THE PERFORMANCE OF EPIC SONGS IN FUNERAL CONTEXTS

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"All that an old song tells, really happened"

Abstract: "All that an old song tells, really happened." One of the traditional functions of performing epic songs is that of evoking the past. The act of performing is invested with the value of empathic communication with "old times" and with the ancestors.The agent who mediates between the audience and those who are evoked is the fiddler. These facts may place the performance in a context with a sacred dimension and funeral meanings.
Being involved in this specific act of communication, the audience has to play an active role. It has to be trained in "listening". The traditional coordinates of performing epic songs have changed. The category of epic song entered the passive repertoire of folklore. Using a questionnaire and interviews the author, together with a group of students, tried to draw the status of performing epic songs in Romanian contemporary society.
Keywords: funeral songs, changing the function of folk genres, reality or fiction, Romanian folklore

In order to search its object for study, folkloristics works as a meta-folklore, calling it a "folkloristic-text", which is a result of many operations, one of the most important being to select from the whole spectrum of cultural manifestations those which meet, at a specific moment, not only the criterion for defining folklore but the priorities of folklorists, as well. Constantly, the folkloristic text has to respond to the folkloric text. But, of course, the process of creation and transmission of the folklore unfolds itself independently by the folkloristic text. New phenomena occur, others become passive or disappear from the genuine context of performance, whether folkloristics is interested to notice them, or not. It may happen that, at the moment when folkloristics starts asking its questions about a specific issue, this comes too late in historical time. In such situations the data have to be reassembled beginning with documents recorded by chance and, at the same time, in concordance with related facts, which have already been studied. There is a danger here, since almost any new information, a theory, an attitude, etc., is susceptible to change the folkloristic text, so the structure has to be regarded as a flexible one.

Ballad and epic song entered the attention of (Romanian) folkloristic text long ago. It is defined as a "genre for listening", implying the need for a large audience which has to be entertained. Even if entertainment was primarily understood as a "divertissement", or, as "the telling and passing on of stories" being "thus one of the primary ways in which cultures speak to their members and thereby maintain a sense of coherence, indeed of history" (BARNOUW–KIRKLAND 1992: 52), the entertain-

ment function of narrative non-ritual songs has been especially underlined by schol-
ars. In this regard, most research has been devoted to the wedding and other parties.
Any act of performance that consists in "actual execution of an action as opposed to
capacities, models, or other factors that represent the potential for such action or an
abstract from it" (BAUMAN 1992: 43) require to bring context into the discussion.
Taking M. Foley's term of "performance arena", the place where "events are not
repeated but recreated" and experienced by the audience (FOLEY 1995: 47), and in
concordance with P. Ruxăndoiu's analysis of generic context (RUXĂNDOIU 1997:
191–210), it may be supposed that the performance of epic songs and ballads in dif-
ferent contexts may change the range of its functional priorities. The context of en-
tertainment may be weakened by those of information, evocation and communica-
tion. Does something new happen when epic songs are performed in a funeral con-
text, apart from the situations offered by weddings and other parties?

In the Romanian traditional system of beliefs, the entire life of an individual is
composed both by his/her antum and postum existence. The death, the real death is
related to the Last Judgement, which will occur at the end of time. Till then, the
anthropomorphized soul is imagined as spending a life similar to that spent during
the antum existence: he eats, drinks, wears clothes, smells, is warmed by fire, watches
the light, dances, listens to music. All these specific needs are assured thanks to the
help of living people through praying, acting rituals, and offering alms: food, water,
light, clothing, odours, dance and music. The gesture of giving alms is accompanied
by the words: "Let it be for the soul of X" or "In the name of X". The goals are ex-
tremely important:

1. to keep the dead content, to avoid their interference with "our" world out of
the consecrated moments and ceremonies, which control the balanced communica-
tions between living people and the dead.

2. to keep the soul "alive" until the time for the Last Judgement, in order to be
resurrected. In the following, the intention of this paper is to discuss a few aspects of
how the performance of epic song and ballads is involved in the actualisation of this
second goal.

The Romanian noun for alms, "pomana", belongs to the same etymological field
with the verb "a pomeni" that means, among others to mention something or some-
one's name. At the time of Doomsday, to hear your name when the "chosen ones"
will be called to spend immortality in the presence of God, is a supreme reward
which deserves all efforts. In this regard, the stress on the commemorations of the
dead, the fact that the funeral ceremonies are ample and carefully respected within
Romanian traditional culture does not express a "morbid" attitude regarding life.
On the contrary, since the focus is not on the end of the life but on the Resurrection,
and on the eternal life, a new perspective of the future may be sustained.

I mentioned the practice of offering songs, including ballads and epic songs, as
alms. Usually, those who order and pay the fiddler to perform "in the name of X"
are women, in concordance with the major roles and responsibilities they have in all
funeral practices. The songs offered respect the preferences the deceased mani-
fested during his/her life.

"Did specialised contexts exist for performing songs as alms?" "Did such a context exist and, if so, which songs were preponderantly offered?", "What was the place of epic song among other genres?", "Are epic songs suspected to have had a ritual function?" The limited information I have been able to find creates difficulties when trying to answer the above questions.

In 1968 Alexandru Amzulescu asked one of his best informers, Mihai Constantin (Lache Gazarul) to play epic songs. As an answer, the fiddler invited the folklorist to Desa, a village from Oltenia, close to the Danube, on the occasion of a collective commemoration of the dead, "Sarindarul de obste", which consists of religious sequences followed by a collective feast when people consume blessed food they had offered as alms to each other. Fiddlers are hired to perform during the feasts and are asked to play songs in the name of the dead. Here is a modality for the dead and the living to sit, eat, drink and listen to music together, around the same table. This fieldwork resulted in a film on how Mihai Constantin performed a heroic song. Among interesting observation and data, archived in AIEF, only a few concern the questions above, since the focus of the collector was on the act of performance, not on the occasion of performance, the funeral context. But, we have the attestation of the practice! A specific atmosphere is created during such celebrations, which combine "a collective modality for expressing the very close connections with the dead", on one side, and, "an opportunity for having fun for the living", as Alexandru AMZULESCU noted (AIEF, I.28177), on the other side.*

"To keep alive" also implies to preserve the memory of things that happened, to assure a future for the past events and for the persons creating the events. Functionally speaking, the Romanian epic song contains two successive ending formulas. The one placed immediately after the end of narration explicitly asserts the preservative feature of both the creation and the performance of epic song: "Let it be mentioned!" ("Sa se pomeneasca!"). For asking to be paid, the fiddler uses the other formulas hence they have a contextual function to signal the end of the narration.

In the southern part of Romania there is still alive, although not frequently used, the practice of ordering the fiddler to compose a so-called "oral chronicle" narrating dramatic events that happened not far in the past and that get a chance to enter the impressed oral memory through a traditionally constituted form. Often the narrated events refer to the tragic death of a person and the family of the deceased orders the song; one of the reasons for their step is precisely to keep in the attention of the community their relative as a character of the song.

Within the frames of oral societies, as ours preponderantly was up to the beginning of the 20th century, written documents did not have a large literate audience. The human need to know how things happened, to find models and justifications for present conduct and identities urged them to be informed and to search the past. The attitude of the narrated events was positive and unquestioning. They were not

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* It should be added that the funeral rituals consist of several major sequences. We have approached only the postburial one, which is the table set for the family, friends, neighbours.

stories, but the history of the forerunners, evoked in front of gathered people. Here is the justification of the informative function of epic songs.

Watching the genuine context of performance, well caught in the film made by Alexandru Amzulescu, it was interesting to note the reactions of listeners to the events recounted: they were touched, expressed satisfaction (by laughing, slapping their hands), disagreement and surprise. Since they were not listening to the song for the first time, why did they react like that to events they already knew? It looks as if the past was actualised, being given a place in the present. Both informative and evocative functions of the epic songs create an emphatic communication between people living in the present and those living in the past. The communication also takes place horizontally, among the group of listeners, whose cohesion is reinforced. Being involved in this specific act of communication, with a sacred dimension, the audience has to play an active role, to be trained how to listen and how to behave. In his turn, the fiddler acts as the one who gives away "pomana" in the name of the deceased's family. In this regard, the ending formulas of epic songs, when the payment is asked, not only signal the end of the performance but they can also suggest "mutual gifts".

On the base of one of the most suggestive and detailed description of the manner of performing epic song during the wedding party, made by Ovidiu Barlea (BĂRLEA, 1983: 128). I think the communication with the forerunners is also induced during the wedding party, mainly by the spirit of performance. Thanks to the evocative and informative functions of "old time songs", as epic songs are called by those who created, transmitted and asked to listen to them, a split in the present time, oriented to the past, may be opened when people who share the same background are gathered.

There are specific epic songs susceptible to have had funeral meanings underlined by folkloristic interpretation, which also gave them funeral functions. Sabina ISPAS put forward a hypothesis that "it seems that at each stage of the life circle and at times of transition (rites of passages) some epic texts were used in ceremonies" (ISPAS, 2000). They did not enter the present discussion, focused on the *role* of the performance, delimited by the content of the songs performed. The justification for this artificial separation is the lack of data.

At the end, two different frames of discussion have been offered for the epic songs. One of them is explicitly situated in a funeral register, when epic songs are performed as alms during collective commemoration of the dead. This belongs to the genuine folk context and concerns the deceased relatives, the community's deceased, being a segment of the worship of the dead. The other one, which underlined the evocative capacity of the performance of epic songs and suggests a worship of the heroes, belongs to the folkloristic text; the possible funeral meanings are induced by interpretation. A connection between the two situations is due even to the act of performance of old times songs, which brings together those who were with those who are.

Nowadays, when epic songs enter the passive repertoire of Romanian folklore, it is more and more difficult to study the epic song "live" and to study its meanings in

the genuine context. The fiddlers forget them, since the audience is not interested and trained in listening to them any more. Concerning how epic songs have been performed as alms, the stage of dissolution of the genre creates bizarre situations. In 1999, during fieldwork in Romanian communities in Bulgaria, we met a woman whose father was a fiddler with a large repertoire including epic heroic songs. She recorded him playing and singing. She told us how important are the tapes not only because they preserve her father's voice. There were no longer any fiddlers able to perform the repertoire and in the manner her father had done, hence the daughter found the ingenious method of discharging her duty of offering songs as alms in the name of her father: she uses the tapes and offers the recorded music to the people invited to commemorate the fiddler's memory on the occasion of requiems.

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