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Historical laments: the case of the community of Kommeno in southern Epirus

Abstract:

This article is an effort to approach Greek folk songs (*demotiká*) as an expression of different aspects of life experiences of people's tradition. Lament songs (*mirolóyia*) from the community of Kommeno in southern Epirus are used as an example to shed light on the evolution of folk songs within the framework of ritual practices. The influence of historical memory is examined as a contributing factor to the expression and the creation of songs. The present article also restates the viewpoint on the classification of folk songs based on their content and purpose. Last, it considers the fundamental features of laments: their musical and poetic structure, as well as the role of *tsakismata* (repetitions and interjected added words or phrases) in the very creation of the laments and as a means to enhance the content of the "pure text" (i.e. the written transcription of a song as standardised verse without the *tsakismata*).

Key words:

historical laments, Greek folk songs (*demotiká*), lament songs (*mirolóyia*), community of Kommeno in southern Epirus

Introduction

In traditional societies the songs of the "circle of life" describe the most substantial stages of human life from birth to death. The last stage of this circle, the passage to *Hades* (the underworld), is of great importance. A series of rituals accompany a person's passage from life to the underworld. Songs, as a means to express all aspects of a person's social life, constitute an integral part of the death rituals. Mourning is the last interaction with the dead and accompanies them to their "last residence".

Tradition is a complex dynamic procedure (Λιάβας 1999, 33). As such, no matter how slow it may be, it leads to the transformation or evolution of all or part of its elements. This evolution usually entails changes as historical periods succeed one another (Κάβουρας 1992, 50). It is also affected by historical or social events that have taken place in a given community or wider region. This, in turn, allows for the development of individual elements within the tradition. New songs referring to specific historical events are thus created and reflect peoples' collective thought. Terzopoulou makes extensive mention of these songs which she calls "songs-facts" (Τερζοπούλου 1999, 121-155). Alexiou talks about the *thrênoi* (weeps) for the fall of Constantino-

ple or the destruction of cities. According to her, laments for cities are initially inspired by historical events (Alexiou 2008, 152).

Historical songs, as classified by the Science of Folklore so far, mainly concern battles or events during the Greek Revolution of 1821 for the creation of an independent Greek state. “Songs-facts” include a wider variety of songs whose content is based on historical or social events having taken place in specific communities or regions.

According to Motsios, evolution is disgraceful. However, the tendency to adapt one’s values to a given historical moment is something inherent (Μότσιοϋ 1995, 15). The song examined below belongs to the Historical songs as far as its content is concerned and to Laments if its function is taken into consideration.

Case study

Kommeno is a community of the regional unit of Arta, situated in the south of Epirus and close to the Amvrakikos bay (Figure 1). During the Second World War the community suffered one of the most obscene atrocities committed by the Axis powers in Greece. On the 16 August 1943 the German occupying forces massacred about half of its inhabitants (317 civilians), among them many women and children (Μάγερ 1998, 143-152).

Maria Antoniou-Lampri, an informant, was born in Kommeno in 1932 and she’s one of the people who survived (Figure 2). In 1943 she was eleven years old. At the time of the crime she was out in the fields where she stayed until shootings stopped at around noon. Then she hurried back home where she found her mother, her two sisters and all the family members of her father’s brother killed in the yard. When the rest of her family members, who had also survived, came back, they buried the nine killed people of both families in three massive graves in the very same yard (Figure 3). Three years later their remains were exhumed and transferred to the cemetery.

Maria Antoniou learned many lament songs from an early age and, among other women of the community, she became a mourner (*mirologistra*). Later on, she learned various other laments from her mother-in-law. She explains that her childhood experiences and memories are the reason why she never sings songs other than laments. Her relation with laments is described as experiential. She creates their verses by improvising during lamentation.¹

¹ The informant Maria Antoniou mentions that laments vary depending on the occasion. According to Saunier, the mourners often create occasional laments proper to the deceased person’s qualities or personal experiences (Saunier 1999, 9). Some of them include the age of the deceased, their marital status and the cause of their death (illness, accident, etc.) There is always a reference to the members of family and friends left behind as well as to feelings of great loss. There is also a clear distinction among the different occasions laments are sung on. Different verses are used during

One of her laments is about the dreadful events in her community. She informs us that she came up with it while she was mourning in her yard in front of the massive graves.

The lament is as follows²:

Ιτούτη η μέρα σήμερα πρέπει χρόνους να γίνει

Kommeno, Arta, Greece, 2008
Singing: Maria Lampri-Antoniou
Recording: Lampros Efthymiou

♩=83
la=re

(Αχ v-) ι τού τη μέ - - - ρα _____ σή- (ιχ- να)_ [η μέ - ρα_ σή-, ι- να _____ σή-] - μερ - - - - - να _____ (αχ_ ν-α λή_ θεια_ γέ_ νου - - - - - ντι) πρέ - - - πει χρο_ νους να_ (αχ)_ γί- (ι-, - νε-) - - - - - νει _____

(Αχ v-) ιτούτην μέρα σή- (ιχ- να) [ημέρα σή-, ι- να σή-]μερνα
(αχ v- αλήθεια γένουντι) πρέπει χρόνους να (αχ) γί- (νε-)νει

the funeral procession, at the house of the deceased or at the cemetery. What is more, laments created for memorial days (*mnemósyna*) differ from those sung for rituals taking place at the cemetery. Their range and complexity is thus really extensive.

² The transcription into the European music notation is based on the work of Spyridakis - Peristeris (1968, ιε'-ιλ'), Baud-Bovy (1936, κα') and Kaïmakis - Kokkalas (2010, 32-34).

(Αχ) για δεσ μέρα που διά- [μέρα που δια-] (-ι) [που διά-]λεξε
(άι κρίμα για νιούς για τ'ς νιές ν-) ου Γερμανούς να κά (να-)ψει

που 'ρθαν απ 'τα χαρά- [αχ να 'τα χαρά-] (-ι) [χαρά-]ματα
(στου δόλιο το χωριό) γύρω να το κυκλώ- [ωνώ-]σουν

στέλνουν μαύρους κι αγρά- (-ι-) [κι αγρά-]μματους
(να μη λυπούντ' οι άνθρωποι) να σφάξουν να σκοτώ- (νω-)σουν

(άι) γιόμ' σαν τους δρόμους πτώ- (τα σκ'λια να) [πτώ-] (-ι-να) [πτώ-]ματα
(αχ ν- αυτοί ν- οι Γερμανοί) κι οι άκρες παλικά- (ανα-)ρια

(ι-) σκουτώνουν γυναικό- (να) [γυνικό-] [γυνικό-]πιδά
(άι κρίμα που έγινε) στο δρόμο που περνά (ανα-)νε

(αχ) να σιμάσ' νι μάνις τα (να)[οι μάνις τα, οι](να)[τα] πιδιά
(αχ κρίμα που γένιτι) κι οι αδερφές τ' αδέ-(νε-)ρφια

(αχ) γιόμ' σαν οι μάντρις πτώ-[ν- οι μάντρις πτώ-] (ινα) [πτώ-]μα (αχ)τα
(αχ κλάψτι μας σήμιρα) κι οι άκρες παλικά- (αχ, να-)ρια

(αχ γκιο) κλαιν οι μάνις για (αχ τρομάρα τ'ς) [για] (ινα) [για] πιδιά
(αχ ν- απού τους Γερμανούς) κι οι άκρες παλικάρια

(αχ) κλαίνι πιδάκια ουρφανά
στου δρόμου σκουρπισμέ- (εχ-, νε-)να

(αχ) γυρνάν τα μαύρα ξ'πο- (ι- τα μαύρα) [ξ'πο-, ινα-, ξ'πο-]λυτα
(αχ ειν' όλα σήμερα) στου αίμα βουτηγμέ- (ενε-)να

(ι-) σκότουσαν νύφη κι (να) [νύφη κι] (ινα) [κι] γαμπρό
(αχ που κάναν τη Χαρά) μ' όλους τους καλισμέ (νε-)νους

σκούτωσαν κι τους παπά-[κι τους παπά-]δισ
(μι τα ιερά που 'χαν στα χέρια τους) στης ακκλησιάς την πό (νο-)ρτα

(αχ) πάν' οι μανάδισ τι [μανάδισ τι] (ι να) [τι] να βρουν
(άι 'κείνες που μείνανε) πιδιά τους δε γνωρί- (ινι-)ζουν.

The "pure text":

Ιτούτην μέρα σήμερα πρέπει χρόνους να γίνει
για δεσ μέρα που διάλεξε ου Γερμανούς να κάψει
που 'ρθαν απ 'τα χαράματα γύρω να το κυκλώσουν

στέλνουν μαύρους κι αγράμματους να σφάξουν να σκοτώσουν.
 Γιόμ'σαν τους δρόμους πτώματα κι οι άκρες παλικάρια,
 σκουτώνουν γυναικόπιδά στο δρόμο που περνάνε,
 να σιμάσ'νι μάνις τα πιδιά κι οι αδερφές τ' αδέρφια.
 Γιόμ'σαν οι μάντρις πτώματα κι οι άκρες παλικάρια,
 κλαιν οι μάνις για πιδιά κι οι άκρες παλικάρια,
 κλαίνι πιδάκια ουρφανά στου δρόμου σκουρπισμένα
 γυρνάν τα μαύρα ξ'πολυτα στου αίμα βουτηγμένα.
 Σκότουσαν νύφη κι γαμπρό μ' όλους τους καλισμένους,
 σκούτωσαν κι τους παπάδισ της ακκλησιάς την πόρτα.
 Πάν'οι μανάδισ τι να βρουν πιδιά τους δε γνωρίζουν.

*This day today seemed to have lasted a whole year,
 look at the day the German has chosen to burn,
 they came at dawn to circle it,
 they command that miserable and illiterate people are
 slaughtered, killed.*

*The streets are covered with corpses and brave men lie dead on
 the side,
 they kill women and children wherever they pass from,
 mothers should pick up their dead children and sisters their
 brothers.*

*The wall fences are covered with corpses and brave men lie dead
 on the side,
 mothers cry for their children and brave men lie dead on the side,
 orphan children cry scattered in the streets
 miserable children, they wander around barefoot drenched in
 blood.*

*They killed the bride and the groom and all the guests together,
 they killed the priests in front of the church.*

*Mothers are searching – to find what - they can't even
 recognise their children.*

The written transcription of the lyrics without the *tsakismata* from which we can understand its content is a narrative song describing specific historical moments as experienced by the mourner. Her sorrowful emotional state is clearly reflected on the verses. Specifically, she mentions the occupiers' intentions and describes the timing within which the events took place. She doesn't also speak of her family's affliction. Instead, emphasis is given to the collective plight suffered by the whole community: corpses everywhere, women's and orphan children's woes and weeping. Special reference is made to the murder of the families and all the guests who had attended a marriage the previous day as well as to the first victims of the catastrophe, two priests

wearing their ecclesiastical vestments, still holding The Gospel when found killed in front of the church.

Musico-poetic structure: analysis and function

During the past decades more and more studies have come to light about mournful songs. Laments are exclusively transcribed in a way to enable the examination of their semantic content (Philological method). One of the disadvantages though is the absence of their *tsakismata*, a basic structural element for the development of melodic phrases, which also reveals the relation between the music and the poetic text³. In the case of the present lament, I have tried to focus on how verses are structured and their relation to the music text.

After having done fieldwork for years recording the laments of Kommeno and the wider region I have come to the conclusion that the creation of laments is in a sense the result of improvisation. Nevertheless, their structure is based on specific musical forms and verse patterns. Saunier underlines the important role improvisation plays in the development of laments. However, he finds the belief that they are fully improvised songs exaggerated (Saunier 1999, 10). Oikonomidis is of the same opinion (1965-66, 11-40).

As far as the development of their melody is concerned, it is structured on two melodic phrases with a constant use of different ornaments (melismata).⁴ The lament examined here is a depentasyllable iambic verse. The case of the *tsakismata* though presents a certain complexity which should be further analysed.

This lament, as the majority of the laments I have recorded in the same region, is a decapentasyllable iambic verse separated at the 8th verse into two phrases. Two different types of *tsakismata* are generally used as a structural element that “supports” the melody of laments: repetitions and additions of verses, hemistiches, words and syllables. The first octasyllable hemistich almost always begins with a one-syllable exclamation-addition followed by the first six syllables of the “pure text”, then comes a single or double repetition of previous syllables and the hemistich finishes with the last two syllables of the “pure text”. The second hemistich of the verse begins with the addition of six to eight syllables strictly followed by the first six syllables of the “pure text”. One syllable is then added before the final syllable of the “pure text”.

³ For the use of the term *tsakismata* see Kaïmakis - Kokkalas (2010, 44-46).

⁴ By analysing the laments of the informant Maria Antoniou and others I recorded in the wider region, we discern two types of melodies. They are similar as far as the melodic phrases are concerned but differentiated in some parts depending on the version and the person singing them. However, they always maintain the same general characteristics of their melodic motion.

Another important element worth examining is the 2nd and 4th hemistich of every strophe. Although additions are usually phrases, words or syllables completely unrelated to the content of the “pure text”, in this lament the content and its additions are closely related. We could also say that the function of the additions in this case form a new supportive text that emphasises the “pure text” even more.

For example, the “pure text” of the fourth verse is the following:

“they command that miserable and illiterate people are slaughtered, killed”.

The eight syllables added below constitute the first part of the 2nd and 4th hemistich of every strophe and enhances the meaning of the content of the “pure text”:

“they command - those who do not feel sorry – to slaughter and kill miserable and illiterate people”.

Regarding the movement of melody there are two melodic phrases, a1 and a2, which finish at the end of each hemistich A1 and A2 respectively. Both melodic phrases mainly move between the tonic and 3rd in the *re* diatonic mode, while the 4th appears in the beginning of a1 and at the end of the a2 melodic phrase.

Based on the above we infer that the relation between the *tsakismata* and the poetic text as well as between the text and the melodic phrases is strictly maintained in a well-structured framework leaving too little space for improvisation (principally concerning the melodic motion).

Conclusion

This article presented a lament from the community of Kommeno in southern Epirus. Since its content refers to historical events, it is also considered a historical song or a “song-event”. Lamentation acts as the collective expression of the events of death and catastrophe. Through a ritualistic procedure the mourner undertakes to tell the tragic story, to describe the sorrowful events and, in this way, express the collective grief. The use of specific structures concerning the verses and their relation to the *tsakismata* and the melodic phrases, limits substantially any attempt for improvisation. The relation between the *tsakismata* and the “pure text” on the one hand shapes new syllabic units and on the other hand plays an assisting role by contributing to the development of the “pure text”.

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Figure 1: The community of "Kommeno".



Figure 2: The mourner Maria Lampri - Antoniou.



Figure 3: This is the exact place in the yard of the mourner's house where the family's victims were massively buried after the Holocaust.



Figure 4: The monument in the square of the community on which the names of the 317 victims are written.



Figure 5: The monument in the memory of the victims next to the cemetery. A tribute from the German nation.

Лампрос Ефтимоу

Историјске тужбалице: случај сеоске заједнице у Комену у јужном Епиру

У овом чланку, учињен је покушај да се грчким народним песмама (*demotiká*) приступи као изразу различитих аспеката животних искустава у народној традицији. Тужбалице (*mirolóyia*) из сеоске заједнице Комено, у јужном Епиру, искоришћене су као пример на коме може да се осветли развој народних песама у оквиру ритуалних пракси. Утицај историјског памћења је проучен као фактор који доприноси изражавању и стварању песама. Поред тога, овај чланак доноси другачији поглед на класификацију народних песама на основу њиховог садржаја и намене. Коначно, размотрене су основне особине тужбалица: њихова музичка и поетска структура, као и улога тзв. *цакизмата* (понављања и додавање речи или фраза) у самом стварању тужбалица и наглашавању садржаја „чистог текста“ (тј. писане транскрипције песме, као стандардизоване варијанте без *цакизмата*).

Кључне речи: историјски ламенти, грчке народне песме (*demotiká*), тужбалице (*mirolóyia*), сеоска заједница Комено у јужном Епиру