

TRADITIONAL ACTS PERFORMANCED WITHIN THE FUNERARY CEREMONY. THE LAMENTS*

Anca CEAUȘESCU**

Abstract: Among the rites of passage, the funerary ones, or those related to the remembering and honouring the dead seem to be the oldest and the best preserved ones. The burying ceremony still preserves in its structure involve a mixture of myth and rite elements, meant to initiate and prepare the individual for the new situation, but also rites that seek to restore vital, material ties to those who have gone into the “beyond” world with this world.

Among the mediated forms of communication, in the present material we are to consider *the laments*, as ancient modalities to express sadness and soul grieving, trying to display their role for the people who mourn, on the long way of sufferance. The laments are situated among the mandatory traditional acts, in our traditional village not-existing a funeral without improvised lamentations. While the ritual funerary songs are strictly related to certain moments from the ritual, and in perfect harmony with certain rules, including specialised performers, the laments are spontaneous manifestations of the pain, sustained by complex verbal structures and specific gestures having an unstable form, and a personal character, their content being adapted to the concrete situation of the deceased.

Keywords: the funerary ceremony, customs, the mediated forms of communication, the laments, traditional acts.

In all the human societies, from prehistory until nowadays, the rites of passage¹ have played a major part in the spiritual life of the communities, ensuring the integration in the sacredness of the Universe. The three rites of passage rediscover the essential moments of the individual existence, which are understood and assimilated as means of existence into this world, but also beyond it. If the birth of a man is nothing

* The article is part of a research project *Poezia funerară în Oltenia*, included in the research programme of “C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor” Institute for Research in Social Studies and Humanities from Craiova, of the Romanian Academy: “Dezvoltarea economico-socială, politică și culturală a Olteniei istorice, condiție a integrării în comunitatea euroregiunilor”.

** 3rd Degree Scientific Researcher, PhD., “C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor” Institute for Research in Social Studies and Humanities from Craiova, of the Romanian Academy; E-mail: ancaceausescu@yahoo.com

¹ At the beginning of the 20th century, Arnold von Gennep calls the rites that accompany the birth, the marriage and the death “rites of passage”. They are based on several transitions, transitions from pre-existence towards the present world, of the living, then to the “other side” world, after dying, all these being preceded or accompanied by rituals and ceremonies. (Arnold von Gennep, *Riturile de trecere*, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 1996, pp. 22–23).

but the beginning of a new stage of cosmic life, in a terrestrial hypostasis, the wedding implies the integration of this stage into the rhythm of the earthy life, and death is the returning on the man into the Cosmos. Therefore, the life of an individual represents a succession of stages, each of them related to ceremonies, whose only purpose is always the same: “the facilitating of the individual’s passing from a determined situation into a different, determined one”².

Among the rites of passage, the funerary ones, or those related to the remembering and honouring the dead seem to be the oldest and the best preserved ones. The last of the three major biological thresholds, the death, is a crucial moment in the existence of the individual, which includes an entire system of ideas, concepts, attitudes and beliefs, related to the soul immortality, and the cult of the dead³. As many other Romanian customs, the burying ceremony still preserves in its structure a series of appreciably old elements, even pre-Christian, to which there have been added, in time, others, imposed by the church: “We have enough evidence of the «pagan» inheritance, that is the Getic and Dacian one on addressing the Romanians... But their number is certainly bigger: it is enough to think about the cult of the dead and the funerary mythology, to the agrarian rites, to the season related customs, to the magical beliefs etc., which, it is well-known, have still persisted, feebly altered, from one religion to the other, for millenniums”⁴.

The same as the other rites of passage (birth, marriage), the funeral ones are organised into three distinct stages: the separation from the old state, the preparing for the passing and the proper passing and the integration into the new condition. The actions involved by each of the Great Passage stages, and especially, the proper passing, involve a mixture of myth and rite elements, meant to initiate and prepare the individual for the new situation. As Delia Suiogan mentions, along the time, the funerary ceremony has gained the characteristics of a real death show, “this situation being specifically determined by the fact that the *Death* has been and remained a great mystery for the man, due to the fact that, beyond the time, *Death* can still be defined as an *absolute transformation*, a transformation determined by both the crossing of some successive and mandatory stages, and the passing from a known, familiar world, into a just imagined one”⁵.

The man becomes aware of the death, meaning that they specifically experience the real feeling of separation from this-side world, once with the passing of the years. In the traditional mentality, death is perceived as a phenomenon derived from the natural order that governs the resorts of the two worlds, and not a rapture that would

² *Ibidem*, p. 16.

³ On the immortality of the soul after the leaving of the body, see Ion Ghinoiu, *Cărările sufletului*, Bucharest, Etnologica Publishing, 2004; Loredana-Maria Ilin-Grozoiu, *Concepts, beliefs and traditions on the soul immortality and the cult of the dead*, Craiova, Universitaria Publishing, Bucharest, Pro Universitaria Publishing, 2014, pp. 92–102.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1995, pp. 75–76.

⁵ Delia Suiogan, *Simbolica riturilor de trecere*, Bucharest, Paideea Publishing, 2006, p. 136.

annihilate the meaning of life. The great separation does not represent the final closure of an individual's destiny, but an irreversible passing, from the world of the living, into that from "the-other-side" – a world which is not totally unknown, as in the moment of birth, but a world represented through an imaginary model. The funeral closes, on the human plan, a physical existence, but it also continues in the magical and ritual plan, as a spiritual co-existence; "Death is considered the supreme initiation, the beginning of the spiritual existence"⁶.

This unavoidable biological event is described, in an imaginary manner, represented as an eternal journey of the soul into a post-human world, similar to ours, but also different, a journey with different obstacles and ritual endeavours for the wandering soul. An important role, on this road taken by the soul from existence into post-existence, is that of the family and then the larger community that, "through their ritual actions, believe that they can help the soul travel in better conditions on the long journey towards the Kingdom of God, and become immortal at the end of the road. Therefore, for the Romanians, death does not represent a total interruption of the intimate and social relations that the passed away had, but is it considered that there will always be a connection that needs to be maintained through rites"⁷.

Among the mediated forms of communication, in the present material we are to consider *the laments*, as ancient modalities to express sadness and soul grieving, trying to display their role for the people who mourn, on the long way of sufferance.

First of all, we need to mention the fact that, within the funerary ceremony, the verbal rites that accompany the *Great Passage* constitute a significant part, among them the other components of the funerary rite being constituted into an assembly of relations. To a closer look, we can observe that the songs accompany the entire life of the man, both in joyful situations, and sad moments. There are lullabies, when people begin their existence, and songs for the funeral, when they leave to the Other-Side world. The ones from the last category form the *Romanian Book of the Dead*, an unwritten paper, transmitted orally, from one generation to the other, which includes texts of initiation of the soul for the great voyage towards the Other-Side world. These are sung by women in certain moments of the funerary ceremony, and include: the Song of the Dawn, the Song of the Fir-Tree, the Song of the Wake, and versified laments.

Constantin Brăiloiu makes a difference within the funerary texts, underlying the fact that, while the ritual funerary songs are strictly related to certain moments from the ritual, and in perfect harmony with certain rules, including specialised performers, the laments are spontaneous manifestations, "melodic expressions of the pain"⁸, sustained by complex verbal structures and specific gestures. If the ceremonial songs have a generalised content, and an impersonal character, the laments have an unstable form,

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Sacral și profanul*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1992, p. 182.

⁷ Apud Ingo Sperl, *Țara fără dor. Funcția psihologică a bocetului românesc*, Bucharest, Univers Publishing, 2000, p. 36.

⁸ Constantin Brăiloiu, *Ale mortului din Gorj*, Bucharest, 1936, p. 1.

and a personal character, their content being adapted to the concrete situation of the deceased, being performed by women, who are close relatives of them.

Death, the last moment of human existence, occurs, according to the sayings of the old-people, after the soul departs⁹. It is announced into the collectivity by visual and auditory signals, among which the laments, a type of improvised songs, semi-versified, through which, with a mournful melodic line, is evoked the departed one, and the pain of the family is transmitted. Immediately after the death of a person, the women from the family get out of the house and lament into the yard, announcing, in this way, the community, about the unfortunate event. This spontaneous manifestation of the soul pain is known by different terms, according to the geographic area: *lament*, in Muntenia and Oltenia, *mourning*, in Moldova, and *death song* in Transylvania.

In the Romanian Explanatory Dictionary, the lament is defined as “nervous crying with moans; words, voiced verses, or sung lines, performed mournfully at funerals”¹⁰. Thus, the lament is an expression of soul grieving, generated from crying, which always accompanies it: “The crying or the laughter are not just simple natural and uncontrolled reactions of the individual to the psychological requests that come from the exterior. They have a cultural base, are part of the para-linguistic codes of human communication and expressivity. Generally, crying represents the sign of pain, grief and despair. Nonetheless, there are tears of joy, relief and clearness of mind and soul”¹¹. In the culture of many people, the crying was awarded magical valences, Canacakis showing that tears release the pain from our bodies when mourning, through this methods the author underlying the healing power of crying¹².

The lamenting for the deceased is a very old practice, met on the entire Romanian territory, being attested at many of the ancient people. This expresses the human experiences and feelings for the losses. At the Jews, the people cried for 30 days after the death of Aaron, and for the same number of days after Moses. At the Greeks, the laments were called *trine*, and at the Romans, *neniae*, the latter name coming from the goddess *Nenia*, who used to represent these “songs”. The

⁹ The soul of the dead is perceived as an immediate and objective reality, as a presence in the house, which obligates the family to fulfil the necessary actions for its satisfaction. The belief is extremely old, being attested both by the funerary Egyptian texts, respectively the Book of the Dead from Egypt, in the Mediterranean space (in the Greek and Latin Antiquity), and the Thracian space (at the Getas and Dacians). Once with the death of the body, the soul leaves on an eternal journey. The great journey means the travelling of immense spaces, full of dangers, between the two worlds. In order to reach the posthumous world, the soul must first pass the many obstacles and dangers from our world. The voyage of the soul to death, the road itself is an initiation into the death, the initiatory journey of the soul marking the passing towards another condition.

¹⁰ *Dicționar al limbii române contemporane*, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedical Publishing, 1980, p. 61.

¹¹ Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale*, Timișoara, Amarcord Publishing, 1994, p. 144.

¹² Ingo Sperl, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

neniae songs were performed by paid women, dressed in black, who would improvise laments for the deceased, according to the information they had about them, gathered from the servants¹³. They used to lament at home, then following the funeral procession, being accompanied by flutes (*funebres tibiae*), made of bone of Milvus (eagle). One of the women who would lament, called *praefica*, was walking ahead and would give the note. Their laments used to include two gestures: the tearing of hair and the proper lamentation¹⁴.

In the plan of the Romanian tradition, the lament has two forms of manifestation: the free lament performed in Oltenia, Muntenia and south of Moldova, and the versified lament practiced in an area that includes the west and the centre of the country, in Maramureş, Bukovina and the north of Moldova. On addressing its age, we can distinguish between: the archaic lament, as a natural form of sufferance, accompanied by cries, sighs, desperate gestures, attested to most of the ancient peoples of the world; the versified lament, which contains, among others, nicely-shaped and artistically realised folkloric motifs; the unconfessed lament, expressed as a silent, inner pain, as a deeply torment of the soul¹⁵. At the Romanians, the archaic lament is related to the versified one, and, in the same time, it is differentiated by the funerary songs¹⁶.

In the structure of the funerary ceremony, the laments are situated among the mandatory traditional acts, in our traditional village not-existing a funeral without improvised lamentations. It is believed that if there are not sung laments for the deceased, this is a great sin, but also a shame for the family. Moreover, if a person is buried without laments, this represents defiance against the divinity. Although spontaneous, the laments assume certain rules that are necessary, first of all, from consideration for the passed away and the community, but also improvisation, inspired either by the relation with the deceased, or the circumstances within the death occurred. Furthermore, they respect certain norms, different from a region to the other, norms that are related to the local tradition, and are according to the system of customs specific to the funerary ceremony and the honouring of the dead.

The laments emerged from the need of communicating to the one that leaves This-Side world for ever, manifesting as a personal necessity of exteriorisation of the moral pain experienced after the loss of the loved ones, thus, the lament has the form of a dialogue, which represents a continuous conversation with the dead. Nonetheless, “the dialogue created through the lament is always reflexive, therefore a fictive one, usually made of questions that never have an answer, or affectional and panegyric evocations, dedicated to the deceased”¹⁷.

¹³ Simion Fl. Marian, *Înmormântarea la români*, Bucharest, 1892, pp. 139–140.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

¹⁵ Ion Ghinoiu, *Mitologie română. Dicționar*, Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic Gold Publishing, 2013, p. 39; Idem, *Lumea de aici, lumea de dincolo*, Bucharest, Romanian Cultural Fundation Publishing, 1999, pp. 95–96.

¹⁶ Ion Ghinoiu, *Mitologie română ...* pp. 39–40.

¹⁷ Mihai Pop, Pavel Ruxăndoiu, *Folclor literar românesc*, Bucharest, Didactic and Pedagogic Publishing, 1991, p. 166.

Usually, the laments are improvised on sad melodies, adapted to the tensioned moment of the funerary ceremony, with simple phrases and sombre intonation. Yet, these improvisations are not free, but according to the system of rules and patters that belong to a collective tradition, or they can also be individual creations. Thus, the laments are not generic; they represent an act of fictive communication between two concrete people (a transmitter – the one who always laments, and a recipient)¹⁸.

Unlike the funerary songs, the distribution of the laments within the funerary ceremony shows more freedom. According to the custom, the mourning starts at a specific time interval after the death, “for the voiced regrets and the noisy crying to not bring the dead back”¹⁹. There are sung laments during the three days when the passed away is in the house. Only the women lament, mainly the ones from the family of the deceased (mothers, wives, sisters), then the further relatives, the neighbours, the friends, or any other woman that wishes to transmit, through the one that leaves, messages for their own dead. In special situations, men are lamenting too. If the dead has nobody else to lament for them, there are hired lamenters to do this activity. There used to be sung laments only during the day, in the morning, at dawn, and in the evening, especially in the room with the dead; moreover, when the coffin is taken out of the house, during the funerary procession towards the cemetery, or on other occasions, when close ones go to the grave. In their laments, said on a monotonous melody, the women cry the name of the deceased, talk about their remarkable deeds, and they tell about the pain caused by the void left behind. Moreover, the laments contain advice that would guide the soul for choosing a not too heavy road, towards the new area of residence.

In his study on the funerary ritual from Transylvania, Gail Kligman notes, on addressing the laments, that they: “are used both referentially and in an indexical manner. The first aspect addresses the cosmological semantics (for example, the relation between the living and the death; the second one, refers to some more «pragmatic» issues) ...”²⁰. Thus, the people who lament, basing on the belief that the dead talk to each other, consider that the people who died recently can be messengers to the other realm. Therefore, through laments, as mediate forms of communication, the deceased is asked to transmit messages for the Other-side humanity, towards the ones who had long gone, information about the life of the remained, their joys and difficulties; “And if they are to ask about us/ What we are doing over here/ You shall tell them like this/ That we are fine/ But we are crying all the time/ No day or hour is passing/ Without us crying”²¹.

Although the lament is a natural process, being determined both religiously and ritually, it is considered inappropriate a too high intensity for the manifestation

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Elena Rodica Colta, *De la naștere la moarte*, Bucharest, Etnologic Publishing, 2015, p. 227, for details see <https://www.ccja.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/De-la-nastere-la-moarte.pdf>.

²⁰ Gail Kligman, *Nunta mortului. Ritual, poetică și cultură populară în Transilvania*, 2nd edition, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 2005, p. 111.

²¹ Mihai Pop, Pavel Ruxăndoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

of the pain, especially when babies and old people die. Simion Fl. Marian, in his work *Înmormântarea la români*, published in 1892, mentions that, in Bukovina, it is believed that, if there are too many dropped tears, on the other realm, these tears are transformed into a puddle, in which children can drown on their way to Heaven²². In addition, the women who lament pay attention that no tear is dropped on the clothes or the cheek of the deceased, believing that these tears would burn the flesh as the boiling water, and would darken the soul²³.

In Oltenia, people lament after the funeral too, at the cemetery, especially on the days that they commemorate the death, believing that it is something that brings joy for the departed on the other side, and comforts the yearning of the living²⁴. These are actually the laments for remembrance and they have, through their technique and spatial and temporal dimension, a cathartic role²⁵. The same as in Moldova, where Cantemir was noticing, at the beginning of the 20th century, the fact that, for one year, each Saturday, the people close to the deceased, would go to the grave to mourn for them²⁶. Rich people would bring lamenters, who would sing about the troubles of life. Their laments would usually begin: "I sing the sorrow of the whole world, / The dreadful life / Is broken and cut into pieces / As a piece of thread"²⁷.

Unlike the occident, where exteriorisation is considered a sign of weakness and primitivism, in the Romanian village the lament used to have, in the past centuries, a major importance in the funeral ritual, believing that that the prays said by the relatives of the deceased can decide his faith in the Other-Side world. If someone is buried without laments, then they shall live a hard existence on the other world. The restraint of not lamenting for the parent, spouses, grandparents, by those who are still alive, a phenomenon which is met frequently nowadays, especially in the urban regions, is perceived, in the traditional mentality, as a sin and lack of respect for the passed away.

Sung with a monotonous melodic line, the laments have a double function: on one side they diminish the pain of the departed from this world, and, on the other side, they ensure the psychical equilibrium of the ones remained behind²⁸. Through lament, which begins as bursts of pain, ended with certain calmness, people gain a relative relief from the sufferance, and accept easier the departure from the loved ones. We further notice the spectacular function of the laments, that of showing how great the sorrow of the people left behind, close to the departed, is.

²² Simion Fl. Marian, *op. cit.*, pp. 400–401.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Romulus Antonescu, *Dicționar de simboluri și credințe tradiționale românești*, p. 69 (for details see <http://cimec.ro/Etnografie/Antonescu-dictionar/Antonescu-Romulus-Dictionar-Simboluri-Credinte-Traditionale-Romanesti.pdf>).

²⁵ Ion Ghinoiu, *Mitologie română ...*, p. 40.

²⁶ Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descrierea Moldovei*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing, 1923, p. 165.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ Ion Ghinoiu, *Comoara satelor. Calendar popular*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing, 2005, p. 102.

As a natural way of expression of pain, provoked by the disappearance of the close people, the laments can be manifested as oral popular poetic forms: “The lament for the dead is shown through different means of expression, which, sometimes, have an artistic approach, even a poetic one... More often than not, the laments can be considered real oral popular poetic creations”²⁹. More than any other folk creation, the versified text of them, along with the funerary songs, expresses the general conception of the Romanians about life and death. In general, the laments include real facts, related to the family life and the activity of the passed away, the description of the circumstances in which they died, and the collectivity within they carried out the activity. In the same time, their content is related to the age, sex, relation, marital status of the deceased. Thus, the lament can be for: the father, the mother, the husband, the wife, the sister, the child, the young man, the maiden, the old man etc. Among the themes that are reflected in the text of the laments, here are few, the most commonly met ones: the indifference of the dead to the repeated calls of the deserted, somehow careless for the people who are left behind, the faith of the close ones; the coffin-house/ the grave-house; the messenger dead; the deceiving, ruthless death, the meeting with other dead, the irreversibility of the death road etc.

As means of expression, the laments use the descriptive or narrative lyricism, “with the intensification of the affective means, marked by the frequency of familiar diminutives and appellatives. Not having a ritual and magical character, the laments could evolve into a pure lyricism, enriching the imagistic stock”³⁰. The way of expression is adapted to the tensioned moment of the funerary ceremony, and the psychical condition of the mourning people.

In a *lament of the girls* for their mother, there can be distinguished lyrics that describe the pain caused by the loss of the beloved, along with the desire that the death did not happen: “Oh, mother, what did you think / That you died so fast? / And how could you / Leave us so fast? / So what if father is here, / He cannot do everything. / He can bring us food... / But would make us clothes? / And if our hair tangles, / And our clothes get dirty / Who would wash them / Who would comb our hair? / Because our mother has died... / Because the motherless children / Are ignored by everyone else...”³¹. The people closed to the deceased women address her directly, saying that her unexpected departure is causing them much distress, owing to the fact that a trustworthy person disappears, the children remain alone without support, and their entire life ought to be reorganised.

In a lament song from Blahnița de Sus, Gorj County, it is expressed the regret for leaving This-Side world: “The bell is taken the grief tall / I am leaving this world / There is a long way ahead, wind-beaten / And my folks are choking with crying. / You, world, are like a dream / Today I’m dying / And I’m leaving with regrets / From my

²⁹ Ion Vlăduțiu, *Etnografia românească*, Bucharest, Scientific Publishing, 1973, 408.

³⁰ Mihai Pop, Pavel Ruxândoiu, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–169.

³¹ Nicolae Cojocaru, *Cântece, obiceiuri și tradiții populare românești*, V, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, 1984, p. 90.

dear place of mine / A fall is coming, a summer is passing / My folks have no one to be with them / Because the ones who they've been with / Are hiding in the grave today"³², and in another one, from the locality of Hârtoape, Iași County, there can be seen the revolt against the death: "You shall burn in fire death, / You do not do justice at all. / Where they call you, you don't go, / Where they chase you from, you remain"³³.

Another example, the lament of the mother for her daughter who **served the strangers**, impresses through the profoundness of the reflections on the life of the daughter, also including reactions of social protest: "My dear poor daughter, / My sweet dear Mary, / You served the strangers, / You sow their clothes, / They treated you bad, / They didn't give you any warm soup, / Nor bread did they offer you, / You fed the strangers. / Until you got ill, / And you died in the end"³⁴.

The most painful deaths are those of the unmarried young people, where, the nuptial background replaces or doubles the funerary one. *The wedding of the dead*, a symbolic one, resolves a deviation from the natural way of life, that is the early occurred death, before passing through the second important stage from the life cycle. This is the reason for which, in the texts of the laments voiced at the *wedding of the dead*, the accent falls on the contradictions created by a premature death. As resorting from the following lament, the stage of the life cycle includes a change of the social status, through the marriage that would occur: "Oh, the good and handsome lad/ It's not the time for your death / It's the time for your marriage, / It's your time for living / And get wedded./ Get up and look around/ There are many people arrived here/ They thought it's your wedding / There are young girls and boys / They thought you got engaged / Get up and choose / Any girl that you would like. / We shall be glad of your choice..."³⁵.

The presence of the laments in the Romanian folklore is due to the oral tradition. Owing to the reason that they were not written on the paper, most of them have been forgotten. Others, even if they suffered modifications and influences along the time, have remained in the collective memory of the people, representing unique ethnographic documents, of an exceptional value for the Romanian space, and not only.

³² Loredana-Maria Ilin-Grozoiu, *Motivul «părăsirea casei pământești» în lirica funerară românească*, in "Arhivele Olteniei", New Series, no. 30, 2016, p. 277.

³³ Ion Ghinoiu, *Mitologie română ...*, p. 42.

³⁴ Mihai Pop, Pavel Ruxândoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

³⁵ Gail Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 169.