

ELORE (ISSN 1456-3010), vol. 19 – 1/2012.

Julkaisija: Suomen Kansantietouden Tutkijain Seura ry.

[http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/1_12/dushi.pdf]



BOOK REVIEW

STUDY OF PRESENT DAY FOLK POETRY

SYKÄRI, VENLA 2011: *Words as Events: Cretan Mantinades in Performance and Composition*. Studia Fennica Folkloristica 18. Helsinki: SKS. 224 pages.

Arbnora Dushi

When starting to read the book *Words as Events: Cretan Mantinades in Performance and Composition*, the first questions that arise are: What are *mantinades*? What is their relation to folklore? Why are they characteristic only for Crete? These questions and many others find their answers in the book by Venla Sykäri, a Finnish scholar who visited Crete for the first time as an exchange student at the University of Crete in Rethimno in 1997. Since then, for the next twelve years, she made many research visits in this country, in search for Cretan mantinades.

MANTINADES AS A GENRE

Mantinades are short, communicative and independent rhyming couplets, still sung and recited in a variety of performances on the island of Crete in Greece. They present rhymed poetry that the Cretan population and also many people in Balkan use for expressing emotions related to different performing situations, including individual as well as collective activities. It is assumed, that these couplets might originate from the time of the Venetian occupation of Crete, which was after the Arabians and before the Turks, from 1211 to 1669, and the word mantinades may originate from

mattinata – a morning song, a serenade-type vocal song. Related with this meaning, mantinades were sung in the villages and life cycle festivities, along with the local music, until the 1970s. They were accompanied by stringed instruments, such as *lira*, *laouta*, guitar and violin. Mantinades are sung in home environments and also in gatherings called *gléndi* – a village festival related to major feast days, such as the village saint's day and the carnival, as well as celebrations belonging to the circle of life, like marriage and baptism. However, mantinades are also sung as part of the *paréa* which is an informal gathering of (male) friends or relatives that takes place regularly in a *kefenio* or village square.

MANTINADES: AN ANALYTIC STUDY

Referring to Sykäri's book, we see that she has done an interdisciplinary study of this short rhymed poetic tradition, conceptualizing her work in seven chapters. In the first chapter, she introduces her personal approach toward this cultural characteristic of Crete. After shortly presenting the discussion on mantinades, she explains in detail the methodology and methods of the research that she uses in her analysis. She combines Finnish knowledge on folklore and folklore theory with the research and studies that are done in the Balkan regions, in several areas around the Mediterranean Sea. Sykäri also compares Cretan mantinades to the Albanian singing tradition of Prespa Lake in Macedonia, as well as to the respective Romanian, Turkish, Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese traditions thus creating a fresh theoretical point of view to the phenomenon in question.

In the second chapter, "Theoretical Frame and Interpretation", she presents her theoretical approach. Sykäri connects research and theoretical arguments of well-known folklorists to her interests to examine and analyze the oral tradition of the Cretans. Applying new approaches, anthropological and folkloristic ones, enables her to address the issues under discussion exactly. She clearly shows the orientation of her work: recording, focusing on the performances, dialogism, creation, conceptualization and improvisation, as well as analysis of the double identity of the poem; as text and as a process.

Although oral poetry is explored more as text rather than performance, Sykäri warns that her approach will orientate toward performance, which in a way presents the modern way of folkloristic research. The third chapter, "Crete and Traditional Performance Contexts", covers most of her practical work and is also more concrete concentrating on these oral couplets. Here the author gives us the historical and cultural background of Crete, accompanied by description of the way of living and the economical status of the region. This information contextualizes the analysis of Cretan music and songs. A detailed analysis of performances, their types, characteristics and cultural contexts, visualized with many photos and also texts of the mantinades, shows the attempt of the author to provide a multidimensional and multifunctional study, in which she also succeeds.

“The Poetic Language” is the fourth chapter of the book. In this chapter, Venla Sykãri focuses on the metrical structure of the mantinades. In the beginning she notes: “The metrical structure of a mantináda is based on a fifteen-syllable line that in Modern Greek is normally referred to as *dekapentasíllavo* (= of fifteen syllables) or today rarely, *politikós stíhos* (= the common verse)” (p. 117), while the other characteristics that classify them are of pure Greek origin. The end-rhyme that is typical for the mantinades had never been systematically used by the ancient Greeks or in the Byzantine Empire, and the conclusions are that the rhyming couplet form came to the island with the Venetians as one parcel.

It is also important to mention the relationship of Cretans have to *Erotókritos* by Vizenos Kornaros, a romantic narrative poem of 10.010 lines written in the form of rhyming couplets around the year 1600. This poem is popular even today. It is learned by heart by the illiterate shepherds of Crete, but by many other people, too. For example, there are many personal narratives of people who give evidence that they were educated in their families with the lines of *Erotókritos*, when elder people gather around the fireplace with children to recite the poem to them. No doubt, the regular repeating of the rhyming couplets of *Erotókritos* has influenced the composition of the mantinades, both earlier on and recently.

PERFORMING MANTINADES: WHO, WHEN, WHERE, WHY

In the fifth chapter, “The Multidimensional Performance”, Sykãri makes a detailed review of collective performances, both in family environments and in open areas in the village, which are mostly places where the mantinades are created. These performances are *glénda* and *paréa*. By talking to many people, whose stories can also be found in the book, she has gained insight on the local mentality and the specific communication typical for this mentality. For example, she shows that in tight village communities, where the way of talking is more metaphorical, mantinades were the only way to express the emotions between the sexes. Even in this case, Sykãri does not hesitate to narrate of her personal experience, telling how her husband, a Greek from Athens, approached her with the metaphorical speech of the mantinades during her research. This form of speech continues to be present among residents of these areas in their daily communication in different situations and under specific circumstances. In this chapter, she provides numerous examples on the communication between her and the residents, and also among the residents themselves. This form of communication, couplets with rhymed verses, is nowadays used even in the mobile phone text messages that locals share among each other in their daily communication. This fact shows another form of expression and composition of folklore.

By using the method of dialogism, the author then continues to the seventh chapter called “Composition”. Through dialogue with oral composers the process of creating the mantinades now becomes visible. All the singers recognize the need to create mantinades as part of their life through which they express joy, anger and other emotions. The composition is related to the poetic talent, which many Cretans have.

Arbnora Dushi: Study of Present Day Folk Poetry

In the closing chapter of her study, the author comes to the conclusion that the mantinades are dialogic oral poetry and they can function as such only in a dialogic processes. In addition to being dialogic, other elements that characterize mantinades are rhythmic language and the prosaic-poetic and textual-contextual continuum. Furthermore, Sykäri makes clear throughout her study that the living tradition takes two poles: the vehicle that is tradition and the individuals who use that vehicle. And these two poles coexist very well in Crete. In this context, she finally points out four essential aspects for composing mantinades: performing or improvisatory creativity, productive creativity, traditional personal feedback and individual creativity.

Sykäri has used a wide bibliography and many different sources which makes her book valuable for the modern study of folk poetry. The photos in the book make the study more concrete and wholesome, especially the mantinades as individual and collective compounds. I close this review with the wish that the author, Venla Sykäri, continues her work as a researcher and gives us more valuable studies in folklore.

PhD Arbnora Dushi works as a research associate at Folklore Department of the Institute of Albanology at the University of Prishtina, Kosova. During the academic year 2011/12, she spent six months as a post-doctoral researcher in Folkloristics at the University of Turku.

Proofreading: Andreas McKeough.