

## BOOK REVIEW

### WORDS AS EVENTS OR EVENTS AS WORDS?

Venla Sykäre. *Words as Events : Cretan Mantinádes in Performance and Composition*. Studia Fennica Folkloristica 18. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society 2011. 234pp.

As emphasised on the book cover, the study of oral poetry in Finnish folkloristics has a long history. Unfortunately the source on which it was born in the 19th century, the *kalevala*-meter folk poetry, is not any longer a far-spread living tradition. Coming from prehistoric times, it was upstaged by modern devices of poetic self-expression. Considering that, the community where the traditional folk poetry has survived the mass media age can be the most fascinating field of research for a Finnish folklorist.

It would not be surprising if the reader has previously no idea what a Cretan *mantináda* is. Few studies about this tradition in French and English have hardly been available for many potential readers. Hopefully Venla Sykäre's book reaches a wider audience and fills that gap, because the *mantinádes* are really worth knowing also outside the tradition and among non-Greek speakers.

The *mantináda* consists of two rhymed fifteen-syllable lines which is the most common meter in Greek folk poetry and literature. A line contains two half-lines with the clearly marked caesura between them. The first half-line contains eight syllables with an obligatory stress either on the sixth or the eighth syllable and the second half-line contains seven syllables with an obligatory stress on the fourteenth syllable. The meter goes back to the Byzantine age, but the end-rhyme was introduced in Crete by the Western European literature model during the Venetian occupation between 1211 and 1669. The first systematic use of rhyme and the couplet form can be found in the late fourteenth century. The origin of the name *mantináda* is thought to be derived from the Italian *mattinata* 'a morning song' – a serenade-type vocal composition. Thematically the *mantinádes* cover a wide variety of topics, but first of all love and courting can be mentioned, while in traditional patriarchal Cretan village communities, a *mantináda* was the only possible way to communicate these subjects.

The *mantinádes* are traditionally sung in the *gléndis*, the annual and seasonal celebrations and the life-cycle celebrations where all members of the community took part, as the accompaniment for the dance with the national instruments or the part of ceremony, especially in weddings. The casual singing events are the informal gatherings of a *paréa*, a circle of male friends or relatives, until the 1980s the only way of casual entertainment among men and an important arena for social discourse. During the performances of a *paréa*, the poems sung are thematically linked to each other so that they form a thematic dialogue. But besides this, the *mantinádes* form part of the



Cretans' everyday life in recited form, embedded into speech as proverbial, referential or meditative quotes, or in connection with recalling of the past performances or presentation of poetic inventiveness.

The changes in the economy, culture and technique have also caused some changes in performance contexts – the *gléndis* take place less and less frequently and the number of guests is reduced, the musical and singing activities are left to the professional musicians, traditional musical *parées* take place between those most dedicated to Cretan music and song. But the tradition is still alive: the new arenas open in television and radio programmes, newspaper columns, public competitions, and people use also mobile phones to archive and exchange the poems.

The creativity of the tradition consists not only in the composition of new poems which is highly evaluated yet not accessible for everybody, but also in the performing of contextually coherent poems from the common repertoire. By the words of one of the informants, Mitsos Stavrakakis: “That is, when young, the way you could communicate [with the other sex] was, either you played the mandolin and sung old *mantinádes* that you liked [...] or you made your own ones; when the existing *mantinádes* did not satisfy you, you made your own personal one. And this way you little by little understood if you had in yourself this poetic talent, which here they say, the most of us have.” In such personal questions, those not capable of poetic creation could also ask help from their relatives or friends. The question of improvisation is also widely discussed through the book, summarising that there are two types of composers: those who in general can compose, and those who are spontaneous and capable of extemporising new poems on the spot, the latter ability not necessarily regarded as being any better.

The reserve of the poems of a modern tradition bearer consists of the verses from old written sources, most popular of them *Erotókritos* by Vizenos Kornaros from about the year 1600, to the newest compositions spread either anonymously or by known composers. The oral and literary have lived in an intertextual relation in Crete for a long time. The *mantinádes* have been written down and collected in notebooks for as long as writing has been possible. The verb *gráfo* ‘to write’ is used among others for the composition of the *mantinádes*, but the composers tell that writing down comes only after the poem is ready in their minds. Putting a *mantináda* into writing has never been regarded as a performance, but a way of storing – this is indeed an oral tradition.

Venla Sykäri calls her study an ethnographic register analysis. Based on the fieldwork which included living in a local village community for weeks and months during more than ten years and long-term relationships with the key informants, the study focuses on the questions of performance, communication, self-expression and creativity. From the viewpoint of the modern world, the author has tried to discern the characteristics of the poetic register which explain the contemporary perspectives and interest in it. She suggests that the creative challenges which draw people to *mantinádes* are the verbal, artistic playing with words and structures in the building of an image, the cognitive skills in making the point, and the experience of taking part in a dialogue. Besides being an excellent vehicle for social sharing and communication, a language of dealing and coping with one's experiences, the *mantinádes* are also the capital for local identity, while people in Crete generally suppose that similar verbal forms are not practiced by other peoples. A pure Cretan *mantináda* avoids the use of common language when local expressions are available, as well as foreign words, new or artificial

words, slang, and idiomatic expressions of other Greek dialects. The poetic units are compact and easy to remember and they can be picked up and used by a much larger group of people than just the specialists. The metrical pattern of the poems is so natural to the Greek language that it is quite naturally recognised by any Greek and could unconsciously appear also when not suitable like the students' written exercises.

The study does not examine closer the texts of the *mantinádes*, just some references are given to couple of analyses. Briefly there is assumed that basic vocabulary of the productive register does not differ very much from the spoken idiom, but it leans heavily on shared idiomatic expressions, metaphors and metonyms. The lyric images and metaphors are most often taken from nature, and they are shared with other Greek folk poetry genres. The singularity of the *mantináda* genre is the compactness, putting the whole figurative idea into two verses. Especially in sentimental verses, the first verse typically contains a metaphor from nature and the second line links it to personal experience. Tens of examples translated into English which illustrate several aspects of the tradition still give the reader perception of its poetic charm. The images in the poems are simple, but sincere, cordial and often surprising. The first introduction to the tradition astonishes one with the universality of poetic attitude, suitable everywhere and always, without any sign of false shame. Venla Sykäre admits that regarding the aspect of privacy of emotional self-expression, Crete as a community differs from many others – the sentimental self-expression in poetic form is open to every member of community, also to tough men, not being the sign of weakness, and probably balances the otherwise rather severe qualifications for men's self-regard.

The question of men's and women's roles in the tradition is interesting, too. In the patriarchal village society women had less opportunity to perform, most of the arenas were reserved for men. But women were not excluded from these occasions, they were attentive listeners, the bearers of tradition in the families who memorised a lot of poems and taught them also to children. The modern arenas are likewise open to both sexes and the key informant of Venla Sykäre is a middle-aged woman Kostoula Papadoyanni who has developed her talent particularly with the help of mass media. One of her poetry's admirers is her husband, not verbally talented himself, but who enjoys and supports his wife's poems which give light to their common life. Sykäre has distinguished four types of creativity, depending on which is the relation between the creator, the situation of creation and the receivers and the last of them the creativity in perception – the experience through interpretation of the image is also a kind of creation. So we could say that the Cretans have a wonderful device in their possession which helps them all to be creators, in festive times and everyday life, giving their life extra value not so easily achievable without it.

Venla Sykäre's study gives an overview of the historical and cultural background of the *mantináda* tradition, as well as the interdisciplinary theoretical basis, the contemporary Finnish and international research on oral poetry and the anthropological research on communicative speech genres. The significant research results are presented mainly in the sixth chapter, *Composition*, and the seventh chapter *A theory of dialogic oral poetry*. The presentation of the theme starts already in the first pages of the preface where the fieldwork situations and key informants are acquainted from the aspects which do not come out anywhere else. For a person specialising in poetics rather than anthropology such an order of information sporadically seemed illogical

and demanded returning to the parts already read. But the context of folk poetry – our life – is not profoundly logical itself. *Words as Events* shows us one kind of possibility how this context can be reborn in poetic expression, not only how the words can act as events, but also how the events form into words, dialogues of the witty and gentle poems.

I would like to end with my favourite *mantináda* from the book, composed by Kostoula Papadoyanni:

*Krató to káthe s'agapó / pou lén' ta dio sou híli,  
osán kratá tis thálassas / ton ího to kohíli.*

I hold every “I love you” / uttered by your lips,  
Like the sea-shell holds / the sound of the sea.

Kanni Labi