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IMS-RASMB, *Series Musicologica Balcanica* 1.1, 2020.
e-ISSN: 2654-248X

Exploring the Function of the Female Lamenter in the Bereavement Process: A Case Study in Chios Island

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.26262/smb.v1i1.7764

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Exploring the Function of the Female Lamenter in the Bereavement Process: A Case Study in Chios Island

Mitsi Akoyunoglou

Abstract: Lamentation dates back to ancient Greece and has survived through the centuries primarily as an exclusive tradition of women. It can be described as a controlled performative act of memory and mourning that has been closely associated with all stages of the death rituals. Nowadays it is a ritual performed in just a handful of Greek villages. The present study focuses on a 91-year-old female lamenter from Mesta, a village in Chios Island. The function of her role as a female lamenter in the bereavement process of self and others is examined through biographical narrative interviews. Biographical narrative analysis, as a tool to explore and gain insight about a human experience, allows for a closer investigation of the lamentation experience; it does so by reaching back in time through establishing a narrative connection to the role of the lamenter and interpreting her function within the bereavement process of self and others. Following a thematic analysis of the narration, it appears that the lamenter, through the semi-structured and semi-improvised *moiroloi*, becomes the bridge between the living and the dead, communicates the pain, expresses the inner tension and, as a result, may facilitate the mourner to reach catharsis.

Keywords: Greek lament, Chios Island, bereavement, death rituals, narrative approach.

Introduction

The Greek traditional lament has been studied from anthropological, folklore, ethnomusicological and sociological perspectives[1] as a ritual and a long-standing oral

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[1] See studies by Nadia Seremetaki, *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani (*Athens: Livanis Publishing Co., 2008); Eleni Psychogiou, *«Mavrigi» and Helen: Rituals of Death and Rebirth (*Athens: Academy of Athens, 2008); Margaret Alexiou,, *The ritual lament in Greek tradition* (Athens: MIET, 2008); Giannis Motsios, *The Greek Lament (*Ioannina: Kodikas Publishings, 1995); Loring Danforth, *The death rituals of rural Greece* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1982); Guy Saunier, *Greek Folk Songs: The laments* (Athens: Nefeli Publishing Co 1999).

tradition in many villages of Greece. Yet, the perseverance and continuation of this death ritual through many centuries suggests an underlying need and benefit for both the lamenter and the mourners. The present paper investigates the function of the female lamenter from a medical ethnomusicology[2] perspective and through an "ethnomusic therapy"[3] lens, and concentrates on the primal need and potential therapeutic aspect of lamentation as a lived experience, described and narrated by a 91-year-old female lamenter who resides in a village on Chios Island. The research questions that guide this narrative approach focus on the way the female lamenter views, experiences and describes her role in the bereavement process through the act of lamenting.

The present case study takes place in Mesta, a medieval village situated in the southern part of Chios Island in the Northern Aegean Sea. In order to approach the research questions, there have been a series of semi-structured interviews with a female lamenter residing in Mesta; as a follow-up, those interviews were analyzed through thematic qualitative analysis. Personal and socio-cultural aspects intersect at the narration and lead us to the meaning of the lived experience of lamentation and its relation to the bereavement process of the lamenter herself and of the relatives of the deceased mediated through her eyes. The narrative thematic analysis tool, based in phenomenology and social constructivism, focuses on the meaning of the narration through which the interviewee presents and constructs her identity and her role in the bereavement process.

Lamentation as a socially structured musical ritual

We are all unique in the way we deal with and express the pain that accompanies the loss of a loved one and the way we engage, endure and cope during the bereavement process.[4] The observation of various burial rituals seems to provide humans with a means to make peace with the passing of a beloved, perhaps in an attempt to bridge the gap between life and death. In the rites of passage of many cultures, music has

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[2] According to Koen, Barz and Brummel-Smith (2008), medical ethnomusicology is "a new field […] that explores holistically the roles of music […] and related praxes in any cultural […] context of health and healing" (3-4) and Daly Berman (2015) adds that the focus of medical ethnomusicology is the symbiotic relationship of music and healing from a cultural standpoint.

[3] "Ethnomusic therapy" is a term proposed by J.J. Moreno (1995) to describe "the multidisciplinary study of indigenous music and healing practices" with a focus on "music and healing traditions that are the products of indigenous cultural development" (p. 336).

[4] Stephen R. Shuchter, and Sidney Zisook, "The course of normal grief," in *Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research, and Intervention*, eds. Margaret S. Stroebe, Wolfgang Stroebe and Robert O. Hansson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23-43.

been closely related with the expression of pain, grief and despair.[5] Even though, nowadays only in a few Greek villages do older women continue to lament on certain occasions,[6] historically, part of the death ritual in all of Greece included the singing of a *moiroloi,*[7] the Greek word for lament.[8] This ritual dates back to ancient Greece, and it has survived through the centuries.[9] According to Danforth (1982), in Greece, the singing of the lament enabled the living to continue a "conversation" with the dead. In terms of emotions, lamentation can be described as an overt expression of the pain due to a loved one's death. Lamentation and wailing were not only a spontaneous expression of affliction, but were an integral part of the Greek burial rituals. As Kapsomenos (1990) remarks, the act of lamenting accompanied all traditional rituals from the preparation to the burial of the deceased. Lamenting was performed during funerals and wakes as well as in subsequent visits to the cemetery, as a collective and exclusive practice by women.[10] According to Psychogiou (2008), this type of lamentation is an extremely delicate, difficult and painful procedure equivalent to "hard labor" (pg. 215). Yet, the *moirologia* provide the mourners with a common language, a cultural code to express their sorrow within an acceptable, socially performed ritual and with the opportunity to externalize their pain in a socially allowed way.

The spelling of the Greek word *moiroloi* that has survived to this day in literature is written with the diphthong *oi*. This word is a compound consisting of the words *moira* (which means 'fate') and *logos* (which means 'word, to tell, to say'). A *moiroloi*, therefore, means 'to tell of someone's fate.' A concise definition of *moirologia* given by Saunier (1999) describes them as Greek folk songs that elaborate on the deceased, on confronting death, and tell myths associated with Haros, the modern Greek equivalent of Charon, the ferryman of Hades.

In musical terms, the typical *moiroloi* is an unaccompanied narrative song composed in a semi-structured, semi-improvised manner with weeping elements incorporated in the singing. It is based on a frugal and quite tragic tune, mainly on a three-tone to

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[5] Dorit Amir, "The use of Israeli folksongs in dealing with women's bereavement and loss in music therapy," in *Arts Therapists, Refugees and Migrants: reaching across borders*, ed. Ditty Dokter (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998), 217-235; Natalie Wlodarczyk, "The effect of a single-session music therapy group intervention for grief resolution on the disenfranchised grief of hospice workers" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2010), 32-33.

[6] Alexiou, *The ritual lament in Greek tradition,* 108.

[7] *moiroloi* (singular), *moirologia* (plural) and *moirologima* (the act of lamenting).

[8] Dimitrios S. Loukatos, "Traditions on death rituals by John Chrysostom," *Yearbook of the Folklore Archive* 2, (1940): 59-64.

[9] Athanasios P Papadoloulos, *The beliefs on death and burial rituals of the Greeks from Homer to the present* (Thessaloniki: Erodios Publishings, 2007), 337-347.

[10] *Ibid.*, 344-345.

a pentatonic scale. The lyrics are either prearranged or improvised on the spot, announcing the death to others, calling other mourners to join in the lament, helping the relatives of the deceased say goodbye to their loved one, telling the story of the departed and communicating with the deceased.

Traditionally, each village, where lamenting is still part of the burial rituals, has a unique lament melody. Yet, the medieval village of Mesta is a rather interesting exception, as there are two distinct lament melodies that have survived during the 20th century. One *moiroloi* originated in Mesta, and another *moiroloi* arrived with the women refugees who came from Asia Minor in 1922. The villagers of Mesta and the refugees that settled in the village followed their own distinct traditions throughout most of the 20th century, without being integrated, and the different laments reinforced the preservation of their unique identity.

One is the original lament from Mesta that was performed during burial rituals.

Example 1

Original lament from Mesta Village

Translation of lyrics: Damn him who will say that the pain fades away…
with a newly deceased… it comes back again…

Α - νά - θε-μα τον που θα πει Α - νά - θε-μα τον που θα πει

Αχ, πως ο κα - μός πα - λιώ - νει Α -

α μα θα τύ-χει λεί-ψα-νο [αχ…γιούκα…μου] Αχ, να ξα-να-και-νου-ργιώ - νει

The other lament was the one brought by the refugees from Asia Minor, who settled in Mesta in the beginning of the 20th century.

Example 2

Lament of refugees from Minor Asia

Translation of lyrics: That which happened to me, no one should go through...

Not a boat at sea, nor a bird in the forest...

Αυ - το που έ - πα - α - θα - α - α - ε - γώ

κα - νείς να - α - μη - η - η - η - ην το πά - α - α - α - θει ού - τε κα -

ρά-α-α - βι στο-ο-ο για - λό ού τε που - λι-ι-ι-ι-ι στα δά-α-α-α-ση.

Both laments were sung by the lamenter during one of the conversations that took place in 2012; they were recorded and transcribed in western notation by the researcher and the lyrics were translated into English. In her narrations, after singing the two laments, she elaborated on the differences of the two laments, describing the Mesta one as more emotional with a lot of sighs and the one originating in Asia Minor as more lyrical and less emotional.

The lamenter improvises lyrics that spring from the pain of the loss and the bitterness that each woman feels from losing a loved one. Women who participate in the lament do so willingly and without asking for permission from the family of the deceased. In fact, according to Alexiou (2008), lamenting was an act performed by certain women who were well-known lamenters. Such is the case of the 91-year-old woman in the present study.

Methodology: The narrative approach

Narrative as story refers to a combination of life incidents that form a unified plot.[11] The overall story offers the context for understanding and making sense of a research topic, through analysis, synthesis and "emplotment", a term coined by Ricoeur (1984). Through narratives, we present our experiences by putting them into perspective.[12] Adopting a narrative approach helps make sense and understand one's

[11] Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 8, no. 1 (1995): 5.

[12] Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991), 4.

experience related to a research phenomenon.[13] As an interdisciplinary and transnational approach,[14] the qualitative narrative analysis method has been used by a number of therapists.[15] Polkinghorne (1988), one of the first theorists to describe the idea of a socially constructed, constantly evolving sense of self, viewed identity as a "self as narrative" (pg. 150). The narrative approach describes "human activity as purposeful engagement in the world".[16] Neimeyer (2000) explored and developed the idea of a narrative as a means for reconstructing the self, both in psychotherapy and in research. In the present study, the narrative open-structured interviews offered the lamenter the means to narrate freely, express overtly and relate with how she has experienced certain life story processes. Also, to focus on her own history and trace her own role in the bereavement process during lamentations. The open-structured element provided her with the freedom to narrate events in the chronological order she chose and the liberty to express overtly only the information she felt comfortable sharing. In addition, Riemann (2003) emphasizes another very important aspect, which is the working alliance between researcher and interviewee, their social relationship and the social setting within which they meet. The fact that I knew her well in advance and that we had already established a relationship of trust made it easier for the narrations to be spontaneous, in depth and quite informative on various aspects of her life, including her role in the community as a lamenter.

The analysis of the interviews followed the steps within the reconstructive biographical research approach that Rosenthal suggests (2004) and the thematic analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). After transcribing the interviews, the narrative data were first analyzed through a text and thematic analysis, in order to reconstruct the lived life experience. The analysis then focused specifically on all sections that centered on lamenting, bereavement, death rituals and deaths in the lamenter's family.

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[13] Nicole Sharp, Anne Cusick, and Rosalind Bye, "Narrative Analysis," in *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences*, ed. Pranee Liamputtong (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 5-6.

[14] Giorgos Tsiolis, *Methods and techniques analyses in qualitative social research* (Athens: Kritiki Publishing Co, 2014), 197-198.

[15] For additional reading: Evrinomi Avdi, and Eygenia Georgaca, "Narrative research in psychotherapy: A critical review," *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 80 (2007): 407-419; Charlotte Burck, "Comparing qualitative research methodologies for systemic research: the use of grounded theory, discourse analysis and narrative analysis," *Journal of Family Therapy* 27 (2005): 237–262; Kate Collie, Joan L. Bottorff, and Bonita C. Long, "A Narrative View of Art Therapy and Art Making by Women with Breast Cancer," *Journal of Health Psychology* 11 (2006): 761-775; John McLeod, and Gordon Lynch, "'This is our life': strong evaluation in psychotherapy narrative," *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counseling* 3, no. 3 (2002): 389-406.

[16] Polkinghorne, "Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis," 5.

The context

One aspect of a qualitative study particularly important for ensuring internal validity and reliability is the detailed description of the social, cultural and historical context within which the research was conducted.[17] My first encounter and conversation about laments with the woman that was 87-year-old at the time was during the summer of 2012. It was then that our relationship began. The first narrative interview took place during the summer of 2013, at a friend's house in the village. The following interviews took place during the summer of 2016 and winter of 2017. These were conducted in her home's kitchen in Mesta, always in the morning. Nothing interrupted our conversations. She always wore dark robes, an apron, slippers and a black headscarf. In all our encounters, she was very friendly, welcoming and with a positive attitude. Our conversations were recorded with a ZOOM H2n which was placed on the table where we were sitting. From the first interview, she began sharing a lot of information about her life, and elaborated a lot on the death rituals, on lamentation and her role as a lamenter. When I reached the second phase of follow-up questions, she enthusiastically provided more details on the specific research topic. Two elements proved to be rather important for a relationship of trust to be built: the closeness established due to our common background (my grandfather and her father grew up together), and my relationship with her daughters who knew me and encouraged her to talk openly and help me with my research. This allowed her to share valuable personal information about her life, her family history and her involvement in the death rituals of over 70 villagers since she was 16. The recordings of the interviews were over 7 hours long, and there were a couple of instances when she asked me to "turn the machine off" so that she could confide about things she did not want to be recorded.

I have to confess that I was feeling quite reserved the first time I went to talk with her, as I felt that a narrative of a life story might invade one's individual privacy, yet, once we began our conversations, my feelings changed. My curiosity was piqued, and I was particularly eager to listen to her narratives and find out more about her story and her connection to the village as a community, as well as on lamenting and her role during the passing rituals.

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[17] Giorgos Tsiolis, "Secondary analysis of qualitative data: is it a research strategy compatible with qualitative approach?" in *Research infrastructures and data in empirical social research. Issues of recording, documenting and analyzing social data,* ed. Giorgos Tsiolis, Nikos Serntedakis, Giannis Kallas (Athens: Nisos Publications, 2011), 143-144.

Her life story in brief

She was born in Mesta, a village that dates back to the medieval period and is located in a rural area of Chios Island. She is the second child of five, although her mother gave birth to 10. Half of her siblings died at a young age from diseases, so she came in contact with death and loss from a very young age. Her father was a farmer and her mother was a housewife. She did not attend school as she, from a very young age, was helping her mother raise her siblings. As a child she enjoyed the company of the elders as she was very eager to learn everything from them. She watched the village elders, listened and learned from them many songs, stories, fairytales, dances, rituals, and she kept all that knowledge alive in her memories. She met her husband while working in the fields with her father, got married at the age of 21 and had three daughters. Although both her parents and she were illiterate, she was and still remains a very active presence in the village's life. She has participated in many cultural events of Mesta and of Chios in general, as a traditional folk singer. She is currently 91 years old.

Time-line of main life events

1928 – M. was born in Mesta Village

1928-1940 – 5 of her 10 siblings passed away in young age during this period

1943 – She was informed about and met her father's out-of-marriage son G.

1944 – News came of her half-brother G's death who drowned at sea

1944 – She lamented for the first time alongside her mother

1945 – Her older brother N. died in the war and she lamented again

1949 – She got married to S. whom she met working in the fields

1949 – Her first daughter was born

1956 – Her second daughter was born

1960 – Her third daughter was born

1974 – Her father passed away at the age of 74

19;; – Her mother passed away (could not recall exact year)

1980-1985 – She got a job working at a boat

2004 – Her husband S. passed away at age 78.

2016 – Her last brother D. passed away

August 2016 – last time she lamented

Lamenting and caring for the dead: the analysis

The main topic of the narrations was the act of lamenting and her capacity in caring for the community's decedents for over 70 years. From the thematic analysis of the narrative data,[18] five major categories emerged, as described and analyzed below.

1. Direct emotional involvement

It was evident throughout her narrations that there is personal and direct emotional involvement of the lamenter in each passing, which has already been documented in various ethnological and anthropological studies.[19] As the 91-year old woman states, "you cannot witness the burial of your beloved in the ground and not lament". Lamentation seems to act as a way to overtly express the deepest grief and to let out some of the pain and sorrow, not only directed to the deceased but also to the losses she has experienced in the past. The word she often used in her narrations to characterize the lament was *ξαλάφρωμα*, meaning "relief". It seems that it stems from a woman's necessity to lament, e.g. for a mother to lament her child's death, for a sister to lament her brother's passing, for a daughter to lament her mother's or father's passing. The emotional commitment was such, that whenever someone passed away in the village, all women would have the opportunity to lament their own losses and commemorate their beloved deceased. In her narration, while describing the deeper need for a woman to lament a loss when she herself has experienced losses in the past, she provided an incident that happened during World War II. A German boat was sunk and many German soldiers washed up dead on a nearby beach. The villagers collected all the bodies and placed them in wagons. At the sight of the dead bodies, an elderly woman started lamenting: "*κλάψετε να τους κλάψουμε […] γιατί δεν έχουμε άλλα... γιατί της μάνας η φωνή είναι σαν την καμπάνα... κλάψετε να τους κλάψουμε, πείτε τους να τους πούμε, παιδιά τους περιμένουννε, μάνες τους λαχταρούνε... ο ξένος εις την ξενιτειά δεν πρέπει να πεθαίνει, γιατί το χώμα ειν' βαρύ κι η πλάκα είναι ξένη*" (cry so we all cry, because there are no more, because a mother's voice is loud as a bell… cry so we all cry, tell them so we all tell them, their children are waiting, their mothers are yearning… a foreigner in foreign land should never have to die, as the soil is heavy and the tombstone is unfamiliar). Although the dead bodies were of the enemy at the time, everyone in the village was moved by the lamenter's wailing and got emotional. As if

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[18] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101.

[19] Seremetaki, *The Last Word*, see chapter 6, 199-243; Psychogiou, *"Mavrigi" and Helen*, see chapter 4, 204-228.

the deceased is nameless, faceless and without identity at that point, so one can give that body the name, face and identity of her own beloved deceased. It seems that the body, as a state of not-being, gets detached of all personal characteristics and represents any and all deceased. The universality of pain allows the lamenter to freely express her sorrow and grief, and become one with the mourners.

2. Care for both the deceased and the mourners

"When you lament, you help people cry". This seems to be one of the most important acts of caring the lamenter offers the mourners. She also describes the importance of the main lamenter to help and support the female relatives of the deceased to join in the lamentation. "*Ελάτε να μονιάσουμε τραγούδια να τον πούμε κι όποια έχει πιότερο καϋμό να τον εμοιραστούμε*" (come all together to tell him songs, whoever has the biggest sorrow, to share it with us). She is reciting words from a lament that is used to bring together all female mourners to share their grief, as is also the case in other Greek villages.[20] This stresses the importance of unity in the pain of the loss and solidarity in engaging with the bereavement process. Her involvement in the burial rituals is not limited to lamentation. She has cared for many deceased and tended to the burial rituals that accompanied those deaths since she was young. From her narrations, it became evident that she was prompted by her father to care for anyone in need, and she has lived her life honoring his advice. Her father had told her, "*όπου πηγαίνεις, αν ψυχομαχά, να φυλάγεις να τελειώνει κι αν ημπορείς σαβάνωνε. δεν έχει, μου λέει, πιο μεγάλο ψυχικό, να τον σαβανώ, να τον ντύνω τον άθρωπο, το κατάλαβες; Αν σου πω πόσους έχω ντυμένους... πάνω από εβδομήντα…*" (wherever you go, if a person is ready to render his soul, be there for him until he is gone and if you can, enshroud him. There is no greater good from enshrouding, to dress the deceased, you understand? If only I told you how many I have dressed… over seventy…). She further explained how she would attend to the dead for anyone who summoned her, whether he/she was "εχτρός μου" ("my enemy") or someone she was not in good terms with, ("ή γιατί αυτοί δε μου μιλούν και δεν πάω, εγώ πήγαινα", "or because they were not talking to me I wouldn't go, [of course] I went"). To this day, she strongly believes that enshrouding is the best way to express one's honor for the dead, and is an act of goodness at its finest, as her father once told her.

Additionally, she learned from him to attend to any person in need in the village. She describes her actions in a firm and definite way, "if a man had a broken limb, I would help, if a man was sick, I would care for him, I would see to everything and everyone". Her father's strong ethical code by which he lived all his life, affected her

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[20] Saunier, *Greek Folk Songs,* 32-35; Motsios, *The Greek Lament,* 234.

values and ethics in her life as well. She firmly believes that "if you do good, you will receive good, if you do evil, it will come back to bite you, here, in this life". And she differentiates herself from other women in the village as being more caring and eager to learn how to attend and help any and all people in need. During her life, she has welcomed both hardship and pleasure the same way, since "life is full of both". But she has difficulty understanding those who live their life without caring for others, especially in times of need, grief and sorrow.

3. Collective knowledge of women

Lamentation appears to be an inherent knowledge of women in the village. It has been documented that women preside over the rites of passage in Greek villages.[21] In Mesta village, women would all learn the laments from older women and would lament at a death of a loved one, as was also the case in various other villages.[22] They would learn from each other during times of grief and pain, and would get better in improvising suitable lyrics for each deceased through practice. They would sing different laments depending on who died; they differentiated between child, young adult or older person. At an orphan's wedding the wedding songs were sung a capella (no accompanying instruments) and would be different content-wise; they even had a special name, i.e. *amanedes*. The words of the *amanedes* were focusing on the misfortune of being an orphan and the loss of a family while growing up. Consider for instance the following example: «το Χάρο θα τον σκοτώσουμε να τον εκδικηθούμε, μικρά παιδιάκια ορφανά να μην εξαναδούμε...» (we will kill Charon to avenge him, so that we will not see orphan children again).

An interesting fact she stressed was that in the beginning of the 20th century, all women and men lamented in the village. Whenever there was a death in the family, all would lament, although it was always mostly women. She remembers her father lamenting at her brother's funeral, singing «μαύρα 'ν τα ρούχα που φορούν όλα σου τ' αδερφάτσια κι απ' όλους ξεχωρίζουνε σαν τα καλογεράτσια» (black are the clothes that all your siblings are wearing and they are singled out as if they look like monks). This changed in time and only women now lament. Additionally, all women stood in solidarity with the other women through their loss, grief and bereavement process. They used specific lamentation lyrics that would call on other women to join in the grief: "ελάτε να μονιάσουμε τραγούδια να του πούμε κι όποια έχει πιότερο καϋμό να τον εμοιραστούμε" (come and join us to sing him songs, whoever has most grief to share it with us). Whenever there was a new passing in the village, all

[21] Papadopoulos, *The beliefs on death and burial rituals,* 344-345.

[22] Psychogiou, *"Mavrigi" and Helen,* 32-33, 312.

women who had experienced loss and grief joined into the lamentation to pay their respect to the deceased and to lament their own losses.

4. The trajectory of a long-standing tradition

As a child, she recalls the bones of the village's deceased being thrown into a deep well, which was located at the one end of the village and was, at the time, called cemetery. This has changed throughout the years and a big cemetery with graves, where all bodies are buried, can now be found right at the entrance of the village. The details, with which she described all the death rituals, imply the importance these rituals had in her life. Consistent with the findings of other researchers,[23] when a person was about to die, a number of women would assemble at the house and watch over him until his last breath. Then, as the lamenter stressed, those who could handle it, would take care of the dead body, enshroud, bathe, clothe, and prepare him for his *latera,* a coffin-bed arranged with nice sheets and pillows. He was carried by men to the graveyard and was put in the earth only with the sheets wrapped around his body. After the funeral, all villagers would go to the house of the deceased; women would prepare food, called *parigoria,* which means comfort food; fish was the traditional *parigoria* dish. They would then make bitter coffee for everyone. All women would prolong their visit to the house in order to lament with the family members. For forty days, the relatives would mourn and lament the passing of their beloved, and the villagers would take care of everything else for the family: they made food, kept them company, lamented, and ate together with them. The whole community treated each passing as a collective obligation to offer support and help to those in mourning. The lamenter's narrations demonstrate that enshrouding the dead was of great importance to her, as her own father asked her to take on that responsibility. As she mentioned, taking care of the dead was characterized by her father as a grace given by God. So, for over 70 funerals, she was summoned by other villagers and fulfilled her *obligation* and *honor* of taking care of the dead body in the most delicate way. In her own words, "I took care of him, I cared for the man, and they asked for me, because I took good care of the body; however dead he might have been, I did not want to hurt him".

All death rituals were passed down from previous generations to the next, yet none of her daughters have expressed the volition to engage with their mother's craft. The current decline in participation in death rituals was particularly emphasized in her narrations. Young people do not want to carry on the tradition of lamenting nor engage in customary death rituals. She considers today's death rituals disrespectful

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[23] Psychogiou, *"Mavrigi" and Helen,* 312, 396; Alexiou, *The ritual lament in Greek tradition,* 87-91; Seremetaki, *The last word,* 162-170.

toward the dead, and she expressed a lot of anger when talking about it; she raised her voice for example, and she even shouted a couple of times. In her own words: "nowadays they have a feast, they give some flowers or a wreath and they feel as if they have honored him [the deceased] as a king. Then they [the relatives and mourners] meet for coffee at a restaurant, where there is a table for the family members, and people go after the funeral and talk and laugh". They do not lament, they do not go back to their home for a bitter coffee, seems that there is no respect for the deceased nor his family. And she concludes, "there is nothing now, nothing anymore" with a whispering voice.

5. On aging and death

Getting old seems to be accepted both as inevitable and difficult. She describes herself as being one of the last four or five elders still alive at the village. As she says, "all elders are gone, there are no more…", expressing feelings of loneliness and social isolation, which is also in accordance with findings of other studies.[24] In her narration, she often compares her life as a young girl with how she is now, and expresses bitterness that she cannot sing as she used to, cannot dance anymore and cannot remember as she used to. She complains about the loss of her voice and does not like the fact that she is not able to do things that she used to do in earlier years. The process of aging seems to be overwhelming. Since the unexpected death of her husband, she described herself developing an "unexplained" anxiety and a psychological fear, having difficulty sleeping and death lingering over her mind all the time. It has been documented that the experience of loneliness in old age could be the result of either living alone or due to the passing of close family members.[25] Both are true for her, since with advancing age, she has lost her husband and many close family members, has witnessed her body change and her capacity to engage in social activities has become limited.

Sadness mixed with frustration was present at various instances in her narration. She is disheartened by witnessing everything she loved during her lifetime gradually vanish, not only the people she loved but also the old ways and traditions. She is frustrated at the other elders who do not remember things from the past. What distresses her even more is the unexpected death, which she calls "a harsh knife". Bitterness and sadness drive her need to lament, yet people, she says, do not want to cry and feel sadness anymore. The last time she lamented was during the funeral of her last brother who passed away during the summer of 2016, yet she sang him "only

[24] Archana Singh, and Misra Nishi, "Loneliness, depression and sociability in old age," *Industrial psychiatry journal* 18, 1 (2009): 51-5.

[25] Singh, and Misra, "Loneliness, depression and sociability," 51-5.

three songs" as her daughters did not let her lament anymore. Witnessing the community's traditional way of life disappearing has been difficult for her to accept.

Oftentimes, in her narrations, she elaborated on her philosophical views on life, death and beyond. It was apparent in her descriptions that she considers death an inevitable truth, and life the only real thing. Even though she has been a lamenter for more than 70 years, she stressed various times that she has no belief in an afterlife. Her views contradict testimonies of other lamenters who engage in funeral rituals as they believe that after death, the person's soul continues to exist and lamentation provides them with an avenue to communicate with the other world[26]. As a result, every passing continues to bring her sadness, grief and pain, due to the finite quality of life. An interesting metaphor she used was: "you cut the grass? [it stops growing] a man's life was cut? [he ceases to exist] no one is immortal… and what I am saying to you right now is the truth… whatever dies, does not live again…". And she adds, "do the dead feel pain?" in an attempt to describe how pain, as a sensation, is connected with life. In other words, she posits what Epicurus mentioned in his Letter to Menoeceus that "death is the privation of sense-experience".[27]

Discussion as epilogue

For many centuries, one of the traditional death rituals in various Greek villages has been lamentation.[28] In the present study, the focus has been on the lived experience of a 91-year-old woman who has lived all her life in the village of Mesta and has lamented in many funerals since the age of 16. From the narrative analysis, and consistent with the view of other researchers,[29] it has become evident that lamenting provided the female lamenter a vehicle to help the mourners express their sorrow, gave them a way to communicate their grief and share it with the community, and offered a safe space for all to grieve the passing of loved ones. In this process, the female lamenter turns weeping into lamentations, communicates and channels emotions, keeps the memory of the deceased alive, articulates the inarticulate, and expresses the inexpressible pain and separation of death.

The *moirologima*[30] acted as a secure circle and a musical haven for women in order to connect on a deeper level and support each other, resembling a grief support group.

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[26] Danforth, *The death rituals,* 127-130; Seremetaki, *The last word,* 216.

[27] Epicurus, The Letter to Menoeceus, transl. Inwood and Gerson.

[28] Papadopoulos, *Beliefs on death and burial rituals*337-347; Alexiou, *The ritual lament,* see chapter 3, 87-109.

[29] Danforth, *The death rituals,* see chapter 5, 117-152; Seremetaki, *The last word,* 214-221; Alexiou, *The ritual lament,* 246-251.

[30] *moirologima* is the act of lamenting in Greek.

The dead body, being the centre of the lamenting, took on many forms and became the face of universal loss, in a way that every woman could relate to. And through lamenting, the women continued the conversation with their deceased. This resembles the approach of the embodied relationality perspective where "the embodied relationship with the other does not die with the person, but can be inscribed in the body of the living" (Ribbens McCarthy and Prokhovnik, 2013: 5).

Despite the fact that lamentation, as part of an old tradition, has been passed down from generation to generation,[31] it has survived to the present day only via three to four older women in Mesta village. Young people do not seem eager to keep up with traditional burial rituals, and as a result, the art of lamenting has not been passed down to younger women in the village, as is the case in many places in Greece.[32] It was apparent from the narrations that the lamenter aimed at increasing the emotional tension of an already painful experience in order to move the grievers and help them express their inner pain and sorrow in public through crying. She had the unique purpose of communicating the pain, expressing the inner tension and, as a result, allowing the mourner to reach catharsis. It appears to be frustrating for lamenters to acknowledge and accept today's death rituals which have banned lamenting as an undesirable form of expressing one's pain and grief. Nowadays, it seems that people feel uncomfortable in the presence of a woman who is crying and lamenting in public, and prefer to attend more private, and somehow detached from grief, death rituals.

Many researchers conclude that each individual grieves in a unique and distinctive way.[33] According to the "continuing bonds" model of grief, the restructuring of a relationship with the deceased is vital to the griever's life.[34] This seems to be one of the main roles of the lamenter. When she is singing a lament, she uses second person in the verbs within the lyrics, aiming her words directly at the deceased, as if the deceased is still present yet fully aware that he is not; she laments expressing her

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[31] Motsios, *The Greek lament,* 21-22.

[32] Alexiou, *The ritual lament,* 108.

[33] See studies by George A. Bonanno, and Stacey Kaltman, "The varieties of grief experience," *Clinical Psychology Review* 21, no. 5 (2001): 705-734; Anthony D. Mancini, and George A. Bonanno, "Bereavement," in *Practitioner's guide to evidence-based psychotherapy,* ed. Jane E. Fisher and William T. O' Donohue (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2006), 122-130; Stephen R. Shuchter, and Sidney Zisook, "The course of normal grief," in *Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research, and Intervention*, ed. Margaret S. Stroebe, Wolfgang Stroebe and Robert O. Hansson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23-43; Elizabeth A. Doughty, Andriana Wissel, and Cyndia Glorfield ,"Current trends in grief counseling," *VISTAS online,* 2011.

[34] See studies by Greg Madison, "Bereavement and Loss," in *Existential Perspectives on Human Issues, A Handbook for Therapeutic Practice*, ed. Emy van Deurzen and Claire Arnold-Baker (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2005), 338-355, and Dennis Klass, "Continuing conversation about continuing bonds," *Death Studies* 30 (2006): 834-858.

need to continue the conversation with the deceased; she laments for all her losses and through the lamentations continues to grieve for all her beloved deceased. In addition, the act of lamentation can be related to the "dual-process model of grief" which focuses on the oscillation between an orientation towards the loss and an orientation towards restoring one's life after the loss.[35] This can be seen at the woman who laments whenever there is a new death or another suitable occasion in the village, yet, she also continues with her everyday life. Through lamenting, it appears that she assists with the bereavement process of the mourners as well, since she provides them a safe avenue to orient themselves toward their loss, and to express their sorrow either by joining in the lamentation or by silently participating through crying. According to the notion of embodied relationality of Ribbens McCarthy and Prokhovnik (2014), the woman expresses through lamenting "the desire for ongoing connection in the form of caring for the departed through the embodied activities of the living" (pg. 8). Even though the "enfleshed other" (ibid., 2014: 7) has been buried, the absent "other" remains as a presence in absence through the ritual of lamenting and the subsequent visits to the cemetery, highlighting a sense of a continuing relation.

These analogies with the aforementioned models of grief are depicted during the analysis of her testimonies. However, it has become clear that although she lamented in order to release her sorrow and to alleviate her pain, since the passing of her husband, 15 years ago, she does not feel comforted when lamenting. Her pain continues to be present, and her need to lament his death continues. Although the circle of lamenting can be viewed as an informal support group and might be characterized as a cathartic experience[36], it seems that it also poses the risk for the lamenter to get trapped in a repetitive habit that renews the pain of the loss in every new death, possibly leading to unresolved and prolonged bereavement. But it is worth reflecting on the changes that have been documented in our century, with traditional burial rituals along with the singing of laments slowly disappearing. So, these few women, now in solitude, continue to express their grief through lamentation, with no companionship or a show of solidarity by other women, nor the support of the community. Consequently, the bereavement process might actually be harder for them as they carry on a tradition that is no longer supported nor acknowledged by society.

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[35] See studies by Virginia Richardson, "The dual process model of coping with bereavement: A decade later," *Omega* 61 (2010): 269-271 and Margaret Stroebe, and Henk Schut, "The dual process model of coping with bereavement: Rationale and description," *Death Studies,* 23 (1999): 197–224.

[36] Danforth, *The death rituals,* 144-146; Dimitris Damigos, "Psychological and Social Dimensions of Euthanasia," in *Euthanasia: The Significance of a "good" death,* ed. Eleni Grammatikopoulou (Athens: National Research Foundation, 2000), 61-63.

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