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**To Cry One’s Fate: Female Expressions of Pain in the Lamentation Songs of Mani in Modern Greece"**

Mani peninsula, located in southern mainland Greece, used to hold a fierce reputation. It was an isolated place ridden with vendettas between local clans who strived to overpower each other. “Since the clan rather than the village has been the central component of Maniot social identity”, Nick Nicholas argued, “conflict between clans has long been a characteristic of the region.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Maniot clans were organised as a strict patriarchal hierarchy. Each clan was led by a council of male elders, the *yerontiki*. The elders decided whether a blood feud should be declared, determined the possibility of a truce and the punishment of treacherous behaviours, and settled property disputes, marital conflicts and kin obligations.[[2]](#footnote-2) Both complementing and opposing the political institution of *yerondiki* was the *klama*, the female mourning ritual.[[3]](#footnote-3) *Klama* performed an informal and indirect power over clan matters: women would either oppose or support the decisions of the *yerontiki* through their lament songs.

The equivalent Greek word for a lamenting song is *moiroloi* – a composite from the words *moira* (fate) and *logos* (speech, word). *Moiroloi* can be literally translated as “to speak about one’s fate”[[4]](#footnote-4), or more loosely as “crying one’s fate”[[5]](#footnote-5). Lament songs can be found everywhere in Greece, but the ones coming from Mani are distinctive and very particular. They are lengthy compositions of eight-syllable verses with an improvisational character.[[6]](#footnote-6) These songs possess a strong biographical element that showcases the life of the deceased, the identity of the lamenter and the bonds that tie them together. They often portray historical incidents or kin lore, providing proof of ties between families and clans. Thus, lamenting songs also have an important record-keeping character: through the songs’ narratives the lamenters claim and confirm their role and social status in the clan.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to Christos Varvantakis, “the lament has the function of a flame that burns in the heart of vendettas”, since the kinship thematic of the narratives is the main aspect of the blood feud killing code.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus, lament songs were not only testaments to how and why a blood feud begun, but they would also keep the hatred alive, reminding future generations of their duty to continue it.

**1. Woman challenging the social order**

In the Maniot context, the lament song has a strong antiphonal structure. The *korifea* (soloist) leads the main song with the help of the chorus, the women surrounding the mourner who repeat, respond to and validate her declarations of pain and loss.[[9]](#footnote-9) Laments were performed during the *klama*, the pre-burial wake ceremony, that would typically start right after someone’s death and continue up to the funeral that – if circumstances allowed – would take place the day after.[[10]](#footnote-10) The end of the wake was signalled by the arrival of the priests, who would come to the house to escort the corpse to the church. However, if the women were not finished with their lamenting ritual, the priests would typically wait outside without interrupting them.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Although the vast majority of Maniots are Greek Orthodox Christians, the lamentation rituals are decisively not a part of the Christian dogma. Priests have viewed them as paganistic but have nevertheless respected them as an ancient tradition. Researchers such as Christos Varvantakis, Anna Caraveli-Chaves, Nadia Seremetakis and Evy Håland describe the lamentation process as deeply gendered because, for Maniots, the wake is “a female ritual praxis while Orthodox Christian burial is an area of male ceremonial authority.”[[12]](#footnote-12) It could be argued that the tension between the female aspect of the wake and the male aspect of the funeral mirrors a generalised tension between central church power and the women’s traditional practices. Evy Håland argues that the Church “also struggled against a female way of expression which gave women a considerable power over the rituals of death.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The segregation of the male and female spheres during lamenting also manifests itself in the men’s silence and physical distance from the dead body during the wake. Their presence is acknowledged by the lamenting women, but men are not allowed to participate or even just approach the lamenting circle. Nadia Seremetakis very eloquently points out that “the men do not cross the boundary set by gender and by death.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The gender segregation during this vital death ritual demonstrates the intimate role Maniot women play in all matters concerned with the dead.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The general male view on the lament ritual has been quite ambivalent. Ethnographers and anthropologists researching lament songs mention reactions such as fear, hostility or uneasy mocking, but also in some cases disguised admiration.[[16]](#footnote-16) Moreover, from the 1960s, the rising middle class and those that had abandoned their villages for the urban centres would look with embarrassment upon their female kin who continued to lament the dead in the traditional form.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This feeling of male uneasiness and fear described above was arguably amplified by the misperception that the laments were inherently chaotic. Although the lamenting process during the wake might indeed appear chaotic, the ritual was strictly organised: gestures of sorrow, such as screaming or chest-pounding, should not disrupt the narrative of the lament song. Moreover, the lamenting “turn-taking” expressed positions of power and social order stratification: close female kin had the right to lament first, and blood ties would override marital or more distant kinship relations. A woman of distant kin could interject and take over the lament if she could provide evidence of her own losses and sorrows or prove her proximity to the deceased. Her claims would be incorporated in the narrative of the lament.[[18]](#footnote-18)

It was through this antiphonal validation of pain that women could find their voice and make social claims. Pain, in the Maniot context, would transcend the personal and emotional level and incorporate aspects of collectivity and legal validation. This was pivotal for the truth-claiming of women’s plights: their claim was coming from a place of pain, so it constituted the truth. At the very least, it should be heard and maybe even considered. Such claims, if voiced outside mourning premises, could be deemed a transgression. During the wake, though, they were justified and validated because they were expressed through the form of lamenting.[[19]](#footnote-19) Within the confines of a strict patriarchal and male-dominated environment, the women could vocalise their particular problems and afflictions which resulted from their social position. Widowhood and the subsequent loss of social status, the pains of motherhood or the abandonment by male relatives who should act as protectors were some of the common grievances aired in laments.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The lament songs functioned as a shield of protection that allowed Maniot women to rage against institutionalised religion, which – as discussed previously – looked with suspicion on their lamenting rituals. The lament songs questioned salvation promises of eternal life to the pious. They would criticise doctors and modern medicine since these had often failed to protect and save their loved ones.[[21]](#footnote-21) The songs also served as a platform to express political views or challenge gender norms. Through their lament narratives, women would also reinforce cultural beliefs about the value of male and female children, an element that merits further discussion.

**2. Boys and girls: The “keys” and the “weeds”**

The language used in lament songs to describe boys and girls is very interesting. It illustrates the “worth” assigned to each sex and thus illustrates the mindsets and practices in Mani during the early twentieth century. In everyday speech, the term “children” was a term only applied to boys. Girls were just “girls”. A certain “worth-assigning” language, pertaining to each sex, is prevalent in lament songs: boys are described as the “keys”, the “crowns”, the “little lords” while the terms used for girls are the “wild weeds”, the “straw”, the “females”.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Lament songs from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries mourn the death of older people with no male heirs as a disaster. The death meant the extinction of a kin, and the dead were therefore often depicted as a house with no keys. In a similar way, songs would also draw an analogy between the loss of an only son and the “loss of the keys to one’s house”. A man dying without any male heirs was described as “a paper with no writing on”.[[23]](#footnote-23) The loss of a boy was considered disastrous since the strength of a family heavily depended on the number of male members. The death of a boy meant the loss of a potential warrior and disrupted the patrilineal kinship system. In this context, boys were called “riffles” or “canons” since they were seen as future warriors who defended the family honour and bolstered the clan’s strength and respectability.[[24]](#footnote-24)

By the mid-twentieth century, however, the attitudes towards girls began to change, and the language of the lament songs mirrors this shift. An illustrative example is a lament song from approximately the 1940s, which was sang by a mother at the wake of her little daughter.[[25]](#footnote-25) The girl had been accidentally killed by her father and another male relative while examining a new gun. In this song, the girl is no longer just a “female” or a “wild weed”. She is not insignificant. She is her mother’s “little girl”, a “good child” that was well-loved. Nadia Seremetakis who recorded this lament was told by witnesses of the lament ritual that it seemed as if the mother was trying to instigate a blood feud.[[26]](#footnote-26) It is possible that the elders of the clan accepted the life of the little girl as equally “valuable” and thus followed the mother’s demands for declaring a feud. Another interesting aspect of the lament is that the mother, who mourned her daughter’s tragic fate, requested a divorce. She presented her husband as the culprit in her daughter’s killing and did not hesitate to accuse him publicly. While such an act would have been perceived as a major transgression during the 1940s, it was justified by her pain and the fact that the accusation was voiced through a lament song. The ceremonial form of the lament also justified the woman’s possible instigation of revenge acts. Pain thus not only gave women the right to provoke a blood feud, but it also “legitimised” their avenging role in the context of clan-law.

**3. Women as instigators and avengers**

Although early laments describe women and girls in a language that could be perceived as derogatory, women are presented quite differently in laments of vengeance. In this particular type of lament songs, women would motivate the men of their kin to commit acts of revenge against enemy clans. They called on them to avenge the death of their kinsmen and thus abide by the unwritten laws of the clan. If the men were unwilling to avenge someone’s death, women would shame them into doing so by threatening to take up guns and behave themselves like men, the ultimate transgression of the gender order.[[27]](#footnote-27) After all, in the context of Maniot society, the division of labour was gendered, and men and women assigned distinct roles. The women’s task was to work in the fields and take care of the household and their children. Men were freed from such toil so they could devote themselves to their role as warriors, wielding guns and defending the honour of the clan.[[28]](#footnote-28) Interestingly, in times of need, such as during wars and full-blown blood feuds, especially in the mid-1800s, women assisted and participated in the fight.[[29]](#footnote-29) Nevertheless, the notion of a woman taking up guns and stepping out of her traditional role was considered extreme. It was only acceptable under very specific circumstances, namely when she had no male “protectors” who could defend her honour, or when her male kin failed – or was unwilling – to fulfil his duty.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The very popular “Song of Lighorou” is such a lament of vengeance. It was originally composed by Lighorou, a Maniot woman, probably around 1828 to 1830.[[31]](#footnote-31) The song describes an incident in her life when she instigated a blood feud, calling on her family to avenge a male member of her kin who had no brothers of his own to avenge him. Through her lament, she shames her brothers into taking revenge by implying that they are neither family nor men if they do heed the call. She seeks to galvanise them into action by symbolically transforming herself into a man and thereby forcing them to “honour” their gendered roles as “men” and “brothers”.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In other popular laments from the same period, women describe how they themselves took up arms to avenge the death of their kin, especially of their brothers. These songs refer to actual incidents that took place in Mani and became immortalised through subsequent generations of female lamenters. The heroic tone of these laments and their elaborate lyricism demonstrate how Maniot society assigned women the role of moral gatekeepers. Although women in such narratives committed the ultimate gender transgression by “becoming” men, the folk muse attributed a heroic value to them. These laments praised the women’s loyalty to their kin and their love for their brothers. While it was highly uncommon and inappropriate for women to commit revenge murders in Mani society,[[33]](#footnote-33) it was seen as justified if women had no male siblings who could fulfil this moral obligation. In such instances, the “weeds” transformed into avengers, into instigators of blood feuds. The lament songs thus also function as a “user’s manual” that stipulate proper conduct under the clan blood feuding laws.

**4. Lamenters as morality keepers and life strategists**

Lamenting allowed women to bond over shared experiences of pain. It also served as means to define and enforce moral codes of conduct which could function as survival strategies. In a society where even a minor misconduct could lead to a woman being killed or ostracised, a lament song that showcased the consequences of a violation of moral norms could have a preventive function. It was shown above that heroic laments of vengeance gave credit to women who killed in order to avenge the death of a kin. Nevertheless, such a murder was not justified if it involved what was perceived as a moral transgression on the part of a woman or a girl. In such cases, the laments took the form of cautionary tales that warned against a certain conduct to secure the social order.

Maniots considered girls a moral liability, “a keg of gunpowder in the foundations of the house”.[[34]](#footnote-34) A great number of blood feuds started because a girl or a woman was “insulted”, for example through rape, abduction, infidelity or the breaking of an engagement without serious reasons.[[35]](#footnote-35) Even if it was the woman who suffered the insult, it was often she who was blamed since women were considered morally weaker than men and thus more susceptible to moral transgressions. If an unmarried girl had a sexual relationship, or if a married woman was accused of infidelity, then the unwritten moral law was strict: she had to be killed by her brothers or her father. Although this was not always the case in practice, there have been many instances of honour killings in Mani.[[36]](#footnote-36) Since a woman’s moral transgression had such dire consequences, lamenters always reminded women to stay on the path of virtue.

Illustrative of this mindset is the lament song of “Stavriani and Giorgantzas” from the late nineteenth century. It narrates how a young girl named Stavriani eloped with her lover Giorgantzas, but was found by her kin, who killed her lover. They spared her life, but she was driven away from her family’s home and prompted to commit suicide:

“Oh mother, oh poor mother, and what shall I do with myself?”

“Go and drown yourself, go and throw yourself over a cliff.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Warnings and life strategies are also imparted in laments where the performers address a widow. In the patriarchal society of Mani, widowhood was considered a living death because the loss of a husband meant the loss of social status and social isolation.[[38]](#footnote-38) Most lament songs adviceyoung widows to stay in the house and accept no visitors. Widows were especially vulnerable to gossip and scrutiny of their behaviour, as this lament song illustrates:

“The widow sits inside, and outside people talk behind her back,

If she walks meekly, they say that she is full of pride,

If she walks quickly, they say that she got mad,

If she talks to another man, they say that she looks for a new husband, […],

And if one falls sick, they say that she got pregnant.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

This lament, sung all over Greece and not exclusively in the region of Mani, illustrates the precarious social situation of widowhood. Irrespective of how widowed women behaved, they were caught in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” duality.

In later lament songs, from approximately the mid-twentieth century, women would not only keep other women in check but also start to chastise men for improper moral conduct. Some of these songs voice particular concern about widowers who choose to remarry. A new wife was presented as a threat to the young children, especially girls, who were in danger of being neglected:[[40]](#footnote-40)

“Beware Skilakoyianni

do not do an unthoughtful job

to gather me a fox here [another wife]

to spoil the nest

and scatter the birds [children]”[[41]](#footnote-41)

In this lament, collected by Nadia Seremetakis, we can see how the lamenter, mourning for her dead sister, warns her brother-in-law against remarrying. It voices concern about how his children will fare with a stepmother.

**5. Concluding remarks**

The life of Maniot women was harsh and unforgiving. They lived in a strict patriarchal environment that controlled every aspect of their lives from birth to death. Although they dared not to speak about their tribulations and desires in public, they could find their voice through the lamentation process. The lament songs gave them an undeniable power. In the formalised context of lamentation, their opinion was heard and considered. Through the songs, women could instigate blood feuds by extolling avenging practices and describe and thereby enforce proper moral conduct. Their lives might have been controlled by the male members of their kin, but the women also exerted control over them in a very potent way. Lament songs created a space for women to challenge male authority while, at the same time, allowing them to control and monitor other women’s behaviour, thus asserting the patriarchal social order.

In the Maniot context, the expression of pain belonged to the female domain. The formalised lamenting process legitimised women’s point of view. The expressions of anguish and sorrow validated their truths, and they could undertake or threaten actions which were usually perceived as unacceptable or out of their assigned gender roles. Female rituals of lamenting have a deeply liminal character: they bridge the distance between life and death, between the present and the past, between the male and female spheres of influence. The latter goes particularly for the vengeance lament songs. They temporarily bridged the gap between the gendered duality of female emotion and male action by showcasing women who undertook actions of vengeance instead of just resigning themselves to their assigned role as mourners. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the songs further confirmed the gendered social order of the Maniot society since it presented such acts of female vengeance as exceptions and only permissible in extraordinary circumstances.

1. Nick Nicholas, A History of the Greek Colony of Corsica, Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora, 31 (2005), 33–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Nadia Seremetakis, The Ethics of Antiphony: The Social Construction of Pain, Gender, and Power in the Southern Peloponnese, in: Ethos, 18, 4, (1990), 481–511; Gareth Morgan, The Laments of Mani, in: Folklore, 84, 4 (December 1973), 265–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 503. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Christos Varvantakis, Mourning Deaths, Lamenting Lives: Grief and Transformation in Inner Maniot Laments, in: Paragrana, 20, 2, (2011), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 482. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 482. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Varvantakis, Deaths, see note 4, 142; Serematakis, Ethics, see note 2, 482, 487, 508. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Varvantakis, Deaths, see note 4, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Lada Stevanović, Funeral Ritual and Power: Farewelling the Dead in the Ancient Greek Funerary Ritual, in: Гласник Етнографског Института САНУ [Bulletin of the Ethnographic Institute SANU], 57, 2, (2009), 37–52; Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 489–490. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Klama* is directly translated to crying, wailing, metaphorically: lamenting. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Evy Johanne Håland, "Emotion and identity in connection with Greek death-cult, modern and ancient," in: Etnološka istraživanja [Ethnological research], no. 16 (2011), 191.; Stevanović, Funeral, see note 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Christos Varvantakis, Emotion, Performance & Death Ritual in Inner Mani, Doctoral dissertation, (2014), 24 (footnotes); see Anna Caraveli-Chaves, Bridge between Worlds: The Greek Women’s Lament as Communicative Event, in: The Journal of American Folklore, 93, 368, (1980), 143–144; Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 503; Håland, Emotion, see note 11, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Håland, Emotion, see note 11, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 489. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Alexiou Margaret, Yatromanolakis Dimitrios, and Roilos Panagiotis, The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition, in: Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos, Greek Studies, Lanham 2002, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Caraveli-Chaves, Bridge, see note 12, 130; Varvantakis, Emotion, see note 12, 147; Alexiou, Ritual, see note 15, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Jill Dubisch, Death and Social Change in Greece, in: Anthropological Quarterly, (1989), 191; Caraveli-Chaves, Bridge, see note 12, 131; Varvantakis, Emotion, see note 12, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 487. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 483; Varvantakis, Emotion, see note 12, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Caraveli-Chaves, Bridge, see note 12, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Håland, Emotion, see note 11, 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “… I was not lucky to have a male child,

    I would have been a good house mistress

    And I would have a secure key to my house.

    But instead, a wild weed was born”, Varvantakis, Emotion, see note 12, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Morgan, Laments, see note 2, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Morgan, Laments, see note 2, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 509. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 509. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “If only I was a male, to wear the trousers and have weapons,

    To play with my rifle, To go in the Argilia (the village of the enemy clan),

    To take out my sword, To cut everyone behind me and in front of me,

    Every winged eagle, every grandson of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (enemy’s name)”, Anargyros Koutsilieris, in: Μοιρολόγια Της Μάνης [Laments of Mani], Bekakos, Athens 1997, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Eleftherios Aleksakis, Τα γένη και η οικογένεια στην παραδοσιακή κοινωνία της Μάνης [The clans and the family in the traditional society of Mani], University of Athens, 1979, 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Aleksakis, Clans, see note 28, 107, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Morgan, Laments, see note 2, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Kiriakos Kassis, Μοιρολόγια Της Μέσα Μάνης Ανέκδοτα Κείμενα Και Άγνωστα Ιστορικά Μοιρολογιών Και Οικογενειών [Lament Songs of Inner Mani, Unpublished Texts and Unknown Histories of Laments and Families], Athens 1980, 178−181. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Varvantakis, Emotion, see note 12, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Morgan, Laments, see note 2, 280, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Aleksakis, Clans, see note 28, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Aleksakis, Clans, see note 28, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Aleksakis, Clans, see note 28, 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Koutsilieris, Laments, see note 27, 53–54; Kassis, Lament, see note 31, 40–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Caraveli-Chaves, Bridge, see note 12, 137–138. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Myriobiblos database, Μοιρολόγια [Lament Songs], in: Atropos, at: [http://www.myriobiblos.gr/afieromata/dimotiko/txt\_moirologia\_next.html#1](http://www.myriobiblos.gr/afieromata/dimotiko/txt_moirologia_next.html" \l "1); access: 22 April, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Varvantakis, Emotion, see note 12, 144–148. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Seremetakis, Ethics, see note 2, 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)