

ȘTEFAN MARIȘ,¹ ROMANIA

Key words: funerary ceremonial, ceremonial songs, imagery, body-soul, deceased-alive

The Funerary Rhymes in Maramureș

Summary

In the Maramureș county of today, the funerary rhymes are still performed in certain villages on the Iza, Mara and Cosău Valleys, as well as in the Lăpuș county. In the Codru and Chioar counties this moment of the funerary ceremonial is present only rarely. A general characteristic for the entire Maramureș, the area we are interested in, is that researchers have not identified in their field research ceremonial funerary rhymes that could be considered very old or very important in our folklore (in a list that C. Brailoiu, and others have drawn in the past century). Nevertheless, such rhymes are wide spread, and they accompany the family of the defunct during the three days of the ceremonial funeral. We must underline, though, that in the funerary rhymes in this area we can identify imagery that is generally present in ceremonial songs, and this indicates that such rhymes used to be present on a much larger area than we witness today.

¹ Centrul Județean Pentru Conservarea Și Promovarea Culturii Tradiționale Maramureș/Univ. de Nord Baia Mare;
ccpmm@rdslink.ro

The Funerary Rhymes in Maramureș

Within the natural process of secularization, which became manifest once with the development of modern civilization, numerous rituals undergone a metamorphosis and became simple ceremonial songs (with a more or less festive character), in banal popular celebrations in which the sacred stone cannot be traced back, or identified. We can not say the same about the funerary ceremonial. In this case, the sacred has been very well preserved, especially as, in the traditional mentality, death is not considered to be just a mechanical passing towards total disappearance, but a real threshold to the other world; this is the moment when man has to answer for everything he has done in his life. Funerary rituals and rites are preserved today in Maramureș, with they more profound meanings, as well as many other attitudes and behaviours within the family customs; they are archaic understandings of the relationships between *body-soul*, and *deceased-alive*. The initial meanings of such attitudes and rites have remained almost unaltered, and thus, the changes and transformations that have appeared during centuries have not proved to be significant, in this case.

In this study, we will try to formulate a few considerations related to an element that accompanies, in a dramatic and spectacular way, the unfolding of the funerary rites: the funerary rhymes.

Among the oldest cultural customs, the funerary rhymes, as well as funerary songs in general, are subscribed to the so-called *universals of sorrow*, that is, they constitute a form of mourning that can be identified in any region in the world². These impressive human creations, together with the other funerary moments, have preserved their archaic forms almost unchanged since immemorial times, as only they, as experimented forms, can be efficient in the moment when the soul advances towards the unknown; they guide the “white wanderer”, and helps him settle, according to the customs and untroubled, in the world beyond.

The structure of the funerary rhymes in Maramureș is based on a relatively restricted number of fix motifs, which impose a certain stability and unity to this ritualistic sequence within the funerary ceremonial. We need to mention, from the very beginning, that when placed under minute analysis, the funerary rhymes present a powerful lyricism in their texts: “However hard the funerary rhymes try to narrate facts and events in the life of the deceased, the dominant notes are lyrical”³, a phenomenon that we may identify in the other regions of our country, as well.

An essential observation has to be made regarding the differentiation of funerary rhymes as compared to other ritualistic songs: the first represent a free and spontaneous expression of feelings, while in the second case we witness a regulated and normative form. This allows a diversification as to the content, and highlights the mastery of the funerary rhymes interpreters to improvise. The funerary rhymes can, thus, be expressed very freely, and they very often have a story-telling characters (especially in their longer parts). Still, there exists that ‘backbone’, easy to identify, which is formed by the more frequent motifs that are always present in such funerary

² Stubbe, Ellen, *Formen der trauer*, 1985, Apud Sperl, INGO, *Țara fără dor, Funcția psihologică a bocetului românesc*, Ed. Univers, București, 2000, p. 26

³ I. C. Chițimia, *Căntece populare funerare*, în vol. *Folelorul românesc în perspectivă comparată*, București, Ed. Minerva, 1971, p. 179

rhymes. Thus, we may refer to the following examples: the direct address to the defunct, the naming of the kin relationships, the circumstances the death and the feelings of the mourners, the relationship with the other dead, the wish of the deceased that he be forgiven, a presenting of the daily events in the deceased family as well as in the village, a requirement addressed to the deceased to let other dead villagers know about certain events, etc.

Being closely linked with the funerary ritual, the funerary rhymes can be grouped, according to the place of their performing, as follows: a. in the house; b. on the way to the tomb; c. at the gate of the cemetery; d. at the grave. According to the age of the deceased, the funerary rhymes can be: a. for the young and b. for the old; and according to the kin relations to the funerary rhymes



Înmormântare din Valea Stejarului; foto: Felician Săteanu

interpreters, there are several groups: of the mother, the father, the daughter, the son, the virgin maiden, the unmarried youth, the husband, the wife, the sister, the grandparents, the grandchildren, the in-laws, the godparents, the godchildren, the neighbours, etc. The most common, and, at the same time, the most accomplished from an artistic point of view, are the funerary rhymes for the mother, the death of the mothers representing a great loss for the children who remain among ‘strangers’, without guidance and affection:

“Death has wandered ‘round our garden
 For more than a week now
 And it came this morning early
 Took away what it first met here
 Our beloved mother
 She will no longer comfort us (...)

We came to you so you can teach me
How to live on this earth
How to guess the thoughts of strangers;
As I live among these strangers
Like a blossoming tree amongst thistles
The thistles grow wide and long
And the tree becomes so dry
So have I remained, my dear
Oh, mother, as I miss you so”⁴

This rhyme was ‘sung’ by the deceased woman’s daughter in the morning, when the church bells were heard. The second time the bells are tolled, at noon, the emotional tension the rhyme interpreter feels is amplified:

“Oh, my mother, mummy dear
I will no longer have you here
I would like you to have lunch with me
But death has come to call on you.
All around our large garden
Your footsteps can be seen
And if heavy rain should come
Your footsteps will be seen no more
And if heavy rain should rain
There will be no more footsteps around
Oh, you see, may you be damned
Cause you do no right and just
And you took my mum away
Oh, my heart hurts, so much now (...)”

Towards the end of the day, and bells toll once more, the woman will ‘sing’ about her dead mother even more dramatically and displaying more expressive power:

“Oh, my mummy, mummy dear
You have left me here so sad
The pillar of the house is broken
And I’ll be comforted no more
The pillar of our house is broken
And we’ll never be the way we were
May you, hidden settling break in two
And leave our mum to us
May you hidden settling break in three
So that mum could stay with us

⁴ Inf. Ana Butcure, 69 years old, 2008, Lăpuș, Maramureș

May you hidden settling break in four
So you never take our mum away
May you hidden settling break in five
So she may stay here with us (...)
Hey, mum, don't you take pity on me
For letting me so lonely here
With the strangers around me
How will I live, I wonder.”



Înmormântare din Valea Stejarului; foto: Felician Săteanu

Suffering and hardships that orphan children will be confronted with, are also mentioned in the funerary rhymes for the husband, in which the mourners also underline the condition of the widowed woman:

“A wife without a husband
Finds no mercy in the world
A wife without a man
Finds no mercy in the village”⁵

The funerary rhymes for the unmarried youth are very special, as they are structured around the motif death-wedding.

“Stephen, darling, how I'd kiss you
'Cause you were born on a Saturday

⁵ Inf. Chira Maria, 74 years old, 2006, Gârdani, Maramureș

And you got engaged on Sunday
Like the beautiful Carpina,
Who was born up in the forest
And was brought up in your name.
With the bride of ugly clay
Coming from the bottom of the earth.”⁶

When a young maiden dies, the emotional underlining is extremely intense, the virgin being compared with a “flower wrath”, with a “field rose”, etc. In the same metaphoric line, they develop the contrast between the *living flower*, which opens its petals towards the sun, and the dead girl (*the dried flower*):

“How I’d kiss you, blossomed tree,
That so young have lost your flowers!
How I’d kiss you blossomed flower
That so early have dried out (...)
Be so happy, you cemetery,
‘Cause we bring you the nicest flower,
We don’t bring you so it may bloom
But we bring it to rot and die”⁷

The formal cohesion of the funerary rhymes, its specificity is imposed by the sequence of motifs that it is formed by. Most of these motifs present a certain degree of stereotyping, which allows the funerary mourning performers to use them according to circumstances – as they can ‘fit’ in the cases of any dead person, or, rather, in any category of deceased persons. Such rhymes display no identifying details, that might make it usable only in certain cases, they are valid for each case. From the point of view of form, such motifs appear in rhymes that are crystallized, deeply embedded in the collective memory of the community, the differences between one variant and another being almost un-noticeable. Among the traditional motifs that are present in such rhymes, which are worth mentioning both for their expressive power and their originality, we may count the following: the road of no return, the cursing of death, the uninvited death, the black shirt, the house of the deceased, the footsteps of the deceased, the pitiful mother, the death-wedding, the food for the road, etc.

The funerary rhymes, these “elegies of rare beauty and full of grandour”⁸ follow certain rules, which are observed strictly, out of consideration for the deceased and the community. These rules are different from one area to another, sometimes from one village to another, and they are related to the local tradition, being in perfect harmony with the entire system of customs and rites that are considered necessary for the funeral and the cult of the dead. Thus, for example, the dialogue in the funerary rhymes is always constituted as a meditation, and contains some heartbreaking interrogations, in which the formulas are full of love and sorrowful words for the deceased.

⁶ Dumitru Pop, *Folclor din zona Codrului*, Baia Mare, 1978, p. 312

⁷ D. Pop, op. cit., p. 307

⁸ Gheorghe Vrabie, *Zur Volkskunde der Rumänen*, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989, p. 251

The funerary rhymes are always an act of fictive communication between certain concrete persons, easy to identify, among between the mourning woman and the deceased, between daughter/son and mother, between wife and husband, etc. Generally, such formulations contain certain fragments from the biography of the deceased, a narration of the circumstances in which he/she died, a description of the mourning relatives whom he/she left behind. The funerary rhymes use as a means of expression the descriptive and narrative lyricism, but also affectionate expressions, among which, very often, they insert diminutives and familiar addresses. The expressing capacities are in full consonance with the psychological disposition of the mourners, but, also with a type of behaviour that is characteristic of human beings around death. Consequently, we may state that funerary rhymes are the affective expression of a profound sadness, in which the voice has an overwhelming importance.

The funerary rhymes, maybe among the first expression of human feelings, are more than a simple language, more than words and phrases, they bond all people, irrespective of their ethnicity, as they have the capacity to appeal and be felt by all humans, as any other manifestation of sorrow.

Works Cited

- Brăiloiu, Constantin, *Opere V*, Studiu introductiv, traducere și îngrijire de Emilia Comișel, Editura Muzicală, 1981
- Chițimia, I. C., *Cântece populare funerare*, în vol. *Folclorul românesc în perspectivă comparată*, Ed. Minerva, București
- Pop, Dumitru, *Folclor din Zona Chioarului*, Baia Mare, 1978
- Sperl, Ingo, *Țara fără dor. Funcția psihologică a bocetului românesc*, Ed. Univers, București, 2000
- Vrabie, Gherghe, *Zur Volkskunde der Rumämen*, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1989