



Singing Fate:

Representations of an Everlasting Present

1. Introduction

This paper is based on my ethnographic anthropological fieldwork and research in Epirus, North-Western Greece during the summer of 2007. The ethnography itself has been presented and is currently under publication.^{1,2} In this paper I intend to explore and elaborate on certain aspects of this work that relate directly to the way language can stir scientific imagination and guide the course of research towards unknown directions and paths yet uncharted, leading to challenging and unexpected findings.

2. Contextualization

Studies in folk polyphony are currently concerned with issues of context and social function³, symbolism⁴ and the manner in which polyphonic genres have sometimes assumed an emblematic role in issues of national identity.⁵

Our case study, an occasion of *contextualized reproduction of orality*, was a performance of polyphonic songs within the frame of a traditional music festival. The female ensemble aged 65-86 came to Greece specifically for this festival from the area of Dropolis, a cluster of 34 Greek - minority villages in southern Albania near the Greek border.



The polyphonic ensemble

The border area as location for polyphonic singing constitutes a condition that enhances the complexity of the case study. This is because both Albanians and Greeks claim the origin of this particular type of singing with respectively extensive research on the topic. Sincere efforts to patrimonialise the traditional practice of polyphony as national

heritage have taken place on both sides of the border.⁶

It is worth wondering, whether national borders can truly, culturally isolate one side of the border from the other. In most cases, it is physical borders such as high mountains that can act as a border, impeding communication between neighbouring communities. In culturally contested regions such as borderlands, “music and music making receives an increased value and a particular vulnerability for ideological interference” as, “a cultural object has to “belong” to someone.⁷” Issues of culture ownership are often employed in the formation of national identity and in political discourse, with the narrative of Self and Other involved in this process.

An exploration of the polyphonic singing phenomenon that is: the current living reality, its origins, its distribution and features, along with the relevant representations we encounter in the constructed reality of mythology, literature, philosophy and art, can help us weave the tapestry of the polyphonic narration and achieve a better insight and perspective of its complexity.

Interdisciplinary approach employing linguistics, social anthropology and philosophy broadens the perspective, allowing contextualization of polyphonic singing as a truly world phenomenon that encompasses aspects inherent in the human nature and condition, while forming a manifestation of cultural diversity.

3. Evolution & Distribution of Polyphony

Polyphonia (πολυφωνία) occurs in ancient Greek, meaning coexistence of many voices. There is not any purely monophonic culture in the world without any elements of social/or musical polyphony. Initially ethnomusicologists thought it to be a late development of the monophonic singing tradition. Yet, recent findings suggest that instead, the origins of human group singing and vocal polyphony date back to the beginnings of the evolution of hominids.⁸

One of the most intriguing features of vocal polyphony is its enigmatic distribution throughout the world's musical cultures. For example, why are there almost no signs of polyphony among Australian Aborigines and so much vocal polyphony in sub-Saharan Africa? A reasonable explanation is that *vocal polyphony is a very archaic phenomenon*, an integral part of the evolutionary process of the development of human language and speech, as well as of human cognition. Social polyphony must have been present in all early human societies. The role of bigger group size, rhythm, synchronic bodily movements and precisely coordinated group singing of our hominids ancestors were one of the survival strategies against the major predators.⁹ The appearance of human intelligence and language happened on the musical communicative stage of development, long before the advance of articulated speech. The latter fundamentally affected vocal polyphony. Choral singing lost its direct survival value and has been gradually marginalized.

4. Polyphonic Areas and Features

Nowadays, polyphony is spread variably on every continent of the planet. Predominantly polyphonic continents are Africa, Europe and Oceania. In Europe, polyphonic singing stretches from Finland to the south-east of Greece, and from Portugal to Georgia.

Most of the polyphonic cultures are found among agro-pastoral communities organized on a strong collective basis, concentrated around two types of natural environment in Europe - mountains and islands. These are isolated regions “where indigenous populations have habitually found refuge in the face of invasion and whose inaccessibility has allowed for the preservation of numerous archaisms.”¹⁰

One of the dominating types of vocal polyphony throughout Europe is the *drone*. It features a tense or vibrant voice-production associated with singing outdoors, while each vocal line has its own distinctive timbre, often popularly compared with environmental sounds (e.g. sheep bellowing).¹¹ Many styles also feature a pronounced vibrato or ‘trembling’ and the incorporation of shouts, yips, yodels, slides, glottal stops or a sobbing effect which contributes to both rhythm and resonance. Staggered breathing can be employed to maintain continuity of sound.

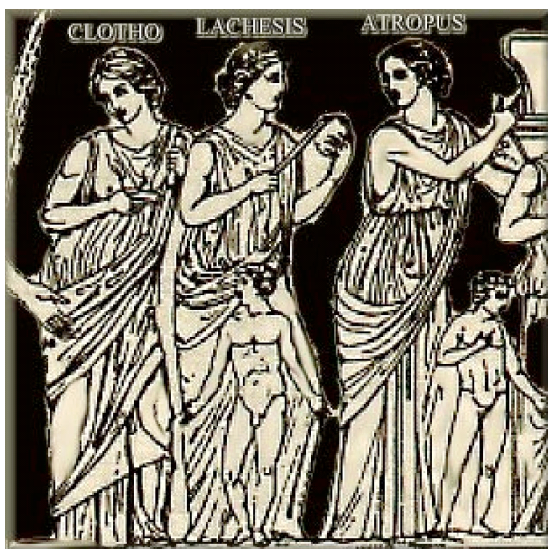
Features relating to the organization of the voices are common to different areas of the Mediterranean.¹² *Each individual voice has its own strictly defined role.* Local terminology often provides a graphic description of how each part is conceived. In Greek polyphonic singing¹³, for example, there are the roles of *παρτής* (*Partis*) the leader, who begins singing and unwinds the basic melodic line, of *γυριστής* (*Gyristis*), the second soloist who turns or twists the thread of the song and of *κλώστης* (*Clostis*, *the Weaver*) “who embroiders the melody with a yodeling voice”¹⁴. The three main

roles are always accompanied by *ισοκράτες* (*iso -krates, the drone holders*) who sustain the tonal centre of the song.

5. From Archaic to Mythic

An analogy drawn between the roles and practice of polyphonic singing and the perception of destiny as represented in ancient Greek mythology, literature, art and philosophy depicts interesting connections.

In Homer, apart from Zeus, we encounter the two names of - a no less important, abstract power- destiny/fate.¹⁵ These are *Μοίρα* (*Mira*) and *Αἶσα* (*Esa*) the latter coming from *ἴσο* (*iso*), meaning equal and the former coming from *μέρος* (*meros*), meaning a share or part of something. Destiny- in which all people equally, have a part- is still quite an abstract notion in homeric times.



It later evolves into the myth of the *three Fates* (*Μοίρες*), the sister divinities of destiny, under the names of *Ἀτροπος* (*Atropos*), *Λάχεσις* (*Lachesis*), *Κλωθώ* (*Clotho*).¹⁶

Clotho (the weaver/ spinner)) spins the thread of life from her distaff onto her spindle, Lachesis {"allotter" or drawer of lots where the word *lacheo* (*λαχείο*-lottery ticket/lot) derives from} measures out the thread of life with her rod, and Atropos, "inexorable" or "inevitable", literally "unturning" {deriving from *τρέπω* (lead towards) - eg. *Ἀτραπός* (path) of the same

root} cuts the thread of life and chooses the manner of a person's death.¹⁷

Plato, in his Republic (v. 617c)¹⁸, calls them daughters of Need and pictures them dressed in white, assisting the orbiting and revolution of the planets while singing “*the Harmony of the Spheres*”, *the eternal music of the Universe* according to Pythagoras^{19, 20}. Lachesis sings of the past, Clotho of the present and Atropos of the future.

Versions of the Moirae also exist in Roman Mythology. *The three Parcae: Nona, Decima, Morta* were the personifications of destiny, the equivalent of the Greek Moirae²¹.



Other versions of them also exist on the deepest European mythological level; those are the other Indo-European spinning fate goddesses known as the *Norns: Urdr (Wyrd), Verdandi and Skuld* in Scandinavian Mythology, and *the Baltic goddess Laima and her two sisters*.



An English tradition talks of the *Three Weird Sisters*, sometimes Wyrd Sisters where *Wyrd* is the English form of *Urtr*, one of the Norns, whose name means itself fate.

In the following engraving, Atropos unrolls upon the globe the cylinder where all eternal truths are written on, Lachesis, turning her head, draws the thread of the mortals' life and Clotho weaves it²². Each of them performs a distinct and specific role, just like



Partis, Gyristis and Clostis in the greek polyphonic singing whereas the drone keepers, Isokrates, all equally sing as one body. Unlike Moira, Aisa was never divided.

One wonders whether the astonishing similarities arising from this comparison are purely coincidental. I believe they are not. Though the ancient Greek music was monophonic^{23, 24}, the chorus in Greek tragedy, drawing from the archaic rituals in honour of Dionysus or Βάκχος, involved polyphonic elements. Euripides' tragedy "Bacchae" (Βάκχαι) presents a female chorus singing hymns for Dionysus, imbued with ecstasy, trembling, shouting, yelling, yodeling, sobbing, with unarticulated cries and staggered breathing, using, that is, techniques present in polyphonic singing.



The Moirae, as presented by Plato resemble nothing but a polyphonic band, with a clear role appointment, singing the eternal truths of this world, the human fate: love, pain, death.

Polyphonic singing, as old as life itself, is clearly re-presented in the Platonic metaphor, therefore it must have had a presence in real life before. Its representation in world mythologies or oral traditions stands for this hypothesis.

Mythology, Literature, Philosophy, Art, are all aspects of culture, where *the pre-existence*

of polyphonic singing is manifested. If nothing else, its achronous origin, its powerful character and the clear structure, the role appointment and the immense impact on people as they acknowledge it forming an integral part of human life, all the above are depicted, when drawing an analogy between polyphonic singing and the perception of fate.

The pretext for attempting this *analogy* - a concept running through the Platonic work like a leading mite - was just the linguistic resemblance of two words sharing the same etymology and meaning: Clotho and Clostis, weaver. Research along this line revealed all the rest. I believe it is an example of how easily language can stimulate the imagination and trigger research.

6. The Harmony of the Spheres

Besides the role of Fates, in his Republic Plato displays his metaphysical-astronomical model of a unified universe imbued by Harmony. In the myth of Ere, he pictures it as a spindle, the whorls of which revolving represent the planetary orbits, each producing a sound. All bound together form a harmonious polyphony along with which sing the Fates:

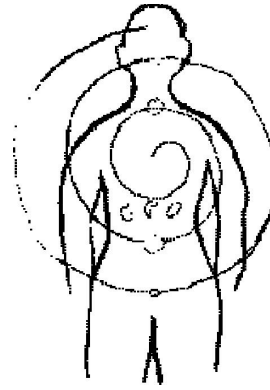
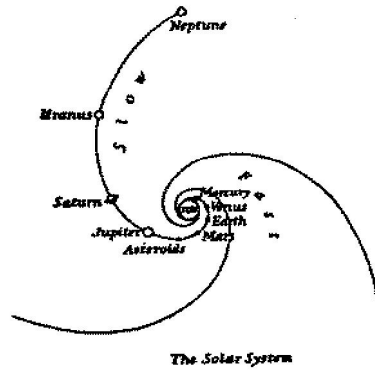
The spindle turns on the knees of Necessity; and on the upper surface of each circle is a siren, who goes round with them, hymning a single tone or note. The eight together form one harmony; and round about, at equal intervals, there is another band, three in number, each sitting upon her throne: these are the Fates, daughters of Necessity, who are clothed in white robes and have chaplets upon their heads, Lachesis and Clotho and Atropos, who accompany with their voices the harmony of the sirens -- Lachesis singing of the past, Clotho of the present, Atropos of the future; Clotho from time to time assisting with a touch of her right hand the revolution of the outer circle of the whorl or spindle, and Atropos with her left hand touching and

guiding the inner ones, and Lachesis laying hold of either in turn, first with one hand and then with the other.

The detail of Plato's description is astounding. His metaphor, perfectly structured, derives from the earlier *Pythagorean semi-mystical, semi-mathematical theory of the Harmony of the Spheres*. In this, the heavenly bodies were thought to be related by the whole-number ratios of pure musical intervals, creating musical harmony. It is not physically audible due to the limitations of the human ear, but is a mathematical concept.

After Pythagoras and Plato, a number of philosophers, scientists and musicians have adopted this theory that has also had literary and symbolic expressions: Cicero in his *Dream of Scipio*, the late Roman writer Macrobius, Nicomachus round 2nd cent. A.D., Plutarch, Aristides Quintilian, Philon from Alexandria etc. The Medieval concept of musica had three branches: *musica universalis* (or *musica mundana*), *musica humana* (the internal music of the human body) and *musica instrumentalis* (produced by singers and instrumentalists). Johannes Kepler also used the concept of the music of the spheres in his *Harmonice Mundi*, *Harmony of the Worlds* in 1619.

In our days, NASA has released records of the *music of our planets*. From the *Voyager* program the magnetosphere of Saturn e.g. emits waves which, transposed into audible sound by speeding up and played through a music synthesizer sounds as a slow, dreamy melody. Scientific theories like that of the Hyper-Chords, the fact that *oscillation* exists on any level of sizes, from the quantum level where we have the double motion of spin and orbiting, to the level of molecules and cells where there is only one motion - the pendulum to and fro motion – up to the size of the celestial bodies, all these depict the



existence of a repetitive model or structure. The universe is said to have a spiral form²⁵, the endocrine glands, vital regulators and transformers of the life energy, are placed in the body as in a spiral formation. It appears that *the human being is a microcosm reflecting the structure of the macrocosm.*

The Harmony of the Spheres or Universal Harmony has not been entirely verified and there have been deniers of it, like Aristotle or Plinius, yet even they admit its sophistication. It is a charming possibility that has endured time and an appealing, open field for interdisciplinary research.

7. Conclusion

As the origins of human group singing and vocal polyphony date back to the beginnings of the evolution of hominids, polyphony is truly a world phenomenon, spread variably on every continent of our planet; as a trait of human cultural evolution it can only be owned by everybody and by nobody. Therefore it is pointless and futile to lower down the universal and archaic to the local and historical so as to fit political interests and national or nationalistic aspirations.

The polyphonic roles performed in the living reality and in the constructed reality of

mythology, art, literature, philosophy, currently and in the depths of time, locally and universally, weave the tapestry of polyphonic narration and the web of life. In order for it to become *visible* and *audible*, one needs to *taste* interdisciplinary cooking, to *inhale* the emissions of the field and *feel* the difference.

When exploring Otherness in Diversity, Selfness and Otherness are fused into one another, the boundaries are often blurred as you discover the Other inside you, and yourself in the Other. Together we all sing our different songs in union - *our Universe*. Plunging into the depths of time unveils the strings-or should I say the chords? - connecting with the present of us all in “a perpetual motion of the constant becoming in Harmony” (“*αέναη κίνηση του διαρκούς αρμονικού γίνεσθαι*”), as the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis has said.²⁶

After all, Lachesis sits between Clotho who sings of the Present, and Atropos who sings of the Future. Against our linear conception of time, *this* Fate is in the middle, like a border, dividing or uniting, turning the whorls with both hands. It is Lachesis, who sings of the Past.

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