WORLD ORAL LITERATURE PROJECT

Oral Poetry

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6. Poets and their positions

In any consideration of oral poetry, one obvious question is: *who* are the poets? Who composes and performs oral poetry? The quick answer is that it can be almost anyone. An immense variety of people are, and are expected to be, poets in different groups and societies. Despite some confident pronouncements on the subject, there seems no one predictable pattern in type of personality, relationship of the poet to his society, or the economic and social rewards of poetry. The role of poet is occupied and envisaged in a variety of ways—from the official court poets of kingdoms in mediaeval Europe or Asia or recent West Africa, to a Malay or Inuit shaman, or an American preacher claiming poetic inspiration from the spirit, or the unpaid lead singer in a working group of canoeists or agricultural workers or prisoners. And yet the position of the makers of oral poetry is neither random nor totally unpredictable. There are recurring patterns found in widely separated parts of the world; and the opportunities and duties of the oral, as of the literate, poet are regulated by social conventions and coordinated with the social and economic institutions of his society.

It may be helpful to start with portraits of individual poets. Case studies can usefully give a preliminary illustration of the variety of oral poets, as well as an initial basis for exploring the still prevalent theory that oral poetry is composed anonymously, perhaps even 'communally', rather than by individual named poets. We also gain some idea of how poets themselves see their work, and of their interpretation of their role.

6.1 The poet: five examples

The first example is Velema Daubitu the poet and seer, at the village called The-Place-of-Pandanus (Namuavoivoi) in the island of Vanua Levu, Fiji. He was an old man in the 1930s, when Quain recorded and

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translated a number of his songs (published in 1942). Velema was the composer and performer of several kinds of poetry, but chief among them were heroic poems about the deeds of far-off ancestors who belonged to the legendary kingdom of Flight-of-the-Chiefs, from whom the present chiefs and their subjects believed they were descended. This was the most valued form of oral literature among the Fijians, and it was held that the appropriate person to compose them was a man who—like Velema—was seer as well as poet.

Fig. 6.1. A photo of Velema, traditional Fijian poet, spiritually inspired in trance. From B. H. Quain' s *The Flight of the Chiefs. Epic Poetry of Fiji* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1942).

When Velema was still a child, people began to notice in him the kind of personality and behaviour which made them feel he was destined to be a seer. They noted in particular his diffidence and his excitability, as well as his curiosity about serious things. Because of this Velema was chosen by his mother's brother to succeed him as priest and guardian of the sacred objects of the village. Over many years Velema learnt from his uncle how to perform the rituals of his land group, and inherited the sacred war club and axe as well as the dancing spear—all of which played a part in his composition of songs. At the same time he was trained in the arts of singing and composition, and learnt the secret mysteries of communing with the ancestors, the inspirers of poems. He 'learned how it felt to speak with them and even let them use his tongue to speak.' (Quain, 1942, p. 14). In Fijian poetic theory, the ancestors teach and form the songs. This is believed to go further than mere inspiration: with the 'true-songs' or epic songs the ancestors themselves chant the songs as they teach them to the poet, and it is in their name that they are delivered.

During one of my sojourns at Flight-of-the-Chiefs
The-Eldest is calling

is the opening of one of Velema's 'true-songs' (p. 21) in which the ancestor is speaking through Velema's mouth, and describing how he himself was there in the ancestral home and observed the incidents of the poem which follows. These poems are given to Velema in trance or sleep. He acts only as the mouthpiece of his mentors: 'he takes no personal credit for his composition, does not even distinguish between those which he has composed himself and those old ones which his mother's brother must surely have taught him. All contribute to the glory of his ancestors' (Quain, 1942, p. 14). Even the special liberties that Velema took with language so as to fit the musical and rhythmic requirements of the verse are attributed to the ancestors' chanting. When Velema chose 'archaic words from his own background, words which he alone understands' (ibid. p. 16) so as to fit the rhythm, this too has the implied sanction of ancestral approval.

This insistence on the personal involvement of the ancestors in the poems is made more effective by the stylistic device of first-person interpolations into the epic narrative. From time to time the poet's recounting of historic events is replaced, as it were, by the direct speech of one of the ancestral actors. This comes out well in the opening sections of one of Velema's 'true' poems, where he describes how the gods of the mythical village of Flying Sand plot to attack Flight-of-the-Chiefs, the ancestral home of Velema and his compatriots. Their ancestor Watcher-of-the-Land discovers the plan, and after vainly trying to find a safe refuge for his friends, comes to Flight-of-the-Chiefs to warn their leader (The-Eldest) of the threatened attack. From time to time Watcher-of-the-Land speaks in his own person (printed in italics).

Those at Flying-Sand hold council;
They hold council there, those Gods of the Beginning.
They decide that Flight-of-the-Chiefs be eaten.
It stings, the foot of Watcher-of-the-Land;
And Sir Watcher-of-the-Land wails forth
So that Flight-of-the-Chief resounds.
And quickly I came outside.
I took up my staff.
I descended to the shore at Bua
I dived down to the Cave of Sharks.
Creeping, I explored the grotto

That those of Flight-of-the-Chiefs might be hidden there.
I crawled outward to the open sea.
I climbed to the village at Levuka.
There are shallows in the open sea,
And Watcher-of-the-Land dives again.
I dived among the white coral rock.
I climbed to the village at Peninsula.
I climbed upward again to Flight-of-the Chiefs.
I entered into The-Land's-Beginning.
And there is the wailing of Watcher-of-the-Land
And it re-echoes through Flight-of-the-Chiefs,
And Watcher-of-the-Land stands up
And takes again his staff.
And quickly I came outside.
I climbed upward to The-First-Appearance. [a high cliff]
And Watcher-of-the-Land digs a hole
And he disappears down into the second depth in the earth.
And then Watcher-of-the-Land says:
'The people of Flight-of-the-Chiefs be hidden here,
Then the Gods of the Beginning will find them.'
And Watcher-of-the-Land returns again.
I entered into It-Repels-Like-Fire. [his own village]
And Watcher-of-the-Land is weeping there.
And he takes up his staff.
And quickly I came outside.
And I hurtled downward to Flight-of-the-Chiefs
I hastened to The-Eldest.
Watcher-of-the-Land is weeping there
And now-The-Eldest asks:
'What report from The-Land's-Beginning?'
And now Watcher-of-the-Land answers:
'Listen, then, the-Eldest:
Those at Flying-Sand hold council.
They decide that Flight-of-the-Chiefs be eaten.'

(Quain, 1942, pp. 45–7)

The most important and serious inspirers of poetry are the 'true ancestors' from whom Velema learns the heroic 'true' songs by virtue of his control of the ancient war club and axe. But there are also other spirits—like the Children of Medicine—who teach him the less serious songs. Velema is a participant in the special Children of Medicine cult, and through this and his possession of his ancestral dancing spear he is able to compose dances and dance-songs as well as serenades.

These songs are comparatively short and less complex stylistically than the 'epic' poems. They raise fewer problems of composition, and are believed to be inspired by less revered spirits.

Velema not only practised his art in solemn religious surroundings, but took part in dance festivities and sometimes entertained an evening gathering with his songs. On these occasions he chanted the epic songs himself, accompanied by another old man who accompanied him as a kind of chorus. His long training and religious responsibilities made use of, rather than changed, his unusual and excitable personality. As he grew up, people came to recognise his strange talents, and to accept from him actions unacceptable in others, like brooding all day in the house or wandering too often alone in the forest. From a poet and seer, such behaviour was even expected. As Quain sums it up, 'Though there are sceptics among modern citizens who suspect that the poet exaggerates the virtues of the heroes at Flight of-the-Chiefs, yet no one doubts the validity of his talent for literary rapport with the supernatural. His ancestral communications are the only bonds with the distant past' (ibid. pp. 8–9).

The second poet is the Yugoslav epic minstrel, Avdo Mededović. He has become famous through the researches of Parry and Lord, but throughout most of his life he directed his compositions to local audiences in rural Yugoslavia.

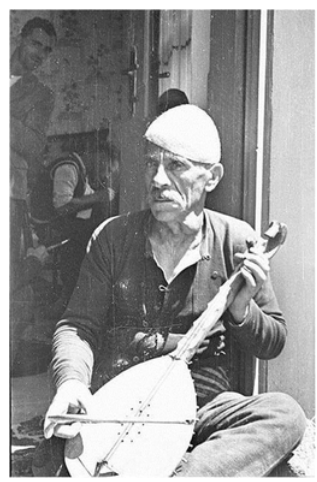


Fig. 6.2. A photo of Avdo Međedović, Slavic guslar player and oral poet. Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/b/b2/Avdo_Me%C4%91edovi%C4%87.jpg

Avdo Mededović was born, lived and died in eastern Montenegro, in what is now Yugoslavia. His father and grandfather were butchers, and in his mid-teens Avdo began to learn their trade and, despite spending some years away from his home in the army, he ultimately married and settled down to follow them as village butcher. As a Muslim, he and his family were in great danger in the months just after the defeat of Turkey in the First World War, but he managed to survive and keep his butcher's shop, and to spend the greater part of his life as 'a quiet family man in a disturbed and brutal world' (Lord, 1956, p. 123).

Avdo was born into a culture in which epic singers flourished, and grew up hearing the traditional themes sung in epic poems to the *gusle* (the one-stringed bowed instrument used to accompany singing). This rich tradition behind him provided him with much of the material for his poetry. But he also learnt his art from skilled singers, above all from his father.

He in his turn had been deeply influenced by a famous singer of his own generation, Cor Huso Husein, who still had a prodigious reputation in the area. Cor Huso's main characteristic was apparently the ability to 'ornament' a song, characteristic also of Avdo's work.

Avdo's capacity to compose and perform epic was enormous. Though it makes no sense in the type of combined performance-composition typical of Avdo's art to try to calculate absolute figures of how many poems he 'knew', it is noteworthy that he claimed to have a repertoire of fifty-eight epics. Parry and his assistant recorded thirteen of these in 1935 (to which must be added the recording of additional versions by Lord in 1950 and 1951). The result is 96,723 lines of recorded epic from Avdo's singing alone. His longest single song contains 13,331 lines and represents over sixteen hours of singing time. From the mere point of view of quantity it is hardly surprising that Parry was so impressed by Avdo as a singer. As Lord puts it, 'Avdo could sing songs of about the length of Homer's *Odyssey.* An illiterate butcher in a small town of the central Balkans was equalling Homer's feat, at least in regard to length of song. Parry had actually seen and heard two long epics produced in a tradition of oral epic' (Lord, 1956, p. 125).

Avdo's epic versions of stories tended to be longer than anyone else's because of his 'ornamentation'. He amplified the details, and elaborated what he had heard from others. He did not merely borrow 'ornaments'

from other singers, for many came from his visualising the scene himself. As he once told Lord, he 'saw in his mind every piece of trapping which he put on a horse' (Lord, 1956, p. 125).

His ability to extend and ornament a song was well demonstrated in 1935, when he heard another poet, Mumin Vlahovljak sing the tale of *Bećiragić Meho,* previously unknown to Avdo. Mumin was a skilled singer and his song, a fine one, ran to 2,294 lines. As soon as it finished, Parry asked Avdo if he could now sing the 'same' song himself. At first he asked to be excused, because he did not wish to offend Mumin or take the honour away from him. When he was finally persuaded to sing, his version reached 6,313 lines, nearly three times the length of the 'original epic'. 'As [Avdo] sang, the song lengthened, the ornamentation and richness accumulated, and the human touches of character, touches that distinguished Avdo from other singers, imparted a depth of feeling that had been missing in Mumin's version' (Lord, 1968a, p. 78).

A similar example is his great epic *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho.* Avdo first heard a song on this theme read aloud from a written version. It had been published in a small songbook that Hivzo, the butcher in a shop next to his, had bought in Sarajevo. Hivzo had taught himself to read, and gradually read out the version to Avdo, making out the words slowly and painfully. The printed version had 2,160 lines—but when Avdo performed the song as one of his epic poems in 1935, it stretched to 12,323 lines.

This capacity to ornament and to introduce his own personal touches, sometimes reflecting insights obviously drawn from his own experiences, runs through all Avdo's poems. It was this, rather than a superlative performance, that gave his poems such force, for his voice was not especially good (it was rather hoarse), and his accompaniment on the *gusle* was only mediocre. But in his poems he could convey the conventional themes of Slavic epic and his own personal commentary on them. He was dedicated to the themes and atmosphere of the epics he performed:

> The high moral tone of his songs is genuine. His pride in tales of the glories of the Turkish Empire in the days of Sulejman, when it was at its height and when 'Bosnia was its lock and its golden key', was poignantly sincere without ever being militant or chauvinistic. That empire was dead, and Avdo knew it, because he had been there to hear its death

> rattle. But it had once been great in spite of the corruption of the imperial nobility surrounding the sultan. To Avdo its greatness was in the moral fibre and loyal dedication of the Bosnian heroes of the past even more than in the strength of their arms. These characteristics of Avdo's poems, as well as a truly amazing sensitivity for the feelings of other human beings, 'spring from within the singer himself. He was not 'preserving the traditional'; Avdo believed with conviction in the tradition which he exemplified.
>
> (Lord, 1956, p. 123–4)

A very different example is the American prisoner Johnnie B. Smith. He had spent much of his life in Texas prisons and it was in prison that he had developed the songs through which, Bruce Jackson says, 'he has woven an elaborate construct of images that brilliantly details the parameters of his world' (Jackson, 1972, p. 144).

Fig. 6.3. A photo of Johnnie B. Smith, a life prisoner in Texas. From Bruce Jackson (ed.), *Wake Up Dead Man: Afro-American Workings from Texas Prisons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

When Jackson, researching on prison songs, met Smith in a Texas prison in the mid-1960s, Smith was in the eleventh year of a forty-five-year sentence for murder. It was not his first sentence, for he had three previous convictions for burglary and robbery by assault. Here he describes the murder:

> I got out of here on those ten-year sentences, that robbery by assault. I lost my people while I was in here and I just felt like I was kind of in the world alone. I wanted to find me a pretty girl to settle down with and marry. I was thirty-five years old then. And I just wanted to marry and settle down. I left my home down at Hearn, Texas, other side of Bryant, and went to west Texas, out in the Panhandle country, to Amarillo. And I married a beautiful girl. She was about three quarters Indian, I guess. A lot of mixed-breed girls out there, 'specially around Mexico and Oklahoma and Amarillo. I found me that pretty girl, the girl of my dreams I thought, and I had good intentions. But now, I fell in love with her, was what I did, and I got insane jealousy mixed up with love. So many of us do that. Lot of fellas in here today on those same terms. I was really insane crazy about the girl and I had just got out of the penitentiary and I was working, just trying to make an honest living and to keep from coming back. But I couldn't give her *all* she wanted and she'd sneak out a little. That went to causing trouble. I was intending to get in good shape, but I hadn't been out there long enough, not to make it on the square, you know. She wanted a fine automobile, she like a good time, a party girl, she liked to drink, she liked to dress nice. So did I, and so I was living a bit above my income. And she would sneak out to enjoy these little old pleasures and that caused us some family trouble. On a spur of the moment I came in one day, we had a fight and I cut her to death. And regret it! Because I loved her still and still do and can't get her back.
>
> (Jackson, 1972, pp. 143–4)

Forty-five years is to all intents a life sentence. In prison on this long sentence Smith composed the poetry under his name in Jackson's collection of Texas prison work songs.

This poetry takes the form of the solo part in songs designed to accompany the work prisoners have to do throughout the day. Some of these songs give small scope for originality. These accompany strictly metered work, in which the timing is critical for effective working and to avoid injury to co-workers—where several men are simultaneously chopping down a tree, for instance. In songs for work like this, the verbal element is relatively simple, with short lines and automatic repetition giving the lead singer time to prepare his next line. But for songs to accompany less strictly timed work—cane cutting or cotton picking for instance—there is more opportunity for the soloist. They tend to be more complex in text as well as in melody and ornament, and offer the soloist scope for experiment.

Smith was an effective leader in the strictly timed songs, and even there he set his own stamp on the words. But in the solo verses of songs for less rigidly metered tasks Smith had the fullest scope for originality. Jackson's collection of non-metered work songs by Smith runs to 132 separate stanzas. Though the sections were often sung separately (and even sometimes given separate titles) Smith usually thought of them as really *one* song, and sometimes talked of them in that way.

His songs are very much a function of his surroundings and reflect his and his co-prisoners' concerns. As Smith once said, 'Guy down here, if he's thinkin' about anything at all, he's thinking about his freedom and his woman' (ibid. p. 37). Eighteen stanzas are indeed about 'his woman', and there are frequent mentions of places outside prison, in the world of freedom. But it is the negatives of his basic concerns that Smith is thinking more of—the constraints and bonds that keep him *from* his woman, and restrict his freedom. Thus many of the stanzas refer to the length of his sentence, or the possibility of escape, and there are constant references to the guards and the prison officials, to firearms and to sickness and death. As Jackson puts it,

> The reason Smith (he is the most creative song leader I met; the statements here apply even more to the others) cannot dwell at any length on his woman or his freedom is that he does not really think of them so much as of their absence; he perceives the negative, and in his imagistic song-world there are no terms to present these feelings (for they are not things) directly. All he can do is deal with the devices of control: the number of years he has to do, the weapons of the guards, the presence of the guards, the existence of other places to which he has no access. To express both hope and longing, both his sense of self and his lack of control over that self's movements, the singer is forced to document the concreteness of the enemy, the prison itself, because that is all that is concrete, and depend on rhetoric to return to his real themes.
>
> (Jackson, 1972, p. 39)

This is evident in the opening of his song 'No More Good Time in the World for Me'

> No more good time, buddy, oh man, in the wide, wide world for me,
> 'Cause I'm a lifetime skinner, never will go free.
> Well a lifetime skinner, buddy, I never will go free,
> No more good time, buddy, in the wide, wide world for me.

Lifetime skinner, skinner, hold up your head,
Well you may get a pardon if you don't drop dead.
Well you may get a pardon, oh man, if you don't drop dead,
Oh well lifetime skinner, partner, you hold up your head.

I been on this old Brazos, partner, so jumpin' long,
That I don't know what side a the river, oh boy, my home is on,
Don't know what side a the river, oh man, oh boy, my home is on,
'Cause I been down on this old river, man, so jumpin' long.

Well I lose all my good time, 'bout to lose my mind,
I can see my back door slammin', partner, I hear my baby cryin'.
Yeah, I'm a hear my back door slammin', man, I hear my baby cryin',
I done lose all my good time, partner, I'm 'bout to lose my mind...

(Jackson, 1972, p. 148)

There is a full account of Smith's style and the way he built up his own individual insights and imagery in a traditional framework in Jackson's book (1972, esp. pp. 143ff). Despite his obvious talent and creativity, Smith felt that it was his circumstances rather than his own application that generated his poetry.

> Now these songs, we can, you know, you stay here so long, a man can compose them if he want to. They just come to you. Your surroundings, the place, you're so familiar with them, you can always make a song out of your surroundings. I read about some great poetry, like King David in the Bible, he used to make his psalms from the stars and he wrote so many psalms. A little talent and surroundings and I think it's kind of easy to do it.
>
> (Jackson, 1972, p. 144)

The fourth example is the Inuit poet, Orpingalik. Although we do not know much about his life or his economic position *qua* poet, his articulateness about his poetry and his greatness as a poet in the eyes of Inuits and foreigners make him an interesting member of this group of brief case studies.

Orpingalik was a member of the Netsilik group of Inuits in the interior of the Rae Isthmus area of northern Canada, which was visited by Rasmussen in his great expedition through Inuit country in the early 1920s. Our knowledge of Orpingalik's personality and poetry derive

from the publications in which Rasmussen reported his findings from that expedition.

Orpingalik—'He-with-the-willow-twig'—was a man of mature years when Rasmussen met him, with several full-grown sons, a daughter, at least one grand-child, and a wife, Uvlunuaq ('The-little-day'), who was herself a notable poet. Orpingalik himself was accepted by local people as outstanding in many ways: 'a big man'. He was a great hunter—important to an Inuit group living under the constant threat of starvation if the game on which they depended eluded them. He was also a strong and deadly archer, and 'the quickest kayakman of them all when the caribou herds were being pursued at the places where they crossed the lakes and rivers' (Rasmussen, 1931, p. 13).

Orpingalik was revered as a shaman as well as for his physical skills. Hewas an *angakok* who could communicate with the spirits in seance, and he had his own guiding spirits who had chosen him of their own volition and whom he could summon through their spirit songs and commune with in the special metaphorical shaman's language. As shaman he was versed in the intellectual and poetic traditions of his people—he recounted many tales as well as poems to Rasmussen during his visit—and was also the personal possessor of many magic songs and spells. These belong to him alone, and no one else had the right to use them. Even Rasmussen could not record them free, but paid Orpingalik in kind 'giving him in return some of those I had obtained from Aua [another shaman].' (Rasmussen, 1927, p. 161). Control of these spells added to Orpingalik's prestige and power: they enabled him to catch seals, to hunt in a strange country, to injure his enemies and, as in this one, to kill caribou unscathed

> Wild caribou, land louse, long-legs,
> With the great ears,
> And the rough hairs on your neck,
> Flee not from me.
> Here I bring skins for soles,
> Here I bring moss for wicks,
> Just come gladly
> Hither to me, hither to me.
>
> (Rasmussen, 1931, p. 15)

But the power of a shaman could rebound too—or so it seemed in Inuit eyes—and Orpingalik's life held suffering as well as leadership and prestige. Only a year before his meeting with Rasmussen, Orpingalik and his youngest son Inugjag had met disaster, and all his power and skill as shaman had not availed to save his son's life. He and lnugjag had been ferrying their possessions over a wide river on an icefloe when the swift current suddenly caught the floe and overturned it. Orpingalik and his son were immediately sucked under.

> When Orpingalik at length came to himself he was lying on the bank, half in the water, with his head knocking against a stone. The pain brought him to his senses, and a glance at the sun told him that he must have lain unconscious a long time. All at once the catastrophe became vividly clear to him and he began to look for his son, whom he found a little way further down the river. He carried him up to the bank and tried to call him to life with a magic song. It was not long before a caterpillar crawled up on the face of the corpse and began to go round its mouth, round and round. Not long afterwards the son began to breathe very faintly, and then other small creatures of the earth crawled on to his face, and this was a sign that he would come to life again. But in his joy Orpingalik went home to his tent and brought his wife to help him, taking with him a sleeping skin to lay their son on while working to revive him. But hardly had the skin touched the son when he ceased breathing, and it was impossible to put life into him again. Later on it turned out that the reason why the magic words had lost their power was, that in the sleeping skin there was a patch that had once been touched by a menstruating woman, and her uncleanness had made the magic words powerless and killed the son.
>
> (Rasmussen, 1931, pp. 11–12)

Other Inuits explained the incident differently. They pointed out that the ice floe would not normally have capsized—'it was as if the floe suddenly met with some resistance that forced it down under the waters of the river'—and that the cause of the disaster was magic words that had rebounded on their master after Orpingalik had tried to kill another shaman. He turned out to be more powerful than Orpingalik and the evil spell turned back against its maker: since it could not kill Orpingalik himself—for he too was a great shaman—it took his son's life instead. 'For a formula of wicked words like that *must* kill if there is any power in it; and if it does not kill the one it is made for, it turns against its creator,

and if it cannot kill him either, one of his nearest must pay with his life' (Rasmussen, 1931, p. 201).[1]

So the position and insights of a shaman among the Inuit involved hazards and suffering as well as prestige. They could not help, either, to save Orpingalik's other son, Igsivalitaq, from the bitterness of long exile from his family after he had murdered a hunting companion in a fit of temper. He had to live as an outlaw in the mountains, cut off from his people. His mother Uvlunuaq described the pain of his deed and his exile in a long poem

> When message came
> Of the killing and the flight,
> Earth became like a mountain with pointed peak,
> And I stood on the awl-like pinnacle
> And faltered,
> And fell!
>
> (Freuchen, 1962, p. 283)

We must set Orpingalik the poet against this background of experience and suffering. For him his songs were his 'comrades in solitude', and 'all my being is song' (Rasmussen, 1931, pp. 16, 15). Rasmussen thought him the most poetically gifted man he had met among the Netsilik Inuit, with a luxuriant imagination and most sensitive intelligence (ibid. p. 15). Orpingalik was always singing when he had nothing else to do, and felt that his songs were a necessity to him, as much so as his breath: part and parcel of himself.

> How many songs I have I cannot tell you. I keep no count of such things. There are so many occasions in one's life when a joy or a sorrow is felt in such a way that the desire comes to sing; and so I only know that I have many songs. All my being is song, and I sing as I draw breath.
>
> (ibid. p. 16)

One of his most famous songs he called *My breath,* for, as he explains 'it is just as necessary for me to sing it as it is to breathe' (p. 321). He composed the poem when he was slowly recovering from a severe

1 The context of Inuit oral poetry: https://www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/igloo-landscape-3d-handdrawing-elements-combined-112024019

illness. He reflects on his present helplessness and reminisces about the past when he was strong and a hunter who could save the village from famine while his companions still slept. Into his poem he pours his despondency and self-questioning as he struggles to regain his strength and vigour.

My Breath

This is what I call this song, for it is just as
necessary to me to sing it as it is to breathe.

I will sing a song,
A song that is strong,
    Unaya—unaya.
Sick I have lain since autumn,
Helpless I lay, as were I
My own child.

Sad, I would that my woman
Were away to another house
To a husband
Who can be her refuge,
Safe and secure as winter ice.
    Unaya—unaya.

Sad, I would that my woman
Were gone to a better protector
Now that I lack strength
To rise from my couch.
    Unaya—unaya.

Dost thou know thyself?
So little thou knowest of thyself.
Feeble I lie here on my bench
And only my memories are strong!
    Unaya—unaya.

Beasts of the hunt! Big game!
Oft the fleeing quarry I chased!
Let me live it again and remember,
Forgetting my weakness.
    Unaya—unaya.

Let me recall the great white
Polar bear,

High up its back body,
Snout in the snow, it came!
He really believed
He alone was a male
And ran towards me.
    Unaya—unaya.

It threw me down
Again and again,
Then breathless departed
And lay down to rest,
Hid by a mound on a floe.
Heedless it was, and unknowing
That I was to be its fate.
Deluding itself
That he alone was a male,
And unthinking
That I too was a man!
    Unaya—unaya.

I shall ne'er forget that great blubber-beast,
A fjord seal,
I killed from the sea ice
Early, long before dawn,
While my companions at home
Still lay like the dead,
Faint from failure and hunger,
Sleeping.
With meal and with swelling blubber
I returned so quickly
As if merely running over ice
To view a breathing hole there.
And yet it was
An old and cunning male seal.
But before he had even breathed
My harpoon head was fast
Mortally deep in his neck.

That was the manner of me then.
Now I lie feeble on my bench
Unable even a little blubber to get
For my wife's stone lamp.
The time, the time will not pass,
While dawn gives place to dawn

And spring is upon the village.
Unaya—unaya.

But how long shall I lie here?
How long?
And how long must she go a-begging
For fat for her lamp.
For skins for clothing
And meal for a meal?
A helpless thing—a defenceless woman.
Unaya—unaya.

Knowest thou thyself?
So little thou knowest of thyself!
While dawn gives place to dawn,
And spring is upon the village.
Unaya—unaya.

(ibid. pp. 321–3)

Besides his powers as poet and shaman, Orpingalik also had the ability to reflect self-consciously on the process of poetic composition and the functions of poetry. He had many discussions with Rasmussen about the significance of song both as an outlet for sorrow and anxiety and as a herald of festivity. He also explained how he conceived of a poem being born in the human mind, a passage interesting enough to quote once more

> 'Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices.
>
> Man is moved just like the ice floe sailing here and there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joy, when he feels fear, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his breath come in gasps and his heart throb. Something, like an abatement in the weather, will keep him thawed up. And then it will happen that we, who always think we are small, will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves—we get a new song.'

(ibid. p. 321)

Most detailed descriptions of individual oral poets are of men. There *are* references to women poets too, but these tend to be more generalised,

and it seems that it is less common for specialist poets to be women. But one expert woman poet about whom we know a good deal is the American singer, 'Granny Riddle', acclaimed by folklorists and public alike as a 'folksinger'. Her memories and songs were recorded on tape by Roger Abrahams and published in 1970 as *A Singer and her Songs.*

Almeda Riddle was born in 1898 in the Ozarks, Arkansas, and spent most of her life in the region. Her father was part-Irish (his mother's people had come to America from Ireland) and he lived first from timber-working, then farming. He was also a singing master and enthusiastic singer: 'He sang all the time. He'd go into any community that we went into, and if they didn't have a singing class, he immediately taught a ten-day school. Those that could pay him, paid him, and those that couldn't, couldn't' (Abrahams, 1970b, p. 6). He himself was accustomed to using written versions—'he sang most of his songs from the books' (ibid. p. 6)—and in this way helped to form his daughter's musical experience. She says 'Every morning before breakfast ... I don't ever remember a time that he didn't sit down with his book and sing a song or two. And after supper each night, he'd always sit down and sing awhile. And from the time I can remember, I got 'round and sang, too. I knew my notes before I knew my letters' (ibid. p. 6).

Her mother, by contrast, relied more on oral transmission, and passed on to Almeda Riddle a number of songs she had learnt from her own mother. Of one song, 'My mother [said] she had learned that from her mother and her mother said she could remember her own mother singing it to her. And I am now singing it to *my* great-grandsons. And as her own mother came from Ireland, she supposed she learned it in Ireland' (ibid. p. 42). Other songs she learned from members of her mother's family, or from a wide circle of friends and acquaintances—for, as she describes it herself, Almeda Riddle had a 'passion' for collecting songs.

Not surprisingly, Almeda's method of learning and performing songs used both written and oral sources from the start. She clearly had a remarkable verbal memory and very quickly picked up songs she heard. But at the same time she liked to keep a written record—what she termed 'ballets'—and from an early age had a large collection of written texts.

In her recollections, Almeda Riddle speaks vividly of the effect her early upbringing had on her development as singer. Her father's influence, in her account, was the strongest of all, but it is clear that singing also formed part of her family life generally, and of much contemporary life around her. She used to sing with her sister and school friends, or creep in to listen to older girls singing ballads. When she and her future husband were courting, they used to sing and discuss singing together: 'We'd sit on the back porch and talk of books we'd read or things we'd seen or of songs we knew. Sometimes we'd just sing' (ibid. p. 67).

Singing often accompanied work—it went with sewing or spinning or making soap—and Almeda Riddle says that one reason she can remember so many songs was that she used to sing them to her cow as she milked. Song was also associated with the Primitive Baptist church of which she was a member, and a number of her songs were learnt there.

Her life was interspersed with tragedy. After only nine years of marriage, her husband and baby were killed in a cyclone in 1926, and she returned home to her father's farm with her three small children. An experience that in some ways affected her even more deeply was the death of her elder sister Claudia, with whom she used to sing.

> One of the earliest remembrances I have in life was playing with my sister, Claudia, who was four years older than I. We were rocking our dolls to sleep and singing to them. My father, who was a singing teacher, always sang with us a while almost every night before bed time. I don't remember the songs we sang while Claudia was with us, but I do remember she sang very well and had a beautiful face, long golden hair, and a very sweet voice. She died after only three days' illness in August before I was six years old. I do remember the day she was taken sick quite well. We sat out in a peach tree in the backyard and sang and ate half-ripe peaches. She said she was getting cold, so we went inside. She was put to bed with a chill, what at that time, 1904, was no unusual thing in Arkansas. There was so much of what people called chills and fever—malaria. And she died the third day of her illness, after two more chills. I had what I guess you would call today a 'mental breakdown', and my father had to take me out in the woods with him each day. And for many months I remember I would only cry and say No when I was asked to sing.
>
> (ibid. p. 5)

Despite this, her passion for singing and song collecting continued, and in later life this was recognised by folksong collectors throughout the United States, who dubbed her 'Granny', for by her sixties she was already a great grandmother. She sang for commercial recording companies[2] and with well-known bands as well as for local and family audiences, 'folk festivals' and university concerts.

Her repertoire covered both her favourite 'classic' ballads, as she called them—mostly those included in the Child canon, like *Barbara Allen, The Four Marys, Lady Margaret*—but also some popular songs of the day, and even songs she had based on printed texts in newspapers or developed from recitations. Though she apparently laid great store on her songs being old and belonging to authentic tradition in some sense, she was by no means a passive traditor only. She explains herself how she changes a song in certain ways while singing, even though she dislikes the idea of over dramatising her performances: 'Now, it's scarcely ever, if you sing a song from memory, that you'll sing it exactly word for word each time. You'll probably change a word here and there, which keeps it changing. This is true of all songs, the classic songs and other kinds' (ibid. p. 117). Her musical interpretations are noted for their richness and individuality. She uses variations to enhance the meaning of her story, so that almost every verse has its own nuances in actual performance. As one observer explains, 'She not only cultivates meaningful texts but creates a rich flexibility within the tune to accommodate the changing speech from stanza to stanza' (Foss in Abrahams, 1970b, p. 162).

In what she calls the 'classic songs' she emphasises that she is less prepared to make changes than in what she regards as newer songs. In the classics, she insists on keeping the 'meaning' as it has come to her even when she makes verbal changes

> The words, you know, are fluid ... they might change this way or that, but never the meaning. I wouldn't consciously change the words of a song, and I'd be *very* careful not to change the meaning. But now I might sing you 'Barbara Allen' today one way, and I have at least six or eight versions of that, so tomorrow some of this version or that might creep in.
>
> (ibid. p. 120)

2 Among her records is Vanguard VRS 9158, *Almeda Riddle: Songs and Ballard of the Ozarks.*

With other songs she is more prepared to claim a piece as her own. Her account of the way she worked out her own interpretation of *Go tell Aunt Nancy* is worth quoting at some length.

> Well, 'Go tell Aunt Nancy' is not a classic; it's my own version. Most of it I wrote ... for the kids, and just to sing it to them ... This arrangement of mine, I never heard of it except we kids just made it up, and sang it along as a child. Probably it's not any more authentic than I am ... The first of that I heard was as a child. A little girl, Merty Cowan, sang that. I was very small, first school. And then my mother sang some verses of this. I guess the original is really the old goose who was always in the millpond. But I've always sung where she was killed by a walnut, definitely—the walnut hit her on the top of the head and killed her. Aunt *Nancy's* goose, and I remember as a child having some fierce arguments with school children over this song. Now, Merty Cowan sang it, the first time I heard it. She sang it as Aunt Nancy, and a walnut killed it. This was an older girl. I was about six, and I got it into my mind like that. Now these other verses have been picked up along the way from other children's versions of 'Aunt Nancy' and from my mother's. I remember one fight I had about the way she was buried and the way that the old goose 'died in the millpond, standing on her head'. And I *said* it definitely was Aunt *Rhody's* goose and not Aunt Nancy's. And so, I still say Aunt Nancy's goose was definitely killed by a walnut. She didn't die in the millpond.
>
> And children like the way it's done now, and it's recorded like that. That's just Granny's version of' Aunt Nancy' and I think it's nobody else's. I've sung that thing so long that I don't remember where it all comes from ...

Go tell Aunt Nancy, go tell Aunt Nancy,
Go tell Aunt Nancy, her old grey goose is dead.
The one that she's been saving, one that she's been saving,
The one that she's been saving, to make a feather bed.
Down come a walnut, down come a walnut,
Down come a walnut and hit her on the head.
Go tell Aunt Nancy, poor old Aunt Nancy,
Go tell Aunt Nancy the old grey goose is dead.

The gander is weeping, gander is weeping,
The gander is weeping, because his wife is dead.
Her goslings all crying, and weeping and peeping,
Her goslings all crying, their mammy they can't find.
Down come a walnut, down come a walnut,
Down come a walnut and hit her on the head.
Go tell Aunt Nancy, poor old Aunt Nancy,

Go tell Aunt Nancy her old grey goose is dead.

Go tell Aunt Nancy, go tell Aunt Nancy,
We took her in the kitchen and cooked her all day long.
And she broke all the forkteeth, broke all the forkteeth,
Broke all the forkteeth, they weren't strong enough.
Broke out Grandad's teeth, broke all Granddad's [sic] teeth,
Poor old Granddad's teeth, the old grey goose was tough.
Go tell Aunt Nancy, go tell Aunt Nancy,
Go tell Aunt Nancy that the old grey goose is tough.

Go tell Aunt Nancy, go tell Aunt Nancy,
Go tell Aunt Nancy, we hauled her to the mill.
We'll grind her into sausages or make her into mincemeat,
Grind her into sausages, if the miller only will.
She broke all the sawteeth, broke all the sawteeth,
Broke all the sawteeth, it was not strong enough.
Broke all the sawteeth, tore down the saw mill,
Broke up the circle saw, that old grey goose is tough.

Go tell Aunt Nancy, go tell Aunt Nancy,
Go tell Aunt Nancy, we know this is a shock.
But go tell Aunt Nancy, poor old Aunt Nancy,
Go tell Aunt Nancy we buried her under a rock.
Go tell Aunt Nancy, go tell Aunt Nancy,
Go tell Aunt Nancy the old grey goose is dead.
Down come a walnut, down come a walnut,
Down come a walnut and hit her on the head.

(ibid. pp. 1 17–20)

Granny Riddle's success as a 'folksinger' seems to be due to her abilities as a *performer* and interpreter as much as to her powers of original composition—insofar as these can be distinguished. But to her what is of explicit and first importance is not her performing skill but the songs themselves, 'classic' or otherwise: these she regards as of enduring value. Typically she ends the tape-recorded account of her life with the words

> So that's all there is about my songs and myself. And as far as I'm concerned, that's a good deal too much about me—and maybe not enough about the songs. But I'll tell you one thing: I've sung ever since I remember. I intend to sing as long as God gives me a cracked-up voice to do it with. And I intend to sing these songs. But *my* own greatest,

> pushing ambition is to get all of the songs I know either on tape or in book form and leave it. Free for anybody that wants to use it. And you can sign that: Granny Riddle.
>
> (ibid. p. 146)

Collectors of oral literature have not always taken much interest in individual poets, so there is a relative dearth of material on the personalities and careers of individual poets. Even so, there are others who could have been described here if space permitted. There was the famous nineteenth century Somali poet Sheikh Mahammed 'Abdille Ḥasan for instance, better known to European historians as the 'Mad Mullah' and leader of the fighting Dervishes (Andrzejewski and Lewis, 1964, pp. 53ff). Among women poets one could mention the opulent Moorish poet in Mauretania, Yāqūta mint 'Alī Warakān, who can support a comfortable well-furnished house from her art, and is efficient at guarding her own songs from piracy by others and ready to sing her own praises

> From what ruby, O Lord of the throne, is Yāqūta?
> From the source of pearl and ruby she is fashioned...
> She is the full moon, but without a blemish in it...
>
> (Norris, 1968, p. 53)

There is the flirtatious Maori poet Puhiwahine who died in 1906, the daughter of the poetess Hinekiore, who was both skilled in traditional poetic forms and prepared to innovate in poetry from new experiences and contacts—famous not only for her poetry but also for her personality and many love affairs (Jones, 1959–60). Again, there are studies of recent oral poets, like Larry Gorman, Leadbelly, the Beatles, or Bob Dylan.

It is probably clear from the portraits given here that something is known about individual oral poets, and that further knowledge would be useful for what it tells us about modes of oral transmission and composition, local theories about poetry and the role of poets, as well for the help it provides in testing older theories about the anonymity of oral poetry or the communal and basically un-individualised nature of oral composition.

Something of the variety of the poet's personality, training and circumstances emerges from this glance at a few creators of oral poetry.

This variety is the main point to emerge when one tries to compare the positions and activities of oral poets throughout the world. But there are also common ways in which societies have come to arrange their literary institutions, and the activities of poets can thus be seen to fit, quite often, into recurrent patterns. Though these are not comprehensive or exclusive, it is illuminating to glance at some of them.

6.2 Some types of poets: specialists, experts and occasional poets

In some societies the role of poet is a specialised one—at any rate for the poet of certain approved kinds of poetry. There are the priest-poets once found widely throughout Polynesia, the highly trained and honorific poets of Ruanda or Ethiopia and the recognised high-status grade of *fili* in early Ireland. In these cases the practice of poetry (of a particular kind) fits with other honoured institutions in the society—most often religious or political. Like the Fijian Velema, the practitioners of this poetry have an approved position consistent with the recognised values and power-structure of the society.

This is particularly obvious with the praise poets often attached to the courts of rulers. In the Zulu kingdoms of South Africa, every king or chief with pretensions to political power had his own praiser or *imbongi* among his entourage. At the more elaborate courts of West African kingdoms, there were often whole bands of poets, minstrels and musicians, each with his specialised task, and all charged with the duty of supporting the present king with ceremonial praise of his glory and the great deeds of his ancestors. The old and powerful kingdom of Dahomey had a whole series of royal orchestras, while in Hausa states teams of praisers included musicians and singers with their own royal titles permanently recognised at court. In Hawaii a poet termed the 'master-of-song' (*haku-mele*) was attached to a chief's court, with the duty of composing 'name chants' to glorify the exploits of the chiefly families as well as transmitting and performing older praise poems and genealogies handed down from previous poets (Beckwith, 1951, p. 35). Court poets are common in aristocratic or hierarchical societies, from

the poets of mediaeval Wales, Ireland and Scotland to the early Tamil bards or the minstrels of nineteenth-century Kirghiz sultans.[3]

In these contexts, the role of poet is often highly skilled and involves specific training. This may involve personal apprenticeship to a qualified practitioner. The Fijian Velema was taught his craft by his maternal uncle, who at the same time passed on to him the authority and mystique of a seer and priest. Or the apprenticeship may—as with the Ifa oracle priest poets in Southern Nigeria—involve a course of learning in which the novice goes to a number of qualified experts, often over several years, before he is considered to have mastered his craft. Training of poets is a fairly common pattern, found in places as far apart as mediaeval Ireland and Scotland, Polynesia and Central Africa, and shows the seriousness with which the acquisition of poetic skill and knowledge is locally regarded.

This is taken even further, with the institution of a fully organised 'school' or official system of training. This is not uncommon even in largely non-literate societies. The Maori 'school of learning' is an example. This was a house, often specially built, in which selected youths of well-born parents were formally taught the traditional poetry and sacred knowledge of the priest-poets. There were grades of proficiency through which the candidates could pass, and moving upward depended on passing examinations conducted by expert teachers (Best, 1923). Similar formal training for poets in schools for the well-born was common in the major islands of Eastern Polynesia (Luomala, 1955, p. 45). Again, there is the training in poetry received by the high-status poets in Ruanda under the overall supervision of the president of the poets' association. There were Druidic schools in Caesar's Gaul, mediaeval Irish bardic schools and schools of rhetoric designed to train the Ethiopian *dabteras* poets in the art of *qene* composition.

With a publicly recognised and specialised role, poets have often become a power in their own right. They help to uphold the authority of state or religion—which gives them their own position—and also sometimes keep a firm hold on their monopoly by conducting their own examinations or other controls over the entrance of new recruits. This is the case with Maori and Ruanda poets. Succession to the powerful

3 However they are not, contrary to some suggestions (e.g. Dillon, 1947, p. 15; Williams, 1971, p. 17), peculiar to 'Indo-European Society'.

positions which poets may hold is not infrequently hereditary, so that powerful dynasties of poets can establish themselves, sometimes forming a recognised and dominant grade within society as with the Marquesan and Mangarevan master bards in Polynesia, the privileged early Tamil minstrels, the early Irish or Scottish poets and perhaps the Brahmanic reciters of the sacred Vedic literature.

Among these more specialised types of poet, there is often a split between reciters and composers. This is especially so when the delivery of the poem involves a group of specialists working together—the West African orchestra, for instance, or Mangarevan song groups, who must to some extent rehearse their performances. It is particularly common with specialist religious poets preserving a conservative tradition where, in theory and often in practice, they are delivering or interpreting traditional material. This is so, presumably, with many transmitters of Vedic literature in India, just as it can also be said of the priests and ministers who carry on and disseminate the literary heritage of the Christian Church, some of which must be classed as a kind of oral poetry. Some praise poets learn the praises of older rulers from previous poets, and may do little more than preserve these in their public recitations, reserving their newer compositions for more recent events. But there are also cases of a joint performer/composer role, and even with the more powerful and specialised type of poet, there seems to be no absolute need for this further specialisation into reciter as distinct from composer.

One corollary of the special status of such poets is the return they get from practising their craft. Sometimes they are mainly (even perhaps fully?) supported by it and so can be regarded as professionals. A king's *maroka* praise teams in Northern Nigeria rely heavily on their position for their livelihood: 'they are allocated compounds, farm-lands, and titles by the king, who may also give them horses and frequently provides them with clothes, money, or assistance at weddings, as well as with food' (Smith, 1957, p. 31). Mediaeval Scottish bards built up powerful hereditary families with extensive lands (Thomson, 1974, pp. 12ff) and the Irish court poet expected lavish generosity and 'an estate of land of the best kind and an abode near his chiefs court' (Williams, 1971, p. 3). Their earlier counterparts, the *fili* or *ollam*, could expect the reward for a poem to be

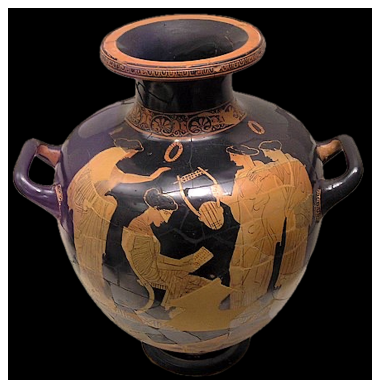
reckoned in cattle or horses. When poets formed a special hereditary class or caste (as sometimes, for example, in Polynesian, Indian and Gaelic society) their economic as well as their socio-political status were related to the practice of their art, and their right to land and other capital possessions followed from this.

Considering the authoritative position often held by such poets, it is not surprising that the view of the poets' role held by them and by members of their culture often involves reference to a higher sanction underlying their words and position. This is particularly so for poets with religious authority. It is common for the poet's words to be attributed to some power beyond him. Velema's poems were composed by some 'true ancestor'; the Vedic scriptures were divinely revealed rather than composed by human poets, and the hymns of the great Zulu prophet and founder of the Church of Nazareth, Isaiah Shembe, were felt to have been directly imparted to him by God. Many other instances of this emphasis on inspiration in early Europe as well as recent oral literature elsewhere are recorded in Nora Chadwick's analysis, *Poetry and Prophecy* (1942). The claim to divine inspiration in the production of poetry is likely to assist such poets to retain their positions of power or prestige.

Fig. 6.4. Oral poets of yesterday and today:

6.4.1. A photo of a tablet with pre-cuneiform writing from the Uruk III era, late 4th millennium B.C. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P1150884_Louvre_Uruk_III_tablette_%C3%A9criture_pr%C3%A9cun%C3%A9iforme_AO19936_rwk.jpg

6.4.2. Depiction of a lyre player and singer on the Standard of Ur, circa 2500 B.C. British Museum. Wikimedia, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Standard_of_Ur#/media/File:Ur_lyre.jpg



6.4.3. Sappho, archaic Greek poet, inspired ancient poets and artists, including the vase painter from the Group of Polygnotos who depicted her on this red-figure vase, circa 440–430 B.C. Wikimedia, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:NAMA_Sappho_lisant.jpg

6.4.4. A painting of the third-century Chinese emperor Shi Chong listening to the music of his concubine Lüzhu, famous composer of musical settings for poems. Hua Yan. 1732. Golden Valley Garden. Shanghai Museum. Wikimedia, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Shi_Chong#/media/File:Golden_Valley_Garden,_Hua_Yan.jpg

6.4.5. Troubadours, illustrated in *The Olomouc Bible*, Part I, 1417. Scientific library, Olomouc. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Troubadours_berlin.jpg

6.4.6. A Romani man sitting in the desert with a drum in Pushkar, India. Unsplash, https://unsplash.com/photos/a-man-sitting-in-the-desert-with-a-drum-9Mj1qB3AgYk

6.4.7. Mural depicting a scene from Mongolian *Epic of King Gesar*, circa third century B.C. Wikimedia, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Epic_of_King_Gesar#/media/File:Gesar_Gruschke.jpg

6.4.8. Photo of a rock singer. Unsplash, https://plus.unsplash.com/premium_photo-1664302642672-d22412d44b1e?auto=format&fit=crop&q=80&w=875&ixlib=rb-4.0.3&ixid=M3wxMjA3fDB8MHxwaG90by1wYWdlfHx8fGVufDB8fHx8fA%3D%3D

6.4.9. Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, celebrated American folksongsters. Wikimedia, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Joan_Baez#/media/File:Joan_Baez_Bob_Dylan.jpg

6.4.10 Portrayal of the sixth-century Arabian poet and warrior Antarah ibn Shaddad, famous composer of orally transmitted poetry. Wikimedia, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Antarah_ibn_Shaddad#/media/File:Antarah_on_horse.jpg

6.4.11 Ruth Finnegan, contemporary British-Irish oral poet. Photo by Louise Langley.

6.4.12 Thomas Forest Bailey, an Australian performance poet. ©John Hunt.

6.4.13 Yoruba dancing singer and chorus. Photo by David J. Murray, 1972, University of Ibadan campus.

A second common type of poet could be called the free-lance and unattached practitioner. Admittedly the distinction can never be clear-cut; for even the most aggressively individualistic poet may form part of the power structure of a society, and what counts as an official role from the point of view of one group (say, a group of Ifa worshippers) may seem more like commercial self-interest from another (say, by certain Christian sects among the Yoruba). Nevertheless the rough distinction is useful: between poets who can rely on relatively permanent and accepted patronage as part of the political and religious establishment, and those who make a living by the effectiveness of their appeal to a succession of potential patrons.

Wandering poets and minstrels who live on their art and their wits are common in many societies. The mediaeval European poet-musicians

are one well-known example, or the Moorish troubadours of modern Mauretania, and professional Tatar minstrels on the Central Asian steppes. It is also common in West African kingdoms: itinerant Hausa praise singers, unattached to an official court, can make a living by moving round the villages, picking on wealthy and powerful men to 'praise' in return for gifts in cash or kind. The attempt by the object of the songs to avoid paying the required largesse is likely to result in hurtful and derogatory 'praise songs', so the victim pays up. Similar power was held by the special 'caste' of poets in the Senegambia region known as *griots.* As holders of the hereditary rank of poet, these *griots* had special impunity: they had the right to insult anyone and—like the Moorish troubadours—to switch to out spoken abuse if they failed to get a reward of the expected size. Poets with this power are naturally feared (even despised) as well as admired and patronised, and hold an ambiguous position in society.

Not all free-lance poets take this aggressive route to their commercial objective. The Kirghiz minstrels work more subtly on a wealthy patron's susceptibilities. Though they make a living by going from feast to feast, singing in honour of the host and for the delight of the guests, they take care to gauge the interest of the audience and compose effective and elaborate panegyrics to their patrons without appealing directly for largesse. It is worth quoting Radlov's vivid description of these performances once more

> One sees from a Kirghiz reciter that he loves to speak, and essays to make an impression on the circle of his hearers by elaborate strophes and well-turned expressions. It is obvious, too, on all sides that the listeners derive pleasure from well-ordered expressions, and can judge if a turn of phrase is well rounded off. Deep silence greets the reciter who knows how to arrest his audience. They sit with their head and shoulders bent forward and with eyes shining, and they drink in the words of the speaker; and every adroit expression, every witty play on words calls forth lively demonstrations of applause.
>
> Since the minstrel wants to obtain the sympathy of the crowd, by which he is to gain not only fame, but also other advantages, he tries to colour his song according to the listeners who are surrounding him ... The sympathy of the hearers always spurs the minstrel to new efforts of strength, and it is by this sympathy that he knows how to adapt the song exactly to the temper of his circle of listeners. If rich and distinguished Kirghiz are present, he knows how to introduce panegyrics very skilfully

> on their families, and to sing of such episodes as he thinks will arouse the sympathy of distinguished people ... It is marvellous how the minstrel knows his public. I have myself witnessed how one of the sultans, during a song, sprang up suddenly and tore his silk overcoat from his shoulders, and flung it, cheering as he did so, as a present to the minstrel.
>
> (Radlov, *Proben* v, pp. iii, xviiif, translated in Chadwick, III, 1940, pp. 179 and 184–5)

The Yugoslav poets such as Avdo Mededović do not make a direct appeal for reward in their singing. But such a singer can make, if not his full livelihood, at least some profit from his songs. In Avdo's Yugoslavia, the singing of epic poetry formed the main entertainment of the adult male population in villages and small towns, and people were prepared to give the poet a reward in return for pleasure. The coffee houses in the towns were places where a singer could make money (as well as getting his audience to buy him drinks). During the period of Ramadan most Muslim coffee houses engaged a singer several months in advance, paying him a basic fee and organising a collection from the guests at the time of the performance (Lord, 1968a, pp. 14ff). So popular Yugoslav epic singers could attain semi-professional status and make some profit from time to time even though (except for those who were beggars) they were not professional singers in the sense of depending on their art for their livelihood.

The views such poets hold of their role vary a great deal. One would expect less stress to be laid on inspiration than in the case of poets with religious authority. This is so, in that the direct sanction of a poet acting as mouthpiece for the spirits in the authoritative religious system of the society is not here in question. But stress on the personal inspiration of the poet, even sometimes on his prophetic insight, is often found among free-lance poets, and is an aspect of the role which naturally adds to acceptability (and thus the likelihood of profit). This view may go alongside deliberate and professional training—which in some senses it might seem to contradict. Among the peoples of Central Asia, where the free-lance poet receives the most specialised training, it is believed that

> the art of poetry is a kind of mysterious gift bestowed on the person of the singer by a prophetic call from on high. The biographical legend of the singer's call is much like that of Caedmon, the first Anglo-Saxon poet, and has been taken for fact by the majority of the epic singers in Central

> Asia and South Siberia, both Turkic and Mongolian. The future manaschi, for example, is visited in a dream by the hero Manas and his forty followers, or by his son Semetei, or by another of his famous warriors, and is handed a musical instrument (the dombra) and commanded to sing of their deeds If the chosen singer disregards this call, he is visited by illness or severe misfortune, until he submits himself obediently to their will.
>
> (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky, 1969, pp. 332–3)

Similarly the long practice and the knowledge of conventional runs and motifs that lie behind the art of an accomplished Kirghiz minstrel, is played down in his own account of his role where he stresses inspiration rather than deliberate art: 'I can sing any song whatever; for God has implanted this gift of song in my heart. He gives me the word on my tongue, without my having to seek it. I have learnt none of my songs. All springs from my inner self' (Radlov, *Proben* v, pp. xviff, translated in Chadwick, III, 1940, p. 182).

The training of these free-lance poets is seldom as formal as that sometimes arranged for official poets. It is common for singers to work at learning their craft in a personal and informal way. Potential Yugoslav singers like Avdo Mededović, for instance, begin by picking up the themes and stylistic conventions of the epic poems unconsciously by listening to others, then later start to try to sing for themselves. One singer explained how he learnt his art.

> When I was a shepherd boy, they used to come for an evening to my house, or sometimes we would go to someone else's for the evening, somewhere in the village. Then a singer would pick up the gusle, and I would listen to the song. The next day when I was with the flock, I would put the song together, word for word, without the gusle, but I would sing it from memory, word for word, just as the singer had sung it ... Then I learned gradually to finger the instrument, and to fit the fingering to the words, and my fingers obeyed better and better ... I didn't sing among the men until I had perfected the song, but only among the young fellows in my circle (*družina*) not in front of my elders and betters.'
>
> (Lord, 1968a, p. 21)

Quite often the Yugoslav neophyte chooses some particular singer, often his father or uncle or a well-known local singer, to follow most closely

(Lord, 1968a, p. 22). This style of training tends to be informal and personal, but involves the deliberate 'learning of a craft'.

Occasionally even free-lance poets had access to more formalised training, either through specific apprenticeships or in organised schools. Professional training was usual for instance, with Central Asian tale-singers. Zhirmunsky describes the system of training for Uzbek singers.

> The most prominent singer-teachers had several pupils at a time. Training lasted for two or three years and was *free* of charge; the teacher provided his pupils with food and clothing, the pupils helped the teacher about the house.
>
> The young singers listened to the tales of their teacher and accompanied him on his trips to villages. At first, under the teacher's guidance, the pupils memorized the traditional passages of dastans and epic cliches, and at the same time learned how to recount the rest of the poem through their own improvisation. The end of the training was marked by a public examination: the pupil had to recite a whole dastan before a selected audience of tale-singers, after which he received the title of *bakshy* with the right to perform independently.
>
> In the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, in the Samarkand district of the Uzbek Republic, especially famous for its tale-singers, there were two famous schools which were by far the most important centres of epic art: the schools of Bulungur and of Nuratin. Two outstanding folk-singers of our times belonged to *these* schools: Fazil Yuldashev (1873–1953) and Ergash Jumanbulbul-ogly (1870–1938). The Bulungur school was especially known for its heroic repertoire (*Alpamysh*), the Nuratin school for its performance of folk romances. Their styles of performance differed correspondingly: the style of the former was more severe and traditional, that of the latter more lyrical and ornamental in accordance with the nature of its romantic subjects. The relative artistic 'modernism' of the Nuratin school must probably be explained by the stronger influence written literature had over it, which can be traced back to Persian romantic epos through Tajik or Uzbek chap-books (*kissa*). Ergash and the majority of his teachers were literate people (as indicated by the word *molla*, usually added to their names), who had received fundamental Moslem elementary education.
>
> The centre of the Nuratin school was Kurgan, a small village, the birthplace of Ergash. Despite the fact that only seven patriarchal 'large families' lived in the village, well over twenty folk-singers could be found there by the middle of the twentieth century, whose names have been recorded by the Uzbek folklorists on the information given by Ergash and the village elders. Ergash's father and two uncles were outstanding tale-singers, as well as his two younger brothers and his great-grandmother,

> the woman tale-singer Tella-kampir. Such 'dynasties of singers' in which poetic talent was passed on from one generation to another, were well known among other Central Asiatic peoples.
>
> (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky, 1969, pp. 330–1)

Free-lance poets are clearly of many different kinds, some hereditary, others not. Some depend on the direct approach in order to gain their main livelihood from poetry, others merely supplement their income by their art. Some rely on face-to-face performance; either drawing their public to hear them *in situ* or themselves travelling to their audience. Others, nowadays, use the radio as an alternative source of income and dissemination, like contemporary Somali poets and Mandinka *griots* in Africa, performing in both traditional and modern vein. Or, like Bob Dylan or the Beatles, they make use of the whole range of modern telecommunications: tapes, gramophone records, radio and television. What they all share is the recognition by their society—or of sufficient groups within it—that their craft is a specialist one, worthy of an individual's spending many years to acquire and practise it, and deserving reward in whatever currency is locally offered. The value thus attached to the learning and practice of poetic art, and the consequent specialisation of the poet's role, is not at all the picture of the organisation of oral literature sometimes held: of a communal, undifferentiated and anonymous activity with no opportunity for the development of the specialist individual poet, still less economic profit.

There are also poets—and perhaps this is the largest category—who are less specialised than those already discussed, and cannot be said to depend largely (and certainly not primarily) on their art, but who are nevertheless in some degree recognised as expert. Such poets often co-exist with more professional poets—the Hausa local and occasional singer for instance, practising in the same society as the official court poets and professional free-lance minstrels—while in societies or groups which do not have the poetic interest or the economic resources to support a distinct group of professional or semi-professional poets, these more occasional poets are the main exponents of the art.

Such poets often appear on ceremonial occasions when convention demands poetry and song, rather than on occasions specifically devoted to entertainment as such. These occasions are often crucial

points in the social life cycle. Funerals often need music and poetry, and it is common for certain individuals recognised as particularly skilled—often but not always relatives—to be asked to assist in the mourning. Women dirge singers among the Akan of Ghana take on the responsibility for singing or intoning laments during public mourning. Though all Akan girls were expected to show some skill in composing and performing dirges to sing at relatives' funerals, some women were recognised as particularly expert and had a larger repertoire than usual (Nketia, 1955, pp. 2ff). Again, the rituals of initiation or marriage often demand the assistance of an expert singer. Among the Limba of Sierra Leone there are no professional or near professional poets, but there are recognised experts specialising in different genres of song: songs for the stages of initiation (separately for male and female initiation); different types of funeral songs, each with their own names and styles; songs and declamations for memorial ceremonies; and songs to go with phases of the farming cycle throughout the year. For attending and performing at such ceremonies the expert poet/singer often receives some small fee or, at the least, generous hospitality from those organising the ceremony. With the more specialised poets (for in Limba culture some occasions, especially memorial ceremonies, demand greater expertise in their singers than others), large gifts may be forthcoming from the hosts.

Though poets like these are less highly specialised in terms of economic position or formally organised training, this does not mean that their art is less carefully structured or their poetic insight and detachment necessarily less. Take, for instance, the Luo *nyatiti* singer in East Africa. His speciality is the lament song, and he appears at funerals, which the Luo celebrate on a grand scale. He makes an appearance partly for social and personal reasons—relationship to the deceased or to help out a neighbour—and partly to make a collection from the large and admiring audience he is likely to find there. He composes and performs his songs for the occasion, drawing on accepted themes of honour and mourning for the deceased. Such songs are relatively conventional and soon forgotten; but sometimes a gifted singer, especially moved by sorrow, composes a song in advance with special care and intensity, devoting much time and concentration to it. The song may be so admired that he is asked to sing it again, after the funeral. When he does

so, the poem often gains in detachment and depth—'being freed from the solemnity of a funeral [it] may rove from the fate of a particular individual to that of other people, and finally to the mystery of death itself' (Anyumba, 1964, p. 190).

Again, Inuit poetry is famed for its insight and careful composition. And yet, among some groups of Inuits a measure of skill in composition was expected of everyone, and while expert poets were admired they did not hold official or professional status.

> Every Inuit, therefore, whether man or woman, can not only sing and dance, but can even in some measure compose dance-songs. Distinction in this field ranks almost as high as distinction in hunting, for the man who can improvise an appropriate song for any special occasion, or at least adapt new words to an old song, is a very valuable adjunct to the community. Certain individuals naturally possess greater ability than others; their songs become the most popular and spread far and wide. But there are no professional song-makers, no men who make the composition of songs their main business in life.
>
> (Roberts and Jenness, 1925, p. 12)

One has to set against this background the art of an outstanding poet like Orpingalik: a recognised and admired expert, but not economically or socially set apart by virtue of his skill.

Besides performing at recurrent ceremonies or creating songs for their own or others' enjoyment, poets sometimes compose or perform in virtue of their membership of particular associations or interest groups in a society. Societies like the Yoruba hunters' society, the Ghanaian military association of the Akan, or the Hopi flute societies have special music or poetry associated with them and one or more members who are skilled exponents of it. Here the poet performs largely in fulfilment of his social obligation as a member, though he may also derive some small material profit from his performance.

One of the roles often taken by the kind of occasional poets considered here is that of lead singer with a choral group, the position filled by the Black American poet Johnnie Smith. The soloist who takes the lead in antiphonal or responsorial patterns with a chorus can create poetry of real originality and depth, as we have seen. It may not be so clear that this context for the practice of poetry is extremely common. From work songs by prisoners in Texas, Indian road-makers, or Limba

peasants in their rice fields, to wedding songs and dance songs and public entertainment throughout the world, lead singers perform and compose their poems, usually with little or no material recompense.

As amateurs, such poets often have no formal training. Their method of learning is likely to be through the informal process of watching and listening, and gradually absorbing the conventions appropriate to different genres of song in their differing contexts. A child growing up in Ireland is likely to hear the typical eight-line stanza and traditional tunes from his earliest years, and when he comes to sing himself to find it natural to compose and perform within these conventions. Similarly Yoruba children grow up with an increasing awareness—of the potentialities of 'their tonal, metaphor-saturated language which in its ordinary prose form is never far from music in the aural impression it gives' (Babalọla, 1966, p. v). A member of traditional Hawaiian culture is likely to be socialised from an early age into the kind of playing on words and complex figurative expression so important in his oral poetry.

These poets are not highly specialised professionals, and might not be noticed in an account of the economic and social division of labour. They tend to make the same kind of living as people around them—farmers, industrial workers, fishermen, building labourers, prisoners, housewives—and have no recognised status or high reward. But they perform an important role in publicising and realising the art of poetry. This is so in whatever society they practise, but most noticeably in cultures where professional and specialised poets are lacking.

It is interesting that women poets and singers are mentioned more frequently in this relatively amateur group than among the more professional. Men may still predominate, but women frequently take the lead in songs designed for ceremonial occasions associated with crucial points in the life cycle, above all in laments and wedding songs.

As might be expected, these amateur poets are less articulate about their roles and sources of inspiration—if only because they have less of a position to keep up and less pressure to theorise about it (or have researchers just taken less interest in the views of these less conspicuous poets?). But some have produced interesting comments on the aims and processes of poetic composition or performance. An aspect often mentioned is the poet's interest and pleasure in his own songs. There

was J. B. Smith's comment on the way 'you can always make a song out of your surroundings'. The earlier American Indian Hopi poet Lahpu describes how he composed his song about 'butterfly maidens' in the fields: 'I had been a long time away, and so my heart was happy as I came through the fields. I saw the Hopi girls playing among the corn-plants, chasing one another and laughing and singing, and—I liked it; it was pretty, and I was happy, so I made this song about it' (Curtis, 1907, p. 483).

A different situation is found in cultures (or poetic genres within them) where everyone is expected to master the specific craft involved. This contrasts with the amateur poets just discussed, where it was important for *one* person to take the lead or have enough recognised and specialist skill to play a role in a specific ceremony. But certain poetic skills are often very widely demanded.

This is sometimes a matter of merely being able to take part in kinds of choral singing where there is practically no specialisation at all: poems for children's action games, work songs, the chorus parts of antiphonal songs led by more skilled soloists. In such cases, the main skill involved is that of performance rather than composition, but even here some awareness of poetic art is needed, and a practised readiness to pick up and transmit newly composed poetry—so that those who take this part in the realisation of oral poetry within a culture are not irrelevant to discussion of the position of poets within it.

Sometimes the poetic skill widely expected of 'ordinary' people is more demanding. In Southern Africa, all Sotho boys had to become proficient in the composition and performance of praise poetry as part of their initiation, and had to declaim their own praise composition in public when they emerged from their exclusion as initiates (Laydevant, 1930, p. 524). Similarly among some Zambian peoples a young man had to sing a song of his own composition at his marriage, while each woman must have her own personal repertoire of *impango* songs to sing publicly as solos (Jones, 1943, pp. 11–12). Among the Ibo of Eastern Nigeria self-praises are widely composed. They can be illustrated by two, one that of a wine-tapper, celebrating his ability to make good money from his perilous ascent of tall palm-trees for their wine, and one by a powerful man expressing his sense of achievement

I am:
Height that is fruitful
Climbing rope that makes king
Knife that harvests money
Wealth from height.

I am:
Tiger that defends neighbours
King that is liked by public
Fame that never wanes
Flood that can't be impeded
Ocean that can't be exhausted
Wealth that gives wisdom...

(Egudu and Nwoga, 1973, pp. 21, 22)

Even when the requirements for personal composition and performance are not formally prescribed as for these set-piece occasions, the convention that individuals either have their own personal poems (as among the Inuit or the Pacific Dobuan islanders) or are just able and ready to take part in the poetic practice of the society, is widely-spread. Mothers in countless societies sing lullabies to their babies—and these are not necessarily derivative or simplified—lovers among the Gond, Pueblo, Dobuans and many many others evoke love or deplore faithlessness or plan elopement. Herdsmen like the contemporary Dinka guardians of cattle or earlier Scottish or Hebrew shepherds in the hills, sing and chant their poems in lonely pastures. Irish travellers celebrate in the traditional 'rebel' song style in the bars of cross-channel ferries, just as Somali lorry drivers sing *balwo* lyrics to liven the tedium of their long journeys, and countless western teenagers transmit and mould popular songs from every kind of origin.

Examples like these may seem trivial, but it must be remembered that it is largely by these practitioners, as well as by the more skilled and spectacular craftsmen, that the poetic heritage of a society is realised. Such practitioners may be performers only, and 'merely' pass on the compositions of others. But one must not forget that *oral* poetry, being oral, depends fundamentally on its expression and realisation in words—the performer is not a 'mere' performer but an essential part of the whole process of poetic creation. In considering the position of the oral poet one has inevitably to take account of performers as well as composers, wherever the two roles are split. Further, it is by no means clear that these unspecialised practitioners *are* always mere reflections of the originality of others. It was an ordinary Somali lorry driver who made the first *balwo* lyric—the new genre that then swept through the Somali younger generation—and the whole sense of variability in oral

transmission that inevitably emerges from research pays tribute to the originality and ingenuity of ordinary singers and reciters without specialist status. To understand the way in which poetry is created and practised in any society one has to take account of non-specialist practitioners like these, as well as the more professional poets, when they exist.

The categories of poet discussed here are not absolute nor clearly differentiated. They cannot be set up as definitive typologies, if only because their differential characteristics do not include clear-cut single criteria, and there is in practice much overlap between them. Thus the Inuit poet Orpingalik comes nearest to my third pattern—the expert among equals—but in his role of shaman he has an element of the religious position held by the seer Velema; while Almeda Riddle, again close to the third type, also shares the economic reward (not necessarily monetary) and relatively formal training more usually associated with the second 'free-lance' type. But, accepted as a rough and ready distinction, the categories distinguished above *are* frequently found, and the arrangements by which poets practise their craft often roughly coincide with one or more of the common patterns discussed here. The categories serve their purpose well enough.

Which types of poets practise in a given society is of some social importance. For it makes a difference whether poetry is composed and performed by professional poets with official and permanent positions (perhaps organised into a self-perpetuating and powerful group), by free-lance and unattached poets who are nevertheless often highly specialised and effective, by less specialised experts who practise mainly in particular genres and contexts, or by the kinds of unspecialised poets who emerge when poetry is diffused widely throughout society and poetic craft expected in a measure from everyone. In some societies—especially those with a marked division of labour and enough economic resources to support specialists in what is not an economically productive role—all or several of these categories often co-exist: in the wealthy and powerful kingdoms of West Africa or Asia, in mediaeval Europe or in some Polynesian islands. In other cultures or groups with less interest or opportunity for this kind of division of labour, only the last two categories are, broadly, likely to be found (perhaps sometimes

only the last)—in Texas prisoner groups, for instance, or possibly some of the poorer peasant economies.[4]

This general account of the status and role of oral poets is inevitably sketchy. But the picture that emerges throws light on some of the controversies in the general area, especially when considered in conjunction with the brief case studies presented earlier.

6.3 Are oral poets anonymous?

It is often suggested that oral poetry is produced anonymously and 'communally'. This idea is particularly applied to oral poetry in non-literate (or mainly non-literate) societies—though the concept is sometimes extended more widely, especially to poetry regarded as subject to 'oral transmission'. It is already obvious that my immediate answer to the basic question posed above is 'no', and that I reject the older ideas about oral poetry as necessarily anonymous and somehow communal. But a summary dismissal is not enough; there are some points here that require discussion.

In one sense it is an attractive possibility that there are elements of anonymity and communal participation in oral poetry. For instance, it is true that audiences play a more directly influential part in the creation of oral literature than is common with written literature; and the process of variability in oral poetry and the influence of the traditional conventions from which a poet selects means that in one sense *many* poets play a part in the composition of a piece of poetry, and not just one original composer on the model of written literature.

It is easy to exaggerate this, and easy to misrepresent both oral and written literary composition by pressing it too hard (do not literate poets make use of traditional conventions, which others have had a hand in shaping?). And when one comes to the more extreme formulations of these concepts (those emphasised by romanticist writers) the contrary evidence seems overwhelming. Where oral poetry involves simultaneous performance and composition—as it often does—it is

4 Once again, what is being commented on here is not the quality of poetry in any aesthetic and evaluative sense; only the *social arrangements* concerning the production of poetry and the position of the poet.

clearly *not* all produced anonymously and 'communally'. The poet, the author of the poem at that particular performance, is, by definition, a known individual, enunciating his poem in his own person before an audience. Among the cases cited here it is clear that Velema or Avdo Mededović or Johnnie B. Smith are neither anonymous nor communal: they are named and known individuals.

When there is a split between performance and composition, with the element of memorisation entering in, the name of the original poet *is* sometimes unknown. Equally, it is often carefully preserved, as with the Somali poets Mahammed 'Abdille Ḥasan, or Faarah Nuur, or Salaan 'Arrabey. In cases when the author *is* apparently unknown, this is sometimes a mere function of *our* ignorance (rather than that of the people themselves) or of the theoretical assumptions of researchers who felt it inappropriate with oral art to enquire about the names of the poets. In the light of the available evidence it seems that anonymity of the poet may sometimes be the case—but often it is not.

The idea that the communal creation of oral poetry is the normal process is also, in its literal sense at least, decisively negated by the existence in many societies of specialist poets. Poems composed by the Ruanda poetic elite, Hausa or Zulu court poets, trained Uzbek epic-singers, or Polynesian nobles cannot be regarded as' communal'—they are in no way the product of 'the people' (far less 'the tribe'), but the compositions of members of a specialised and to some extent separate group within the society. This type of social arrangement for the production of poetry is *not*, furthermore, an unusual and aberrant phenomenon with oral poetry: on the contrary, it is extremely common in societies with the economic resources to support an extended division of labour.

The question of the ownership and control of poetry is also relevant here. It is true that 'copyright' is a concept that goes with the printed word and is not characteristic of oral, but of written poetry. This is particularly so in contexts where the primary realisation of a poem is by its performer, and the performer's responsibility for the poem is in any case there for all to see. Thus the attitude to what we would call 'copyright' in oral poetry is very widely of the kind well summed up by Wilkinson writing of Malay poets:

> The horror of literary piracy which characterises European work has no place among primitive peoples. A jester whose jokes are repeated is only flattered by the repetition; a Malay song-writer who objected to other people using his songs would be regarded by his fellow countrymen much as we should regard a man who went to Stationers' Hall and applied for permission to copyright his own conversation. A native author likes to claim the monopoly of a recognised classic such as 'Esop's Fables' or the 'Arabian Nights' or the local 'Si-Miskin' romance which is at least two centuries old; he does not care so much about securing rights over his own original work. A native dramatist picks up his plots anywhere; he stages 'Aladdin' or 'Ali Baba' one night, and tries 'Hamlet' for the night after. He *would* be horrified at the charge of lack of originality; indeed, he glories in the fact that he has treated 'Hamlet' in a novel manner—quite unlike the way in which his predecessors treated that very hackneyed theme, he would compare himself rather to the great Greek tragedians who dealt in 'slices from the great banquet of Homer' and who related the same Orestes legend from characteristically different points of view. He would curse as a 'plagiarist' any man who crimped his clown or enticed away his poet, but he would not stoop to quarrel about mere words, which, once uttered, are to him as stale as the jokes of yester-year.
>
> (Wilkinson, 1924, p. 41)

This is not the only possible attitude to ownership of oral poetry. There are also societies in which the practice of having' personal poems' is both recognised and encouraged, and in such cases the individuals presumably 'own' their own songs in the sense either that they alone know and are able to sing them, or that they alone have the *right* to sing them. (This is another topic on which further research is needed). Among the Dinka of the Southern Sudan, songs are owned in the sense that all individuals and groups have their own songs, composed either personally or by an expert on their behalf. 'Only the owner of a song may present it formally, but informally any person may sing any song almost anytime and anywhere' (Deng, 1973, p. 78).

There are also societies in which legal ownership is quite explicitly recognised for at least some categories of poem. The Dobuan islanders in the Pacific lay great stress on originality of content and words and recognise the ownership of poems: 'The song-maker is proud of his creation, proud of its originality, and he has rights to prevent others from using his song, at least for a while. The song-maker must give his permission before his song is used for the dance' (Fortune, 1963, p.

251). Again, the Rwala Bedouin recognise the concept of authorship and copyright in poems, even if proving this in practice is difficult.

> The begging poets are not held in much esteem, being reproached for their insatiability, for their disregard of honesty in praising even scamps for a reward, and also because they lie and steal. They steal the ideas, sentences, and even whole verses of others. It often happens that the hearers assail such a poet with the words: 'Thou liest. Thou stolest it from So-and-Sol' The poet defends himself, calling on others to be his witnesses, but the confidence of his hearers is gone, and they say: 'A poet is a liar, *ḳaṣṣâd kaḏḏâb*.' When the poet learns that his composition or some of his verses are claimed by somebody else, he complains to the chiefs or even in the courts, but they refuse to listen on the ground that a poet cannot be trusted.
>
> (Musil, 1928, p. 283 (quoted in Greenway, 1964, p. 165))

The 'ownership' of a poem is not necessarily wholly vested in the person who—in our terms—was the composer. In Hawaii, writes Pukui, 'chants "belonged" to the person, or the family of the person to whom they were dedicated and for whom they had been composed. Others were not allowed to use them, except to repeat them in honour of the owner' (Pukui, 1949, p. 255). In Polynesia generally poems are not only owned but often given and received as precious gifts. The poem

> If I give a mat it will rot,
> If I give cloth it will be torn,
> The poem is bad, yet take it,
> That it be to thee boat and house,
> For thou art skilled in its taking,
> And ever have I joyed
> When the ignorant of heart have conned a poem
> In companionship with the wise

was from a one-hundred-and-one-line poem that a Tongan sailor and poet chanted as a gift to a friend who was also a poet. The poem was highly appreciated, as being of greater value than a material gift, and the friend showed his delight in it by responding "'Thanks for the..." and reciting the entire poem back to its composer' (Luomala, 1955, p. 43).

Poems which—like charms or incantations—are regarded as in themselves powerful are often the subject of ownership by an individual or social group, and sometimes sold to another or inherited along with

other property. Thus one Apache priest described how his *family* had owned a powerful 'medicine song'

> The song that I will sing is an old song, so old that none knows who made it. It has been handed down through generations and was taught to me when I was but a little lad. It is now my own song. It belongs to me.
>
> This is a holy song (medicine song) and great is its power. The song tells how, as I sing, I go through the air to a holy place where Yusun[5] will give me power to do wonderful things. I am surrounded by little clouds, and as I go through the air I change, becoming spirit only.
>
> O ha le
> O ha le!
> Through the air
> I fly upon a cloud
> Towards the sky, far, far, far,
> O ha le
> O ha le!
> There to find the holy place,
> Ah, now the change comes o'er me!
> O ha le
> O ha le!
>
> (Curtis, 1907, p. 324)

Among the Inuit too, magic songs are sometimes owned and handed down from father to son, while for the Native Australians of Arnhem Land, the 'ownership' of a song cycle by a particular 'songman' entails not so much exclusive knowledge of the story involved—many people in practice know this—but 'the right of access to the dream-spirits manifested in the stories ... the songman is in direct contact with these live spirits' (Berndt, 1970, p. 588).

'Ownership' of poetry thus turns out to be a remarkably complex phenomenon. The overall picture that emerges is not of the type of 'communal' poetry envisaged by early theorists. Oral poetry is composed, performed and even sometimes owned by individuals, and its production and publication is not infrequently under the control of specific and differentiated groups within the society, rather than of 'the tribe' or 'the society' in general.

5 The Supreme Being.

This leads to a final point concerning the communally shared aspect of poetry. It is sometimes tacitly assumed that the productions of poets in some sense stand for the whole society; reflecting the views and aspirations of the people at large and being essentially 'their' culture; so that even if one individual poet can be recognised as the composer or performer, he is really speaking not as himself, an individual, but as the 'voice' of the community. This is a readily-held idea, applied as often to the productions of literate societies as to those of more 'primitive' cultures. There is a sense in which it is true, but too facile an acceptance of this stance can lead to misassessment of the role of poets and poetry. This has been forcefully pointed out by Cesar Graña:

> The normal ways of sociology require that statements about the 'values' of a culture should rest on whatever one can find out about behavior and belief among a *number of people* which, with one or another justification, might be regarded as representative. Some sociologists of culture, however, embracing what is in fact a traditionally romantic view of the relationship between social life and aesthetic expression, fall to writing as though the work of artists, the work, that is, of a minority of the uncommon, should be taken as the final testimony of a culture's true character, or as the act or gesture *defining* the quality of a social period.
>
> It seems clear, at least to me, that a sociology of art moving at such a glamorous level of abstraction would be constantly faced with the temptation of taking the unique eloquence of art as *proof* of its social representativeness, thus circumventing the very thing that sociologists should be required to demonstrate: the connection between ordinary, unselfconscious experience and the memorable creations of the few.
>
> (Graña, 1971, p. 66)

Graña's comment applies equally to oral literature. The traditional emphasis on the communal and homogeneous nature of non-literate society or the democratic connotations of the term 'folklore' might lead one to suppose that oral poetry is always equally shared and approved throughout the society and the poet merely the spokesman of that society (of 'the folk'). But so far as its *production* goes this is not always the case. In non-literate as in literate societies, powerful groups of poets can retain their positions in conjunction with religious and political interests, can maintain a monopoly over the production of certain types of poems (usually those which express certain points of view) and in addition receive good reward and control the entrance of new recruits to

their profession. The *reception* of their openly performed poetry may be in principle more widespread than when the appearance of such poetry can be confined to small numbers of inaccessible or expensive books. But even this contrast can be exaggerated, for official poets sometimes address themselves to restricted audiences (wealthy and powerful patrons at court, or members of particular esoteric groups) and in some cases such poets may not travel far beyond the main political and economic centres of the culture of which they are sometimes taken to be the 'representatives'.

The point is obvious, but worth stressing, for it is tempting in any study of poetry, especially of a non-literate society, to be so impressed by the insight or art of certain poetry that one forgets the touch of cynicism which any sociologist needs in order to study any social phenomenon with detachment. So it has to be said explicitly that in societies where there is a marked division of labour affecting the production or circulation of poetry, it cannot be assumed without evidence that the official and established poets in every sense represent the people at large in the sentiments they express or the means of expression. Marx's comments in *German Ideology* on the vested interests of groups of intellectuals might apply equally to certain oral poets:

> The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that in consequence the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are, in general, subject to it. The dominant ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas, and thus of the relationships which make one class the ruling one; they are consequently the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess, among other things, consciousness, and therefore think. In so far, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the whole extent of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in their whole range and thus, among other things, rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age...
>
> (Marx in Bottomore and Rubel, 1963, pp. 93–4)

The representativeness or otherwise of specialist oral poets always needs empirical investigation, for it cannot be predicted in general

terms. To assume any one interpretation—whether 'Marxist', 'folklorist' or other—in advance of detailed enquiry is likely to be misleading.

6.4 The poet as seer

Another interpretation of the role of oral poets has been put forward by some scholars: namely that the poet is essentially and always a seer or prophet, who reveals what is hidden through divine inspiration and communication with spirits. He speaks in an exalted and trance-like manner and through his poetry links his fellow men with the spirit world. Nora Chadwick was a leading exponent of this view. In *Poetry and Prophecy* she wrote:

> The fundamental elements of the prophetic function seem to have been everywhere the same. Everywhere the gift of poetry is inseparable from divine inspiration. Everywhere this inspiration carries with it knowledge—whether of the past, in the form of history and genealogy; of the hidden present, in the form commonly of scientific information; and of the future, in the form of prophetic utterance in the narrower sense. Always this knowledge is uttered in poetry which is accompanied by music, whether of song or instrument. Music is everywhere the medium of communication with spirits. Invariably we find that the poet and seer attributes his inspiration to contact with supernatural powers, and his mood during prophetic utterance is exalted and remote from that of his normal existence. Generally we find that a recognised process is in vogue by which the prophetic mood can be induced at will. The lofty claims of the poet and seer are universally admitted, and he himself holds a high status wherever he is found.
>
> (Chadwick, 1942, p. 14, cf. also pp. 27–8, 41, 57, 72)

On this general view, it has been observed that the so-called 'shaman' in Inuit and North Asian cultures often has close associations with poetry as well as having the prophetic and visionary personality that can, according to accounts like Chadwick's, be widely expected of the poet. Some scholars have extended this observation into a theory that one of the main historical origins of epic poetry in these areas is in 'shamanism': a complex of characteristics which cover the personality and function of the poet and typical elements of content and style in the poems—for instance a hero's journey to the other world, or narration in first person dream-like style (Hatto, 1970). Shamanism, in Hatto's view, has

> left its traces in the epic traditions of Northern Asia in these ways: in the excitement bordering on ecstasy of improvisation; in a dream or trance-like style of first-personal narration; in narrative content in the form of initiatory tests and heroic journeys to the Otherworld, marked by battles with spirits and monsters or by other encounters by land, air or water.
>
> (Hatto, 1970, p. 3)

He extends this by finding a link between Northern Asian epic and others further afield, including the old Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh: 'the link', he asserts, 'is through shamanist tradition' (1970, p. 19).

A similar—but even more generalised—approach is taken by Caerwyn Williams who, reflecting the views of a number of other writers, asserts categorically that 'Every primitive poet was to some extent a shaman or magician, in other words he claimed the ability to exercise power over things, and his poetry was the means to that end' (Williams, 1971, p. 25). This general approach has influenced interpretations of the role of poets in a number of societies (e.g. Kailasapathy, 1968, pp. 61ff).

Sweeping generalisations like these (even Hatto's, though confined to the one genre of epic, is extensive geographically) can at times be illuminating. Certainly poetry is often associated with religion and with a highly wrought and nervous personality in the poet; it is, furthermore, useful to be reminded of the prophetic calling of the poet which is a part of poetic theory widely held in northern Asia and the Pacific.

But there is no *necessary* connection between these characteristics; nor do they apply more widely as a general characterisation of all poets (or all oral poets in non-industrial contexts). It may be helpful to separate these traits, and consider them separately.

First, poets indeed often have religious roles. There are the established poets of official religion and the carriers of authoritative religious tradition—like the Vedic poet/priests of India, the practitioners of the Christian literary heritage or, at a more specialised and local level, poets and priests expressing the poetry of one particular cult in society (like the Yoruba Ifa cult) or, like Velema, representing religious authority in one particular village. Such poets may add to their position the extra sanction of claiming to be directly and supernaturally inspired. But the manic personality sometimes associated with shamanism and possession is not necessarily a feature of this kind of poetic practice. In some cases, religious poets prefer to present a dignified and austere

mien. On the other hand there *are* many poets who resemble mediums in that, like the Malay magician or, in some cases, the Inuit shaman, they receive and deliver their poems in the context of a kind of spiritualist seance where trance and dream are elements and the poet claims direct access to a possessing spirit. Such poets may be associated with the main established religion of the area—but often they are not. Their poetry is a means for gifted or unusual individuals to make a mark outside the official ranking system in the society and practise on a free-lance and individualistic basis.

But though poets with religious functions do exist widely, they do *not* comprise the whole body of oral poets. There is also a great number of secular poets, from official court poets lauding the military achievements of their patrons to entertainers like Avdo Mededović and countless others, who seek primarily to tell a good and gripping story and for whom passing religious allusions are of secondary importance; or there are local poets interested mainly in love or recent political events or, like Johnnie Smith, in interpreting and enduring prison life. Such poets have little in common with prophets and shamans.

The same argument applies to the question of personality. In other words, many poets *are* characterised by a manic and highly charged personality—either because such individuals are more likely to turn to poetry or (perhaps) because social pressures can encourage individuals of this type to become poets. But not all poets are like this. And as Nora Chadwick herself points out on the basis of a wide study of the subject, while it is true that 'nervous and highly strung people make likely subjects for ecstasy and other forms of manticism ... that people who ... are actually mentally abnormal or diseased, make good shamans has yet to be shown. Nor have I found satisfactory evidence elsewhere that people who are obviously mentally diseased are held in high esteem for mantic gifts in their own community' (Chadwick, 1942, p. 65).

One *could* so define the poetic art that insight akin to prophecy and a 'sensitive' and 'highly strung' personality in the poet are defining characteristics. Up to a point, this would fit well with some of the cases discussed here: Velema's strange personality, Almeda Riddle's 'mental breakdown' after her sister's death, Johnnie Smith's uncontrollable jealousy and murder of his wife. But one must not be tempted to turn an empirical matter into a value judgement, or a tautology, and include

under the term 'poet' only those whom the analyst regards as 'good' or 'true' poets. This is to ignore the commonsense point that local classifications of poet widely include the second-rate practitioner as well as the truly original and insightful creative artist: and many recognised poets do not have neurotic and manic personalities, even if some of the most gifted do.

It sometimes causes ambiguity that poets claim that their words are inspired—that they arise not from conscious deliberation but from some deep unconscious impulse within, for which the poet is not fully responsible, or from some outside supernatural source. Such claims are at least evidence of local poetic theories and of how poets envisage their role; and it is clear that in some cultures—early Ireland for instance—poets *were* seen as essentially seers. But it can be a mistake to treat such claims literally as a complete account of poetic creation. This is partly because poets do not necessarily speak equally strongly about all aspects of their craft, or necessarily analyse accurately what contribution is made by different activities. The Inuit poet Orpingalik stresses the element of improvisation and spontaneity in his statement that 'the words we need will come of themselves ... shoot up of themselves' (Rasmussen, 1931, p. 321), yet he also gives his poetry all the deliberate and time-consuming attention typical of Inuit poets. One has, too, to preserve some detachment about such apologias, remembering the practical purposes that can be served by powerful poets claiming, sincerely or not, to be inspired by divine sources beyond themselves. In some cases, references to inspiration are merely conventional: for instance, Virgil's or Milton's invocation to the muse are not evidence that they composed the rest of the poem in an inspired shamanistic trance. So claims to inspiration from supernatural or mystical sources cannot be taken at face value, and do not *necessarily* mean that the poet speaks in inspired ecstasy or that all the characteristics which Hatto claims as typical of 'shamanism' are simultaneously present.

Many of the characteristics variously associated with prophets or mediums are found among oral poets. But none of them applies *universally* or to *all* oral poets, and the varying characteristics do not necessarily always go together. To produce wide generalisations from scattered evidence or to draw together different characteristics

into some over-all term like 'divine inspiration' or 'shamanism' is to over-generalise.

6.5 The poet as individual genius

The final assumption on which this sketch of poets' positions can throw some light is that of the poet as individual genius, above and untrammelled by society: the poet as defined by the romantic theorists. On this view the artist represents the extreme individual guided by his own canons of sincerity and emotional integrity, independent of the accepted conventions of society. Emphasis is placed on the individual emotional genesis of poetry, embodying the poet's personal and deeply experienced vision.

Again, in one sense this is true. The 'best' poets are extraordinarily gifted, and many must have been drawn to poetry by their creative ability. In non-literate as in literate society, poetry is one medium through which an individual can, in a sense, free himself from the here and now and, through his creative genius, both re-interpret and rise above his environment.

But taken to extremes the approach can be misleading. It is easy to be moved by Whitman's famous panegyric: 'The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into anything that was before thought small, it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer; he is individual; he is complete in himself' (Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of grass* in Anderson and Warnock, 1967, p. 343). But the statement, illuminating in one sense, is no full or safe guide to the position and activities of all poets in all contexts. For one thing this approach too assumes a circular and limiting definition of the poet as 'the good poet' (or some particular ideal of the good poet). It ignores the part played by *social* conventions and opportunities, and concentrates on the genesis of poetry from the individual and spontaneous genius of the poet. This theory of creation may be acceptable and helpful to poets, but does not for that reason necessarily coincide with the facts.

This is particularly so in the extreme version implied in statements that the poet is free from external constraints or stimuli, uninfluenced by the background or opportunities of society around him. That this cannot be so is already clear: the poet's language, style, mode of composition,

local poetic theory, role, type of training and mode of reception are surely socially and not individually generated. They are moulded and developed (sometimes changed) by individual poets, without whom the conventions would not persist. But no poet creates in a vacuum, looking only to himself and never to the social and economic world within which he must practise, the audience to which he must direct himself or the acceptable artistic conventions on which he can draw.

The position of poets in society is incorporated in the wider social, political and economic institutions in which they practice. Take as example Emerson's vivid description of the way Hawaiian hula singers used to make their way. He writes:

> The king overhears remark on the doings of a new company of hula dancers who have come into the neighborhood. He summons his chief steward.
>
> 'What is this new thing of which they babble?' he demands.
>
> 'It is nothing, son of heaven,' answers the kneeling steward. 'They spoke of a hula. Tell me, what is it?'
>
> 'Ah, thou heaven-born (*lani*), it was but a trifle—a new company, young graduates of the halau, have set themselves up as great ones; mere rustics; they have no proper acquaintance with the tradition of the art as taught by the bards of your majesty's father. They mouth and twist the old songs all awry, thou son of heaven.'
>
> 'Enough. I will hear them to-morrow. Send a messenger for this new Kim's. Fill again my bowl with kava.'
>
> Thus it comes about that the new hula company gains audience at court and walks the road that, perchance, leads to fortune. Success to the men and women of the hula means not merely applause, in return for the incense of flattery; it means also a shower of substantial favors—food, garments, the smile of royalty, perhaps land—things that make life a festival. If welcome grows cold and it becomes evident that the harvest has been reaped, they move on to fresh woods and pastures new.
>
> (Emerson, 1909, p. 27)

This is far from the romantic view of the detached and self-sufficient poet. And yet their involvement in the political and economic realities of their society has not prevented the Hawaiian singers from producing the highly metaphorical and beautiful poems translated in Emerson's great collection *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii. The sacred songs of the hula* (1909).

Inevitably, the way in which poets and poetic activity fit into the social, economic and political institutions of their society varies in detail.

The relationship may be functional and official—as with those poets discussed above who are a part of the current power structure of society. Other poets occupy an ambivalent or even marginal role in society, where they are both admired and feared, or where they can act as unaligned and above partisan interest. Thus early Irish poets were a national and not a local group, and travelled widely even through warring and hostile groups (Knott, 1922, p. xii), while Manding *griots* 'could pass freely through enemy territory, for the person of a *griot* was inviolable' (Innes, 1974, p. 8). Poets are also sometimes regarded as outcasts or lower caste: the Senegambian *griots* belonged to the special low caste of poets and musicians, the mediaeval Chinese ballad singers sometimes belonged to the ambiguous category of prostitute, the Moorish troubadours are both feared and despised, and the famous travelling minstrels of mediaeval Europe were often subject to legal disabilities and positive discrimination. But even these ways of signalling the special status of certain poets result in a role that is socially recognised, pertaining to an accepted social category; so that the individual poet is not 'outside' society nor free from its claims.

The involvement of the poet in society can also be seen in a whole range of factors affecting his life and livelihood *qua* poet. The mode by which a poet receives his initial training in his craft is socially organised and in a sense comes to him from outside, whether in the form of official and continuous instruction and schooling or through the informal socialisation into poetic conventions common in relatively non-specialised contexts. Again, the occasions on which he can practise his art do not depend only on the poet, but on the ways in which special ceremonies, entertainments or specialist associations are organised in his society. The patronage available is likely to affect his art considerably, for though solitary poems and songs do occur, by and large an oral poet with no patrons is scarcely likely to regard it as worth persisting—unlike literary poets, he cannot console himself by 'writing for posterity'.

This need for patronage refers both to the wealthy and powerful patrons who often support the more specialised poets, and to the ordinary audiences to which a poet is likely to address himself. This is a particularly pressing problem for poets in a period of changing fashions and economic circumstances, when genres once in demand have lost their appeal. Some Hausa singers still want to perform certain

types of traditional poetry, but their old audiences have turned to other interests—just as the street ballad singers had to give way to music hall artists, and face-to-face performers turn to television and radio. The more committed a poet is to his craft—the nearer he is to the model of the individual committed Artist—the more likely he is to have to take account of economic pressures, for he is more dependent on the practice of his art for his own livelihood than part-time experts.

Not every poet makes careful material calculations—after the manner of the classical economic man—before making a conscious decision about whether and how to ply his craft. But it is clear that these are factors which, consciously or not, help to mould his expectations for himself as poet, the practical exercise of his art, and the way he composes and performs poetry. They are the parameters within which he works, and present him both with constraints and with the opportunities and incentives which help to feed his poetry.

In poetry—as in any other part of life—there is a constant interplay between individual insight and originality and the constraints and opportunities afforded by society. The oral poet is not merely the voice of communal pressures, neither is every poet an individual and untrammelled genius: poetry is the creation *both* of a particular community *and* of a particular individual. This dual genesis applies as much to oral as to written poetry, and for a satisfactory study both aspects need to be remembered.