

The Texts of Funerals and Vigilances – the Song-Dictation

Abstract. The present paper examines a novel aspect of folk literacy within the ethnographical research, which is an important part of the culture. The main theme of the study is some manuscripts from Shalank, which were used at funerals. The manuscripts are in quadruplicate, and contain only funeral songs. Besides this, I would like to emphasize the importance of an old custom, the dictation. It is a religious custom, which was typical of the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia. *Keywords:* manuscripts from Shalank, funeral songs, song-dictation

Резюме. Це дослідження присвячене одному з нових напрямів етнографії – народній писемності, яка є важливою частиною культури. У публікації проаналізовано кілька рукописів з села Шаланки. Книжка «*Halottas alkalmakra készített és írott könyv*» («Книга, написана для випадків поховань померлих») існує в селі в чотирьох екземплярах, містить пісні для похоронів. Також окрему увагу приділено на такий звичай реформатських громад, як диктування пісень (вокальний диктант). *Ключові слова:* рукописи у селі Шаланки, похоронні пісні, диктування пісень

Rezümé. Az alábbi munka a néprajzi kutatás egyik új írásbeliséggel foglalkozik, mely a kultúra igen fontos része. A tanulmány középpontjában néhány salánki kézirat áll. A *Halottas alkalmakra készített és írott könyv* jelenleg négy példányban található meg a településen, mind-egyikük temetési énekeket tartalmaz. Emellett szeretném felhívni a figyelmet a református közösségekben egykor oly jellemző szokásra, az énekdictálásra. *Kulcsszavak:* salánki kéziratok, temetési énekek, énekdictálás

My research deals with an ancient custom, the *song-dictation* in a Transcarpathian Hungarian village, Shalank.

Until World War II village students dictated the psalms in the Reformed Church. Ambrus Molnar ethnographer wrote about the custom in his study, which was published in 1999.¹ His work is about the custom of *dictation* in Nagydobrony, but this was typical of several Hungarian-inhabited settlements in Transcarpathia. The texts were dictated from *manuscripts*.

The first reason of the dictation was the lack of Psalms. The second reason of this custom was the lack of printed books and the illiteracy.² Later the appearance of the Psalms squeezed the dictation out of the church.

One of the main scenes of dictation was the Sunday worship. The person who was dictating said the song per line and the community sang after him. In Shalank the *pre-recited* form was used.³ This means that the dictator said the rows, singing

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¹ MOLNÁR AMBRUS: Egyházi és vallásos élet, „diktálás”, „énekklők” Nagydobronyban. In S. Lackovits Emőke – Mészáros Veronika (szerk.): *Népi vallásosság a Kárpát-medencében* 5. Veszprém, 2001

² ZÁN GÁL ADÉL: Az ének diktálás hagyománya Salánkon. *Ethnica*, 2011, 13. évf. 3. sz. 58–59.

³ JÁKI SÁNDOR P. TEODÓZ: Ősi és modern. *Magyar Egyházzene*, 1995/1996, II. évf. 4. sz. 429–433.

slightly. This form was practised in Nagyecsed as well.⁴ The characteristic of the village is that the Reformed Church inhabitants also sang after dictation from the printed psalm books.

In Shalank the person who dictated was named *cantor*, elsewhere his name was *precentor* or *song-leader*.⁵ He was the one who set the tune and started the song so that members of the community could sing after them.

After the Sunday worship, the second and the main scene of the dictation were the funerals and the vigils. The funerals and the vigils had a private cantor or precentor.⁶

For the funeral occasions, direct manuscripts were made full of funeral songs. The title of these manuscripts was *Book made and written for the funeral occasions*. The manuscript contains mixed songs/psalms to be dictated in the funerals and during the vigils.⁷ It is a collection, in which the source of the songs is unknown. These are Reformed Church folk songs. According to the literature this songs came from the middle ages, however they spread at the time of the Reformation, in the XVI century.⁸

In Shalank the funeral and the vigil are held in the courtyard today. This usually takes two or three hours. Earlier mostly men participated in the vigils. Here the cantor and the assistant cantor dictated from the manuscript mentioned above. He led the vigil like a master of ceremonies.

The cantor chose the song from this booklet according to the social position of the deceased. Different songs were sung at the *church caretaker's* funeral and other at the *bellman's* funeral. This way they made a distinction between the pastor and simple men. The cantor chose different song for the funeral of a young girl or a grandmother. The members of the community respected each other by selecting the appropriate songs/psalms.

The *Book made and written for the funeral occasions* can be found in several copies in the researched area. I have found four manuscripts in Shalank. The manuscript contains songs only related to the funeral service. None of these can be found in today's or older psalmody or in psalms. Some songs may have familiar melodies, but most of them are labeled with subtitle "*own melody*". This means that the melody of these funeral songs is not found in the psalmody.

⁴ SÁPY SZILVIA: „Diktálás énekek” Vámosoroszi temetkezési hagyományában. *Ethnographia*, 2000, 111. évf. 1–2. sz. 157–176.

⁵ GYÖRGY-HORVÁTH LÁSZLÓ–LAJOS MIHÁLY: *A Hömlöc lábánál. Falumonográfia. Salánk, Feketepatak és Verbőc történetéből*. Intermix Kiadó, Ungvár–Budapest, 1998, 122–127.

⁶ BÁLINT SÁNDOR: *Népünk ünnepei. Az egyházi év néprajza*. A Szent István Társulat kiadása, Budapest, 1938

⁷ ZÁN GÁL, 2011

⁸ KATONA IMRE–RAJECZKY BENJAMIN: Népének. In Ortutay Gyula (szerk.): *Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon K-Né*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1980

The first manuscript was written in 1883–84. It was owned by Ferencz Gáll. On the first page we can find the most important entries written in carefully drawn letters. Here we can find the function of the book, the name of the owner and the date of the entry. On the next page we can read the songs of Stage I.

The second manuscript was written in 1906. It was owned by József Orbán. On the first page of the manuscript we can read the name of the owner, and the date of the copying as well. On the next page we can read the songs of Stage I.

Both of the manuscripts are worn and damaged by long use. They were often used, because at funerals the cantors dictated only from these.

The third manuscript was written in 1971–73, and was owned by Zoltán Zán. At the first page of the book we can find the author's notes: “*Explanation*”, which serves as a guide for cantors and precentors on how to use the booklet.

The content of the quote is as follows:

*“In this book are written familiar and less familiar songs/psalms for each funeral services. To this belongs a table of contents at the end of the manuscripts. So the cantor must choose the psalms the present may know .”*⁹

Zoltán Zán wrote the fourth manuscript too in 1981.

The construction of the manuscripts

All of the four manuscripts have a similar structure. They are divided into ten sections. The songs in the sections are built around different age groups. They refer to the cause of death, sometimes to the rank of the deceased or to the material status. The contents at the end of the book also show the sections. The ten sections are the following:

Section 1: Funeral songs for babies

Section 2: Funeral songs for children

Section 3: Funeral songs for youths

Section 4: Funeral songs for middle aged

Section 5: Funeral songs for the elderly

Section 6. Simple songs at vigilance

Section 7: Songs at vigilance

Section 8 and 9: Songs for various cases

Section 10: Songs on the way to the cemetery and other songs for vigilance

Songs are similar and match in the manuscripts. This proves that one has been copied from the other. The first lines of the texts can be read below. The example shows that the texts are the same.

⁹ The quotation is provided only by translation.

Table 1. Comparison of manuscripts

| Gáll Ferencz 1883–84 | Orbán József 1906 | Zán Zoltán 1970–73 |
|--|--|---|
| Section I. | | |
| Funeral songs for babies | | |
| 1. Little baby you are gone... 2. Sere the spring of my life... 3. Little baby, you were a nipple... 4. Like a rose damaged by the warm wind... | 1. Little baby you are gone ... 2. Sere the spring of my life 3. Little baby, you were a nipple... 4. Like a rose damaged by the warm wind... | 1. Little baby you are gone ... 2. Sere the spring of my life 3 Little baby, you were a nipple... 4. Like a rose damaged by the warm wind... |

Source: Own source (manuscripts)

In some texts the difference is barely noticeable. We find spelling errors in many places, but the stylistic value of the songs will not be less because of that.

The sources of the manuscripts are unknown. We can read only the source of the melodies.

The central thought of the songs is passing away which is expressed often with natural image. Human life is paralleled with the development of the plants and the cyclical change of the nature. The nature appears in several songs, mostly in the songs of the first, second and third section. For instance,

“*Sprightly spring of my life had faded away...*” (Section 1. song 2)

“*In Autumn is falling the splendor of the summer...*” (Section 5. song 96)

Most common symbol is the flower, which is the symbol of the origin of the universe.¹⁰ Roses are often used among the flowers. The rose is the symbol of rebirth, kindness and respect.¹¹ The rose also symbolizes young life. It often occurs in songs sung for the youth. Buds are also common, because it is the symbol of the child, and it can be the symbol of hope.¹² Consolation in the texts is frequent.

Dictation is an old tradition. It has ended just a few years ago in Shalank. The inhabitants of the village think differently about the dictation. Opinions are split. Most of them wanted to observe the custom, because it was part of our Reformed Church Hungarians, and part of the Reformed Church religion.

¹⁰ HOPPÁL MIHÁLY – JANKOVICS MARCELL – NAGY ANDRÁS – SZEMADÁM GYÖRGY: *Jelképtár*. Helikon Kiadó, Budapest, 1997, 235.

¹¹ HOPPÁL – JANKOVICS – NAGY – SZEMADÁM, 1997, 183.

¹² HOPPÁL – JANKOVICS – NAGY – SZEMADÁM, 1997, 37.

In my work, I would like to draw the attention to the manuscripts, and the funeral songs in it because these manuscripts contain not only simple texts but also ancient Hungarian folk tunes. The community has preserved the tunes for centuries. We cannot bring the habit back but we must not let it be forgotten. Firstly, manuscripts should be collected as soon as possible. Secondly, this ancient singing tradition should be introduced not only to young people but also to professionals.

In my research, I introduced a custom that is part of the tradition of our region, Transcarpathia, and part of the Hungarian nation, who lives here.

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