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Emigration Songs – Interethnic and Multilingual Polyphony in Epirus

Introduction

When the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare was flying over the Arabian desert on his way home from far away China “not a book or art, or memories of relatives” (Kadare 1987: 4) came to his mind, but a folk song about longing for his homeland, a song of *nizam*, sung by Albanian recruits in the Ottoman army more than hundred years ago. This nostalgic reflection about *kurbet* (migration) became the point of departure for his book “Autobiography of the people in verse” an impressive attempt to write a national history on the basis of orally transmitted folk poetry and song texts (Kadare 1987).

In my paper I will try to present a short overview of the repertoire of migration songs in Epirus, its terminology and musical characteristics and present the changing views on this repertoire from communist times to the present.

Epirus as transnational place

The area of Epirus, the border-region of South Albania and Northern Greece, could be characterized both as place of musical coexistence and as place of a contested musical identity. A “border”, in this context not perceived as line but as a space, combines different aspects in it. It may be considered a temporal, geographical, ethnical, economical or cultural shift; but after the end of communist isolation also as a transnational place of increasing interaction and a place of identity construction. This new situation of “transnationalism”

(Rapper 2005: 192) is based beside other aspects on the common legacy of *kurbet* among all ethnic groups of the area whether minority or majority in the respective part of Epirus. The

Albanians, Greeks, Çam, Aromanians and Arvanites share a collective memory of migration, which makes clear their geographical and cultural proximity in a shared cultural space. The collective memory of migration is constructed through place (f.e. the “lëndina e loteve” [meadow of tears] in Korça) and sound (migration songs).

Emigration as historical legacy

Emigration in the region is not only a shared legacy but also a historical continuum. It dates back into the 15th century, when 200 000 Catholic Albanians (Piperno 2002: 1 for the time 1486-1506) left their homeland after the death of Skanderbeg to settle in southern Italy where they became known as *Arbëresh*. While this migration had strong religious and political motivations, the following migration waves were predominantly stimulated by a lack of social and economic development. One has to distinguish three main forms of migration: labour migration (short-term), emigration (long-term) and forced migration as consequence of ethnic cleansing or population exchange. The most common strategy of survival in mountainous South Albania was transhumant pastoralism, labour migration or military service in the Ottoman Empire. The last category, a sort of forced labour migration, found its expression in the *nizam* songs, distinct from the repertoire of *kurbet* songs.

The *kurbet* itself, the long-term emigration abroad, reached its first high point between the Albanian independence 1912 and the outbreak of the First World War. Entire families left in this time to escape the miserable economic situation for the USA, France or Argentina. The migration flow continued in the interwar period, during which estimated 150 000 people left Albania (Piperno 2002: 1). The Second World War saw the expulsion of more than 20 000 Çam people from Northern Greece and the migration of about 19 000 Albanian people, who distanced from the new regime (Piperno 2002: 1), which stopped all internal and external migration during the following forty years. This suppressed migration turned into an unexpected traumatic mass migration involving more than 800 000 people till 2000 (King

2005: 140). The features of this recent mass migration were its unorganized character and the fact that the people went abroad never to come back.

Terminology

The Albanian terminology for migration movements and its musical reflections is complex and sometimes contradictory. Every term reflects certain attitudes, emic and etic views on the phenomenon of migration. Three terms predominant in the South Albanian case are *kurbet*, *mërgim* and *emigracion*.

While *emigracion* is the most widely used non-Albanian term to refer generally to the phenomenon, involving the discourse of sovereignty, territoriality and citizenship (Papailas 2003: 1064), *kurbet* and *mërgim* are words charged historically and emotionally.

Kurbet comes from the Turkish “gurbet” referring to a “foreign land”. *Kurbet* as a term refers to “local” labour and long-term migration and involves a sentimental connotation. *Kurbet* is also associated positively with a range of new opportunities, with progress and modernity achieved through the sacrifice of leaving home and family. The *kurbetli* (migrants) returned home “me kulturë” (with culture) and experience. The positive aspects of *kurbet* are reflected in the Albanian proverb “burrin e njeh kurbeti/gruan e njeh djepi” (A man becomes a man in *kurbet*, a woman becomes a woman over the cradle) (Papailas 2003: 1064). The term has been used also for the mass migration of the post-socialist period, which differs in its character significantly from migration movements in the past.

Mërgim is the least frequently used official word for migration without time specification. This terminology has its parallels among the Greeks. The emotionally charged counterpart for the term *kurbet* is *ksenitia*. *Metanastevsi* as official and objective term is comparable to the Albanian *emigracion*.

Songs can be categorised using all these terms but generally the differences in meaning are neglected and the terms *tragoudia tis ksenitias* and *këngë kurbeti* preferred.

As noted before, migration songs can be found among all ethnic groups of Epirus.

The Aromanians refer to them as *cantitsi di xinitii* or *cantitsi di xeani* (Kahl 2005), the Greek use *tragoudia tis ksenitias*, the Albanians *këngë nizamet* or *këngë kurbeti*. The terms are nevertheless used with flexibility in the Albanian context and one may also find loan expressions such as *këngë ksentitie* (Vasili 1980: 8). Migration songs can be sung in two languages or bilingual versions, proving the cultural interaction in the area. The choice of language in most cases can be regarded as a choice of identity among multiple identities.

Music and Migration

Music has played a two-fold role during migration processes. Music itself has accompanied these century-long processes and commented on them, has kept the experience of *kurbet* in public memory. But musical practice was also endangered by migration. Intellectuals and musicians tended to leave the village and the country, causing a “generation reversal” (Bajrektarević 2005 in reference to rural Bosnia) in the villages. Certain villages at the border became “muted” because of the lack of sufficient singers, indispensable for the formation of a multipart choir (Pistrick 2005: 64).

Contemporary migration songs are in many respects to be situated between modern pop songs and old traditions of multipart singing. Here I will refer exclusively to songs in multipart style dedicated to external migration movements. These songs are representative for the contemporary revival of a multipart tradition which is still considered an adequate means for expressing time-immanent problems.

It has to be stressed, that migration songs, although referred to with a special terminology, do not constitute a distinct genre characterized by a defined musical style. At the contrary migration songs follow musically the general features of Lab or Tosk singing style or that of the Çam subgroup. Only through their texts these musical creations can be grouped in an own category as migration songs. The repertoire of these migration songs is quite considerable: Vasili (Vasili 1980) lists 326 *nizam* songs and 184 *kurbet* songs of the Albanians. Aromanian

examples can be found in the anthologies of Candroveanu, Chira and Papahagi (Kahl 2005), Greek examples in Peristeris (Peristeris 1968) and Dimitrios (Dimitrios 2000), Arvanite examples in Moraïtis (Moraïtis 2002). What makes migration songs interesting are their textual and musical relations to the repertoire of laments (*vajtim* or *miroloi*). The emotional world of *ponos* (pain) is pronounced by the use of certain vocal techniques such as “kënduar me grykë” (singing with the throat), a switching in the higher octave, or stylized crying. The throat singing technique is used extensively in migration songs of the *folklori i ri* (new folklore) to evoke feelings of compassion.

One example for a solo migration song is “Ksenitemenou” (see **Illustration 1, sound example**), recorded in the Greek-speaking village of Finiq in South Albania (Pistrick 2005: 185-187). It is a typical example of a *tragoudia tis ksenitias*, sung by Greek populations and bilingual singers on both sides of the border. The anthology of Papahagi lists an Aromanian version of this song which resembles the Greek text version (Kahl 2006: 182 referring to Papahagi). The song exists in several versions and was already notated in Werner von Haxthausens’ classical collection of Greek song texts from 1814/1815 (Haxthausen 1935: 7). Two versions can be found in the Peristeris collection from 1968: one from the island of Kythira and another from Epirus (Peristeris 1968). Katsanevaki mentions that this song is also known in Pindus. The native singers there acknowledge the popularity of this song but at the same time distance themselves from it, because they did not consider it as one of *their* songs (Katsanevaki 2006).

The text consists of six stanzas each made up of three verses. The structure is a+(b+r)+b; r being the refrain-like exclamation “more ksenemou” (“my stranger”) running through all stanzas. The text is typical in its mixing of love song and migration song elements, its highly personalized tone, which nonetheless allows the audience to envision broader collective categories of identification. The text is –as it is often the case in migration songs- written from the perspective of some who is left home, in this case a girl who is awaiting her beloved.

Through the time and distance which have been laid between them, he has become “a stranger” to her. The crucial question is how to transcend the distance, how to communicate. The communication problem should be solved in our case by symbolic means: an apple (used during wedding ceremonies to find a “hidden husband”), a faded rose (as symbol of fading love) and a “mantili” (a self-made handkerchief, a very personal part of the dowry) with a tear, which symbolizes her mourning. *Ksenitia*, the foreign land, is described as a damned place, which has poisoned the migrating people. The textual mood, the musical outlook and performance practice of this song can serve as a good example for the proximity of migration songs to the repertoire of laments. It is a female solo example, performed in free-metric style – a typical feature for laments. The character is explicitly lyrical and introvert, sung with half-voice (“zë të hollë” [thin voice] as Albanians say) in *legatissimo* with a melismatic stress on keywords such as tear, rose or handkerchief. Predominant interval is the third, connected with the affect of mourning and longing, used at the end of each line. The ornamentation of this song, concentrated on the pitch centre and the fourth, is also of note.

Illustration 1

The second example “Moj dardha dimërore” (My winterly pear) (**sound example**) comes from Saranda and is sung by the multipart group “Dea” with a female singer as *Marrës* (Lab four-part singing is usually performed by first voice [*Marrës*- who takes], second voice [*Kthyes*- who turns], third voice [*Iso*] and fourth voice [*Hedhës*- who throws]).

O moj dardha dimërore (“DEA”, Saranda, 23.9.2004) (Pistrick 2005: 177-181)

O moj dardha dimërore Ç’ e bëre berrin që more Ç’ e bëre e ç’ e bëre e Ç’ e bëre e burrin e që more Rron a s’ rron.	Oh my winterly pear Where is the man, whom you have married, Where is he, where is he, Where is the man, whom you have married, Does he live or not?
O moj dardha dimërore Një vit ka që u martove Ç’ e bëre e ç’ e bëre e Ç’ e bëre e burrin që more Rron s’ rron Korbë ç’ ta vranë.	Oh my winterly pear Only one year you have been married, Where is he, where is he, Where is the man, whom you have married, Does he live or not? Oh poor raven, whom they have killed.
E dërgove me Pashanë Ta vranë korbë ta vranë. Ç’ e bëre e ç’ e bëre e Ç’ e bëre e burrin që more Rron s’ rron Korbë ç’ ta vranë.	You have sent him to the Pasha And they killed him, poor raven. Where is he, where is he, Where is the man, whom you have married, Does he live or not? Oh poor raven, whom they have killed.
Ndanë lumitë ç’ e lanë Ta vranë korbë ta vranë Ç’ e bëre e , ç’ e bëre e Ç’ e bëre e burrin që more Rron a s’ rron. Korbë ç’ ta vranë.	They let him at the shore of the river And they killed him, poor raven, they have killed him Where is he, where is he, Where is the man, whom you have married, Does he live or not? Oh poor raven, whom they have killed.
Mbi u bari e mbuloi Erdhi lumi e sbuloi Ç’ e bëre e ç’ e bëre e Ç’ e bëre e burrin që more Rron a s’ rron Korbë ç’ ta vranë.	Grass has covered him And the river washed him away. Where is he, where is he, Where is the man, whom you have married, Does he live or not? Oh poor raven, whom they have killed.

It is performed in the giusto-syllabic manner of the four-part style of the Labëria and its lyricism is probably influenced by the style of Himara. In five stanzas with each six verses the song describes the experience of migration from the point of view of a young married woman who fantasizes about the destiny of her drafted husband. The three segments of each stanza: free-metric introductory verse, choral verse and two codas are built together to develop an increasing dramatic tension, stretching the ambitus step by step, underlined by the menacing repetitions of the question “Where is he?” The pivot of the musical and textual expression is the fifth line, carrying the crucial textual message. The stanzas begin in the melismatic-aria style typical for Tosk singing and are characterized by an increasing expressivity culminating in the second coda on the words “Oh black raven” a sort of stylized cry with the highly expressive ambitus of a seventh. The glissandi and weeping melodic elements re-enforce the impression of pain.

The temporal structure of the song with a fixed, slow tempo in the middle section (associable with mourning), framed by a fast excited tempo reflects some of the emotional-states which the singer-self is living through.

The song is a fine example of a dramatic emigration song, whose textual content is reflected in musical, metrical and temporal structure and in performance style.

Interpretations of Albanian migration songs

Migration songs have assumed different meanings and interpretations in the past both in Greece and Albania. As example I will present here some of the complex and multi-layered views on migration songs in communist Albania. Both *nizam* and *kurbet* songs served as an illustration of miserable conditions in the past, which were overcome through a new society model. They were used as a means for the self-representation of the achievements of the new regime before the background of a defamed pre-socialist past. While *kurbet* songs were predominantly describing economical misery *nizam* songs had political connotations. In them

Enver Hoxha traced the expression of a suppressed people under Ottoman rule, the uncompromising, rebellious character of the Albanian people (Vasili 1980: 6 referring to Hoxha). In his adventurous interpretations he sought to combine the ideology of class struggle with the revolts against the forced military service in the Ottoman army between 1839 and 1912. The creation of new song texts was stimulated and honoured at the National Folk Festival in Gjirokastra (Pistrick 2005: 72, 189). Many of these texts deal with “mythistory” which circles around the main myths of Albanian identity: a) myths of territory, b) myths of redemption and suffering, c) the myth of unjust treatment d) the myth of moral superiority and e) the myth of military valour (Schwandner-Sievers 2002: 10-11). Although official communist propaganda considered *nizam* a fateful event in Albanian history, it never saw in it the sign of fatalism or pessimism, but a reaction against the “turkish-islamic superstructure, against the unprecedented cultural barbarity” (Vasili 1980: 10). The same interpretation was applied to *këngë kurbeti*. Although one observed melancholy and mental states of dejection in the texts, one interpreted a feeling of protest into these songs. Although musical parallels to *vajtim* (lament) and to stylized crying during wedding ceremonies were admitted, the text was suspected to contain a life optimism and express the “stoicism of the Albanian women” (Vasili 1980: 10). Behind these interpretations stood the implicit assumption that individual grief could be transferred onto a generalized social level where it could be surmounted through social community and prosociality. This assumption was the basis for most textual structures of migration songs created during communist time. It can be summarized that these songs were considered firstly as real historical sources, describing political or economic miseries, surmounted by the achievements of political independence and collectivisation. Secondly, the texts were interpreted under avoidance of fatalist or pessimist meanings and were intended to strengthen the positive, forward-looking aspects and values such as heroism in *nizam* and stoicism and optimism in *kurbet* songs.

Thirdly, the songs contained depersonalization, generalization and exemplification of individual destinies onto a social level.

From the communist point of view migration was a closed historical chapter, migration appeared “like a bitter remembrance of our life in the past” (Vasili 1980: 11).

Revitalisation of Migration Songs

The unexpected traumatic mass migration of the 1990’s required an artistic response and digestion, which resulted in a revival and revitalisation of *kurbet* songs.

The renewed discourse takes place in reference to a nostalgic notion of *kurbet* contrary to socialist argument. One of the most interesting examples for the power a contemporary migration song can have, are the numerous songs created around the tragedy of the Albanian migrant Flamur Pishi who hijacked a Greek bus and was shot in Elbasan in 1999. The songs are interesting hybrids combining traits of *këngë kreshnike*, *kurbet* songs and laments. These memorial songs, stylizing Flamur as “hero of migration”, influenced the public valuation of the event in Albania considerably through the dissemination of pirate cassettes. It functioned “as low-tech counter-dialogue” (Papailas 2003: 1071) to Greek and Albanian mass media.

The migration song itself became an accepted symbol for a “society’s mourning for the death, both literal and social, of the Albanian youth, through migration” (Papailas 2003: 1070).

It stimulated a discourse about the situation of migrants in Greece, about *besa* (honour), security and brutalism. A song discourse questioned the omnipresent border itself, its relevance, transformations and reaffirmations in highlighting the visible and invisible wounds it causes.

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