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Lab Epic Historic Songs – A Story of Continuity and Change

The epic historic songs of the Balkans have a significant value for the cultural self-definition of constructed nations, regional, religious or ethnic groups. In Albania orally transmitted songs, especially epic and heroic songs fulfil a decisive role in shaping the Albanian self-image.¹ The famous Albanian writer Ismail Kadare put the historical significance of epic songs in the following words: "No outstanding personality of the Albanian world has passed through this world without a song."² That this tradition is endangered since the socialist cultural repressions and especially by the effects of globalization is pointed out only occasionally.³ A case study of 6 different homophonic and polyphonic versions of the song "Abdyl Frashëri" from the region of Labëria in South Albania reveals exemplarily changes in text, musical form, singing style and performance practice over the course of almost 80 years.⁴ The first consulted version was a text collected in 1936 in Delvina, the most recent version recorded by a polyphonic group from Saranda in 2005.

The songs for "Abdyl Frashëri" belong to the genre of the epic songs, more specifically the epic historic songs, which have to be clearly differentiated in performance practice and content from epic legendary songs. While the latter group is mostly performed by a vocal soloist with accompanying instrument and is related to the time before and during the Ottoman occupation, often based on orally transmitted legends, the first group is executed predominantly in choral style and with reference to actual historical events. These songs are also called *këngë trimash* (heroic songs) in Albanian. They can be divided

¹ Cf. Reuer, Bruno B.: Musik, In: Grothusen, Klaus-Detlev (Ed.): Albanien, Südosteuropa-Handbuch, Vol. VII, Göttingen 1993:715.

² Kadare, Ismail: The Autobiography of the People in Verse, Tirana 1987:34.

³ Cf. Sugarman, Jane: Engendering Song – Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings, Chicago 1997:336-340.

⁴ For a detailed analysis cf. Pistrick, Eckehard: Lab Epic and Historic Songs in the Saranda region (South Albania) – Continuity and Change of an Oral Tradition, Master Thesis, Faculty of Philosophy University of Halle 2005:79-97.

further into subcategories according to their content. Pipa distinguishes between a) songs of national liberation (praising national heroes), b) songs of social revolt (praising popular leaders who fought against feudal lords and governments), c) vendetta songs (connected with blood feud activities), d) songs of *kaçaks* or *hajduts* (praising outlaws or rebels).⁵

The epic song belongs to the sphere of "mythistory", while the myth serves in the structural-functionalist interpretation of Schöpflin as a "way of organizing history, so as to make sense of it for a particular community."⁶ Central myths relevant for epic songs in South Albania are the a) myths of territory, b) myths of redemption and suffering (including the ante mural myths, which argue a national sacrifice to save Europe from the invasions of barbarians and Orientals) c) the myth of unjust treatment d) the myth of divine or profane election (in terms of moral superiority) and e) the myth of military valour.⁷

There can be distinguished roughly two kinds of main characters: the over regional, institutionalized heroes and the regional heroes. To the first category belong Skanderbeg, Abdyl Frashëri, Çerçiz Topulli and Ismail Qemali. These heroes represent a proud national history reflected and personalized in their lives and deeds. All of them are in the one or other way connected with the concept of nation, independence and self-determination. And all of them are associated with a constructed perception of history as a line of continuity along which threats and challenges to Albania, as well as Albania's reactions to these pressures, remained consistent throughout the centuries. The genre of epic songs is characterized by historical continuity. Its texts reach without interruption from the medieval heroes to the main characters of the *rilindja* (Albanian Renaissance) and Enver Hoxha.

The regional heroes at the contrary represent the values, history and characteristics of a certain region and their inhabitants. They do not belong to the national pantheon, but they are constitutive for the collective memory of a certain region. These regional heroes such as the *kapedanei* (local chieftains or captains) are used for distinguishing a specific regional group (whether defined

⁵ Cf. Pipa, Arshi: *Albanian Folk Verse: Structure and Genre*, Munich 1978:17.

⁶ Schöpflin, George: *The Nature of Myth – Some Theoretical Aspects*, In: Schwandner-Sievers, Stephanie and Bernd J. Fischer (Eds.): *Albanian Identities – Myth and History*, Bloomington 2002:26.

⁷ Cf. Schwandner-Sievers, Stephanie and Bernd J. Fischer (Eds.): *Albanian Identities – Myth and History*, Bloomington 2002:10-11.

by religion, ethnicity or gender) within the “community of anonymity”,⁸ within the constructed nation.

Every performance situation of epic historic songs is highly significant. The characteristic relation between musicians and audience, the physical behaviour of the musicians, their stance, gestures and facial expressions are relevant in interpreting epic songs as much as it is the musical and textual analysis. Sitting or standing in a circle is considered essential for producing a good vocal sound with aesthetic qualities. Usually the semi-circle positions centres around the first voice (*Marrës* -“who takes the song”) with the second voice (*Kthyes* -“who is turning the song”) right of him and the fourth voice (*Hedhës* -“who throws”) left of him in close distance, so that these voices can be in continuous acoustic and eye contact. The second row, which forms a semi-circle behind the soloists, consists of all drone (*Is o*)- singers. The parts in Albanian polyphony are generally indivisible from one another because of the interwoven relationships between them that form the inner logic of Lab singing. The singers in Lab polyphony play unchangeable, irreplaceable roles. Every performance incorporates the element of negotiation between the singers. The selection of the songs, considered as representative for a village or a region is negotiated as is the choice of a “representative” textual version and the realization of a certain sound ideal. Epic songs require a special quality of sound adapted to its heroic textual world. In Lab polyphony men and women generally sing with force and full voice in chest register. “While singing, the soloists not infrequently fall into a state of complete rapture. Completely immersed in singing they forget about their surroundings. In some cases they get worked up about a certain excitation, that they are unable to perform a complete melodic line and that they can just produce solely tones in suggesting manner.”⁹ Because epic historic songs belong almost exclusively to the sphere of men’s singing, it is also connected with the vocal ideals of men’s singing, such as the *zë të trashë* “thick voice”, the wide range of ornamentation techniques, frequent interjections of exclamations and energetic rhythmic

⁸ Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

⁹ Stockmann, Erich and Doris Stockmann: *Die vokale Bordun-Mehrstimmigkeit in Südalbanien*, In: *Les Colloques de Wégimont*, Paris 1958:104.

accents. In this sense the singing style represents an aural counterpart of the visual presentations of gender.

Asking finally about the changes and consistencies in an oral tradition based on the comparison of different texts and musical versions of the song "Abdyl Frashëri" recorded by ethnomusicologists such as Erich Stockmann, Qemal Haxhihasani or Benjamin Kruta one might sum up the recent trends under three viewpoints: "generation reversal", the shifting conception of singing from a participatory activity to a performative activity¹⁰ and "musical impoverishment." An in-depth analysis reveals not only the transformability of songs in an oral music tradition, but also a process of "musical impoverishment" throughout half a century. "Musical impoverishment" should be understood in this context as "a substantial loss of or reduction in musical expressions."¹¹ Applied to the case of Albania this term seems appropriate to describe the shrinking knowledge of texts and the decreasing variety of regional singing styles. Villages are about to become "muted" or "without song" ("pa këngë") as Stavro Zisos, the last singer of the village of Vrion, explained me embarrassed. All the above mentioned trends are connected in the one or other way with the collapse of the socialist regime, the collapse of organized cultural activity in rural areas, the end of political and cultural isolation of Albanian people and the spell of migration.

The traditional role of multipart songs in Albanian folk culture seems to be endangered as well as their oral transmission by learning through listening and by practicing in events and regular meetings of multipart groups. The fact that music is gradually losing its functionality profoundly threatens the musical practice. Contexts for singing are disappearing and singers die without having had the possibility to transfer their knowledge to others. Singing as intergenerational practice, practised on any communal occasion is no longer the general case. The shift of singing from a participatory to a performative activity seems to be predetermined.¹²

Two of the main factors which accelerated this development were the migration and the mass media. The last years have seen the advance of popular music

¹⁰ This development has begun with the *folklori i ri* movement.

¹¹ Kartomi, Margaret: The Process and Results of Musical Culture Contact: A Discussion of Terminology and Concepts, In: *Ethnomusicology* 25 (2), 1981:239.

¹² Cf. Sugarman 1997:342.

into village households mostly under influence of 1) the returning of labour migrants from Greece and Italy, 2) the so called "summer children", who bring the latest pop music from the larger cities into rural communities (provoking passive musical reception instead of active performance activities) and 3) the Greek and Albanian television programmes.¹³ Television does not only carry the wave of popular music, it has in general replaced the information exchange via song and substituted the "oral literature" for a pseudo-objective information stream. That means that the concept of *muabet*, of communicating through storytelling, singing, dancing and/or playing musical instruments, is considered as inadequate in relation to advancing modern communication technologies.

On the other hand, traditional music has assumed a new integral role after the collapse of the socialist regime. This revival is the result of the preceding stigmatisation of the aesthetic dimension during the socialist dictatorship. Singing epic historic songs today, recalling and reinterpreting national or regional history means also to reposition and to reaffirm Lab identity within new contexts such as the globalization.

Sugarman comes in regard of the Prespa songs to the conclusion that the repertoire will reconsolidate itself between the contrasting poles of the old style songs and the newer media songs.¹⁴ This challenge is also posed onto the Lab repertoire whose most astonishing feature was its ability to renew itself over the course of time. This ability, rooted in an amazing virtuosity to adapt musical versatility and textual knowledge to changed conditions is expressed in improvisations such as the *përs'hëndetje* (Songs for Well-Being), in new emigration songs built on formulas of the older *këngë kurbeti* or in political satirical songs. These examples show that this style of singing is not only rooted in the past but also able to comment on contemporary aspects of life. As long as Lab multipart singing does not lose this decisive quality, this unique tradition can be considered a living multipart tradition. Considering that Albania is one of the youngest countries of Europe, with 42 % of the total

¹³ Cf. Tower, Caroline: Jugend und Geschlechterrollen im Wandel, In: Kaser, Karl, Robert Pichler and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers (Eds.): Die weite Welt und das Dorf, Vienna 2002:227.

¹⁴ Cf. Sugarman 1997:340.

population under 19 years of age,¹⁵ the reaction of the young generation to the experience of migration will be crucial for the persistence and survival of traditional music.

Përmbledhje

Këngët epike historike të kënduara në mënyrën shumëzërëshe kanë një vlerë të veçantë për konstruktimin e identitetit shqiptar dhe kujtesës kolektive. Këto këngë janë formuar nga pjesë të një sfere mito-historike dhe personazhet e saj mund të ndahen në dy kategori kryesore: heronjtë e institucionalizuar dhe mbi-rajonale, që formojnë një panteon kombëtar, dhe heronjtë rajonale, që reflektojnë vlerat, historinë dhe karakteristikat nga një krahinë të veçantë. Me ndihmën e krahasimit midis 6 versioneve të ndryshme të këngëve të "Abdyl Frashëri"- t, nga disa vende të Labërise, në shtrirjen kohore nga 1936 deri në 2005, mund të dokumentohet një shembull vazhdimësie dhe ndryshimi brenda një tradite gojore. Një analizë teksti dhe muzikore që merr në konsideratë edhe kontekstet etnografike ku janë krijuar dhe luajtur këngët, tregon jo vetëm ndryshimin brenda një tradite gojore, por edhe një proces "varfërimi muzikor" në këndvështrim të pakësimit të stilit rajonal dhe pakësimit të gjatësisë së teksteve. Një tjetër fenomen i konstatuar, që zë fill me krijimin dhe dinamikën e "Folklorit të Ri" në kohën e socializmit, është roli i institucionalizuar që luajnë këngët e kohës së hershme në kundërshtim me rolin tradicional të të kënduarit si një aktivitet social me pjesëmarrjen kolektive. Këto probleme janë të lidhura të ngushtë me rënien e regjimit të Enver Hoxhës, me rrënimin e aktiviteteve të organizuara në zonën fshatare, me fundin e izolimit politik dhe kulturor të Shqipërisë dhe me emigracionin "e mallkuar". Një rol kryesor për vazhdimin e traditës do të luajë reaksioni i brezit të ri përballë eksperiencave të emigracionit dhe medias. Nga ana tjetër, këngët epike-historike në Labëri luajnë një rol vendimtar për ri-pozicionimin dhe ri-vërtetimin e identitetit rajonal në kontekstin i ri të globalizimit. Me disa kategori të ri-krijuara dhe improvizuara, si këngët e kurbetit apo këngët përshëndetëse, këngët shumëzërëshe labe

¹⁵ UNICEF Situation Analysis Children's and Women's Rights in Albania, Tirana 1998:14-15.

kanë treguar aftësi të komentojnë pa ndërprerje mbi aspektet e përditshme të kohës.