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Research Article

## IDEO-THEMATIC AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF ALBANIAN RITUAL SONGS

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### ABSTRACT

*Man learned to celebrate religious rites, feasts of the hunt, of the beginning of the seasons, and to accompany them with ritual songs, which we may still encounter in areas not affected by 'modernity'. However, it is difficult to imagine a dumb civilization, unable to sing to express its feelings. Therefore, it is the song, which has often given voice to the collective passions in the great moments of labor, trust (idealism), and pleasure.*

*When we talk about mythology, as a worldview phenomenon, we can say that it is very ancient, and has always been subject to the historical specifics and demands of different epochs. So, mythology has undergone changes not only in the informative and narrative level of the subjects but also in the ideological interior, changes which will be the object of study.*

*Knowing that mythology is a specific ideology, as is poetry and art, on which the epochs have left their indelible marks we will undoubtedly treat mythology very carefully from this perspective, as well. Man, in the face of nature and vain beliefs, has always felt weak, so this weakness has pushed him to create various rites, by virtue of which he tried to influence the mysterious forces, to bring him good fortune throughout the year.*

**Key words:** *Ritual songs, holidays, myths, faith, mysticism, etc.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This article also focuses on connections, similarities, parallels, and influences between biblical literature and Albanian oral literature with particular attention to motmot ritual song, which is an issue that for well-known reasons has been excluded from the object of folkloristic studies.

Oral literature has begun to be written late, similar to other areas of national culture, that is, to be more precise, it has begun to be collected and studied late. The Albanian National Revival is considered a period of Albanian national culture, when the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural values of the people's heritage have been put at the service of the history and life of Albanians, and have also gradually become the property of cultural heritage of European proportions.

The song has often given voice to collective passions during the great moments of work, trust (idealism), and pleasure. But the rites themselves are nothing but a display of the inability of people to properly understand the phenomena of nature and society and of the desire to influence them. The dream of understanding and ruling nature gave birth to oral literature in its earlier form, i.e. poetry. Later oral literature began to evolve into very short stories in prose, especially in the forms of brief anecdotes and tales, given that earlier forms either did not have sufficient courage and potential or they could not present and articulate profounder thoughts and experiences.

It is known that deities in human form belong to a later stage in the history of religions. However, it would be a mistake to think that this was a sudden and immediate transformation. Hence, this paper also sheds light on this slow and gradual transition.

## **2. THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MYTHS AND RITUAL SONGS**

Mythology, as a very ancient worldview phenomenon, has been subjected to the historical specifics, needs, and demands of different epochs. It has undergone changes not only on the superficial, informative, and narrative aspects of the subjects but also on internal ideological aspects. That is why special attention will be paid to distinguishing the initial primitive stage of the myths and the changes they have undergone over time. Mythological narratives, processed through imagination, were created as a reflex of a kind of empirical experience that people gained from the unbelievable observations of the various phenomena of the world around them and from the instinctive desire to comprehend their meaning. In these narratives, there was nothing mystical or religious at the beginning, in the sense in which they were used (Tirta, M. 2004), nowadays, however, these terms are distinguished for their profane character (Tirta, M. 2004). The interactions between myths and ritual songs do not surprise anyone; they are cooked in the same kitchen and by the same hand; they revolve around the same figures, revealing and proving the inability of primitive man to understand the nature of society, and why not the unconditional submission to its laws, although in ritual songs this kind of submission is more apparent. Many rituals involve protecting humans, livestock, and crops from the "wrath" of the forces of nature. So the changes that myths have undergone over the centuries are normal and inevitable, even justified, because they prove that mythology is a specific ideology, as is poetry and art, on which the epochs have exercised huge influence and left ineffaceable marks. Man's weakness in the face of nature and vain beliefs led to the emergence of different rites, through which man tried to influence the mysterious forces in order to bring him good luck throughout the year. Thus, all their rites and songs are related to the farmer's interests in raising cattle, in good harvests, in good health, and the increase of the workforce in his family.

However, it is not surprising that the content of ritual songs serves as a key to understanding the myth (Tirta, M. 2004). In Greek mythology, the role of the god Apollo is, doubtless, one of the most complex. As per his ancestry, the old thesis of Vilamovich-Melendorf has already been overcome, according to which he was originally a god of the Middle East who was later Hellenized (D'Anna, N. 1996). In a 1975 article, Walter Burkert noted the philological closeness of the name of the god with Apéllai, the annual feast of the hands, during which young boys were accepted among men, that is, entered into puberty (D'Anna, N. 2004). This is an important fact, given that not only does it justify one of the main attributes of Apollo, as a protector of youth, but also that in the Doric world this role is associated with a special moment of adolescence, with the performance of initiating rites which turned the boy into a man. In Athens, this aspect of spiritual life became particularly clear during the etiquette ritual, when ephemerals were accepted among adults and the polis launched a "new year" to enter another stage of community life. In this way, Apollo became one of the protagonists of the life of the polis, because he defended the true wealth of a people, its youth.

Even from a panoramic perspective of Albanian oral literature, in particular of the epic of the Knights Templar, it can be clearly noticed that there has been no lack of interest of scholars in finding and determining the motives and parallel figures of this great corpus of traditional values as classical forms of modeling the aesthetic mythological thought. However, this article will also focus on an issue that for well-known reasons has been neglected from the object of folklore studies, that of connections, similarities, parallels, and influences between biblical literature and Albanian oral literature, with special attention to motmot ritual songs. Of course, our goal is neither to evangelize ritual songs nor to secularize the Bible, but simply to trace possible interactions between figures and their motives, as the first step to a deeper critical examination of the relationship between these two worlds. The motifs and figures that will be selected to illustrate and examine the cultural parallels are found not only in Albanian secular tradition but even further. Some are inter-Balkan motives, some are European, but here we are first interested in their mutual influence on Albanian developments. In most cases, the biblical literature, which we refer to as the separation of parallels with the ritual songs of the weather, "is a medium, a 'mediator' of an older, pre-biblical, mythological, pagan subject." But it must be said that some of the great legacies of this subject in their biblical modeling, in the way they were acquired in this literature, changed content. The main motive that will be considered here as an indisputable cultural parallel is, without a doubt, the resurrection, in its three stages: pagan resurrection (Sinan, Sh. 2000), can also be considered as a renewal of nature, non-gospel biblical resurrection, and evangelical resurrection. However, what should be emphasized immediately is the triple relationship between mythology, biblical literature, and popular literature, where it is difficult to separate the giving role of one from the receiving role of the other and vice versa. According to Tvrtko Cububeliq, "ritual songs are the oldest creations, which in ancient times accompanied a certain rite, expressing a collective supernatural action and giving special features to an important moment of social life" (Cububeliq, T.1988, p.63). Older or not, ritual songs, especially those of the motmot, because of their pronounced utilitarian character, sometimes were not considered as a genuine piece of oral literature or literary folklore. According to Shaban Sinani, "the literary folk tradition is represented by the open structure of standards and clichés that have long been preserved. These connections have allowed aesthetic functions to interfere with pre-folk communication, which at an early stage was of a ritual and informative character" (Sinani, Sh. 2000, p.74). There were even earlier opinions according to which, "motmot songs in Albanian folk literature, for the most part, have been registered in an impaired and fragmented manner, given that even the rites have been gradually fading away" (Shala, D. 1968, p.48). In the same article, the same author writes that "over time, with the cultural development of society, songs of a supernatural nature, like the rites themselves, lost their original character and meaning and gradually faded away, or they

even winded up in children's songs, just as a good part of the rites ended up in children's toys” (Shala, D. 1968, p.88).

### **3. THE UTILITARIAN CHARACTER OF RITUAL SONGS**

Since we are talking about the utilitarian character of ritual songs, let us refer to a very eloquent case. Levi-Strauss has defined his theory of symbolic efficiency, relying on a ritual song sung by the shaman *kuna* to relieve work-related sufferings and pains. (*Kuna shamans are a tribe of Indians living in an autonomous region of Panama, famous among anthropologists for their rich mythical and ritual heritage*). The song refers to a myth that *Muu*, the goddess responsible for the formation of the fetus and to childbirth, has seized *Purba*, a part of the soul of the woman who is giving birth. The song describes this difficult reaction following a classic scheme: we get sick because we lose part of our soul; then the shaman makes a journey into the supernatural world to find and restore the balance between the forces of life. According to Levi-Strauss, the value of the text lies in the discovery that the mythical journey takes place within the woman who is giving birth, within all the *Purba*, those of the heart, the bones, the teeth, and the hair. The path of the goddess *Muu* is the vagina; her home, the ‘deep, dark she’ is the womb, while the penetration of the shaman and the protective spirits resembles a sexual union. The song is for Levi-Strauss a psychological therapy that addresses the sick organ, the body. “Shaman feeds his patient with a language in which some unformulated states can be immediately expressed and cannot be formulated differently. It is precisely the transition to this form of expression that (enables at the same time the most normal experience of a situation which would otherwise be chaotic and irreversible) causes the unblocking of the physiological process, or the reorganization in the right direction of the process during which the pregnant mother intervenes” (Strauss, CL 1966). Levi Strauss compares shamanic cure to psychoanalytic one; both strive to make unconscious conflicts and resistances cognizant. Thus, Shaman and the psychoanalyst, the first speaking and the second silently, establish a direct connection of the consciousness with the unconscious of the sick. The splendor of these two figures allows us to experience today an early, scientifically unarticulated experience (Severi, C. 1998). As it has long been known, similar to other areas of national culture, oral literature has begun to be written late. Namely, it has begun to be collected and studied late. The Albanian National Revival is considered as a period of Albanian national culture, when the intellectual and spiritual values of the Albanian heritage have been put at the service of the history and life of Albanians, and have gradually become part of a cultural tradition of European proportions. In this regard, suffices to mention only the studies of Elena Gjika or the translation of De Rada's masterpiece entitled “Rhapsody of an Arbëresh Poem” (1866) into five main European languages. Historically, it is known that the oral tradition of the Albanian people was collected by intellectuals and writers of old literature (Budi, Bardhi, and others), but it has also been collected and studied by foreign writers, diplomats, intellectuals and members of various study expeditions, who have visited Albania. However, as it was said, Albanian National Renaissance was what laid the foundations for both the systematic collection and the study of the oral literature of the Albanian people, which has later been introduced to and became part of the European cultural opinion and beyond.

Therefore, it is worthwhile mentioning the most outstanding writers and intellectuals of this great Albanian period, starting from Jeronim de Rada's father, Mikel de Rada, continuing with Thimi Mitko and Zef Jubani and going to Prenushi and other distinguished and prominent representatives of this age. However, problems of this nature arise even when studying songs and calendar rites. Each season has had its festivities, with similar rites and special rites. Man learned to celebrate religious rites, feasts of the hunt, of the beginning of the seasons, and to accompany them with ritual songs, which you can still encounter in areas not affected by ‘modernity’. However, it is difficult to imagine a dumb civilization, unable to sing to express

its feelings. The song has often given voice to collective passions in the great moments of work, trust (idealism), and pleasure. But the rites themselves are nothing but a display of the inability of people to properly understand the phenomena of nature and society, as well as of the desire to influence them. Whenever it comes to rites, it is impossible to avoid so-called animation. The psychological matrix of this conception of primitive peoples is closely related to the oniric activity of people, to the fear of disease and death, but also to any other situation where the soul seemed detached from the body. These experiences would push a primitive man to believe that he had an alter ego, a second self, with a parallel existence very different from that of the everyday. Through transcendence, primitive man would extend this feature not only to other living beings (animals, plants) but also to things. The meaning that the term has today, as the spiritualization of 'things' that have no soul and from which man is excluded, is, in fact, a reflection of our religious culture. Under these conditions, "creating a second reality through excessive fancy was an objective need because through myths and legends people tried not only to explain the phenomena of nature but also to find the key to deconstructing them, even in their fantasies... these hidden forces that acted in such an incomprehensible way in the life around them" (Xhaxhiu, M. 1997, p. 95). The dream of understanding and ruling nature gave birth to oral literature in its earlier form, poetry. Later oral literature began to formulate very short stories in prose, especially in the form of anecdotes and tales either because earlier forms did not have enough courage and potential to do so or they were not able to present more broadly and lucidly certain thoughts and experiences. It remains unclear whether the narrative has shifted from one form of expression to another, as it remains unclear how much impact did economic, social, and cultural circumstances have in this process. On the other hand, in Albanian mythology, the 12 nights of December and January are mentioned, which fall within the period from December 25 to January 25. These are the 12 nights when, according to the belief, wolf-men come out on the streets. During this period, the devils tease and attack women, disturb the cattle, and their souls bring death according to the beliefs. But by nature, this belief does not belong to these days at all, because *buzmi* is more the spirit of resurrection and joy, and it has nothing to do with wolf-men and devils, much less with the spirit of death and fear. There seems to have been a shift in the date, as well. This is because in its beginnings mythology was simpler and rudimentary and animal figures predominated over plant ones.

«In their primordial stages, deities had the form of wild animals and trees. Hence, deities in the human form are of a later stage in the history of religions. Zeus for example before becoming a king of Olympus was an eagle in some tribes, a woodpecker in some others; Hera was a cow; Athena – an owl and Artemis – a bear. It would be a mistake, therefore, to think that this is a sudden and immediate transformation. It is rather a very slow and quite gradual transition. Many elements later show, in most cases, the theriomorphic and dendriomorphic practice that preceded anthropomorphic religions». Sometimes the animal, once the god himself, becomes a faithful companion, as for example the eagle of Zeus, the owl of Athena, the serpent of Demeter, etc. Behind every fantastic imagination lay a real phenomenon. The flash coming from the collision of clouds with opposing electric charge was attributed to Zeus throwing lightning from the top of Olympus; the storm as a natural phenomenon was attributed to Poseidon, who, angry, stirred the bottom of the sea with his trident.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

There is no phenomenon of nature, but also the spiritual world and the relations between people, that is not captured and conceived with much powerful poetry and imagination by the conscience of the ancient primitive man. In time the gods, who in the beginning were only the abstract personification of good and evil, became in the imagination of men real living beings, similar to humans. Like these, the gods were clothed with all the good and bad qualities, with all the human passions, with all the virtues and vices, but in greater proportions. Gods living on

Olympus, like humans on earth, eat, drink, sleep, hate and love, quarrel and fight with each other, plot and trap each other, cheat on each other, and all this is done with even greater cynicism and violence than in human society.

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