

MORE FEATURED TRADITIONS

Dub Poetry: A Conscious Rhythm

— Bob Holman

You won't find Dub Poetry in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics — yet. But when it makes its entrance, the definition will probably read something like:

Dub Poetry: poetic form that developed in Jamaica in the late 60s-early 70s, associated with and contiguous with the rise of reggae music. Dub is generally written in Jamaican patois (Creole/Rasta), rhymed, and occasionally dactylic. The content is often of a political nature. While most major practitioners were born in Jamaica, the Diaspora has taken many to Brixton, Toronto, and New York. Among them are Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean Binta Breeze, Michael Smith (1954 – 1983), Benjamin Zephaniah, Mutabaruka, Lillian Allen, and Clifton Joseph.

The definition pales in comparison, however, to attending a few minutes of a performance by these magicians of the spoken word, whose language is more real than newspapers, whose beat carries meaning as efficiently as text, and whose audience can dance and think at the same time. Dub continues the African oral tradition with a combination of spoken word and beats. Like rappers, many early Dub poets started out as DJs with local sound systems; their rhythmic talkover style evolved into poetry.

Dub functions as art and entertainment, as a grass-roots political mechanism and an international dance-hall underground sensation. This is a poetry not afraid to take on important issues. There are Dub poems that deal with the IMF and the Third World debt, not as academic concepts but as the underpinnings of the powerful emotions in real people's real lives. In her collection of poetry, *Spring Cleaning*, Jean Binta Breeze reworks the 23rd Psalm to powerful effect:

De lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,
an she scraping de las crumbs off de plate
knowing ants will feed.



Chan E. Park

P'ansori: The Ancient Korean Art of Storytelling in Verse

— Chan E. Park, The Ohio State University

P'ansori is a solo-singer storytelling that surfaced as a distinctive poetic genre about three centuries ago in the southwestern part of the Korean peninsula. Its documentation goes back to the mid-18th century, when a government official stationed in the Chôlla province one day witnessed in his village a performance of *The Song of Ch'unhyang*, one of the most popular stories performed. He later recorded the narrative that remains the first transcription of its kind today.

The conventional performance of *p'ansori* takes place on a straw mat upon which the singer stands, moves around, or sits, while the drummer is seated to the singer's left. The singer alternates between stylized speaking (*aniri*) and singing (*sori*) to tell the epic tales of the ancient times and stories in verse that take between three and eight hours if delivered in their entirety (performers do take breaks!). The performer sings the detailed descriptions of the scene, including the thoughts and actions of the characters, and speaks plot summaries and scene changes.

The drummer beats the barrel-shaped drum called *puk* with his left palm and fingers and a smooth birch drumstick held in his right hand. As the singing progresses, the drummer emits a stylized cry of encouragement (*chwimsae*) that blends with the singing and the accompanying rhythm. The members of the audience follow suit, showing appreciation for both performers' energy and expertise.

Mushaira: A Gathering of Poets in the Urdu Tradition

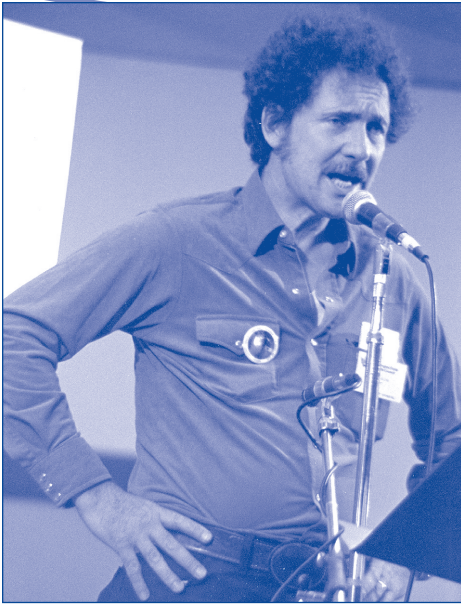
— Asad ur Rahman

Urdu is a hybrid language that is based on the spoken languages of Northern India with a generous overlay of Arabic and Persian words. When Muslims from Afghanistan and Central Asia invaded India in the 12th century and made it their home, the Urdu language grew out of the necessity of communication between the newcomers and the indigenous people. It is written from right to left like Arabic and Persian and in the same script. By the 18th century, Urdu became a well-developed language with a body of literature that consisted mainly of poetry.

Urdu poetry has a wide range of forms. The *masnavi*, for example, is a long narrative romantic poem like “The Roman de la Rose” of medieval Europe. A *marsiya* is an elegiac poem that grieves over the death of an important person while a *qasida*, on the other hand, is a panegyric in praise of a king or a patron, usually written in a highly exaggerated style and diction. A *na’at* is a poem expressing the poet’s devotion to the Prophet of Islam. A *rubai* is a four-line poem on a specific theme like *The Ruba’iat* of Omar Khayyam. Humorous and satirical poetry is also plentiful in Urdu. However, the most popular and important form of poetry is undoubtedly the *ghazal*. The *ghazal* is a love poem written in stanzas, consisting of two hemistiches called a *sh’er*. A *ghazal* may have seven or nine *she’rs* but each of them may be independent of the other in thought. One *she’r* may be about the pangs of separation and next about the impermanence of the world, while the one after that may express the undying devotion to the loved one — human or divine. Thus a *ghazal* is a collection of verses expressing the poet’s thoughts and emotions joined together by the rhyming end words.

In the 19th century, Urdu came under Western influence because of British dominance, and the British system of education. Thoughtful and enlightened people began to question the conventions and traditions of the old order. A powerful modernistic literary movement emerged in the 1930s that sought to change the content as well as the forms of Urdu literature. Novels and short stories became very popular in this period. The new poets started writing in blank verse and free verse in order to break away from the restricted traditional forms. Through their work, poets and writers of fiction tried to reform the prevalent social and political system. Using their writings as social commentary, some talked ardently about freedom from the British rule. In spite of these radical changes, however, the *ghazal* has survived as the most popular form of poetry in Urdu. People still gather in large numbers to listen to poets read their poems for long hours, some times all night.

A gathering of poets is called a *mushaira* and it is a small, intimate social function. Traditionally, the poets and members of the audience sat on a carpet covered floor in horse-shoe formation. The president was usually the most distinguished poet or the most respected scholar. The reading of the poems started with the youngest or the least known poet. An oil lamp or lighted candle was placed before the poet to indicate that it was his or her turn to read and to provide better lighting for his reading. In ascending order, the poets read their poems till the candle came to the president, and if he was a poet he would read his poem, and if not, he would comment on the poems read that day. Then, he would announce the *misra-e-tarha*, or the half line of poetry on the metrical pattern which would serve as the model for the poems written for the next meeting. *Mushairas* are held in cities all over the world where there are concentrations of Urdu speaking populations, including, of course, New York.



Logger Poet Hank Nelson



Logger Poet Lon Minkler

Occupational Poetry: Traditional and Modern

— Jens Lund

Before the days of the phonograph and radio, cowboys, farmers, fishermen, loggers, miners, and sailors — any of those who worked together in isolated locales — made their own entertainment. The isolation of the group and the challenges and rewards of the work made for a rich folk poetry.

The occupational poetry of the 19th century was supported by the emphasis on memorization and recitation common in those early years of public education. Performances of the work of Coleridge, Tennyson, Kipling and Service were popular in logging camps and forecastles, even while the poems of farmers, loggers, and ranchers were finding their way into print in trade journals and local newspapers.

During most of the 20th century, the development of mass media seemed to bring about the demise of traditional occupational poetry. Today, in part thanks to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, cowboy poetry is widely composed and recited in the West, while a Fisher Poetry Gathering is convened annually in Astoria, Oregon, and logger poetry is heard at banquets and political rallies in Northwest timber communities.

Today, popular interest in poetry and spoken word has encouraged a whole new generation of occupational poets. Taxi drivers, construction workers, firefighters, plumbers, airline pilots, nurses, and schoolteachers publish poems about their work and perform them at poetry slams and open mics. While traditional cowboy and logger poets often still adhere to the simple rhymed couplet and ballad stanza, newer occupational poets experiment with contemporary forms of free, blank, and concrete verse. Many men and women still find that the challenges and rewards of their work are best expressed in poetic form.