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Troubadours and their heritage in the edges of Europe –

Singing and rapping experiences of being in a minority in Southern France and in Sámiland

One of the most dazzling and influential vernacular cultural traditions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is that of the troubadours. We know them best through their love songs but they were also active commentators and critics of their own society. This paper considers medieval troubadours as intermediators of contemporary actualities and their concern about their own culture and language, Occitan, in a situation where growing political influence and control of the “French” along with the central administration were viewed as a threat to the local culture. After 800 years, the same concern is expressed by modern, living troubadours. Actually, various singers and composers in many parts of the world share the same concern in respect of minorities or ways of life considered as endangered. As for the modern “troubadours”, the focus is on two European contemporary artists or group of artists describing how they are redesigning the promotion of the regional language and increasing awareness of the national minorities they represent. This is demonstrated by two examples, first, by a group which considers the medieval troubadours as their literal ancestors,¹ Massilia Sound System from the city of Marseille, and second, a rapper called Amoc from the Finnish Sámiland (Lapland).

What is common to these artists is the way how they define and express their belonging to their own ethnic group. The characteristics of their ethnic identity² are above all else language, home territory, and history. All the way from the troubadours, the role and choice of language became central in the art along with the phenomenon called

¹ John Haines, *Eight Centuries of Troubadours and Trouvères: The Changing Identity of Medieval Music*. Musical Performance and Reception. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 287.

² Ethnic identity can be defined in various ways, see e.g. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Ethnic identity, national identity and intergroup conflict: The significance of personal experiences. In Ashmore, Jussim, Wilder (eds.): *Social identity, intergroup conflict, and conflict reduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 42-70.

vernacularization. Therefore, it might be appropriate to remind the linguistic and political situation in the troubadours' world from the end of the eleventh century to the thirteenth century when their art flourished. While the majority of medieval authors wrote in Latin, the first known troubadour, Wilhelm IX of Poitiers in the end of the eleventh century, already composed in a local language that today we call Occitan, though it has been (somewhat erroneously) known also as Provençal. In the Middle Ages the language of the troubadours could be designated by a variety of terms, some referring to local variant (e.g. *Provençal*, *Lemosi*), others merely to vernacularity (*Roman* or *Lengua romana*) as opposed to Latin.

The region where the Occitan language was spoken is frequently called Occitania. Its geographical extent has not varied significantly since the Middle Ages, though the relative number of native speakers has decreased remarkably. This cultural area roughly encompasses the southern half of France and Italy's Occitan Alpine Valleys, Monaco and Catalonia's Val d'Aran in Spain.³ It never existed as a state or as a political unity. Twelfth century Occitania was politically fragmented and it comprised several more or less autonomous, shifting territories such as the duchy of Aquitaine and the county of Toulouse, the largest political power in the area. Particularly, the Toulousain rulers were important actors on the European stage, e.g. marrying into both the French and English royal families. However, political interests and strategies of territorial lords were often divergent and even conflicting.⁴

It was Italians who established the term *proensal* or *proensales* because Italians still regarded southern Gaul as *Provincia Romana*, whose inhabitants were the *Provinciales*, distinguished from the people of northern France (*Francigenae*).⁵ Dante used the expression *lingua d'oc* opposing it to the languages of *oïl* and *si*, the words for 'yes' in Old Occitan, Old French and medieval Italian.⁶ The term Occitan became established since it was used by the official administration in the fourteenth century, in such terms as

³ For a more detailed definition of the Occitan area, see Paterson, 2.

⁴ Andrew Roach, Occitania Past and Present: Southern Consciousness in Medieval and Modern French Politics. *History Workshop Journal* No. 43 (Spring, 1997), 1-22; here 2-3.

⁵ Paterson, 3.

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*. Ed. Aristide Marigo, 3th ed. Firenze: Le Monnier 1968, I: VIII: 7, 57.

lingua occitana, respublica occitana and *Occitania*. In addition to the literary and administrative texts, the Occitan language was also used in the field of religion, science, and law until it was replaced by the use of French which was used for all literary purposes and the vernacular was left for oral communication. And as it is often the case where oral communication is in the minority language and literacy in the majority language, that minority language will have lower prestige and have usually greater risk of weakening.⁷ Occitan is since July 2008 registered in the French Constitution but France did not ratify the European Charter of the regional or minority languages.⁸ However, Occitan has the status of an official language in Spain and a protected language in Italy. In southern France today, the term Occitan might be politically loaded, but medievalists prefer it because it refers to the whole historical and cultural region and not only one small part of it.⁹

Culturally, Occitania's medieval identity is marked by the troubadours, perhaps the best-known ambassadors of Occitan language. They and their art cross the linguistic boundaries, for not only did they travel abroad in search of patronage, their language was adopted at a variety of courts in Catalonia, other parts of northern Spain, and in northern Italy where several Italian troubadours learnt Occitan, particularly in the thirteenth century, with the specific intention of composing poetry.¹⁰ Then Dante, scarcely fifty years after the last of the troubadours in the thirteenth century, admired these ingenious poet-musicians and mentioned his debt to their poetic perfection in a vernacular language in several of his works which was, of course, an essential link between their early reception and later reputation, which associated the troubadours with the use "Provençal" as a literary language.

How about the troubadours themselves? The themes of the songs sung by medieval troubadours mainly dealt with love and chivalry. There can be few repertoires of poetry

⁷ Baker 2006, 328.

⁸ European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 5.XI.1992 <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/html/148.htm> (last access on 31 Jan 2011).

⁹ Paterson 1993, 1–3.

¹⁰ Paterson 1993, 3.

so self-conscious as that of the troubadours, for they were proud of their proficiency, sophistication and technique within the art of *trobar* (composing) and they wanted people to understand their poetry. A Catalan troubadour Raimon Vidal de Besalu wrote a poetical tract *Razós de trobar*¹¹ (The Rules of Composing Troubadour Poems), around the year 1210 in which he stated that the audience should understand what is sung and in that way listeners keep silent during the performance. This idea has been regarded as groundbreaking in the history of music.¹²

The troubadours were a heterogeneous group comprising noble poets, wealthy and independent, as well as those who made their song their profession, wandering from place to place and castle to castle. But whether dependent or independent, they were able to enter into questions of politics. They were present when peace treaties were signed, and receptions of diplomats or notables. It is good to bear in mind that many noble patrons of poets were troubadours themselves and therefore very aware of political issues.¹³ Moreover, an itinerant troubadour enjoyed a conversational advantage by virtue of his journeys. In courtly circles the audience expected him to tell rumors and stories and report items of news he had learned as he moved from place to place. As an artist, he had privileges of speech and was free to exaggerate, modify, and color his material in various ways.¹⁴

Actual topics such as the Crusades and their legitimization gave motives for troubadours' writing. The opinions were divided: some were against and some for the Crusades. Those who were for, tried to convince others e.g. by promising the place in Paradise as a reward according to their Crusade songs.¹⁵ Those who were against were against all the killing

¹¹ Las Rasos de Trobar, *Grammaires Provençales de Hugues Faidit et de Raymon Vidal de Besaudun*. Ed. F. Guessard, 2ème éd. Paris: A. Franck 1858.

¹² Christopher Page, Listening to the Trouvères. *Early Music*. Vol. 25, No. 4, 25th Anniversary Issue; Listening Practice (Nov., 1997), 638-650+653-656; here 648.

¹³ Ruth Harvey, Courtly Culture in Medieval Occitania, *The Troubadours. An Introduction*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 8–27; here 12.

¹⁴ Christopher Page, *Voices & Instruments of the Middle Ages*. London : J.M. Dent & Sons 1987, 27–28; Susanna Niiranen, “Peire Vidal – a Fool and a Troubadour.” *Behaving like Fools: Voice, Gesture, and Laughter 1200–1600*, ed. Lucy Perry and Alexander Schwartz. Brepols: Turnhout, 2010 [in press].

¹⁵ Jaye Puckett, “Reconmenciez novele estoire”: The Troubadours and the Rhetoric of the Later Crusades. *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 116, No. 4, Sep., 2001, French Issue, 844–889; here 854–855.

and they placed a great deal of emphasis on the fact that it is not only heretics but also Christians whom the Crusaders are killing.¹⁶ Some anti-war comments have led to the conclusion that the troubadours had adopted ideas from cathars or they were cathars themselves, but we have no direct literary evidence of cathar troubadours. It is plausible that cathars and troubadours had interaction, e.g. under the eminent protection of the count of Toulouse, Raimon VI, who was sympathetic to the both groups and antagonistic to the Roman Church. One of the suspected cathar troubadours was Aimeric de Peguilhan whose song *Cel que s'irais ni guerreja amb amor* (One who gets provoked and makes war with love) reflects the anti-war views along with the conventional love casuistry. A recent adaptation of Aimeric's song serves as an example of the various ways of using medieval history and creating new significations in modern context.¹⁷ Its power lies not on the musical authenticity, but on the interaction of the touchy musical interpretation and powerful visual material.

The troubadours were well aware of the connection between the Fourth Crusade and the war unleashed upon them in 1209 by the Church and the French.¹⁸ The Albigensian Crusade or the Albigensian War (1209-1229), a military campaign initiated by the Church to eliminate the Cathar heresy in Languedoc and prosecuted primarily by the French gave motives for virulent anticlerical and anti-French political *sirventes* (political satire) particularly in the first third of the thirteenth century.¹⁹

With over four hundred named troubadours, we know at least twenty women poets who lived in southern France from about the mid-twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century and who fully participated in the poetic and cultural system of the troubadours. As to these female troubadours known also as *trobairitz*, according to a thirteenth century romance, they did not display the same sensitivity to language and politics in their songs.²⁰ In fact,

¹⁶ Puckett 2001, 862.

¹⁷ Aimeric de Peguilhan, *Un canto a la paz*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYhv2xIGsuk> (last access on 31 Jan 2011).

¹⁸ Puckett 2001, 861.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Siberry, *Criticism of Crusading, 1095–1274*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985; Elaine Graham-Leigh, *The Southern French Nobility and the Albigensian Crusade*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005

²⁰ Angelica Rieger, *Trobairitz: der Beitrag der Frau in der altokzitanischen höfischen Lyrik*. Edition des Gesamtkorpus. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991; Pierre Bec, *Chants d'amour des femmes-troubadours*. Paris:

only one *trobairitz* has composed a political *sirventes*. A woman named Gormonda de Montpellier wrote a poem called *Greu m'es durar* (It is hard to endure). She defends the Church and attacks the heretics. Though nothing is known of Gormonda except for her name recorded in one of the manuscripts that preserves her *sirventes* and what can be deduced from her poem, it seems plausible that she was associated closely with the orthodox clergy of the region of Montpellier. Nowadays, she is considered one of the Occitan women troubadours, the *trobairitz*, even if her poem is not of that aristocratic love-poem genre they mainly represent. Actually, Gormonda's poem is a rare example of the genre of *sirventes* attributed to a woman.²¹

It was a common habit to compose a song as a response to another song. Sometimes, as in Gormonda's case, both poems were structured identically and their vocabulary and imagery was similar as an indication of shared discussion. Even more current was the habit of composing a *tenso* which takes the form of a debate in which each voice defends a position on a topic. Occitanist Pierre Bec has considered the genre as highly valued courtly game or *divertissement*, a poetic jousting match in which two or more poets could show their verbal talent.²² This debate song between two poets whose voices alternate with each stanza is known by the Occitan reggae band Massilia Sound System. One of their songs is called *Tenson du Bambou*²³ in which two members of the band discuss addressing to each other by names according to the best poetic traditions of the troubadours. The band formed in Marseille in 1984 has developed a hybrid version of reggae, rap and electronic music, among other things but it equally exploits the troubadour tradition and collaborates with academic Occitanists, such as Pierre Bec.²⁴

Stock 1995; Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, Laurie Shepard, and Sarah White, *Songs of the Women Troubadours*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995; Susanna Niiranen, « *Miroir de mérite* ». Valeurs sociales, rôles et image de la femme dans les textes médiévaux des *trobairitz* Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University 2009.

²¹ Rieger 1991, 44–45; See also Catherine Léglu, “Did Women Perform Satirical Poetry? Trobairitz and Soldadeiras in Medieval Occitan poetry,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 37.1 (2001): 15–25.

²² Pierre Bec, *La Joute poétique*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2000.

²³ From the album “3968 Cr 13” (2000).

²⁴ Haines 2004, 287.

It is no wonder then, that already in their album *Chourmo* (1993), there are several songs which “dip into the mighty fund of troubadour poetry”²⁵: e.g. *Lo trobar reven*, *Trobador*, *Tribute to Peire Vidal*, and *Ara que per riddim charra la cortesia*. Though inspired by troubadours in various levels, that of vocabulary (e.g. *trobar*, *trobador*, *cortesia*), troubadours’ texts, genres, themes, and medieval instruments, these new songs adapt to their time and at the same time, create a contemporary Occitan tradition. Even though they sing both in French and in Occitan, they share passions with medieval troubadours: their lyrics indicate anti-centralism and regionalism, especially for Marseille and Occitania in general. Since their first CD album, *Parla Patois* (Let’s speak dialect, 1991), they have successfully continued to vaunt their regional identity against the Parisian monopolization of culture and contributed to create a new, positive identity for “an entire generation of young Marseillais”²⁶.

Regional or minority languages are also spoken in the Northern Europe. The Sami languages are spoken in *Sápmi* or in Sámiland, in a region stretching over the four countries Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia extending from the southern part of central Scandinavia in the southwest to the tip of the Kola Peninsula in the east. The amount of native speakers is small, —among approximately 60,000 to 80,000 Sámi people, half of them speak one of the nine Sámi languages—²⁷ but the position is now stable since Norway, Finland, and Sweden have recognized it as a minority language and even as an official language in certain municipalities of the region. Some of the neighbouring Sámi languages may be to a fair degree mutually intelligible, but there are, however, language boundaries, in particular between Northern Sámi, Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi, the speakers of which are not able to understand each other without learning or long practice.²⁸

²⁵ Haines 2004, 290.

²⁶ The quote is from the English Wikipedia article on Massilia Sound System http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massilia_Sound_System (last access on 31 Jan 2011).

²⁷ Sari Pietikäinen, Sámi language mobility: scales and discourses of multilingualism in a polycentric environment. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. Volume 2010, Issue 202, Pages 79–101; here 85.

²⁸ <http://www.npld.eu/aboutus/languages/pages/sami.aspx> (last access on 31 Jan 2011)

The smallest language community in Sàmiland is Inari Sámi, where there are only about 300-400 native speakers, depending on how fluency is determined. This amount represents roughly a third of all Inari Sámis. The majority uses primarily Finnish language.²⁹ Nevertheless, children are learning Inari Sámi in day care, it is learned in school, and now it can be listened to even in rap songs. Young rap artist Amoc, who is a native Inari Sámi, released his first CD in 2006. The inspiration for his raps is the Arctic, its wilderness and mythology. He blends it with elements of heavy metal. The first Inari Sámi rap *Val moonam taan coda* has reached nearly 50 000 plays in the Internet.³⁰ The Finnish affiliate of the Brussels-based organisation Young European Federalists has chosen Amoc as its Young European of the Year 2007. The award citation praises Amoc for his success in promoting tolerance and internationalism and for his ability to integrate the identity of an indigenous people into global popular culture.³¹ A Finnish scholar in Applied Linguistics, Sari Pietikäinen sees at least two effects in Amoc's success: onerelating to Amoc's credibility as a rapper—an original voice with a political edge from the margins—and another influencing Inari Sámi language values and functions. As Pietikäinen states, the scale from traditional language institutions into global hip-hop spaces affects positively both the language and its user.³²

Conclusion

Language has, besides being a means of communication, a built-in conception of living environment and urban structure, lifestyle – virtually a whole world view. Language often identifies our origins, history, membership and culture. But that identity is daily authored, imagined, reconstructed, displayed and negotiated. For many, language is a symbol of their identity, manifesting their preferred distinctiveness and allegiance. However, it is one marker or feature amongst many that creates our constructed, shifting

²⁹ See the map of the Sámi languages and language areas

<http://www.samimuseum.fi/anaras/english/kieli/kieli.html> (last access on 31 Jan 2011).

³⁰ Amoc, *Val moonam taan coda*, http://www.mikseri.net/artists/?id=21483&displ_lang=en (last access on 31 Jan 2011).

³¹ <http://www.virtual.finland.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=160116&nodeid=41798&contentlan=2&culture=en-US> (last access on 31 Jan 2011).

³² Pietikäinen 2010, 96.

and hybrid identity.³³ Besides the minority language, the common feature for these different musicians singing in different languages and styles is the use of history in their songs. They all exploit the mighty imagery of the past. Massilia Sound System knows the long Occitan tradition of the troubadours and holds a deep commitment to it. At the same time, they redefine troubadour conventions to suit their present context and create a new contemporary cultural heritage for the use of new generations. That conscious use of history is intertwined with the defense of the minority language, Occitan, and of the Occitan cause in general. The same concerns the Sàmi rapper Amoc, who excavates his imagery from the Northern language and mythology combining them to the heavy metal traditions. From the point of view of whatever minority, the use of history as well as the use of regional or minority language serves basically the same purpose. It aims to satisfy a need for identity. This need for identity applies to nations as well as other communities and individuals; cultural identity contributes to meaning, purpose and cohesion in society.³⁴

Note

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³³ Baker 407-408.

³⁴ Beryl Southgate, *Why Bother with History: ancient, modern and postmodern motivations*. London: Longman 2000.