

The Power of Tropes in the Laments of Death¹

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ABSTRACT At the center of my analysis will be the interaction or play between the tropes of mother, sister and daughter using examples of Azerbaijan laments of death (*dillār*). The play is particularly revealed in the dynamic relation between the dimension of contiguity and similarity, through which semantic differences between these female social categories are transformed and finally abandoned. This achievement of tropes' interplay, being described as a linguistic process of transformation, is paralleled by a ritual process of transformation which is realised through different rites of gift giving, equalizing mother and married daughter to one another. Both linguistic and ritual context express the value of the "milk" or *süd* in contrast to the value of the "bone" or *sümük*, which is explicitly recognised in patrilineal descent tracing and agnatic groups. As basic ideas of procreation and relatedness *süd* and *sümük* refer to the core of Azerbaijan kinship, which is to be identified with cross siblingship, the status of brother and sister.

INTRODUCTION

In rural communities of Azerbaijan the death of a village member is followed by several death rituals. According to the Gregorian calendar they take place immediately during the first three days after death (*üçü*),² on the seventh day (*yedisini*), the fourth day (*qırx*), the fifty second day (*älli ikisini*) and one year after the death (*illik*). In addition, the rituals can be held on seven successive Thursdays (*adına*) after the death, but in this case their performance is optional, depending primarily on the wealth of the deceased's family.

The death rituals are performed by men and women at the same time, yet separately; the two sexes are segregated. All of them show the same pattern: At ten o'clock in the morning the men assemble in the courtyard or in a room of the deceased's house, take their seats - corresponding to age and kinship - and listen to the prayers of the *molla*, while the women - the female kin of the dead, the invited female guests, and a female *molla* - assemble in another room of the

deceased's house. It is the *molla* who starts the ceremony with a prayer or lament, while the whole female congregation is occupied with ritual mourning. After this initial presentation by the *molla*, some of the women present take over the task of consecutively performing the lament. After approximately two hours the ritual mourning comes to an end; all of the women wash their faces with rosewater and the ceremony is concluded with a communal meal.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE LAMENT AS GENRE

According to Sherzer (1987: 112ff.) and viewed in a cross-cultural perspective, laments are associated with one sex; as with lullabies, they can be regarded as a female genre. The short description given above of the ritual context in which laments are sung shows clearly that in Azerbaijan laments are performances of verbal art (Bauman, 1975) in which actors and audience are exclusively female.

Laments were called *dillār* by the people of the village. The Azeri word *dillār* derives etymologically from the word *dil*, which means tongue or language, the suffix *-lār* indicating the plural form. Not all of the women are seen equally suitable for a good lament performance, the purpose of which is to bring the audience to explosively and emotionally charged crying and weeping. My female informants of the village associated the capacity for a good lament performance with painful experiences in the life of the female singer herself. As these experiences normally accumulate as life passes by, primarily old women are known as respectable singers, while young women are seen as incapable for lament performance. According to this ideology of pain and sorrow we can regard the lament - leaving its specific style and content aside - as a gender-specific cultural expression of pain. As a cultural

code the lament is part of an oral tradition, in which there is no fixed concept of what a correct or authentic lament should be. Every performance in the village is more or less an original presentation of the female singer, who accommodates the content of the lament in a flexible way to the specific death she is singing about and to the audience present. In this sense the meaning of the texts is apprehensible only if one considers the immediate context of the performance itself (Caraveli, 1985), who is singing whose death to whom, and if one has access to background information of the persons involved.³

On the one hand it is this accommodative capacity that makes it difficult or impossible to learn laments by heart in a recitative fashion, yet it is precisely this inventive flexibility which accounts for the commendation of the singer besides her natural given vocality. On the other hand there are stylistic norms, melodic patterns, stereotype themes and metaphors, which can be found regularly in the laments and which are used by the singers to influence the ongoing process of the ceremony by indicating the climax or the end of a lament. Distancing himself from the "event"-concentration of the performance approach, Blackburn (1988) reverts to the formal aspects of oral art forms. In his analysis of the Tamilian bow songs he underlines that it is also the relatively fixed narrative content of oral traditions which determines the ritual process. Balancing both components of fixedness and flexibility, of influencing the event and being influenced by the event, Urban (1988: 387) speaks of a tension between regularity and variability, between standardisation and individuation, a tension which he holds as typical for the ritual lament. Whereas standardisation will correspond to cultural norm, variability will signalise the individual or uniqueness of emotion.

The performance of laments is an example of ritual action. As with every ritual activity many different functions are ascribed to the lament in the literature. Laments are seen to strengthen social roles or to provide a collective confrontation to the fact of death linked with the possibility of catharsis. Underlying this last argument is the implicit assumption that life and death are seen everywhere in opposition which is bridged by the lament. The question why this interjoining

function of the lament is operated only by women so that the lament cross-culturally can be seen as a female genre has not been answered satisfactorily. Often this question is not posed at all and laments are analysed as gender-neutral compositions. Only a few authors have remarked on this problem. Danforth (1982), who works on laments of death in Greece, refers to the marginal position of women in Greek society and promotes a structural-psychological explanation. Women would incorporate the affective side of kinship relations; therefore the fact of death would specifically threaten their socially constructed world. Caraveli (1980), working in the same geographical area, relates the stylistic and thematic conventions of the laments with the female world. Laments of death would function as a bridge between life and death and strengthen the bonds between women, whose reproductive capacity would guarantee them a privileged access to the domain of the dead.

SINGERS AND ADDRESSEES

In all of the various death rituals in which I was present,⁴ the singers were primarily close female kin of the deceased, usually his or her mother, sister and/or daughter followed by patrilineal (brother's daughter, father's sister), matrilineal (mother's sister), affinal (brother's wife, wife's sister) kin and neighbor women. Depending on the genealogical distance of kinship to the deceased person it is precisely this circle of persons, which is expected to perform the duty of lament performance at various death ceremonies. In other words, village people are able to tell you in advance who will probably sing the laments. I would like to stress further that in case of the death of a husband, his wife never carries out the task of lament performing; during the whole ceremony she will remain silent. We shall return to this decisive point later in the interpretation of the laments. A quite different position in comparison to the kinship-based position of the singers is that of the female *molla*. She has a leading function and intervenes in the performance by taking over the task of lament performance, particularly after emotional climaxes or if the singer seems to be very exhausted. As a *molla* she integrates her profession and the

ideology of pain and combines Koranic verses with the traditional lament of death.

Not only the singers but also the persons and social roles who are addressed in the laments are primarily female. In the case of a deceased woman the songs deal with female social roles of mother, sister, and daughter in a general way. The singers relate these social roles to particular women when addressing those who are present in the mourning congregation. If a man died, his social roles as father or brother or son are described, but never any particular man is referred to by the singers. Insofar as singers, addressees and receivers are predominantly female, together with Klymasz (1975: 52) we can clearly classify the lament of death as a female-centered genre. But why do women play such a central role?

THE LAMENT AS A FEMALE-CENTERED GENRE

In my analysis I wish to demonstrate in case of the Azeri lament how the relationship between the genre as such and the female sex is established. My focus on the lament as a gender-specific composition has the consequence that other themes such as national politics, images of nature etc., although mentioned in the laments, are not included in the analysis. First, it will be shown that in the lament genre through a particular rhetorical management of its important "tropes" (Sapir, 1977) of mother, sister and daughter, a process of transformation is achieved which dissolves the boundaries between these different social categories in everyday life. Second, this linguistic transformational process is not to be considered as only "liminal," confined to a specific phase in the death ritual with the implication of what Caraveli calls the strengthening of female bonds, instead it is paralleled by other ritual transformation processes, some of which are partially articulated as a theme in the laments themselves and expressed in various gift exchanges between mother and married daughter. We shall see that all these ritual transformation processes must be seen together, for they articulate one and the same topic: the value of the "milk" and the female uterine kinship.

The different linguistic transformational processes of the tropes of mother, sister and daughter

will be shown in the following textual examples:⁶

Case 1:

Singer: Sārafāt, daughter of the deceased father Ismail, who takes over the lament performing task from her sister.

Addressee: Sister and mother.

Transformation process: From daughter to mother.

"I am offering myself for your soul which cannot breathe anymore, ai sister,

I am saying ai, your heart which was not aching is now full of pain, ai sister,

oi, oi, oi,

I am saying my God, wounded on one seat, pierced on thousand seats"

Her mother comments:

"och, your mother should die my heart"

"oi, oi, oi,

my mother, who remains separated from the doors and roadsides,

my mother, who remains looking to the roadsides, if somebody is coming,

who opens the door,

my mother, my mother, who remains separated from the doors,

mother, my God, you have been wounded at one seat, pierced on thousand seats, mother you,

I am saying ai, without Camran it will be raining snow at our roof"...

The lament performance is often begun by first addressing the preceding singer. The traditional phrase "wounded at one seat, pierced on thousand seats" recurs in the laments of different singers and usually refers to the social role of the mother. In our example the mother of Sārafāt thus is invited to comment on the lament. She offers her daughter her own death, but, as my female informants during the transcription work explained to me, not as a substitute for the dead father of Sārafāt, her husband, but for Camran, the dead son of Sārafāt, who was killed in a dispute some days before his grandfather died. The comment by Sārafāt's mother refers only to the death of her grandson and is sung by his mother Sārafāt as she continues her lament till the end. Presenting the death of her son in the context of her

address to her mother, Sārafāt brings the double aspect of her own position as mother and daughter to the foreground. "Daughter" is transforming to "Mother" and the other way round.

Case 2:

Singer: Iradā, neighbour women.

Addressee: Sālfirā, another daughter of Ismail.

Transformation processes: Addressee and singer: from sister to mother; singer: from sister to daughter, to mother.

"I am saying, ai Sālfirā bacī (traditional form of address, bacī: sister),

I am offering myself to your heart which pain one could not see,

I am offering myself to your great grief,

let me be allowed to weep for the pure Ismail dayī (traditional form of address, dayī: mother's brother),

Ismail dayī is like my father,

ai, my gālin bacīm (traditional form of address, gālin: daughter in law, bacīm: my sister) full of grief,

ai, my gālin bacīm whose head is covered with a black cloth,

I am offering myself to you,

oi, gālin bacī, you always were a mother to me,

I have seen my mother full of grief too,

I have seen you full of grief too,

I cannot bear it,

I bring a sacrifice for your troubles and for my troubles,

I am offering myself to your mother who is closing the doors,

by God, the father is a sweet part (of the family),

the father is the backing of the daughters,

I bring a sacrifice for your and my soul which are without a brother,

ai my Camran, ai my Camran who I set in the brother's place."

At the beginning of her lament Iradā addresses Sālfirā with a traditional form of address (*bacī*, later *gālin bacī*) which places her on an equal level. In the next step, she transforms Sālfirā to her mother (you always were a mother to me). This transformation can be explained by Iradā's biography. The biological mother of Iradā left

her husband and child, and Iradā is speaking of the care which she received from Sālfirā during her childhood, while she lived next to Ismail and his family. Then Iradā follows with expressions of thanks to Sālfirā as her "mother" in connection with a shift to her own person as a mother (I bring a sacrifice for your troubles and for my troubles) and a further shift to Sālfirā's mother and her own mother. Singer and addressee are sometimes sisters (and in this case also daughters), sometimes mothers or mother and daughter to one another.

Besides actual kinship relations or biographical constructions which could be translated into kinship analogies, all of the women present are in terms of their relationship to the deceased or in terms of their relations to the deceased's female kinfolk transformed to metaphorical sisters, daughters and mothers.

Case 3:

Singer: Sister of the deceased Ādilā.

Addressee: the female dead; sisters, daughters, mothers in general.

Transformation processes: From sister to daughter to mother.

The following lament sung by the sister of the deceased Ādilā can only be understood, if one knows that the daughter of Ādilā's sister died childless shortly after her marriage.

"When the child of somebody dies, the eyes fill with bitterness,

I am saying, look what the daughter of your sister would have said to you,

och mother's sister, look what she would have said,

I am saying, my child has died, there was nobody who had called her 'mother',

when one was carrying away the corpse and was speaking the prayer Ālhāmdullah,

she said, I am leaving, ai, childless,

ai sisters, whose sister has died,

ai daughters who go to the house of the father looking for the mother when the heart fills with grief,

och mothers, mothers, is there one of you who is without sorrow?"

The lament unites all three actors of the performance: singers, actual (the audience present) and potential receivers and addressees (sisters,

daughters, mothers in general) meet one another as daughter, sister and mother.

If we translate all these transformation processes into tropic terms and regard the interplay of these tropes or the tropic constitution (Fernandez, 1991, 1994; Turner, 1991) we can recognise first a metonymic or syntagmatic relationship between the different social categories of sister, daughter, mother, mother's sister and mother's mother as parts of a whole. I propose calling this system the uterine pool or, in native terms the "milk kinship" (*sūd qohumlug*). Secondly, we can recognise a paradigmatic relationship which refers primarily to a relationship of equivalence or convergence between daughter or sister or mother. This convergence is possible because of the sister and daughter's potentiality to transform to mothers. Thus the paradigmatic relationship refers to the primary value of the *sūd qohumlug* which is "motherhood." As a common and decisive aspect of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimension "motherhood" is not constituted as much by biology but rather is achieved by the metonymical integration of these different social entities in the larger whole, the *sūd qohumlug*. Both modes of relationships or associative processes show themselves as being mutually interpenetrated in the conceptual design of the lament and, as we shall see, are paralleled, expressed and recognised in other ritual activities too.

We can assume that the whole social universe ideally is composed of daughters, sisters, mothers and, on the male side, as it is indicated in the lament of Iradä (Case 2) of sons, brothers and fathers.⁷ An analysis of the kinship terms marks a clear tendency that even affines are integrated in this ideology and are ordered in terms of their relationship of being a brother or sister to one's husband/wife or to one's own daughter/son or consanguinal kinsmen/kinswomen. It is an attempt to transform affines into consanguines, an attempt of making the potential stranger and the Other(s) to one of the Selves. But in the situation of the lament there is one person, for whom such a transformation process could not be established. The wife of a deceased male is excluded from this community of metaphorical mothers, sisters and daughters of her husband. Due to this exclusion she can neither

participate in the lament nor are others allowed to address her. In difference to other affines her relation to the deceased can not be transformed into a consanguinal relationship. Thus, the transgression of boundaries between Others and Selves has its limits.

I have already mentioned that this linguistic transformation process and interplay of tropes is paralleled by a social transformation process which is articulated as a theme in the lament itself and expressed in various forms of gift giving between mother and married daughter in different ritual activities, traditional visiting patterns and daily life. In the laments the description of the social roles of father and brother corresponds to the patrilineal ideology and can be summarised in the phrase of Iradä (Case 2), that fathers are the support of their daughters, and brothers of their sisters. But before we regard domains beyond the death ritual I first wish to consider what the laments themselves impart about the female position of mother, or, what mothers signify to their daughters.

In the laments the relation between mother and daughter is described as a mutual gift giving: both sides have the right to a gift of the other. Three different kinds of gifts are formulated:

Case 4:

Singer: female molla.

"Ai daughters, ai daughters, whose mother has died,

the mother is saying, give to me what I am entitled to,

sing my lullabies."

After the death of her mother, the daughter in performing the laments sings those lullabies that the mother sang to her as a little daughter in the cradle. Sherzer (1987: 112) has pointed to the cross-cultural identification of lullaby and lament of death as female genres. But he cannot really explain why both forms of oral traditions are performed by women. He interprets the lullaby in the context of the (universal) female role of child care, but he cannot find a corresponding female role in case of the lament. With his functionalist return to female social roles Sherzer cannot relate both genres to one another, because ideological transformation processes such as those

implied in our examples cannot be grasped. However, our analysis of the Azeri lament shows that only the transformation of daughter to mother is capable of relating both different genres as mutual gift giving. Lullaby and lament of death are the two sides of this transformation and exchange process; like their female agents the two genres become identical.

Case 5:

Singer: female molla.

*"Ai daughters, ai daughters whose mother
has died,
ai daughters, ai daughters,
if you are full with grief, you can neither
weep in your mother's nor in any other house,
I am offering myself to you,
if the heart is filling itself with grief, put salt
in the pot,
we are thinking of our mother."*

Among the cosmological concepts of the village people is the idea that the dead are dependent on the living. If the village women see their deceased relatives in their dreams, the women add salt to the meal in behalf of the relatives, thus making the meal food for the dead. Food preparing is a female task, and like the mother nurtured the daughter, now the daughter nurtures the mother.

Case 6:

Singer: Daughter of the brother of Ādilā (female deceased)

*"My father's sister, my father's sister who has
arranged the marriage of her child (daughter),
who could not visit her to bring the mother
her part,
ai my father's sister who could not eat your
part."*

(...)

*"Ai Sākiyā (daughter of Ādilā), the mother
has separated herself from the pots,
if a mother brings the child his part,
if a mother brings the child his part on holi-
days,
you will lean your back on the door."*

Being part of an exchange itself the lament tells us about different ritual occasions of mutual gift giving between mother and daughter. It is the marriage of the daughter which is the start-

ing point of this gift exchange between the two persons. The exchange is lifelong and continues after the mother's death with the holder of other female positions of the uterine kin group. After bread baking, which takes place in a household about every five days, mother and daughter send one loaf of bread to each other; on every Islamic holiday they send a piece of meat from the sacrificed sheep (*gurban*); and when a special dish is cooked by the one, the other will receive her portion.

THE LAMENT AS EXPRESSION OF THE MILK KINSHIP (*sūd qohumluq*)

The marriage of a daughter is the starting point of a mutual gift exchange between her and her mother. This rite of passage changes the relationship between mother and daughter, a change marked by a particular gift (*guymax*). I wish to emphasise here that the rite of marriage not only manifests the prime gift (Lévi-Strauss, 1949), the gift of a woman between groups of males and of the constitution of their relationship, but equally it expresses and constitutes the value of the milk kinship. There are several ritual markers that accompany the marriage process of the daughter, which in this sense is not ended by the marriage ceremony but instead by her transformation to a mother. The most impressing ritual marker of the value of the female uterine kinship is the gift of *guymax*. In the morning after the wedding night the mother of the bride sends *guymax* to her, a traditional meal made of flour, butter and sugar. Not only the bride, but all the women in her new household and all the female visitors of the bride during this day, which is called *gālin görmäsın gün* (the day of looking the bride) eat some of this *guymax*. If we look at the matter from a gender perspective, we can interpret this undifferentiated eating as an equalizing sign for all women; if we view it from a group perspective, it must be noted that the mother-in-law cooks *guymax* too. However, the decisive point is that in the eyes of all those involved, it is the gift of the bride's mother that not only strengthens the bride after the loss of her virginity, but guarantees the fecundity of her daughter. It is said that if the mother does not send the meal of *guymax*, the daughter will become

infertile. The gift of *guymax* by the bride's mother is repeated after every childbirth of the daughter.

The mother's gift of *guymax* is the basis and the guarantee for the fecundity in the female line, for the transformation of the daughter to a mother, for the changing relationship between daughter and mother and for the constitution and recognition of the value of the milk kinship. From then on gifts are mutually exchanged. Traditionally forty days after the marriage the mother of the bride invites the newly married together with the bridegroom's parents and receives a small gift from her daughter. This invitation is reversed some weeks later by the mother of the bridegroom, whereby the mother herself presents a small gift to her daughter. On both occasions there is not only a gift exchange between affinal groups but also the recognition of the transformation of the "filial relationship" (Fortes, 1953) between mother and daughter to the structural relation of the milk kinship.

In the literature (Bourdieu, 1976) gift and gift exchange are mostly described as taking place between families, clans and lineages, thereby bringing relations into existence that are often associated with the questions of prestige. Similarly, gift giving between mother and daughter is not to be seen on an individual level, but on the level of social categories. The reciprocal gift exchange between mother and daughter starts with the marriage of the daughter, that is with her transformation into a potential mother. All the various expressions of reciprocal gift exchange are phenomena which recognise the milk kinship. Even a blood feud between two agnatic groups cannot hinder the mother from continuing to meet her daughter who is married to the enemy. Without constituting double descent lines the kinship bond between these uterine women (mother, daughter, sister, mother's mother, mother's sister, etc.) is conceptually separated from agnatic lines and extends beyond them.

The gift exchange expresses the relationship between mother and married daughter as equals. If the filial relationship is ranked, the structural relationship is not. The social category of the "mother" and the value of motherhood or fecundity stand in the center of the female uterine kin group or milk kinship. In terms of patrilineal ide-

ology, marriage and the birth of children set daughter and sister apart and distances her from father and brother. However, in terms of the *sūd qohumluq* these same events approach the daughter and the mother, making both similar or equal. The concentric circle of the female uterine pool is closed with the death of the mother, when the reciprocal relationship of daughter and mother is again transformed into a one-sided relationship. Now in reverse the daughter (a mother herself) gives back to her mother the gifts which she received from her during her infancy by singing the laments of death (the lullabies sung by her mother). At the same time the circle is opened again by the same gifts which she presents to her own daughter.

NOTES

1. This analysis is based on an eleven month project of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural village of 900 inhabitants in the northwest of Azerbaijan, one of the so-called Islamic countries of the former Soviet Union that declared its independence in 1991. The village population belongs to the Sunni-Hanefi direction of Islam. Fieldwork was conducted in the years 1995, 1996 and 1999. The research project, of which this analysis is partial result, was devoted to the general theme of "Non-dominant perspectives in religion and kinship" and was financed by the German Research Community (DFG).
2. Names and words in the Azeri language are written in Latin, recently introduced in Azerbaijan in 1992. Because of technical reasons, Azeri letters could not be inserted. We replaced the 13th vowel of the Azeri alphabet with □□□. Instead of the seventh vowel of the Azeri alphabet we used "ä".
3. The tape recorded laments were transcribed in the native language during the fieldwork in the village together with a village women who was divorced and lived in the house of her mother. It was extremely difficult for both of us to understand the words sung because of all the crying and weeping of the audience. As far as possible I talked with my informant about the meaning of the distinct lines and many times we were able to determine them only with the help of the old mother, who had the necessary biographic knowledge of the persons concerned.
4. Laments were recorded at the *qırx* of İsmail, an

80-year old husband, father and head of a household; at the *qirx* of Ädilä, a 52-year old wife and mother of yet unmarried daughters; at the *illik* for Gudrät, a young husband and father, who was killed in a dispute; at the *älli iki* of Säbohä, a 15-year old boy who drowned in Russia.

5. A trope is a figure of speech which includes metaphor, metonym, synecdoche and irony.
6. After transcription all of the laments together resulted in a 52-page long text. The number of laments sung at each ceremony respectively varies between ten to sixteen songs, some of them very short, others very long. The translation of the examples of laments presented here in English was undertaken by myself.
7. An analysis of the kinship terms (Pfluger-Schindlbeck forthcoming) showed clearly that the underlying grid in case of collateral kin terms is not to be seen in a separation of patrilineal from matrilineal kin, but that all collateral and important affinal kin terms are ordered after one principle: in their relation of being a brother or sister to one's mother, father, husband or one's wife.

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