
Death Costume and Ritual Lament in Greek Folk Tradition (19th – 20th Century)

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Abstract: *In this paper, we address the issues relative to the clothes used to dress the dead in traditional Greek culture. This is done on the basis of literary testimonies from popular artistic prose, and more specifically from the songs about death and the moirologia (laments or dirges), on the basis of ethnographic testimonies of the primary folkloric material in printed and handwritten collections. We examine all the types of clothes, the differentiations between urban and rural areas, according to social and economic class, and according to gender and age, but also the possible ritual uses of these clothes, as encountered in the death customs of the Greek people.*

Keywords: *Death Customs, Dead Body, Clothes, Traditional Greek Culture, Moirologia.*

A common practice among the Greek people is that of dressing the dead in their best clothes, preferably in clothes that have not yet been worn¹. Indeed, in many regions, such as in the villages of Pylia in the Peloponnese, the old men and crones kept a specially designated new costume, so that they might be dressed in it when they died, due to the widespread belief that the dead must wear new garments «to travel to the Underworld»². In the Pontus (the Black Sea region of modern-day Turkey),

¹ N. G. Politis, «Τα κατά την τελευταίην», *Λαογραφικά Σύμμεικτα* 3, Athens 1931, p. 327.

² ΚΛ, MS 1378, p. 70 (G. Tarsouli, Pylia). See also D. V. Economidis, «Ο θρήνος του νεκρού εν Ελλάδι (το μοιρολόγι και η εθιμοτυπία του)», *Επετηρίς Κέντρου Ερεύνης Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας* 18-19 (1965-1966), pp. 11-40, with important descriptions and abundant ethnographic material.

they usually adorned the dead richly, especially the wealthy, which is why they also used the expression «*armátossan ton apothaméno*» (they equipped the deceased)¹ to denote the preparation and dressing of the dead before their display and wake. The rich adornment of the dead, and in particular with gloves, rings and a watch, is also attested to by satirical poet and writer Andreas Laskaratos in Cephalonia², who obviously refers to urban cultural environments.

Similar testimonies about the luxurious dress of the dead, and indeed in new garments, also exist amid other peoples, as noted by N. G. Politis, founding father of Greek folklore studies, who also cites many of the different local customs³, as well as by other authors who studied Greek traditional culture, such as, for instance, B. Schmidt⁴. However, despite the references made in the laments - but also of the relevant ethnographic material - regarding the rich attire of the dead dressed in their wedding costume, or with «festive» clothes, sometimes even - depending on the financial capacity of the deceased and his family - not only with clothes of good quality but also as yet unworn, new garments, in the Greek *moirología* (traditional laments) the dead in Hades lack the luxurious garments and accessories with which they were laid to rest and buried. Thus, the young man is «*xarmátotos*» (unequipped) in the underworld and the maiden «*astólisti*» (unadorned), and the relatives are invited to send the relevant accessories to their dear ones who have already passed away with the dead who follow them⁵.

¹ Xen. Akoglous, *Λαογραφικά Κοτώρων*, Athens 1939, p. 223.

² A. Laskaratos, «Η Διαθήκη μου», *Ποιητικός Ανθών Ζακύνθου* A, 1 (1886), pp. 1-2.

³ N. G. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 327. See also Er. Kapsomenos, «Ο θάνατος στο δημοτικό τραγούδι», *Αρχαιολογία* 11 (1989), pp. 64-72.

⁴ B. Schmidt, «Totengebräuche und Gräberkultus im heutigen Griechenland», *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 24 (1926), p. 285.

⁵ G. Saunier, *Ελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια. Τα μοιρολόγια*, Athens 1999, p. 34 Nr. 5β.

Of course, this is not a poetic impression of the death rituals concerning attire, but an attempt to render the bitterness of death¹ and the miserable situation of the dead in the underworld, which is depicted in the clothes they wear², and which bear no resemblance to the clothing of their dead body according to the customs of death. And this because, as already mentioned, dressing the dead in the best clothes they possessed while alive (usually the wedding costume) constitutes a common ground in traditional laments, often accompanied by the observation that these clothes truly befitted the dead person while alive, but also now he/she is dead³.

Among the Greek people, the «*savánoma*» (shrouding) is synonymous with dressing the dead, though now the shroud does not take the form of bands, nor of the sheet covering the dead body, but is a piece of fabric made of linen or calico, which is placed directly onto the deceased and tied to the body with strips of cloth, over which the clothes are worn⁴. It is a piece of white cloth roughly three *píches*^{TN} long, which without fail must be unused and in the middle of which a cross-shaped opening is made, through which the deceased's head is passed after washing the body. Two strips of cloth are then cut along the sides with a pair of scissors, which are used to tie the shroud to the dead body, so that the deceased may then be dressed in his/her clothes⁵.

Relevant references exist in the Modern Greek traditional laments and in the related songs of the Greek people about the Underworld. Often, the *moirológia* refer to the three *píches*-long shroud, which they call either «*lazári*» or «*áplyto paní*» (non-washed cloth), considering it a typical

¹ See Guy Saunier, «L'amertume et la mort: πικρός et φαρμάκι dans les chansons populaires grecques», in the volume *Βουκόλεια. Mélanges offerts à B. Bouvier*, Genève 1995, pp. 225-241.

² Guy Saunier, *Ελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 238 Nr. 6γ.

³ Guy Saunier, *op. cit.*, p. 274 Nr. 7ζ.

⁴ P. Themistoklis S. Christodoulou, *Περί της κηδείας, Ιστορικολειτουργική προσέγγιση στη νεκρώσιμη ακολουθία και στα περί αυτής τελούμενα*, Athens 2004, p. 57.

^{TN} A *píchis* (pl. *píches*) is a (now redundant) unit of measuring cloth that is 64cm, or 25.2 inches, long.

⁵ M. G. Varvounis, *Λαογραφικά και εθνογραφικά της Χώρας Σάμου*, Athens 2010, p. 231 *et seq.*

example of the vanity of human things, as it is the sole material object, the only possession, that man takes to the grave with him when exiting life¹. Indeed, older people took care to have shrouds at the ready in their home, as well as a change of clothes to be dressed in upon their death, taking precautions while still in life for their mortal remains to be seemly when they died². This is also why seeing to all that is connected to the shrouding and dressing of the dead body was considered as one of the main concerns of the elderly, who often indicated the place of these clothes to their children, so that they could find them when they were needed³.

The Modern Greek *poukámisso* (chemise) constitutes the main garment related to burial clothes, which are called *thanatíkiá*⁴ (from the word *thánatos*, meaning death). It is the garment that functions as a *second skin*⁵, *skin*⁵, as it is usually worn directly against the flesh and is not absent⁶ from any local costume, whether women's or men's. For this reason, precisely, in many regions of Greece there was a widespread habit for women to keep a chemise from their dowry or the chemise they wore on the first night of their marriage⁷ as a burial garment. Thus, in Zakynthos (Zante), particular significance was attributed to the long baptismal chemise, called «*photíki*», which the women wore at their marriage, to their bridal bed, but also in death.⁸

¹ I. S. Anagnostopoulos, *Ο θάνατος και ο Κάτω Κόσμος στη δημοτική ποίηση (εσχατολογία της δημοτικής ποίησης)*, Athens 1984, p. 131.

² Ch. Rembelis, *Κονιτσιώτικα, μετά τοπογραφικού χάρτου της επαρχίας Κονίτσης*, Athens 1953, p. 124.

³ G. A. Megas, «Ζητήματα Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας», *Επετηρίς Λαογραφικού Αρχείου* 2 (1940), p. 171.

⁴ A. Will-Badieritaki, *Το γυναικείο παραδοσιακό πουκάμισο της ηπειρωτικής Ελλάδας*, Athens 1980, p. 123.

⁵ M. Horn, *The Second Skin*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston 1968.

⁶ I. Papantoniou, «Συμβολή στη μελέτη της γυναικείας ελληνικής παραδοσιακής φορεσιάς», *Εθνογραφικά* 1 (1978), p. 8.

⁷ A. Will-Badieritaki, *op. cit.*

⁸ M. Vrelli-Zachou, *Η ενδυμασία στη Ζάκυνθο μετά την Ένωση, 1864 – 1910. Συμβολή στη μελέτη της ιστορικότητας και της κοινωνιολογίας του ενδύματος*, Ίδρυμα Αγγελικής Χατζημιχάλη, Athens 2003, p. 223, note 181.

Special mention should be made to the relevant burial rituals of the Sarakatsani¹ (transhumant shepherds), who lived death as an inevitable fact that had to be treated with dignity. Elderly women and women in advanced pregnancy, cognizant of the risk of dying while giving birth, prepared of their own accord a bag with the clothes and shroud they would be covered with when they died². During their migrations, the *xekalokairió* (summering in the mountain pastures) and the *cheimadió* (wintering in the lowlands), they placed in a *tourvás* (a carrying bag with a lanyard to hang over the shoulder) a brand-new and unworn costume, which they called *nekrallaxiá* (literally: suit of clothes for death) or *allaxiá* (change of clothes). The men's *nekrallaxiá* was prepared by the women when the former reached the age of 50-60 years old.

This costume was sewn without knotting the thread used to make it, so that the soul could leave the body easily and go to paradise, and included a piece of wax and a piece of string made of nine strands, so that Charos (Death) would not come again to the *konáki* (the wigwam-like hut the Sarakatsani built as their homes). They also prepared the *nekroskouíti* (burial garment), a woollen woven cloth made to envelop them when they died and were laid in the grave, as well as the shroud that the women³ wound around the dead on their own. If someone died during the transhumance without a *nekroskouíti* among their possessions, they were buried wrapped up in two capes⁴.

¹ A. Hadzimichali, *Σαρακατσάνοι*, Τατιάνα Ιωάννου-Γιανναρά (επιμ.), τόμ. Ι, Ίδρυμα Αγγελικής Χατζημιχάλη, Athens 2007, pp. 237-242.

² A. Hadzimichali, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

³ The role of women also remains strong in the posthumous customs, such as, for instance, the preparation and ornamentation of the *kollyva* (boiled wheat with sugar, spices and berries, offered at funerals and memorials), or caring for the graves. Cf. M. Kenna, «Ονοματοδοσία, κληρονομιά και η μοίρα της ψυχής: σκέψεις για τη συνέχιση και την αλλαγή των συμβολικών πρακτικών σ' ένα κυκλαδίτικο νησί», in Eleftherios Alexakis, Maria Vrachionidou and Andromachi Economou (eds.), *Ανθρωπολογία και συμβολισμός στην Ελλάδα*, Ελληνική Εταιρεία Εθνολογίας, Athens 2008, p. 215.

⁴ A. Hadzimichali, *idem*.

Those of a younger age (maidens and young men) were adorned in death with flowers, a wreath of blossoms around their head and pieces of jewellery, such as rings, chains and earrings¹ and coins, *silver pieces*, *talents* were also placed with them.² Just before burying them, they tore rents in the clothes they were dressed in (dress, cape, *bourazána*-trousers) «so that they might go freely to the other world»³.

In the ritual prophylactic measures connected to making the burial clothes, we observe the tendency to ward off evil, which they conceived as the stylized form of Charos, and to circumvent the entrapment of the living who made the burial clothes, but also of the dead for whom these were destined, through the avoidance of what, according to the popular metaphysical conception, are seen as binding knots. Similar superstitions and prejudices are also encountered in ritual ties and prophylactic measures of the Cypriots⁴.

In this context, it is frequently mentioned that the lack of a shroud at the time it was needed created unfavourable impressions among those present as regards the family's capacity to run a tight ship⁵. But the adornment of the deceased, after the winding in the shroud, with the best, the festive, the most luxurious and - as a rule - as yet unused clothes also constitutes a common ground in Greek traditional laments and in the demotic songs relating to the customs and rituals of death⁶. In them, frequent references are made to the «*férmeli*» (waistcoat) with which they will dress the dead *levéntis* (fine young man)⁷, or to the dead maiden who «*yiortállaxe*»

¹ A. Hadzimichali, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

² The jewellery and coins are retrieved during the exhumation and are used as good-luck charms for children to wear. See A. Hadzimichali, *idem*.

³ A. Hadzimichali, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁴ K. Protopapa, *Τα έθιμα του θανάτου στην παραδοσιακή κοινωνία της Κύπρου*, Nicosia 2012, p. 55 *et seq.*

⁵ A. Kriaris, *Κρητικά δημοτικά τραγούδια (πλήρης συλλογή)*, Athens 1969 (3rd edition), p. 222.

⁶ I. S. Anagnostopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 132. Cf. M. Ioannidou, *Untersuchungen zur Form der neugriechischen Klagelieder (Moirologien)*, Berlin 1938, pp. 5-7.

⁷ N. Laskaris, *Η Λάστα και τα μνημεία της*, Pyrgos 1902, p. 554.

(changed into her festive clothes) and is «*yiortallasméni*» (festively garbed), as if she were going to a marriage or a *panigyri* (religious festival)¹. Indeed, in some *moirólógia* the deceased himself appears requesting that his dead body be adorned handsomely, with his best and most richly decorated clothes, and with an ornate fez².

In certain regions, after dressing the married deceased man, they placed the wedding wreaths in the coffin, as ritual proof of the marriage's dissolution through death. Also, they put on his hat, if he was in the habit of wearing one, or his fez³ in older days, if it so happened that he held to the traditional costume of his region,⁴ and new shoes, the *nekropoutsas*⁵.

A ritual prophylactic measure to avoid other deaths in the family was also that of destroying the scissors used to shape the cloth of the shroud, or the needle and thread used for any adjustments to the garments used to dress the dead body. Indeed, they believed that, when the garments the deceased was dressed in had already been worn, these should only be ones belonging to somebody already dead⁶, given that if they sewed a garment worn by a living person this would entrap its owner's vital forces and bring about misfortune and woe.

Following an ancient tradition, the Greek people liken death to marriage, especially in the case of the unmarried dead⁷. The young men

¹ N. Kosmas, «Τα μοιρολόγια των Πραμάντων», *Λαογραφία* 19 (1960-1961), p. 371. See also M. Ioannidou, «Ο Χάρος και τ' αδέρφια. Συμβολή εις την μελέτην του δημοτικού τραγουδιού», *Επετηρίς Λαογραφικού Αρχείου* 3-4 (1941-1942), pp. 38-59.

² A. Yiangas, *Ηπειρωτικά δημοτικά τραγούδια*, Athens 1959, pp. 565-566.

³ D. Loukopoulos, *Πώς υφαίνουσι και ντύνονται οι Αιτωλοί*, εκδ. «Δωδώνη», Athens - Yannina 1985, p. 135.

⁴ N. Dimitriou, *Λαογραφικά της Σάμου* 1, Athens 1983, p. 484.

⁵ D. Loukopoulos, *op. cit.*

⁶ M. G. Varvounis, «Μαγικό έθιμο Αδριανουπόλεως», *Θρακικά* 6 (1988-1990), pp. 168-173.

⁷ M. G. Varvounis, «Αρχαία κυπριακά επιτύμβια επιγράμματα και νεοελληνικά μοιρολόγια», *Επετηρίς Κέντρου Επιστημονικών Ερευνών* 20 (1993-1994), pp. 359-415. Regarding the premature death of young people and children in literature, see indicatively A. M. Verilhac, *Παίδες άωροι, poésie funéraire* 1, Athènes 1978, comprising examples

and maidens who died before being wedded were adorned with their nuptial costume¹, and wedding wreaths were placed on their head, while often at the funeral and following it *kouféta* (sugared almonds, traditionally offered at baptisms and weddings) were handed out². Through the ritual use of the wedding costume on the dead, which the Greek people still adhere to today, an eons-old conception is continued, whereby dead men become relatives through marriage and acquire a relation with the earth and women with Hades or Charos³.

In one case, a murdered maiden orders that she not be dressed in clothes of green velvet, but instead be buried in the bloodied ones she was wearing at the moment of her murder, and which constitute proof of her unjust/untimely death⁴. However, by refusing the customary garb of the dead, in essence the lament testifies to the relevant popular customs that were followed in Greek popular culture. According to Ioannis Anagnostopoulos, «*the adornment of the deceased is considered indispensable, because it is believed that the life of this world continues identically in Hades, too. Sometimes, in fact, the deceased asks to be sent his festive clothes, so that he may go to church on Easter Day*»⁵. The lament referred to by this scholar also mentions the «*skoutiá*» (clothes), with which the deceased wishes to adorn himself, to change into so as to go to church⁶.

from Ancient Greek γραμματεία. See also M. Vovelle, *Mourir autrefois*, Paris 1973, which includes examples together with earlier bibliography.

¹ See indicatively D. Loukopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

² See indicatively P. Kallidonis, *Μανιάτικα μοιρολόγια*, Piraeus 1972, p. 108.

³ J. Wiesner, *Grab und Jenseits*, Berlin 1938, pp. 170-171. G. K. Spyridakis, *op. cit.*, p. 114. I. S. Anagnostopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁴ A. Jannarakis, *Kretas Volkslieder nebst Distichen und Sprichwörten*, Leipzig 1876, pp. 222-223. Ch. Papachristodoulou, «Δημοτικά τραγούδια της Ρόδου», *Λαογραφία* 20 (1962), p. 298.

⁵ I. S. Anagnostopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁶ S. Karavitis, «Μοιρολόγια Τριφυλλίας», *Δελτίο Ιστορικής και Εθνολογικής Εταιρείας της Ελλάδος* 2 (1885-1889), p. 145. More generally on the *moirología*, cf. G. Moutsios, «Προβλήματα ποιητικής τεχνικής στο μοιρολόγι», *Δωδώνη* 17:2 (1988), pp. 127-173. M.

In any event, in Greek popular culture, the manner in which the living dress their dead is ritualistic; it echoes people's social, symbolic and metaphysical conceptions about the world; and, it touches upon popular religiousness and its ritual manifestations¹, and is of interest in the study of Greek popular metaphysics. Besides, in the matter of attire, too, the world of the dead is conceived as a continuation of the world of the living, given that in the customs relating to death it is the living who speak of the dead and act in their name, prolonging their worldly certainty into the dark area of death², which can only be grasped and given meaning to by having recourse to ideological tools, faith and metaphysical conviction³.

And this is certainly the principal eliciting cause of the ritual customs of death, as these are inscribed in the customary «cycle of life» of the Greek people.

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¹ Cf. H. Knoblauch, *Populare Religion. Auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt - New York 2009, pp. 156-157, with similar observations. See also M. Vovelle, *La mort et l'Occident*, Paris 1980, p. 34 *et seq.*

² Cf. D. Anagnostopoulou, «Η παράλληλη πορεία του ύπνου και του θανάτου στα νανουρίσματα», *Νέα Παιδεία* 60 (1991), pp. 100-117. For similar examples of other peoples cf. C. Blum, *La représentation de la mort dans la littérature française de la Renaissance*, Genève 1988, with relevant observations.

³ Of particular interest is what is noted on the subject by J. Ziegler, *Les vivants et la mort*, Paris 1975, which also includes the earlier relevant bibliography.

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