

“Albanian Iso-Polyphony”

Albanian Iso-polyphony (IP) is indeed one of the most prominent values, not only of Albanian musical folklore but also of the world cultural heritage of folklore in general. Iso-polyphony is the basic musical phenomenon in Southern Albania, which is built on the principle of bringing together multi-part songs with usually four or more singers joining voices in a gradual, harmonious manner. *According to F. Konica: “the songs themselves are mournful and monotonous, but they are unique examples of old folk music consisting of different parts of singing, whereas in other countries folk songs are sung in harmony. ... Iso-polyphony refers to a form of three-part singing with two men (soloists) who sing songs that are largely different though entirely interconnected, accompanied by a chorus who sustain a continuous and monotonous tone similar to a pedal point.”*

TYPES:

TOSK-ISO POLYPHONY

One division of the Albanian iso-polyphony. In regards to tosk-iso polyphony, we would like to emphasize the fact that it is sung by people from the right bank of the Vjosa River to Shkumbin. The iso-polyphonic music of Përmet, Leskovik, Kolonjë, Korçë, Devoll, Mokra, Opar, Skrapar, Shpat, Myzeqe, Librazhd, Gramsh, Berat appears more or less as a theme with variations, where the theme is the tosk type of polyphony.

Tosk IP is also encountered outside the state borders of Albania, in the so-called "Macedonia toske", which includes Albanians living in the eastern part of Lake Prespa, on the west coast of Lake Ohrid and on the left side of the Black Drin, in the vicinity of Struga where this kind of polyphony is sung with one, two and three voices. Specifically, in the villages of Frëngovë, Ladorisht (Radoven), Kolisht, Zagrajani, villages which are in the direction of the upper Mokra; in the villages of Prespa-Kranjë, Arvat, Gërncan, Lower Belloceika, Upper Belloceika, Nakolec, Lubojna, Asamati that lie in the geographical area on the border with Albania and Greece, as well as on the outskirts of Monastir (Bitola), in the village of Kishof etc.

Just like with Lab-Iso polyphony, Tosk iso-polyphony is sung by both men and women who sing almost all genders, ranging from poetic creations with mythological and ritualistic loads to dances, ballads and historical, lyrical, love, immigration songs, laments, doggerels etc. Iso-polyphony is

sung in every place and occasion, be it joy or misfortune. According to Çabej: I really like to describe the real Tosk melody with the two elegiac and expansive attributes. As for tosk-iso polyphony accompanied by instruments, we would like to point out that there are a number of popular formations with traditional instruments playing in polyphony. By the names: permetarçe, kolonjarçe, devolliçe, myzeqarçe, etc. we will understand the local variants of Tosk IP singing. The Tosk type of iso-polyphony is also found in Chameria.

LAB-ISO POLYPHONY

Another division of the Albanian Iso polyphony. With regard to the geographical extent of Labëria, according to Çabej: "By the name of Laberia we understand that part of southwestern area of the country, the border of which begins at the village of Lazarat, south of Gjirokastra. The eastern border extends from Lazarat, along the Broad Mountain (Mali I Gjere) and the southern part of Mount Picari to Tepelena. It extends to the west of the river Vjosa, whereas on the right of the river lies the Tosk land. The border in the north comprises the village of Mesaplik near Vlora and continues along an imaginary line that runs from Mesaplik to the nearby Kudhës.

The village of Armen, a village on the left bank of the Vjosa River marks the border between the myzeqe and Lab Iso Polyphony. The main ethnographic areas comprising Labëria are: Kurveleshi, Mesapliku, Drashovica, Topalltia, Treblova, Gorishti, Kudhësi, Lopësi, Kardhiqi, Rrëzoma, Bregdeti, Dukati. The Lab iso polyphony is also encountered in Zagorie, Lunxhëri, Malëshovë, Tepelena, Dragot, Kras, Izvor, Buz, Mallakastër, areas which can be considered as the periphery of Labëria. The Labe population is subdivided into "Christian lab" (Rreza e Tepelenes, Zagoria, Sea Coast) and "Mohammedan lab" (the central population block). In today's perspective of genuine administrative division, Labëria includes the districts of Vlora, Saranda, Delvina, Gjirokastra, Tepelena, Mallakastra. There are different ways of portraying and explaining Lab iso-polyphonic music. Polyphonic singing is considered mysterious and instinctive, and generally as a phenomenon that carries within it the reflexes of nature, the noises of the night and those of the land of Labëria.

According to Çabej: "the impression that you are left with when hearing polyphonic music is a feeling of harsh longing and heroic spirit. This viewpoint has previously been mentioned in various works which state that songs of the highlanders, especially those of the south, have preserved elements of pastoral life, imitation of the shepherds' bell and the sounds of nature. According to a popular tradition, it was once said that there was another way of singing iso-polyphony. This type of IP was sung at night by people who would go to get water at the well or do other different

chores. They believe that night is the source of singing as singing at night doesn't have any practical purpose. It is commonly assumed by inhabitants of Labëria, that it exists a kind of "dry iso polyphony", which means iso polyphony sung in the mountains, as well as "iso polyphony of the sea". This has caught Çabej's attention as he asserts that the villages of Vlora and Himara that is a more forceful, violently surging manner of singing.

Polyphony is sung at weddings, wakes, various festivals, before and after contests, in the countryside, etc. Finally, everyone knows that when two Labs get together they break into song.

Dukati with its deeply sonorous melodies, Kurveleshi, Delvina, Gjinokastra, Lunxhëria and others are just as many local color centers of labe songs. Iso-polyphony is predominantly encountered among men, but also occurs among women, in almost every type and genre, including musical and poetic compositions with a mythological and ritual content, dances, ballads and historical songs, lyrics, love songs, songs of emigration, laments, doggerel, etc Polyphony is also found in musical instruments, such as culadyjare. Polyphony is sung at weddings, wakes, various celebrations, before and after battles, in the countryside, etc. Finally, everyone knows that when two labs get together, they break into singing. The expressions *Gjirokastraçe*, *himariotçe*, *vlonjatçe* etc. signify local variants of Lab Iso Polyphony.

THE STRUCTURE OF ISO POLYPHONY CONSTRUCTION:

The structure of the polyphonic, lab or tosk construction is a direct expression of the genetic unity of this kind.

The structural organization of the Tosk polyphony is as it follows:

Voice I – “*throws it*” thrower or taker

Voice II – fielder, interceptor

Voice III- “*sustain*”-drone, in a chorus.

In Labëria:

(three voices)

Voice	I-	“ <i>takes</i> ”	<i>it</i> ”-taker
Voice		II-“ <i>turns</i> ”	<i>it</i> ”-turner
Voice III-	drone, in a chorus		

(four voices)

Voice	I-“takes	<i>it</i> ’-taker
Voice	II-“turns	<i>it</i> ’-turner
Voice	III-“throws	<i>it</i> ’-thrower
Voice IV-“sustain”-	drone, in a chorus	

The above formula indicates how the essential framework of folk iso-polyphony has developed in practice over hundreds of centuries, and combines into one the individual characteristics, the polyphonic content, of the other voices.

TWO VOICES ISO POLYPHONY:

Regarded as the simplest form of Albanian polyphony, two-part iso-polyphony, sometimes known as *marrje dhe prerje* (taking and interrupting), is widespread throughout the south of Albania, and is sung by women and men. Geographically, it extends without a break over almost all Toskëria and Labëria, such as the districts of Korçë, Librazhd, Pogradec, Kolonjë, Fier, Upper Shpat, Coastal Myzeqe, Myzeqe of Vlorë, the town of Vlorë, Lumi i Vlorës, the Berat villages, Mallakastër, the town of Gjirokaštër, Lunxhër, etc. It has been pointed out that two-part polyphony is performed by two singers, principally by women from the town of Gjirokaštër and men from the village of Dukat in the Vlorë region. The latter case, in particular, is held to be encountered less frequently and to be more limited in range and in genre.

This style of performance, by two individuals alone, is encountered in the zones of Dol, Zajaz, Kërçovë/Kičevo, Tetovë/Tetovo, etc, where it is sung by Albanian women; in Labëria only in the village of Dukat in the Vlorë area, where it is the province of men alone; and in Toskëria in some villages of coastal Myzeqe, predominantly performed by women of the older generation. This type of duophony is also found among the Arberesh of Calabria, where it is widespread and in frequent use even today. In Lorenc Antoni’s view, the two-part songs of Kërçovë were probably inspired by the polyphonic singing of the neighbouring Tosks.

Although various classifications have been suggested distinguishing many variations, two-part iso-polyphony as a whole, manifests the relationship between the *marrës* and the *prerës*, the fundamental feature of southern iso-polyphony in both Toskëria and Labëria, regardless of how many individuals may participate in a performance. It must be emphasised that the fundamental form consists of two vocal parts, with a hidden iso accompanying the melodic development of the voices. In my view, the two-voice genre in general should not be viewed as a preliminary phase

of polyphonic performance. Indeed, I consider that iso-polyphony has not been formed historically by developing two-, three- or four-part characteristics, but has always functioned as a common organism which has fragmented into features with their own individual classification.

Two-part iso-polyphony, therefore, is only apparently duophonic, but actually operates as a “concealed three-part” type, which has been “reduced” to two parts. What needs to be said about it is related to the fact that this two- part classification cannot have been derived simply from a consideration of the melody, or even more the rhythmic tendencies of the songs. These two-part examples cannot exist without the concept of the iso drone, as embodied in practically every extant form of two- part singing within southern iso-polyphonic music.

THREE VOICES ISO POLYPHONY:

Three-part iso-polyphony predominates in the iso-polyphonic repertoire of the rural population in South Albania, familiar as vocal iso-polyphony, and in that of the urban population, where it is accompanied by an instrumental ensemble. This is the basic form of Albanian polyphony, where the parts are identifiable not only from the standpoint of melody, but also distinguished by the role that they play. In company with the iso drone, the taker and the interceptor compose a unique group of three personae.

It must be stressed that in the vast majority of cases three-part polyphony is sung by men. Although contemporary trends have resulted in mixed-gender ensembles being formed, this type of polyphony is traditionally the province of three male voices. This original framework has been inherited by the urban folk music of South Albania, otherwise known as iso- polyphonic music with saze. The transfer of this framework to another field (the field of the urban instrumental ensemble) and its maintenance there clearly determined both the survival of its popular form based on a composition of technical parameters, and the safeguarding and development of the genetic formula of traditional musical expression by other means. From this moment (the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century), the role of clarinet or clarinetist corresponded to that of the taker, the first voice (or the one that “spoke it”, “started it” or “took it up”). The violin or violinist (dhjoli xhiu) was equivalent to the interceptor, the second voice (the one that “intercepted it”, “fielded it”, “returned it”, “held it”, “picked it up”), while the many-stringed llautë or its player played the part of the collective iso (the role of those who “filled it in”, “held the voice”), embodied within a common general organisational framework. In urban songs accompanied by an instrumental ensemble, gender equality exists in the singing of the urban polyphonic repertoire.

At the present time it is possible to experience, not only vocal polyphony, but also its twin sister, iso-polyphony with an instrumental ensemble, which is the most contemporary and best developed manifestation of Albanian folk polyphony. The music of three-part urban instrumental ensembles includes the well-known urban music of Përmet, Korçë, Leskovik, Vlorë, Delvinë, etc. Three-part vocal iso-polyphony continues to be practiced extensively in many parts of Toskëria and Labëria. Among the zones most typified by three-part rural polyphony those of Skrapar, Gramsh, Devoll, Gjirokastër, Kolonjë, Sarandë, Vlorë, etc, are worthy of attention. According to Sokoli: in studies of the distinctive character of three-part polyphony, attention has been drawn to the internal resonance of the voices of some singers from south-eastern Albania, when they respond full-throatedly in the polyphonic songs with a drone; here we are dealing with a type of very distinctive “yodelling”.

It should also be noted that three-part iso-polyphony is also an important constituent of dance folklore. The co-existence of polyphony with folk choreography is one of the original forms of the interpenetration of polyphonic folk music and folk dance, and a sign of its antiquity. Just as we encounter a taker and iso in the framework typical of polyphony, we may also observe a similar structure in this type of dance. In this case it is the structural framework of polyphony which inspired a corresponding structure in the folk dance. One proverb, which uses the structural details of IP dance to express its message, runs: “It’s not the leader that makes a good dance, but those that support him”.

FOUR-VOICES ISO POLYPHONY:

Iso-polyphony with four vocal parts is found in Lab musical folklore only. This may be asserted since the four-part type encountered in the Tosk iso-polyphony of Skrapar has not yet developed a true fourth part, as is the case in Lab iso-polyphony. According to Shituni, although three-part polyphony has traditionally been more widespread, at the present day, four-part polyphony has achieved greater popularity. Structurally, four-part Lab polyphony displays the same features as the three-part type, with the addition of an extra part. This is the *thrower*, typical of the polyphonic songs of Gjirokastër, the West and Himarë, and well-known through the performances of Xhevat Avdalli and Neço Muko’s polyphonic group.

It is generally accepted that the consolidation of the *thrower* part in the polyphonic songs of the coast may be ascribed to Neço Muko. According to Kruta: This type of *thrower* is unknown in other zones of Labëria... What we encounter here is a significant phenomenon which must be the product of a single trained individual, and it is probable that this was Neço Muko (Marioti),

who accomplished, perhaps intuitively, this experiment which is just as simple in appearance as it is interesting with respect to the sound of polyphony, and not merely that of the coast, but Lab polyphony in general. In fact, the role of the *thrower* in Lab song is not a recent phenomenon. It is true that recordings made by Neço Muko in the 1930s feature this type of four-part song with a highly developed role for the *thrower*, but this is not sufficient reason to claim that a *thrower* structure may not be encountered elsewhere in Labëria.

Musical examples testifying to the existence of this type may be of a somewhat later date, but it is important to point out that this musical style is frequently encountered in musical folklore. One highly significant place in the history of four-part polyphonic song is occupied by the town of Gjirokastër, where we find a taker, interceptor, thrower and drone. It is referred to as “the way old people sing”, and we may consequently regard it as a very ancient style of singing.

A particularly interesting aspect of the four-part polyphony of Gjirokastër is related to the fact that a capella polyphony has been, and still is, the main form of Gjirokastër urban folk music. Unlike the vast majority of Lab songs, which are expressed vertically rather than horizontally, the polyphonic songs of this town develop and display the most horizontally-oriented iso-polyphony of all of Labëria. In my view, the perfection of the songs from the villages surrounding Gjirokastër, from which those of the town originate, was achieved with the growth and development of the population of Gjirokastër itself. The urban folk music of Gjirokastër, unlike that of any other town, did not accept the introduction of instrumental ensembles, saze, as was the case in 99% of the towns of southern Albania, and even now it continues to develop and refine the polyphonic song tradition.

ISO POLYPHONY VOICES

- **TAKER:** The first voice of the Albanian IP, *toske* and *labe* song. We also encounter it in the oral folklore:

I'll take it one time,

And you will hold the drone for me,

Hey friends, amani!

This term is also used to denote the taker of the dance, i.e. the dancer leading the dance.

- **CUTTER, INTERRUPTER:** The second voice in the Albanian iso polyphony.
- **THROWER:** Term used in lab iso-polyphony. We use the word *thrower* to define the third voice in lab iso-polyphony, in the case of four voices polyphony.

- **DRONE:**

The final voice in the iso-polyphonic songs of Southern Albania. The iso is sung by a chorus or group of singers. It is usually the third voice in a Tosk polyphonic song, and the fourth one in a Lab song. A variety of terms are commonly used alongside or instead of the word iso in the areas where this type of music is performed, including: the group that *mban zë* (*sustains a voice*), that *mbushin* (*mbushësit*), (*fills it*), that *zien* (*drones*), *mbajnë e* (*holds the vowel "e"*), *mbajnë Kaba* (*holds the bass*), etc.

The Fjalor i gjuhës së sotme shqipe, Tirana 1980, defines it as: Unchanging vocal part, which continues without interruption and which accompanies and supports the lead voices in a polyphonic song or a melody. Powerful (broad, slow) iso. Lab (Myzeqe) iso. Men's (women's, young people's) iso. Song with iso. Iso, come on lads, iso! Let's sing (let's pick it up) with an iso. Hold (play) the iso with a voice (with a pipe). The Fjalori Enciklopedik Shqiptar, Tirana 1985, defines it as an extended sound which is held by one or more voices when accompanying polyphonic songs with three or four voices. Finding a satisfactory definition of the iso is somewhat problematic, since there are several schools of thought on the subject.

It is not possible to be sure when the word iso was first used to describe a chorus of singers "holding the voice", but it is highly likely that as a popular term, with reference to the polyphony of the South, it is no more than two or three hundred years old. Even today the word iso is not widely used in some zones where polyphonic music is preserved, or it is used alongside other expressions to describe the phenomenon of a vocal part held for a long time by a chorus of singers. In these areas, ideal for observing the phenomenon of polyphony, words with an Albanian root have been, and still are, used to describe this extremely significant aspect of folk polyphony. These terms include: ja mbush, mbajnë zënë, bëjmë e, mbajmë kaba, mbajmë avaz, ziejmë.

The existence of these variants to describe this phenomenon should be emphasised, owing to the fact that the word iso had not initially acquired this sense in folk practice, and that with the passage of time we subsequently find this symbolic term crystallised into one meaning. It is very possible that the word iso was aided in its spread by the establishment of the saze folk ensembles in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. A detailed examination of the iso as a concept in folk music indicates that it conceals within itself an entire structure which is linked both with the origins of polyphony and with the genetic code of the Albanians.

The iso concept is one of "extra-musical sound", and as such remains a quite incontestable

phenomenon of Albanian genetic musical structure. It is not a tempered pitch in any manner at all, because it was never envisaged as performing such a function. The iso supports a multiple interplay of voices about a centre which is defined in its entirety as a specific note. The way in which this “folk” tonic cluster is identified within its intonation is another matter, but the iso within a tone cluster conceals a “graphic pre-projection” of polyphony above a single note. One of the chapters of Ismail Kadare’s *“Concert at the End of Winter”* bears the title *“Iso in all the parts”*. Iso has also been used as a pseudonym. The Communist militant Kozma Nushi (1909-1945) from Vunoi near Vlorë used the pseudonym Iso during the Second World War. We also find it as a surname in the case of Jorgo and Kosta Iso, the singers in the iso-polyphonic group of Poliçan. On 25 November 2005 the musical phenomenon of Albanian folk iso-polyphony was proclaimed a *“Masterpiece of the Oral Heritage of Mankind”*.

- The Albanian iso polyphony is declared - *“Masterpiece of the Oral and Cultural Heritage”* ***Kryevepër e trashëgimisë gojore të njerëzimit***, under the guidance of UNESCO, **Paris 25 November, 2005**

“Albanian Folk Iso-Polyphony” is part of the list of *“Masterpieces of Oral Heritage of Humanity”*, today *“Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage Phenomenon”*, protected by UNESCO, a fact that was announced in all media around the world by Dr.Koichiro Matscuro, Director-General of UNESCO, from the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. The International Jury convened in Paris on 21-24 November 2005, reviewed over 60 nominations proposed to be included in the *“Masterpiece of Humanity”* list, proposals made officially by various states from all around the world which met all the criteria announced for this purpose, in accordance with the 3th Proclamation of UNESCO. The jury was made up of:

Doc. Antonio A. ARANTES

President of the Brazilian National Institute for Historical and Artistic He, Brazil.

H.R.H Basma BINT TALAL

Princess of Jordan

Aziza BENANINI

Ambassador of Morocco in UNESCO

Prof.Georges CONDOMINAS

Representative of France in UNESCO

Prof. Anzor ERMAICHVILI

Professor at the National Institute of Culture, Georgia

Carlos FUENTES

Representative if Mexico in UNESCO

Mister Yoshikazu HASEGAWA

CEO of the Foundation for the New Theatre, Japan

Prof. Epeli HAU'OFA

Founding Director of the Center for Art and Culture, Oceania

Prof. Alpha Oumar KONARE

Chairman of the African Union Commission, former President of Mali

Elvira KUNINA

Headmaster of the National School of Folk Art, Russia.

M.s.Olive W.M.LEWIN

Director of Youth, Jamaica

Prof. Armandina LIHAMBAA

Professor at the University of Dar El Salam, Tanzania

Doc..Ahmed MORSI

Director of the National Library, Professor at the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University, Egypt.

Doc. Zhentao ZHANG

Professor at the Institute of Music Research at the Academy of Arts, China.

The file, prepared by the Albanian party, contained the following documents:

I. Written documents in English:

- The official request of UNESCO's National Commission of Albania for the registration of iso-polyphony as "*Masterpiece of the human oral heritage*".
- Completed form of "Albanian folk iso polyphony", pg. 1-29. according to the standards and model of UNESCO
- Bibliography of works written by foreign authors on iso-polyphony.
- Bibliography of the works of Albanian authors on iso-polyphony.
- Official data and publications on the areas where iso-polyphony is sung.
- Draft Action Plan 2003-2008 on "*Iso-Polyphony*".
- 5 other proposed categories as required in the Tip Application Form.
- Law no. 9048, presented in English language, dt. 07:04. 2003 "*On cultural heritage*".
- Complete scientific study on iso-polyphony by Vasil S. TOLE
- The study "Odyssey and Mermaids, Returning to the Iso-Polyphonic Areas of Epirus", Uegen, 2005, by Vasil S. TOLE

II. Audio, video materials and books:

Different maps of Albania.

- 32 color photographs and their negatives of the Albanian iso-polyphonic groups.
- A 2-hour video document which illustrates the iso-polyphonic singing in the areas below:

- a. *Himara* *Lab iso-polyphony*
- b. *Kolonja* *Tosk iso-polyphony*
- c. *Tepelena* *Lab iso-polyphony*
- d. *Gjirokastra* *Lab iso-polyphony*
- e. *Përmeti* *Tosk iso polyphony*

A list of audio and video publications that will add to the submitted file:

“Albania Intangible Heritage in CD”, Tirana 2004

Intangible Heritage-Iso-polifonia, Tirana 2003

The polyphonic group “Kristalet e Smokthinës”, Eurostar

The iso-polyphonic group “Djemtë e Vlorës”, Eurostar

The polyphonic group “Ergjëria”, Eurostar

f. The publication “Popullsia e Shqipërisë” – “Albania’s population”, Tiranë 2001

A professional video of the type (Betacam SP) entitled "Albanian Iso-polyphony" ~ 10 minutes which reflects the most important elements of the musical phenomenon of IP, prepared based on Annex IV.

Authorizations and documents proving the Copyright of the above materials.

Listing Iso polyphony among the masterpieces protected by UNESCO will bring its further recognition and dissemination around the world, more care and financial support for folk groups, further studies on iso polyphony and more commitments to carry out the activities dedicated to IP.

Professor Vasil S. TOLE