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ON TWO UNUSUAL RITUALS

Happiness and sorrow, torture and consolation, hope and despair, life and death are companions in all epochs and centuries, in the history of a country or a life of an individual. None of the greatest creators and architects has interpreted this logical, consistent and inevitable coexistence the way it is reflected in folklore and ritual traditions. We should not exaggerate if we said that Greek folk songs acquire a peculiar place in this respect as they express the above mentioned coexistence in a double way, which is determined by two basic factors:

1. Their performance is evidenced throughout the long history of the Greek people and therefore, along with conveying the ages-old wisdom and experience, they imply convergence of mythology, history and contemporaneity.
2. Since they are directly related to ritual customs, they acquire a comprehensive character and are equally interesting to folklorists, ethnographers, anthropologists and literary critics.

Close links between folk songs and diverse rituals related to the human existence is a natural fact. However, Greek folk songs are particularly remarkable due to two facts mentioned below:

1. The bridal ritual incorporates mourning elements.
2. The funereal ritual includes ceremonies characteristic of a wedding.

Before considering each of the two cases separately, we should mention that the content, symbols, vocabulary, character and ritual functions of the two types of songs are so similar that it is difficult to discern the initial correspondence between the songs and the rituals – i.e. whether the songs were initially composed for funerals or a wedding. Scholars also admit that some

purely bridal lyrics were later pertained to or transformed into the ritual of mourning.¹

Elements of Mourning in the Bridal Ritual

Mournful content of many of bridal songs would not appear strange if the latter were performed at the wedding arranged regardless of the couple's desire and consent, or if the couple suddenly met an accident. However, the songs are free from such a content, while their number gives no grounds for pertaining them to a specific case.

It would be in the least surprising if love songs included tragic tones and lamentations caused by love-related suffering. However, Greek love songs are very cheerful and merry. Against such a background, the mournful character of a big number of bridal songs is rather unexpected, the more so as they usually follow the songs to be performed during the eight day preparations to the wedding – the songs that are full of joy, blessings and hopes.

In the course of the long history, the bridal songs have acquired the earnestness and respectfulness, hopefulness and gaiety – the properties of the Greek bridal ceremony. Every song illustrates the people's respect for each mystical element of this significant event. The songs likewise convey happiness and diligence on the part of the couple's relatives and friends throughout the long preparatory ceremony preceding the wedding. The universal cheerfulness and excitement, buoyant and merry tunes and lyrics suddenly give place to a heavy and grave melody and the content full of despair and sorrow. Nature, environment and home are pictured the way as in funereal songs:

Σήμερ μαύρος ουρανός, σήμερ μαύρη μέρα

.....

Φεύγεις κι ο ουρανός βρόντα και η γης ούλη ταράσσει
κι ο τόπος όπου καθόσουν κλαίει και ανασεδιάζει²

Οι καρδιές λυγίζουν, τα μάτια όλων βούρκαναν³

An ordinary reader would find it difficult to guess that the lyrics pertain to the group of bridal songs. Many of them even exceed the usual mourning songs by their grievous character. According to G. Saunier, by their vocabulary, they resemble *The Lamentations of the Virgin* and *The Mourning over Dygaenis*.

In some songs, the bride mourns and invites death the same way as a sister grieves over her dead brother in funereal songs:

¹ Saunier G., Ο γάμος και ο θάνατος. Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια, Αθήνα, 2001, 503.

² βλαστός Π., Ο γάμος εν Κρήτη, Αθήνα, 1853, 74.

³ Παππάς Ι.Α., Με αφορμή τα δημοτικά μας τραγούδια, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2001, 275.

Και γω να μείνω και ας χαθώ⁴
ας μείνω και ας πεθάνω

Moreover, the bride leaves a will to her mother asking her to water her flowers with dew in the evening and with tears in the morning:

Μάνα μου τα λουλούδια μου
συχνά να τα ποτίζεις
το βράδυ βράδυ με δροσιά
και το πρωί με δάκρυα⁵

The mother mourns as well and promises to never smile again:

μισευγείς θυγατερά μου και
πλιό δε θα γελάσω⁶

Similar to the funereal songs, the bridal lyrics also have the bride asking her mother to keep away from a "stranger" (ξένος – "a stranger", "a foreigner"), who wishes to kidnap her daughter:

Τους ξένους μην τους μπάζεις⁷
και μης τους κουβεντιάζεις⁷
τους ξένους μην τους δέχεσαι,
τραπέζι μην τους κάνεις⁸

Remarkably, in bridal lyrics, a "stranger" refers to the bridegroom, while in funereal songs the word is applied to Death, Charon.

Κρύψε με μάνα, κρύψε με να μην με πάρει ο Χάρος⁹

Presumably, the old, initial version of the above song belonged to the bridal songs group and sounded as follows:

Κρύψε εμένα, κρύψε με ο ξένος μη με πάρει¹⁰

It would take us long to consider common symbolic images of wedding and funereal songs (e.g. killed or kidnapped hind). Our immediate concern is to trace down the reason which determined inclusion of such grievous songs

⁴ Saunier G. Η κρίση του γάμου.Θρήνος και τελετουργία. Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια, Αθήνα, 2001, 413.

⁵ Πετρόπουλος Δ. (ed.), Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια,τομ.Β, Αθήνα,119, 1'.

⁶ Βλάστος Π., 75.

⁷ Saunier G.,Ελληνικά δημοτικά τραγούδια, Τα μοιρολόγια, Αθήνα,1999, 427.

⁸ Op. cit., 427.

⁹ Saunier G, 2001, 503.

¹⁰ Πετρόπουλος Δ., 117.

in the bridal ceremony – the songs which are so mournful that some of them were later performed only at funerals. We can easily find an answer if we consider the phase of the ceremony, when the songs are performed.

Parcels of the bride's dowry are all packed during several days of preparation and are already taken to the bridegroom's house. Close relatives of the bride are in the yard, while the bride herself is waiting by a white horse, which is to take her from her father's home. The young lady is not only leaving her habitual, native environment, but is starting a new life, which does not prove easy. (Here we should also bear in mind that the songs were composed in the epoch when marriages were arranged in accordance with fathers' will irrespective of their daughters' opinion, which was common in Greece.) The sorrow is mutual – the bride was parting from her home and parents are letting a strange man to take their daughter. Everyone and everything is petrified at the moment:

Στέκουν τα άλογα στρωμένα
 στέκει η νύφη αρματωμένη
 Στέκονται κι' οι συμπεθέροι
 στο κοντάκι ακουμπισμένοι
 Να κινήσει δε κινάει
 να καθήσει δε καθέται
 δεν μπορεί ν' αποχωρήσει
 απο μάννα και πατέρα¹¹

The bride awaits encouragement from her parents, her father in particular, to help her decide to leave or force her to do so. This is the moment when the bride performs a purely funereal song:

Φεύγω κλαίοντας
 φεύγω παραπονιώντας¹²

The above is followed by mother's responsive part. Usually, in Greek ceremonies, mothers are allowed to a greater extent to express their emotions. It is difficult to make out by her words whether she is seeing off her daughter – the bride, or is mourning over her dead child:

Άνοιξαν οι εφτά ουρανοί, τα δώδεκα
 βαγγέλια
 και πήραν το παιδάκι μου από τα δυό μου χέρια
¹³
 μισευγείς θυγατέρα μου και πλίο δε θα γελάσω.

¹¹ Saunier G., 2001, 412.

¹² Παπιάς Ι.Α., 275.

Φεύγεις κι ο ουρανός βροντά κι η γης ουλή τεράσσει
κι ο τόπος όπου κάθουσουν κλείει κι αναστενάζει¹⁴

Mournful character dominates among the songs performed at the moment when the bride parts from her father's home, while the post-bridal ceremony lacks grievous tones. This can be explained in the following way: the mourning bears a symbolic and ritual sense and allows the bride to "give herself airs" and "look effected" for a while. Her parents emphasize that they are losing and the bridegroom is acquiring their treasure in the person of their daughter. Another reason which puts an end to lamentations is the fact that the bride enters the bridegroom's family from that moment and at once assumes a new role. Correspondingly, the rituals emphasize the significance of marriage and responsibilities of the couple as well as of their close relatives and friends.

Mourning over the bride's departure is an intrinsic part of the ritual lyrics, while no such songs are performed by the bridegroom and his household. This may be explained by the fact that a traditional Greek family does not part with their son after his marriage, as the latter either stays in his father's family, or settles nearby.

Mournful lyrics become less and less characteristic of the bridal songs of later period as the bride's lot is much eased and her opinion upon her own marriage is considered. Consequently, the funereal mystery gradually loses its emotional component, which results in the transfer of bridal lamentations to the ceremonies of funeral and parting.

Investigation of evidence of mourning elements in other peoples' bridal rituals lies beyond our immediate goal. At the present stage, we may only assert that unlike Georgian tradition, the above mentioned phenomenon exists in the Hellenic world, and is present in the Greek bridal folk songs.

The Bridal Ceremony at the Funereal Ritual

The opposite phenomenon, the bridal ceremony at funerals does not pertain to the Greek world alone. However, according to the sources at our disposal, other peoples' folklore has preserved fewer materials in this regard, while Greek sources convey rich and invaluable information about this controversial phenomenon. Among the bridal lyrics performed at funerals two types are distinguished:

1. Songs composed specially for the ritual.
2. Songs that transferred from the bridal ritual to funerals.

¹³ Πετρόπουλος Δ., 118

¹⁴ Βλάχτος Π., 74

In parallel cases, type 2 songs were only slightly altered. The less significant is the difference, the more tragic is the mourning emotion. In such cases, people usually perform the bridal songs that express the tragedy of parting and fear of the "stranger", as mentioned above.

Numerous funereal songs picture a situation typical of a wedding. Only, the symbol of a bride, whom a youth is going to marry, refers to the earth. Here we usually come across the following epithets:

νύφη πικρή νύφη κακή
μαύρη γης νυφούλα¹⁵

As commonly acknowledged, the Greek mystery of mythical marriage was related to the early death of young men who went to the nether land unmarried. Remarkably, if a betrothed young man or girl died, the imitation of the bridal ceremony was performed at the funerals. (Some songs say that Charon takes away the bridegroom and leaves the bride. In other cases the mourners lament that bridal crown and one candle are left lonely.)

Φέρνουν το στέφανο μόνο και τη λαμπάδα μία³

Often, mourners remark that the wedding lacks gayety and laughter:

Στον Άδη και στην μαύρη γη
δεν είναι γλέντια και χοροί¹⁶

The above makes it clear that the songs considered were composed specifically for funereal rituals, like the lyrics which say that the wedding will take place in Hades.

Στον ουρανό χορεύγουνε
στον Άδη γάμο κάνουν
Ο χάρος κάνει μια χαρά
παντρεύει τον γιό του¹⁷

According to the songs in this category, people are invited to the wedding party either by Charon, or a widow, or any of the dead person's parent. This occurs when the latter is also dead and welcomes his/ her child in the nether land.

¹⁵ Saunier G., 1999, 288

¹⁶ Op.cit. 289

¹⁷ Op.cit. 290

Most surprising are the songs in which Charon or the deceased speaks in the first person. This undoubtedly indicates that the mourners used to play the part of Charon or the deceased, which aimed at overcoming fear of death and the dead.

The ritual, which was compulsory to perform, evidently, helped the mourners express their grief in all its intensity, assert existence of the nether world and eased their sorrow.

The unique rituals considered above vividly picture links between death and marriage. The funeral mystery at the bridal ceremony and elements of bridal ritual at funerals are the phenomena which will always attract scholars' particular interest.