

Weaving in Polyphony: Destiny, Culture and the Human Condition

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Polyphonic singing, its roles and practice and the perception of destiny as represented in ancient Greek mythology, literature and philosophy are explored in this paper. An analogy drawn between them, between the living reality and the constructed reality, depicts connections that help weave polyphonic narration.

Contextualization of polyphonic singing as a truly world phenomenon that encompasses aspects inherent in human nature and condition, while forming a manifestation of cultural diversity, is achieved through a broad perspective employing linguistics, social anthropology and philosophy.

Thus, cultural phenomena such as polyphonic singing, although often employed in political discourse and the formation of national identity — with the narrative of Self and Other, directly involved, particularly in border areas — can no longer constitute issues of culture ownership.

Introduction

Research on polyphony in ancient Greek literature, philosophy and mythology was triggered by the findings of my ethnographic, anthropological fieldwork and research in Epirus, North-Western Greece during the summer of 2007 (Tsobanopoulou and Apostolopoulou: under publication).¹ The current paper emphasizes the case aspects concerning ancient Greek mythology and philosophy.²

¹ The ethnography itself has been presented and is currently under publication:

Fenia Tsobanopoulou and Vassiliki Apostolopoulou, "Border Orality: Contextualizing a Polyphonic Singing Performance", *6th Balkan Border Crossings Network Conference* (Korca, Albania, May 2008).

Fenia Tsobanopoulou and Vassiliki Apostolopoulou, "Oral Tradition Across The Border: Reflections on/of Polyphonic Singing in a Greek-Albanian Context" in *"Balkan Border Crossings — Anthropology, Ethnography and Comparative Folklore of the Balkans 2"* eds Giorgos Aggelopoulos, Giannis Manos, Vassilis Dalkavoukis and Vassilis Nitsiakos. (Berlin: LIT -Verlag) (submitted for publication in August 2009).

² An earlier version was presented and was published, elaborating on the ethnographic findings and exploring the way language and culture can stir scientific imagination and research:

Destiny in ancient Greece: *οι Μοίρες*

In Homer, apart from Zeus, one encounters the two names of a no less important, abstract power, namely destiny or fate (Decharme, 1970:359–367). These are *Μοίρα* and *Αίσα*, the latter coming from *ίσο*, meaning equal and the former coming from *μέρος*, meaning a share or part of something. Destiny, in which all people equally, have a part, was still quite an abstract notion in homeric times.

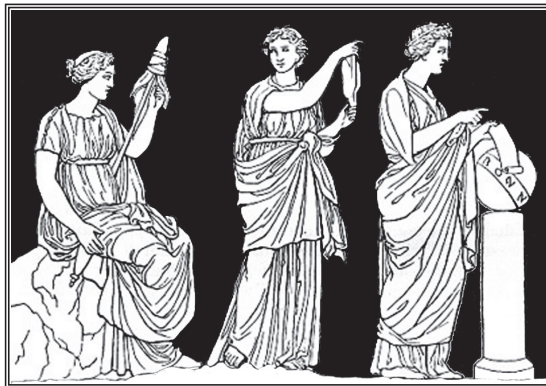
Homer's *Iliad* speaks generally of the *Μοίρα*, who spins the thread of life for men, at their birth (xxiv.209), the *Μοίρα κραταιά* “strong Moira” (xvi.334) or of several *Μοίραι* (xxiv.49). In the *Odyssey* (vii.197) there is a reference to the *Κλώθες*, or Spinners.

This later evolves into the myth of the *three Fates (Μοίρες)*, the sister divinities of destiny, under the names of *Ατροπος*, *Λάχεσις*, *Κλωθώ* (Willis, 1995:74). In ancient Greek art they are often depicted as old, ugly and unmerciful women.

Κλωθώ (the weaver/spinner) spins the thread of life from her distaff onto her spindle, *Λάχεσις* (“allotter” or drawer of lots, where the word *λαχείο* [lottery ticket/lot] derives from) measures out the thread of life with her rod, and *Ατροπος*, “inexorable” or “inevitable”, literally “unturning” (deriving from *τρέπω* [lead towards] — for example, *Ατραπός* [a path] of the same root) cuts the thread of life and chooses the manner of a person's death (Andriotis, 1995).

Hesiod, in his *Theogony* (904), mentions that in the abode of the Fates are the records of all that happens. These records are on tablets of brass and iron, which are neither shaken by warfare in heaven, nor lightning, nor any destructive power: “They are eternal and secure, these archives of the Fates”.

In the following engraving, Atropos unrolls upon the globe, the cylinder on which all eternal truths are written. Lachesis, turning her head, draws the thread of the mortals' life and Clotho weaves it (Decharme 1970:362).



Fenia Tsobanopoulou, “Singing Fate: Representations of an Everlasting Present”, *11th ISSEI Conference: Language and the Scientific Imagination* (Helsinki, Finland, Aug. 2008).

Fenia Tsobanopoulou, “Singing Fate: Representations of an Everlasting Present”, in “*11th ISSEI Conference Proceedings: Language and the Scientific Imagination*” ISSEI and University of Helsinki (submitted for publication in September 2009).

Plato, in his *Republic* (v. 617c)³ 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 (Kaimakis, 2007:135–142; Kalfas, 2007:123–134). Lachesis sings of the past, Clotho of the present and Atropos of the future.

Besides the role of the 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 detail of the description is astounding:

Now when the spirits which were in the meadow had tarried seven days, on the eighth they were obliged to proceed on their journey, and, on the fourth day after, he said that they came to a place where they could see from above a line of light, straight as a column, extending right through the whole heaven and through the earth, in colour resembling the rainbow, only brighter and purer; another day's journey brought them to the place, and there, in the midst of the light, they saw the ends of the chains of heaven let down from above: for this light is the belt of heaven, and holds together the circle of the universe, like the under-girders of a trireme. From these ends is extended the spindle of Necessity, on which all the revolutions turn. The shaft and hook of this spindle are made of steel, and the whorl is made partly of steel and also partly of other materials. Now the whorl is in form like the whorl used on earth; and the description of it implied that there is one large hollow whorl which is quite scooped out, and into this is fitted another lesser one, and another, and another, and four others, making eight in all, like vessels which fit into one another; the whorls show their edges on the upper side, and their lower side all together form one continuous whorl. This is pierced by the spindle, which is driven home through the centre of the eighth. The first and outermost whorl has the rim broadest, and the seven inner whorls are narrower, in the following proportions — the sixth is next to the first in size, the fourth next to the sixth; then comes the eighth; the seventh is fifth, the fifth is sixth, the third is seventh, last and eighth comes the second. The largest (of fixed stars) is spangled, and the seventh (or sun) is brightest; the eighth (or moon) coloured by the reflected light of the seventh; the second and fifth (Saturn and Mercury) are in colour like one another, and yellower than the preceding; the third (Venus) has the whitest light; the fourth (Mars) is reddish; the sixth (Jupiter) is in whiteness second. Now the whole spindle has the same motion; but, as the whole revolves in one direction, the seven inner circles move slowly in the other, and of these the swiftest is the eighth; next in swiftness are the seventh, sixth, and fifth, which move together; third in swiftness appeared to move according to the law of this reversed motion the fourth; the third appeared fourth and the second fifth. 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

³ We have followed the normal convention of referring to passages in Plato, which is to refer to the page numbers and column letters of the standard edition of the works of Plato, edited by Stephanus. These page numbers and column letters are repeated in all modern editions of Plato's works.

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 Harmony of the Spheres

Plato's metaphor, perfectly structured, derives from the earlier Pythagorean semi-mystical, semi-mathematical theory of the Harmony of the Spheres. In this, the spheres were thought to be related by the whole-number ratios of pure musical intervals, creating musical harmony or *Musica Universalis* as it was known in medieval times. This music is not physically audible due to the limitations of the human ear, but is simply a mathematical concept.

There is a legend that Pythagoras could hear the “music of the spheres” enabling him to discover that consonant musical intervals can be expressed in simple ratios of small integers. Pythagoras told the Egyptian priests that Thoth had spoken to him and given him the ability to hear the harmony of the spheres. The tones correlated with the great celestial movements of the day. Pythagoras knew that only Egyptians of the “right” bloodline, passing successful initiations, could enter the temples and learn the mysteries set in place by the gods at the beginning of time. To learn more he had to win their confidence and needed to appear as a royal soul, begat of the gods and above the sins of man.



Pythagoras

In Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* (*Somnium Scipionis*), the elder Scipio Africanus describes an ascent through the celestial spheres, compared to which the Earth and the Roman Empire, dwindle into insignificance. The sound in particular, is strong and sweet, *tantus*

et tam dulcis sonus. A commentary on the *Dream of Scipio* by the late Roman writer Macrobius, which included a discussion of the various schools of thought on the order of the spheres, did much to spread the idea of the celestial spheres through the Early Middle Ages. Also, Nicomachus, around the 2nd century AD, Plinius in his *Naturalis Historiae* (77–79 AD), Plutarch (45–120 AD) who substitutes the Platonic sirens with the Muses, the Latin Martianus Capella in 4th century AD, Aristides Quintilian before the 3rd century AD, Philon from Alexandria (combining it with the Judaic tradition), Nicodemus from Mt Athos in 1806, and the Byzantine Athanasios from Alexandria (4th century AD), helped spread the idea of the celestial spheres. According to Max Heindel's Rosicrucian writings (Heindel, 1908) the heavenly “music of the spheres” is heard in the Region of Concrete Thought, the lower region of the World of Thought, which is an ocean of harmony.

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.

The Harmony of the Spheres or Universal Harmony theory 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 time⁴ and an appealing, open field for interdisciplinary research.

Polyphony and anthropological research

This case study, that instigated research in the areas of mythology and philosophy, was an occasion of *contextualised reproduction of orality*, a polyphonic song performance within the frame of a traditional music festival. The singers, a female amateur ensemble, aged 65–86, were members of the Greek minority of southern Albania, near the Greek-Albanian border. The border area as a location for polyphonic singing constitutes a condition that enhances the complexity of the case study (Tsobanopoulou and Apostolopoulou, under publication). This is because both Albanians and Greeks have claimed the origin of this particular type of singing. Efforts to patrimonialise the traditional practice of polyphony, as national heritage, have taken place on both sides of the border (Herzfeld, 1986). Studies in folk polyphony are currently concerned with the manner in which polyphonic genres sometimes



The polyphonic ensemble

⁴ 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 form, 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 might be a microcosm reflecting the structure of the macrocosm*.

assume an emblematic role in issues of national identity (Bithell, 2000) along with issues of context, social function (Sugarman, 1997) and symbolism (Rice, 1994).

It appears that national borders cannot 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 (according to our informants' experience). An exploration of the polyphonic singing phenomenon, that is, the current living reality, its distribution, its origins and features can help in obtaining a broader perspective of its complexity and hopefully, achieve a better insight into this intriguing cultural phenomenon.

Polyphony in time and space

Deriving from ancient Greek (*πολυφωνία* – coexistence of many voices) *polyphony* is a phenomenon present in musical cultures around the globe. There does not exist any purely monophonic culture in the world, a culture without any elements of social/or musical polyphony. Polyphony is enigmatically distributed throughout the world's musical cultures. The reason could be 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. It was initially considered, by ethnomusicologists, as a late development of the monophonic singing tradition, yet, recent findings state that the origins of vocal polyphony and human group singing date back to the beginnings of the evolution of hominids (Jordania, 2006).

Social polyphony must have been present in all early human societies. Rhythm, synchronic bodily movements, bigger group sizes and the precisely coordinated group singing of hominid ancestors, were all an important part of survival strategies against major predators. Long before the advance of articulated speech, the musical communicative stage of development, gave voice to human intelligence and language. Eventually, the former has fundamentally affected vocal polyphony, so that choral singing has lost its direct, survival value and has been marginalised, gradually, ever since (Jordania, 2003).

Polyphony is nowadays spread on every continent, yet the predominantly polyphonic continents are Europe, Africa and Oceania. In Europe, polyphonic singing stretches from Finland to the south-east of Greece, and from Georgia to Portugal.

Most of the polyphonic cultures are 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 (Cooke, 1998). Polyphonic cultures are often found among agro-pastoral communities organised on a strong collective basis.

A dominating type of vocal polyphony throughout Europe is the *drone*. It is associated with singing outdoors and features a vibrant or tense voice-production, with each vocal line having its own distinctive timbre resembling environmental sounds, for

example, sheep bellowing (Lortat-Jacob, 1993). A pronounced vibrato or “trembling” and the incorporation of staggered breathing, shouts, yips, yodels, glottal stops or a sobbing effect which contribute to both resonance and rhythm are common features in many styles.

Voice organisation is another common feature in the Mediterranean where each individual voice has its own strictly defined role (Sugarman, 2000). In Greek polyphonic singing (Tenta, 1998), for example, there are the roles of *παρτής* the leader, who begins singing and unwinds the basic melodic line, *γυριστής*, the second soloist who turns or twists the thread of the song and of *κλώστης*, the *Weaver* who embroiders the melody with a yodeling voice (Cowan, 2000). The three main roles are always accompanied by *ισοκράτες*, the *drone holders* who sustain the tonal centre of the song.

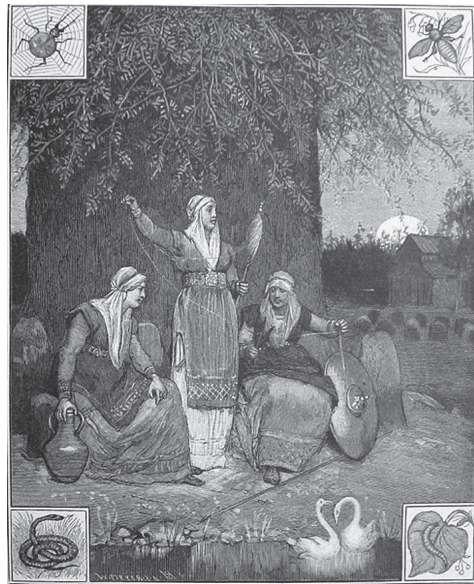
When the Past is present ...

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. In ancient Greek Mythology, each of the Moirae performs a distinct and specific role, just like *Παρτής*, *Γυριστής*, *Κλώστης* in the Greek polyphonic tradition, singing of love, pain, death. The drone keepers, *ισοκράτες*, all sing equally as one body. Unlike Moira, Aisa was never divided.

The similarities arising from this comparison are astonishing and one wonders whether they are purely coincidental. Ancient Greek music was indeed monophonic (Schavernoeh, 1981:143), (Kaimakis, 2007:142), yet the chorus in Greek tragedy, drawing from archaic rituals in honour of *Βάκχος/Διόνυσος* involved polyphonic elements. For instance Euripides’ tragedy “*Bacchae*” (*Βάκχαι*) presents a female chorus singing hymns for Dionysus, imbued with ecstasy, shouting, trembling, yodeling, sobbing, with staggered breathing and unarticulated cries; all of them techniques present in polyphonic singing.

Old as life itself, polyphonic singing is clearly re-presented in the Platonic metaphor, therefore it must have had a presence in real life before. In further support of this hypothesis stands also, its representation in world mythologies.

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



The Norns: Urdr (Wyrd), Verdandi and Skuld, in Scandinavian mythology

Other versions of the Moirae also exist at the deepest European mythological level; these are the 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, itself, means fate.



The Three Weird Sisters

Research along this line has revealed all the rest.

Mythology, Literature, Philosophy, Art, are all aspects of culture, where *the pre-existence of polyphonic singing is manifested* empowering the linguistic, musicological and biological research findings. If nothing else, polyphony's achronous origin, its powerful character and clear structure, its role appointment and immense impact on the people who acknowledge it as 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 inspiration for attempting this *analogy* — a concept running through the Platonic work like a leading mite — was the linguistic resemblance of

Conclusion

Culture forming an integral part and expression of each society, is often attributed qualities of a political or even nationalistic character. Polyphonic singing has not been an exception to this practice. Along the Greek-Albanian border, and elsewhere in the world, folklorists and States have tried to claim the ownership of this archaic, fascinating, musical phenomenon.

Interdisciplinary research though, reveals that polyphonic singing is a diverse cultural expression that is not only beyond national monopolies but is indeed a world cultural trait and aspect of the human condition. Its representation in world mythologies and literature enhances this view. Greek research, particularly in philosophy, proves to be valuable and enlightening in weaving the tapestry of polyphonic narration and in revealing what the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis has called “*ἀέναη κίνηση του διαρκούς αρμονικού γίγνεσθαι*” / “perpetual motion of the constant becoming in Harmony” (Theodorakis, 2007:80).

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