. The result of this is the scarce inheritance that writers of the present century had, as well as a valuable literary tradition, a delay of two or three centuries in what is not a religious topic, a great variety of literary dialects, and a marginal language with incredible cultural deficiencies.

Sarasola's statement reflects the widespread assumption that if a language has not been used for literary production, it is a marginal language, one that is "culturally deficient." That is, he is supporting the idea that if a language does not have an extensive literary corpus, it is not a language of "culture". I disagree with him on his statement that Basque is a culturally deficient language since, even though it does not have many literary works until recent times, it still has plenty of examples of orature, which are as "valuable" as any form of literature. In addition, he does not explain what "valuable" literature is, and I do not think that a form of literature is more or less valuable than another.

María José Olaziregi is aware of the limited amount of literary works published in Basque after the publication of *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae*, as she states in her article, "By Way of Introduction to Basque Literature:"

There will be few references to our ancient literary past because since the first book written in the Basque language – Bernard Etxepare's collection of poems *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* – was published in 1545, until 1879 only 101 books were published and, of them, only four can be said to be literary works<sup>5</sup>. It is clear, therefore, that we are dealing with a late-blossoming literature, a literature conditioned by socio-historical circumstances that have hindered its development and are tightly bound to the ups and downs suffered by the language that sustains it: Basque, or Euskara. (110)

Joanes Leizarraga translated the New Testament into Basque, as he was asked to do

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<sup>5</sup> The other books would be mainly Linguistics books.

by the Calvinist Synod in 1564 (Sarasola 122). This same century, earlier works that had not been published before started being compiled and published:

The oldest literary fragments of Basque literature are the epic poems of the 14th and 15th centuries gathered by authors of the 16th and 17th centuries. Among these first poems or songs are *Beotibarko gudua* (1321), *Urrexola* (14th century), *Olasoren kantua* (1443) or *Mondragoneko erreketeta* (1448). All these poems and many others were carefully gathered and compiled by authors such as Esteban Garibai (1533-1599) in his work *Compendio e historia universal de todos los reinos de España* (1571) or Juan Carlos Guerra (1860-1941) in his anthology *Viejos Textos del idioma. Los cantares antiguos del euskara* (1924). Several collections of old Basque proverbs were also published at this time. In this sense it is possible to mention the work by Garibai *Refranes y sentencias comunes del vascuence...* (1596) or those by authors like Jacques Bela (1568-1667) or Lope Martinez de Isasti (1560-) who wrote *Compendio historial de Guipuzcoa* (1624-1626). (Irujo Ametzaga 34)

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the authors from the School of Sara, a group of writers (the majority of them priests), who wrote religious literature in Basque, produced multiple literary works, including *Gero* ‘Later’, by Pedro Axular, published in 1643, which “is still considered one of the most outstanding works in Basque literature” (Irujo Ametzaga 36). As Irujo Ametzaga has noticed, “throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the printing of pious books was multiplied: catechisms, sermons and brief poems and narrations or religious texts in Basque were also published” (36). Oihenart, who did not belong to the

School of Sara, was another writer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we have to mention Manuel Larramendi. According to Sarasola, “la obra del Padre Larramendi ha condicionado toda la literatura del País Vasco meridional, y puede decirse que sigue condicionándola todavía” ‘Father Larramendi’s work has conditioned all the literature from the Meridional Basque Country, and it can be said that it is still conditioning it’ (54). In 1729, Larramendi wrote *El imposible vencido. Arte de la lengua vascongada* ‘The Impossible Defeated. The Art of the Basque Language,’ the first grammar of the Basque language (this would be the first attempt to normativize the Basque language), which was written in Spanish and “addressed to Spanish speakers who, without speaking Basque, criticized its complicated grammar or preached on the impossibility to learn it” (Irujo Ametzaga 37). Larramendi also wrote a trilingual dictionary, in Spanish, Basque and Latin, published in 1745.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have *Peru Abarca*, by Juan Antonio Moguel, which is published in 1881. According to Sarasola, this novel understands the Basque essence as a traditional *baserritarra* (peasant):

El *Peru Abarca* adopta como tesis una ideología reaccionaria que tuvo en su tiempo y tiene todavía una enorme fuerza: las formas de vida y la lengua del campesino, del baserritar, deben constituir para la totalidad de los vascos un modelo a imitar. La consecuencia del influjo dominante de esta creencia es la buena acogida que la literatura vasca, y la mentalidad vasca en general, ha prestado al campesino y sus modos de vida. Desde entonces el “baserritarra” y el “vasco neto” serán una misma cosa. De aquí viene la tendencia, en que han caído muchos vascos, a tomar las formas de

vida rurales como la “esencia del alma vasca.” (61-2)

*Peru Abarca* adopts as its thesis a reactionary ideology that had in its time and still has a huge strength: the lifestyle and the language of the peasant, of the *baserritarra*, must constitute a role model for all the Basques. The consequence of the dominant influx of this belief is the good acceptance that Basque literature, and Basque mentality in general, has had towards the peasant and their lifestyle. From that moment the “*baserritarra*” and the true Basque will be the same thing. From this comes the tendency, in which many Basques have fallen, to consider the rural lifestyle as the “essence of the Basque soul.”

It is in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, too, when the Prince Louis Lucien Bonaparte developed his division of Basque dialects, which, as I mentioned above, is the one that is still used today.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Resurrección María Azkue, who was elected president of *Euskaltzaindia* (The Academy of the Basque Language), published a dictionary (Basque-Spanish-French) in 1905. He had already published a Basque grammar in 1897. Arturo Campión, who was a member of *Euskaltzaindia* too, also published works on the Basque language: about its social situation, its dialects and phonetics, as well as novels and short stories (Irujo Ametzaga 44). During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, José María Aguirre “Xabier Lizardi”, Esteban Urkiaga “Lauaxeta” and Nicolas Ormaetxea “Orixe” published poetry. The Civil War and Franco’s regime had a negative effect on Basque culture and literature:

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) had devastating effects on Basque



literary production. The great number of dead and exiled authors, as well as the tremendous repression exerted by the winning side, contributed to this factor. This was an era in which Basque names were prohibited, as well as inscriptions in Basque on tombstones; an era in which streets, government buildings, the cultural world, and more, were the channels through which Francoism imposed its censorship. It has been said that the post-war generation was one of the most important in Basque literature, because it was given something it needed more than anything else: continuity. (Olaziregi “By Way of Introduction to Basque Literature” 111-2)

In fact, this continuity, that is, the fact that there still was some production of literature written in Basque after the Civil War and during the Francoism, is very important, as even though Basque was prohibited during this period in Spanish history, some people still used it in their works, so posterior generations had some model to follow.

During this period, some Basque writers we can mention are Jon Mirande, Gabriel Aresti, who wrote *Harri eta herri* ‘Stone and Country’, published in 1964, one of the most canonical Basque literary works, Koldo Mitxelena, a linguist, and Txillardegui, a novelist. Even though this was a difficult moment for Basque culture, as Olaziregi mentions, these writers added some important works to the corpus of literature written in Basque.

### **Basque Literature from the 1960s**

The situation of Basque written literature changed towards the end of Franco's regime. According to Ana Toledo, Basque written literature does not begin until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "los inicios de la narrativa en lengua vasca son tardíos en comparación con los de las literaturas que la rodean, puesto que comienza su singladura a finales del siglo pasado" 'Basque narrative begins late in comparison with those literatures that surround it, as it begins at the end of last Century' (171). Even though there are some literary works written in Basque since 1545, when *Linguae vasconum primitiae* was published, the corpus of written literature is not big enough to consider that the Basque Country has a literary tradition. In the last decades, after Franco's death and the recognition of Basque as co-official language in the Basque Country in 1978, many people started to take Basque lessons, both adults who needed it for their jobs or who already spoke it but had never studied it, and children who got their education either partially or completely in this language. This created a larger audience for literature written in Basque, as all these people had formal education in Basque, both oral and written.

With the normativization of the language mentioned above, and the concomitant prestige of Basque as well as the new audience for literature written in this language that was created as a consequence of these changes, more and more authors started using Basque as the language in which to write their literary works. As Jon Kortazar states, "los beneficios de la unificación de la lengua están claros ahora, que la escolarización en la lengua vasca está extendida, y que los hablantes y lectores se han acostumbrado a la lectura en la lengua normalizada ..." 'the benefits of the unification of the language are

clear now that education in Basque language is extended and Basque speakers and readers are used to reading in the normalized language” (17).

During the transition, as Jon Kortzar mentions in *Literatura vasca de la transición* ‘Basque literature during the transition’ (2003), some literary magazines were created by groups of writers, among which we can mention Bernardo Atxaga, Ramón Saizarbitoria, Joseba Sarrionandia and Arantxa Urretabizkaia. This is important because not only did it give the writers a sense of belonging to a group (the group of Basque writers) but it is also a way of approaching a bigger number of people than by writing books.

A fact that had an effect on the production of literature written in Basque during this period is that the increased number of people who started to learn Basque constituted a new audience. Since many started studying Basque at school, many of the literary works in Basque were produced having children and teenagers in mind. Thus, this affects what type of literature was written and published in Basque at that time, as Jon Kortazar points out:

Sobre la importancia de la escuela pueden aportarse muchas anécdotas. Desde el editor que me dijo un día, “que sí, que la novela es buena, pero no se venderá en COU”, hasta la broma que suponía que la literatura se había convertido en ancilla pedagogiae. Y la escuela ha creado la figura del escritor angustiado por ver si su libro será o no “lectura obligatoria”.  
(37)

Several anecdotes about the importance of school can be shared. From the editor who told me once that “yes, the novel is good, but it will not be sold to high school seniors,” to the joke about how literature had turned into the

servant of pedagogy. And that school has created the figure of the writer who is anguished about if their books will or will not be “mandatory readings.”

Some of the authors that are writing in Basque at the present time are Bernardo Atxaga (1951-), Ramón Saizarbitoria (1944-), Arantxa Urretabizkaia (1947-), Kirmen Uribe (1970), Karlos Linazasoro (1962-), Mari Asun Landa (1949-), Lourdes Oñederra (1958-), Joxean Sagastizabal (1956-), Joseba Sarrionandia (1958-), Jasone Osoro (1971-), and Harkaitz Cano (1975-).

### **Oral Traditions and Written Literature Today**

In spite of the increase in written literature, Basque oral traditions are not only alive, but also affecting these very same written works. Even though authors use the written language to express themselves, their literary works show a clear influence of the oral nature of the Basque language and culture. This influence of the oral in written texts has been observed in other communities that have not traditionally had alphabetic writing, until it was imposed on them. Lienhard, for example, mentions how some letters written by Mesoamerican indigenous people, whom he regards as coming from the periphery, in contrast with those documents written by more privileged and literate individuals, deal with topics such as everyday oppression and have characteristics of oral narration (xxxii).

The value Basque people place on oral traditions has an influence on the texts that have been written in Basque (both in prose and in verse) in recent years, in various ways. They include: 1) authors use the same techniques that are usually utilized in oral language. 2) They show a huge interest in using the story they are narrating as a frame for

storytelling. 3) They often reflect about the role of telling stories orally, in contrast with writing them. 4) They often explore the relationship between orality, literacy and civilization. 5) In addition, in the written texts there are often references to other written texts that do not fulfill their supposed mission of organizing knowledge and preserving memory, so that additional non-written materials are needed in order to maintain memory. 6) Finally, written texts often present the readers with a series of different characters who find themselves not being able to produce or reconstruct a written text, undermining the notion that, unlike oral language, written language is permanent. Thus, we can affirm that in contemporary literature written in Basque, a variety of elements of orature are present.

At the same time, the increase of literacy in Basque language is affecting the different oral traditions in several ways. The fact that, nowadays, most of the people who keep these traditions alive are not only literate, but many of them university educated (in Basque) has an effect on the language used in oral performances. In addition, there are many examples of oral traditions that are being written down. With literacy, there emerges what Ong calls secondary orality, which can only take place in literate societies. This secondary orality is also changing the reception of Basque oral traditions. Therefore, not only are Basque oral traditions present in Basque literature, but literacy and its consequences are also present within oral traditions.

Moreover, several literary works written in Basque today attempt to challenge general assumptions about orality and literacy. For instance, some of them deal with the assumption that orality and illiteracy are related to lack of civilization and that literacy is related to civilization. Not only do they question this assumption, but they undermine it.

In the same way, they challenge the idea of the written text as something permanent to which we can go back anytime in order to acquire knowledge, and oral discourse as a temporary thing that is meant to disappear or change and thus should not be trusted.

### **Structure of the Dissertation**

Taking all this into account, the present study examines the following questions:

1. How have Basque oral traditions changed over time?
2. What characteristics of Basque oral tradition are present in contemporary literature written in Basque?
3. What characteristics of literacy are present in contemporary oral manifestations of Basque culture?
4. Has technology had an influence on this community's written and oral literature? How has it affected them?
5. How are gender roles present in both oral and written production in Basque? How have these roles changed over time?
6. Does this community's literature present the written as civilized, and the oral as uncivilized or do contemporary writers keep the influence of oral tradition, and even subvert this dichotomy? If so, how?
7. How do contemporary Basque writers face the process of writing? How is it represented in their work?

In order to answer these questions, I analyze the works of six authors that have written short stories and/or novels, in Basque, in the last three decades. Even though I am aware that there are types of writing other than literary writing, in this dissertation I will focus only on this type of writing. I will study two novels by Bernardo Atxaga: *Bi letter*

*jaso nituen oso denbora gutxian* ‘I received two letters in a very short time’ (1988) and *Obabakoak* (1988), two by Arantxa Urretabizkaia: *Saturno* ‘Saturn’ (1987) and *Zergatik, panpox?* ‘Why, Honey?’ (1979), two short novels by Joxean Sagastizabal: *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel* ‘Show me the way, Ixabel’ (1994) and *Kutsidazu berriz, Ixabel* ‘Show me again, Ixabel’ (2006), one novel by Ramóm Saizarbitoria: *Gorde nazazu lurpean* ‘Keep me underground’ (2000), another by Karlos Linazasoro: *Bestiarioa/Hlilerrikoiak* ‘Beastiarium/Of the cemetery’ (2006) and children’s literature by Mari Asun Landa. In addition, I will analyze Kirmen Uribe’s collection of poems, *Bitartean, heldu eskutik/Meanwhile, Take my Hand* (2001), as well as his recent novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* (2008), a work with which he won the Narrative National Prize in 2009. I have chosen these texts because in all of them Basque orature is present in different ways, as will be discussed in the following chapters, or because there is a reflection about the roles of oral tradition and writing. In other words, these written literary works can all be placed at different points within the continuum of orality-literacy, never in one of the poles. In addition, I will examine some *bertsoak*, as well as other manifestations of Basque oral tradition, such as songs, old sayings and legends.

The present study contains four chapters: the first describes the different forms of oral traditions that have long been present in the Basque Country and how these are present in written literature. In this chapter, I also examine how these have changed over time, and how they have adapted to the new technologies and to the new status of Basque as a language that is used for writing and reading. In this chapter, I analyze *Bi letter jaso nituen oso denbora gutxian* ‘I received two letters in a very short period of time’ and *Obabakoak*, by Bernardo Atxaga, *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel* ‘Show me the way, Ixabel’ and

*Kutsidazu berriz, Ixabel* ‘Show me again, Ixabel,’ by Joxean Sagastizabal, and *Bitartean, heldu eskutik* and *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, by Kirmen Uribe.

Chapter two explores the role women have had in transmitting oral tradition and culture, and how the division between public and private spaces has an influence on their oral and written production. In addition, it takes into consideration how their roles and spaces have changed over time, and how the tendency to write in Basque has affected traditional gender roles. I analyze both oral manifestations and literature written in Basque that reflect these trends: *bertsoak* in which women respond to male *bertsolariak*, various children’s stories by Mari Asun Landa, and the novels *Zergatik, panpox?* as well as *Saturno*, by Arantxa Urretabizkaia.

The third chapter concentrates on the idea of civilization and the uncivilized, in relation to orality and literacy. To this end, I examine three novels written in Basque that provide us with several examples of the extended idea that orality, and languages and cultures that privilege it, are seen as uncivilized in contemporary Western societies, while civilization is linked with literacy. However, I analyze how these texts question this very idea. The three novels analyzed here are *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel* and *Kutsidazu berriz, Ixabel*, by Joxean Sagastizabal, *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, by Kirmen Uribe, and *Katuak bakar bakarrik sentitzen direnean*, by Mari Asun Landa.

Finally, the fourth chapter examines the very process of writing in Basque, re-examining the idea that the written word is permanent and reliable, while the oral word is temporary and unreliable. For this, I concentrate on novels written in Basque in which the protagonists reflect on the process of writing, often have problems doing this, and frequently have difficulties recovering written texts: some tales in *Obabakoak*, by



Bernardo Atxaga, *Bestiarioa/Hilerrikoiak*, by Karlos Linazasoro, *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, by Kirmen Uribe, and “Rossetti-ren obesioia”, by Ramón Saizarbitoria. This discussion is important, because it analyzes and challenges the overspread assumption that written language is better for storing and transmitting knowledge, as oral language is not permanent and can vary depending on who tells a story, or the story can be distorted and have multiple versions. However, as shown by the aforementioned literary works, this assumption is not necessarily accurate, as they show how oral language can, in certain cases, be more permanent and reliable than written language.

In conclusion, Basque orature, literature and other verbal art forms that are placed at different points of the orality/literacy continuum serve to prove that orality and literacy are not two separate, mutually exclusive entities. In addition, they serve the function of going against assumptions that relate orality to lack of civilization and literacy to civilization, as well as those assumptions according to which literacy is a more efficient manner of storing and transmitting knowledge, as it is supposedly more permanent than orality.

## Chapter 1: Oral Traditions, Written Literature, and New Technologies

**Introduction: “The Long History of Writing” in Basque**

In his article “The Basque Bertsolari in the New Millennium”, Gorka Aulestia mentions how at a *bertsolaritza* contest that took place in Oyarzun, in 1999, Egaña and Goikoetxea improvised *bertsoak* answering to written poetry, which was read aloud (236). This is a clear example of how a manifestation of Basque oral tradition can appear hand in hand with a written text that is, in addition, read out loud: here, the limits between an oral and a written manifestation are blurred. Basque orature has had an impact in many ways on the literature produced in Basque in the last decades, while the opposite is also happening: Basque orature has been influenced by the normativization of the grammar, orthography and the alphabet, the officialization of the language and the subsequent increase of literature written in Basque. In the first part of this chapter, I will examine examples of how Basque oral traditions are incorporated in contemporary literary works, that is, how orature is present in literature, giving place to oral literature. In the second half, I will analyze how oral traditions are affected by literacy and the secondary orality that comes with literacy.

Nowadays, more and more writers choose to use Basque in their literary works. Kirmen Uribe’s poem “Teknologia” / “Technology”, which is included in the collection of poems *Bitartean heldu eskutik* (2001) / *Meanwhile Take my hand* (2007)<sup>6</sup> is a good example of this evolution Basque has gone through:

Aitonak ez zekien irakurtzen,

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<sup>6</sup> *Meanwhile Take my Hand* is a bilingual edition in English and Basque (translated into English by Elizabeth Macklin) of *Bitartean heldu eskutik*, which was published in Basque in 2001. There is also a Spanish edition, published in 2004.

ez zekien idazten. Hala ere kontalari  
 ezaguna zen herrian. Berak pizten zituen  
 haurrez inguraturik, sanjuan suak.  
 Aitaren kaligrafia etzana zen, jantzia.  
 Doinki ehuntzen zuen papera,  
 Arbela zizelatuko balu bezala.  
 Mahaian dut soldaduzkatik igorritako postala.

*“Yo bien, tú bien,  
 mándame cien”.*

Gure saioan mezu elektronikoak  
 Bidaltzen dizkiogu elkarri.  
 Hiru belaunaldietan, egia da,  
 idazketaren historia luzea igaro dugu.  
 Dena den, kezkak, beldurrak  
 Beti-betikoak izango dira, eta izango:  
*“Yo bien, tú bien...” (Meanwhile 40)*

My grandfather didn't know how to read,  
 he didn't know how to write. He was, however,  
 a storyteller famous in the village. It was he who lit,  
 surrounded by children, the Midsummer bonfires.  
 My father's handwriting was cursive, spruce.  
 He meticulously interlaced the paper,  
 as if he were engraving slate.

On my desk is a postcard he sent from the service:

“I well, you well,  
send me a few bills.”)

In these times of ours, e-mails  
are what we send each other.

In three generations, true,  
We’ve traveled the long history of writing.

Nonetheless, worries, fears  
are the same as ever, and will be:

“*Yo bien, tú bien...*” (*Meanwhile* 41)<sup>7</sup>

He starts the poem referring to how his grandfather could not read or write. Nevertheless, he was a well-known storyteller in the village. According to Walter Benjamin, “the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed” (1). Uribe is giving recognition to his grandfather, who tried to keep this art alive. Not only did his grandfather transmit stories to other people in the village, but he also carried out the task of keeping the tradition of lighting bonfires on San Juan’s night, so he is presented as preserving two traditions that form a fundamental part of the Basque society: storytelling and celebrating San Juan’s night with bonfires. The fact that he is surrounded by children while doing this is extremely important, as it reflects his desire that next generations are

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<sup>7</sup> The translations of Kirmen Uribe’s poems are by Elizabeth Macklin in *Meanwhile Take my Hand*.

familiar with these two traditions. In addition, this form of storytelling in which the person tells a story to the audience while interacting with them contrasts with the author who writes a story that will be read by an isolated person who will not have any interaction with the writer. As Walter Benjamin notices, “[a] man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader” ‘For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener’ (10).

In his book *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, Uribe also makes some references to his grandfather’s storytelling skills:

Bizitzeko hilabete gutxi falta falta zitzaizkiola-eta gure ama museora eramán zuen gizon hura, kaleko haurrak bildu eta ipuinak kontatzen zizkien gizon hura, gizon ona eta esku zabala ustez, kartzelan zegoen altxamendu faxistaren alde egitearren. (168)

That man who took my mother to the museum when he only had a few more months to live, that man who gathered the kids from the street and told them stories, that man who apparently was a good and generous man, was in jail for supporting the fascist rising.

Unlike Uribe’s grandfather, the author’s father knew how to write. In “Technology”, he gives an example of a postcard his father sent while he was at the military service, which, unlike the rest of the poem, is written in Spanish:

*Yo bien, tú bien*  
*mándame cien. (Meanwhile 40)*

“I well, you well,

send me a few bills”. (*Meanwhile* 41)

He also comments on his father’s handwriting, which not only shows us that he wrote the letters by hand, which contrasts with the printed word that is predominant today, but it reveals that for his father, the task of writing involved a great amount of concentration and effort, in order to produce a neat handwriting:

Aitaren kaligrafia etzana zen, jantzia.

Doinki ehuntzen zuen papera,

Arbela zizelatuko balu bezala. (*Meanwhile* 40)

My father’s handwriting was cursive, spruce.

He meticulously interlaced the paper,

as if he were engraving slate. (*Meanwhile* 41)

After transcribing his father’s postcard, he claims that, nowadays, instead of writing letters, we use email, and the poet reaches the following conclusion:

Hiru belaunalditan, egia da,

idazketaren hizkera luzea igaro dugu. (*Meanwhile* 40)

In three generations, true,

we have traveled the long history of writing. (*Meanwhile* 41)

So not only does he refer to the transformations the Basque language has gone through, but to the whole transformation of Basque people: from an illiterate grandfather, to a father who could write letters in Spanish, to Uribe himself, who belongs to a generation that no longer writes letters, but emails. Furthermore, unlike his father’s letters, written in Spanish, his writing is done in Basque, which means that now not only does he have the possibility of expressing himself in written Basque, but also of having

his work published. Not only can he write in Basque, but he even earned his degree in Basque Philology, so he received a university education in Basque and about Basque, which would have been unthinkable both for his grandfather and his father. In fact, Uribe is part of a generation that has witnessed several changes that affected the Basque language's status, as noted in the introduction to *Meanwhile take my Hand*:

Uribe, who was five when Francisco Franco died, and eight when Spain got its present Constitution, is a member of the first generation of Basques able to start school in their own language. He is also one of a number of people his age, throughout the Peninsula, who have been trying to understand, or to imagine, their grandparents' experience –that of the generation who lived (or died) as adults during and after the Spanish Civil War. From the present of the twenty-first century, it can be a leap of imagination even back to the experience of their parents, who grew up during the dictatorship's so-called Forty Years of Peace and Victory.  
(Uribe xiii)

We need to add one more step to this “long history of writing” that Uribe does not mention in his poem: the return to orality. Joseba Gabilondo states that “*azken batean egun poesia guztia ahozkoa dela, performantze bezala pentsatu behar dugula, defendatu nahi baitut*” ‘in the end, *I want to defend that all of today's poetry is oral, that we have to understand it as a performance*’ (“Euskal poesiaren historia postmoderno baterantz” 2). This is true in Kirmen Uribe's case who, as we will see, has performed his poems in several cities around the world, thus going back to orality.

Uribe is an example of how oral and written language can be brought together, not only because of this return to orality, but also because the limits between the oral and the written language are not that clear, as he is part of a project that reunites Basque oral tradition with written language, as well as with new technologies:

In 2000, Uribe began working with several musicians on an oral-history project, loosely defined –collecting stories and local folk songs from coast towns like Ondarroa, turning the stories into poems or lyrics, which the musicians, Mikel Urdangarin and Bingen Mendizabal, set to music. (Uribe *Meanwhile* xv)

This is a clear example of how orature (in this case, Basque stories and folk songs) become written literature (poems) or are adapted to new technologies, when they are turned into lyrics that are then recorded (becoming oral once more) and then, can be distributed in CDs. So, in projects like this, we find what remains today of what Ong describes as primary orality (Basque stories and folk songs) and how it is influenced and changed by secondary orality (CDs).

In *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, the influence of oral stories is fundamental, as a great part of this work comes from interviews the author had with family members from previous generations, other people who had pieces of information he needed, and even conversations with random people, such as the woman who is sitting next to him on his flight from Frankfurt to New York. All these texts provide the frame for the novel. Thus, this novel is formed by fragments of conversations, as well as several other kinds of texts (like diaries, movies and images) intertwined in order to create a literary text.



In the same way as Uribe, many authors now choose to write and publish their works in Basque. And in the same way as in Uribe's project and poems, different elements of Basque oral tradition play a critical role in their literary work, as they are present in several manners in their literary works. Many of these authors are aware that the source of many of their written stories is precisely another story they have encountered in oral language. For example, Arantxa Urretabizkaia is aware of the influence of oral stories in her written work. She affirms that many of the topics in her novels come from the stories her friends and acquaintances told her (Urkiza 40). In addition, she sees the book as just a tool (Urkiza 56), and not the only instrument to store and transmit knowledge. She is aware of how stories have been passed on for centuries using just oral language, without the help of written documents. She realizes that nowadays, with the advances in technology, oral language is a way of passing on stories again:

Gizarteak, pertsonak izateko, kontakizunak behar ditu, baina ez literatura bereziki. Historian zehar mendeak pasatu dira literatura idatzirik gabe, ahozko transmisioan oinarrituz. Pertsonak, istorioak kontatu, entzun eta berriro kontatzea behar dute. Kontua da, istorio horiek kontatzeko formatoak aldatuz doazela, eta orain, adibidez, telebista dela istorio horien transmisore nagusietarikoak. (Urkiza 48)

In order to be social beings, we need stories, but not literature specifically. Many centuries have passed without written literature, based on oral transmission. People need to tell stories, hear them, and tell them again.

The thing is that the formats to tell those stories have been changing, and now, for example, one of the main ways of transmitting them is television.

In the same way, Lourdes Oñederra, another Basque writer and linguist, realizes the importance of the stories she was told by her parents at home (Urkiza 232). Another example of this would be Mari Asun Landa, who affirms that she enjoyed the experience of storytelling at home, and that she would take this practice outside of the house, to her friends:

Bestalde, idazketaren eta irakurketaren artean, badago beste arte bat: kontaketa. Eta nik, etxean, kontalari onak nituen, eta ni neu ere onak nintzen. Lagunei, astean zehar eta kapituluka, igandean ikusitako filmak kontatzen nizkien. Lagunak oso gustura egoten ziren; nirekin ez zirela aspertzen esaten zidaten. (Urkiza 79)

On the other hand, apart from writing and reading, there was another form of art: storytelling. And I had good storytellers at home, and I was good too. I would tell my friends during the week and by chapters the movies I had watched on Sunday. My friends were very happy; they told me that they did not get bored with me.

Then, these three authors who write in Basque recognize the influence of oral stories. In Kirmen Uribe's case, as Joseba Gabilondo notices, the influence of orality goes beyond the recognition of the importance oral stories have in his written literature. He transfers his written poetry into an oral art (what Zirimu refers to as literary orature) when he reads his poetry out loud:

Alabaina, Uriberen liburua ezin da ulertu testu huts gisa; performantze bezala aztertu behar da, eta hor bai, hasi gaitzke liburuaren garrantzia konprenitzen. Izan ere, liburua argitaratu baino lehen eta gero ere, Uribek lan handia egin zuen egunkaritako idazle eta kantaldi-irakurralditako performatzaile edo artista bezala. Bertsolaritzan eta rokkean bezalatsu, Uriberenean ere biziko performantzea da garrantzitsu eta, horregatik, performantze honetatik bereizirik ez dago bere testua irakurtzerik.

(“Euskal poesiaren historia postmoderno baterantz” 31)

The fact is that Uribe’s book cannot be understood just as plain text; it has to be examined as performance, and there yes, we can start understanding the book’s importance. In fact, before and after he published the book, Uribe made a great job as a newspaper writer and as a performer or artist in singing and reading sessions. In the same way as in *bertsolaritza* and in rock, in Uribe’s work, performing is also important and, because of this, we cannot read his text separating it from his performance.

Apart from reading his poems in front of a live audience, he has also published a CD with Mikel Urdangarin, Rafa Rueda and Bingen Mendizabal in which they make his poems into songs: *Zaharregia, txikiegia agian* ‘Maybe too old, too small’ (2003). Taking this into account, we can add one more stage in “the long history of writing” Uribe talks about: from the primary orality of his grandfather, through his father’s letters in Spanish and his poems and e-mails in Basque, to the secondary orality of his literary orature.

### **Characteristics of Oral Language in Written Texts (Oral Literature)**

In various societies that have traditionally privileged oral language to store and transmit knowledge, but that now have been touched by written language, there are some examples of written literature that presents some traits of oral discourse; that is, oral literature:

Some black and Asian or mixed culture oral storytellers, who deliberately relate to and revive these oral forms, include Indian writers ... African Americans ..., and Jamaican ... They use oral literary forms to underpin their work, emphasizing the circular, repetitive, revisiting moment, so that no stories are fixed and there are several perspectives available; meaning is shared and negotiated. (Wisker 131)

In many of Kirmen Uribe's poems, these characteristics of oral discourse are present. For example, he uses resources that are typical of oral language, and which are used in order to create rhythm, such as repetition. One example of this is his poem "Sagarrak" / "Apples", in which he repeats a whole stanza of the poem: the first one and the second to last are the same. In this stanza he first makes a reference to Homer and Sappho who, in spite of the fact that they wrote, form part of classical Greece, a society that privileged orality over the written word. He also mentions Etxepare, who is the author of the first book published in Basque. It is not my intention to affirm that this resource is only used by Basque poets, as it is, in fact, a commonly used one, but it is true that poetry is the genre of literature that is closest to orature.

Homerok hitz bakarra zerabilen gorputza eta azala izendatzeko.

Safok lagunen bularretan egiten zuen lo.

Etxeparek emazte biluzgorriekin egiten zuen amets. (*Meanwhile* 48)

Homer used a single word for body and skin.

Sappho slept on the breasts of her friends.

Etxepare dreamt about stark-naked women. (*Meanwhile* 49)

In “Conversational Narration/Oral Narration” (2009), Monika Fludernik refers to what she calls “pseudo-oral discourse,” that is, “the evocation of orality in literary narrative” (65). She lists some techniques through which this impression of orality can be achieved in written texts:

Such evocation of narrative in narrative report can be based on the combination of several techniques. In English literature, it requires the avoidance of literate vocabulary and complex syntax. Thus, pseudo-oral narrators... are often garrulous, repetitive, contradictory and illogical. They keep interrupting themselves and tend to address a fictive listener or audience familiarly; they seem to have an intimate rapport with the fictional world, to which they apparently belong, and also do not shy away from expressing their feelings and views empathically, thus setting themselves off from the typical narrators of literary texts – aloof, bland, reliable, neutral. (65)

In contemporary Basque literary works, we find several examples of this pseudo-oral discourse, as many characters’ language reminds us more of oral language than of written language. For example, the colloquial expressions used by the main character of *Kutsidazu bidea*, *Ixabel* and *Kutsidazu berriz*, *Ixabel*, sound more as if he were talking to us than like a written narration. Furthermore, since he refers to the audience in several

occasions, the illusion of orality is even bigger. He also gives us his opinions about the people he is living with, so he is not neutral at all. In the section of *Obabakoak* entitled “Azken hitzaren bila” ‘Searching for the last word,’ especially in the last part, the narrator also uses simple vocabulary and syntax, so here we also have pseudo-oral discourse. Then, we can affirm that in some contemporary literary works written in Basque, we have a language that gives us the impression that we are listening to a story, rather than reading it.

### **Literature as a Frame for Storytelling**

As I mentioned in the introduction to this study, according to Ong, one of the characteristics of oral cultures is the importance they place on narrative. In Arantxa Urretabizkaia’s novel, *Zergatik, panpox?* ‘Why, honey?’ (1979), which will be analyzed in the following chapter, we have the narrator telling stories and singing songs to her five-year-old son. The presence of oral stories in a written literary work is also a huge component in both *Bi letter jaso nituen oso denbora gutxian* ‘I received two letters in a very short period of time’ (1984) and *Obabakoak* (1988), by Bernardo Atxaga. In the latter, which has been described by Ibon Izurieta as “theory and practice on how to build a body of narrative fiction in a language of dominant oral tradition” (73), there is a conscious reflection about tales and poems: two friends are driving to Obaba (place of origin of the protagonist), and this road trip serves as a frame to reflect about storytelling and telling stories.

Begi bistakoa iruditu zitzaigun, aurrena, ipuinak poemarekin duen  
parekotasuna. Biak direla labor; biak datorrela antzinako garaietatik –  
beren tradizioa, ahaztezina, ahozkoa delarik-; eta gainera, agian arestiko bi

kondizio horiengatik, biek daukatela oso *esanguratsua* den harekin jokatu beharra. Oso zaila dela ipuinek edo poemek, egilearen asmoz behintzat, *bano*, *faun* eta *alfer* izan daitezen; aitzitik, asmoa, beti, hitz gutxirekin gauza asko esatea izaten dela. (217-8)

It seemed obvious to us, first of all, the similarities between the tales and the poems. That both of them are short; that both of them come from ancient times –being an oral tradition, unforgettable - and in addition, that maybe because of these two conditions, they both need to play with that issue of being *significant*. That it is very difficult for tales or poems, at least because of the author's intention, to be *vane*, *shallow* and vague; that on the contrary, the intention is always to say many things in few words.

Then, Atxaga, who recognizes that tales come from oral tradition, decides to insert several in his written book, recognizing the advantages they have over the novel: their ability to transmit many valuable ideas in few words. In fact, these two novels by Atxaga serve as a frame for their characters to tell stories orally and to reflect about the act of storytelling.

*Bi letter jaso nituen oso denbora gutxian* is a novel whose main character is a man who emigrated from the Basque Country to Idaho to work as a shepherd at a very young age. Many years later, when he already has a grandchild, he receives two letters from his village, Obaba, which lead him to remember his past there. Although he had forgotten much of the past, thanks to the letters, he starts to remember some events, and narrates them. Subsequently, we have stories within this novel, like the story of why his two best friends got mad at each other, and his relationships with women. When the main

character, who is also the narrator, is not remembering his past in Obaba, he is telling us stories about his family in the United States, all the time using a language that reminds us of oral discourse: full of sayings used in informal oral language, which are typically part of a community's popular culture, and used by all its members. For instance, the protagonist says: "Biak oso zaharrak ziren, eta, esaera zaharrak dion bezala, gazteetatik bakar batzuk hiltzen dira, baina zaharretatik den denak" "They both were very old and, as the old saying claims, only a few young people die, but all old people die" (10).

In addition, he affirms that he is glad he could remember what happened in Obaba, as he intends to tell those stories to his daughter in law, who criticizes that fact that he does not share stories with his family and accuses him of being secretive, like a criminal: "ez dudala ezer kontatu nahi nire bizitzaz, horretan kriminalak bezalakoa naizela" "that I don't want to talk about my life, that in that sense I am like a criminal" (14).

He also plans on sharing his stories with his grandson, who was born and is growing up in Idaho. His grandfather wants to share his culture with him, as the child is not familiar with it. However, he has various problems with this task, one being that he could not remember the past until he received the letters, and, another one, his limited knowledge of English:

Baina bai zera, hori hitz mordo luzeegia da nire english kaskarrantzat.  
 Bai, pena haundia ematen dit Jimmy-ri nire kontuak ezin kontatu izateak,  
 ezin esplikatu ondo nongoa naizen, ezin esplikatu nondik datorren bere  
 apellidu hori, Agirre, apellidu ederra, Agirre, bai, beautiful benetan, ezin  
 esplikatu hori ere, pena haundia benetan. Baina mendian ez da ezer



ikasten, ezta english ere, mendia gauza barbaroa da, eta nik mendian  
 pasa ditut ia berrogei urte, zer berrogei!... baita hirorogei ere, hirurogei  
 urte, pentsa, artzantzan beti, bakar bakarrik beti, eta orain, ba hori, izurrari.  
 (7-8)

But yeah, right, that's too many words for my poor "english"<sup>8</sup>. Yes, it makes me very sad not to be able to tell Jimmy my stories, not to be able to explain to him where I am from, not to be able to explain to him where that last name of his comes from, Agirre, nice last name, Agirre, yes, really "beautiful", I can't explain to him that either, really a pity. But you don't learn anything in the mountain, "english" either, the mountain is a barbarian thing, and I have spent almost forty years, what do I say forty!... sixty years too, sixty years, think about it, always as a shepherd, always alone, and now, those are the consequences.

In this quote, he makes clear his intention to tell his grandson, Jimmy, about his past, his last name and his heritage, but explains that he does not think he will be able to do so. He believes that, having spend so many years in the mountain, he has not had the opportunity to learn English, so there is a communication barrier between him and Jimmy.

In the same manner, in *Obabakoak* we can see the importance given by Basque society to the act of telling stories. This book is, perhaps, the clearest example in Atxaga's work of how the Basque tradition of telling stories orally can be put down on paper. As Izurieta has noted, "Obabakoak is the result of a system of different texts with

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<sup>8</sup> "english" and "beautiful" are written in English in the original.

tenuous relations based on relations of opposition, in a Saussurean sense of the term.

Traditionally this is what Basque literature has been, a chaotic compilation of different tales communicated orally” (77). Then, *Obabakoak*, which functions as a collection of short stories, is a reflection of Basque orature, which is a collection of tales transmitted orally. Then, as Zirimu would understand it, this book is an example of oral literature. Izurieta also affirms that *Obabakoak* is a mixture of various elements: “oral tradition, great works from other literatures, and our own fears. Atxaga is able to produce a significant text with those ingredients” (80).

The first part of the book is a collection of short stories which, although independent from one another, have some common elements, such as certain characters and the village where they take place: Obaba. The last of those stories, “Hamaika hitz Villamedianako herriaren ohoretan eta bat gehiago” ‘Eleven words in honor of the village of Villamediana and one more’ begins with the narrator telling us two events of his life and, after the second one, expressing his intention of narrating his experiences in the Castilian village of Villamediana, and continues with the narration of those memories. The last part of *Obabakoak*, “Azken hitzaren bila” ‘In search of the last word’ tells the story of two friends who travel to Obaba to spend a weekend there. This trip is also a frame for both friends to tell each other tales. During the road trip, they meet a man who also tells them stories about his life. One of the purposes of going to Obaba is that the protagonist (and narrator of this section of the book) has an uncle there who organizes literary readings, for which all of them have had to write something to share with others. Therefore, the whole book serves as a frame for telling stories in different contexts. While telling those stories, the two friends also reflect on what characteristics a good

story should have. His friend gives the following answer to this question: “Ona bada, erreparatuko zioke bere [egilearen] esperientziari eta edonorentzat balioa izan dezakeen zerbait antzemango dik bertan, zerbait esentzial. Txarra bada, *pasadizoez* bakarrik ohartuko duk” ‘if it is good, it will deal with [the author’s] experience and you will find in it something that could be valuable for anyone, something essential. If it is bad, you will only notice its anecdotes’ (218).

In addition, this reflection about what constitutes a good story gives the protagonist an excuse to tell one more tale: the protagonist offers to tell his friend the tale Boris Karloff considered the best one of all, as it fulfills what these two friends consider to be the main requisite for being a good story.

Many of these stories told within the larger frame of *Obabakoak* are legends or stories that form part of the oral tradition of a specific community where nobody knows where they come from, or who started them, and thus they belong to everybody. Many of these were used to give an explanation of certain facts that seemed to be inexplicable, or to try to have people act in a certain way, to follow some rules. Furthermore, a great part of the stories in *Obabakoak* form part of the oral tradition of Obaba. One example of this would be the story of the lizard, which is a legend from Obaba. I understand the term “legend” as:

A story or group of stories handed down through popular oral tradition, usually consisting of an exaggerated or unreliable account of some actually or possibly historical person – often a saint, monarch, or popular hero. Legends are sometimes distinguished from myths in that they concern human beings rather than gods, and sometimes in that they have

some sort of historical basis whereas myths do not; but these distinctions are difficult to maintain consistently. The term was originally applied to accounts of saints' lives, but is now applied chiefly to fanciful tales of warriors, (e.g. King Arthur and his knights), criminals (e.g. Faust, Robin Hood), and other sinners; or more recently to those bodies of biographical rumour and embroidered anecdote surrounding dead film stars and rock musicians (Judy Garland, John Lennon, etc.). (Baldick 138)

The story of the lizard is the other reason why the two friends decide to spend a weekend in Obaba: apart from attending the storytelling session, they also expect to solve a mystery related with a story that forms part of Obaba's popular culture. The narrator has found a picture of when he went to primary school and has had it enlarged by a friend, which allows him to appreciate certain details he could not see in the original picture. In the enlarged version, he can see how one of his classmates has a lizard in his hand, ready to put it in another boy's ear. The latter, who, according to the narrator, used to be one of the smartest kids in the class, began losing his intelligence, and finally became the village idiot. According to Obaba's popular culture, if a lizard got into your ear, it would eat your brain, and you would become dumb:

Izanez ere, muskerrak buruko muinen zale zirela esaten baitziguten Obaba hartan: ahal izatera, jendearen belarri zulotik sartu eta buruan gelditzen zirela, jan eta jan, eta ez zutela ateratzekorik egiten ondo ase arte. Ordurako, ordea, berandu izaten zen; muskerra edukitakoa ergeldu zela betirako, inuzentetu. Eta herriko hainbat xelebre seinalatzen zizkiguten:

hantxe genuekala frogantza, haiek guztiek hozka eginda zeukatela  
buruaren puska bat. (199)

In fact, in that Obaba we were told that lizards like brains: that if they had the chance, they would enter through a person's ear and stay in their brain, and they would eat and eat, and that they would not go out until they were completely full. However, at that point, it would be too late; the one who had had the lizard would become dumb forever, he would become innocent. And they would point out the village idiots to us: there we had the proof, all those had a piece of their heads eaten.

As the narrator points out, the possible reason for telling the children this story is to try to stop them from sleeping on the grass where, as he mentions later in the novel, they could encounter other real dangers, such as snakes. However, the story is rooted deep in the collective imaginary of the people from Obaba, since there is also a superstition about what should be done if a lizard entered your ear:

Guztiarekin ere –soberan ikara ez gintezen edo – muskerragandik  
begiratzeko bi modu bazeudela gaineratzen ziguten. Bata, belar gainean lo  
ez gelditzea. Bestea –animaliak buruan sartzea lortzen zuen aldiatarako –  
lehenbailehen ibili eta zazpi herritako erretore jaunei kanpaiak jo zitzaten  
eskatzea; zeren orduan, kanpai iskanbila ezin sufrituz, jatun maltzurak  
ihesari ekiten baitzion zalaparta batean. (199)

All in all –probably in order not to scare us too much – they would add that there were two ways of protecting ourselves from the lizards. One, not to sleep on the grass. The other one – for when the animal had been able to

get into one's ear – you had to go as soon as possible to ask the priests of seven villages to ring the bells; because then, not being able to bear the noise of the bells, the evil eaters would run away.

Therefore, this trip serves as the means to find out if a story that is known by everyone in Obaba, as the result of oral transmission, is true or not. Interestingly enough, the trip proves that this story is true: the protagonist spends the night surrounded by lizards and falls asleep at some point. After a while, he realizes that he cannot hear from one ear, and little by little, starts having problems expressing himself. In the end, he goes to Obaba to live with his uncle, who tries to make him read, but the only thing he enjoys reading is children's literature, so he is losing his intelligence.

Thus, the story of the lizard turns out to be true, contrary to the scientific logic the narrator's friend (who is a doctor) attempts to impose on him. So not only does Atxaga use *Obabakoak* as the frame for these oral stories from Obaba, but he also defends their validity over scientific knowledge. There is a conflict between traditional wisdom and scientific knowledge, in the same way as there is a confrontation between orature and literature. While the author is able to reconcile orature and literature, in the conflict between traditional wisdom (which is usually transmitted orally) and scientific knowledge, Atxaga decides to make the former prevail.

This story of the lizard is related with oral tradition in one more way. In "Interiores y exteriores de la literatura (vasca)" 'Interiors and exteriors of (Basque) literature', he explains where he got the idea for it:

... puedo relatar cómo la red consiguió un día atrapar una historia contada por una mujer que hablaba del último deseo de su madre, la cual, al final

de su vida, tuvo una especie de respiración sibilante, de forma que silbaba al respirar y al hablar, y entonces dedujo esta mujer que ello era debido a que una serpiente había entrado dentro de su cuerpo mientras ella dormía junto a unos manzanos. Así, pidió como última voluntad que un médico, antes de enterrarla, le sacara esa serpiente que ella llevaba dentro y que indudablemente era el origen del silbido. Cuando yo escuché esa historia que un investigador había grabado, a la que seguía en letra pequeña a modo de postdata el informe médico que hablaba de un asma crónico que se agudizó con la edad y que acabó con la vida de esta mujer, pensé que si escribía la historia de esta mujer, no desde el punto de vista del médico, sino desde el de la propia mujer, el resultado era literariamente, objetivamente hablando, un cuento fantástico. Es decir, un cuento que utilizaba elementos fantásticos, explicaciones que no están cerca de la lógica de lo real, para explicar algo perfectamente real. (89)

... I can recount how the web could trap one day the story of told by a woman talking about her mother's last wish, who, at the end of her life had a kind of sibilant breathing, so she would whistle when breathing and talking, and then this woman deduced that this was due to the fact that a snake had entered her body while she was sleeping by some apple trees. Thus, she asked as her final wish that, before burying her, a doctor took that snake she had inside her out of her body, which was, without any doubt, the source of the sound. When I heard the story, which had been recorded by a researcher, to which followed, as a postscript, the doctor's

report, according to which the woman had a chronic asthma which got worse with age, and which ended with her life, I thought that if I wrote this woman's story, not from the doctor's point of view, but from the woman's point of view, the result would be, literarily speaking, a fantastic tale. That is, a tale that would use fantastic elements, explanations that are not inside the logic of the real, in order to express something perfectly real.

Then, the story of the lizard is really based on an oral tradition: if a woman who existed in real life thought it possible to have a snake inside her body causing her sibilant breathing, it is possible that people from a village similar to the fictional Obaba could find it possible that a lizard could enter your body through your ear and then eat your brain.

The first short story in *Obabakoak*, "Camilo Lizardi erretore jaunaren etxean aurkitutako gutunaren azalpena" (Explanation to the letter found at the priest Camilo Lizardi's house) is "... the reconstruction of a folk tale from the incomplete writings of a priest who lived in Obaba. This story does retell a tale which could very well be part of the oral tradition of folk tales" (Izurieta 75). The folk tale being reconstructed is about a boy who becomes a boar, which, according to Izurieta would be "a folk tale of the purest oral tradition" (76), since it has this element of fantasy. I adopt the following definition of "folk tale":

A story passed on by word of mouth rather than by writing, and thus partly modified by successive retellings before being written down or recorded. The category includes legends, fables, jokes, tall stories, and



fairy tales or Märchen. Many folktales involve mythical creatures or magic transformations. (Bladick 99)

So Atxaga is including in his written work a story that was part of a community, which used to be transmitted orally. Again, we can see how orature and literature are reconciled, giving place to oral literature. In a Spanish edition of *Obabakoak*, there is a section where Atxaga explains where he got the idea for this story from:

Ocurrió en el barrio alto de Asteasu, donde está la iglesia y la casa en la que, sucesivamente, vivieron el general carlista Lizarraga y el sacerdote y escritor en lengua vasca Juan Bautista Aguirre. Un hombre que arreglaba la puerta de una cabaña me detuvo al pasar y me dijo: “¿ves este agujero?”. Había, efectivamente, un agujero en la base de aquella puerta. “¿Sabes para qué hicieron esto?”, añadió. “¿Para que pasara el gato?”, respondí, por decir algo. El hombre sonrió. Sabía que yo era aficionado a escribir y que me gustaba escuchar las historias de la gente. “Encerraron aquí a un niño que se llamaba Manueltxo, porque le mordió un perro rabioso y él también se volvió perro. Cuando sentía que alguien se acercaba por el camino, se ponía a ladrar y a aullar. Así, hasta que murió.” “Entonces, ¿el agujero?” “Era para la comida. Venía su madre dos veces al día y le metía la comida por ahí. Con cuidado de que no le mordiera.” Nunca pude olvidar la historia, y cuando escribí el cuento titulado “Camilo Lizardi”, en el que un niño parece haberse transformado en jabalí, pensaba sobre todo en aquel Manueltxo que se había vuelto perro. (n.pag)

It happened in the high area of Asteasu, by the church and the house where the Carlist general Lizarraga and the priest and Basque writer Juan Bautista Aguirre lived successively. A man who was fixing the door of a shack stopped me as I was passing by and told me: “Can you see this hole?” There was, in fact, a hole in the base of that door. “Do you know what they did it for?” he added. “So that the cat could come in?” I answered, just to say something. The man smiled. He knew that I enjoyed writing and that I like to listen to people’s stories. “A child named Manueltxo was locked here, because he was bitten by a dog that had rabies and he turned into a dog too. When he felt that someone was close by, he would start barking and howling. It was like that, until he died.” “Then, the hole?” “It was for the food. His mother would come twice a day and she would put his food there. Very carefully, so that he would not bite her.” I could never forget the story, and when I wrote the tale entitled “Camilo Lizardi”, in which a child seems to have turned into a wild boar, I was thinking above all, about that Manueltxo that had turned into a dog.

Then, this folk tale about a child that turns into a boar, in the same way as the story about the lizard, comes from a story that someone told him, another story that was accepted by the people from a small town.

In the second story, “Jose Francisco: Obabako erretoretxean azaldutako bigarren aitortza” ‘Jose Francisco: the second confession that appeared in Obaba’s priest’s house’, the author also retells a story found in the priest’s house, but this one does not come from a letter, but from a recording which, unlike the letter in the first story, does not need to be

reconstructed, as practically the whole story can be understood. Therefore, we can affirm that Atxaga is defending the validity of oral language over the written word in order to transmit stories: unlike the letter in the first story, which breaks with the supposed permanent nature of the written word, the oral word in this story is able to survive for several decades. However, this new type of oral language that comes with technological advances is different from the oral language of primary oral cultures: since language is recorded, it is permanent. In addition, it is not live so, in that sense, it would be something between oral and written language. This will be examined in more detail in chapter four.

In the same way as we cannot understand Uribe's *Meanwhile Take my Hand* as just a text, but also as a performance, we cannot understand Atxaga's *Obabakoak* as a written text, as its success is also the result of performance:

... *Obabakoak* argitaratu zuenerako, Euskal Herri osoan (eta kanpo ere) ehunka hitzaldi eta irakurketa egina zela azpimarratu behar da. Bestela esanda, liburua argitaratu aurretik, Atxagak ere zegoeneko liburua performantze bezala emana zuen, ahozko performantze bezala. Liburua erostea eta irakurtzea Atxagaren kasuan ere bigarren mailako ekintza izan zen, performantzearen lekune zentralarekiko sekundario suertatu zen jazoera. Eta beraz, ironikoa badirudi ere, *Atxagarengandik Uriberengana hedatzen den euskal literatur kanona ez da idatzizkoa, performatiboa baizik: ahozkotasun sekundarioaren barnean landua eta garatua.* (Gabilondo "Euskal poesiaren historia postmoderno baterantz" 32)

... It is necessary to stress the fact that, by the moment he published *Obabakoak*, he had given hundreds of talks and readings in all Euskal Herria (and also outside). To say it in another way, before the book was published, Atxaga had also already given the book as performance, as oral performance. In Atxaga's case, buying and reading the book were secondary level activities, the event that turned out to be secondary to the central space of the performance. Therefore, even if it seems ironic, *the Basque literature canon that spreads from Atxaga to Uribe is not written, but performative: carved and developed within secondary orality.*

In the same way as Atxaga's work, Uribe's poems often serve as a frame for legends and stories transmitted orally, many of which become part of a community's popular culture. We can find an example of a legend inserted in a poem in "Urrezko eraztuna"/"The Gold Ring", in which he tells us a story that is transmitted orally for many years within a family, becoming a legend: it is the story of how his father lost his wedding ring while he was fishing in the sea and how, by coincidence, he caught the fish that had eaten it. He questions the credibility of this story but in the end, in the same manner as the children from Obaba, the narrator and the reader of *Obabakoak* take the lizard's legend as a valid possibility, Uribe accepts the ring's story as convincing enough:

Eraztunarena kasualitate handiegia da. Baina ez du axola. Inportanteena orain hauxe da: urte askoan erztunaren istorio hori sinesgarri egin zitzaielagure haur adimen txikiei. (*Meanwhile* 110)

The ring's is far too great a coincidence. But that doesn't matter.

What's most important now is this: for years and years, the story of the ring was entirely believable to our small, children's intelligence.

*(Meanwhile 111)*

Oral tradition that belongs to a given community is also present in his poem "Mohammed", which is full of inserted stories, some related to the narrator's life and one that is a legend that serves the function of giving an explanation to a historical event. The poem begins with the first person narrator remembering his family and a friend, and tells us about the experiences he shared with the latter:

Aipa nezake Kotimo, lagunik minena, handia eta umoretsua.

Nola ikusten genuen telebista elkarrekin,

Nola eginten genuen eskolak ihesi Tangerreko molletara joateko,

Nola imajinatzen genituen Londres, Amsterdam edo New York,

Portuko urrazalaren gasolina orbaletan. *(Meanwhile 20)*

I could mention Kotimo, my closest friend, large and amused.

How we watched TV together, how we skipped school

To go to the Tangiers docklands,

How we imagined London, Amsterdam and New York

In the gasoline stains on the surface of the harbor water. *(Meanwhile 21)*

The narrator then starts telling a story, a legend, his father used to tell about the Arab invasion of Toledo. According to this story, this invasion happened when the twenty-fifth Christian king of this city decided to open the door of a tower to which each previous king had added a padlock, leading to the finding of a collection of paintings

representing Arab soldiers. One of these paintings had the following reckoning: “ate hau zabaltzean soldadu arabeek hartuko dute hiria” ‘When this door opens, Arab soldiers will take the city’ (*Meanwhile* 20-1). Then, this tale serves as an explanation of a historic event: the narrator of this poem chooses a version of a past event that does not appear in History books, but one which has been transmitted to him orally. After this story, he starts narrating his trip, first going to Cádiz illegally and later to Madrid, Barcelona, Bordeaux and Bilbao, with a flashback in which he remembers his father’s experiences in Europe. He then uses the poem to narrate a recurrent bad dream about his friend Kotimo, who died in a fight. Finally, we learn that the narrator has been remembering all those things from prison, in a cell that is twenty-four padlocks away from the street. Thus, there is a relationship between the legend his father told him and his life: the legend is becoming true again, as twenty-five padlocks lock him, just as they locked the paintings in the legend. Hence, in this poem we have a written version of a story that used to be told orally, which is used both for explaining a historical event and another event in the narrator’s life. Like Atxaga’s story of the lizard, this legend, which is part of the traditional wisdom, becomes true.

“Animalien hizkuntza” / “The Language of the Animals”, another poem by Uribe, is also the frame for two interrelated stories. The first one is a legend about how the pope was elected in Italy a long time ago (he does not specify when). He was elected by a white dove in St. Peter’s square. Afterwards, he tells us a folktale about a boy who knew the language of the birds. He affirms that this legend is told in various languages and cultures, with some variations, such as if the boy know just the birds’ language or all the animals’ languages. The birds tell the boy that his father will kneel before him, which his

father refuses to believe and, mad at his son because of his arrogance, throws him out of the house. The boy finally becomes pope.

In *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, there are also some stories that are known by people from Ondarroa. For example, the daughter of an architect that used to spend the summers in Ondarroa tells the author that there used to be a saying in the village about his father: “Bastida hori, edo da garbiegia, edo zerri hutsa da. Edo egunero aldatzen du alkandora edo eguna joan eguna etorri berbera erabiltzen du” ‘That Bastida, either is too clean, or he is a pig. Either he changes his shirt every day or he wears the same shirt every day’ (44).

There is a legend that is known by people from Ondarroa, and passed on from generation to generation:

Ermitara iritsi eta harekin lotutako istorio eta uste zaharrak kontatu nizkion, txikitan neuri aitona-amonek kontatzen zizkidatenak. Tartean Nazarenoaren dohainei buruz aritu nintzaion. Nola ermitako bazter batean dagoen irudiari eskuarekin musu eman eta burua argitu egiten dizun. Nola uxatzen dituen gogotik uste txarrak eta irudimena piztu. (*Bilbao* 228)

We arrived at the hermitage and I told him old beliefs, which my grandparents had told me when I was a child. In that time I told him about Nazareno’s gifts. How if you send a kiss with your hand to an image that is on a corner of the hermitage, he clears your head. How he takes away bad thoughts from your mind and he lights your imagination.

### Songs, Old Sayings, and *Bertsoak* in Literature

It is also possible to defend the idea that Basque oral tradition is present in contemporary novels written in Basque if we look at the amount of references to typical songs, proverbs, sayings and *bertsoak* in various novels or short stories. We can see an example of this in Joxean Sagastizabal's novel, *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel* 'Show me the way, Ixabel' (1994), where one of the characters refers to a popular song from the area where the protagonists are staying in order to learn Basque, which serves as a way to mock Catholicism: "Eta bada kantu bat ere: 'Nire herriko apaizak semetxo bat badu, osaba esaten dio, berak hala nahi du'" 'And there is a song too: "The priest from my village has a little son, he calls him uncle, he wants it that way"' (101) .

In *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, Uribe also makes reference to some traditional songs from Ondarroa. For example, when his father was going to have surgery, Uribe's mother and aunt sing a song with him:

Amak eta izeba Margaritak agurtu zuten kirolfanorako bidean, dena ondo aterako zela esanez. Esku-ohetan jarri zutenean "Ama Santa Ines" umeen kantatxoa kantatu zuten hirurek, amets txarrik ez izateko umei kantatzen zitzaiena.

Ama Santa Ines,  
 bart egin dot amets.  
 Ona bada,  
 bixon partez.  
 Txarra bada,  
 doala bere bidez. (178)



Mum and aunt Margarita said good-bye to him on his way to the operation room, telling him that everything was going to be okay. When they put him on the stretcher the three of them sang the children's little song "Ama Santa Ines", which is sung to children so that they do not have nightmares.

Mum Santa Ines,  
 last night I had a dream.  
 If it is good,  
 for both of us.  
 If it is bad,  
 let it go its way.

In Uribe's poem "Amesgaiztoa"/"Bad Dream", which is about a dream the author has about the children who left Spain during the Civil War, Uribe sees himself as one of those children, and says that, as they were crossing the border, they were singing. So here oral discourse is present in form of a song:

Neu ere haurra nintzen. Eta ihes egiten genuen,  
 mugarantz, kantari:

"Nora goaz? Ez dakit!

Nora goaz? Gu pozik!" (*Meanwhile* 64)

I was a child, too. And we were running away  
 toward the border, singing:

"Where are we going? I don't know!

Where are we going? Glad to go!" (*Meanwhile* 65)

In addition, instead of referring to textbooks or written texts that document the Spanish Civil War, he reflects about it through an oral manifestation, a song.

Furthermore, it is not the victor's voice, that is, the version of the history that can be found in history books, but that of the children who had to leave their country during the war. This is important because in these cases, the written texts tend to represent the victor's voice, while the ones who lost the war can only count on oral history to tell their experience. By writing about it, Uribe is breaking this dichotomy, as he is putting the voices of those who lost the war in a written text.

In the novels *Saturno* and *Zergatik, panpox?*, by Arantxa Urretabizkaia, which will be analyzed in more detail in the following chapter, there are also a references to Basque typical songs: In *Saturno*, to a song that we would hear in a bar: "Boga boga, marinela"; in *Zergatik, panpox?*, to children's songs.

In some contemporary novels written in Basque some old sayings are present. For example, in *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel*, there is a reference to an old saying mocking the priests, which says in Spanish: "los cojones del cura de San Fernando los cargan cuatro mulas, y van sudando" 'the priest from San Fernando's balls are carried by a mule, and they are sweaty' (101). In Uribe's *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, the author also mentions some old sayings. For example, when he is telling us the story of a painter that emigrated to Mexico in order to run away from Franco's dictatorship, and he dies there, he mentions an old saying that his mother uses: "'Nora joan, hantxe hiko zara' esaten du gure ama" "'you will die wherever you go", says my mother' (148).

*Bertsolaritza* is also present in some contemporary literary works written in Basque. For instance, in *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel*, the protagonist and his classmates go to

a village where there is a *bertsolaritza* contest. They go as a class, with their teacher, who uses this form of Basque orature as a tool to teach them Basque, and she tries to help them all understand the *bertsoak*, which are extremely hard to understand for all of them:

Bertsolariek ikasketen ahozko azterketak gogorarazten zizkidaten; gizon batzuk niri begira, swahiliz hizketan; beti mundo arrotzetan, ni.

Lazkano eta Agirre. Gai jartzaileari ondo ulertu nion, ezkongaiak ziren eta Lazkanok dudak zeuzkan, bestea ez ote zitzaion aitaren dirutzagatik arrimatuko.

DOINUA: MARITXU NORA ZOAZ

LAZKANO

Pitxuflini txaputin

zuretzat eginik

tralarí txurrobeitia

barruko indarrik.

...

AGIRRE

Trasfumandis pitxirri

Zu bezain alperra

Kotatobiespageti

Ein deten okerra.

... (93)

The *bertsolariak* reminded me of the oral exams from school; some men looking at me, speaking Swahili; me always in a foreign place.

Lazkano and Agirre. I had no problem understanding the man who decided the topic, they were a couple and Lazkano had doubts about the other one being with him because of his father's money.

TUNE: MARITXU NORA ZOAZ (Maritxu, where are you going?)

LAZKANO

Pitxuflini txaputin

done for you

tralarí txurrobeitia

inside force.

...

AGIRRE

Trasfumandis pitxirri

as lazy as you

kotatobiespageti

if I have done wrong.

...

Here, the importance given to *bertsolaritza* is clear, since the narrator gives us several details about the event: he talks about the person who decides the topic, about the topic itself and he tells us the melody that the *bertsolariak* are using. In addition, the *bertsoak* follow the traditional pattern regarding the number of syllables, number of lines and the rhyme. It is more than a simple reference to the event of a *bertsolaritza* contest, but a realistic description of it, told from the perspective of someone who is not familiar with this tradition.

*Bertsolaritza* is also present in a poem by Kirmen Uribe, “Pagoa”/”The Beech Tree”, which is a tribute to a *bertsolari*: Imaz of Altzo (1818-1893). This poem tells the story of how Imaz of Altzo planted a beech tree the year he met his wife and how he took care of it all his life, which is a real story. He also talks about how he died in 1893, not even a month after his wife’s death. He also mentions another *bertsolari*, Pello Errota (1840-1919), in order to tell us what opinion this *bertsolari* had of Imaz of Altzo: “Pello Errotaren esanetan bertso jartzen puntakoetarik” ‘Pello Errota said he was among the best of poets’ (*Meanwhile* 18-9). Thus, he uses a *bertsolari*’s voice in order to evaluate another *bertsolari*, instead of repeating a critic’s or a judge’s opinion about him. The voice of a representative of oral tradition is privileged over the voice of an academic.

Finally, as it has been mentioned earlier in the chapter, Arantza Urretabizkaia is not only aware of the need to tell stories human beings have, but also of the fact that nowadays television works as one of the main tools for transmitting those stories. Forms of technology like the radio and television, which Ong would refer to as secondary orality, are present in many of these contemporary Basque novels, as the background of the main events and conversations. The same happens in *Bestiarioa/Hilerrikoiak* (2006), by Karlos Linazasoro, while the main character is trying to write his novel.

### **Influence of Literacy, Literature and Secondary Orality on Orature**

As we have seen, there is a clear influence of Basque orature and oral traditions on contemporary authors who write in Basque, as many of them include elements of it in their written work. However, the opposite is also true: literacy and the written word also have an effect on Basque oral tradition, sometimes even changing its essence. The most obvious example of this would be how all the writers mentioned above, as well as many

others, have decided to write in Basque and use their written literature as a tool to document Basque orature: this orature is no longer transmitted only orally, but written literature serves as a vehicle to pass it on to a larger audience. In addition, the improvisatory nature of orality is now lost, as the writer has time to create his or her work. Furthermore, while orature makes it possible to have more than one version of the same story, legend, poem or song, the literature written by these authors provides us with only one version of them. Another example of how literature is translated into what Zirimu calls literary orality is the aforementioned case of Uribe, who not only performs his poems, but has also given them melodies and recorded them in a CD.

Another example of how the written word has an influence on oral language would be the storytelling session in *Obabakoak*. For this, the narrator, his friend and the uncle have written some stories. Even though they are going to be read out loud, they are not improvised, neither are they stories that have surged from oral tradition and that have been transmitted orally over time. In a similar manner, many of the stories the two friends tell during their road trip are tales they have read. For instance, the protagonist's friend tells a story by Chejov. Consequently, we can affirm that in these cases the written precedes the oral word and that the text put on paper has started to be used as a tool for transmitting information: here we do not have an example of a story that was first told orally, and then put into paper, but a circular phenomenon: a short tale, which is characteristic from oral tradition, is written down and then read, in order to be told orally again.

The printed text is not the only way in which literacy is influencing oral traditions, as there are several web pages where popular stories, songs, old sayings,

legends and *bertsoak* can be found. For example, as will be mentioned later, the association of *bertsolaritza* has a web page where a great amount of *bertsoak* and information about *bertsolariak* can be found. There is another web page, “Klasikoen gordailua” ‘The classics’ deposit’<sup>9</sup>, where different manifestations of Basque orature and literature can be found. Under the section *herri literatura* ‘popular literature’, we can find tales, poems, songs, ballads, legends, theater and old sayings.

An obvious example of the influence of literacy on Basque orature would be *bertso-paperak*. Gabilondo states that “garbi dago, bertsolaritzaren tradizioa luzea dela, gutxienez XVI. menderaino jaisten dela, eta ahozkoa dela. Dena den XIX. mendean, fenomeno berri bat dugu, poesiaren ahozkatzearena eta bertsolaritzaren idaztearena” ‘It is clear that the tradition of *bertsolaritza* is a long one, which at least goes back to the sixteenth century. Anyways, in the nineteenth century, we have a new phenomenon, that of oral poetry and written *bertsolaritza*’ (“Euskal poesiaren historia postmoderno baterantz” 10).

According to Zavala, “...el ‘bertso-papera’ lo inició el sector culto del País, pero los vio el pueblo, le gustó el método y se lo asimiló hasta formar de él el fenómeno literario impreso más interesante en lengua vasca” ‘The educated sector of the Basque Country started “*bertso-paperak*”, but people saw them, they liked the method and they appropriated it until they made of them the most interesting printed literary phenomenon in Basque language’ (*Bosquejo* 34) . Then, this written form of *bertsolaritza* became part of Basque popular culture, which in this case, was oral. Even if it was started by literate people, soon, several illiterate *bertsolariak* started practicing it. Some of them could write,

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<sup>9</sup> <http://klasikoak.armiarma.com/>

so they wrote their own *bertso-paperak*. However, several people could not write at all, or not well enough, so they would ask someone else to write their *bertsoak* down. An example of this would be Txirrita, who asked his nephew to copy his *bertsoak*, and Errota, whose daughters (especially one of them) did this task (Zavala *Bosquejo* 50-1). Then, even this tradition is not purely written, as in many cases it was dictated to people so that they would write it down. In addition, as I mentioned in the introduction, these *bertsoak* were written and sold to be read aloud.

Improvised *bertsolaritza* has also experienced other changes related with literacy, which are another example of the influence of literacy on Basque orature. Gorka Aulestia lists these changes in his article “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium.” Many of them have to do with the *bertsolaris*’ literacy level and with the creation of schools where classes are taught in Basque. Aulestia notices that “until now, *bertsolaritza* has been evolving and adapting to the realities of every age, and it is logical to believe that it will continue to do so” (“The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 227). Since the reality of this age involves an increased literacy in Basque, it is possible to affirm that *bertsolaritza* has incorporated it. According to Aulestia, the *bertsolari* of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century was often an uneducated person:

In the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the figure of the *bertsolari* played the role of an entertainer at festivals, a man with no visible means of support, a person with little education (the majority barely knew how to read, let alone write), who tried to please the audience with clever repartee, expressed in very free, ironic, satirical, and, on



occasion, even obscure language (“The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 228).

So *bertsolaritza* used to be an entertainment form that was not considered an intellectual manifestation. In fact, it was performed in festivals, bars, squares and, as we will see in the next chapter, in the house. It had an unofficial character, it did not attract the critics’ attention, and its purpose was not economic profit. Therefore, the *bertsolari* was not a prestigious, educated or wealthy member of the community.

However, there was an exception to this: Bilintx (1831-1876), who not only was literate, but also wrote for the Madrid Press (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 234). In addition, he was from San Sebastian, so he did not belong to the rural world:

The majority of *bertsolariak* of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century were illiterate. Some knew how to read, but not to write (with the rare exception of “Bilintx”, who wrote for the Madrid Press) and they belonged to the rural world” (234).

According to Aulestia, the illiteracy of those *bertsolariak* from past centuries made the language of the *bertsoak* “more personal, more imaginative, more creative, and much freer than it is today because its language was livelier and more direct” (“The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 228). Therefore, he considers that, in a certain way, the increase of literacy among *bertsolariak* is not necessarily something of which this art can benefit. But “literacy in Euskera is advancing” (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 235) and this does not exclude *bertsolaritza*. In fact, literacy has not only affected *bertsolaritza* in terms of the literacy level of its performers,

but also in terms of how the act of improvising *bertsoak* is understood and experienced by these. This has changed with the creation of centers where *bertsolaritza* is taught, so it is no longer a spontaneous creation that required no formal education at all, for now there are people who learn how to improvise, which is contradictory, since improvisation is one of the main characteristics of *bertsolaritza*.

There are also *ikastolas* (elementary schools) where not only Basque but the practice of *bertsolaritza* itself is taught by specialists whose mission is to pass on the art. There are also *bertso eskolak* (verse schools), center where adults of both sexes learn to be *bertsolariak*” (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 244).

Therefore, *bertsolaritza* is no longer the art that used to be performed in bars and squares by individuals that, apart from not being literate, had not had any formal instruction on how to improvise *bertsoak*. Another fact that needs to be taken into consideration is that, nowadays, several young *bertsolariak* have a university education, which they bring to their art (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 234). In fact, “among the eight finalists in the 1997 championship, seven were university educated, and four of those had already finished their degrees” (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 235).

Furthermore, many of them get their university education in Basque, so not only do they have a university education, but they receive it in the language in which they create their *bertsoak*. Evidently, this, together with the formal education on the creation of *bertsoak*, affects the language they use in their *bertsoak*, probably making it, as mentioned above, less lively and less personal than it used to be.

Together with this literacy comes the institutionalization of the art of *bertsolaritza* with the creation of the *Bertsozale Elkarte* ‘Association of *Bertsolariak* and Fans of *Bertsolaritza*’. This association’s main goal when it was created in the 80s was to organize contests. With this association came the first organized *txapelketa* ‘championship’ or *Bertso Eguna* (Bertso Day), which took place on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1935 (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 229). This first *txapelketa* is crucial in the modernization and increased presence of literacy in *bertsolaritza*:

“The black peasant shirt worn by “Txirrita”, long a symbol of traditional rural *bertsolaritza*, was replaced by the suit coat of the new champion. It was “Basarri” who laid the first stone in the foundation of modern *bertsolaritza*. Everything began to change, to shift, to adapt to modern urban life, but there was still a long way to go before the complex organization that surrounds *bertsolaritza* today could come into being.  
(229)

However, organizing *txapelketak* is not the only task this association carries out. In fact, it has centers such as the *Xenpelar Dokumentazio Zentroa* ‘Xenpelar Documentation Center’, which has a library (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 230), and it also has a journal. The fact there is a center that serves the function of documenting anything related to *bertsolaritza* and that, in addition, this center has a library is a clear example of how literacy has entered the world of *bertsolaritza*. Nevertheless, the *Bertsozale Elkarte* does not limit itself to documenting *bertsolaritza* in paper, for it also takes advantage of new technologies. In fact, it produces “Hitzetik hortzera” ‘From the word to the tooth’ (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New

Millenium” 230), a weekly show in ETB (the Basque TV channel). It also has a webpage, which is the adaptation of this art to a new form of literacy: *bertsolaritza* no longer is an improvised oral art form that is told only once, and maybe remembered by the audience, but they do not have the chance to go back to it, so there can be variations of it. However, with new technologies, the bertso is available for the audience after the bertso was improvised. So not only do they break the boundaries between the oral nature of *bertsolaritza* and the word printed in paper, but they take literacy to a new level: that of the webpage as a tool for storing and transmitting information. However, while *bertsolaritza* adapts to new technologies in the ways mentioned above, its form has not changed.

The tasks carried out by the *Bertsozale Elkarte* are not the only attempts to integrate the art of *bertsolaritza* in the predominantly modern urban literate society the Basque Country is today. As a matter of fact, several scholars have been paying more and more attention to *bertsolaritza*, so this oral tradition has started to enter the world of academic research, which contrasts highly with the reactions to the *bertsolaritza* of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries:

In recent decades the notable scholar A. Zavala has dedicated himself to transcribing performances recorded on tape by *bertsolariak* and publishing them in the Auspoa collection of more than 250 volumes about oral literature. At the same time, written literary production by the *bertsolariak* themselves is also being published. (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 235)

An example of a *bertsolari* who, apart from doing this activity also writes, is Andoni Egaña (1961), to whom Aulestia refers as an “esteemed writer of Basque literature” (“The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 243). He is also a good example of an educated *bertsolari*, as he has a university education: he studied Basque Philology, so he has formal education in and about Basque, which implies that he has studied its grammar, its history and the literature produced in this language. He writes several genres (press, narrative, essays) and has also recorded a CD with his *bertsoak*, and writes scripts for television. In addition, he has also composed lyrics for other people (<http://www.bertsozale.com/euskara/pertsonak/egana.htm>).

Recording *bertso* CDs and putting them to music, as well as compiling them in order to publish them in books, is a new phenomenon that has been going on in the last decades among the new generations of *bertsolariak*. These are experimenting with this oral tradition, taking it both to the music industry and to written literature; that is, they are adapting *bertsolaritza* to new technologies, changing the way the audience interacts with this oral art form.

Taking yet another direction, these young *bertsolariak* are not amenable to having their verses simply recorded [...] Instead, they form their own small groups in order to put the verses to music and to join them with written literature, publishing their own CDs and videos. (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 235-6)

“Today there are *bertsolariak* who honor their art through their professions in various arenas, such as service in the Basque Government, Basque television, the University, and in Basque letters” (242-3). An example of this is Andoni Egaña. So

*bertsolaritza* is no longer a mere form of entertainment that takes place in squares and bars without providing any economic reward or social prestige to *bertsolariak*, but an art form that can bring economic compensation and prestige to them.

As Aulestia recognizes, this has an influence on the creation of *bertsoak* that affects the *bertsolari* himself or herself: “in this fashion these bards of oral literature enter as well into Basque written literature, making way for a new psychology of *bertsolaritza*” (“The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 235): these *bertsolariak* are familiar both with the art of *bertsolaritza* and written literature, so unlike the illiterate *bertsolariak* from previous centuries, they have access not only to the resources of oral language, but also to those of written language. So it is not only scholars and fans of *bertsolaritza* that are changing this oral tradition, but also its authors.

However, as White observes, it is important to take into consideration that none of these attempts to integrate *bertsolaritza* into written literature (what Zirimu calls oral literature) or to new technologies, such as DVDs, videos, television or the Internet is a faithful way of reproducing or transmitting this oral tradition, since a great part of the experience is lost, as there is no longer an interaction between the *bertsolari* and the audience, which is crucial in *bertsolaritza*:

Although the modern *bertsolari*'s verses are recorded on audio and video tape, and even transcribed and published in books, the art form itself is not accurately or truthfully represented by those attempts at record-keeping ... Watching a performance on video tape is the next best thing to attending a live competition, although the interactivity between *bertsolari* and

audience cannot be fully experienced in this format. (White “Orality and Basque Nationalism” 10-11)

Although White believes that the experience of *bertsolaritza* is lost when the *bertso* is put into paper or any other form that lacks the interaction between the *bertsolari* and the audience that a live performance has, she is also aware that the audience still has the knowledge of how live *bertsolaritza* works, and therefore, the reader of the *bertso* that has been taken to paper still has the ability to imagine the orality in it:

On the other hand, the audience of the transcription is a reader, and the reader is the only source of orality for the transcribed *bertso*. The quality of the “mental orality” brought to the work by its readers depends on many factors, including the readers’ dialect of Euskara, their status as native or non-native speakers, their familiarity with the art form and its components, their knowledge of the Basque melodies used for creating *bertsoak*, and their cognizance of current events in Basque society (because the sounds of certain names or words can evoke entire scenarios connected with those sounds in the larger socio-political context).

Although an informed reader is capable of bringing many of these factors to the textual representation of a *bertso*, the fact remains that no remnant of the artist’s orality survives on the written page ” (“Orality and Basque Nationalism” 14).

The fact that she assumes that the audience of *bertsoak* that have been put in paper has this “mental orality” is important, because she is aware that orality is key in Basque culture, so in her opinion, the act of reading a *bertso* would automatically take the

reader to a live *bertsolaritza* performance. However, it is also possible that not every reader is able to imagine a live *bertsolaritza* performance just by reading a *bertso*. It is also significant that she recognizes that the audience of *bertsolaritza* performances is not homogeneous, as she mentions that several people are not native speakers of this language, and that they speak different dialects, which transform the way in which they understand the *bertsoak*.

All in all, as mentioned above, *bertsolaritza* has changed in order to adapt to a new time, and even if these changes may have some negative consequences (such as the use of a less lively language in the *bertsoak* or the loss of the experience of a live *bertsolaritza*), they have also contributed to the increased prestige which this art form enjoys now. In fact, this art is a cultural expression of a society that currently privileges the written over the oral, the educated over the uneducated, the urban over the rural and the modern over the non-modern. Therefore, the incorporation of the printed letter and of new technologies to it, together with the advanced level of education the newest generations of *bertsolariak* have, and the interest some scholars have started to demonstrate, have turned both *bertsolaritza* and the figure of the *bertsolari* into something prestigious.

### **Prestige of *Bertsolaritza* in Relation with Literacy**

Aulestia is aware of this prestige the newer generations of *bertsolariak* possess, which differentiates them from previous generations that have often been perceived as performers of a lower type of cultural production. An example of this would be the opinion that Carmelo de Etxegarai (1825-1925), a member of *Euskaltzaindia* (The Academy of the Basque Language) had about *bertsolaritza*: in his opinion, *bertsolaritza*



was nothing but “an enormous collection of trifles and vulgar remarks, completely prosaic expressions, and all done in incorrect language full of Spanish expressions” (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 238-40). As a member of *Euskaltzaindia*, which is the institution that carried out the task of creating a unified variety of Basque, as well as normativizing its orthography, and serves the function of regulating Basque grammar, he found the “incorrect” use of the language used in *bertsoak* unacceptable. We need to remember that most *bertsolariak* during the time in which Carmelo de Etxegarai lived, were not educated, so this had an impact on their *bertsoak*. In addition, he considered that including words from another language was something improper.

In *Literatura oral vasca* ‘Oral Basque Literature’, by Manuel de Lekuona, there is an example of a *bertso* with Spanish words. It is a *bertso* improvised by Pello Errota (1840-1919) around 1875, at the end of the second Carlist war, when in some villages where people were suspected of being Carlists the police was asking to see people’s papers. When he was asked for his, he improvised a *bertso* whose first line was: “Buenos días, *txanbergo jauna*” ‘Good morning, mister uniform jacket’ (qtd. in Lekuona 75).

In the same way as Carmelo de Etxegarai, Larramendi, a writer and philologist, did not have a positive opinion of *bertsolaritza*. In *El imposible vencido. Arte de la lengua Bascongada* ‘The impossible vanquished: The art of the Basque language’, the first published grammar of Basque (1853), “Larramendi described the verses of Basque as ‘languid’” (Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 239). Again, this negative opinion about *bertsolaritza* comes from someone who is concerned with the

grammar of the Basque language and therefore perceives bertsolaritza and its language as a lower art form, due the illiteracy of its performers.

Even in the last years there have been some people who have described bertsolaritza as an inferior art form. For example, Aulestia quotes a fragment of an article published by Matías Múgica, a translator from Navarra, in *Ostiela* (a journal) in 1997:

... the dreadful mediocrity in which official bertsolaritza has moved and continues to move, and above all to demonstrate how a studious nationalist can speak of an obvious monstrosity with such ecstatic uncton, when the monstrosity is Basque... it is still more difficult to believe that these things raise enthusiasm and even produce tears in our listeners. This is puzzling. I don't know how to judge what effect they can have on an illiterate peasant. I am disposed to believe that he sincerely likes them (although I suspect that the peasant is the one who likes them the least); in any case, I cannot put myself in his place nor will I speak for him. But when I see townfolk, educated and literate people, even those fond of literature, whose eyes glaze over in the presence of these vulgarities in trite verse and even worse, then yes, I feel capable of rendering an opinion: these people are lying. They are basically lying to themselves and to everyone else. If so desired, I won't deny it, this may be a nationalistic ritual, an act of ideological communion, a ceremony of brotherhood; it may be whatever it wishes and there will be a thousand justifications for it and I think that's fine, but the pleasure, the basic physiological, direct and

sincere enjoyment does not exist, it is a sham (qtd. in Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 241).

Even in a moment in which most *bertsolariak* are literate and many of them have a university education, Múgica still refers to them as “illiterate peasants”, while placing himself within a group of people who are educated and literate. He also finds it is impossible that a literate person would enjoy *bertsolaritza* as an aesthetically pleasing art form. According to him, those literate people are just using *bertsolaritza* for nationalist and ideological purposes. So he is a clear example of how Basque society has started to privilege written literary production over oral tradition. However, he does recognize the role of creating a sense of community both orature in general and *bertsolaritza* in particular have.

In the same way, the Gipuzkoan writer Hasier Etxebarria wrote for the newspaper *Egin* on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1998:

I am one of those who think that the Basque language’s only viably economic cultural industry is nothing but castrated poetry, an agricultural type of culture that effectively hypnotizes and stupefies the majority of educated Basques (qtd. in Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 242).

In Etxebarria’s opinion, *bertsolaritza* is considered a prestigious art form by many educated people. In addition, he recognizes that it is economically beneficial. However he perceives it as an oral manifestation that is practiced by rural people, which would contrast with the written discourse he produces. The fact that he still perceives *bertsolariak* as rural uneducated people, when now most of them have a university

education reminds us that, in spite of the changes *bertsolaritza* has experienced and all the studies about it by many scholars who attempt to change this negative perception about it, there are still many people that keep perceiving orature as an inferior art form, one that educated people should not enjoy.

Unlike the educated people who enjoy *bertsolaritza*, he considers it as some type of defective “castrated” poetry. Interestingly enough, he is describing a form of orature in terms of literature: he understands written poetry as the norm for beauty, and *bertsolaritza* would be like that poetry, but incomplete. According to Aulestia, “the attempts to compare the techniques of and beauty of oral poetry with the parameters of written poetry” (“The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 240) is one of the reasons why *bertsolaritza* has been perceived as inferior. The fact that he refers to this form of orature as “castrated poetry” has one more implication: while he understands written poetry as a complete art form, he understands *bertsolaritza* as an incomplete art form. Furthermore, he is describing written poetry as a masculine art form, and *bertsolaritza* as a type of poetry that has lost its “manliness.” That would imply understanding literature as masculine and orature as feminine. However, in the case of the Basque Country, this division would not be appropriate: while it is true that literature written in Basque is a predominately masculine task, as we will see in the next chapter, it has been mostly men that have practiced techniques like *bertsolaritza*. Again, as we will see in the next chapter, this does not mean that women have not practiced it, but that they have not received any recognition for doing so. However, there are certain oral traditions and other examples of orature (like folktales, child songs and legends, and even *bertsolaritza*) that women have been passing on to the next generations for centuries.

Aulestia adds that “the main reason for the lack of esteem for the art of *bertsolaritza* stems from a disdainful valuation of it as an art form. The consensus (in certain so-called intellectual circles) was that popular poetry, including *bertsolaritza*, is second-class literature” (“The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 240). This would be related with the prestige so-called modern societies place on the written word and the perception of oral popular culture as something inferior. However, this idea is changing, probably due to the fact that, as mentioned above, most *bertsolariak* are now literate, and probably because of the efforts carried out by scholars to adapt it to modern society and bring it to a larger audience. It is also important to think about how even though *bertsolarirza* was considered inferior to written literature, nowadays it is the Basque authors who incorporate orality in their written word that get to become part of the canon. This would be the case of Kirmen Uribe and Bernardo Atxaga, who not only include orality in their written works, but also perform them.

Lizardi (1869-1933), a poet who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, realized the importance of *bertsolaritza* in Basque society, as he affirmed that “we need all types of plants in our garden. We must not reject the crude *bertsolari* or the purist poet or the difficult-to-understand innovator...” (qtd. in Aulestia “The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 240). However, he still separates the world of *bertsolaritza* from the world of written literature: even if he respects this oral tradition, he sees it as a different type of “plant”. This way of understanding it would differ from the aforementioned examples of the breaking of boundaries between *bertsolaritza* and written literature.

Some decades later, Lekuona defended the validity of *bertsolaritza*, as well as the inadequacy of approaching it as if it were written literature in his book *Literatura oral euskérica* ‘Basque oral literature’:

Manuel Lekuona, in 1935, in *Literatura oral euskérica*, had realized many years earlier that evaluating *bertsolaritza* with the standards for written literature would lead to nothing but scorn for *bertsolaritza* and its artists. For that reason, he attempted to root the phenomenon within the context of oral literature, thereby contributing to the appreciation and prestige that *bertsolaris* enjoy today (239).

When Lekuona wrote this book, *bertsolaritza* was not in a good moment, as the author observes:

El *bertsolarismo* como fenómeno de improvisación, tuvo, antes, una difusión mucho mayor que la que tiene actualmente. Difusión horizontal o geográfica en el mundo; y difusión vertical, que pudiéramos llamar intensidad del fenómeno en cada pueblo, en el sentido de que el don de la improvisación era más general que hoy en las diversas clases sociales (Lekuona 58).

*Bertsolaritza*, as a phenomenon of improvisation used to have a much bigger diffusion than today. Horizontal or geographical diffusion around the world; and vertical diffusion, which we could refer to as intensity of the phenomenon in each village, in the sense that the gift of improvisation used to be more general than today among the diverse social classes.

He is aware that, at that time, *bertsolaritza* was only practiced by people from the lower classes: “en la Sociedad actual, en cambio, el improvisar es patrimonio de unos pocos, gente de la clase humilde” “In present day society, however, improvising *bertsoak* is the patrimony of a few, of people from modest classes’ (59). This would contrast with the past centuries, when *bertsolaritza* was practiced by people from higher classes: Lekuona gives the example of some women from a high class who were verse improvisers in the fifteenth century (59).

Nowadays, people from more social classes practice *bertsolaritza* and there are more people who have a positive opinion about it than those that still consider it as an inferior form of literature. Aulestia would agree with this, as he affirms that “fortunately, there are more cultured people every day in the Basque Country who, far from considering *bertsolaritza* to be a species of rural subculture, defend it as the most vital expression of popular Basque poetry” (“The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millenium” 242). Anyways, if we take into account the aforementioned literacy of the newer generations of *bertsolariak*, it is hard to see this oral tradition as a “species of rural subculture.”

This appreciation of *bertsolaritza* has been happening mostly in the last decades, so it may be due to the fact that it is no longer “a species of rural subculture”, but an urban phenomenon performed mainly by literate educated people that are also taking this oral tradition to the new technologies as well as to written literature. Therefore, the fact that the limits between oral tradition and the written word are starting to disappear has had a positive impact on the situation of *bertsolaritza*, in terms of general acceptance of it and the economic benefits this tradition produces now. However, this also proves that

Basque culture has changed from privileging the oral over the written word to favoring written language. Present day *bertsolaritza* is no longer what it used to be, since it has been changed by literacy; subsequently, we cannot know what its situation would be if this had not happened, as it might still be considered by many scholar and critics, and even by the performers themselves, as an inferior art form.

### **Conclusion**

The limits between the oral and the written word in Basque language and cultural manifestations are becoming less and less clear. Now, we can access popular songs, old saying, legends, stories and *bertsoak*, which are examples of Basque oral tradition, in written form, both in paper (in books and journals) and on the internet. Furthermore, new technologies are contributing to the presence of secondary orality: with the role of television, CDs, the radio and videos, oral language has the function of transmitting the aforementioned oral traditions. In several cases, these attempts to put the oral word in written form come from those same authors who produce orature. At the same time, contemporary Basque writers are incorporating various forms of Basque oral tradition into their written works. Therefore, we cannot understand present day Basque written literature without taking into account Basque oral tradition, nor can we understand contemporary representations of Basque oral culture without placing them in the context of a society that has internalized the written discourse and privileges it so much.



## Chapter 2: The Role of Women in Basque Oral Traditions and Written

### Literature

#### **Introduction: Masculine and Feminine roles**

In the previous chapter, we have seen how in Basque oral tradition and orature, and Basque contemporary literature, the limits between the oral and the written word tend to become blurred, as there is a presence of characteristics of oral tradition and orature in the works written in Basque while literacy is affecting oral tradition in various ways. This is the result of the modernization of Basque society. This process of modernization affects in a special way the works produced by Basque female authors, who have gone from being the transmitters of oral traditions in the house to using these oral traditions as a tool to resist the dominant male discourse, and finally, especially in the last decades, after Franco's death, to express themselves in written language.

In most cultures in the world, women have been in charge of taking care of the house and bringing up the children, for which they have seen themselves obliged to remain in a closed, private space. Unlike them, men have had access to public spaces, such as the street and bars. As Kerber notices, these "separate social spheres were due neither to cultural accident nor to biological determinism. They were social constructions, camouflaging social and economic service, a service whose benefits were unequally shared" (14).

The separation of spaces in relation with gender has been very well defined in the majority of cultures:

Men's places were often clearly defined; menstruating women were often excluded from them. Men's space normally included the central

community meeting place and the fields; that is, as Lucienne Roubin writes, the village government “tends to juxtapose and to fuse male space with public space.” Women’s space, by definition, is what is left: sleeping enclosures, gardens. (Kerber 31)

### **Basque Women’s Role in the House**

“A great deal of recent work has made it clear that the separation of spheres was not limited to a single generation or a single civilization” (Kerber 18), and the Basque region is not an exception to this: Basque women have traditionally been in charge of the house and the children. They have played an extremely important role in transmitting not only their language, but also oral traditions to future generations. However, they have not received enough recognition for this, partly due to the fact that many of them have carried out this task in the private space of the house, especially the farmhouse. Villasante said in a meeting of *Euskaltzaindia* (The Academy of the Basque language) in 1975:

Women working for the Basque language have chosen a place, a castle, one that is their very own: the home. This is the nest where Euskera should never be lost. From here, yes, go outside, into the street, into the square, and everywhere, but always, if possible, without losing the home. And that is in the woman’s hands, more than in anyone else’s! The home is the first and most necessary school (Villasante<sup>10</sup>; qtd. in White “Mission for the Millenium” 150-1).

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<sup>10</sup> Luis Villasante (1920-2000) was a member of *Euskaltzaindia* (The Academy of the Basque language).

This idea is also present in Saizarbitoria's "Rossetti-ren Obsesioa" 'Rossetti's obsession' when he notices that "hemengo ama bati, euskalduna ez izan arren ere, normalean ez baitzaio bere umearekin maitasun hitzik euskara ez den beste hizkuntzatan ateratzen" 'a mum from here, even if she does not speak Basque, normally does not tell her child love words in any other language but Basque' (187).

Then, this role of women has been perpetuated by Basque society, even by members of *Euskaltzaindia*, like Villasante. It is not that "women working for the Basque language" have chosen the home as the place to carry out this job, but rather this is the place that has been imposed on them. Carrie Hamilton notices that "Basque nationalism, like Francoism, had defined women chiefly in terms of their domestic and maternal roles" (229). Her article deals specifically with women's relationship with ETA, but it could be extended to Basque women in general: they have been seen primarily as mothers. As Joseba Gabilondo states, for the Basque nationalist imaginary the only woman that exists is the mother; the phallic, ahistoric and natural mother ("Del exilio materno a la utopía personal" 35). Therefore, it has been the Basque culture and its "mythical matriarchalism" (Gabilondo "Del exilio materno a la utopía personal" 35), a concept defended by the Basque anthropologist Ortiz-Osés, which has positioned them in that space. According to Gabilondo, behind the myth that Basque society is a matriarchal one there is a historic reality that places men in public spaces, while placing women in private ones ("Del exilio materno a la utopía personal" 35). In fact, women have been regarded as the center of Basque life because they are in the center of the house, the kitchen. Therefore, this "mythical matriarchalism" is nothing more than a way of keeping women inside the home.

The role women have played in passing on not only the language, but also Basque culture and tradition is not fully recognized or appreciated by Basque society in general and the members of *Euskaltzaindia* (The Academy of Basque Language) in particular, due to the fact that this takes place in a private space: the house. Women have been involved in keeping alive the Basque language, and as Aulestia notices, orature and oral tradition too. According to him, the farmhouse kitchen is the place where the promulgation of oral literature takes place (“Bertsolaritza: Island or Archipelago?” 14). This would be because the kitchen is the place where women are and carry out the task of taking care of the children, so this way, the children can listen to the improvised *bertsoak* and the stories women tell in this private space. As Villasante defends, women are expected to pass on Basque language and culture to future generations, which in his opinion, must be done in the private space of the house. This relation between women and the house “invades their creative space” (White “Mission for the Millenium” 135). That is, they tend to maintain themselves in their roles of mothers and caregivers. However, my intention is not to deny that there were women who practiced various forms of Basque oral tradition and orature, but that, in general, (with a few exceptions and until quite recently), they have been excluded from studies about this topic. For example, in the fifteenth century, a law that prohibited women from composing *coplas* and songs was passed, which means that there were women who used public spaces to demonstrate their ability to create. In fact, Lekuona refers to the presence of female *bertsolariak* in previous centuries: “entre nosotros en las edades pasadas (siglo XV), vemos improvisar a la encofetada dama Usoa de Alós en Deba, y a la señorita de Lastur, hermana de la honorable Milia de Lastur casada en Mondragón con Peru García de Oro” ‘among us, in

previous times [fifteenth century], we see the high lineage lady Usoa de Alós improvise in Deba, as well as the young lady of Lastur, honorable Milia of Lastur's sister, who was married to Peru García de Oro in Mondragón' (59). After that law was passed in the fifteenth century, women could no longer improvise *bertsoak* in public spaces and as a result, it is not until the nineteenth century that we can find women involved in *bertsolaritza* again, although they tended to compose *bertsoak* in their written version, that is, *bertso jarriak* or *bertso paperak* (Larrañaga Odriozola "Del bertsolarismo silenciado" 60-1).

But even when they did not step out of the house, women's contribution to keeping alive oral manifestations of Basque culture is undeniable. In his history of Basque orature, Lekuona is aware of the fact that *bertsolaritza* has been practiced and transmitted by women in farmhouses, and that this is what makes them invisible (Larrañaga Odriozola "Teatralidad y poética" 403). In the same way, Larrañaga Odriozola mentions that many male *bertsolariak* remember that their mothers, aunts and grandmothers recited *bertsoak*, although they did not leave the family and the house ("Teatralidad y poética: el bersolarismo y las mujeres" 404). Thus, we cannot forget to include female *bertsolariak* in histories of *bertsolaritza* (which is still happening), but instead of trying to find their presence in cider houses, bars and squares, we should look for it in the house ("Teatralidad y poética: el bersolarismo y las mujeres" 399-400).

### **Women in Other Private Spaces**

Another space where we should look for female *bertsolariak* is that of the convent, which is somehow a private space that, in addition, tends to exclude men, although it is necessary to remember that it is very different from the space of the house.

The convent is an exclusively feminine space, more isolated from the rest of society than the house. In “Del bertsolarismo silenciado,” Larrañaga Odriozola gives us the example of two nuns who compose *bertso jarriak*: Sor Justina Aldalur (born in 1922) and Sebastiana Gesalaga “Zaldubi,” later Sor Niño Dios (born in 1924). According to the author of this article, the former entered the convent thanks to an ability she had, which could be considered as non feminine: she could sharpen scythes, a task that the other nuns appreciated, since then the man who used to do that chore for them was no longer necessary. She was used to reciting *bertso jarriak* to her family, due to the fact that her parents could not read well. She did not have the opportunity to compose *bertsoak* during her first years at the convent, as the abbess considered this ability unsuitable for a nun, as nuns are supposed to be humble: “la contribución de Sor Justina Aldalur sufrió la limitación de verse restringida a normativas comunitarias que censuraron en su tiempo su afán por la composición” ‘Sor Justina Aldalur’s contribution suffered the limitation of being restricted to communal norms which censored in her time, her willingness to compose [*bertsoak*]’ (Larrañaga Odriozola “Del bertsolarismo silenciado” 70).

Nevertheless, some friars who visited the convent asked if there was someone who could sing, and Sor Justina offered to sing some verses she knew. One of the friars asked her if she could compose her own, and he taught her the techniques of composing *bertsoak*.

Although she composed a huge amount of *bertsoak* in the private space of the convent, she has only produced a few for the public. One contribution she made to *bertsolaritza* is that she composed *bertso jarriak* for a contest organized by Franciscan monks in Zarautz. She received the second prize, while Inaxia Etxabe (another female *bertsolari*) won the

contest, which led Basarri (a male *bertsolari*) to write in a magazine that it was a completely feminine triumph (Larrañaga Odriozola “Del bertsolarismo silenciado” 69).

The second example, Sor Niño Dios, shared her love of writing *bertsoak* with her father, who would sell the religious *bertsoak* he composed. He was an inspiration for her, as she has composed *bertsoak* for him even after his death. She still composes religious *bertsoak*, but she does not sign her name, as she considers that they belong to all the community she belongs to: “qué me importa pues a mí. Lo que haya que hacer yo lo haré en nombre de la comunidad y se acabó. Además cada una ya sabe si son o no propios, en el estilo y en el detalle” ‘what does it matter to me. What has to be done, I will do in the name of the community and that is it. In addition, one knows if they [the *bertsoak*] are hers or not, in the style and in the details’ (Larrañaga Odriozola “Del bertsolarismo silenciado” 72). This idea of literary creation as something communal is characteristic of those societies that privilege the oral over the written word. In this case, although she can tell which *bertsoak* are hers, as they have a unique style, she is not concerned with receiving any acknowledgement for having composed them.

When asked what she thinks about *bertsolaritza*, even the type that is created in bars (which would be the type that has only been accessible to men), she has a positive opinion about it; she believes that it is a good, non-malicious form of entertainment. She remembers seeing men improvising *bertsoak* in bars, sometimes about “inappropriate” topics, but she affirms that:

Se les notaba la buena intención, que lo hacían para entretener. Luego nosotros comenzábamos también a decirnos versos, disparatados algunos, y nos reíamos, porque era cosa buena ... Los versos ... son cantos que

levantan el ánimo. Cosa buena y sana, algo pulcro. (Larrañaga

Odriozola “Del bertsolarismo silenciado” 72)

You could see their good intentions, that they did it [recite *bertsoak*] in order to entertain. Then, we would start telling verses to each other, some of them crazy, and we would laugh, because it was a good thing ... Verses ... are chants that cheer you up. A good and healthy thing, something clean.

So not only does she write *bertso jarriak*, but she also used to improvise them, imitating the men she saw at the bar on her way home, which would be a way of transgressing gender roles: not only did she have access to a masculine world, but she also participated in it.

### **Women in Public Spaces**

On December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Maialen Lujambo was proclaimed winner in the *Bertsolaritza Txapelketa* (Official *Bertsolaritza* Competition), being the first woman who has won that contest (EITB “Lujanbio” n. pag.). However, for a very long time, there have been other women who have been able to step out of the house and the role of mother or religious woman that society has imposed on them, even though they are only mentioned in very few studies of *bertsolaritza* and have not won official prizes. Indeed, the number of women who transcended private spaces and stepped into public spaces like the square and *bertsolaritza* contests is not very big. In fact, Aulestia notices that women have been excluded from *bertsolaritza* contests that took place in the square until recently (“Bertsolaritza: Island or Archipelago?” 34), in the last decades. Few women have measured their creative capacity against that of men (Larrañaga Odriozola “Teatralidad y



poética: el bersolarismo y las mujeres” 400). Yet, there are a few women that have practiced *bertsolaritza*, both in its improvised oral and written forms, even though public spaces were a hostile environment for them (Larrañaga Odriozola “Teatralidad y poética” 423). We do not have a great amount of information about them, partly because this oral manifestation, in general, was not very well documented and partly due to the fact that they were intruding on the public space of men and practicing *bertsolaritza* in a space that was supposed to be exclusively masculine:

Pues, contra lo que se ha creído, la historia del *bertsolarismo* siempre ha contado con mujeres, diestras compositoras en cualquiera de sus dos ramas: la improvisada o *bat-batekoa*, y la escrita o *bertso-jarriak*. Los datos que se disponen de ellas no son exhaustivos (tampoco los que conciernen a sus homólogos varones), en el periodo en el que empieza a datarse históricamente su práctica: finales del siglo XVIII y comienzos del XIX [...] (Larrañaga Odriozola “Del bertsolarismo silenciado” 44).

Contrary to general belief, the history of *bertsolaritza* has always had women, skilled composers in both of its variations: the improvised one or *bat-batekoa*, and the written one or *bertso-jarriak*. The information we have about them is not very thorough (nor is it for their homologous men), in the period in which *bertsolaritza*'s practice starts to be historically documented: the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This would be the case of Joxepa de Hondarribia, who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had a reputation as a *bertsolari*. The well known *bertsolari* Indalezio Bizkarrondo,

known as Bilintx (1831-1876), even mentioned her ability as a *bertsolari* in some of his verses and various male *bertsolariak*, including Bilintx, wanted to measure themselves with her: “los versos de Bizkarrondo indican que Joxepa era una improvisadora de plaza a quien bertsolaris varones invitaban a fin de medirse con ella. Es el caso de *Bilintx*, que quiso probar su suerte con Joxepa” ‘Bizkarrondo’s verses indicate that Joxepa was an improviser in the squares who was invited to compete with male *bertsolariak*. This would be Bilintx’s case, who wanted to measure himself against Joxepa’ (Larrañaga Odriozola “Del bertsolarismo silenciado” 44). In her article “Del bertsolarismo silenciado” Larrañaga Odriozola points out that Bizkarrondo could be considered a *plazandrea* (or “*imporvidadora de plaza*,” a woman who improvised *bertsoak* in the square, with men), in spite of the fact that this is a concept that does not exist in *bertsolaritza*, unlike *plazagizon*, or man who improvises in the square. The fact that in Basque there is a term to refer to men who are in the square, while there is not an equivalent one for women, tells us much about the expected gender roles. It does not mean that there were no women who improvised in the square, but it definitely means that even when they existed, their task was not recognized or appreciated by Basque society.

In the *bertso* below, composed by Bilintx to recognize Joxepa de Hondarribia’s ability as a *bertsolari*, he invites her to compete with him. This means that she was a *plazandrea*, a woman who improvised *bertsoak* in public spaces. In his *bertso*, Bilintx refers to her as a “*dama bertsolari*,” which would be literally translated into English as “*lady bertsolari*.” Basque is a language that does not make gender distinction, so the fact that the author of these *bertsoak* chooses to specify her gender is significant. In addition,

he chooses to use the word “dama” (dame), which holds certain connotations, instead of choosing a more neutral word, like “*emakume*,” which means “woman,” or just not making any reference to her gender, which in addition, is already implied by her name:

1 Aspaldian, Joxepa,  
 famatua zeunden,  
 gu berriz ikusteko  
 desiotan geunden;  
 Hondarrabi aldian  
 aditzen geunden  
 dama bertsolari bat  
 nola bazeguen  
 zeñak Euskalerrían  
 parerik etzuen.

2 Egiak ote ziren  
 famaren hots haiek  
 bixitatu zindugun  
 zenbait jakinzalek  
 hamar edo hamabi  
 donostiarrek;  
 haiekin batian zan  
 bizar haundi harek,  
 izkribatzen dizkitzu

zuri bertso hauek  
3 Ni bertsolaria naiz  
bainan det aditu  
ez nintzaizula zuri  
hala iruditu;  
zuk horla pentsatzia  
ez da zer harritu:  
nere jakinduririk  
ez nuen argitu,  
zergatikan ez nitzan  
premiak arkitu.  
4 Baliteke iritxia  
premia horretara,  
agindu zenidala  
goguan det bada,  
prestaturikan nere  
desiuetara,  
baldin dibertsio bat  
nahi banuen para,  
etorriko ziñala  
Errenteriara.  
5 Egizu nahi zunian,  
dama etorrera;

zuregan utzutzen det

egunen aukera:

ipintzen badidazu

horrelako era,

aprobetxatu gabe

ez niteke gera,

alkarrekin berriro

mintzatuko gera.

6 Arkitzen baldin banaiz

orduan umorez

proga emango dizut

lehenengoko ordez,

beste iñori baiño

gustorago dobles,

gero juzga dezagun

ezaguera hobez,

ia bertsolaria

al naizen edo ez. (qtd. in Larrañaga Odriozola “Del bertsolarismo” 62-3)

1 For a long time, Joxepa,

you have been famous

that is why I

would like to see you;

in Hondarribia

we were hearing  
that there was  
a lady *bertsolari*  
who did not have equivalent  
in all Euskal Herria.

2 To be sure of the truth  
of the rumors of such fame  
many scholars  
visited her,  
about ten or twelve  
people from San Sebastian;  
the one with the enormous beard  
that went with all of them  
is writing to you  
these *bertsoak*.

3 I am a *bertsolari*  
but I have heard  
that you do not  
think I am;  
that you think like that  
is not a surprise:  
my knowledge  
I did not show

as I did not feel

the need to do so.

4 It is possible that that need

comes to me

because I remember

that you promised me,

taking into account

my desires,

that if I wanted

some fun

you would come

to Renteria.

5 Whenever you want madam

come visit us

I let you choose

the day:

if you offer me

an opportunity

I would not

waste it,

we would talk

To one another again.

6 If then

I feel in the mood,  
 I will give you the opportunity  
 we did not have last time,  
 more than to anyone else  
 even twice,  
 so that afterwards we judge  
 with a better knowledge,  
 if I am or not  
 a *bertsolari*.

In these *bertsoak*, Bilintx recognizes that Joxepa de Hondarria is famous for being a good *bertsolari*, and he invites her to improvise *bertsoak* against him. He seems to be attempting to defend his honor, after Joxepa de Hondarribia doubted his ability to compose *bertsoak*.

Despite the attention she received from *bertsolariak* like Bilintx, we do not have much information about this woman: apart from Bilintx's *bertsoak*, we do not know anything about her, not even her last name, which is significant, since, as Larrañaga Odriozola points out:

Un silencio tan compacto sobre una *bertsolari* de la envergadura que *Bilintx* atribuye a la de Hondarribia parece indicar que aquél no fue el mejor momento para que las mujeres dieran a conocer su habilidad improvisadora en público; de ahí que la memoria haya hecho todo por olvidarla, a excepción de los versos de Bizkarrondo (“Del *bertsolarismo* silenciado” 44).



Such a compact silence around a *bertsolari* as skilled as Bilintx claims the *bertsolari* from Hondarribia is seems to indicate that that was not the best moment for women to show their improvising skills in public; hence, memory has done everything possible in order to forget her, except for Bizkarrondo's verses.

Some other women have practiced *bertsolaritza* outside the house and have used it to fight men's stereotypes about women and to examine topics that they would not be able to bring up in any other context or using any other type of discourse. Larrañaga Odriozola mentions how *bertsolaritza* can function as a way for female *bertsolariak* to respond to male *bertsolariak*'s offenses towards women. A woman who did this is Joxepa Antoni Aranberri Petriarena (1865-1943), who practiced *bertsolaritza* at her workplace, a sewing workshop. This space could be considered something between a private and a public space, as it was outside of the house but, as she was accompanied only by other women, it was an exclusively feminine space. Once, she responded, under the demand of other single women from her village, to the *bertso jarriak* composed by the *bertsolari* Elizegi, also known as Pello Errota, in which he mocked *neskazaharrak*, that is, "old" single women. He said that if women do not get married, they become crazy, and that there is no such thing as a good old single lady. In her responses to Elizegi's *bertsoak*, she denies that stereotype of the single woman as crazy and bitter. She also makes it clear that the only reason why she responds to his *bertsoak* is that she has been asked to do so by her friends. Thus, she speaks for other women, voicing their opinions and creating a communal voice for *neskazaharrak*.

zuri bertsoak jartzeko,  
bañan lagunak esan dirate  
isilik ez egoteko;  
motiborikan ez degu eman  
zu orrela mintzatzeko  
ezdiran gauzak esan dituzu,  
miña da minberatzeko  
*2 Ibaizabal*'en sari txiki bat  
irabazteagatikan,  
gogora etorri zaizun guztiya  
esan dezu gugatikan;  
nik esan behar banu, munduban  
zaude gaur guregatikan,  
zu sendatzeko sendagarririk  
etzan iñungo botikan.  
*3 Gu* ernegatzen bizi gerala  
senargairikanen ez ta,  
nere lagunen artean beintzat  
orrelakorik ezta;  
neri sinesten ez badirazu  
etxian asi galdezka,  
nik baño obeto emango dizu  
Bizentak errespuesta.

4 Zure amigo batek esan du  
 neskazar onik eztela,  
 orren ederki gure gañean  
 egin dezute pastela;  
 pruebarik asko berak baditu  
 ori egina eztela,  
 gure moduko pertsona ez da,  
 esango nuke bestela. (qtd. in Larrañaga Odriozola “Del bertsolarismo” 67)

1 I did not intend to  
 compose these *bertsoak* about you  
 but I have been told  
 that I should not remain silent;  
 we have not given a reason  
 for you to speak like that  
 you have said false things  
 which have hurt us

2 In order to win  
 that small prize in *Ibaizabal*  
 you have said about us  
 anything that came to your mind;  
 if I could respond to you,  
 you are in the world thanks to us  
 there is not in the whole world

a medicine that could cure you.

3 That we live bitter

because we do not have a husband,

that is not true

at least among my girlfriends;

if you do not believe me

start asking at home

Bizentak will give you

A better answer than mine.

4 One of your friends has said

there is no good single woman

what a good thing you have

done to us;

he has enough proof

that that is not true

or I would say that he is not

a person like us.

Elizegi and Joxepa Antoni Aranberri kept discussing this topic in several *bertsoak*, responding to each other in *bertso paperak*. At some point, the editor of the newspaper intervened in the discussion, taking Elizegi's side (Larrañaga Odriozola 67). This is an example of how female *bertsolariak* have been seen as a threat for social order, as the editor of the newspaper takes the male *bertsolari*'s side.

In a similar manner, Inaxia Etxabe (1933) responds to the *bertsoak* in which Basarri, a male *bertsolari*, talks about the defects young women from Gipuzkoa have: his *bertsoak* simulate a conversation between a grandfather and his grandson, in which the former warns the latter about the defects these women have: they are only concerned with looking good, reading and going to the movies, having fun, and they do not even know how to turn the stove on. Etxabe's response enumerates several defects men have. She affirms that, just by looking at a bar, anyone can see men's defects: they waste all their money on drinks, even if they know that it is bad for their health and their family's economy. The grandfather in Basarri's *bertsoak* tells his grandson he should be careful when deciding whom he is going to marry. In her *bertso*, Etxabe also asks young women to be very careful when choosing a husband (Larrañaga Odriozola "Del bertsolarismo silenciado" 45). This is a direct response to Basarri's *bertsoak*, which are about women's defects. Even though both men and women's defects are similar, in the sense that they are all related with stepping out of the house, the fact that men spend time and money at the bar was not seen as a defect. By doing this, she is questioning and reorganizing the social structure according to which women are supposed to be in the house, while it is acceptable that men are in public spaces.

Interestingly enough, Elizegi composes *bertsoak* mocking the women who, for whatever reason, did not follow the social rules according to which women are supposed to live their lives; that is, women who did not get married. In the same way, what Basarri's *bertsoak* criticize are those women who, instead of assuming their role as housewives or mothers, only care about those things that could not be more unrelated to the private space of the house. Joxepa Antoni Aranberri's *bertsoak* go against the

stereotypes about single women some men have, without attacking men's defects.

She breaks with the expectation that all women should get married, and denies that they even want to do so. Etxabe's responses to Basarri's *bertsoak*, however, make reference to men's defects, and also emphasize the presence of men in public spaces, specifically bars. Then, she goes against the double standard according to which it is acceptable for men to spend their time and money outside of the house, while it is intolerable that women do the same thing.

Improvised verses as a way to fight stereotypes or express topics that are taboo in a certain community have been or are used in several societies that privilege oral culture. As Wisker points out, "oral literature and oral storytelling forms are potentially powerful political expressions, inflected by culture and also gender. For silenced colonial Others, and women in particular (doubly silenced as secondary citizens) expressions in literary form, first oral and then much later written, have offered a powerful opportunity." (130)

For example, Abu-Lughod studies how the women in a Bedouin community in Egypt use improvised verses, known as *ghinnāwas* 'little songs' in order to express the emotions and feelings they cannot share with men because they are not socially accepted and therefore cannot express in any other way. This genre is used by men and women who want to express feelings that violate the moral code (xvii), but "it is a genre of poetry that women use. Through it, I argue, they express sentiments that violate the very moral code they uphold so passionately with their practices of modesty" (Abu-Lughod xxi). Women use this genre when there are no men around, and they do not share the verses they improvise with any men. Like Basque female *bertsolariak*, these Bedouin women

utilize improvised verses to create a discourse that allows them to fight the dominant figure in their societies: men.

An additional example from another culture in which women improvised verses is that of the *trobairitz*, that is, female Provençal troubadours. Usually, the role women had in Provençal lyric poetry was a passive one: they were the receivers of the verses that men dedicated to them, in addition to being the inspirers or muses of those verses. However, as De Riquer points out, there are some cases in which women were not only the receivers or muses of troubadours, but the ones who created the verses:

Invirtieron el discurso viril de la cansó trovadoresca en un “yo” femenino, de modo que la donna, la señora, pasó a convertirse de suplicada y reverenciada en suplicante del amor; y la merced, la recompensa otorgando el amor, pasó a ser privilegio masculino (33).

They converted the virile discourse of the troubadour cansó into a “feminine “I,” in a way that the donna, the lady, passed from being the recipient of the pleas and the revered one, to being the one who begs for love; and the favor, the reward of granting love, got to be a privilege of men.

As happens with female *bertsolariak*, the *trobairitz*’s production did not get much attention, and even in the twentieth century, they were still considered by scholars a marginal product, and were judged as sensual (De Riquer 33). By being seen as sensual, they are still being perceived as a body, and their verses are denied their quality.

Both troubadours and male *bertsolariak*’s creation has been acknowledged by society, while *trobairitz* and female *bertsolariak*’s production has been overlooked, on

the one hand, because these were women who were “invading” the public space that belongs to men; on the other hand, because the way in which they go against men has been seen as a threat to the normal functioning of their societies.

Antton Kazabon realizes that the *bertso* is about dominating the other, which would explain why women have not been part of this form of orature throughout history (Larrañaga Odriozola “Teatralidad y poética” 422). Since *bertsolaritza* contests consist of two people, responding to what the opponent said before, trying to say something more astute than what the other said, this would clash with the role women were supposed to have: weak, modest, and respectful to men. It was not until 1985 that a woman took part in *Bertsolari Txapelketa Nagusia* (Main *Bertsolaritza* Contest) for the first time in history (Larrañaga Odriozola “Teatralidad y poética” 399). However, this is starting to change and nowadays it is becoming more normal to find women who participate actively in *bertsolaritza* contests, which take place in public spaces. They are becoming more and more present in the square (Larrañaga Odriozola “Teatralidad y poética” 423). As Aulestia notices, *bertsolaritza* is a popular, oral phenomenon that is changing to adapt to the modern, urban reality. This new reality would include the presence of women in the public space, not only as audience, but also as performers. The fact that women are now participating more actively in *bertsolaritza* affects the characteristics of this tradition, adding a new voice to it. As Larrañaga Odriozola states, the presence of women contributes to the creation of a balance between the different visions of the world men and women have (“Del bertsolarismo silenciado” 45).

Aulestia mentions how the *bertsolari* Egaña publicly referred to the active presence of women in a contest in 1982:



He alluded to the 1982 championship were women appeared only as a topic assigned to the *bertsolaris*, whereas in 1997 a woman was participating in the final round. Playing with the words *gai* (topic) and *gai izan* (to be capable of) he sang:

...bertsolaritza aurrera doa

emakumeen harira;

laroita biko txapelketari

Jarri gaitzen begira,

orduan gaitzat hartzen genitun

ta orain eurak gai dira

...*Bertsolaritza* advances

at the hands of women;

let's look at the

1982 championship,

then we considered them topics

and today they are capable (of being performers). (*Bertsolari Txapelketa*

*Nagusia* 97, 222, qtd. in Aulestia "The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New

Millenium" 232)

Even though the number of female *bertsolariak* that participate in contests is increasing, there is still a big difference between men and women in *bertsolaritza*. For instance, the number of female *gai jartzaileak* (those who decide the topic the *bertsoak* are going to be about) is very small (Larrañaga Odriozola "Teatralidad y poética" 413). This is something that needs to be taken into consideration, since without women's input

in choosing the topic, we only have men's ideas about which topics are relevant to present day society, and female performers have to improvise *bertsoak* about the topics imposed on them by men. Another aspect we should be aware of is that, while at *bertsolaritza* competitions at primary school level the number of girls is as high as the number of boys, this number starts to decrease at university level. The reason that has been given to justify this fact is that girls dedicate all their energy to study. However, there must be another reason, because boys also study, but do not stop practicing *bertsolaritza* (Larrañaga Odriozola "Teatralidad y poética" 422).

While their presence in the public spaces like bars, squares and *bertsolaritza* contests is something new for most women, their task of transmitting oral tradition has been crucial for the presence of this tradition in public spaces. First of all, it is because of their work that men have been able to take Basque oral tradition from the private to the public space, so in this sense, they are responsible for the presence of *bertsolaritza* in public spaces: as women improvise *bertsoak* in the house while taking care of the children and other domestic chores, children start having contact with *bertsolaritza* in the house, from their mothers. Secondly, they have taught Basque to their children, created schools in Basque and writing materials when this language was illegal (White "Mission for the Millenium" 139). Then, they have stepped out of the private space of the house into the public space of the schools. However, this task women have carried out is still related to their primary role as mothers, who pass on their language and culture to their children, which does not provide them with any prestige.

### **Representation of Women in Popular Songs**

As mentioned in the introduction, songs are a fundamental part of Basque lifestyle. As Egaña notices, they are a manner of creating a sense of community, especially in social situations, such as weddings, dinners at restaurants and family reunions. In public spaces, such as bars and restaurants, it is men that sing them, but inside the house, it is both men and women that sing them. In this section, however, I am going to focus on the way in which masculine and feminine roles are presented in Basque popular songs, as, like Ansorena, I believe that songs are a reflection of society.

In *Cancionero popular vasco* ‘Basque popular songbook’, where songs are organized by topic, there is a section about the topic of marriage, in which the expected roles of women as housewives who stay in the house and want to get married, and men as breadwinners and people who stay out of the house are represented. Nevertheless, very often, these songs are spaces for expressing the subversion of these expected roles. Interestingly enough, Ansorena expresses his decision to have a section about marriage and another about love, as these two do not always go together (39). Some of the subtopics include: the fear of not getting married, the interference of families in relationships, arranged marriages between young women and rich old men, unsuccessful marriages, and wishing good luck to the newly weds. Only one song expresses a positive opinion about marriage, but it is hard to know if it is ironical or not (Ansorena 39-40). This song is “Nere andrea (Kaiku, Praisku Txomin)” ‘My wife (Kaiku, Praisku Txomin)’, where the narrator describes his wife as a good person, loved by her neighbors, and talks about how happy he is (Ansorena 65-6).

Among the songs that were sung the day of the wedding, to wish happiness and good luck to the newly weds, we have “Ezkonberriak” ‘The Newly weds’, which is about how happy the couple is, and “Andre Nobia” ‘Mrs. Bride’, forms part of a tradition related to the wedding day:

A las ceremonias que antaño se celebraban el día de la boda, se les llamaba Ioiak, De mañana, los amigos del novio, acompañados por txitularis, acudían a casa de la novia y desayunaban allí. Luego la acompañaban a la iglesia, y posteriormente recorrían las calles del pueblo. En el banquete de bodas, mientras se servía el errekia (pollo asado), los txistularis dedicaban esa pieza a los recién casados.

The ceremonies celebrated in the past were called *Ioiak*. In the morning, the groom’s friends, accompanied by *txistu*<sup>11</sup> players, would go to the bride’s house and eat breakfast there. Then, they would walk her to church, and afterwards, they would walk the streets of the village. During the wedding banquet, while roasted chicken was being served, the *txistu* players would dedicate their song to the newly weds.

In that tradition, we can see the expected roles of men and women: the bride is in the house, but the men, after going there and taking her to church, keeping her company when in a public space, walk the streets of the village.

The songs “Aita San Antonio” ‘Father Saint Anthony’ and “Neskazaharrak” ‘Old Maids’ are about the desire to get married. “Aita San Antonio” is about the tradition of

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<sup>11</sup> Ansorena describes the *txistu*, as the main instrument in folk Basque music, played in combination with the *tamboril* (20). The *txistu* is a wind instrument, a variant of a flute, and the *tamboril* a percussion instrument, a type of a small drum.

going to the festivity of Urkiola in order to find a husband or a wife, which is still done today. This song does not distinguish between men and women's desire to get married. However, "Neskazaharrak," as even the title indicates, is about old maids' processions to St. Madeleine's chapel to ask the saint for a good husband, which she does not want to do:

Santuak esaten die  
 Buruakin ez, buruakin ez, buruakin ez,  
 Zergatikan lehenago akrodatu ez,  
 Akrodatu ez, orain batere ez. (Ansorena 43)

The saint tells them  
 no shaking her head, no shaking her head, no shaking her head,  
 since they did not remember before,  
 remember before, now nothing.

In this song, the ones who are willing to find a husband are older women who did not marry when they were younger. The fact that they ask for a good husband, and not just for a husband, indicates that they are women who do not just want to marry any man, and thus prefer to be single than to get married only to follow social rules. However, they still decide to go ask the saint for a husband, and her negative to give them one could be seen as a kind of punishment to those who at some point decided to break social conventions.

"Ama eta alaba" 'The mother and the daughter' is about an arranged marriage between a young girl and a rich old man. In this song, the daughter complains that the mother made her marry an eighty year old man when she was only fifteen, and that she

would have preferred to marry a young man, even if he does not have money (Ansorena 44-5), but the mother tells her that that is not a good idea, that the old man will die very soon and that then the daughter will have a good life (Ansorena 44-5). Here, the role of a man as a provider for his wife is present. It is also important to notice that for the mother, marriage has nothing to do with love; it is just a practical thing, which makes sense economically. However, for the daughter, the role of the husband as a breadwinner is not that important, and we can see that she is more interested in marrying a younger man.

The counterpoint to this song would be “Zer deabrukeria?” ‘What mischief?’, where someone criticizes an old man who wants to get married, telling him that at that age, one should not get married just to be warm in bed, that there are other options. He also recommends that if he still decides to get married, when he wakes up in the morning, he should kick his wife out of bed (Ansorena 46-7). Here, the old man is presented as someone who is no longer able to perform his role as a husband. In addition, the woman is portrayed as a utilitarian object that should be mistreated.

The topic of a marriage impeded by families is present in “Erreguetan” ‘Praying’, where the girl tells her boyfriend that, since his mother does not allow her to marry him, she intends to become a nun. She also promises him she will be faithful to him, that she will always remember him and that they will be together in heaven (Ansorena 48-9). In this song, the woman is represented as what a good woman is supposed to be like: willing to marry, but if this is not possible, dedicated to religious life, where she can remain faithful to the man she loves.

In “Pello Joxepe” we have the topic of a man that doubts that his wife is faithful to him: while he is in the bar, he hears his wife has had a baby. Then, he returns home and denies that the baby is his, and that his wife should find who the baby’s father is. In the end, he attributes the child’s paternity to the priest:

Abade batek eraman dizkit  
 Umea eta andrea.  
 Haurra berea bazuen ere,  
 Andrea nuen nerea. (Ansorena 53)  
 A priest has taken away from me  
 The child and the wife.  
 Even though the child was his,  
 The wife was mine.

In this song, according to narrator and the protagonist, the woman subverts the role of the faithful wife, but she is at home. The man is represented as occupying the space he is supposed to be in: the bar, where he is even when his wife is having a baby. Here, the division of the masculine and feminine spaces is clear.

Obviously, this song is narrated from a man’s perspective, as are “Ezkongaietan” ‘When we were boyfriend and girlfriend’ and “Nere andrea” ‘My wife’, whose main topic is also an unsuccessful marriage. In “Ezkongaietan,” the man talks about his wife, who, according to him, used to be pretty until they got married, but she is no longer pretty, and he is sad. He then criticizes her abilities as a good housewife, saying that she is lazy, she needs a man to survive, and does not clean the house properly. In addition, he complains that her clothes are old and in bad condition, and that she likes to sing, drink

and party (Ansorena 57-8). Thus, the woman in this song subverts the traditional role as a housewife who cleans the house for her husband, and instead parties, drinks and sings. These all, together with her physical appearance, are things that give the man the idea that he has the right to complain. In the same way, in “Nere andrea,” the husband complains about his wife. He affirms that he would sell her to those who say that she is pretty for the same price he bought her. He also complains about how she dresses: she wears a dirty shirt for seven weeks, as she is too lazy to change it (Ansorena 59). So in these two songs, the husbands criticize similar things about his wives: how they dress, and how dirty they are.

We also have songs that offer us the women’s point of view about unsuccessful marriages: “Bart hil zitzaidan senarra” ‘My husband died last night’, “Esaten dute (Nere senarra) ‘They say (My husband)’”, and “Nere senar tontozko” ‘My silly husband’. In “Bart hil zitzaidan senarra,” the widow affirms that she wishes her husband had died before, as he was old, bent, blind and limp, and he was good for nothing. Thus, here, the woman does not need a husband, and she considers she is better off without him. In “Esaten dute (Nere senarra),” the woman affirms that she regrets she married her husband, and she started regretting it as soon as she did, as after that day, she has lost her beauty, she does not have as much to eat as she used to before she got married, her husband goes to the bar, drinks and returns home to beat her, and she has less clothes than she did before getting married. Because of all this, she assures us that she cries a lot and would be willing to leave her husband, as this would make her happier (Ansorena 61-3). In this song, the man is represented as being in the bar, a supposedly masculine space, and he is not a good husband, as he does not fulfill his role as a breadwinner (the wife



complains that she does not have oil to cook, and she has had to sell her clothes); in addition, he beats his wife. As in “Bart hiz zitzaidan senarra,” the wife is represented as an independent woman who would prefer to be by herself, without a husband. In “Nere senar tontozko,” the woman describes her husband as a silly man who eats without control; in addition, he is lazy and procrastinates or leaves his tasks to others; furthermore when he goes to the market to do business, he gets drunk, so his friends need to take him home (Ansorena 64). The woman in this song complains about the fact that the man gets drunk, which traditionally, was not badly seen. In addition, in the same way as the men in “Nere andrea” and “Ezkongaietan,” where women are criticized for being lazy, in this song it is the man who is criticized for this reason. These three songs give a voice to women, break with the assumption that women need husbands or live better when they have one, and criticize men for doing things that were socially accepted.

The first five songs in the section about wine are about women who like to drink it, which, according to Ansorena is a recurring topic in Basque songs (23). In the five next songs ‘Wine and the lives of drinkers and gluttons is praised’ “se elogia el vino y la vida de bebedores y triperos” (Ansorena 23). Interestingly enough, the lives of women who drink are not praised. The five songs about women who drink are from a man’s perspective.

In the first song, “Andre bat ikusi det” ‘I have seen a woman’, a man says that he saw a woman in the bar, and describes her as wearing her husband’s pants (Ansorena 24). The song ends with the woman telling the bartender to keep the pants until she brings the money for her drinks (Ansorena 24). Then, in this song, the woman is presented as masculine, as she is wearing men’s pants, and as someone who does not mind that she

does not have enough money for paying for the wine. In addition, she does not have any problem giving her pants to the bartender.

The second song, “Atzo, atzo” ‘Yesterday, yesterday’ is about ten old ladies who died the day before. The second two verses of this short song say:

Baldin ardoa merkatze ez bada

hilko dirade beste asko. (Ansorena 25)

If wine does not get cheaper

a lot of other old ladies are going to die.

The forth song is also about old women who drink, which, according to Ansorena, is a very common topic in Basque songs (25). Here, the old ladies from Lexaka appear as prone to consuming alcohol, always looking for something to drink and “larrua estaltzeko/arroparik gabe” ‘with no clothes/to cover themselves’ (Ansorena 29). This reminds us of the woman in the fist song, who is ready to give up her pants in order to pay for her drinks.

The third song, “Donostiako hiru damatxo” ‘Three little ladies from San Sebastian’ is also about three women who work as seamstresses in Renteria, a town near San Sebastian, who know how to sew, but are better at drinking wine. The song mentions that they go to bars wearing red skirts and leave drunk, and that they have made a bet about who can drink more wine without getting drunk (Ansorena 26-7). Apart from drinking wine, which is what makes them happy, they also spend time in the street, with men:

mutilalerkin egoten dira

kalean jolaskerian. (Ansorena 27)

they spend time on the street  
 playing with their boyfriends.

In contrast with the negative way in which these three women are represented, the song gives a positive image of the fishermen (obviously men) who, just like the three ladies, drink wine and cider:

Donostiako arrantzaleak  
 dira txit gizon bapoak.  
 Gaztelupeko sagardoakin  
 egiten ongi tragoak. (Ansorena 28)  
 The fishermen from San Sebastian  
 are very good looking men.  
 They drink a lot  
 of cider from Gaztelupe.

Then, in this song, the contrast between women and men who drink is clear: while women are judged for doing it, the only comment the song makes about men is that they are good looking.

Finally, the fifth song, “Maritxu,” is about a woman who has bad habit of drinking alcohol: “malas mañas tienes tú<sup>12</sup>” ‘you have bad habits’ (Ansorena 30). However, the fourth verse says: “bizitzen badakizu” ‘you know how to live’ (Ansorena 30). Then, this song is ambiguous: while it says that she has bad habits, it also recognizes that she knows what to do to have a good life. It is very possible that living like that is

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<sup>12</sup> In Spanish in the song

considered as something positive for men, but as something bad when it is a woman who does it.

In contrast with the negative image of the women who drink, the songs about men and alcohol are always more positive, and in them wine is represented as something good that makes people better and happier. Then, here we can see once more that Basque songs tend to criticize those women who step in “male” spaces or do “male” activities. These songs used to be sung by men, in public spaces like bars and cider houses. Again, different forms of Basque orature and women have not traditionally appeared together.

### **Old Sayings**

There are also old sayings about women, many of which transmit a negative image of them. In many of them they are presented in relation with their role as wives. The following proverb presents marriage as a negative experience that needs to be regretted:

Ezkondu eta damutu. (Esukal Jakintza n.pag.)

Get married and regret it.

In the following proverb, one’s wife is presented as being bad, or at least not as good as other women, as it affirms that the best wife is the neighbor. This implies that every man believes that other women are better wives, and thus, no woman is good:

Zakurrik onena etxekoa: emaztea auzokoa.

([http://es.wikiquote.org/wiki/Proverbios\\_en\\_euskera\\_n.pag](http://es.wikiquote.org/wiki/Proverbios_en_euskera_n.pag))

The best dog is the one from the house: the best wife is the neighbor.

There is another proverb about a kind of women that is bad. That proverb classifies women in three groups: the wife and the relative, who would be the good

women, and every woman that is not inside any of those two groups, is supposed to be dangerous and bring problems:

Lehenengo andrea da emazte, bigarrena senikide, hirugarrena gaitz eta kalte. (<http://euskaljakintza.blogspot.com/euskal-atsotitzak/> n.pag.)

The first woman is the wife, the second one, a close relative, the third one, bad and harmful.

However, there is one saying that does not reflect marriage as something negative:

Ezkondutako urtea eta txerria hildako urtea onenak.

(<http://euskaljakintza.blogspot.com/euskal-atsotitzak/> n.pag.)

The year you get married and the year you kill the pig are the best ones.

In general, then, in the same way as in popular songs, women and marriage, unless a few exceptions, are presented as something bad that should be avoided.

### **Basque Female Writers**

Not only have women contributed to the survival of Basque language and oral tradition and orature in the space of the house, but they have also played an enormous role in the creation of the written materials that have allowed Basque to evolve from being the language of the house and the street to a language in which it is possible to express ideas in written form. We have already seen that the distinction between the oral and the written is not always clear; in a similar manner, we could affirm that the distinction between the public and the private space where women are supposed to be is not always clear.

After Basque became co-official with Spanish, it began to be taught in public schools, where children had the obligation to study it. In the same way, many adults needed to learn it because it was now required to show proficiency in this language when attempting to get a public job. This also affected those adults who could already speak Basque, who now had to show their proficiency in this language by passing an exam. Therefore, new materials, both for learning Basque and for the new audience who had already acquired the ability to read, were created. Eventually, writers started to produce their literary work in Basque. Most of them are men, but there are also some women who have chosen Basque as their literary language. However, they are being excluded from many studies. For example, Jon Kortazar does not mention any woman in his article “El canon en la literatura vasca” ‘The canon in Basque literature.’ This does not mean that there are not Basque women who write, but that they are not mentioned in many scholarly articles and thus do not form part of the canon. This lack of recognition of female writers’ work makes Gabilondo consider them “una minoría más” ‘one more minority’ (“Del exilio materno a la utopía personal” 33), while White refers to them as a minority within a minority, a group with a double minority status (“Mission for the Millenium” 141). In addition, they do not seem to have a group identity. As Gabilondo notices, they do not edit books together and do not identify themselves as a group. He affirms that “las escritoras vascas no tienen habitación propia como grupo, y tampoco parecen quererla” ‘Basque female writers do not have a room of their own as a group, and they do not seem to want one’ (“Del exilio materno a la utopía personal” 33). Here, he is making reference to Virginia Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own,” where she points out that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write

fiction” (n.pag.). However, this article was published in 1998, and things have changed since then, with female authors winning literary prizes and the publications of works like Ana Urkiza’s *Zortzi unibertso, zortzi idazle* ‘Eight Universes, eight writers’ in 2006 . Nevertheless, even in this text, we can still see a certain sense of isolation some Basque writers have: Arantxa Urretabizkaia says that at some point in her life, she realized that she did not know how to write as a woman: “bat-batean, emakumea nintzela jabetu nintzen, eta ez nekien nola idatzi behar nuen emakumeek bezala idazteko” ‘suddenly, I realized that I was a woman and that I didn’t know how to write as a woman’ (Urkiza 39). This implies that women are supposed to write in a different way from men, but also that she lacks female referents in Basque literature.

In his article, “Del exilio materno a la utopía personal: Política cultural en la narrativa vasca de mujeres” From maternal exile to personal utopia: Cultural politics in the narrative by Basque women (1998), Gabilondo counts twenty-one women that write in Basque, of whom only thirteen write literary works (the rest are translators, or write other type of materials). Gabilondo chooses to include these women who write in Basque, even if they do not write literary works. He also makes the choice to include those women who have not written much because, as White points out, there are many men that have not written much either, but are recognized as Basque writers (“Mission for the Millenium” 265). White makes us realize that “the fact that women make up 53 percent of the human population, but only 18 percent of Basque writers, underscores the disparity between the number of Basque women who write (and publish) and their male counterparts” (“Mission for the Millenium” 140).

Thus, both Gabilondo and White are aware of the imbalance that exists between male and female writers when deciding who should and who should not be included in the canon of Basque literature. White has pointed out the need to “engender” literature, that is, the need to give acknowledgement to those women who write in Basque. She is aware of the fact that Basque literature is a minority literature, and she asks the following question: “how can Basque prosper in a postmodern world dominated by English and Anglo culture if 18 percent of all works written in Euskera are ignored, shunted aside, and treated as unworthy of inclusion?” (“Mission for the Millenium” 140). This is related to Gabilondo’s affirmation that Basque female writers are a minority, or White’s affirmation that they are a minority within a minority.

Gabilondo believes that, at the present time, there are few possibilities for Basque female writers to become part of the canon of Basque literature, even those who receive some recognition. He affirms that today there are very few “*personajes*” ‘characters’ in Basque literature. He defines “*personajes*” as those people with social relevance, unique, extravagant, in literature or film. “*Personajes*” distance themselves from the other people in their same profession, due to a historic and political aura they have (“Del exilio materno” 33). According to him, the only “*personaje*” in contemporary Basque literature would be Bernardo Atxaga. He also recognizes some “*semipersonajes*” or “*personajes periféricos*” ‘semi-characters or peripheral characters’, like Ramón Saizarbitoria and Joseba Sarrionaindia. The rest are, according to Gabilondo, “*no-personajes*” ‘non characters’. So he does acknowledge that there are many male writers that are “*no-personajes*”, who do not form part of the canon, but it is true that the only “*personaje*,” as well as the few “*semipersonajes*” he mentions, are men.



According to Gabilondo, the reason why Basque literature written by women has been marginalized has to do with the fact that their works tend to reflect an individual, personal voice, when Basque culture privileges communal voices:

Hasta ahora, la literatura vasca de mujeres ha sido marginal en la cultura vasca, que ha privilegiado obras que representan y alegorizan al País Vasco como cuerpo nacionalista orgánico. Las voces personales se han marginado a favor de voces comunitarias, a su vez masculinas (“Del exilio materno” 36).

Until now, Basque literature produced by women has been marginal in Basque culture, which has privileged works that represent and allegorize the Basque Country as an organic nationalist body. Personal voices have been marginalized in favor of communal voices, which are also masculine.

Female writers have tended to represent an individual, personal voice in their novels. However, there are male writers who have chosen to do this too and their work still forms part of the canon. For example, Ramón Saizarbitoria’s work *Gorde nazazu lurpean* presents us with several characters’ personal experiences, not with a communal voice of the Basque Country. The same would be true for Bernardo Atxaga’s *Obabakoak*, where the voices of several individuals are represented in numerous short stories. These characters could be from anywhere else in the world (and some of them, in fact, are from somewhere else), and the stories could have taken place anywhere else.

One of the women who writes in Basque and whose work has been marginalized is Mari Asun Landa. She is often excluded from the canon because she writes children’s literature. What she does is related to the role of women as primary caregiver of children,

which is something that could be extended to some other female writers who choose Basque as their literary language:

As a result, many women who write in Basque have expressed themselves within the limitations of Basque society's domestic expectations by creating child-related and education-related materials. As far as 1804, Vicenta Moguel felt she had to apologize for having the audacity to pick up her pen and write, even though she produced fables to please a child (Moguel 1804). In this century, women like Tene Mujika and Julene Azpeitia expended considerable effort on the maintenance and teaching of the Basque language, and their creative energies as well were channeled through the acceptable venue. They wrote stories for children. Basque women today continue to first publish within this culturally approved arena (White "Mission for the Millenium" 136).

The fact that Mari Asun Landa writes for children does not mean that her work has a lower quality than that produced by male writers who write for an adult audience and whose literary production is recognized. As Olaziregi Alustiza notices, Landa's literary production is of unquestionable literary quality, but negatively conditioned because she is a woman who writes for children and in Basque ("El universo literario de Mari Asun Landa" 426). So her literary production is not only doubly marginalized because she is a woman who writes in Basque, but it would be triply marginalized because, in addition, she writes books for children, which would imply that she does not transcend a woman's role of raising children. By writing children's literature, she is perceived as a woman assuming the role of the mother who tells stories to children.

Because of this, and because she does not adopt a communal voice in her works, her literary production is disregarded as one of lower quality, that should not be considered Literature with a capital “L”. However, even if she follows the role of the mother that tells stories to children, she also subverts this role, as well as the separation between public and private spaces and the oral and the written word.

First, she subverts the role of the mother as a storyteller because this kind of storytelling is usually done orally: the story may be invented, sometimes improvised by the mother, or it can be a story that she already knows, maybe a story that forms part of the community, or she can even read it from a book, but it is still oral, since she tells or reads it out loud to the child. Mari Asun Landa’s stories are for children and teenagers who can already read their own books, not the voice of a mother telling a story to the child, but the voice of the narrator telling a story.

So she does not really perform the mother’s role, and neither do the female characters in her stories act in the ways expected according to their gender. Olaziregi has noticed that the female protagonists in her stories, both children and adults, invert traditional sexist stereotypes (“El universo literario de Mari Asun Landa” 431). For example, in *Katuak bakar-bakarrik sentitzen direnean* ‘When cats feel really lonely (1997), both Mainer (the protagonist) and her mother decide to leave the space of the house, each of them for different reasons: the mother decides to become a theater actress, and later works in television, which makes her husband divorce her. Mainer decides to leave the house in order to go look for her cat, who has disappeared from the farmhouse where she was staying. The only woman who stays in the house is the grandmother. She

is even represented as a woman who carries out the traditional role of telling stories in the house:

Baina, amona bera ere nahikoa berezia da. Nekez eta gogoz kontra utzi zuen bere baserria aitona hil ondoren, eta oraindik landare, zuhaitz, eta belarren izenak gogoan ditu, baita animalia eta abereen ohiturak ere, hemengo edo hango baserriarraren pasadizuak, kontu zaharrak... baserriko bizimodua herenegun utzi zuela ematen du (20).

But grandma herself is also very particular. She left her farmhouse against her wishes after grandpa died, and she still remembers the names of all the plants, trees and herbs, as well as the habits of animals, the anecdotes, the old stories of this or that person from a farmhouse... it seems that she left the way of living in the farmhouse the day before yesterday.

Then, we can see that Maider's grandmother is the representation of the typical woman of the rural Basque Country: she remembers and is willing to share stories within the space of the house. Her voice would be a communal voice, as she can tell stories about people from different farmhouses.

We learn through Maider that her mother recites long poems to her. Thus, both her mother and her grandmother transmit stories and poems to her orally. However, the use of oral language the grandmother and the mother make is completely different: while the grandmother tells stories related to the Basque rural tradition of the farmhouse, the mother improvises, recites poems or does imitations: "bai, orain arte ez dut esan baina nire ama aktorea da, inprobisatzen dakien aktorea horietakoa izan da beti, une larrietan ere, lasaitasun handiz antzezten duena" 'yes, I haven't said anything till now, but my

mum is an actress, she has always been one of those actresses who know how to improvise, and she performs with great calm, also in bad moments' (18). Unlike the grandmother, the mother would be the representation of the modern Basque society, which has been influenced by cultural representations that come from all over the world. Furthermore, she ends up working for a television show, which is a newer form of orality.

Niri ilusioia egiten zidan ama eszenatokian irudikatzeak, askotan entzuna nuen olerki luzeak erreztatzen edota imitazioak eginez, eta oso ona iruditzen zitaidan. “Komeriante hutsa da” zioen amonak, nahiz eta jarraian “gezurra dirudi nire alaba denik” erantsi, harrituta bezala. (23)

Imagining my mother on a stage made me really excited, I often listened to her reciting long poems or doing imitations, and I thought she was very good. “She is a comedian” used to say my grandmother, although she added immediately, as if she were surprised “it doesn't seem true that she is my daughter.”

Here, we see the aforementioned difference between the grandmother's stories and the mother's way of performing: while the former places herself in front of her audience to tell them about Basque tradition, the latter needs a larger audience and pretends to be someone else. In that sense, the interaction between the mother and the audience is much more distant than the one between the grandmother and the audience.

In *Elixabete lehoi domatzailea* ‘Elixabete the lion tamer’ (1997) the protagonist is a little girl who has her dream come true during one night. Her dream is not what is expected of a girl: she wants to tame lions. In addition, the female lion she gets to tame is presented as the sensible one, unlike the male lion. In *Julieta, Romeo eta saguak* ‘Juliet,

Romeo and the mice' (1994), Julieta, even though she is initially presented as a woman who spends much time in her house, cooking (although she is a single girl who has a job), ends up breaking gender stereotypes. She changes throughout the tale: she decides to go on a diet when she falls in love, so she stops baking the cakes the mice who live in her house like; she decides to read and study, and finally, she is not scared when she sees the mice, unlike the boy she likes, who climbs on a chair. The mice's plan was to scare her, make the boy "save" her and bring them together, so that she would start cooking again, but in the end, the opposite happens. In this story, the woman transcends the private space of the house when he decides to study. However, the house also functions as a space of transgression, as it is there that she defies the conventional stereotype of women as weak beings that need to be protected by men.

Landa recognizes that, as a child, the books she used to read made her feel limited because she was a woman, so by presenting us with these women who break gender roles she is avoiding that a generation of girls feel the same way as she did:

Baina neska izateak nire amets guztiak lausotu zituen. Tom [Sawyer] mutila zen, eta ni neska. Gainera, Tom-en neska-laguna, Becky, lela hutsa zen: ezin zuen hitz zatarrik esan, beti negarrez zegoen, beti beldurrez... eta ni, ostera, Tom-ekin gauza guztietan identifikatzen nintzen. Niretzat, Tom-ek, askatasuna eta iraultza zekarren (Urkiza 75).

But being a girl steamed all my dreams. Tom [Sawyer] was a boy, and I was a girl. In addition, Tom's girlfriend, Becky, was a fool: she could not say bad words, she was always crying, always scared... and I, unlike her,

identified myself with Tom in everything. For me, Tom brought freedom and revolution.

Secondly, Landa ends with the separation between the public and the private space because she writes and publishes. She is not the woman who has the traditional role of passing on her language and culture in her house, orally, but instead she writes, she tells stories in written form, which does not necessarily take place in the house. In addition, those books may be used in the public space of the school.

In the third place, her work transgresses the limits between the oral and the written: she writes, but we can still see how orality is present in her stories: “la oralidad estructura de una forma muy peculiar el pensamiento, y recursos como las repeticiones, aliteraciones o antítesis son utilizados en la comunicación donde no se ha impuesto la escritura” ‘Orality structures in a very peculiar way one’s thinking, and resources like repetitions and antitheses are utilized in communication where writing has not been imposed’ (Olaziregi “El universo literario de Mari Asun Landa” 441). The use of such resources is, in fact, common in oral societies, as they help with the memorization of a particular story. This use of these resources, which often serve as a strategy to memorize in oral societies, makes Landa’s work suitable for reading out loud. For example, in *Partxela* (1984), there are several examples of sentence structures that are repeated:

\_Tximist hori ikusi *al duzue*?

\_Urakana sentitu *al duzue*?

\_Arrapalada hots hori aditu *al duzue*? (18).

\_Have you seen that lightning?

\_Have you felt the hurricane?

\_Have you heard that sound of speed?

The title of her book *Kleta bizikleta* ‘Bicycle Kleta’ (1998) is an example of repetition and alliteration. Furthermore, in that book we can also find several examples of onomatopoeias:

\_Pi... Papapaaaaa...

Popopooooo....

Kotxe, autobus, kamioneta andana bat gure atzetik builaka (19-22).

\_ Pi... Papapaaaaa...

Popopooooo....

A line of cars, buses, trucks behind us, making noise.

Moreover, as Olaziregi notices, the characters in Landa’s books demonstrate the need to express themselves, to narrate their stories (“El universo literario de Mari Asun Landa” 448), in many cases, orally. For example, in *Katuak bakar-bakarrik sentitzen direnean*, Maider says: “baina aitarena eta beste guztia ondo ulertzeko gertatutako guztia hasiera-hasieratik kontatu behar dudala uste dut” ‘But in order to understand well what happened with my father and everything else I think I have to tell everything that happened from the beginning’ (13). The rest of the novel is Maider’s version of the story.

*Nire eskua zurean* ‘My hand in yours’ (2005) is, in this sense, very different from *Katuak bakar bakarrik sentitzen direnean*. Here, the protagonist is a teenage boy, Xabier, who is willing to tell his story about his mother and her new boyfriend, who is going to move into their house. In order to tell his story, he has a diary. While Maider’s narration reminds us of oral language, Xabier’s has the characteristics of written language. He is aware of his need to express himself through written language, and knows that other



people, such as his teachers, and his best friend, who asks him to write essays for him, know he is a good writer. His ability to write contrasts with his friends' attitude towards writing: when he asks the girl he likes if she is going to write him letters while she is on vacation, she answers: "Idatzi? A zer roiloa! Telefonoz deituko dizut!" 'Write? What a drag! I'll call you on the phone!' (36). When one of his teachers asks him to read what he wrote in front of the class, the rest of the class makes fun of him:

Ia hankaz gora erori nintzen maisuak idatzitakoa denon aurrean  
irakurtzeko agindu zidanean, oso polita atera zitzaidalako idazlan hura,  
idazten iaioa nintzelako. Puf!, tipo alua hura, egiatan!

Poeta! Poeta! Poeta!

Gelako guztiak builaka, algaraka. Neska guztiak txutxu-mutxuka, Txusmi  
"que se besen, que se besen" marruka (34).

I almost fell with my legs up when the teacher asked me to read what I had  
written in front of the whole class, because I had written a very nice job,  
because I was born to write. Uf! A stupid guy, that one, really!

Poet! Poet! Poet!

Everyone in the classroom making noise, laughing. All the girls  
whispering. Txusmi shouting "kiss, kiss, kiss<sup>13</sup>!"

However, not only does he recognize his ability to share stories in written form, but he also recognizes that he talks a lot: "Ni, berriz, nahiko berrtisua naiz irakasleek diotenez, ez dakit oso ondo zergatik" 'I, on the other hand, am very talkative, as the

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<sup>13</sup> In Spanish in the original.

teachers say, I don't know very well why' (32). Then, not only does he express himself through writing, but he also needs to communicate through oral language.

In the same way as there are characters who are willing to tell their stories, there are some characters who want to listen to them, such as Maider's grandmother: "Baina, gero, afori goxoa prestatzen zion, bainera ur beroaz bete eta ama sukaldeko mahaira esertzen zenean bere ondoan jarri eta telebistaoren gorabeherak kontatzeko eskatzen zion" 'However, then, she would prepare a nice dinner for her, fill the bathtub with hot water and when mum sat at the kitchen table, she would go to her side and ask her to tell her the ups and downs of the television show' (48). So we can see that the grandmother turns the secondary orality of television into primary orality.

In *Elefante txori-bihotza* 'Bird-hearted elephant' (2001), the protagonist, a teacher who gives lessons to elephants, writes a letter to a child, Xabier, in which she shares a story with him. The need for this character to tell stories is also emphasized in another part of the novel, when she tries to tell a story to the elephants she gives classes to. Unlike the grandmother in *Katuak bakar-bakarrik sentitzen direnean*, the elephants do not want to listen to her stories, as they claim they do not understand their purpose. Thus, we have a character trying to maintain the tradition of telling stories, fighting those who are not interested in them.

In Arantxa Urretabizkaia's novel, *Zergatik, panpox?* 'Why, honey?' (1979), we also find a character who feels the need to express herself: the main character, and narrator, is a woman whose husband, Txema, decided to leave her. They have a five-year-old son, Antxon. The female narrator tells us about one day in her life, starting when she wakes up in the morning and remembers what she dreamt, and ending at night, before she

goes to bed. During her day, she reflects about things like her separation, her duties as mother, her womanhood and her economic situation and work. The language she uses to express herself and to narrate her day makes the limits between the oral and the written become unclear: it is a novel, so we only have access to her thoughts through written language, but this written language reminds us of oral discourse. So this novel would be an example of what Zirimu refers to as “oral literature.” In fact, this novel has been acted as a play, where we have access to the protagonist’s feelings through oral language. However, she is also the non-traditional woman who is separated from her husband and who has a job. It is important to take into account that this novel was published in 1979, four years after Franco’s death, and a year after the 1978 Constitution was approved: this Constitution recognized Basque as an official language, as well as gender equality.

Regarding her role as a mother, she often tells stories to her son. So the main character has the same role as Basque traditional women: she is in charge of staying in the house with the children and telling them stories, as is made clear in various parts of the novel: “[...] bai, ipuin bat kontatuko dizut, konforme” ‘yes, tonight I’ll tell you a story, okay’ (18). Finally, she tells him one:

Bai, kontatuko ipuin bat oherakoan.... Egun batean, bazen arrantzale bat Euskal Herriko herri txiki batean, eta arrantzale horrek paneka polit bat harrapatu zuen Antxonentzat, baina Antxonek ez zuen jan nahi izan. Bale, egia da, ipuin honek ez du balio, baina hobe zenuen arraina arrautza baino, arrain asko jan behar duzu mutil haundia egingo bazara, bero baldin badago, bota haize pixka bat ... Tira, ohera, bai, kontatuko agindutako ipuina... (35)

Yes, I will tell you a story at bedtime. Once upon a time, there was a fisherman in a small village in the Basque Country, and that fisherman caught a nice fish for Antxon, but Antxon didn't want to eat it. Okay, it's true, this story does not count, but it would be better for you to eat the fish instead of the egg, you have to eat a lot of fish in order to become a big boy. Come on, go to bed, yes, I will tell you the story I promised...

The narrator's role as a mother, as described by Villasante, is also seen when she shows she is familiar with some children's songs. At some point in the novel, when she is by herself, she remembers one song. That song appears in the novel in the middle of one of her thoughts, interrupting it: "A, a, a, maite dut ama. E, e, e, txikiak hemen daude" 'A, a, a, I love my mum. E, e, e, the little ones are here' (22). Interestingly enough, the thought that this song interrupts is when she is reminding herself that she should be getting her period soon, maybe that same day, a thought that is linked to her identity as a woman.

This woman finds herself both in public spaces (her work and the coffee shop) and private spaces (the house). We can also find a space we could consider to be something in between: the hairdresser's. This is a public space because, in a way, it serves the same function as a bar: it is a place where people can talk, share stories. It is a private space in the sense that it gives women some privacy, as it is a space occupied only by women, which allows them to share certain stories they would not share with men.

In this space, she speaks and is spoken to in Spanish, unlike when she talks with her son. This shows, once again, the idea supported by Villasante, according to whom the function of women is to pass on the language to the next generations: the main character

in this novel talks to her son in Basque, but outside of the house, she switches to Spanish, as she is not performing her role as a mother there. Again, we can see a situation of diglossia: Basque is the language used in the house, and Spanish the language used outside this space.

The protagonist brings the private and public spaces together: she is in all of them: in the public, the private, and one that shares characteristics with both. Thus, the narrator of this novel blurs the distinction between oral and written language as well as that between private and public spaces. The limits between spaces are blurred, because she moves among all of them, she belongs to all of them, even though she is not completely comfortable in any of them. She fulfills her role as a mother in all of them, but she also completes other tasks that are not linked directly to her maternity. The distinction between the oral and the written word is not that clear because her style reminds us of oral language, and the novel is full of stories she is telling her son, as well as children's songs. Again, we have an example of what Zirimu calls "oral literature."

White is aware of the authenticity of this novel, as it is very realistic. The thoughts, worries and tasks this woman have are the ones many women have in real life. White recognizes the author "was never granted the authority to speak universally of the Basque experience" ("Mission for the Millenium" 145). She realizes that only women who transcend their female identity can form part of Literature, not literature ("Mission for the Millenium" 137). In the same way as White, Gabilondo is conscious that this novel did not make its author a central "*personaje*" or "character" in Basque literature, as it did not end with the idea of the image of the phallic, natural and peripheral mother that is present in Basque contemporary literature ("Del exilio materno" 34).

Unlike the main character in *Zergatik, panpox?*, the protagonist of *Saturno*, another novel by Urretabizkaia is a man. The author made the choice to write from a man's perspective:

Badakit ez dela horrela irakurri, baina nik *Saturno* idazterakoan zera esan nuen: “orain maitasun istorio bat idatziko dut eta, gainera, protagonista mutil bat izango da”. Aspertuta nengoen beti protagonistatzat emakumeak erabiltzen ditugula entzuteaz eta behin, hitzaldi baten ostean, Montserrat Roig-ek, Rosa Monterok eta hirurok topo egin genuen eta elkarrekin gau osoa pasatu ondoren, apustu bat egin genuen: protagonistatzat gizonezko bat izango zuen nobela bana idatziko genuela (Urkiza 44).

I know it has not been read like that, but when I was going to write *Saturno*, I said this: “now I am going to write a love story and, in addition, the protagonist is going to be a boy.” I was tired of hearing that we always use women as protagonists and once, after a conference, Montserrat Roig, Rosa Montero and I got together and, after spending the whole night together, we made a bet: that each of us would write a novel that had a man as protagonist.

Here we can see that there are certain stereotypes associated not only with Basque female writers, but with female writers in general. In fact, the two other female writers she gets together with are not Basque. This also reinforces the aforementioned idea that Basque women do not have a group conscience. It seems that, at least for this writer, her identity as a woman is stronger than her Basque identity. What she does in this novel is go against the expectations society in general has about female writers.

Like in *Zergatik, panpox?*, in *Saturno*, orality is present, although in a very different way. While in the first novel, presenting a woman's voice, her language reminds us of oral speech, and there are references to children's stories and songs, in *Saturno*, orality is present in those spaces that have traditionally been related to men: the bar. For example, there is a reference to a Basque traditional song that is usually sung in bars by groups of men who are drinking together, "Boga, boga, marinela" 'Row, row, sailor'. This song, in addition, deals with topics that used to be related to men: it is about a sailor who has to leave his homeland and go to another country. Like the sailor in this song, the main character in this novel is a sailor who has to leave his house from time to time to go work in a ship.

Boga, boga, marinela, marinela

Joan behar dugu urrutira, urrutira

Bai, Indietara! Bai, Indietara!

Ez dut, nik ikusiko zure plai ederra.

Agur, Ondarruako itsaso bazterra.

Marinela, boga, marinela<sup>14</sup>. (Ansorena 281)

Row row, sailor, sailor

We have to go, far away, far away,

Yes, to the Indies! Yes, to the Indies!

I won't see your beautiful beach,.

Bye, seashore from Ondarroa

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<sup>14</sup> This is one of the versions of this song, as it appears in José Ignacio Ansorena's *Cancionero popular vasco* (Basque Popular Songbook)

Sailor, row, sailor.

However, orality is also present in the private space of the house: the secondary orality that comes with new technologies is the background of various passages in the novel. For example, the television is usually on while the main action is taking place. The forms of orality here contrast with those in *Zergatik, panpox?*: here it does not have the purpose of passing on language or culture to future generations, but just functions as a background for the main action and as a way of creating unity within a group: the songs sung at bars are part of everybody's tradition and they are known by every man in the bar.

Thus, the novel in which the story is told from a man's point of view is completely different to the one in which it is told from a woman's perspective, in terms of the kinds of orature and oral traditions included in them. While both of them have several examples of oral language, in *Zergatik, panpox?*, they are mostly children's stories and children's songs. In *Saturno*, however, they are popular songs and the television.

In general, Basque female writers, in the same manner as Basque male authors, include in their works examples of orature and oral traditions, thus giving place to what Zirimu calls oral literature. Even though they do not have a group conscience, their works do have that characteristic in common.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the fact that women have had an active role in perpetuating Basque oral tradition, they have not been recognized for this. This happened especially in the house, although some got to practice it in public spaces where only men were supposed to be.



Nevertheless, very often, when this happened, these women did not receive any recognition by society. In fact, it is hard to find documentation for these cases. When, after Franco's death, the boom of Basque literature began, several women chose to step out of the private space of the house and their role as mothers and instead began to write in Basque. However, still nowadays, not many of them receive recognition for their work. In many of their written stories and novels, we can still see the importance of the Basque woman as the mother who passes on the Basque language, culture and oral tradition to her children: the author may take the role of the storyteller, positioning herself as the mother who tells stories and sings songs to her child. The author may also choose a narrator who is a woman, a mother, who fulfills this role, but these writers also distance themselves from this type of traditional women by writing their stories and stepping out of the house, and by presenting us with female characters that also escape the roles they are expected to play. Very often, in their works, the limits between the public and the private, the oral and the written, and the role of women as mothers who stay in the house or as workers who step out of it, become blurred.

### Chapter 3: Questioning the Relationship between Orality and Lack of Civilization, and Literacy and Civilization in Basque Orature and Literature

#### **Introduction**

In the last two chapters I analyzed various forms of Basque orature and oral traditions, as well as literary works in order to show that orality and literacy interact with each other. In this chapter, I am going to examine how the fact that the Basque people have traditionally privileged the oral over the written word has given place to stereotypes of the Basques as illiterate, rural and primitive people, stereotypes that are still maintained long after they started using the written word (first in Spanish, and then in Basque). These stereotypes are based on the assumption that the written word gives place to civilization, to development, while people who rely mainly on the oral word are primitive and uncivilized. By examining some forms of Basque orature and written texts, we can see that Basque verbal art forms often undermine this assumption by presenting the worlds of orality and literacy as interacting with each other, rather than being mutually exclusive, and by presenting us with completely illiterate or not very educated people who are more “civilized” than literate people, or whose knowledge is more valuable.

#### ***Barbarie versus Civilization***

It is very common to find instances of civilization understood in opposition to barbarism. This is a recurrent topic in the works about the relationship between the Europeans and the indigenous people from America. For example, Walter Mignolo is aware of how Europeans were seen as the civilized ones, while Amerindians were

considered the barbaric, as we will see in the next section. Another example of this is Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* '*Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*' (1845), where this opposition is also present. In this case, the civilized would be the people from the city, usually Europeans. As Roberto González Echevarría points out in the introduction to an English translation of this work, "Sarmiento believed that European immigration was the key to eradicate what he called barbarism" (9). Then, the indigenous people would be the barbaric people. However, for this author, this opposition goes beyond that: "[c]ivilization for Sarmiento means modern European ideas and practices, and it is based on the cities, particularly Buenos Aires; barbarism, meanwhile, represents the backwardness of the countryside, especially the Pampas" (Sarmiento 12). Thus, this opposition between *barbarie* and civilization is not based only on being European or indigenous, but also on being from the city or from the countryside. Finally, we have to take into account that, although it has not always been the case, barbarism tends to be related to lack of alphabetic writing. In fact, as we will see in the next section, Mignolo refers to this. At the same time, civilization is often related to literacy.

### **The prestige of orality and literacy in different periods**

In "Plato's Pharmacy" (1972), Derrida revisits the relationship Socrates, Plato and the sophists had with writing. Socrates relates the written word with the sophists, and sustains that it is incompatible with truth (68). The written word was considered by Socrates as a "pharmakon;" that is, he believed it was something artificial, a drug that could be both a remedy and a poison (70-1). Thus, as a drug, being something that comes

from outside oneself, writing cannot be simply beneficial, it may have negative consequences as well (99). It is also important to notice that, although Plato and the sophists have a negative opinion of the written word, they still write. In Plato's opinion, "writing is the miserable son" (145). For him, the written word means death, the death of the oral word, which would be its "father":

What is written down is *speech (logos gegrammenos)*. As a living thing, *logos* issues from a father. There is thus for Plato no such thing as a written thing. There is only a *logos* more or less alive, more or less distant from itself. Writing is not an independent order of signification; it is weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breadth (143).

As Derrida notices, Plato understands that there is a "... hierarchical opposition between son and father, subject and the king, death and life, writing and speech, etc..." (92). However, these oppositions cannot be maintained by him, as they are not really oppositions, but supplement each other: "Writing is the supplement of speech" (89). That is, writing supplements the oral word, a relationship that necessarily implies that the oral word is incomplete. Therefore, in Derrida's opinion, writing and speech are not two separate entities, but rather they work together, one complementing the other. Thus, Derrida goes against this idea of the superiority of speech over writing that Socrates, and even Plato and the sophists, defended. The fact that Derrida needs to question this proves that, in classical Greece, the oral word was believed to be superior to the written word.

However, this idea of the superiority of the oral word changed, especially after the invention of the printing press. For example, it is impossible to deny the role that the assumed superiority of the written word played in the perception of the Amerindians by the Spanish colonizers. In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (2003), Walter Mignolo affirms that indigenous people from Latin America haven been perceived as uncivilized by their European colonizers. This negative perception was often supported by the fact that they did not use alphabetic writing (32). While alphabetic writing and the book would be related to civilization, those who favored the oral language would be considered uncivilized. Interestingly enough, even though some indigenous groups had their own writing system, their lack of alphabetic writing made the Spanish colonizers consider them as inferior. This shows that not only did the colonizers consider writing as a prerequisite for civilization, but that it had to be alphabetic writing.

According to Mignolo, this idea of writing and civilized development going hand in hand has not been left behind, as he affirms that "... we are still immersed in the ideology and philosophy of writing that prevented Spanish missionaries and men of 'letters' to understand that their own 'lack' of a Mexica writing system could have been more than a good reason to be perceived as 'barbarians' or 'illiterates'" ("When Speaking was not Good Enough" 338).

In fact, this way of understanding writing and illiteracy in relation with civilization or a lack of it, has given place to theories that emerged during the twentieth century and, I would add, are still alive in the twenty-first:

The sixteenth-century philosophy of writing celebrating the letter provided the foundation for a philosophy of written discourse that reemerged (in the twentieth century) in “the consequences of literacy” and “the great divide,” depicting oral and literate cultures (Goody and Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy”; Ong). The belief in the power of writing to transform (and implicitly upgrade) consciousness (Ong) was responsible for the image of the “great divide” and it was, in the twentieth century, a rational articulation of the implicit judgment of sixteenth-century missionaries and men of letters when they were confronted with societies whose members were deprived of letters. (Mignolo “When Speaking was not Good Enough 334-5)

Thus, the importance placed on writing in the sixteenth century is still alive today, giving place to a number of assumptions related to literacy and lack of it, one of which would be the relationship between literacy and the development of a society. According to Ong, literacy is necessary in order for a society to develop:

Orality is not an ideal, and never was. To approach it positively is not to advocate it as a permanent state for any culture. Literacy opens possibilities to the world and to human existence unimaginable without writing. Oral cultures today value their oral traditions and agonize over the loss of these traditions, but I haven’t ever encountered or heard of an oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible . . . Yet orality is not despicable. It can produce creations beyond the reach of literates, for example, the *Odyssey*. Nor is orality ever completely

eradicable: reading a text oralizes it. Both orality and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness. (171-2)

In this way, even though he claims he does not believe orality is something negative, that both orality and literacy are necessary, and that orality cannot disappear, he still accepts as true the premise that without literacy there are certain things that cannot be achieved. He does recognize that some things created by predominately oral societies are “beyond the reach of literates,” but the example he gives is the *Odyssey*, a work that, even though it was composed orally, is now considered part of high culture.

In *Literacy and Orality* (1988), Ruth Finnegan explains the Great Divide Theories: there is a division between two types of societies: “these two types are referred to as ‘oral’ (or sometimes ‘primitive’) and ‘literate’ (or ‘civilized’) respectively” (12). She affirms that “one empirical question about the technology of literacy is whether it is a precondition for abstract detached thought. Are “oral” peoples necessarily unreflective, simple or concrete in their thinking?” (45). She believes that there is no evidence of this, although it may be possible that there exists some relationship between literacy and abstract thinking (150). According to her, this perception of the illiterate person as “uncivilized” still persists in present day society:

It is still often assumed that non-literate peoples have little or no awareness of the subtleties and depths of linguistic expression. To this is sometimes added the suggestion that they lack the power of analysis (or possess it only in a very small degree) and have little or no capacity for abstract thought. There is also the special image of ‘primitive man’ as

incapable of standing back in a detached fashion, and thus being emotionally involved with the world around him. (55)

Even though she does affirm that the evidence for linking illiteracy to the lack of capacity of abstract thinking is not that clear (150), she is aware that this association is often made:

Thus orality – and hence oral transmission – has been seen as characteristically and essentially found in cultures without writing and also, going back in history, without modern commerce or transport systems, resting on traditional and communal norms. Correspondingly, literacy has been associated with cultures characterized by the development of urban and bureaucratic systems and the rise of secular and scientific enquiry, patterns arguably further intensified with the advent of printing. In this view two very different types of culture are contrasted and the characteristics of oral and written traditions thus investigated in the framework of these essentially opposed settings. (140)

Thus, she is aware that cultures that rely on orality are perceived as non modern, undeveloped and traditional, which is usually seen as negative in present day western societies. She realizes that orality and literacy, and traditional and modern, are understood as oppositions. This should not be done: as we have already seen, orality and literacy form part of a continuum, and so do modernity and traditionalism. Finnegan also links writing to economic development: “economic development too can be linked with



writing. Written records make systematic accounting possible as well as the whole complex of sophisticated mathematical procedures” (Finnegan 23).

Not only is she aware of the fact that this association is widely spread in present day western societies, as well as responsible for economic development, but she also realizes that literacy is essential in countries that are considered modern:

Even though writing is now augmented by the use of other communication media, a moment’s reflection brings home how essential the medium of writing still remains even in the most “modern” of contemporary states.

To take just a few examples at random, consider the crucial role of writing for the kinds of activities we tend to take for granted in modern society: publishing and implementing laws; issue of passports, driving licenses and or international vaccination certificates; circulation of newspapers and books; publicity and information leaflets; Open University and other distance teaching; postal service; medical prescriptions; country-wide examination systems; civil service and regular administrative functions.

(18)

Thus, Finnegan realizes that writing is necessary in order to live in what is considered a modern society. According to this statement, illiterate people would not be able to survive in a “modern” state. Marcone recognizes that this perception makes people from illiterate societies have a negative opinion about themselves: “... la crisis de inferioridad de determinada sociedad es el resultado de una carencia de escritura; de hecho, es esta misma carencia la que permite reconocer en primer lugar la crisis o la

inferioridad de esa sociedad” ‘...the inferiority crisis of a given society is the result of a lack of writing; in fact, it is this same lack that allows for the recognition, in the first place, of the crisis or the inferiority of that society’ (Marcone 46).

In conclusion, even though it has not always been the case, nowadays the written word has more prestige in western society than the oral word, which is often linked to a lack of civilization. In addition, as we will see later in the chapter, the written word is not only associated with civilization, but also with the urban world, while the oral word is connected with the rural world. In the Basque Country, the written word used to be linked to Spanish, whereas the oral word was linked to Basque. Nonetheless, now, the written is associated with *Batua*<sup>15</sup>, and the rest of its dialects are related to the oral word.

### **Stereotypes about the Basques as Illiterate People**

There are stereotypes about Basque culture in general and the Basque language in particular. According to these stereotypes, Basque culture is rural, uncivilized and “primitive”, and so are its people. As mentioned above, the Basques have been a predominantly oral culture throughout history (even though writing has also been part of Basque culture). Then, it is possible that these stereotypes come from the importance Basques place on orality. We can see an example of this in “Rossetti-ren obsesioa” (Rossetti’s obsession), a story by Ramón Saizarbitoria, when the main character and a friend of his visit Madrid and they run into a woman the friend knows and a friend of hers. The woman’s friend, Eugenia, says: “o sea, que vascos” ‘so, you are Basque’ (77), to which her friend responds: “zibilizatuak, ordea” ‘but civilized’ (77). The fact that these two Basque men are in Madrid for a meeting to organize an anthology of poetry (*Poetas*

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<sup>15</sup> The unified variety of Basque.

*de las cuatro lenguas* ‘Poets in the four languages’) makes the woman refer to them as “civilized”, unlike the rest of the Basques.

In “*Bertsolariak* and writers: An Old Tale of Fathers and Sons,” Joseba Zulaika tells us the story of his grandfather, his father, himself, and his son. His grandfather was from a rural area, and completely illiterate, so he would be a representation of the stereotypical, rural, monolingual and illiterate Basque. Zulaika’s father, who could read, as mentioned in the introduction, would read out loud, thus oralizing the text. This is a sign that orality is an essential element for him. In addition, he would improvise *bertsoak*, as Zulaika remembers: “... on rare occasions, I also heard my father improvise songs in some tavern, usually after being challenged by another *bertsolari*. By standards of professional *bertsolariak*, however, he was mediocre” (246). So, even though his first language was Basque and orality played a central role in his life, he was in some ways different from his father: he could speak some Spanish he learned in Sodupe, a town near Bilbao. This, according to Zulaika, must have made him “... [feel] so removed from his parents’ world of illiteracy” (256). Zulaika, who is a university professor in the United States (where he teaches Basque Studies), is also completely different from his father and his grandfather: he speaks Basque, English, and Spanish. He spends most of his time in a library. Now, he is worried that his child has the same negative idea of him that he had of his father. Although he does not usually improvise *bertsoak*, he tries to do that with his son, who is more interested in videogames than in reading, when they take road trips together. However, this is not his main activity and he wonders “whether my reading is for him [his son], as my father’s singing was for me, merely a gesture indicating an obsolete world that won’t be his” (250). This change from illiteracy to literacy and later

to a world of secondary orality affected by new technologies did not only take place in the Basque Country. In fact, everywhere in Spain there is a generation that was affected by the Civil War. Many of those children did not have the chance to attend school, or if they did, they did not go for a long time. The difference in the Basque Country is that this generation, even when they could attend school, could not receive an education in Basque, which was a problem for many children who could not speak Spanish. Then, the stereotype about the Basques as rural and illiterate people does not have a real foundation, as probably, the level of illiteracy in the Basque Country was similar to that in the rest of Spain. Nowadays, almost everybody in the Basque Country is literate, both in Spanish and in Basque. However, this stereotype still continues, and the Basques often continue to be perceived as rural illiterate people by those coming from other areas of Spain and, in fact, even some Basques have this stereotype about themselves.

Since Basque people have been seen in this way, the Basque language has been perceived as the language spoken by an illiterate group of people and therefore, not appropriate for transmitting any valuable knowledge or for creating any cultural production. Knör tells an anecdote that exemplifies this perception of Basque as a language spoken by inferior people: he tells that when a woman from Bayonne was asked if she spoke Basque, she answered: “*Oh, Monsieur, seulement avec les domestiques*” ‘Oh, sir, only with the servants’ (147).

As Ana Toledo has noticed, the Basque language has traditionally been excluded from education. This situation has lasted until a few decades ago, when Basque became co-official with Spanish and it became mandatory to be proficient in it in order to work at

any public position. Since it was excluded from education for such a long time, it has been seen as the language of lower and uneducated classes, while Spanish and French, the languages that are in contact with it, are the “culture languages” (Toledo 179). Therefore, speaking (and writing and reading) Spanish or French, that is, the “high” languages, would be a sign of civilization, while speaking Basque, the “low” language, the language that was not used in education and writing, would be a sign of an uncivilized society.

Although, for a long time, Basque has not been considered as an appropriate language for writing, it does have a great amount of oral traditions and orature that make up for the lack of written production. As Lecuona notices, “el mundo está lleno de temas literarios cuya dependencia de la escritura resulta absolutamente improbable. El folk-lore está lleno de ‘tradiciones’ de innegable valor artístico, independientes en absoluto de toda ingerencia escrita” “the world is full of literary topics whose dependence on writing is totally improbable. Folklore is full of “traditions” of undeniable artistic value, completely independent from writing’ (10-11). Nevertheless, these oral traditions and orature did not start having any prestige until they began to be practiced by people who not only were literate, but literate in Basque, very often with a university education.

As for Basque literature, as we have already seen, there are not many works written in Basque, and none of them serves as a reference outside the Basque Country, as Uribe mentions in *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*. Moreover, as Uribe mentions, the Basques do not want to show it to other people, as they consider it something too poor to share with others. In a chapter of *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, “Agirrerren arrosak” ‘Agirre’s

roses,' the author tells us that Agirre<sup>16</sup> did not want to show his house to his friend

Azkue<sup>17</sup>, as he was embarrassed by it. Uribe compares that house with Basque literature:

Gure literatur tradizioa Agirrerren gurasoen etxe hura bezalakoa da, txikia, txiroa, desordenatua. Baina okerrena hori ezkutuan izatea da. Beharrezkoa dugu gure etxe aurretik pasatzen diren horiek sartzera gonbidatu eta etxean zerbait eskaintzea, zerbait hori gutxi bada ere. (225)

Our literary tradition is like Agirre's parents' house: small, poor and disorganized. However, the worst thing is to keep it hidden. We need to invite in those who pass in front of our house and offer them something from the house, even if it is a small thing.

Then, it has been the Basques themselves that have considered both their orature, and oral and literary traditions as something underserving of being shown to other people, which is the result of the widespread assumption that the Basques are uncivilized and illiterate people with nothing valuable to contribute to verbal art forms. Nevertheless, as Uribe affirms, even though there are not many literary works written in Basque, they still need to be shared with other people. Now, this is changing with the increased literacy both of oral performers and writers. As we will see in the next sections, now that *bertsolariak* are educated, this form of orature has more prestige, and Basque writers are starting to win literary prizes. For example, Uribe himself won the Spanish National Prize of Narrative in 2009, as Bernardo Atxaga and Unai Elorriaga did in 1989 and 2002

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<sup>16</sup> Txomin Agirre (1864-1920) was a Basque writer from Ondarroa.

<sup>17</sup> Resurrección María de Azkue (1864-1951) was a Basque linguist.

respectively. In addition, we will also examine how these Basque writers use their literary works to undermine the aforementioned stereotypes.

### **Bertsolaritza: From Illiteracy to Literacy**

An example of a form of orature that started to have prestige when its performers began to be educated would be *bertsolaritza*. As we saw in the first chapter, it has gone from being a rural phenomenon practiced by illiterate people, to being an institutionalized urban phenomenon practiced by people who are educated in Basque.

In his *Bosquejo de historia del bersolarismo* (1964) ‘Draft of the history of bertsolaritza’, Antonio Zavala writes more about the written version of *bertsolaritza* (*bertso-paperak*) than about the oral performances. He obviously has a higher opinion of the former, as he states that “... el bersolarismo al abandonar el ‘bertso-papera’, sin sustituirlo por ninguna otra forma impresa, ha dado un paso hacia atrás, ha experimentado una lamentable regresión a su primitivo estadio de literatura meramente oral” ‘*Bertsolaritza*, having abandoned the *bertso-papera*, without substituting it with any other printed form, has stepped backwards, it has gone back to a pitiful return to its primitive status of purely oral literature’ (*Bosquejo* 46). Clearly, he holds written (and printed) literature in a higher esteem than orature.

However, even though he has several stereotypes about improvised *bertsolaritza*, he still tries to give the reader a positive idea about it. In fact, he regrets the harm former studies have done to this form of orature. For example, he mentions the work by Pablo Gorosabel, *Noticia de las cosas memorables de Guipúzcoa* (1868) ‘News of the memorable things from Guipuzcoa’, where *bertsolaritza* is criticized, in order to question Gorosabel’s point of view:

Sus autores son comúnmente labradores, y otros que carecen de instrucción literaria, hasta de saber leer y escribir; hombres de poco o ningún trato con gente literata, con cuyo roce pudiesen al menos adquirir algunas ideas de versificación. Es admirable, sin embargo, el talento que algunos de ellos han descubierto para este efecto desde su misma juventud, que cultivado convenientemente hubiera tal vez producido poetas distinguidos. (Gorosabel, qtd. in Zavala *Bosquejo* 93-4)

Its authors [of improvised bertsolaritza] are usually peasants, and other people who lack literary instruction, even reading and writing; men who have little or no relationship with literate people, with whom they could at least acquire some ideas about versification. It is admirable, however, the talent that some of them have discovered for that from their youth, which, conveniently cultivated might have produced distinguished poets.

Gorosabel does recognize that some *bertsolariak* have talent for improvising *bertsoak*, but he does not believe that they are real artists, and affirms that they would need to learn versification rules from literate people, to which Zavala responds:

Asoma aquí el tópico ineludible, del que no hemos sabido liberarnos todavía, mil veces repetido, formulado siempre al estilo de una regla de tres: Si esto lo han hecho sin instrucción, ¿cuánto más con ella? Esto es muy equívoco y superficial. La poesía y la cantidad de conocimientos van por caminos diversos. Por muchos conocimientos que amontonemos en un hombre, no le haremos poeta, si ya no lo es; y al poeta popular, como la flor que ha brotado en un clima y tierra determinados, lo marchitaremos,



seguramente, transplantándolo. En el fondo de todo hay una raíz de vanidad: creemos que la clase instruida es sin más humanamente más rica que la clase no instruida. Opino que es un principio gratuito. Unas veces será así, pero otras quizás no lo sea. (*Bosquejo* 94)

Here emerges the unavoidable topic that we have not been able to get rid of yet, which has been repeated one thousand times, always formulated as a rule of three: if they [*bertsolariak*] have done this with no education, how much more could they do if they were educated? This is very wrong and superficial. Poetry and the amount of knowledge go on different roads. No matter how much knowledge we put in a man, we will not make him a poet if he is not one already; and if we transplant the popular poet, we will shrivel him, just like the flower that has been born in a determinate type of climate and soil. Underneath all this there is a root of vanity: we believe that the educated class is just humanely richer than the uneducated class. I believe that this is an unwarranted principle.

Sometimes, it may be true, but some other times, it may not be true.

So, in spite of the fact that he regrets the end of the written version of *bertsolaritza*, he still defends the quality of improvised *bertsolaritza*, which used to be practiced by uneducated people. Interestingly enough, he refers to *bertsolaritza* as “poesía popular” or popular poetry. Thus, he uses a term that is utilized for a written art form. It is also necessary to notice that he assumes that in order to practice *bertsolaritza* one needs to be uneducated, as he (he uses the masculine form, which shows that in the past, female *bertsolariak* were invisible) would be out of place if he received education.

Thus, until quite recently, the *bertsolari* has been seen as someone illiterate, whose art was worth nothing. In the twentieth century, there were some scholarly works that tried to give a positive idea about *bertsolaritza*, like the ones by Antonio Zavala and Manuel de Lecuona. In some of these works, like Zavala's *Bosquejo de historia del bertsolarismo*, there are still some stereotypes about improvised *bertsolaritza* as a "primitive" art form, due to its oral nature and the lack of education of its performers. It has not been until the moment when *bertsolariak* started to be educated and mostly from urban areas that there has begun to exist a great number of scholarly studies about the value of this form of orature. As Antonio Zavala points out in the prologue to *Voicing the Moment: Improvised Poetry and Basque Oral Tradition*:

As regards Basque popular poetry one may say it was born under a bad star. When the regular people (and the majority) admired and almost overvalued it, the educated classes scorned and rejected it. Now the latter are the ones who appreciate it and study it, but do the masses support it in the same way? (26).

Thus, Zavala is also aware that it has not been until recently that *bertsolaritza* has started to be appreciated by educated people, while he questions if the rest of the population enjoys it that much now that it has become an institutionalized art performed by literate people.

Then, we can say that *bertsolaritza* is an example of the changes that have taken place in Basque society in the last decades regarding literacy. The increasing attention this art receives from scholars shows that literacy is held in higher regard than oral expression, for while the former is seen as high culture and worthy of being studied, the

latter is seen as low culture and invaluable.

### **Basque Literature: Does it Continue the Stereotype, or Does it Subvert it?**

The stereotype of the Basques as rural and uneducated people goes beyond the figure of the *bertsolari*, as it is not only him that is seen as rural, uncivilized and illiterate. In contemporary literature written in Basque, this stereotype is often present. However, most frequently, it is present in order to be questioned and denied. In fact, in several literary works there are characters that, at first sight, would seem like the typical stereotype of the rural, illiterate Basque: the *baserritarra*<sup>18</sup> or the sailor. Nevertheless, this stereotype is later subverted, very often making the person from the city who, according to the stereotype, would be the superior, civilized and literate person, look like less civilized, modern and educated than the people from the *baserri* or the fishing town.

In addition, some literary works go against the stereotype of the Basque as a *baserritarra* or fisherman, showing us that there are more types of Basques. However, some go even further: in the same way as we have seen that orality and literacy are not two separate entities, but rather that they interact with each other and complement each other, many contemporary literary works written in Basque make us realize that the worlds of the *baserri* and the fishermen's town, supposedly worlds of orality, of primitiveness, of lack of civilization are not independent from the world of the city, apparently a world of literacy, of development.

### ***Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel and Kutsidazu berriz, Ixabel***

In *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel* 'Show me the way, Ixabel' and *Kutsidazu berriz*,

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<sup>18</sup> *Baserritarra* means peasant. This term is used to refer to the person who lives in the *baserri* or traditional Basque farmhouse.

*Ixabel* ‘Show me again, Ixabel,’ by Joxean Sagastizabal, the stereotype of the Basque uneducated *baserritarra*, in contrast with the educated boy from the city is present.

Nonetheless, this stereotype is questioned and proved false in several ways.

These two short novels tell us the story Juan Martin, a young boy from the city who goes to the *baserri* to study Basque in two different ways: going to class and living with a family there. In the first novel, *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel*, we find the main character arriving in the *baserri* and having a cultural shock, interacting with the family, going to class and falling in love with Ixabel, one of the members of the family he is staying with. At the end of this novel, he is ready to leave the *baserri*, go back to the city, and wait for Ixabel, as she is going to study there. At the beginning of second novel, *Kutsidazu berriz, Ixabel*, Juan Martin is in the taxi that is going to take him back to the city, but changes his mind and goes back to the *baserri*. Now, he stays with his former teacher and some of the people he was taking classes with, and continues to see Ixabel and her family.

At first glance, the family is the stereotype of the rural, illiterate and primitive people, and the *baserri* is presented in a similar manner in *Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel*. Both the people and the house contrast with Juan Martin, the city boy. These novels take place in 1978, that is, three years after Franco’s death, when laws about the officiality of minority languages were being passed. In fact, 1978 is the year in which the new Constitution was created. The author, in a humorous tone, analyzes and criticizes the stereotypes associated with the typical Basque speaker and the way they contrast with the young literate person who studies Basque as a second language.

The young student in this novel refers to the farmhouse, where Basque is the predominant language spoken by illiterate people, as “savage”, while describing the city,

where he speaks mainly Spanish, as “civilized”. For example, *Kutsidazu bidea*, *Ixabel*, begins like this: “1980rako urte pare bat falta zela, uztaileko arratsalde sargori batean ailegatu nintzen zibilizazioaren azken portura, Tolosara” ‘A couple of years before 1980, in an extremely hot afternoon I got to the last port of civilization, Tolosa’ (7). Even when the summer is over and he needs to go back to the city, Juan Martin transforms the popular song “San Simon eta San Juda/joan zen uda,/eta negua heldu da” ‘Saint Simon and Saint Jude, the summer has gone and the winter has come’ to “San Simon eta San Juda, joan zen uda, eta zibilizaziora bueltatu beharra heldu da” ‘Saint Simon and Saint Jude, the summer has gone, and the need to go back to civilization has come’ (*Kutsidazu bidea* 109).

As an example of the supposed backwardness of the house, Juan Martin is surprised that they do not have a television, and he expresses his reluctance to living without one: “Ai Santa Gertrudis; kajatontarik gabe bizi ote liteke?” ‘Oh, Saint Gertrude; would it be possible to live without a goggle box?’ (*Kutsidazu bidea* 15)

As for the family, he is terrified by them, and even describes the grandmother as “la bruja piruja” ‘the witch’ (*Kutsidazu bidea* 11). The idea he has about them is that they are primitive, uneducated people. He describes them as indigenous people who speak swahili, and compares them with the Masai from Kenya: when, at the festivity in a village, the local people play a joke on Juan Martin and his classmates (they throw piss at them), Miren, one of the classmates, mentions a TV documentary about the Masai and how they bathe their children in urine in order to disinfect them. After listening to her, Juan Martin makes the following comparison:

Hizkuntza bera – shwahilia – eta jendea txisaz desinfektatzeko mania berbera. Antropologo edo antropofagoren batek ikertu beharko lituzke massaitarren eta euskaldunen arteko lotura begi-bistakoak. (*Kutsidazu bidea* 99)

The same language – Swahili – and the same obsession for disinfecting people with piss. An anthropologist or an anthropophagous should research the obvious relationships between the Masai and the Basques.

So not only does he describe the Basques and the Masai as barbarians, but he also believes that they are just a subject for research. It is important to realize how he relates the illiterate Basque speaker who, from his point of view is rural and savage, to the Masai and also to the indigenous people, who are seen in this exact same way: they are “illiterate” and therefore, savage and uncivilized.

Nevertheless, Juan Martin will be surprised by some members of the family: Ixabel and her sister Bego. While he considers the grandmother, the parents and the twin brothers as backwards, illiterate and uncivilized, he is surprised to find out that Bego is a doctor and Ixabel wants to study Philosophy. In fact, the protagonist is surprised when he finds out about this and reaches the conclusion that he is not going to be able to make her fall in love with him due to his intellectual superiority as he had hoped, since he notices that she is really smart and educated. Thus, we can see Mignolo’s idea that civilization is related to literacy or, as Ong notes, the idea that literate people believe that the written word has more power than the oral one (96).

Coming from the city, Juan Martin is expecting to be the one who brings modern ideas to those people he considers primitive, but he ends up realizing that Ixabel is more

modern than him. For example, when she tells him that her sister and she like to swim naked, he is really surprised to find out that she is more open-minded than he thought, and he says:

Hiritik enbaxada kulturala etorri, neu, alegia, baserriarrei mendetako ezjakintasun eta ilunpetik irteten laguntzeko, modernitatearen argiak ikuiluetan sartzeko eta Lady Godiva azaltzen ez zait bada! (*Kutsidazu bidea* 56)

The cultural embassy, that is, me, came from the city in order to help the country people rise out of the lack of knowledge and darkness in which they have been for centuries, and to enter the lights of modernity in the stables, and does not Lady Godiva appear in front of me?

However, even Ixabel, the educated girl that has proven to Juan Martin that she is more modern than he is, has some stereotypes about her family. When Juan Martin tells her that he can only understand her and Bego, she answers him in the following way:

Bueno, bikiak hika eta oso azkar hitz egiten due, eta gurasoak... bakizu, moteil, baserriarrek. (*Kutsidazu bidea* 19)

Well, the twins use the *hika* form and speak very fast, and my parents... you know, boy, they are *baserriarrek*.

So even the girl refers to her parents as country people. Nonetheless, Sagastizabal gives a voice to these *baserriarrek*, giving them the chance to ridicule the young student from the city in several ways. First of all, not only does he show us how Juan Martin sees the *baserriarrek*, but he also makes Juan Martin think about how the *baserriarrek* must

see him: when the twins take him out with them, he says: “bikiak hiriko maskotarekin” ‘the twins with the pet from the city’ (*Kutsidazu bidea* 15).

Furthermore, Juan Martin believes that, as a city person, he is superior to the *baserritarrak* and he is convinced that his knowledge will make him succeed in anything he has to do in the *baserri*: “Baserri aldeko bizimodu basatia hiritarraren jakinduri zabalagoaren mende” ‘The savage way of life of the *baserri* was under the control of the bigger wisdom from the city’ (*Kutsidazu bidea, Ixabel* 83). Nonetheless, the knowledge he acquired in the city proves to be worthless in the *baserri*, as he fails to carry out every single chore he is asked to do. In addition, most people cannot understand what he says, and even if they did, it would still be inadequate to carry out the tasks that need to be done there:

\_Hau eskuaria dek, eta hau sardia; beste hori sega, ezautuko dek.

\_Bai, Heriok erabiltzen duena.

\_Hori Donostian izango dek, hemen aitak ibiltzen dik jeneralian, herriko onena bera dek segan (*Kutsidazu bidea* 38).

\_This is the rake, and this is the hayfork; that other thing is the scythe, I guess you are familiar with it.

\_Yes, that is what Death uses.

\_That must be in San Sebastian, here the one who uses it normally is my father; he is the best one with it in the village.

Thus, all that knowledge is useless in the *baserri*: he may know about Greek mythology, but he is unable to differentiate between a cow and a bull, and does not know



how to drive a tractor or collect the grass. For those reasons, the family in the farmhouse makes fun of him, and most of its members cannot understand his metaphors:

\_Hi, Walt, poesia ondo zegok, baina ganaduak ez dik metaforarik jaten, sega zak! (*Kutsidazu bidea* 39).

You, Walt, poetry is good, but the cattle do not eat metaphors, so cut the grass!

Not only is all that knowledge useless in the *baserri*, but neither his Spanish nor the Basque he learned in San Sebastian (in Basque classes) help him cope with the people and the situations he is exposed to in that rural setting. For example, the first day, when he cannot understand the family, he goes to his room and reviews all the verb conjugations, as he is convinced that is the reason why he cannot understand them. However, clearly, that is not the reason, but quite the opposite: the motive why he cannot understand them is that till that moment, he has not been exposed to the Basque spoken by native speakers from a rural area. He has only been exposed to the Basque spoken in an artificial setting: the lessons he took in San Sebastian. Sagastizabal presents this city as a space in which only Spanish is spoken (his mother talks to him in Spanish, as do the policemen she asks to look for him when he decides not to go back home at the beginning of *Kutsidazu berriz, Ixabel*). This image of San Sebastian as a place where the only language spoken is Spanish is far from reality, but serves the author's intention of making a parody of as many stereotypes of Basque people and language as he can. By exaggerating them, he makes us realize that these are just stereotypes, and not the reality of the Basque Country. In the same way as the *baserri* and the city are not completely

opposed spaces in terms of the language spoken in each of them, neither are they opposed in terms of one being civilized while the other is uncivilized.

The Basque he learned in those classes is not appropriate for the conversations that take place at the *baserri*, which provides the family with situations where they can make fun of him:

\_Amona, lo; Bego, Tolosan lanian, medikua da; gurasoak, ukuiluan,  
behiak jezten.

\_Nora “jetsi” behar dituzte?

Bikiak algaraka.

\_Jo, jo, kalekumia erabatakua, jo, jo!

\_Behiak jeztia zera da, *ordeñar*.

\_Aaaa... (*Kutsidazu bidea 25*).

\_Grandma is sleeping; Bego is working in Tolosa, she is a doctor; my  
parents are in the stable, milking the cows.

\_Where do they have to take them?

The twins laughed very hard.

\_Ha, ha, he is a complete plebeian, ha, ha!

\_Milking the cows means this... *ordeñar*.

\_Aaaa...

Not only do the twins make fun of him because he cannot distinguish between taking someone down and milking the cows, but they call him a “complete plebeian.” Here, the social roles are subverted: the educated city boy is the one in an inferior position.

While Juan Martin speaks *Batua*, the family he is staying with speaks Guipuzcoan<sup>19</sup>. At the same time as he learns from the family who speaks that dialect, he is taking Basque lessons with a group of people who come from different parts of the Basque Country, some of them with a higher level of education than others. The dialect they learn in the classes is *Batua*. This is a reflection of the situation of diglossia that takes place in the Basque Country now: most of the people who take Basque lessons, take them in *Batua*, but the people that speak Basque as a first language speak another dialect. As I mentioned in the introduction, even people who speak other dialects often write in *Batua*, as the aforementioned case of Kirmen Uribe.

In Juan Martin's case, his knowledge of both *Batua* and the grammatical rules of Basque language make him feel superior to most members of the family he is staying with. In *Kutsidazu berriz, Ixabel*, the father asks him to alphabetize him, which reinforces this self-image of superiority, even comparing himself and the father to Socrates and Plato (39). When the father asks him to alphabetize him, he asks the audience:

Konturatzen al zarete momentu historikoaren garrantziaz? Konturatzen al zarete zirkulu perfektua itxi egiten zela?: 1-Urbanikola baserrira etorri. 2-Urbanikolari Indigenak euskara eta baserriko bizimodua irakatsi. 3-Urbanikolak Indigenari goi mailako euskara jaso irakatsi (*Kutsidazu berriz* 32).

Do you realize the importance of this historical moment? Do you realize that the perfect circle was being closed? 1- The Urbanicholous comes to the farmhouse. 2-The Indigenous teaches Basque and the lifestyle of the

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<sup>19</sup> Dialect of Basque spoken in Guipuzcoa.

farmhouse to the Urbanicholous. 3- The Urbanicholous teaches the high variety of Basque to the Indigenous.

Juan Martin's thoughts about the father's request show various things. First, he sees the two worlds (the *baserri* and the city) as two completely different spaces. Secondly, the *baserritarrak* (or Indigenous, as Juan Martin calls them) teach the city person "their" language. This is a perfect example of the stereotype that relates the Basque language to the rural sphere, as this language does not belong to the *baserri* more than to the city, but Juan Martin perceives it as a rural language. Third, he believes he possesses a higher variety of the language, that is, that he learnt the "low variety" of it from the *baserritarrak* and added to it the knowledge he acquired at his Basque lessons. However, again, this is an excuse for Sagastizabal to make fun of that stereotype, as the lessons do not have the result both Juan Martin and the father expected. The first thing Juan Martin tells his student is that Basque has declinations, which does not make any sense for him:

\_Ba begira, Joxe Joakin, euskara deklinatu egiten da.

"Thaabos kônieg slověnska netinsky ahrutaj" esan banio bezala  
begiratu zidan.

\_Zer?

\_Euskara deklinatu egiten da, esaterako... latina bezala.

\_Nik sekula eztit dlekinatu (sic), eta latinez apaiza aitze huan garai  
baten baina ostiatik enintxoan entenitzen.

\_Bai, bai, deklinatzen duzu, baina konturatu gabe.

\_Keba, hemen eztaiu hori eiten, normal hitzeiten diau.

\_Baina deklinatzea gustiz normala da, ezin da euskaraz hitz egin deklinatu gabe!

\_Hemen bai, guk eiten diau.

\_Baina zuk esaten duzu “baserrian” eta “baseritik” eta “baserrira”, ezta?

\_Hik e bai, no te jode!

\_Ba hori deklinatzea da.

\_Bai, eta gure ahariyak zazpi errape zeuzkek! Ez iak aarrik jo!

(*Kutsidazu berriz 40-1*)

\_So, look, Joxe Joakin, Basque has declinations.

He looked at me as if I had told him “Thaabos kônieg slovënska netinsky ahrutaj.”

\_What?

\_Basque has declinations, for example... like Latin.

\_I have never used dlecinations (sic), and the priest used to speak Latin, but I couldn’t understand what the fuck he was saying.

\_Yes, yes, you use declinations, but without realizing.

\_No way! Here we don’t do that. We speak normally.

\_But declinations are totally normal; you can’t speak Basque without using them!

\_Here we can, here we do.

\_But you say “in the *baserri*” and “from the *baserri*” and “to the *baserri*.”

\_And so do you, what the fuck!

\_So those are declinations.

\_Yes, and our ram has seven udders! Don't pull my leg!

Not only does the father not understand what declinations are, but refuses to believe Juan Martin's biased explanation. In addition, one of the reasons why he wants to alphabetize is that he intends to write a discourse for his thirtieth wedding anniversary. Before giving the discourse, he says: "Juan Martinek asko laundu dit oaingo euskara modernua eskribitzen" 'Juan Martin has helped me a lot writing the modern Basque of the present time' (*Kutxidazu berriz, Ixabel* 75). The result of Juan Martin's "help" and his abuse of the dictionary give place to a completely artificial sounding discourse, full of incomprehensible phrases that are never used, and unnecessary circumlocutions. With this discourse, Sagastizabal is making fun of the purists of Basque grammar and *Batua*.

The novel is written in *Batua*, except for some dialogues in Guipuzcoan, and following the grammatical rules, but reminds us of an oral style, as Juan Martin, who is the narrator, addresses the audience in several occasions, as if he were a storyteller in front of an audience: the distance that takes place with writing (Ong 103) is not present here. Thus, in these books, the appropriate dialect and register for writing are questioned. These two novels are a mixture of *Batua* and Guipuzcoan, and written and oral characteristics.

In conclusion, Sagastizabal makes us realize that the distinction between rural/illiterate/oral/uncivilized/inferior and urban/literate/written/civilized/superior is not that clear, as in both spheres there are elements of the other. For example, Ixabel is as literate as Juan Martin, and in some aspects, Juan Martin would be inferior to the people

from the *baserri*, as he lacks the knowledge the *baserritarrak* have, while he knows many unnecessary things. In addition, now Juan Martin is a mixture of both worlds. Therefore, once he goes back to the city, he will have acquired a type of knowledge that can only be learned at a *baserri*, and will incorporate it to his new life. Furthermore, Ixabel, whom he met at the *baserri*, will be part of his life in the city. Therefore, the rural and the urban worlds will continue to be in contact through Ixabel. It is necessary to take into consideration that the person that makes the connection between the rural and the urban is a woman. By locating her between these two worlds, the author is presenting her as a border or a transitional character.

***Katuak bakar-bakarrik sentitzen direnean:***

In *Katuak bakar-bakarrik sentitzen direnean* ‘When cats feel really lonely,’ Mariasun Landa tells us the story of Maider, a girl whose mother decides to become an actress, which causes her parents’ divorce. She has a cat, Ofelia, who they end up taking to a *baserri*, but she runs away. Then, Maider runs away in order look for her. In the end, the cat appears, Maider’s parents get back together and the boy Maider met at the *baserri* shows an interest in her.

As we saw in chapter two, in this novel for teenagers, two worlds are represented: the one Maider’s grandmother comes from (the *baserri*), a rural world where orality plays a central role, and Maider’s world, an urban world where she goes to school and both literacy and secondary orality are fundamental parts of her life. In this case, secondary orality is present through television and the scripts Maider’s mother memorizes and then performs for her job at a television station. Mariasun Landa breaks with the stereotype of Basque people as rural and illiterate: Maider’s mother and Maider

are literate. In addition, the grandmother is now part of these two worlds: she was born and used to live in a *baserri*, but now she lives in the city, with Maider and her mother. Thus, these two worlds are not independent from each other.

Furthermore, when Maider and her mother visit the *baserri* where they are going to leave Ofelia, we see that the *baserri* and the city are not that different. First, two of the three children of the woman who live there have a university education. The other son, who is too young to go to the university, is in high school. His mother's interest in his education is evident, as she is worried that he is lazy:

Alaba zaharrena informatika ikasketako azken kurtsoan dabil, seme bigarrena artista samar atera zaigu eta Arte Ederrak egiten ari da, eta Xantik... ai, txikiarekin ez dugu atarramendu onik ateratzen!... Mutil ona bai, baina alferrontzi hutsa!... (64)

My oldest daughter is in her last year of Computer Science, my second son turned out to be a bit of an artist and he is studying Fine Arts, and Xanti... oh, with the youngest one we don't get a good result...! He is a good boy, but really lazy...!

In addition, secondary orality is also part of the *baserri*, while there are not any examples of primary orality. For example, the television is a central part of the house. This shows us that the urban and the rural worlds are not that different: the orality brought by new technologies is presented in both of these worlds. This image of the television being a central part of the *baserri* contrasts with the image Zulaika gives us of his father sitting in the kitchen of his *baserri* and reading out loud:

Etxe barruan sartu eta jangelan eseri ginen.



Hara non telebistaren aurrean nire adineko mutil bat aurkitu nuen, sofa gainean etzanda eta pipak jaten abiadura handiz (64).

We went in the house and we sat in the living room.

And I found a boy my age lying on the couch in front of the TV, and eating sunflower seeds quickly.

Futhermore, Xanti, the youngest child, is obsessed with his computer and his videogames. He shows them to Maider and describes a videogame he has as “superguai.” “Guai” is not a word in Basque; therefore, this shows us that he knows Spanish, and that the language he uses is like the language that any city kid would use. The same is true for the clothes he wears:

Bere gelara heldu eta egin zuen lehen gauza ATLANTA izena zeraman bisera gorri bat jartzea izan zen... eta bere mahai gainean zegoen ordenadore berria erakutsi:

\_Joko-programa superguai bat zeukanat! (66)

The first thing he did when we went to his room was to put on a red cap that read ATLANTA... and show me the new computer there was on his desk:

\_I have a super cool videogame!

Thus, Landa makes us realize that the distinction between the *baserri* and the city, the primitive and the modern, the oral and the written, the educated and the uneducated is not that clear. The *baserri* is no longer the place where illiterate and primitive people live. In fact, the image of the *baserri* Landa gives us could not be more different from that: secondary orality is as present there as in the urban world, and the new generations

are as educated as those from the city, as well as having the same interests they do.

On the other hand, while Mainer's grandmother could seem to be a representation of the old stereotype, that is not so clear either, as we have seen. Even though she feels nostalgia for the *baserri* and tells stories she remembers about it, which is an example of primary orality, she is now part of the city. She is influenced by secondary orality, as we can see the interest she shows in television, especially when Mainer's mother starts to work on it. Thus, both primary and secondary orality play an important role in her life. Therefore, she is a mixture of both worlds. Consequently, she is the perfect example that shows us that the rural and the urban worlds, as well as primary and secondary orality, are not mutually exclusive, but are inevitably in contact. As a result, the stereotype of the Basque as an illiterate peasant in whose world there is only place for primary orality is subverted.

***Bitartean heldu eskutik/Meanwhile Take my Hand and Bilbao-New York-Bilbao***

Sometimes, the stereotype of the true Basque as a *baserritarra* or a sailor is Romantic and romanticized, both by people from outside the Basque Country, but also by the Basques themselves. In *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, a novel set during the author's plane trip from Bilbao to New York, Uribe tells us stories about his family, his village, previous trips, people he has met, interviews he has had, diaries, letters and emails he has read, songs he has heard, and many more texts. For example, Gabilondo mentions how Kirmen Uribe shows a Romantic view of the Basque sailor when he talks about his father, who was a sailor:

Lehen momentu batean erreferentziak anakronikoa badirudi ere, aitaren deskribapen idealizatua eta ohiturista (kostunbrista) azpimarratu nahiko nuke, aita gaztetan pobrea zena (lau anaiak, traje bakarra izanik, elizara txandaka joaten ziren) eta semeak beti ere “iparralderago” bultzatzen zituena, ez konformatzeko eskatzen ziena, eta lau semeek portuko barratik itxaroten ziotena. (“Euskal poesiaren historia postmoderno baterantz” 35)

I would like to emphasize that, although at the beginning the reference [of his father as a sailor] seems anachronical, the description of his father is idealized and costumbrist, one according to which the father, in his youth, was poor (he had four brothers and only one suit, they took turns going to church) and he always pushed his children to go further North, asked them not to resign, and his children waited for him at the harbor.

Not only does Uribe present his father as the typical Basque sailor who had a difficult childhood, but he also describes his grandfather according to the stereotype of the illiterate Basque from a small village who does not know how to read or write, but is a famous storyteller in Ondarroa, the small fishing town the family is from. When writing *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, a novel that is formed by several conversations, interviews, photographs, CDs and notebooks, Uribe interviews Carmen Bastida, the daughter of Ricardo Bastida, an architect from Bilbao who used to spend the summers in Ondarroa with his family. Carmen Bastida tells Uribe that her favorite person from Ondarroa was Liborio, that is, Uribe’s grandfather, as he would tell her stories: “Nik maiteena, baina,

herriko gizon bat nuen, Liborio, berak kontatzen zizkigun ipuinak” ‘I loved most, however, a man from the village, Liborio, as he was the one who told us tales’ (20).

In *Bitartean heldu eskutik/Meanwhile Take my Hand*, these romanticized descriptions of Uribe’s father as a sailor and his grandfather as an illiterate storyteller are also present. As we saw in chapter one, in his poem “Teknologia” he reviews “the long history of writing” (47) that has taken place in the Basque Country, which has a strong parallelism with Joseba Zulaika’s family. As mentioned above, Zulaika’s grandfather could not read or write; his father learned how to read and write in Spanish, in a town that is close to Bilbao, and he liked to read news or *bertso-paperak* out loud, as well as improvise *bertsoak*; and a big part Zulaika’s life takes place in a library. In the same way, Uribe’s grandfather could not read or write, but he was well known in Ondarroa because he was a good storyteller; Uribe’s father could read and write, but he wrote in Spanish. Like his grandfather, Uribe is famous, not only in Ondarroa, but in the rest of the Basque Country, Spain and even in other countries. Like his grandfather, he is famous because of the stories he tells, but unlike him, he first writes and has these stories published, and then performs them in front of an audience.

Even though these idealized stereotypes of the traditional Basque as a peasant or sailor are present in Uribe’s work, in *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, he also gives us a different image of the Basque from Ondarroa. While none of his brothers and sisters lives in Ondarroa and only one of his cousins is a sailor (96), he is aware that the new Basque sailor now has a different profile. He affirms that “[h]erriko gazteek ez genuen itsasora joan nahi eta haiek [Afrikako inmigranteak] dira orain arrantzaleak” ‘we, the young people from the village, did not want to go to the sea, and they [the African immigrants]

are the fishermen now' (126). He realizes that the typical Basque is no longer the sailor/fisherman or *baserritarra* who was born in the Basque Country, for he can now also be someone who comes from a different country or his children, often born in the Basque Country. When Vojtech Jasny, a film director, visits him in Ondarroa, he starts recording something that catches his attention, which gives Uribe the opportunity to describe this new type of Basque: "Jolasean zebiltzan haurrak bi neskatilak ziren. Beltza bata eta zuria bestea. Bi-biak herriko alabak... Euskaraz air ziren" 'the two children who were playing were two little girls, one black and the other one white. Both of them daughters of the town... They were speaking Basque' (229). Then, while, in some way, the stereotype of the typical Basque as someone from a rural area who is either a sailor or an illiterate storyteller is present in *Bilbao-New York-Billao*, this stereotype is also denied, as this model of the traditional Basque is shown to no longer exist, and there emerges a different model of Basque, which is more inclusive. While at some points in the novel he sounds nostalgic about how the young people from Ondarroa do not want to be fishermen anymore, he also seems happy that there is place for this new type of Basque who originally comes from a different continent.

In *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, there are references to the division between the rural and the urban Basque that support the idea of the *baserri* and the city as two contrasting worlds. He includes in the novel, among several other texts, a painting by Aurelio Arteta, a painter from Bilbao who was friends with Ricardo Bastida. The latter asked the former to paint a mural for his summerhouse in Ondarroa, and he painted it in 1922. In the sixties, after Bastida died and his family sold the house, the painted mural was taken to the Bilbao Museum of Fine Arts, where we can still see it (Uribe *Bilbao* 13-4). The title

of this mural is “Erromerian 1”. As the title indicates, it represents an “erromeria”, that is, a celebration in honor of a saint, a festivity. Uribe describes it in the following manner:

Muralean bi mundu ageri dira, biak elkarrekin. Alde batetik baserritarrak daude eta beste alde batetik kaletarrak. Baserriko neskek era tradizional batean daude jantzita. Orkatilaraino heltzen zaie gona, zapia buruan eta eskoterik gabe. Aitzitik, hiriko neskek ez dute horrelako trazarik. Haien soinekoak arinak dira, haizeak mugitzen ditu. Gona laburragoak dituzte, belaunburuak agerian utzita eta eskoteak ere zabal-zabalak. (*Bilbao* 15)

Two worlds appear together at the mural, both together. In one part there are the *baserritarrak* and in the other part, the city people. The girls from the *baserri* are dressed in a traditional way. Their skirts come down to their ankles, they are wearing headscarfs and they do not have cleavages. On the contrary, the city girls do not look like that. Their dresses are light, the air moves them. Their skirts are shorter, their kneecaps can be seen and they have big cleavages.

Another thing that should be mentioned is that while a boy and a girl from the *baserri* are playing the *trikitixa* and the tambourine, two traditional Basque musical instruments that are an important part of Basque oral tradition as they are often used to accompany traditional songs, none of the city girls are playing any musical instruments.

When Uribe talks to José Julián Bakedano, one of the people in charge of the museum, about that painting, he tells him that “koadro honek mundu zaharretik berrirako jauzia azaltzen du, eta baserritarraren eta kaletarren arteko kontrasteak areagotu egiten du

hiriko neskabilen erotismoa” ‘this painting explains the jump from the old to the new world, and the erotism of the girls from the city increases the contrasts between the *baserritarrak* and the city people’ (Uribe *Bilbao* 15).

Even though, as Uribe and Bakedano notice, this mural makes the difference between the world of the *baserri* (of the rural, the oral, the traditional) and that of the city (the urban, the written, the modern) clear, it still presents these two worlds hand in hand. Even though the *baserritarrak* are on the left side of the painting, while the city girls are all together on the right side, they are all part of the same scene, taking part in the same event. In addition, one of the city girls’ hand is on one of the *baserritarrak*’s shoulder. Therefore, this painting may also give us the idea that these two worlds, although different in some ways, are more in contact than we might have thought.

In this novel, we can see the aforementioned situation of diglossia in which *Batua* is used in writing while the other dialects are used in conversation. As mentioned in the introduction, Uribe answered the question about why he has decided to write in *Batua* saying that he does this so that more readers can understand his work. However, when I asked him about this, he responded that the reason why he writes in *Batua* is because it is the “literary dialect” (Uribe “Re: galdera bat”). This proves that there is a diglossic situation in which now this is the high variety, while the other dialects are the lower varieties. When he interviews people, he transcribes the conversations and incorporates them into his novel in *Batua*, even when it is clear that the conversation took place in the dialect from Ondarroa, like when he interviews Maritxu, his grandmother’s sister: “[h]erriko euskara zerabilen Maritxuk, baina duela laurogei urte hitz egiten zen bezalakoa. Tarteka gaztelania sartzen zitzaion, Bilbon bizi izandako urteen emaria” ‘she

used the Basque from the town, but the type that was spoken eighty years ago. In between, she also used Spanish, as a result of the years she had spent in Bilbao' (Uribe *Bilbao* 27). Although it is clear that this conversation was not in *Batua*, with some Spanish, it is transcribed in *Batua*. Nevertheless, he includes a fragment of his mother's diary, which she reads out loud, where she speaks about her husband. That fragment is in the dialect from Ondarroa. I find it interesting that he chooses to leave this fragment in that dialect, while the rest of the novel is in *Batua*, even the conversations with his parents. In some way, both his mother and he are subverting the diglossic situation: his mother, because she writes her diary in her native dialect, and Uribe, because he transcribes it in that same dialect. Even though it is a diary, something that is most probably going to be read only by its writer, it is still a written manifestation.

Furthermore, a fragment of this particular diary has been published and read by a rather big audience. When I asked Uribe why he decided to leave this in his dialect, he answered: "Bizkaierazko testuak sartzen ditut errealitate sentsazio handiago bat sortzeko. Bere horretan jarri dut amarena, horrelaxe idatzi zuelako" 'I include texts in Biscayan in order to create a sensation of reality. I have left my mum's [diary] in its original form, because that is how she wrote it' (Uribe "Re: galdera bat"). The fact that he believes that Biscayan creates a sensation of reality implies that that's the dialect that he would usually communicate in. Therefore, he is stating that his writing is not real, which implies that in communication in his real conversations would happen in Biscayan, not in *Batua*. In addition, he also made me notice that he has included texts in other languages (Uribe "Re: galdera bat"). From the information he gave me, I find that he leaves written texts



and songs in their original form, while paraphrasing conversations and writing them in *Batua*.

In this novel, there are two examples in which literate people need help from a less educated person, in order to carry out tasks that normally require being not only literate, but also having a high level of education: writing a column for a newspaper and creating a dictionary. Here, however, the more educated people could not have achieved these goals without the help of two people that do not have as much education as the writers.

First, when Uribe refers to the moment in which he wrote his first column for a newspaper, he affirms that “[i]dazleak behar du babesa” ‘the writer needs help, protection’ (*Bilbao* 51). He decides to ask his father for help, and it is the father, the fisherman, who used to write in Spanish, who gives him advice about his writing. In addition, not only does he criticize his writing, but he uses a story in order to explain to him why his writing is not good:

... kontakizun baten bitartez erantzun zidan. Mutil koskorra zelarrik baziren herrian bi apaiz. Sermoia esateko bakoitzak bazuen manera jakin bat. Bata hurbila zen, jendeak samur jasotzen zituen hark esan nahi zituen guztiak, Don Manuel. Bigarren apaizaren estiloa, oster, makurra zen. Ez zitzaion ezer ulertzen. Don Jesusi buruz ari zitzaidan. Elizako hasierako ilaretan esertzen ziren aberatzentzako esaten zuen sermoia, atzeko ilaretakoak kontuan hartu gabe. Bada, nik bigarren apaiz horren moduan idazten nuela esan zidan aitak, Don Jesusen moduan...

(*Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* 52)

... He gave me the answer through a story. When he was a young child, there were two priests in the town. They both had their own way of giving their sermons. One of them, Don Manuel, was close to the people, and explained everything he wanted to say in an easy way. The other priest's style, however, was crooked. You could not understand him. He was talking about Don Jesus. He gave his sermons only for the rich people who sat in the front rows of pews in the church, without taking into account the people who were sitting in the back rows. So, my father told me that I wrote in the same way as Don Jesus...

His father, who is not as educated as him, helps him improve his writing style, and he does it by telling a story, something that happened in the town. In addition, he compares an oral discourse with a written piece, and judges them by the same rules: they both serve the function of communicating something to an audience.

The other example of a person who does not have much education helping a very educated individual is when Uribe's uncle helps write a Basque dictionary. He meets Eneko Barrutia, the writer of the dictionary his uncle helped to write. Barrutia gives him a CD with the recordings of his uncle participating in the creation of the dictionary (Uribe *Bilbao* 87). Here, we have another example of the interaction between an orality (the CD) and literacy (the dictionary). In this case, it is the oral source that gives place to the written text. Uribe describes the process of writing a dictionary, which he listens to in the CD:

Barrutia irakasleak hitz bat esaten dio, gaztelaniaz gehienetan, eta osabak herriko euskarara ekartzen du.

...

Baina kontua ez da hor bukatzen. Hiztegieak hitza itzultzeko eskatu eta gero, itzultitako hitz horri aurretik “hiru” jartzeko agintzen dio. Adibidez, “vela” nola den galdetuta, osabak “beli” erantzungo du.

“Eta hiru aurretik jarrita?”

“Hiru bela”.

...

“Zergatik esaten duzu hiru behin eta berriz” [osabak] galdetzen dio jarraian.

“Bai, badakit arraroa dela, baina hitzak artikulurik gabe jakiteko da”. Barrutia saiatzen da zergatia azaltzen, baina arrakastarik gabe.

“Ondo, ondo” esaten dio osabak, konbentzimendu handirik gabe. (Uribe *Bilbao* 89-90)

Professor Barrutia tells him a word, most of the times in Spanish, and my uncle translates them into the Basque from the town.

...

But that is not the end of the story. After the writer of the dictionary asks him to translate the word, he asks him to put “three” before it. For example, having been asked how to say “sail,” my uncle will answer “beli.”

“And putting three before it?”

“Three sails.”

...

“Why do you say three once and again?” He [the uncle] asks next.

“Yes, I know it is weird, but I do it in order to know how the word is without the article.” Barrutia tries to explain the reason to him, but he is not very successful. “Okay, okay,” says my uncle, without sounding very convinced.

Here, we can see that a type of non-academic knowledge is privileged over academic knowledge: without Uribe’s uneducated uncle, that dictionary would not have been written. An educated person like Barrutia needs the help of someone who lacks this education. Thus, Uribe is recognizing the importance that the knowledge of an uneducated person, like his uncle and his father, has. Without that knowledge, his first newspaper column would not have been successful, and a dictionary would not have been written. Thanks to the help of two uneducated people, educated people have access to two new written texts.

Thus, Uribe’s *Bilbao-New York-Bibao*, even though it could seem that he is reinforcing the stereotype of the rural illiterate Basque person, as he sounds nostalgic when he remembers his father’s and grandfather’s lives, actually denies this nostalgia in several ways. The typical Basque person has changed, as not many young people from the Basque Country want to be fishermen, but now there is a new type of Basque who is willing to do this job and is completely integrated in the Basque culture (the African immigrant). Furthermore, by using a painting, he brings two apparently opposed worlds together: the rural/traditional/illiterate and the rural/modern/literate. In addition, he acknowledges the importance of the knowledge uneducated people have.

## Conclusion

It is evident that in present day western societies, the written word is associated with civilization, with a modern world, while the oral word is associated with lack of civilization. An example that justifies this affirmation would be the consequences of *bertsolariak* being more educated. Whereas *bertsolaritza* used to be an art practiced by uneducated, often completely illiterate people, many of whom came from rural areas, it is now mostly practiced in urban settings by young people who have a university education. After this change, *bertsolaritza* has started having more prestige, and it is no longer considered a lesser artistic manifestation. On the contrary, it is now taught in schools and there are more and more scholarly works about it. Now, it is an art form that makes several Basque people proud, unlike what happened in the past.

Interestingly enough, while this is going on with *bertsolaritza*, several Basque authors are using their written works to undermine this assumption linking orality with lack of civilization and literacy with civilization. These authors write in Basque in order to break with the stereotypes that the Basques are rural and illiterate people, and that the rural and urban, and the oral and the written word are separated from each other. In order to subvert these assumptions, they use different techniques, like making a parody of the stereotypes, or just giving us concrete examples of how the rural and the urban, the oral and the written, and the civilized and the uncivilized are not necessarily opposed to each other. Nevertheless, the fact that they use writing in order to subvert stereotypes about orality implies that they are establishing a hierarchy in which orality is being absorbed into literacy, and thus the former would be subjected to the latter.

Chapter 4: Breaking with Assumptions: Questioning the Permanence of the  
Written Word and the Evanescence of the Oral Word

**Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the association between the written word and civilization, as well as that of the oral word with a lack of civilization. I explored how this is questioned both in Basque oral and written manifestations: the rural, uncivilized, illiterate is not opposed to the urban, civilized and literate, but rather they interact with each other. In the same way as I believe that the written/oral, and the “uncivilized”/“civilized” are not opposing concepts, I consider that the function of a text as a tool for storing and transmitting knowledge does not differ that much depending on the oral or written nature of the text. While the written text is considered in present day Western societies as the most appropriate tool for this task, since it is thought to be both invariable and permanent, Basque oral and written manifestations often show us that the oral text (which is supposed to be variable and ephemeral) can be more reliable than the written to fulfill such a function. To demonstrate this, I explore in this chapter how some forms of Basque orature remain over the years. I further analyze various literary works written in Basque that present images of how the oral word remains, while written texts disappear, or are destroyed or damaged. These literary works are: *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, by Kirmen Uribe, “Rossetti-ren obsesioa” ‘Rossetti’s obsession,’ by Ramón Saizarbitoria, two stories in *Obabakoak*, by Bernardo Atxaga (“Jose Francisco: Obabako erretoretxean azaldutako bigarren aitortza” ‘Jose Francisco: the second confession found in Obaba’s priest’s house’ and “Camilo Lizardi erretore jaunaren etxean aurkitutako

gutunaren azalpena” ‘The explanation of the letter found in the priest Camilo Lizardi’s house’), and *Bestiarioa/Hilerrikoiak* ‘Bestiary/Of the cemetery,’ by Karlos Linazasoro.

**Assumptions about the Permanence and Invariability of the Written Word versus the Impermanence and Variability of the Oral Word**

In present day Western societies, it is a generalized supposition that the written word is more reliable in order to store and transmit knowledge than the oral word, due to the fact that the former supposedly remains, is permanent and unchangeable, while the latter is apparently temporary and disappears once it has been pronounced. Among the people who defend this idea, we find Walter Ong, who affirms that the oral word is ephemeral: “[s]ound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word ‘permanence’, by the time I get to the ‘-nence’, the ‘perma-’ is gone, and has to be gone” (32). So the oral word is thought to last only for the moment that it is produced, and is therefore incapable of transmitting information reliably, in a way that guarantees its permanence, since it disappears as soon as it has been pronounced. In addition, Ong defends the idea that there is no way of creating the exact same oral discourse twice: “[i]n the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not” (Ong 34). That is, since according to Ong, the oral word disappears as soon as it is produced, we do not have an original to go back to in order to recover the information and reproduce it.

In the same manner as Ong, Ruth Finnegan refers to the permanence of the written word, which would differ from the impermanence of the oral: while the former can be repeated in the exact same manner in different spaces and times, this would not be possible with the latter: “[t]he most obvious property of writing is that it gives *permanence* to verbal expression. Words can be transmitted through space and over time in permanent and unchanging form” (Finnegan 17). Then, in Finnegan’s opinion, it is only through writing, and not through the oral word that we can have permanence and invariability. However, the written word can change too: since all words, no matter their oral or written nature, are inevitably interpreted by the audience or the reader, the meaning of the written word is not necessarily permanent. In fact, it can be interpreted in different manners by different readers, so even though the signifier remains intact, its meaning changes. Since this happens with the oral word too, in this sense, again, they are not two opposed entities, as they both are subject to interpretation.

Finnegan also pays attention to how this variability of the oral word has an effect on what she calls “oral literature,” that is, verbal art forms that rely solely on the oral word (to which, like Zirimu, I refer as “orature”):

First, there is the idea that *oral* literature, just through being oral, is handed down word for word over the generations. Now there are a few cases where – it seems – this is indeed done (though more likely over the years than over generations), but by and large the most striking characteristic of oral as opposed to written literature is precisely its variability. There is little concept of the verbal accuracy typical of cultures which depend on the written, particularly on the printed, word. By its very



nature oral literature is changeable: it cannot be checked by reference back to a written standard, and the performer/composer is aware of the need to speak in accordance with the demands of his audience rather than those authenticated but remote prototypes. (Finnegan 69)

So from Finnegan's point of view, even though orature is transmitted from generation to generation, it is not passed on in the exact same way, but in various modified versions, as there is no quest for precision in societies that depend primarily on the oral word. In the same way as Ong, she points out that there is no referent to go back to when attempting to recall a given example of orature or, for that matter, any oral discourse. Moreover, this referent has to be written, according to her, which indicates that she does not believe that there can exist an oral reference. Apart from this, she makes reference to the variability that comes as a result of the different audiences. However, as it has already been mentioned, the oral word also has an audience that, even though it does not interact with the author at the moment of the creation of the work, can interpret it in different manners that may change its meaning, just as with the oral word. It is true that, as the oral performer interacts with an audience and with a space, his or her performance is most likely to vary depending on these two factors, giving place to various versions of a same work: "[u]nlike the written word there is no fixed and 'correct' text, for oral literature is a performed not a printed art form and its expression depends on the effectiveness of the performers and their sensitivity to the audience's wishes as much as on a *text*" (Finnegan 87). Then, in Finnegan's opinion, whereas written literature depends solely on an invariable text, the art form that is orally performed in front of an audience is composed not only of a text, but also of an audience.

As Richard Schechner points out in *Performance Theory* (1988), “[t]he audience is not an either/or stagnant lump. Changes in an audience occur during performances as well as from one performance to another” (193). So, as the audience is always going to be different, what is being performed is going to vary as well. He gives the example of a representation in which someone in the audience talked to one of the authors, who first responded to him as his character, but since the spectator wanted to keep talking, which gave place to a situation in which two people were talking at the same time, the actor had to tell him that he was not going to be able to continue with his performance if he did not stop talking. In the end, more people in the audience said something too, some supporting the man and some asking him to stop talking (Schechner 193). According to Schechner, the audience licenses the performance, although they may not realize how much power they have (194). Thus, like Finnegan, he is aware that, even if it is the same text that is being performed, it is going to be slightly different in each representation, depending on the audience. Therefore, this proves Finnegan’s idea that what she calls oral literature usually has many versions.

Nevertheless, the difference between the oral and the written is not that clear: while the oral word can remain unchanged over time and through space, both with primary and secondary orality, the written word may not fulfill the function of conserving information in a reliable manner over time, as even Ong and Finnegan recognize. In fact, both of them are aware that it is not as simple as understanding every oral word as variable and ephemeral, while considering every written word as permanent. In fact, there are various factors involved in the idea of permanence and fixity of the written word, as

opposed to the impermanence and variability of the oral word. Thus, once again, we cannot understand the oral and the written as two opposed entities.

First, as Ong notices, it is not the written word, but the printed word, which would have this permanence and invariability. He compares the manuscript with the printed text:

The printed text is supposed to represent the words of an author in definitive or 'final' form... By contrast, manuscripts, with their glosses or marginal comments (which often got worked into the text in subsequent copies) were in dialogue with the world outside their own borders. They remained closer to the give-and-take of oral expression. (130)

Therefore, according to Ong, the written word of the manuscript would, in some way, be closer to the oral than to the written in terms of permanence and invariability, as every copy was different from the others, and some incorporated the glosses from a former copy. In addition, this implies that manuscripts work in a similar manner as an oral dialogue: every copyist dialogues with readers of a manuscript, and incorporates their thoughts in a new text. In contrast with this, there is the printed text: “[p]rint encloses thought in thousands of copies of a work of exactly the same visual and physical consistency” (Ong 130) and “encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion” (Ong 129). Then, in Ong’s opinion, the dialogue that formed part of manuscript copying is not present in the printed text. I do agree with him on this: with manuscripts, not every copy is exactly the same as the others; it depends on the copyist’s handwriting, and this person can also “make a mistake” and not copy the exact same words. In this sense, then, in the same way as Ong

does, I consider that the manuscript is closer to primary orality than to a printed text.

I also believe, like him, that printing gives a sense of completion: the manuscript includes glosses that dialogue with the main text, and they may be included in a posterior copy, as can happen with primary orality. However, with a printed text, it is not possible to include marginal comments of a previous copy. It is possible that a reader makes marginal comments on a printed copy and then someone else reads them, but these comments are not going to be incorporated in subsequent editions of the book, unlike what happens with the marginal comments in manuscripts.

Secondly, it is necessary to take into consideration that it is not only that some kind of written texts are not that invariable, but also that there are some kinds of oral texts that have the ability to remain over time and travel to other places: with the secondary orality of new technologies this is a reality, as Finnegan points out:

Are we perhaps in danger of assuming too readily that that [writing] is therefore the *only* way things can be: that fixity can *only* go with a visual medium? After all, a fixed auditory form or the multiplication of identical *auditory* copies is not in principle impossible. Indeed, through the developing technology of auditory reproduction, above all of tape/cassette recorders, we are already beginning to see precisely this happen in our own culture. Even in fully literate societies therefore it is no longer just through *written* forms that fixity and multiple identical copies are achieved: a development whose significance we are perhaps only beginning to appreciate. (107)

In this manner, Finnegan does recognize that with the secondary orality that technological advances bring identical versions of the same oral text can be created, with which I agree. Furthermore, these identical copies can last for a long time. With them, we have a reference to go back to. Thus, the oral word that comes with secondary orality is no longer ephemeral. Apart from this, we also need to take into consideration the fact that even with primary orality we can achieve fixity and permanence: if a performer performs in front of an audience, this audience can remember what he or she said. As we have already seen, people who rely primarily on orality rely on their memory more than people who rely mainly on writing. Although memory does not guarantee that they are going to remember the exact same words, so that we may have some variants of a given text, we still conserve its essence, and keep a form of orature or oral tradition alive for a long time. Nevertheless, as we saw in the previous chapter, the long history of privileging the written word over the oral still has an impact in the present time, so even if we are aware that the oral word can be exactly duplicated, even if we keep recordings for a long time, we still tend to rely on the written word as a trustworthy means to maintain and transmit a text through space and over time.

In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida is aware of the irremediable disappearance of texts:

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they

can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception.

And hence, perpetually and essentially, they [texts] run the risk of being definitively lost. Who will ever know of those disappearances? (63)

Thus, Derrida, based on the impossibility of the text to be perceptible, realizes that it can be lost forever, and nobody will know about its disappearance, and not knowing about it, neither will anybody know about the text itself. Then, while Ong realizes that what gives completion and makes a text invariable is the printing press, Derrida claims that the text does not necessarily remain.

In the Basque Country, we have examples of both orature and literature (as well as oral literature and literary orature) that undermine this assumption that relates the written word to permanence and fixity and the oral word to impermanence and variability: there are examples of oral texts that have been conserved over time both through primary and secondary orality, while we often find that written texts have been destroyed and therefore, their content, lost forever. The fact that we find these examples may mean that Basque performers and writers are trying to show us that the oral and the written word are not two opposed entities, that they are not that different. However, they may also be attempting to bring to our attention the fact that Basque culture has been predominately oral, and that its oral verbal manifestations are as valuable as any written literary work. By showing us that the oral word may be as permanent (or more) as the written word, they may be attempting to make us aware that orature and oral traditions are as valuable as written literature.

### The Permanence of the Oral Word

As I have already mentioned, in the Basque Country, there are several legends, old sayings and popular songs that have been transmitted from generation to generation relying solely on the oral word. It is true that there are various versions of them, but their essence, their main idea and function, remain unchanged. In addition, some *bertsoak* that were improvised, and supposed to be forgotten after they were created and performed, have actually been memorized and passed on to form part of the shared oral tradition of a given community. Again, we can see that the audience plays an extremely important role on the permanence or loss of the oral word. As I mentioned in the introduction, Manuel de Lecuona is aware of how *bertsoak* have become songs. Apart from him, Ansorena also realizes that this happens, as in his songbook, he affirms that “... muchas composiciones que originalmente fueron bertsos, con el tiempo y por fuerza de la costumbre – o, porque alguien les ha puesto música – se han convertido en canciones” ‘several compositions that were originally *bertsoak*, over time and by force of habit – or because someone has put music to them – have become songs (11). In his songbook, he includes equally those compositions that were originally songs and those which were *bertsoak* but have become songs: “[e]n esta recopilación, huyendo de distinciones innecesarias, van juntos versos y canciones” ‘in this compilation, avoiding unnecessary distinctions, *bertsoak* and songs appear together’ (11).

With the secondary orality that comes with technological development, these forms of orature and oral traditions are easier to conserve. It is true that they are also being written, but when we read them, several things are missing; for instance, the voice of the performer and the interaction with the audience. Nonetheless, when they are in a

DVD or CD, we can still appreciate their oral nature. Even though, as the audience of those DVDs or CDs, we cannot interact with the performer anymore, we can see the way in which the performer interacted with the audience at the time of the performance. We have already seen that now *bertsolaritza* contests are recorded and shown on television so, definitely, there is a referent to go back to, in order to find the original version of a given *bertsoa*. In the same way, there are CDs of Basque popular songs. If you do a search on youtube.com, you can find several videos both of *bertsolaritza* and of popular songs. Consequently, we can affirm that with the secondary orality of the new technologies, Basque orature and oral traditions can remain unchanged over time. It is true that, when listening to a CD or watching a video, the essence of *bertsolaritza* is lost, as we cannot interact with the performer, and we are not there at the time when a *bertsoa* was improvised, but these CDs and videos maintain the *bertsoak* unchanged.

However, it is not only through examples of Basque orature and oral traditions that we can prove that the assumption that the written word is permanent whereas the oral is ephemeral is mistaken. For instance, in *Obabakoak*, by Bernardo Atxaga, we have several examples of oral stories that are transmitted and conserved over time, unchanged. An example of this would be the story of the lizard mentioned in chapter one: it was an extended idea in Obaba that if a lizard entered your ear, it would eat your brain and, as a consequence, you would become dumb. Using that example, Atxaga shows us that a story that is told orally can be maintained over time: as a child, the protagonist of that section of *Obabakoak*, was told that story, and as an adult, not only does he still remember it, but it is also part of his beliefs: although he is aware that this story goes against his logic and his knowledge of the world, he is still suspicious that this may have happened to a boy he



went to school with. In fact, one of the reasons why he goes to Obaba is to find out more about this, and even after Ismael (the boy he thought had put the lizard in the other boy's ear) gives him what would sound like a logical explanation for his interest in lizards, the main character is not convinced that the reason the other boy became dumb is not related to the lizard. Thus, even though there is not a referent or original "text" to go back to, this story still remains unchanged.

Apart from this example of primary orality that is maintained over the years, Atxaga also shows that, thanks to technological developments, secondary orality guarantees that a given text survives over time in a more efficient way than a written text. In the second story in *Obabakoak*, "Jose Francisco: Obabako erretoretxean azaldutako bigarren aitortza" 'Jose Francisco: the second<sup>20</sup> confession found in Obaba's priest's house,' we have a confession that was recorded, not written. Thus, in the same way as Finnegan, Atxaga is aware that with new technologies, the oral word can become as permanent as the oral word. This tale tells us the story of two brothers who sleep with a woman at the same time and, when she gets pregnant, both of them decide to be the fathers of the baby. They have an extraordinarily strong deaf mute child. One of them tries to kill him, but ends up abandoning him in the forest. After the boy's abandonment, his mother kills herself, and the child kills one of brothers, as he blames him for his mother's death. Then, the other brother confesses that he is planning on killing the child and then himself. The narrator of this story finds a confession at the priest's house, in

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<sup>20</sup> The first two stories in *Obabakoak* are two confessions. Since "Jose Francisco: Obabako erretoretxean azaldutako bigarren aitortza" is the second story, this is the second confession. The first story (and first confession) will be discussed later in the chapter.

which the brother who is still alive not only retells this story, but also confesses that he is planning on killing the child.

This confession is not written, but recorded, as the narrator of the story points out: “... ez baitzegoen, bigarren aitortza hori, inongo paperetan idatzia, baizik eta hari magnetiko baten grabatua edo *markatua*” ‘as this second confession was not written down in paper, but recorded or *marked* in a magnetic tape’ (25). We can say that the narrator, who describes himself as a “paper aztertzaile” ‘paper examiner’ (25), a researcher who relies on the written word as a means of recording and transmitting information, and thus he was not expecting to find this information in an oral manner: “nik ez nuke aurkitu ahal izango. Baina, zorionez, laguntzaile bizkorra izan nuen erretoretzeko nire miaketa hartan...” ‘I would not have been able to find it. However, fortunately, I had an alert helper in my search of the priest’s house’ (25). As someone who relies on the written word over the oral word, the narrator transcribes the recording by hand (25), word for word, which again shows us how he privileges the written word over the oral as a manner of storing and transmitting knowledge. Nevertheless, as we have seen before, the manuscript is, in a certain way, closer to the oral than to the written word: two manuscripts cannot be an exact copy of each other, and are subject to variation, just like with primary orality. In fact, the narrator may have not transcribed what he heard word by word. Thus, as Ong points out, a manuscript does not have the feeling of being a finished text that the printed text has.

However, the narrator in this story finds out that this recording is almost complete, as there are only a few minutes missing (there are only three short interruptions where no important information is missing or is easy to guess from the rest of the

recording), unlike the written confession that will be examined in the following section. Furthermore, he mentions details of the recorded person's voice, a piece of information that would have been missing in a written text (27). Unlike the written confession that I will analyze later in the chapter, this one does not hide information: the person in the recording (one of the brothers, Francisco) confesses everything, and expresses his intention that somebody listen to it, instead of hiding it:

Makina honetan markatutakoa San Martineko ermitaren atarian utziko dut, hartara Obabako erretorearen babesa izan dezan. Entzun dezala erretoreak nik hemen azaltzen dudana, inork ez ditzala pagatu nik egindakoak. (41)

I will leave what I have marked in this machine in the entryway of the chapel of San Martin, so that it has the protection of the priest from Obaba. Let the priest listen to what I explain here, so that nobody has to pay for what I did.

Interestingly enough, Atxaga shows us that primary orality may be even a better means for transmitting information than secondary orality: while the story of the lizard is part of the main character's being, still conditioning his way of understanding the world, the confession recorded on tape is almost complete, with few interruptions, but it still has some minutes of silence, of missing information. In this manner, the secondary orality that comes as a result of new technologies and that would appear to be more similar to the written text than to the oral word (there is a referent to go back to, and thus it would seem easier to repeat the exact same version) is less reliable than primary orality.

In conclusion, through this story, Atxaga shows us that the oral word can be used to conserve information through time. In fact, the recording is from the end of the

nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth century, so it has survived in very good conditions for approximately a century when the researcher's helper finds it. In addition, this recording is not subject to variation, as exact copies of it can be made: the narrator transcribes it, word by word, and if we recorded it, we would obtain the exact same version of the story. However, it is not as complete as the story of the lizard, which has been transmitted from generation to generation without the help of new technologies. In this manner, Atxaga also makes us realize that an oral story, even without the new technologies, can be kept alive for generations, even better than if these are used.

In *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, by Kirmen Uribe, we have some examples of how the oral word survives through secondary orality. One would be the CDs with the author's uncle's recordings for the creation of a dictionary, which were mentioned in the previous chapter: he talks to the person who wrote the dictionary, who shares the CDs with Uribe. In the same way, the author interviews the widow of one of his father's coworkers, Miel, and she tells him about her husband's storytelling skills and how they are still conserved:

Mielek ilobatxoari kontatu zizkion kontu hauek denak eta ilobak grabatu egin zituen eskolarako lan baterako, Miel hil baino apur bat lehenago. Etxera bisitan joan nintzaionean Antigua "Piperrak" zinta utzi zidan esanez, "hementxe dago Mielen izate guztia". (135)

Miel told all these stories to his little grandchild<sup>21</sup> and the grandchild recorded them for a school project, a little bit before Miel died. When I

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<sup>21</sup> "*Iloba*" can mean both "grandchild" and "nephew/niece" in Basque.

went to her house to visit her, Antigua “Piperra” lent me the tape, saying “here is Miel’s whole being.”

Through the grandchild’s recording, Miel’s stories are kept alive. In addition, they can be shared with more people in an unchanged manner; they survive over time and through space. Moreover, it is through the oral word that Miel’s “whole being” is kept alive after his death. Furthermore, we also have some examples in *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* of oral traditions that are kept alive only through primary orality, as the song I mentioned in chapter one, “Ama Santa Ines” ‘Mum Saint Ines,’ a song that is part of popular culture and that has been sung to children in several generations, without the help of new technologies, just through word of mouth. Then, in the same way as Atxaga, Uribe shows us that, with or without the help of new technologies, the oral word can remain over time.

Accordingly, we can affirm that some forms of Basque orature, as well as some literary works written in Basque prove to us that the oral word (both primary and secondary orality) can be a reliable manner of storing and transmitting information. At the same time, as we will see in the next section, they also show us that the opposite happens with the written word, which appears to be an easily destroyable entity.

### **The Impermanence of the Written Word**

We have already examined how both Basque written and oral manifestations prove to us that the oral word can be considered a reliable means of storing and transmitting knowledge. In the same way, it can be said that they also demonstrate that the written word is not as efficient a means of storing and transmitting a text as it is often assumed. While, as mentioned above, there are several tales, popular songs, old sayings

and *bertsoak* that have been passed on from generation to generation orally, there are also several instances of written texts that have disappeared. For example, in *Bosquejo de historia del bersolarismo* ‘Draft of the history of *bertsolaritza*,’ Antonio Zavala quotes Manterola<sup>22</sup> to explain how Bilintx (a *bertsolari*) destroyed many of his *bertso-jarriak* (written *bertsoak*), which Manterola and Zavala refer to as “poems:”

Allá por los años 1870 al 1871, solicité de él con mucho empeño su colección completa [de poesías] con el propósito de darla a la estampa, pero poseído Vilinch de su eterna manía de que nada valían, como escritas – decía él – en sus ratos de melancolía y con el único fin de endulzar sus pesares, se opuso a la idea de que fueran publicadas. El escaso valor que la modestia de Vilinch concedía a sus producciones ha sido causa de que ni aun conservara los originales de muchas de ellas, que rasgaba apenas escritas, e indudablemente son muchas las que se han perdido para siempre. (Qtd. in *Bosquejo* 73-4)

Around 1870 and 1871, I asked from him, with great determination, his complete collection [of poems] with the intention of having it published, but as Vilinch was convinced that they were worth nothing, as they were, according to him, written in his moments of melancholy and with the only goal of sweetening his sorrows, he opposed the idea of having them published. The scarce value that Vilinch’s modesty conceded to his productions has been the cause that not even their originals were

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<sup>22</sup> Jose Manterola was Basque writer and scholar from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

conserved, as he would tear them as soon as he wrote them, and there is no doubt that many of them have been lost forever.

Then, it is clear that, according to Manterola (and Zavala, as he quotes him to make his point), the written word, either manuscript or printed, is necessary to conserve a text. However, in my opinion, this shows that the manuscript word can be easily destroyed. If one improvises a *bertsoa*, which happens in front of other people (the other *bertsolariak*, the audience and, in official contests, the judges and *gai jartzaile*, (the person who decides the topic of the *bertsoak*), there are several people who may remember it, as has, in fact, happened on several occasions. However, if one writes a text, since writing is an activity that isolates the creator from the audience, if he or she decides to destroy it after finishing it, nobody is going to be able to recover that text, or even to know that it existed.

This same idea is examined in *Bestiarioa/Hilerrikoiak* ‘Bestiary/Of the Cemetery’ (2006), by Karlos Linazasoro, where the process of producing a literary text is explored. The main character is a writer who is trying to write, but he is having difficulties achieving his goal. In addition, as soon as he writes something, he throws it away:

Mahaira eseri nintzen. Hantxe zegoen, lo bezala, ipuinttoa: *Autobiografia*.  
Berriro irakurri nuen. Asko gustatzen zitzaidan, oso. Ez zeukan tatarik.  
Biribila begitantzen zitzaidan. Argi zegoen: hartu, biribildu, eta  
zakarretara bota nuen. (44)

I sat by the table. There it was, as if it were asleep, the little tale:  
*Autobiography*. I read it again. I really liked it a lot. It did not have

mistakes. It seemed to me it was perfect. It was clear: I took it, I shaped it as a ball, and I put it in the trash.

Then, he recovers it from the trash, and now that it is wrinkled, he is happier with how it looks (46). However, he puts it in the trash again: “...pilotatxo bat bezala biribildu, eta zakarrontzira jaurti nuen. Eta, hura poza! Bi ipuin ja txirtxilatu nituenak!” ‘... I rounded it as a little ball, and I threw it at the trashcan. And, what a happy feeling! I had already destroyed two tales!’ (46). So he is happier when he destroys a text than when he produces it. Thus, in the same way as Bilintx, this writer intentionally destroys his writings: we can see both a *bertsolari* who composes *bertso-paperak* and a writer who destroys their works, showing us that the written word, specially manuscripts, can easily disappear, not assuring the durability of a written text.

The writer in this book describes this process as a “desidazte-ekintza” ‘an action of unwriting’ (44), and thinking about his concept makes him realize that it is possible that many books have been destroyed like that, before having been made known to anyone: “eta honen haritik, hausnarketa honek asaldu ninduen gogor: inguruan dauzkadan liburu hauek guztiak *idatziak* izan diren bezala, zenbat liburu izanen dira Unibertsoaren jira osoan *desidatziak* izan direnak?” ‘and following that train of thought, the following reflection assaulted me: in the same manner as the books that surrounded me have been *written*, how many books have been *unwritten* in the whole Universe?’ (44). Then, he is aware that several written texts have been destroyed, showing that writing does not necessarily guarantee the permanence of the word. This is related to the aforementioned idea held by Derrida that if a text disappears, nobody will know about it.



While we do not find examples of oral recordings being destroyed in Basque literary works, we do find several instances of writers who make a written text disappear. In addition, they do it intentionally. The main character in *Bestiarioa/Hilerrikoiak*, as he realizes of the possible impermanence of the written word, does not believe that books are useful, but quite the opposite: when a book salesman goes to his house and tries to convince him to buy something from him, he ends up talking to him about the books he would sell to him. When the salesman asks him how much an encyclopedia costs, he answers: “Horrek asko balio du, lagun. Egia esateko, ez du ezertarako balio, baina oso garestia da” ‘that one is worth a lot, my friend. To tell you the truth, it is good for nothing, but it is very expensive’ (106). In this way, he is going against the type of written text that has been trusted in Western societies as a true source of knowledge. In fact, not only does he criticize the extremely high price of books, which would be a sign of the importance given to the written word, but he also affirms that an encyclopedia is not good for anything, thus recognizing that one of the most trusted resource for organizing, transmitting and finding knowledge in present day Western societies is not as valuable as we might think.

In Ramón Saizarbitoria’s “Rossetti-ren obsesioa” ‘Rossetti’s obsession’, one of the stories in *Gorde nazazu lurpean* ‘Keep me underground,’ there are two written texts that disappear: a novel the main character wrote and a short note he wrote to a woman (Eugenia) in order to seduce her, and which he wanted to recover later in order to seduce another woman (Victoria). Although both texts end up reappearing, they appear too late: the main character does not even care about his novel anymore. Even though he does mention that the novel stayed in his subconscious (75), he also tells Victoria that he is not

obsessed with the text he lost, that as soon as he knew it had disappeared, he started to write a new one (143). As for the short note, which he wrote to seduce Eugenia and he is now trying to recover in order to seduce Victoria, it reappears when it is too late to seduce her: he ends up going to a hotel room with Eugenia, in order to recover the note, and he runs into Victoria, who gets mad at him. Consequently, in this story, there is a reflection about the inappropriateness of the written word as a reliable means for storing and maintaining knowledge, as it can easily disappear. Interestingly enough, the character that serves the function of proving that the written word is not the most efficient manner to conserve a text is a writer. In fact, at the beginning of the story, he clearly states his preference for the written over the oral word: “Alde batetik, iruditzen zitzaidan esateko nuena, hitzez baino gehiago, idatziz adieraztea komeni zitzaidala” ‘on the one hand, it seemed to me that what I had to say, rather than speaking, it was convenient for me to explain it by writing’ (69).

In addition, he has internalized the idea that the permanence that comes with the written word is essential; that is, he values invariability, and for that reason, he does not want to send a different text to Victoria, it has to be the exact same one he sent to Eugenia:

Bi hitzetan esateko, hau zen arazoa: Eugeniarekin erabili nuen izkribua ia erabat ahantzia nuela, eta, horregatik hain zuzen – ahantzia nuelako –, obsesionatu egin nintzela berarekin: Victoriari ere testu bera bidali behar niola sartu zitzaidan buruan – ez antzekoa; testu bera behar zuen izan, hitzez hitz. (70)

To summarize, the problem was the following: that I had almost completely forgotten what the document I had used with Eugenia said and, exactly because of that – because I had forgotten what it said –, I became obsessed with it: I was obsessed with sending Victoria the same text – not a similar one; it had to be the exact same text, word for word.

Then, ironically, even though the writer in the story is obsessed with the accuracy that is supposed to come as a consequence of writing, he cannot remember what the original text says: once he sent it to Eugenia, he lost it, and therefore, he lost its content too. Hence, the written text here does not allow the main character to recover its content: the referent is lost, so, in this sense, this written text would be more similar to an oral one. Even though the main character is not preoccupied with recovering the novel he lost, he is obsessed with recovering the text he used to seduce Eugenia in order to seduce Victoria, as he admits: “baina obsesionaturik nengoen oharra berreskuratzearekin” ‘but I was obsessed with recovering the note’ (205). The difficulties he faces in doing so, remind us that the written text is not more reliable than an oral one: both of them can disappear.

In addition, he does realize that his written note to Eugenia is nothing special as a purely written text, but it is when it is read out loud that it becomes unique. He calls Eugenia and asks her to read it to him, so that he can rewrite it and send it to Victoria, and when she starts reading it, he forgets about writing it down, since as she reads it, this text acquires a new essence: “[h]itzak arruntak ziren; hitzak baino ez, edozein hitzen parekoak: esku, botila, mihi, ur, perla... Baina haren ahotsean ezta bilakatzen ziren, beroak: esku, botila, mihi, ur, perla...izateari uzten ziren fereka bilakatzeko” ‘the words

were normal; nothing but words, similar to any other words: hand, bottle, tongue, water, pearl... But in her voice they became honey, warm: they stopped being hand, bottle, tongue, water, pearl... in order to become caresses' (181-2). Thus, the writer in this story realizes that his written text is not as complete when it is just a written document as when it is read out loud by someone that adds other elements to it. Again, we have a text that goes beyond orality and literacy: it is performance.

The text he uses to seduce Eugenia, which he intends to use later to seduce Victoria would follow Roland Barthes' requirement: "[t]he text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*. This proof exists: it is writing. Writing is: the science of the various blisses of language, its Kama Sutra (this science has but one treatise: writing itself)" (6). Thus, this author text has the expected effect, the reader's pleasure:

If I read this sentence, this story or this word with pleasure, it is because they were written in pleasure (such pleasure does not contradict the writer's complaints). But the opposite? Does writing in pleasure guarantee – guarantee me, the writer – my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must "cruise" him) *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's "person" that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game. (4)

Then, according to Barthes, the possibility of the pleasure of the text is based on an unpredictable possibility of desire. The author in "Rossetti-ren obsesioa" leaves a place for this possibility, and thus the reader, Victoria, can read it with pleasure. However, it is essential to think about what happens when this text is oralized by being

read out loud. Barthes also mentions the “pleasure of performance.” “the feat is to sustain the *mimesis* of language (language imitating itself), the source of immense pleasures, in a fashion so *radically* ambiguous (ambiguous to the root) that the text never succumbs to the good conscience (and bad faith) of parody (of castrating laughter, of ‘the comical that makes us laugh’)” (9). As we have seen, the main character in Saizarbitoria’s story perceives the text in a completely different manner, as being more than words, being caresses, when Eugenia reads him the text, and thus performs it. This is what Barthes refers to as “writing aloud” (66), which, according to him, “is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language...” (66). This is what happens with Saizarbitoria’s main character: it is not the text itself, but Eugenia’s voice what makes it erotic.

In the same way as the writer in *Bestiarioa/Hilerrikoaiak*, the main character in “Rossetti-ren obsesioa” destroys texts he has written. For example, he tries to write something that Victoria can read (both Eugenia and Victoria mention their desire to read something he has written), and then breaks it: “... ‘Victoria maitea’ eta tontakeria batzuk idatzita nituen paper orriak hautsi, eta metrorako bidea hartu nuen” ‘... I broke the pieces of paper in which I had written “My dear Victoria” and other silly things, and I went on my way to the subway’ (174). Thus, we have two characters in two stories who remind us that the written text is not necessarily permanent, that we do not have necessarily a referent to go back to, as it is possible that it have been destroyed.

Bernardo Atxaga starts *Obabakoak* with an epigraph by Eça de Queiroz<sup>23</sup> in *Cartas de Inglaterra* ‘Letters from England’: “... começam aqui a aparecer os livros, folhas às vezes tão efêmeras como as das árvores, e não tendo como elas o encanto do verde, do murmúrio e da sombra” ‘... the books start appearing here, that are often as ephemeral leaves as those of the trees, and without having, as they do, the charm of the green, of the murmur and of the shadow’ (qtd. in Atxaga n. pag.). Thus, this novel that would be an example of oral literature (what Zirimu describes as the oral reduced to the written) begins with a quotation about the ephemeral nature of the word that is written on a piece of paper, so it is no coincidence that he does not write a purely literary text, but inserts oral stories throughout it.

The first story (and first confession) in *Obabakoak*, “Camilo Lizardi erretore jaunaren etxean aurkitutako gutunaren azalpena” ‘The explanation of the letter found in the priest Camilo Lizardi’s house’ proves the appropriateness of the epigraph with which *Obabakoak* starts. This story is the confession of Obaba’s priest, in which he tells us about Javier, a child of unknown father who disappears from Obaba, and shortly after a wild boar starts appearing in the village and attacking people. Matias, a man from Obaba who has sympathy for Javier, confesses to the priest that he believes that the wild boar is Javier, and that he wants to kill him, so that he stops suffering. Unlike the second story found in his house which, as mentioned in the previous section, was orally recorded and has managed to survive in fairly good conditions for approximately a century, this first story is written down and incomplete, as the paper has not resisted all those years: “[g]ehietsunek [orriek], zeuden sotoaren hezetasuna dela medio, ezabaturik daukate goi-

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<sup>23</sup> Jose Maria Eça de Queiroz was a Portuguese writer from the Realism.

parteko zenbait lerro, eta lehendabizikoa, urte guzti horietan lurra ukituz egon delarik, irakurtezina bihurtu duten mantxez beteta dago” ‘most of the leaves, because of the humidity of the basement where they were, have some lines erased from the top part, and the first one, since it has been touching the ground for all those years, is full of stains that have become illegible’ (11). While in the recording only a few minutes are missing, here most pieces of paper are half destroyed. Thus, the narrator of the story realizes that the written word is not permanent, as it can be easily destroyed, due to different circumstances. The story is a transcription into print of the letter he found in the priest’s house, with comments about when each piece of paper begins and ends. The narrator, who, as mentioned above, describes himself as a paper examiner, gives importance to where the words are located within the piece of paper, which would be completely irrelevant for an illiterate storyteller. In this case, however, it is important that he mentions this, as his references to the end of a page and the beginning of a new one indicate to us that the next words are unreadable, and consequently, that part of the story is lost. It is also important to take into account that the narrator is transcribing a manuscript, as it is possible that he did not transcribe the original text in an exact manner, but variations may be included.

In addition, the priest did not share his written confession with anybody, which may be because he was the father of the boy who becomes a boar. Then, this written text does not fulfill the function of transmitting information, as it is not until after many years, when the priest is dead, that someone reads the legible parts of it. The priest did not want to share it with anybody, as it is not a complete confession: he does not mention that he is that boy’s father (23). Whereas the narrator mentions how this confession has not been

read by anyone, he does not say the same about the recording on the second story, which has probably been listened to by other people before he did. Then, while the main character in the second (recorded) confession does not hide information, the priest leaves out of it some information in his written document.

In the second story, where Atxaga proves that the oral word can survive, there is a character (Joxe and Francisco's mother), who doubts the permanence of the written word, as she is aware that it can be easily destroyed. Her other son, Antonio, emigrates to Montevideo and, although at the beginning he would write letters regularly, with time, he stops doing so. Instead of believing that her son does not want to write any more letters, or that something has happened to him that prevents him from doing it, she chooses to believe that the mailman breaks his letters (30). The fact that she chooses to believe this may mean both that she does not want to accept that her son does not want to be in contact with her or that something has happened to him, but it also means that she is definitely aware of the impermanence of the written word.

Then, in Basque literary works, we can find several examples of written texts that, unlike the oral texts mentioned in the previous section, either disappear or are destroyed; in any case, they do not carry out the presupposed task of maintaining information over time and over space in an unvaried manner. Several Basque writers, even if it may sound contradictory, question the assumption that the written word is the ideal tool to keep and transmit knowledge, as it can be easily destroyed or lost. Moreover, there are authors, like Karlos Linazasoro, who question the value of books as a source of knowledge. It is possible that these authors who write in Basque choose to do this in order to prove Basque oral traditions and forms of orature are as valuable as written literature.



## Conclusion

In present day Western societies, the written word is considered to be the most appropriate tool for storing and transmitting information, as it is believed to be able to remain unchanged over time and through space. Nonetheless, this is not so clear, as it is not the written word, but the printed word, as Ong notices, that this invariability is guaranteed. In fact, manuscripts can be easily altered. In contrast with the written word, the oral word is now seen as ephemeral and variable, but this assumption is not that clear either, as there are several forms of orature and oral traditions that have been kept alive for centuries without having been written. In addition, with new technologies, having a referent of an oral text to go back to so that we can have an unmodified version of it that can last over time and through space is becoming an easier task.

We can find evidence for this both in Basque oral and written art forms. First, there are forms of orature and oral traditions that have been alive for centuries. Even some *bertsoak*, which are supposed to be ephemeral, to be forgotten as soon as they have been improvised, have become popular songs that are now known by all members of a given community. Nevertheless, there is evidence that some *bertsolariak* who practiced the written modality of *bertsolaritza*, that is, *bertso-jarriak* or *bertso-paperak* have destroyed their creations before anybody had the opportunity to read them. As a consequence, these written texts have neither remained over time nor fulfilled their supposed function of transmitting information.

In Basque literary works, there are many examples of manuscripts that are either lost or partially or completely destroyed, so that we no longer have a referent to go back to. Consequently, there cannot be an exact copy of a given written text. In these works,

there are also several instances of oral stories that, both through primary or secondary orality, are kept alive for a long time and can be shared by many people, in an unchanged version. Thus, we can conclude that both Basque oral and written manifestations show us that the oral and the written word are not two opposed entities: the oral word can easily fulfill the functions attributed to the written word in present day Western society, while the latter can often fail to do so. This shows us not only that the written and the oral word are not two opposing entities, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, but also that Basque writers are attempting to prove that Basque forms of orature and oral traditions, which have been seen as inferior for several reasons, one of which would be their lack of permanence and variability, are as valuable as the written literature that is privileged in present day Western societies.

## Conclusion

### **Assumptions: Can We Understand Literacy and Orality as Opposites?**

There is a natural tendency to classify things as opposites. For example, it is easy to assume that orality and literacy are two completely opposed entities. Furthermore, although this has not always been the case, at the present time, it is often assumed that the oral word is connected to the rural, to lack of education, illiteracy and to a lack of civilization, while the written word is associated with the urban, with education, literacy and civilization. In addition, when we examine the Basque Country, we also need to include the linguistic situation in this opposition: Basque used to be related to the former, while Spanish used to be related with the latter. Now, it is *Batua* (the unified variety of the language) that is linked to the civilized and literacy, while the other dialects of Basque tend to be related to the uncivilized and illiteracy. Finally, the oral word is understood in opposition to the written word in terms of how they each function to store and transmit information: while the former is considered ephemeral and subject to change, the latter is thought of as permanent and invariable, and therefore more adequate for storing and transmitting information over time and through space.

Nevertheless, these oppositions often do not hold up to close scrutiny. In fact, as Zumthor, Ong and Finnegan argue, they can coexist with each other. In that manner, we can understand them as a continuum rather than as two opposed and unrelated entities, as they often interact and support each other. Thus, we may find that different texts, either written or oral, can be placed on the poles of orality/literacy, while other texts can be placed in different points of the continuum, depending on how much they rely on the oral or on the written word. Furthermore, we need to take into account that there are different

types of orality and literacy: primary orality and secondary orality, which exists after writing and depends on it, are quite different. In the same manner, the manuscript and the printed text are also very different. In some sense, secondary orality would be closer to the written text, while manuscript writing would be closer to orality. Apart from this, illiteracy, lack of civilization and the rural world cannot be associated solely with the oral word, while linking the written word only to literacy, civilization and the urban world. As a matter of fact, the rural and the urban interact with each other, as they are not two isolated worlds. Furthermore, the meaning of “civilization” is relative, so we should not use that word to judge a given community, as it may mean something different for each society. In terms of the assumption about the oral word as ephemeral and as something that can be easily altered and the written word as a permanent and invariant entity, we may have reservations, as there are several factors that play a role in the word’s permanence or evanescence. For instance, we need to take into account if the oral text is recorded using some new technology or if it is just produced without being recorded. We also need to consider if it is produced in front of an audience that may be able to remember and transmit it to other people. Lastly, it is also necessary to consider if the written text is a manuscript or a printed text.

### **How Basque Orature, Oral Traditions and Literature Undermine these Assumptions**

Basque forms of orature and contemporary literary works written in Basque, as well as literary orature and oral literature, prove that the oral and the written are not two opposed entities but that they rather interact with each other, affecting one another constantly. They also show us that illiteracy is not related to lack of civilization, to the

rural, to Basque or to a given dialect of this language, while literacy is not related solely to civilization, to the urban world, to Spanish or the unified variety of Basque. Finally, they make us aware that the written and the oral text are not that different in terms of permanence or lack of it, or of possible variations or lack of them.

First, it is necessary to point out that several contemporary literary works written in Basque have some characteristics of oral language: formulaic patterns (which, as we saw in the introduction, Parry defines as phrases or sentences that are more or less repeated throughout a text), circularity, rhythmic nature of their language, and an explicit presence of the audience. In addition, many authors claim that they obtain possible ideas for their written work from oral stories. Thus, we can see that orally told stories have an important role in the creation of written works. Furthermore, many contemporary works written in Basque serve as a frame where their characters can tell stories orally, as well as listen to them. Several legends and folktales that have been transmitted from generation to generation using only the oral word are also included in literary texts, as well as some *bertsoak*. This is a perfect example of how the oral and the written are not independent entities, but appear hand in hand. A similar example would be the transformation of primary orality into secondary orality: the word is still oral, but the interaction between the performer and the audience, as well as the experience of being present at the scene and time of the performance, is lost. This is something that has been taking place in recent years, due to the increasing importance of new technologies: now, *bertsolaritza* contests are televised, and popular songs can be found in CDs and DVDs. Moreover, we cannot forget the influence of the Internet, where we can also find these manifestations both reduced to mere written text (like just the lyrics of the songs or transcribed *bertsoak*)

or influenced by secondary orality (we can find videos of *bertsolaritza* contests or of people singing popular songs).

The opposite example of this would be the *bertso-jarriak* or *bertso-paperak*, that is, the modality of *bertsolaritza* in which the *bertsoak* are written down and sold in order to be read out loud. In this case, we see what Ong refers to as literary orature, which would be “literature transmitted into orature” (76). The same happens with Kirmen Uribe’s poetry, which, as Joseba Gabilondo has noticed, has benefited greatly from the author’s performances: Uribe has read his poems in several countries, which has contributed to the success of his work. Therefore, as Gabilondo points out, we cannot understand *Bitartean, heldu eskutik/Meanwhile Take my Hand* as mere literary text, but as a written text accompanied by (oral) performance. In addition, Uribe’s work has benefited from secondary orality, as some of the poems are now part of a CD, in which they have a melody. These two examples are, to some extent, different: while *bertso-paperak* imply first transforming what originally is a form of orature into written text in order to go back to its oral state, Uribe’s poems are originally written texts that become oral through his performances and the CD and whose result is more written texts: the more people become familiar with his work, the more books he sells.

Being influenced by secondary orality is not the only change Basque forms of orature and oral traditions are experiencing. The people who keep them alive and practice them now are literate and, in any case, more educated than the people who practiced them in the past. The most clear example of this would be the transformation that *bertsolaritza* has undergone in recent years. Now, its performers are young people from urban areas with a university education (that most of them receive in Basque and some of them, about

Basque). Thus, the language of the *bertsoak* differs from that of the *bertsolariak* from previous centuries. In addition, *bertsolaritza* has become an art that can be learned. In fact, it is now taught at some *ikastolak* (Basque private schools) and there are also special centers where it is taught. The same would be true for popular songs. I remember learning some of them in primary school. At the *Euskaltegi* (a center for learning Basque for adults), we had a two-week workshop in which we received a book of popular songs that we had to sing while someone played a guitar. Even though the purpose was to sing them when, later in the course, we went to a *sagardotegi* (cider house), we still learned them in the setting of the classroom.

It is also essential to mention the increasing role of women in the practice of these forms of orature and oral traditions in public spaces. They have always practiced and passed them on to the next generations in the private space of the house, and there have been some women who have practiced them in public spaces, going against the social expectations of their times. However, it has not been until recent years that their role as performers and transmitters of these oral traditions has started to be recognized and respected. It was not until the mid eighties that a woman participated in a *bertsolaritza* contest, and not until 2009 that a woman received the first prize. However, there is still a long way to go to achieve total equality between male and female *bertsolariak*. The same is true with Basque female writers: so far, there are not as many as male writers, and their works usually do not receive as much attention, despite their high quality. Again, I have to mention that we cannot make a clear distinction between two apparently opposed things; in this case, the difference between male and female *bertsolariak* and writers is not clear-cut. They both use the same resources as improvisers and as writers. In literary

works by both male and female writers, we can observe the same presence of orature and oral traditions, and now both male and female *bertsolariak* have the same education and preparation for this task.

In conclusion, Basque forms of orature, oral traditions and written literary works both by male and female authors serve the function of making us aware of the impossibility of separating orality and literacy. In the Basque Country, like in most societies at the present time, orality and literacy coexist, thus interacting endlessly with each other, which is reflected in verbal art forms. Some of them depend more on orality and others on literacy; thus, we find verbal art forms in different points of the orality/literacy continuum.

In the same way as we cannot understand orality and literacy as two opposed concepts, we cannot consider that illiteracy, lack of civilization or a given language or dialect are at one pole of a continuum while literacy, civilization and another language are at the other. In fact, orality is not related to illiteracy or lack of civilization, and neither is any language. Basque, a language with several forms of orature and oral traditions, but with few literary works, which was not used in education until a few decades ago, has been considered a less valuable language than Spanish, the language with which it shares a space, which was used in education. Since Basque used to be spoken mainly in rural areas, where people did not have much education, it was seen as the language of the uncivilized, while Spanish, spoken mainly in the cities, was considered the language of civilization. This gave place to a situation of diglossia in which Spanish was the high language, whereas Basque was the low. However, this has changed in recent decades, after Franco's death and after Basque became the co-official



language with Spanish in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country. Now Basque is taught in schools, and there are *Esukaltegiak* or centers for alphabetizing adults. Now, Basque is also spoken by highly educated people from urban areas.

However, there is a new situation of diglossia: now the educated people from urban areas speak mainly *Batua* (the unified dialect of Basque), which has become the high variety of the language, while less educated people from rural areas speak one of the several dialects of Basque, which are now the low varieties.

Interestingly enough, there is a form of Basque orature that supports this assumption according to which literacy is a sign of civilization, something superior to orality: when *bertsolaritza* was practiced in rural areas mostly by illiterate or poorly educated people, it did not have any prestige. It was highly appreciated by the people who practiced it, but it did not receive much attention from the Academy, and when it did, it usually was described as something low, vulgar, not worthy of being studied. In the last decades, *bertsolaritza* has changed a great deal: now, it is institutionalized, and there are official contests where *bertsolariak* compete against each other. At the moment, and I believe, as a consequence of the aforementioned increased level of education of *bertsolariak*, *bertsolaritza* receives attention from scholars, who are starting to write more about this practice, but now in a positive manner. This proves the theory according to which literacy is related to civilization, and is understood as something superior to orality, which would be associated with lack of civilization.

Then, the attention given to *bertsolaritza* by scholars supports the assumption that literacy and civilization go hand by hand and they are superior to orality and lack of civilization. At the same time, some Basque authors who write in this language (in *Batua*)

at the present time are using their work to go against this stereotype that associates the Basques and their language with a rural world, and with lack of civilization and of education. We can see a paradox here: while a form of orature like *bertsolaritza*, which used to be related to illiteracy, to rural areas and to lack of civilization receives more positive attention only when its performers are literate young people from urban areas, Basque writers attempt to break this division. They do this both by showing us that these two worlds are not isolated from each other and are not that different from each other, as well as by making us realize that those who come from the world that was supposed to be civilized have much to learn from those who hail from the sphere that was linked to lack of civilization.

Finally, we cannot claim that the oral and the written word are opposed entities in the sense that the former is ephemeral and variable while the latter is permanent and unchangeable. Critics like Ong and Finnegan have claimed that the written word assures permanence, in contrast with the oral word. However, even these authors have had to admit that this contraposition is not as clear as we would like to think. Ong notices that this permanence and invariability comes with the printed text, not with the manuscript text. With a printing press, we can have the exact same copy of a text, but every manuscript copy of a text is different from the others, unique, and may include marginal comments from former copies. Finnegan does not mention how the oral word can be invariable without the help of the new technologies, but she does point out that the oral word may also be permanent and invariant, and that, in fact, that is what happens with the help of new technologies, which allow us to go back to the original referent. In that sense,

the orality that comes with new technologies is closer to the printed text, while the manuscript text is closer to the type of orality that does not depend on new technologies.

Basque forms of orature and oral traditions, as well as literary works, often prove to us that the oral and the written word are not two completely opposed entities in terms of their (im)permanence and (in)variability. In fact, we find several examples of how the oral word, both with and without the help of the new technologies, can be as permanent as the written word, or sometimes, even more permanent. Furthermore, while the oral word can be permanent, it is possible that the written word is not as permanent as it is thought in present day Western societies. Therefore, we cannot understand the written word in contraposition with the oral word in terms of its permanence or lack of it, or its variability or lack of it. In fact, there are several factors involved in the permanence of the word, or lack of it. If it is oral, its permanence can depend on the audience's memory, or on the new technologies that allow us to have an exact copy of the content of the oral discourse. If it is written, it depends on the nature of the text, on if it is a manuscript or a printed text. In addition, we have to remember that no matter if it is an oral or a written word, the signifier can remain unchanged, but the meaning is subject to the audience's or the reader's interpretation, so it is most likely to vary.

Taking all this into consideration, it is impossible to understand orality and literacy as two opposed entities, as they interact and influence each other endlessly. It is also not possible to relate one to civilization, while linking the other to a lack of it. In the same manner, we cannot relate the oral word to evanescence and variability whereas we associate the written word with permanence and invariability. Basque forms of orature, oral traditions, and contemporary literary works prove these statements right in several

manners. First, authors include examples of orature and oral traditions in written literature (thus giving place to what Zirimu refers to as oral literature), while nowadays, orature and oral traditions are being told and practiced by literate people, which affects the language of these verbal manifestations. Second, Basque writers demonstrate that it is not that clear what “civilization” means: we often find literate characters from civilized areas that have a lot to learn from “uncivilized” illiterate people. However, Basque forms of orature and oral traditions have started to be appreciated by educated people only when they started being practiced by educated people. Finally, there are forms of orature and oral traditions that are still alive, without any help from writing or from the new technologies, while some manuscripts have been destroyed, leaving us without a referent to go back to. In contemporary written literature, we also find examples of oral discourses that remain while written texts are lost forever.

### **Areas for Future Study**

There are many issues I have not been able to examine in this dissertation that I would like to explore in my future studies. First of all, I would like to research how the new technologies of the market are affecting the relationship between orality and literacy. I have mentioned how Kirmen Uribe uses the oral language, both by giving performances of his literary works and by turning his poems into songs and selling them in a CD. I would like to look in more detail at how this changes the production of literary works, as well as the language used in an oral performance. I believe these new technologies of the market present in a globalized world affect cultural models of a given community, so I find it essential to pay more attention to this subject.

Furthermore, throughout this dissertation, I have been considering only one type of writing: literary writing. However, there are many other types of writing, which are in a hierarchical relation. For example, we also have emails, flyers, newspaper and magazine articles, and many other types of writing. I am interested in looking at how these types of writing interact with orality, how they affect it while they are also influenced by it. In Kirmen Uribe's novel, *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, other types of writing are included, together with different types of oral language, so I believe that it is crucial to study the interrelation of various kinds of writing.

I also find it fundamental to extend the discussion about the written versus the oral to one about the visual versus the oral. In that manner, I would not only consider different types of writing, but also images (paintings, pictures, etc.). I find this especially relevant to my discussion about the permanence or impermanence of the written versus the oral word, as it is not only words, but any visual element that is considered to be permanent. Thus, it is important to extend this discussion to this realm.

Another important subject to study would be the relationship between orality and literacy in new technologies. For instance, something to take into account is the presence of both orality and literacy in the telephone, the former through phone calls, and the latter through text messages. This can also be observed on the Internet, with instant messaging, chat rooms and programs like Skype, which allow both oral and written conversations, as well as videoconferences. I believe that with new technologies, the oral and the visual (both writing and images) interact in more ways than primary orality and the written word. Consequently, I consider it essential to examine this in more detail.

Finally, I am aware that Basque orature, oral traditions and literature are not the only cultural context within which one can study such issues. For that reason, I consider it essential to examine orature, oral traditions and literature from other areas in order to see if they also support my thesis. There are other areas of Spain in which orality plays a central role. Examples of this would be León and Galicia, which possess a great amount of popular stories and legends. Some areas, like Murcia and the Canary Islands have some improvisational verbal art that is similar to *bertsolaritza*, so these areas would be extremely helpful for my research. The same happens in various areas of Latin America, many of whose countries have some form of improvised orature, as well as a great number of folktales, oral stories and legends. Examples of this would be the Venezuelan *contrapunteo* and the Chilean *payadores*, as well as the numerous indigenous legends and stories that have been transmitted for centuries relying solely on the oral word. It would also be relevant to study Hispanic communities in the United States, in order to see if the situation of diglossia that was present in the Basque Country between Spanish and Basque, and that now is taking place between the unified Basque dialect and the rest of the dialects is present between Spanish and English. In the same way as I do not believe we can understand concepts in contraposition to one another, I doubt that we can understand a given community in contraposition to other communities, since at the present time, most of them are not isolated, but interacting and influencing each other.

In conclusion, we need to remember that we cannot understand orality and literacy, as well as the characteristics associated with them, in opposition to each other, but as two entities that are intertwined. As I have demonstrated, the Basque culture is a

perfect example of a community where this can be observed, due to the increased literacy level present in oral traditions and orature and the presence of these elements in written works.

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