

Death Rituals in Albania

An anthropological review

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Abstract

The structure of death rituals differs consistently among regions of Albania. The death ritual contains very strong patriarchal features in the Northern part of the country; in southern regions (next to the seashore) and in Albanian communities living elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin, the features are more animistic; the females playing an important role in grief proclamation, suggesting a more matriarchal-oriented ritual organization. The wailing of men in the northern Albania, the so-called *gjama*, is an organized ritual of crying for the dead person, and till recently it has been accompanied with self-punishing behaviors such as face scratching etc. The wailing of women is acceptable and codified as well in the northern areas (the so-called wailing of milk). A different situation, probably related to the social organization and to the gender role of females, is apparent in southern Albania. The death rituals hereby are mainly accompanied from the so-called “*kuja*”, (wailing through words) more impressive and loquacious than the northern masculine “*gjama*”. Similarities with Greek and Hellenic rituals (“*Thrênos*” and “*Goös*”) are suggested; probably embedding multiple cross-acting and inter-related influences.

Keyword: spirituality, grief, funerals, death rituals, wailing, mourning process.

INTRODUCTION

The anthropology refers about panoply of rituals, positions,

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death-coping mechanisms and grief behaviors. The death has been always considered as a marginal phenomenon between the terrestrial existence, the hope for eternity and resurrection, and the fear of oblivion or hell suffering. When considering death rituals, dying coping mechanisms and the process of grief, obviously a departing position is particularly important, as it differs not only und an intercultural point of view, but also from an author to another (Rodger, 1991). On the other hand, particular emphasis in studying in a detailed form the death rituals has been pointed out, as long as such rituals might reflect directly or indirectly the social structure, the spirituality of the culture, the meaning of the world, and internal psychological world of a people (Morris, 1992).

Pelasgian, Albanian and other pre-Hellenic or Hellenic rituals, such as described from Herodotus and found in Aeschylus, overlap in several aspects (Herodotus, 440 B.C.; Aeschylus, 472 B.C.). The lament and the wailing for the dead has a dichotomist manifestation in two geographical extremes of Albanian territory, since the wailing process and verbal laments are led from males in North, and from females in South. Similarities with the expression of grief from Greek men (the so-called *Thrênos*, θρήνος) or from Greek women (the so-called *Goös*, γόος, γόοι) are impressive.

In Homer, the lament of Menelaus and of Penelope, offer a very similar situation, but the theme remains the same: there can be a *womanly way of grieving*, and a *manly wailing*. The *γόοι* of Penelope is described in *Odysseus*, Book XIX (Homer, 800 B.C.). The Homeric language offers therefore a precise distinction between the *Thrênos* and the *Goös*: it is not the same word, and it will not be the same action or reaction. Since *Thrênos* is performed from men and *Goös* from women, these lament forms should have been related to precise situations; should have had precise consequences, and socially would be controlled to the larger extent that the grief expression can ever be controlled, if at all.

'Persians' of Aeschylus, put into scene in 472 B.C., describes the evocation of a dead person through a necromantic ritual, mixed up with witchery and religiosity. The choir laments and recalls the spirits of the dead; the exclamations in the form of *γόοι* are in fact the equivalent of women's *Goös*, highly emotional and full of tension.

The difference between these two kinds of wailing and grief expression is described as follows: *'Thrênos was a more controlled and orderly expression of grief. Already in Homer, it consisted of composed songs, sometimes sung by professional mourners, and was the type of lament most often associated*

with men. *Goös, in contrast, was spontaneous and emotionally powerful – sometimes excessively so* (Johnston, 1999).

In fact, the *Goös* (lament of women) have taken the value of a dangerous instrument, of particular importance in cases of violent death: the audience could therefore get informed in an urgent way not only about the suffering of the lamenting women, but also about the injustice and the brutality suffered from the dead. *'The Goöi (γóoi) of women, sung in the presence of male survivors, could drive a cycle of murder and counter-murder'* (Johnston, 1999). Under such circumstances, in an attempt to avoid a vicious circle of personal, familiar and tribal revenges, there have been adopted strict rules since archaic times. Such rules were trying to discipline the funeral practices; among other elements, the number of wailing women was restricted together with the time length of the lament. Furthermore the lament should take place only in particular places (Johnston, 1999).

The wailing process and laments, under a psychological point of view, are not only aiming at the pacifying of the dead's soul, but as said above, also toward raising awareness on a possible brutality suffered from the dead. The laments are considered also a magical instrument for recalling the dead, since *'... the same specialist who could send the souls to the nether world [...] could call them up again'* (Graf, 1999).

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF MOURNERS, SELF-PUNISHMENT AND COLLECTIVE WAILING

The Albanian tradition has expanded the restrictions and the formal character of a death ritual in several aspects, since the wailing and lament had to be performed not only in particular places, but also in particular time points: no lament would ever be heard after the sunset, and it was considered a blameful thing to cry during the night. Such a regulated behavior on the other hand is contradicting the nightly crying performed in an epical song, the so-called *Ajkuna's Lament*, where an epical female figure (*Ajkuna*) laments the death of her son. The full text of *Ajkuna's* lament, and respective commentaries, are available (Elsie, 2004; *Ajkuna's* lament, Albanian Epos). The death is considered a divine curse, and *Ajkuna* laments through using the same way by imprecating a celestial object: *"the mother began to curse the moon / May your light expire, old sir moon."* (*Ajkuna's* lament, Albanian Epos). The epos in its narrative function seems to contradict the written rules of sociality; such an epical phenomenology is widely discussed

(Horkheimer, 1947).

Together with apparent similarities with the Hellenic tradition of wailing and lament, the verbal expressions of wailing process in Albanian reflect as well this dichotomist separation between the crying of a man and the crying of a woman. The Albanian tradition depicts the highlander wailing in terms of a *gjama*, i.e. a kind of particular masculine crying, sound and controlled, very similar to the Hellenic *Thrēnos*. The woman wailing is named *kuja*, very similar to the Hellenic *γόοι*; although already present in the Homeric language and for many authors considered as a nostalgic and painful way to express sorrow for someone's absence, in fact, *γόοι* in Greek like *kuja* in Albanian, respect the onomatopoeia. Both words that depict the wailing of women consist of a lengthy onomatopoeic repetition of consonants shouted during the cry of women: o-o-o-o in *γόοι* (Greek), and u-u-u-u in *kuja* (Albanian).

These elements can be traced since very remote times in Albanian regions where the performance of the wailing of men (the so-called *wailing of blood*) and the wailing of women (the so-called *wailing of milk*) will suggest a strict gender role in the process. Large collection of data and comparative points of view are available (Jahoda, 1977; Scupin, 1992; Taylor, 1992; Durham, 1929).

The collective mourning and self-punishment behaviors related, or being part of a death ritual, are as well described in the written history. Characteristics of the collective wailing of males, of Egyptian and from other origins, are described from Herodotus (Herodotus, *The history*, Vol. 1, Book 2, no. 36). The ancient historical describes also the self-punishment behaviors of antiquity. This is probably one of the most ancient descriptions of a massive mourning and burial; thus self-punishing or self-mutilating behaviors performed from Egyptians and "other men" (*faces with mud*; *beating themselves*; *cutting the hair short*) seem to be an even more ancient occurrence, than the Greek, Pelasgian or Albanian historiography might otherwise suggest (Herodotus, *The history*, Vol. 1, Book 2, no. 85).

The collective mourning has ever since become a structural part of the Balkan process of mourning and wailing for the dead persons. More than a mere process of grief, it has become a coping methodology, such as a famous narrator will describe later in the history of a Balkan city "...between the skies, the river and the hills, generation after generation learnt not to mourn overmuch what the troubled waters had borne away..." (Andrić, 1977).

During the XIX and XX century Albanian Catholic clergy

collected a rich ethnographic documentation of mourning acclamations and blood rituals. The blood rituals were performed through face and chest scratching, pulling off the hair and other gestures, all of them initially aimed at self-mutilation and therefore, accompanied with a facial or more rarely a presternal bleeding of inconstant severity.

The best collection of social and moral rules governing northern Albania is the *Kanun*, published in several editions (Gjeçovi, 2001). The rules of wailing process are detailed in several paragraphs. The *Kanun*, being mainly a social and juridical code, has been extensively and erroneously misinterpreted as the *blood feud code* or *law*; in fact the blood tribal rules administering the process of revenge in cases of perpetrated murder, are only a part of the *Kanun*. On the other hand the process of wailing and the ceremonials of death in southern parts of Albania have not been published as a single code, but rather observed and described from several authors, mainly Albanian (Tirta, 1996; Tirta, 2003; Llambrini, 1974). Some authors have shown interest also in profiling the infrastructure arrangement and the spiritual reflections it provides, through the cemetery structures and rituals differences (Bowden, 2008).

The Albanian process of lament and wailing has safeguarded some of the psychological and magical elements that are definitely unavoidable; nevertheless the evolutionary and the socio-hierarchical scope seem by far much more important in the entire system. The socio-hierarchical and the sociability purpose of a ritual wailing has been elsewhere suggested (Urban, 1988). The evolutionary aspect has to be considered in terms of a merely defensive reaction (murder and counter-murder) like some authors explain it (Johnston, 1999); it can quite well reflect the transition from a matriarchal or pre-patriarchal society to a strictly patriarchal one; or it can merely suggest a gender role partition in the entire wailing process (Herzfeld, 1993). The gender role partition is more kin to the socio-hierarchical context, thus a wailing woman somehow pursues her attempts for emancipation (Herzfeld, 1993). The female lamentation paradoxically might serve even to disempower further the women, through narratives of suffering (Goluboff, 2007).

PATRIARCHAL MYTH AND DEATH RITUALS IN NORTHERN ALBANIA

The northern remote areas of Albania have a strong patriarchal life organization, and despite the transition period they

suffered during the communism collapse, remnants of ancient death rituals, with male mourners, can still be found. Male mourning and lament are strictly regulated. *Kanun* indicates that *'When someone dies, messengers are sent out to invite people to obsequies'* (Gjeçovi, 2001). While men groan, they scratch themselves and sway back and forth (from the waist up). The women lament but do not scratch themselves. Since the scratching got out of hand and the participants at the obsequies were streaming with blood, the Catholic Church banned this custom several decades ago, under the threat of severe punishment, maintaining that such despair ran counter to the belief of resurrection. The mourning process and the emotional pain were greater when the wrecking caused from the death was important in economic terms. In cases when the only male of the family died, leaving no descendants, often expression like “The door is forever closed” or “The land is left arid” were used (Tirta, 1996; Llambrini, 1974).

The cult of the son and the patriarchal myth connected herewith predominate the entire wailing process. If we consider the *Kanun* [paragraphs 1235, 1236, 1238, 1239, 1245 and 1251], there is explicitly said: *'...when males are wailing, they with scratch themselves and will beat the breast... Females will cry, but will not scratch themselves... The wailing for the dead will be repeated thrice, and sorrow words will be pronounced nine times... The husband will not wail for his dead spouse; but the son for his mother and the brother for his sister can do so... The wailing males will line up in half-a-circle, facing the dead person... The people that have scratched their faces during the funeral of their friend, will not clean up their bleeding faces in the house where the mourning took place [...] but only upon arrival at their own home'* (Gjeçovi, 2001)

The patriarchal myth is hereby evident in northern Albanian death rituals, since only males might form a structured wailing chorus; only males might scratch themselves (blood ritual), and considering also that mourning was more expressed in cases when the last male descendant of a family died.

The tradition speaks for a “wailing of milk” and a “wailing of blood”. The norms regulating collective male wailing (*'wailing of blood'*) are very strict. No permission will be randomly given to anyone to wail for the dead person, since the list and sequence of wailing persons are preliminarily decided. The people present at the obsequies will accompany the *'wailing conductor'*, forming the half-circle around the corpse. 10-40 other males will accompany the *'wailing conductor'*; whereas in the so-called *'burned-out deaths'* [i.e.

young males or single sons dying with no children left behind] the number of wailing persons can achieve up to 80-160 males. A huge choir will echo in these occasions, wailing the grief for the death (Tirta, 1996; Tirta, 2003).

The ‘wailing of milk’ seems to be a particularity of this patriarchal way of living like the one of the northern Albania. In fact, the ‘wailing of milk’ represents the crying of the dead person’s mother. As a symbolic survival of the suppressed matriarchal power, the mother of the dead will cry for him with a strong, sound and masculine voice.



The wailing conductor is a very important male figure of the family or of the tribe of the dead person. In his wailing function he is supported from several other male mourners, whose role and number is strictly defined. (Photo of an anonymous wailing conductor shot in the Northern Albania, 1964. A courtesy of the Albanian Film Archive, Tirana, reproduced with permission).

GIVING SORROW WORDS: WOMEN AS WAILING LEADER IN THE SOUTH

Some mourning takes the form of a repeated antiphonal two-verse song sung by a *leading mourner* followed by a female chorus (Tole, 2010). The southern figure of a female leading mourner is straightly contra positioned with the male wailing conductor of the northern regions. Sometimes the leading woman is hired, and the professional figure of a wailing conductor or of a leading mourner is created. It may quite frequently happen that the wailing woman that leads the choir ignores the dead person, or has never met him (or her) in life; the woman specialized in wailing is sometimes paid for the job. Her main role is to emulate other women in the process of wailing, and to make the laments run in an organized form. Terms like *'kuja'* and *'qarje me ligjërimë'* (i.e. crying through words; words that generally characterize the life and the merits of the dead person, or memories of him with a considerable emotional burden) are used to define the women's laments or wailing, especially in those geographical regions.



The wailing ritual and laments in Southern Albania are led from a professional mourner, a woman that might be not a relative of the dead, and hired for that function.

(Photo of an anonymous wailing woman shot in the Southern Albania, 1985. A courtesy of the *Albanian Film Archive*, Tirana, reproduced with permission).

ANIMISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF MOURNING IN THE SOUTH AND OTHER ALBANIAN COMMUNITIES

In Southern Albania, such as in Myzeqe etc. the mourning and

wailing has more *animistic* characteristics: windows and doors are wide opened, so that the spirit of the dead might fly away. The corpse will be positioned facing the East (The cult of the sun – *Helios*). Everyone participating at the funeral will throw a hand full of soil over the grave (The *chthonic* cult). No burial will ever take place after the sunset. According to the same beliefs, the spirit will thereafter circulate in the form of a butterfly (Llambrini, 1974).

Burial follows on the same day or, if a person dies in the afternoon, on the next morning, after a procession to church. Females bid farewell with a last kiss in front of the door; whereas men do so inside the church. In some areas the bodies of important males are dressed in their most typical costume, with their rifle and other things associated with them (like a cigarette in the corner of the mouth), and then seated in their own yard on a chair to say their last goodbye to those who gather there. Mourning is continued for forty days in the house of the deceased and repeated at certain intervals at the graveside (Llambrini, 1974). There is no universal explanation regarding the time length of the mourning, but this period (40 days) is not a particularity of Albanians, nor it is related to any of the three monotheistic religions of the country. In fact, Rumanian and Balkan beliefs speak about a 40-days journey of earth that the human soul makes after the death (Stahl, 1987). Other cultures may suggest different periods of mourning, for example, Jewish population respect a length of mourning equal to 30 days (Dalsace, 2006).

In Eastern Orthodox areas of Albania, traditionally the remains were exhumed after three years and the bones placed in a bone house. The good persons are believed to have an easy death and the bad a hard one. Life is thought to leave a person through the mouth (Llambrini, 1974). As well as having a decorated wooden cross, the grave is surrounded by stones either as a protection from the corpse becoming a vampire (the stones hold the corpse down) or as stepping-stones leading the dead on their way to the other world. To make their voyage easier the dead also have coins placed in their mouths (in some areas also apples or other travel supplies).

Another interesting issue, affiliated to the Southern Albania discussion, is the one related to the remote communities of Albanian refugees, that left the country before the Turkish occupation (15th Century, the so-called ‘*arbëreshë*’ population). Since those refugees left mainly from the southern regions of the ancient Albanian territory, these communities (actually living and dwelling in southern Italy, mainly in Sicily and Calabria) do reflect and perform in an almost original and

unchanged form the death rituals and traditions of Albanians of the 14th-16th Centuries.

Thus, anthropological studies (mainly from Italian albanologists) have shown that the commemoration of the dead persons among the ‘arbëreshë’, i.e. ancient Albanian refugees actually living in southern Italy, is made through a so-called ‘*lauto banchetto*’ (Italian “lavish banquet”), where people is given abundant food, wine and other victuals that are even distributed and consumed inside the church, during the commemorative ceremonies (Bolognari, 2001). The animistic and pagan elements surrounding these ceremonials among the ‘arbëreshë’ of Basilicata, Southern Italy, are so described: “[...] *during the funerals, the people used to place over the corpse wine, vegetables, fruits, herbs or leaves, telling through lamentation the life of the dead person... washing their hands and distributing bread, wine and candies inside the church...*” (Verrastro, 1998).

These practices also were, like the scratching of faces in Northern Albania, initially contested, banned and abolished from the Italian bishops, who considered such practices as blasphemies. The fact is that under such restrictions, these original practices have undergone important modifications, if not fading away totally. Although animistic remnants and mythological influences seem consistent, nevertheless, the concepts of the death and of the afterlife are mainly Christian-religious, like the terminology that is used to denote heavenly and infernal worlds [the equivalents of *parajsa* and *ferri*, i.e. respectively *heaven* and *hell*, are derived from the Latin words *paradisus* and *infernum*, and so on] (Poghirc, 1983).

CONCLUSIONS

Differences in the wailing rituals between southern and northern areas of Albania, mainly how these rituals are performed in the remote and geographically isolated areas, suggest different elements of the culture, with a diversity of provenance. Through their discussion we may understand the psychical resonances, in an ethnological and infrastructural approach. Also, in discussing these differences in rituals, some authors use a more ethnologically-oriented approach; others are more interested in the infrastructure arrangement and remote spiritual reflections. A deep patriarchal character in the death traditions and rituals is met in the northern Albania; a more animistic and pre-patriarchal one (somehow merely matriarchal) is seen in the southern Albania. Hereby the animistic and the religious influences are directly implied, in both situations.

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