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Understanding Repetition: Modern Greek Oral Poetry and Its Musical Contexts

Repeatability in oral traditions has been identified as a factor that links the everyday to the eternal, or “now” to “forever” in what constitutes a particular notion of ritual time. Repeated groups of words have been defined as functional tools that are handed over from one active member of a tradition to another, in order to facilitate their work of (re)composition-in-performance. In the same context, musical repetition has been shown to foster experimentation with verse forms that are considered as standard. Despite these and many other significant interdisciplinary advances, scholarship on modern Greek oral poetry, the *dimotikó tragoudi*, seems—in most cases—to adopt a binary “either/or” distinction between text and song. This may be seen as a consequence of formerly prevalent, ideologized views of these works as “monuments” of Greekness. As opposed to such views, I believe that oral traditions cannot be confined within strict national or disciplinary borders. Therefore, transnational relations and interdisciplinary perspectives find themselves at the heart of this project.

The attentive analysis of verbal and musical repetition is key to understanding the *dimotikó tragoudi* not as text, neither simply as song, but as a performative act of singing (*tragoudisma*). In the modern Greek oral tradition, repetition is actualized in various forms such as *gyrismata*, *formulas*, and *refrains*, which have been mainly considered as factual necessities of composition and performance. However, I propose that repetition is to be interpreted, not merely acknowledged. These devices do not serve solely as mnemonic aids or as ornaments; they are hybrid (verbal/musical) meaning-making mechanisms. They also carry cultural significance, reflecting the collective memory and shared narratives (as well as shifts, ruptures, and discontinuities in these narratives). Through my examination of selected recordings from the James A. Notopoulos Collection at Harvard University, I show how various kinds of repetition are able to establish novel associations between words and things. I further argue that repetitive phenomena can disrupt the semantic rigidity of verbal utterances, thus weaving words and music together.

This research situates the study of repetition within a comprehensive interdisciplinary framework, drawing insights from linguistics, literature, musicology, anthropology, and cultural studies. Nevertheless, I remain dedicated to the analysis of the literary and musical material at hand. To this end, the recordings are set side by side with textual variations (*parallagés*) of the songs, as found in predominant printed editions (Fauriel, Zambelios, Passow, Pachtikos, Politis, Academy of Athens, Peristeris/Iliopoulos). The investigation extends beyond the verbal realm to encompass the musical dimensions of repetition in the modern Greek oral tradition. Focusing on the notion of musical *trope* or *mode* (*tropos*, sometimes also called *dromos* in Greek)—a concept that echoes the constant variation and change that is embedded in repetition—I map certain notable links between the tradition at hand and the late Ottoman world. I argue that such connections are integral, if we are to perceive the modern Greek folksong tradition in relation to a greater, dynamic, and heterogeneous cultural whole.

Dimitris Prokos is conducting his Ph.D. research at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, in the field of modern Greek Studies. He holds a BA in Classics and an MA in modern Greek Literature. His doctoral dissertation consists of an interdisciplinary approach to the notion of verbal/musical repetition and its functions in modern Greek oral, sung poetry. Dimitris is also an active musician, composing and performing original music in the context of live concerts, mainly with the band Dury Dava, as well as in theater plays and art exhibitions. In an attempt to transform such interests into academic practice, he has been working towards creatively comparing literature and music since his first years as a graduate student. He has shared his views with the community through conferences and journal publications, in Greece and abroad. Currently, he is working on the James A. Notopoulos recordings of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University, supported by a Fulbright Visiting Research Student grant.