

Singing back the *kurbetlli* – Responses to migration in Albanian folk culture as a culturally innovative practice

Eckehard Pistrick

Martin-Luther-University Halle/Université Paris-Ouest-Nanterre, eckehard.pistrick@musikwiss.uni-halle.de

Abstract

The massive ‘brain-drain’ which has afflicted Albania after 1991 in almost all cultural fields affected also to a large respect the folk culture. A state-sponsored system of cultural houses spread all over the country collapsed. State-supported folk culture ceased to exist for a transitional period. Villages with a once vibrant tradition of multipart singing became emptied and muted, without songs. The cultural landscape had to reorganise itself. Within this process of the reorganisation of cultural institutions returning migrants played a decisive role. Money from returning migrants resulted in the creation of mostly privately sponsored *shoqëritë*, promoting regional cultural heritage. The social absence of the migrants became culturally felt. The folk repertoire of songs turned into a tool for responding and commenting on human loss as well as on tragic events such as the drowning of Albanian migrants in the Strait of Otranto 1997 or the hijacking of Flamur Pislari 1999. The leading figures of this culturally highly innovative practice were local intellectuals called *rapsods* who tried to relate the nostalgic *mythistory* of *kurbet* before the 2nd World War with the actual mass migration through a shared emotionality. Through a highly effective use of metaphors and performance devices taken from oral folk poetry and the repertoire of death laments they show the ability to react and comment on the present migrations and to fix them in the memory of the community. Based on fieldwork in South Albania 2004–2009 this paper will try to evaluate how migration has contributed in the cultural realm to the identity-building processes in post-communist Albania.

KEYWORDS: Albania, folk culture, songs, migration

Introduction

Migration has been treated in scholarly discourse primarily as a social and economic process and has received relatively little attention from the cultural point of view. This neglect of culture, and in particular folk culture, in discussing migration phenomena is regrettable, because culture has the ability to comment on and question migration history. At the same time, migration has often threatened the existence of cultural expressions themselves (Pi-

strick 2005). In addition, it can provide important insights about the impact of migration on the communities ‘left behind’. The following thoughts examine how migration shaped contemporary folk culture in Albania and how migration songs commented on the social, economical and mental changes caused by migration.

Commenting on migration through folk culture – proverbs¹ and songs – means to bring forward not only the official national histories of migration as a collective tragedy, the ‘myth of redemption and suffering’ as part of the Albanian ‘mythistory’ as Schwandner-Sievers (2002: 10) put it, but it also makes visible local and highly individual ‘histories’ of migration, which can significantly contrast with the national narratives. Cultural expressions can help us to understand on a basic level how migration has shaken the social foundations of rural Albanian society, its traditional perceptions² and the attempts of the people to absorb and frame these experiences. Inspired by Kadare’s *A History of People in Verse* (1987), it would be worthwhile to write another history of migration through the songs of the people.

Songs have a role to fulfil in traditional Albanian society. They ‘refer to the individual, conceived exclusively as part of a family (or network of families) and in relation to its attendant needs and priorities’ (Mai 2001: 98). Singing about migration means to build up a ‘world of pain’ (Al.: *dhimbje*), which coincides with the emic view of migration and death as related to each other. The migrant is conceived metaphorically as a ‘living dead man’.³ It is therefore not surprising that lament formulas re-appear in a stylised and encoded form in migration songs.

Albanian migration songs have been treated in scholarly ethnographic discourse as textually defined genres, in which the appearing term *kurbet* or similar associations serve as doubtless ‘indicators’ of what is and what is not a migration song (Vasili 1981). Discussion with singers reveals that the choice of what to term a migration song ‘depends more on performative context than on thematic content’ (Herzfeld 1981: 51). It would be therefore more useful to treat migration songs as a ‘performative category’ (Herzfeld 1981) characterised not only through a musical form but also through a specific performance context, behavioural expressions and the gender of the performers. Furthermore, migration songs possess musical characteristics which allow the setting of the migration song repertoire apart from the ordinary song repertoire in emic thought.

After a short account on the multiple interpretations that migration songs received in socialist Albania, I want to discuss migration songs collected in south Albania and Kosova,⁴ in terms of a highly innovative cultural reaction, connecting the ‘mythistory’ of *kurbet* before World War Two with the mass migration of the 1990s through an overarching

¹ The most common proverb about migration in Albania is ‘A man becomes a man out in the world (*kurbet*), a woman becomes a woman over the cradle’ [literally: ‘*Kurbet* knows the man, cradle knows the woman’] (Al.: ‘burrin e njeh kurbeti, gruan e njeh djepi’).

² The migration is perceived as an attack to the cell of traditional society, family, hence it has ultimately led to the ‘degradation of the family’ (Al.: ‘degradimi i familjes’ Sejдини 2006), caused by the separation of the parents.

³ A concept which is shared across the Greek-Albanian border.

⁴ Collected during field-research in the regions of Saranda, Gjirokastra, Erseka 2004, 2006, 2007 and in Kosova 2007, supported through grants of the ECF Foundation and DAAD Exchange Service.

concept of pain. Migration songs can be seen in this context as a ‘tool’, possessing the potential to mobilise memory and the emotions connected with them.

Interpretations of Migration songs in Communist Albania

From the communist point of view, migration was a closed historical chapter; migration appeared ‘like a bitter remembrance of our life in the past’ (Vasili 1981: 11). Being considered a part of the oral national history, Albanian migration songs (*këngë kurbeti*) and recruit songs (*këngë nizamësh*), treated as historical sources (in the sense of textual sources), served to recall this bitter migration memory. Both types of songs served as an illustration of the miserable conditions in the past, which were overcome through a new social model. They were used as a means for the self-representation of the achievements of the new regime in face of the background of a defamed pre-socialist past (Pistrick 2008: 96). Although official communist propaganda considered *kurbet* and *nizam* a fateful event in Albanian history, it never saw in it the sign of fatalism or pessimism, but a reaction against the ‘Turkish-Islamic superstructure, against the unprecedented cultural barbarity’ (Vasili 1981: 10).

Although one observed melancholy and mental states of dejection in the texts, one could interpret a feeling of protest into these songs. Even musical parallels to *vajtim* (lament) were admitted, but the texts were interpreted in the spirit of socialist realism as containing life optimism and expressing the ‘stoicism of the Albanian women’ (Vasili 1981: 10). Behind these interpretations stood the implicit assumption that individual grief could be transferred onto a generalized social level where it could be surmounted through social community and pro-sociality. This assumption was the basis for most textual structures of migration songs created during communist time within the *New Folklore (Folklori i Ri)* movement. The creation of new songs was promoted and honoured at the National Folk Festival in Gjirokastra (Pistrick 2005: 72, 189). It can be summarized that these songs were considered firstly as real historical sources, describing political or economic miseries, surmounted by the achievements of political independence and collectivisation.

Secondly, the texts were interpreted to avoid fatalist or pessimist meanings and were intended to strengthen the positive, forward-looking aspects and values such as heroism in *nizam* and stoicism and optimism in *kurbet* songs.

Thirdly, the songs contained depersonalization, generalization and exemplification of individual destinies onto a social level (Pistrick 2008).

Refreshing the pain – migration songs and memories in a transitional Albania

The breakdown of the communist regime in Albania in 1991 not only had disastrous economic and social consequences but also threatened the system of state-supported folk culture whose most important event was the National Folk Festival of Gjirokastra, established in 1968, a successful attempt of the elite in power to discipline diversity, to exhibit and frame folk culture politically. The system of *houses of culture (shtëpitë e kulturës)* ceased to exist, singers and musicians had to reorganize themselves into *cultural*

associations (*shoqata kulturore*). Singing, once a participatory activity for strengthening and reaffirming social bonds and sharing of moral values, became an increasingly staged activity of semi-professionals in urban settings.

Migration was an important factor and accelerator of this development, while fundamentally changing the musical practice in the villages of south Albania. Villages became ‘muted’, ‘without song’⁵ as Stavro Zisos, the last singer of Vrion, explained me, with some embarrassment. The demographic change resulted in a generational reversal in musical practice and a considerable loss of song texts, a factual musical impoverishment. In a wider context, this musical impoverishment was only one indicator of a general cultural crisis in rural areas caused by migration. Return migrants also contributed considerably to a change of musical preferences in rural settings. Popular music advanced into village households not only through Greek and Italian television programs, but also through the returning labour migrants from Greece and Italy and the so-called ‘summer children’, who brought the latest pop music from urban centres into rural communities (Tower 2002: 227). Considering that Albania is one of the youngest countries of Europe, with 42 % of the total population under 19 years of age (UNICEF 1998: 14–15), the reaction of the young generation to the experience of migration will be crucial for the persistence and survival of traditional music.

Talking and singing about migration is intrinsically connected with emotions. Singers and local folklorists refer to migration frequently as a collective historical burden, a *hard plague* for the Albanian people,⁶ quite similar to the *Ottoman yoke*, omnipresent in Balkan national histories.

Given that the migration song is seen as a digestion and/or reflection of real experience, the song is experienced in the same way as migration is experienced in reality. A migration song may be described in emotional terms as a work of nostalgia,⁷ or as the result of bad luck and misery⁸, it may be heavy (*i rëndë*) as the experience of *kurbet* is hardly bearable. It may be filled with pain (*dhimbje*), which can turn into longing (*mall*) or touch (*mallëngjim*) through singing.⁹

But how and by whom is a migration song ‘born’?¹⁰ The first migration songs are cries improvised on the spot, at the symbolically charged places of departure for the migrants.¹¹ They are improvised and not a product of intellectual reflection, or how a local historian put it ‘no one sat down on a table to think and write it down with a pencil.’¹² Singer Nazif Çelaj distinguishes two possible ‘births’ of a migration song: the first is effectuated by the *rapsods* (local poets, historians, singers or self-acclaimed intellectuals), who reflects about passed migratory events, acting as a poet. The second ‘birth’ is effectuated

⁵ Al.: ‘pa këngë’.

⁶ Al.: ‘plagë e rëndë për popullin shqiptar’ Loku 2007.

⁷ Al.: ‘punë e nostalgjisë’, referring to Freud: ‘Trauerarbeit’.

⁸ Al.: ‘punë e mjerimit’.

⁹ Neziri 2007.

¹⁰ The term ‘born’ in relation to a song is common among Albanian singers.

¹¹ Al.: ‘këto improvizoheshin në vend’ Sejdi 2006.

¹² Al.: ‘nuk ulej ai të mendohej me kalem’ Sejdi 2006.

by the singer who uses the given text only as a stimulator (Al.: *ngacmues*) which serves as a guideline for the singer ‘to work with the text, creating variations and an idea of how to sing.’¹³ It is through this process that a song comes into being.

In the small town of Kaçanik in Kosova migration songs were historically positioned into the very beginnings of the Albanian migration movement. For all interviewed folklorists and musicians and singers, it was clear that this kind of repertoire was inherited from the Arbëresh of Italy. The famous song *Moj e bukura More! (O thou beautiful Morea!)* was considered the initial point for the genesis of the repertoire. A local informant would add on this occasion that ‘the first migration songs were created when the people began to move from their own soil.’¹⁴

Especially discussed are the particularities of the *old* (pre-World War Two) and the *new* migrations (after 1991). Local historians like Luan Sejдини from Pilur consider the recent mass migration as exceptionally tragic.¹⁵ This exceptionality is expressed also in emotional terms: ‘the pain is fresher’¹⁶ in the case of new migration songs. The songs are consequently seen as written with more *dhimbje* (pain) which has to be shared ideally between performer and audience.

Creating migration songs today has passed from the village collective into the hands of a few *rhapsods* who comment on the tragic events of mass migration referring to inherited models of speaking about *kurbet*. As singers in a country where the ‘doors are opened’¹⁷ (i.e. the borders), they were inspired to ‘write an immeasurable number of songs.’¹⁸ Such texts became immensely popular and circulated after their emergence among the peasants, becoming part of the oral heritage.

A typical example for a rhapsodic text of a migration song, using effectively common formulas such as regional affiliation, allusions to death, nature and destiny was recorded in Tepelena.¹⁹ The text points particularly on the Albanian concept of personal honour (*nder*) which is endangered through the repressions of migration (associated with shame-*turpë*). Nevertheless the concept of honour is defended successfully by the migrants facing their destiny – despite their mothers mourning for them.

¹³ Al.: ‘këngëtari duke punuar tekstin krijon variacionin, iden e kënduarit’ Çelaj 2007.

¹⁴ Al.: ‘kangt e gurbetit jan kriju kur ka fillu populli me u shpërngul pi trojeve t’veta’ Naziri 2007.

¹⁵ Al.: ‘emigracioni tani është jashtë zakonisht tragjik’ Sejдини 2006.

¹⁶ Al.: ‘dhimbja është më e freskët’ Çelaj 2007.

¹⁷ Al.: ‘sepse u hapën portat’ Çelaj 2007.

¹⁸ Al.: ‘kanë shkruajtur pamasë’ Çelaj 2007.

¹⁹ Performed by Enver Jaupi a famous *rhapsod* of the town, accompanied by Islam Kalimi, a poet from Tepelena, and poet Kristaq Shabani from Gjirokastra.

<p>Përse është mbuluar deti? Dallgët po thyejnë shkëmbenjtë Të zezat nëna ç’i gjeti vajtojnë ku i kanë djemtë. Oh Labëria me derte Të zuri halli me gurrë djemtë ikën në kurbete nënn e lanë të sëmurë. Histori e saj e vjetër Me plagëtë që ka mbi supë Nëna s’ndërrohet me tjetë[r] oh djem të mos ju vij turpë.</p> <p>Dufi që u del nga gjiri akoma nuk është shuar bijtë tanë kanë nur vezir ndërsa vetë gjymtyreshkurtuar.</p>	<p>Why is the sea covered? the waves are breaking the rocks the poor mothers, what has happened to them They weep for where the sons have gone. Oh Labëria with sorrows The trouble threw stones over you the sons went to kurbets And left their mother ill Its old history with the wounds on her shoulders you cannot find another mother[elsewhere] oh sons don’t feel ashamed [for your mothers while in foreign lands]. The wrath which comes out of your breast is not yet extinguished our sons have a face [as good- looking] as that of a vizier While they themselves [look as] shortened/ cut limbs.</p>
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Table 1: *Përse është mbuluar deti?* (Why is the sea covered?) Tepelena, 17 August 2006

For light-music singer Gagica, his own migration to Switzerland was a migration of the old type in the sense that ‘he has worked the whole day and that he lived only for a piece of bread.’²⁰ For him the old *kurbet* was *heavy* (*i rëndë*) and consisted mainly of ‘sleep and work.’²¹ Contemporary migration (after the 1990’s) at the contrary is for him no longer *kurbet* in the traditional sense of the word.

These different migratory experiences are related for him interestingly to an *old* and *new* style of verbalising and singing. He recalled that he became conscious of these changes through remembering a meeting in 1979 with a wise and blind Albanian singer, living in Italy who dictated him the following song text:

Merri o det këto dallgë
dhe qoj atjë ku më bukur lundrojnë
Merr o zog këtë këngë
dhe qoj ku më bukur tingëllon
Take o sea this wave
and carry it there where it more beautifully sails.
Take o bird this song
and carry it there where it more beautifully sounds

²⁰ Al.: ‘se ka punue tënë ditën e dhe ka jetue vetëm me një obrik’ Gagica 2007.

²¹ Al.: ‘gjurmë dhe punë’ Gagica 2007.

According to him, the text uses ‘unique and metaphoric words which have different meanings.’²² This way of singing ‘metaphorically’ has been replaced by a ‘direct way of singing’ in recent times.²³ This progression from a *metaphoric* to a *direct* way of singing relates according to him to two entirely different modes of communication and a different value of the song as such. Nevertheless, he finds a way to combine both forms of communication: because ‘on the telephone masts the birds [still] sing.’²⁴

Conclusion

Although the modes of creation and the value of the traditional song in Albanian rural society have changed significantly, music making is still considered a practice of emotional release. Migration songs have been proved like other partly improvised repertoires such as humoristic songs or *përshendetje* (songs for greeting and wishing for well-being) that they are still valued for the expressing individual or collective pain. Migration songs open up over-individual categories of identification (Papailas 2003: 1060) and even serve as a low-tech counter-discourse to the official media discourse about migration. This became apparent in the tragedy of Flamur Pislis in 1999 – an event in which a memorial song (*këngë për kujtimore të dhimbshme*) for the killed migrant,²⁵ distributed as a pirate cassette copy in Kosovo, Greece and the Albanian areas of Macedonia, influenced the public valuation of the event turning the hijacker into a ‘hero of migration’ (Papailas 2003: 1063). This song, performed in local homophonic North Albanian style became a powerful metaphor for a ‘society’s mourning for the death, both literal and social, of Albanian youth through migration’ (Papailas 2003: 1070). These migration songs were understood by Albanians as collective laments, making visible once again the self-renewing and magical power attributed to traditional Albanian musical practice.

²² Al.: ‘janë fjalë të veçanta, metaforike po janë me shumë kuptim’ Gagica 2007.

²³ Al.: ‘tash nuk këndohet me metafora, tash këndohet direkt’ Gagica 2007.

²⁴ Al.: ‘në shtyllat e telefonit zogjtitë cicërojnë’ Gagica 2007.

²⁵ Written by the local *rapsod* Ded Gjinaj from Burrel, north Albania.

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POVZETEK

Množični 'beg možganov', ki je na vseh področjih kulture zadel Albanijo po letu 1991, je imel pomemben vpliv tudi na ljudsko kulturo. Državno sponzoriran in razvejan sistem kulturnih domov po vsej državi je razpadel. V tranzicijskem obdobju je država prenehala podpirati ljudsko kulturo. Vasi, ki so nekoč imele živahno tradicijo večglasnega petja so se izpraznile, obnemele in ostale brez pesmi. Kulturna pokrajina se je tako morala reorganizirati. V tej reorganizaciji kulturnih institucij so ključno vlogo odigrali vračajoči se migranti. Z njihovim denarjem so začeli ustanavljati *shoqeritë*, ki so promovirale regionalno kulturno izročilo. Družbena odsotnost migrantov je bila tako kulturno občutena. Ljudski repertoar pesmi je postal orodje za odgovarjanje in komentiranje izgube ljudi, pa tudi tragičnih dogodkov, kot so bile utopitve albanskih migrantov v Otrantski ožini leta 1997 ali ugrabitve Flamurja Pisljija leta 1999. Vodilne osebnosti te, kulturno zelo inovativne prakse, so bili lokalni intelektualci, imenovani *rapsods*, ki so skušali skozi skupno emocionalnost povezati nostalgično *mito-historijo kurbeta* izpred 2. svetovne

vojne z dejanskimi množičnimi migracijami. S pomočjo zelo učinkovite rabo metafor in izvajalnih načinov, prevzetih od ljudske poezije ter z repertoarjem obžalovanja smrti, so dokazali sposobnost odzivanja in komentiranja sedanjih migracij ter njihovega sidranja v kolektivnem spominu skupnosti. Članek, ki temelji na terenskem delu med leti 2004 in 2009, skuša ovrednotiti, kako je migracija na področju kulture vplivala na procese izgradnje identitet v post-komunistični Albaniji.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Albanija, ljudska kultura, pesmi, migracija

CORRESPONDENCE: ECHEHARD PISTRICK, Institute for Music Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Kleine Marktstr. 7, 06108 Halle/Saale, Deutschland. E-mail: eckehard.pistrick@musikwiss.uni-halle.de.