

Peculiarities of the *Fir tree song* from the Stremț commune in the Apuseni Mountains

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Abstract: *The funeral songs associated with the funeral have always accompanied man on his last journey, the types of sound manifestations, usually syncretic, being different from people to people. In European practice, the song of mourning, which expresses the suffering of those left behind, is found throughout the territory. In Romania, this category of songs is represented by lament. In addition to this, in a limited area, some ritual songs are practiced: "Fir tree song" and "Song of the dawn", whose roles are different and come from ancient beliefs related to mythology. Although poorly represented at the national level, in the Stremț commune of the Apuseni Mountains, we encountered five Fir tree songs, representing three different musical typologies, most likely originating from different evolutionary layers. These typologies differ in terms of number of melodic lines, type of verse, melodic profile, sound structures and ambitus, but also cadences and tempo. The fundamental similarities lie in the female group interpretation and the specific, unitary theme. An evolution can be seen in the presented repertoire.*

Keywords: *funeral songs; Fir tree song; musical typology; Apuseni Mountains;*

Introduction

Considered by some folklorists to be part of "the oldest layer of Romanian folk songs preserved until today"², funeral ritual songs constitute a limited repertoire nowadays, due to the disappearance of the mythological elements associated with them and the orientation of the population towards the Christian elements associated with the funeral service. Another reason for the limited presence of the genre, both geographically and as a repertoire, is due to the problems of organizing the extensive ceremonial that integrates this musical genre, the typical *lamentation song* offering a simpler alternative. However, in a research carried out by Professor Ioan Bocșa and the teams of the "Gheorghe Dima" National Academy of Music in Cluj Napoca during February 2010 – November 2012 in the Apuseni Mountains region, later published in the volume *Traditional vocal music from the Apuseni Mountains*³, 11 funeral ritual songs were collected, of which 10 are variants of the *Fir tree song*. Five of them come from the Stremț commune, underlining the importance of this genre in the area, considering the fact that the research included 80 villages.

Purpose of the Research and Methodology

We will try in the course of this article to determine the reasons why the *Fir tree song* has survived so well in Stremț and to present the morphological characteristics of the variants collected here.

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² Mariana Kahane, Lucia Georgescu Stanculeanu. 1988. *Cântecul zorilor și bradului (tipologie muzicală)*, [The songs of dawn and of the fir-tree (musical typology)]. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House, p. 7.

³ Ioan Bocșa. 2013. *Muzică vocală tradițională din Munții Apuseni*, [Vocal Traditional Music from Apuseni Mountains]. Cluj-Napoca: MediaMusica Publishing House.

The analysis will start by describing the genre and framing the *Fir tree song* in the ritual of which it is a part, as well as listing the premises due to which this genre appears in the funeral, together with the mythological elements and superstitions associated with it.

Based on the variants collected in Stremț, we will analyze the structure and content of the text, the melodic typology, together with the comparison of the variants, in order to issue a theory regarding the variety of musical variants present in the commune.

We will use demographic data to observe the structure and evolution of the population of Stremț, we will specify the interpretive formulas and the characteristics of the interpretation, based on both musical transcriptions and audio recordings from the field, using the observation method.

As research methods, we will use the historical method, starting from the current stage of the research, through a bibliographic incursion related to the chosen subject, but we will also make a structural analysis of the *Fir tree songs* presented.

1. Spread area

The genus currently has a limited distribution area, being found "in a few isolated areas: the south-east of Banat, the north-east of Oltenia, in Transylvania in the area of Hațeg, Hunedoara and the neighboring areas of the Mureș valley and in the Năsăud area"⁴. Based on some elements that seem to come from this ritual (such as placing a fir tree at the grave of a young person) Ileana Szenik assumes that, at some point, the custom "was spread throughout the country"⁵. The origin and area of European spread of the genre is disputed, Maria Kahane and Lucia Georgescu Stănculeanu claiming that it "constitutes a repertoire specific to Romanian folklore. It was not signalled among the European peoples, but only partially, in the Hispanic Mediterranean folklore"⁶. On the other hand, Szenik states that "ethnological research has established that the custom is very old and was once widespread over a wide geographical area - at least in Europe"⁷. The rich symbolism that can be found in the ceremonial of which the *Fir tree song* is a part, can leave room for interpretations, in many regions being observed actions like planting a tree at the head of the deceased, sometimes regardless of his age/sex/religion.

In most countries, the funeral has complex rituals and music is not absent from them, but the free interpretation and personalization of the text make us associate these musical productions with mourning and not with funeral ritual songs. Analyzing the music associated with old European rituals, Jan Ling, professor of musicology at the University of Gothenburg generically names these musical productions "songs of weeping" or "laments", saying about them that they are "monotonous repetitions of formulae interrupted by cries and moans, that triggered emotional reactions"⁸. He also mentions certain "ritual songs" found in Northern Europe, which he divides into songs with a fixed character and songs with an improvisatory character, but their character remains that of lamentation.

2. The context and location

Mythology and ancient beliefs have always been a source for people's manifestations, their utility harmoniously combining with their artistic side. The main role of man in society was considered to be the perpetuation of the species, family being one of the most important

⁴ Ileana Szenik. 2010. Folklore. *Study mode for distance learning university studies. [Folklore. Study module for university studies through distance learning]*. Cluj-Napoca: MediaMusica Publishing House, p. 127.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Mariana Kahane, Lucia Georgescu Stănculeanu, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁷ Ileana Szenik, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁸ Jan Ling. 1997. *A History of European Folk Music*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, p. 59.

elements in this regard. In the Romanian tradition, founding a family required the acquisition of certain skills by young people. In the case of boys, they had to be able to hunt and be strong enough to do some household work.⁹ Girls were supposed to be beautiful and hardworking¹⁰. If boys participated in true initiation rites before their competence was confirmed, girls were educated both within the family and within sitters. The departure from the living of a young man who failed to start a family, was considered a failure, being also a potential future danger to the community. In many areas it was believed that the deceased would return to the village in undead form to choose a mate, this involving the death of another young member of the community. Other superstitions assume that 6 weeks after death, if the deceased is undead, he will take someone from the family with him to the other world.¹¹ With these premises, together with the funeral, the "wedding of the dead" was also performed, a ritual by which the deceased young man was married to a symbolic fir tree, in order to have a pair and implicit rest and peace of mind in the other world. In this process the *Fir tree song* tree appears. Things go even further, the roles being reversed at some point, in the sense that the fir tree is the one blamed for the young man's death, when he is brought to the village by the lads who went to cut him down from the forest.

Stremț commune comprises 4 villages and is located in the Apuseni Mountains, on the southern side of the Aiud Hills. The population of the commune has a certain stability over time, between the censuses of 2011 and 2022 it decreased slightly, from 2418 citizens to 2321. We are also talking about a young population, over half of the inhabitants being under 50 years old.¹² These premises are favourable to the preservation of local folklore, which justifies the good representation of the *Fir tree song* in Stremț.

3. Description of the custom

The appearance of the fir tree during the funeral is often found in Romania, but the way it is used differs from area to area. In general, the tree is decorated with all kinds of objects: "with flowers, with branches, with apples, with figs, nuts, prunes"¹³, sometimes being placed in the deceased's household to announce his death. Due to this type of decorating the tree, it is also called "flag", similar to other customs in which this symbol is found, presenting another similarity with the wedding custom. If the deceased was a shepherd, a tuft of wool was also placed in the fir tree. In other places, such as Bucovina and Moldova, a coil and a candle are also placed in the tree, to illuminate the dead person's journey to the afterlife. In the Sibiu area, when a virgin girl dies, "earrings and an engagement ring, if she was engaged, or other rings are put on top of her".¹⁴ An important element is that "the tree, at funerals, is made only for bachelors, virgin girls and very rarely in some places for young married people".¹⁵ Since the 19th century, academician Simeon Florea Marian noted the fact that "in Transylvania it is customary for lads to go [...] to distant places, to bring fir trees and when they pass through a village with him, the girls go to meet them and sing the song of the fir

⁹ Mihai Coman. 2009. "Ecouri ale riturilor de inițiere masculină în folclorul colindelor" ["Echoes of the Rites of Male Initiation in the Folklore of Carols"]. In *Studii de Mitologie*. București: Nemira, p. 15-36.

¹⁰ Ciprian Mizgan-Danciu. 2022. *The Presence of Myths in Romanian Carols*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura MediaMusica, p.44.

¹¹ Artur Gorovei. 1915. *Credințe și superstiții ale poporului român înmormântări* [*Beliefs and superstitions of the Romanian people regarding funerals*]. București: Librările Socec, p. 310.

¹² *Populație Comuna Stremț*. Retrieved May, 5, 2024, from <https://populatia.ro/populatie-comuna-stremt-judetul-alba/>.

¹³ Theodor T. Burada. 1882. *Datinele poporului român la înmormântări* [*The customs of the Romanian people at funerals*]. Iași: Tipografia Națională, p. 27.

¹⁴ Simion Florea Marian. 1995. *Înmormântarea la români* [*The Burial at Romanians*]. București: Grai și Suflet Publishing House, p. 67 (republished after the 1892 volume).

¹⁵ Simeon Florea Marian, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

tree"¹⁶. Even if the description is brief, the author publishes some illustrative texts for the custom, similar to those we still encounter today.

Essentially, the *Fir tree song* is part of a ceremonial sometimes called *the wedding of the dead*¹⁷ and it has the role of compensating for the fact that the deceased was not able to start a family. The performance of the ceremony begins with a group of lads, acquaintances of the deceased, who go early in the morning to the nearest forest, where they cut down a young fir tree, cut off its lower branches and leave only the crown intact, then set off with it towards the village. At the entrance to the village, a group of women greets them and the *Fir tree song* is sung, then they all go to the house of the deceased, where the tree is decorated, often similar to the wedding tree, thus being a clear intersection of the two customs, as we mentioned before. On the day of the funeral, the tree is taken by the procession to the grave, placed at the head of the grave, and left there until it dries up and rots. During the ceremony, the *Fir tree song* can be sung at various times¹⁸:

- when bringing the fir tree from the forest, on the road from the end of the village to home;
- after the traditional decoration of the tree;
- on the road, after the procession leaves home;
- when approaching the burial place;
- when it is raised and fixed in its final place.

4. Literary theme

The texts associated with the *Fir tree song* are unitary, having an epic character and containing an imaginary dialogue between the female group and the fir tree. The text begins with a direct address to the fir tree, which may include elements that show the women's feeling of hatred and rejection towards it, later being directly accused of the young man's/woman's death. The second part of the dialogue represents the response of the fir tree, through which it tells its sad fate, from which it appears that its growth has been cut off, thus once again a connection is made with the fate of the deceased.

As a rule, the beginning part repeatedly invokes the tree and sometimes this invocation turns into a chorus:

"Bradule, bradule,
Bradule, bradule,
Ce rău mi-ai avutu,
Ce rău mi-ai avutu,
Bradule, bradule,
Bradule, bradule,
De mi-ai coborâtu,
De mi-ai coborâtu"¹⁹

"Fire tree, fir tree,
Fire tree, fir tree,
How bad you were to me
How bad you were to me
Fire tree, fir tree,
Fire tree, fir tree,
You came down to me
Why did you come down to me"

(women's group, Stremț, 2012)

The text continues with the question addressed to the fir tree and its answer:

"Bradule, bradule,

"Fire tree, fir tree,

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Ileana Szenik, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹⁸ Mariana Kahane, Lucia Georgescu Stanculeanu, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁹ Ioan Bocșa. *op. cit.*, p. 35, no. 26.

Lemn verde, lemnule,
 La ce-ai lăcomit,
 De te-ai coborât,
 De la loc de piatră,
 La mormânt de fată,
 De la loc petros,
 La mormânt jelos?"²⁰

(women's group, Stremț, 2012)

Green wood, little wood,
 What did you covet?
 Since you came down
 From the place of stone,
 At the girl's grave,
 From the stony place,
 To the mourned grave?"²¹

"Da după mine-or venit,
 Cinci ficiori, ca cinci haiduci
 Cu săcurile pe mâni
 Și ei or zîs cătră mine,
 Că m-or duce și m-or pune,
 În mijlocu satului,
 La casa-mpăratului.
 Adevărul nu mi-or spus
 Și pe mine ei m-or pus
 Lângă-un șir de măgheran,
 La un ficior junișean,
 Lângă-un șir de lăcrămioare,
 La un cap de fată mare."²²

(women's group, Stremț, 2012)

"Yes, they would come after me,
 Five sons, like five outlaws
 With the axes in hands
 And they will say to me,
 That they would take me and put me,
 In the middle of the village
 At the king's house.
 They wouldn't tell me the truth
 And they put me
 Next to a row of marjoram,
 At a young lad,
 Next to a row of water lilies,
 A head of a young girl."

The finale contains the foretold fate of the tree, which usually prolongs its suffering, due to the fact that it is wet with the tears of those who mourn for the deceased:

"Brade, nu și supărat,
 Că are neamuri în sat
 Și ele s-or aduna,
 În tăță duminica
 Ș-or plânge, ș-or lăcrăma
 Și pe tine te-or uda,
 Tu, brade, nu te-i usca."²³

(women's group, Stremț, 2012)

"Fir tree, don't be angry,
 That he has relatives in the village
 And they would gather,
 On every Sunday
 They would cry, they would shed tears
 And you would get wet,
 You, fir tree, won't dry up."

5. Methods of interpretation

In ceremonial practice, the *Fir tree song* is performed exclusively by a group of women, just like the *Dawn song*, another funeral genre with a ritual character. In the folklore gathering sessions carried out by the teams of the "Gheorghe Dima" National Academy of Music in Cluj-Napoca, coordinated by Professor Ioan Bocșa, all variants of funeral ritual songs were collected from groups of women or women singing individually. The variants from Stremț were performed in the same way, as follows: one variant performed by one woman, one variant performed by two women and the remaining three variants performed by a group of women. If we also include the version performed by two women as a group, taking

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 37-38, no. 29.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 34-35, no. 25.

²³ *Ibidem*.

into account the fact that the version performed individually is a variant of a song performed by group, we can conclude that the custom is either still alive in the commune, or the performers lived during the period when it was practiced. Considering the age of the informants, most of them between 70 and 82 years old at the time of collection, the second option seems more plausible.

6. Musical typology

An interesting aspect of the repertoire of the ritual *Fir tree song* from Stremț is the presence of 3 distinct melodic types, which seem to be part of three different evolutionary layers.

6.1 Melodic type 1

The first type consists of two close versions of the same song, one performed individually and the other in a group. In what follows, we present the version performed in a group, highlighting the sounds that are different in the version performed individually. This difference concerns only some ornaments and a melisma.

Stremț, AB
Grup femei

♩ = 86

Bra-du - le, ar - de-te-ar fo-cul, Bra-du - le, ar - de-te-ar fo - cul.

AB230 *Cul. Bocșa I., studenți, 2012; Tr. Stan A.*

Fig.1. *Bradule, arde-te-ar focul* [*Bradule, the fire will burn you*], Ioan Bocșa. 2013.

Muzică vocală tradițională din Munții Apuseni, [Vocal Traditional Music from Apuseni Mountains], no. 24.

This melodic type consists of two melodic lines - AB. The first melodic line has a unilinear profile, using an oligochordic sound structure, namely the *G A B* trichord, with a cadence on the *G*. A characteristic of this row is the gradual progression, no leap being present. The second melodic row consists of a larger melodic structure: the *E-C* aeolian hexachord, with final cadence on *E*. This time the melodic profile is descendant. The lyrics are tetrapodic, a single verse being repeated on the two melodic lines. In the individually interpreted version, the text lines are not repeated, each melodic line having a new text, otherwise the melodic typology is almost identical, with only one different sound: *F* sharp, which appears as an ornament at the beginning of the melody.

6.2 Melodic type 2

The second melodic type has 4 melodic lines, having the form *ABCBvk*. The first melodic line is related to the one in melodic type 1, the sound structure being the same – *G A B* trichord and this time the melody also has only stepwise motion, without leaps. The second melodic row is also related to the one in type 1, having a descending melody, the structure being also a hexachord, this time dorian. Also, in the version performed by two women (Ioan Bocșa, 2013, no. 33), the verse is repeated in the first two melodic lines, constituting a chorus.

Geoagiu de Sus, Stremț, AB
Neagoie Aurelia, 80
Bobăilă Eugenia, 79

Bra - du - le, bra - du - le, Bra - du - le, bra - du - le,
Ce boli ai bo - lit, De te-ai co - bo - rât.

AB226 *Cul. Bocșa I., studenți, 2012; Tr. Stan A.*

Fig. 2. Bradule, bradule, Ioan Bocșa. 2013. Muzică vocală tradițională din Munții Apuseni, [Vocal Traditional Music from Apuseni Mountains], no. 33.

Melodic line 3 brings a vaulted profile and an instability of the 3rd, originating from the major tetrachord present in the incipit, later having only F natural. We have here a doric pentachord and a catalectic tripod verse. In the last melodic line, the structure from the second line returns, the only difference being the cadence on the 2nd note, the final value is missing and the verse remains catalectic. These two important differences: the morphology of line 3 and the catalectic structure of the last two lines make us believe that we are dealing with an evolved variant of the first melodic type, to which two lines have been added, one of which is the second line with cadential variation, keeping its purpose in the end of the melody.

Geomal, Stremț, AB
Grup femei

Bra - du - le, bra - du - le, Lemn ver - de, lem - nu - le,
La ce-ai lă - co - mit, De te-ai co - bo - rât.

AB242 *Cul. Bocșa I., studenți, 2012; Tr. Stan A.*

Fig.3. Bradule, lemn verde, lemnule, [Fir tree, green wood] Ioan Bocșa. 2013. Muzică vocală tradițională din Munții Apuseni, [Vocal Traditional Music from Apuseni Mountains], no. 29.

6.3 Melodic type 3

The third melodic type is present in a single melody, consisting of four melodic lines. The first two of them, as illustrated in Fig.2, melodic type 2, constitute a chorus with the same invocational text. This time the first melodic row has a vaulted profile and as a melodic structure it consists of the mixolydic pentachord G1-D2. The second melodic line has a descending profile, as in the other two melodic types, being formed by the doric hexachord D-B. A characteristic that brings this melodic type closer to more recent folklore is the G fundamental, which stands out in the first two melodic lines, then in the last two the fundamental, including the final cadence, is on E. In these melodic variants, the change of

modal character is considered to state the existence of two modal centers²⁴. Melodic line 3 brings an extended ambitus, a seventh, and a vaulted profile with the final line descending, ending with a phrygian cadence on E. Another element that differs in this melodic type compared to the first two is the tempo, which is less frequent than in the previous songs (56 instead of 86, 72, 88). This, together with the extended ambitus, the melodic line with leaps up to the fifth and the major-minor parallelism, make us believe that it consists in another evolutionary layer, more recent.

Stremț, AB
Grup femei

♩ = 56

Bra - du - le, bra - du - le, Bra - du - le, bra - du - le,
Ce rău mi-ai a - vu - tu, Ce rău mi-ai a - vu - tu.

AB132 Cul. Bocșa I., studenți, 2012; Tr. Stan A.

Fig.4. *Bradule, bradule* [*Fir tree, fir tree*], Ioan Bocșa. 2013. Muzică vocală tradițională din Munții Apuseni, [Vocal Traditional Music from Apuseni Mountains], no. 29.

7. Conclusions

In comparison with the other localities included in the research conducted in the Apuseni Mountains, the commune of Stremț appears to be a good preserver of the *Fir tree song*, possibly due to the population's stability over time at the commune level, alongside with the importance of this ritual associated with funerals, both locally and regionally. The interpretation of this genre in its traditional form leads us to believe that the informants actively participated at some point in this custom. Although the repertoire can be divided into three typologies, it remains cohesive, with the differentiation between types being attributed to the evolutionary development of this musical genre over time.

The evolutionary layers are distinguished by:

- the number of melodic lines, initially two and later four;
- the musical scale, which transitions from pre-pentatonic structures to complete modes;
- the melody's structure, evolving from gradual progressions to leaps up to a fifth;
- the tempo, which becomes slower in the newer layer.

The only morphological element whose change does not have a clearly determined evolution is the text, which can be tripodic or tetrapodic, with the presence of the refrain determined by the importance given to the initial invocation, with the chorus text exclusively being "Bradule, bradule."

Despite being part of an ancient ritual whose utility has waned in modern times, the *Fir tree song* constitutes an argument regarding the importance that the Romanian people have attributed to death, which has been considered as a passage to the afterlife. Furthermore,

²⁴ Ileana Szenik, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

the thresholds of a person's passage through life have held particular significance, evidenced by the compensation for the absence of one such threshold - marriage - for those who died young, through the inclusion of the ritual song of the fir tree in funeral customs. These aspects of spiritual life, whether Christian or pre-Christian, must be documented and studied as long as there are peasants who possess knowledge of these traditions and generously offer us these values for documentation and remembrance.

8. References

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