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### FOLK FANCY OR REMINISCENCES SHAPED AS A LEGEND?

The roots of some folk texts with no ritual function nowadays are closely connected with a remote rite. However, in the course of time, along with the loss of corresponding rituals, customs and beliefs, the songs were cut off their roots and were modified in accordance with the development of artistic vision. The plot, vocabulary and the conversational genre of the majority of such songs point directly at pagan cults and totems of birds and plants as their origin. After ancient beliefs and magic customs sank into oblivion, the songs that lost their functions passed through the stages of evolution and modifications, attached the remainders of the past they implied a different, modified format and stimulated the development of new genres.

The above-mentioned suggests that episodes from folk texts of different genres may convey ancient information. In this respect, Greek folk songs are particularly remarkable as they incorporate layers of many different epochs from the archaic period till our contemporary life, indicate the dynamic development of ethnical, cultural and religious concepts and are distinguished for long traditions for protecting ancient structures and beliefs. Especially noteworthy are the song patterns that have no parallel in other peoples' folk art.

My immediate interest is focused on construction texts. The most popular one among them is the ballad of *The Bridge of Arta* ("*Της Αρτας το γιοφύρι*").

The ballad survived in many diverse versions<sup>1</sup> which in fact are united by the same plot: hosts of builders, apprentices, craftsmen and masons are

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<sup>1</sup> Γνεύτος Π., Τραγούδια δημοτικά της Ρόδου, Ρόδος 1980, 100-101; Παππάς Ν., Ελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια, Αθήνα 1953, 131-132; Ιωάννου Γ., Τα δημοτικά μας τραγούδια, Αθήνα 1994, 48-49; Πετρόπουλος Δ., Ελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια, αρ. 46, Αθήνα 1958, 71-73. Ελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια (εκλογή), Ακαδημία Αθηνών, τ. Α', Αθήνα 1962, 319-325; Πολίτης Ν., Δημοτικά Τραγούδια, Αθήνα 2001; Πολίτης Ν., Δημοτικά Τραγούδια, Αθήνα 2001, 213-216.

building the bridge all day long just to find it collapsed next morning. Finally, a strange bird says in a human voice that the only way out is human sacrifice. And the person to be sacrificed should be neither an orphan, nor a stranger and a passer-by, but the foreman's beautiful wife (... και μη στοιχειώσε' τε ορφανό, μη ξένο, μη διαβάτη, παρά του πρωτομάστορα την όμορφη γυναίκα).<sup>2</sup> The distressed husband sends the bird to his wife to delay her coming to the building site.

– αργά ντυθεί, αργά αλλαχτεί, αργά να πάει το γόμα,

– Let her take no haste in putting on her dress, be slow at changing clothes, and bring the meal without a hurry.

αργά να πα και να διαβή της Άρτας το γεφύρι.<sup>3</sup>

*Let her go slowly and cross the Bridge of Arta* – he asks the bird. However, the messenger tells his wife the opposite. The lady believes the strange creature speaking the human language and goes to the site rapidly. The builders say her husband has dropped a ring in the arch of the bridge and that is why he is worried. The devoted wife goes down into the arch of her own will to find the lost thing. At that very moment the builders pour down the lime, and the master himself throws down a huge stone. The lady starts lamenting over her ill fate; her two sisters were also built in the foundations of other structures. The words of damnation come up from the arch:

Ως τρέμει η καρδούλα μου να τρέμει ο γεφύρι,

*May the bridge reel the way my heart is trembling now*

ως πέφτουν τα μαλλάκια μου να πέφτουν οι διαβάτες.<sup>4</sup>

*May the passers-by fall down the way my hair is coming out now.*

Some songs include follow-up phrases that sound as a response to the lady's curse:

Κόρη, τον λόγον άλλαξε και άλλη κατάρα δώσε

*Daughter, change your word and say some other spell-word;*

κ' έεις αδερφό στην ξενιτιά, μη λάχει και περάσει.<sup>5</sup>

*Your brother is in a strange land, and may he not cross the bridge.*

None of the song versions mention the name of the person who says these words – it is unknown whether they belong to the foreman, a builder or a lyric character. Anyway, they always yield the removal of the anathema:

<sup>2</sup> Ελληνικά δημ. Τραγούδια, Ακαδημίας, 1962, 320, α'9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Πολίτης Ν. Γ., 2001, 214.

<sup>4</sup> Ελληνικά δημ. Τραγούδια, Ακαδημίας, 1962, 321, α'33-34.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; 321, α'35-36.

*Αάμον ντο στεκ' η καρδά μου, να στεκει το γεφύρι,  
As soon as my heart stops, may the bridge stop?  
κι άμον ντο στεκ' ν' τα γόνατά μου, να στέκ' νε κ' οι δαβάτι...<sup>6</sup>  
And may the passers-by stand (on the bridge) upright the same way  
my knees will straighten...*

The above samples of the ballad relate about sacrifice.

The sacrifice practice had a different shape in different epochs and religions and functioned as an offering aimed at either winning divine favor or mollifying divine wrath or giving thanks or atoning for one's sins. The offering could be a human being, an animal or a plant (ears, fruit, bee comb, flower...).

Animal or vegetable offerings were popular in Christian Greece as well; and although they are not directly reflected in texts, some of folk songs are performed when the bloodless offering is being prepared (Holliday bread is being baked or boughs are being collected for the Palm Sunday). The same songs however clearly reflect the tendency of replacing either bloody or bloodless sacrifice with charity as the latter appeals to God most of all (this is directly stated in winter and spring songs (kalandas)).

The *Arta Bridge* ballad is based on a foundation sacrifice. Some researchers argue the history of Hellenic civilization provides no evidence for the actual existence of such an offering and attribute the literary descriptions of the cases solely to folk fancy.<sup>7</sup> This particular type of human sacrifice could have been out of practice in ancient Greece, but this does not mean that they were never performed throughout the history of humankind. It is hard to believe that the legends, sagas, verses and songs that survived in peoples' memories and have preserved almost identical plots belong solely to the imaginary world and are not supported with real, even if extremely remote, facts. Both ancient Greek literature and Modern Greek folklore 'persistently' picture human sacrifice episodes.<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, such traditions have a realistic basis: they go back to the remote past when human sacrifice was performed,<sup>9</sup> or to the epoch when people still remembered the real stories about human sacrifices related by their immediate ancestors. After human

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid; 123, γ'/31-32.

<sup>7</sup> Hughes D. D., *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*, London, New York 1991, 26-57.

<sup>8</sup> About human sacrifice in ancient Greek literature see Ratiiani N., *The Reflection of Ritual in Ancient Greek Literature*, Tb., 2001, 4-66 (in Georgian).

<sup>9</sup> According to A. Taylor, human sacrifice was practiced till recent times among some of the savage tribes of Australia and Africa (Тэйлор Э., *Первобытная культура*, М., 1939, 57).

offering was replaced with animal sacrifice,<sup>10</sup> the ritual that expressed old religious beliefs could well have adopted the shape of a legend.

I share the viewpoint, which explains the existence of parallel plots with different people not through close ties and mutual impacts but through identical social conditions. Similar social conditions could foster similar ideological, ‘superstructural’ models including plots.

Considering the above statement, it is not accidental that apart from Greek folklore, the plot with an in-built victim occurs in Georgian, Serbian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Roumanian, German, Lithuanian and Albanian traditions.<sup>11</sup> In almost all the above-mentioned cases, the plot is rendered through the lyrics with lost melody. There is one point to be accentuated here: a piece of verbal folk art goes through several stages before it is recited as a verse:

1. The recital of the verbal text is accompanied with dance and song;
2. The verse is accompanied with music;
3. The verse is performed with a melody but without an instrument.<sup>12</sup>

If we bears in mind that each of these stages normally took centuries, once again we may come to the conclusion that the roots of the texts with foundation sacrifice are linked to the archaic past. None of the traditions associates the ballad with a particular setting. Although in the majority of Greek versions the structure is the Arta Bridge, some of them mention different place-names (Sperchios, Pynios, Arachova, etc.).<sup>13</sup> Likewise, similar tradition is related to buildings in nearly all parts of Georgia: apart from the Surami fortress ballads<sup>14</sup>, folk tradition offers a number of other legends: the builders of the Mindali fortress in Racha failed to erect walls until a young boy was built in; a woman and a cow were mured in the walls of the Kelasuri fortress in Apkhazeti; the construction of a fortress in the Signaghi district of Kakheti required the sacrifice of a lad who was the only-begotten son; likewise, according to the Imeretian tradition, Levan Bakhtadze, the only son, was allotted to be built in the church wall; sister and brother were walled up

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<sup>10</sup> The Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac is often cited as an illustration of the process. According to the story, God had mercy on Abraham and bade him to sacrifice a lamb instead of his son.

<sup>11</sup> Georgian Folklore, vol. III, ed. by M. Chikovani, Tbilisi, 1964, 303-318 (in Georgian); Криничная Н. А., Эпические произведения о принесении строительной жертвы, в кн. Фольклор и этнография, Л., 1984, 154 -161; Байбури А. К., Строительная жертва и связанные с нею ритуальные символы у восточных славян, в кн. Проблемы славянской этнографии, Л., 1979, 162.

<sup>12</sup> Georgian Folklore, 113-114. The same idea is developed by M. Chikovani (Georgian Folk Literature, 1956, 48-60 (in Georgian)), A. Veselovski (Историческая поэтика, М., 1940, 201) and A. Taylor (Первобытная культура, 1939, 163).

<sup>13</sup> Πολίτης Ν. Γ., 2001, 213-214.

<sup>14</sup> Umikashvili P., Folklore, vol. I, Tbilisi, 1937, 177-178 (in Georgian).

in the Iluri St. George church.<sup>15</sup> Strangely enough, such traditions are linked to Christian churches. Likewise unusual is one of the Cyprian versions of the tradition about a victim built in a bridge, which says that the human sacrifice was performed under the will of the Lord and Archangels:

*Ἦρθεν βουλή που τον Θεόν τζαί που τους αρχαντζέλους,  
The will of the Lord and the Archangels came on,  
μεν βάλη που το γένος του, γιοφύριν εν κρατίζει.<sup>16</sup>  
If he (the foreman) does not mure up his family member,  
The wall will not remain erect.*

Certainly, the above abstract is not an argument for associating the story with the Christian epoch (although the Arta Bridge was evidently built at the outset of the 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D., when Arta was the capital of Epirus Kingdom)<sup>17</sup>; likewise, Georgian legends mentioned above cannot be contemporary of the period when the mentioned Christian temples were built; in both cases, the stories reflect the deep imprints the reminiscences of the remote past left in human memories. And the mentioning of the Lord and the Archangels is nothing but an attempt to put a Christian veil on the text related to a pagan ritual. This assumption is reinforced by the following phrase from the Ivron Monastery manuscript:

*Τζαί μιάν Αγίαν Τζερκατζήν, χριστιανίν ημέραν,  
On St. Tzerkatzin's day, the Christian day,  
έρασσαν που το γένος της, έρασσαν τζ'επερνούσαν...<sup>18</sup>  
Her (the walled-up victim's) descendants went onto it (the bridge)  
And crossed it (successfully)...*

It is hard to say whether the name really belongs to a holy saint or is invented or represents an altered dialectical version. Anyway, it is certain that the names of the saint and the Archangels were added to the text later. In later versions of the ballad, the sacrifice is not God's will. Moreover, some researchers believe that in the Pontic patterns of the Arta Bridge the master is talking ('bargaining') with the invisible demonic spirit, the rival of God.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Georgian Folklore, 1964, 306-307.

<sup>16</sup> Ελληνικά δημ. Τραγούδια, Ακαδημίας, 1962, 323, δ'4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Ευσταθιάδης Σ. Ι., Τα Τραγούδια του Ποντιακού Λαού, Θεσσαλονίκη 1992, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Buvier B., Δημοτικά τραγούδια από χειρόγραφο της Μόνης των Ιβήρων, Αθήνα 1960, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Ευσταθιάδης Σ.Ι., 1992, 46.

Foundation sacrifice was normally performed in honor of the house-spirit<sup>20</sup>, the so-called mother-spirit of the place or the angle of home.<sup>21</sup> In the belief of different peoples, such a sacrifice worked as a tribute for the space<sup>22</sup> and acted as a guarantee<sup>23</sup> for the ‘validity’ of the facility. This belief is vividly reflected in a song where a certain abstract power addresses the foreman several times to have him specify what exactly is offered:

*Τι δίνεις πρωτομάστορα, να στήσω το γιοφύρι; ...*  
*What will you give away if I erect the bridge?*  
*Τι τάξεις πρωτομάστορα, να σου το θεμελιώσω;...*  
*What do you promise if I lay the foundation?*  
*Και τι μου δίνεις, μάστορα, να σου το στερεώσω; ...*  
*What will you give me, master, if I make it (the bridge) solid?<sup>24</sup>*

The foundation offering is the best and the most distinguished: according to the Georgian version, it is the only son, and in Russian and Balkan folklore, it is a beautiful woman, the foreman’s wife. The plot versions with different peoples have another remarkable point in common: the structure is destroyed on its own, without outside interference. The only way out is to make a sacrifice; however, in the majority of cases, the person to be offered is not aware of his/ her lot. He/she becomes a victim unexpectedly, deceitfully, regardless of his/ her own will.<sup>25</sup> However, some cases are different – sometimes, the victim is fully conscious of what is bound to happen and in fact performs self-sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, close attention should be paid to the Pontic version<sup>27</sup> in which the lady is sorry she has to leave her baby in the cradle (...πονιά, κλαίω το βρέφος μου, που τ’άφησα στην κουνιά...). Anyway, she is absolutely determined and even sings a song as she descends into the abyss after her husband’s hammer (Πέντε οργιές στο βάραθρο βουτάει τραγουδώντας – she goes five feet down the abyss singing a song). The episode can be interpreted in terms of symbols: The woman-mother, the symbol of fertility, is sacrificed to the fulfillment of artistic and social tasks.

<sup>20</sup> Криничная Н. А., 1984, 160. According to Russian beliefs, the person who dies first in the family occupies the place of the house-spirit. In some Russian villages people still perform certain ritual customs to honor the spirit. *ibid*; 161.

<sup>21</sup> Javakhishvili Iv., *The History of Georgian Nation*, vol. I, Tb., 1960, 65 (in Georgian).

<sup>22</sup> Криничная Н. А., 1984, 155.

<sup>23</sup> Байбури А. К., 1979, 162.

<sup>24</sup> Ευσταθιάδης Σ. Ι., 1992, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Παππάς Ν., 1953, 131-132; Πολίτης Ν., 2001, 214; Ελληνικά δημ. Τραγούδια, Ακαδημίας, 1962, 320-325, α’,β’, γ’, δ’,β’; Байбури А. К., 1979, 157-158.

<sup>26</sup> This is vividly illustrated in the prose version of the Surami fortress legend; see Chonkadze D., *The Surami Fortress*, ed. by M. Zandukeli, Tb., 1932, 98.

<sup>27</sup> Ευσταθιάδης Σ. Ι., 1992, 38.

According to one of the versions, the lady prepares thoroughly before going to the building site: she puts on her clothes and jewels made of gold, decorates her head with golden syrmas (cf: Iphigenia's head is embellished with garlands at the sacrifice site) and takes a golden apple (*Πουπάνω χόρησεν χρυσά, πουκάτω χρυσταλλένα, τέλια τα πουπανότερα, χρυσά, μαλαματένια, χρυσόν μήλον εμ που 'πκιαεν*).<sup>28</sup> According to another version, on Saturday the foreman's wife goes to the bath, on Sunday – to a wedding party and on Monday – to the lake of the *monster* (*Σάββαν επήγεν σο λουτρόν, την Κερεκήν σον γάμον, και την Δευτέραν τον πουρνόν σο Δρακολύμν' ευρέθεν*),<sup>29</sup> where according to the version, the bridge is being erected. These patterns clearly imply the fusion of preparations for sacrifice and the wedding ritual, which points to the mystic union of the bride-victim. Similar convergence (of the bridal ritual and foundation offering) occurs also in Russian folklore where the woman to be offered is dressed as a bride in white clothes and best footwear, receives blessings and is specially visited on the day of sacrifice to be accompanied to the sacrifice site.<sup>30</sup>

Some Georgian researchers believe the custom of carrying heavy iron chains around St. George church in Gori is the symbolic repercussion of an old offering ritual.<sup>31</sup> Presumably, the same is true about laying a piece of adornment or a cross in the foundation of a building.

In the interim between muring up a human being and laying a cross in the facility foundation, the consciousness of humankind went through a series of important changes, and human lifestyle was remarkably altered, while folk texts, which abolish territorial and chronological boundaries between spaces owing to the properties pertinent to different epochs, nations and social strata, have preserved the human sacrifice ritual with all its impressiveness.

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<sup>28</sup> Ελληνικά δημ. Τραγούδια, Ακαδημία, 1962, 324, δ'29, 31.

<sup>29</sup> Ευσταθιάδης Σ. Ι., 1992, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Криничная Н. А., 1984, 161.

<sup>31</sup> Javakhishvili Iv., 1960, 54.