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NIGHT WITHOUT MOON: ASPECTS OF THE REBETIKA

by A. A. Fatouros

The rebetika, the Greek urban folk songs of the mid-century, have had a paradoxical fate. They started as the voice of a small subculture of pot-heads and small-time crooks. They were soon adopted by a much larger group, essentially the whole Greek urban working class; the middle class and most of the intellectual elite ignored them or treated them with contempt. Suddenly, they were "discovered;" they became popular; pop singers tried to sing them; composers honored them with "the sincerest form of flattery" - imitation. By now they have pride of place in tourist ads; "Athens by Night" includes half-an-hour in a bouzouki joint at the end of its regular tour. Yet, the rebetika are still forcefully rejected by large numbers of Greeks. Tolerance of particular songs is often in direct proportion to their lack of authenticity, their denial, or toning down of those features which are most profoundly original in the rebetika. Neither have they fared any better with politicians and ideologues, of the right as much as of the left, albeit with honorable exceptions on both sides. The right has traditionally considered them vulgar and "un-hellenic;" their influence, they claim, weakens the moral fiber of the nation. The ideologues of the left, on their part, insist that the rebetika are products of a worthless *Lumpenproletariat* - corrupting tools in the hands of a cunning ruling class. The phenomenon is not unique. The Greek modernized elite has shown over the last century and a half an unerring instinct for rejecting most of what is authentic in modern Greek culture - what Seferis has called "the essential elements of the Greek tradition." It is true that traditional folk songs have been tolerated, even honored, but this may be attributed to the effects of nationalism, of a romantic conception of their idyllic rural origins, and of the fact that foreign scholars discovered and appreciated them first. Byzantium and its achievements were long slighted - tradition has it that one hundred Byzantine and post-Byzantine chapels were torn down so that their stones would be used to build the esthetic and spiritual monstrosity that is Athens Cathedral. Much of the folk tradition was treated as Turkish-inspired. For a long time, *Erotokritos* was considered a servants' book, the kind that maids read in the kitchen; the memoirs of General Makriyannis were first published more than a century after independence. Seen in such perspective, the continuing resistance to the rebetika is as important as their own persistence for understanding their significance and their place in modern Greek society.

This paper attempts a brief discussion of some aspects of the rebetika. My concern is neither that of a literary critic nor that of a folklore specialist. I am interested in the songs' social, political and moral premises, their historical background and evolution, their role and significance in modern Greek society. My own limitations as well as other constraints oblige me to deal mostly with their lyrics: This is in itself a very serious limitation, for music,

dance and poetry are inextricably combined in the rebetika and any separation is highly artificial. It is generally true, moreover, that the lyrics are less important as artistic achievements than the music and the dance.

Contexts of the Rebetika

The historical cultural context of the rebetika has received little attention. It is my submission that they are an art form which reflects, marks, and indeed facilitates, the transition of a society from tradition to modernity. Without attributing undue rigidity and distinctiveness to these two notions, I use them to refer to the social and cultural conditions of two kinds of societies: a slow-changing society with strongly-held values and well-established beliefs and expectations concerning individual behavior and worth, on the one hand, and on the other, a society where (relative) economic growth and industrialization bring rapid social and cultural change, where expectations are uncertain and contradictory, and where established values are disputed and obscured by "possessive individualism," egalitarianism and a near-exclusive affirmation of the value of rationality.

Passage from the one kind of society to the other is a wrenching and painful process, whether it happens to an individual moving across borders or regions, or to a whole population affected by "progress." The rebetika express the responses of some persons who were subjected to this process, without much choice or any clear understanding of what was happening to them. These songs exhibit accordingly a profound ambiguity concerning personal and social values: their creators and their audience are still close and attached to the traditional, in the Greek case essentially rural, values, the legitimacy and moral authority of which they still accept; they feel, at the same time, a certain distance, a gap, an inability to conform to them, for which they sometimes blame the individual and sometimes the "society." The rebetika thus depict the consistent infringement, and thereby the disappearance, of traditional values still felt as morally binding; the new, emerging, hierarchy of social and personal values is still far too unclear and uncertain and it has no obvious source of social and moral legitimacy. It is their success in expressing this fundamental conflict that accounts for the remarkable expansion in the constituency of the rebetika over a few years. The losers in the *Lumpenproletariat* had always had their own subculture and their own songs; but at this particular moment, these songs captured and expressed anxieties and feelings shared by a much larger group. The political importance of the changing role, or at least potential, of the *Lumpenproletariat* in countries undergoing modernization has been much stressed in recent years. I see the rebetika as a corresponding manifestation on the cultural side.

At the same time, the role of the rebetika as expressions of the passage to modernity may account for the lack of contact between them and most of

contemporary Greek literature. Transition from tradition to modernity is no longer an immediate emotional problem for most Greek writers. One way or another they all belong to the modernized section of Greek society; they have found their identity in terms of modernized society. The pains of the transition may have been already expressed in Greek literature, in an earlier period and therefore in differing context: roughly from 1880 to 1920. The constituency of most Greek writers and poets in the last forty years has been exclusively among modern, "westernized," Greeks.

The social context of the *rebetika* is urban and lower class. In a country which has very recently passed from predominantly rural to half-urbanized, the *rebetika* represent one of the first expressions of urban folk art. This sharply differentiates them from earlier folk songs, which held tightly to traditional rural value orientations. At the same time, the *rebetika* are songs of the lower classes, of people living in the outskirts of the big cities -- eternally poor and unskilled workers, occasionally employed in unpleasant jobs, often in trouble with the law, with no expectation of affluence or social advancement. In their majority these people are still fresh from, although they no longer belong to, the village and the countryside; or they are, especially in the early periods of the *rebetika*, refugees from the ethnic Greek communities of Asia Minor. The rootlessness of the villager, newly emigrant to the city, is thus fused with that of the refugee, permanently deprived of his native land. It is not an accident that refugees from Anatolia have played such an important role in the development of the *rebetika*; their plight -- suddenly wrenched from the relative wealth and security of their towns and villages, living in abject poverty in urban slums, with a younger generation growing up totally unable to adopt (and even perhaps to understand) the ways their parents had inherited from a different society -- may be seen as symbolic of a whole society's passage to modernization.

The evolution of the *rebetika* over the years has been accompanied (and in part caused) by a shifting in their primary constituency; the miserable shiftless member of the *Lumpenproletariat* of their early periods has been replaced (although never totally displaced) by the skilled worker, the more established member of a regular working class, say, a construction worker or a factory hand. The change in constituency has been reflected in the content and themes of the songs, although perhaps not as clearly in their general attitude and atmosphere.

Finally, the literary context of the *rebetika* reflects their essential ambivalence in attitude and values. While properly classified as "folk songs," they are much less anonymous than folk songs normally are. Their brief historical timespan, the impact of phonograph recording and of the media in general, the greater individualism of their makers, all contribute to identify authors and especially, composers. Still, with half-a-dozen exceptions, *rebetika* composers, and even more writers of lyrics, were largely unknown to the public at large until quite recently; moreover, there is considerable confusion and controversy over some attributions of authorship and

there are a few well-known songs whose creators are anonymous and indeed collective – for instance, *O Haros, the Man from Votanikos*.

The language and style of the rebetika are marked by extensive borrowings from the traditional folk songs of rural Greece. Even where there is no conscious imitation, there are clearly recognizable memories from, echoes of, folk songs. The lyrics of Markos Vamvakaris are particularly notable in this connection:

Your eyelashes are shining like flowers in the meadow.

* * * * *

Black eyes, black eyebrows

Black curly hair,

A white face like a lily

And on the cheek a beauty-mark.

Despite similarities and borrowings, however, the whole context of the rebetika differs so much from that of earlier folk songs that it strongly affects the meaning and tone of folk-song phrases or verses incorporated in them. Compare two folk couplets, collected in the early nineteenth century by Fauriel and Didot, with a song of the late nineteen forties by Tsitsanis:

Night falls, dawn comes, it is not feasible

Not to sigh, not to say, "Ahh!"

* * * * *

It's always with sighs that night falls, dawn comes,

For you my little heart cries and can't be comforted.

* * * * *

The dawn comes and night falls

On the same old tune

Bring me your most expensive drink

I'm paying for the eyes I love.

On the other hand, the rebetika are replete with city-talk, petty bourgeois borrowings from foreign tongues, banalities of media-dominated life. One of Tsitsanis' best known songs has "*Cherchez la femme*" for a refrain. (The rhymes which had to be devised to fit it were most ingenious.) And in one of the "heaviest" songs of hashish-smokers, they are ironically called "*enfants-gatés*":

And all the enfants-gatés will sit in the teke.

[*Tekes* being the pot-smoking "pad."] This kind of cheap and banal language imports into the songs strong prosaic elements, which contrast with their generally correct scanning and rhyme and differentiates them both from rural folk songs with their authentic lyricism and from modern pop songs with their fake genteel language. At their best, the rebetika renew the tired and cliché-ridden tongue of the cities; their use of homely expressions and proverbs to express emotion and feeling reaches the modern city-dweller's dulled sensibility, pierces his defenses against the lyrical rhetoric he is constantly exposed to and to which he has become immune.

It is in such juxtapositions of the old and the new, the banal and the

original, the cliché expression and the novel, that one finds sometimes, occasionally – indeed all too rarely, for authenticity is rare in any body of literature, and particularly hard to find in a literature of transition – the genuine voice of the rebetika:

Tonight you are great, Wow!

The streetcars see you and they brake and stop.

* * * * *

And if I dance when I am high, beautifully and humbly.

* * * * *

My heart clouds over,

My tears fall like rain;

The way we are going, we surely will end up

You under the ground and me in jail.

* * * * *

It's cloudy over Piræus

In Athens it's raining.

There are those who've got their love

There are those who've lost it.

Some Themes of the Rebetika

Unlike other bodies of folk songs, the rebetika cover a narrow range of themes. They include few narrative songs, ballads or *paraloges*; they have no epics. This last is indeed remarkable, when one considers that during the lifetime of the rebetika Greece went through two wars and an occupation marked by powerful national liberation struggles. These experiences found their music in foreign or foreign-derived tunes and their poetry in folk songs; they have left no direct mark on the rebetika, except perhaps for deepening the gloom of which they sing and adding more prisoners to write jail-songs about. The rebetika show little consciousness of a broader national community, of collective feelings and reactions; their concerns are too closely tied to individuals, the desires they express too earthy and earth-bound. This is surely a handicap, an element which may deprive them of any claim to greatness; it is at the same time utterly typical, totally characteristic of the alienated semi-modernized persons they are written for and about. To remain faithful to their own essence, the rebetika cannot properly deal in epic manner with national issues.

A major theme of the rebetika is love; a good majority of the songs treat its many aspects, stages and moods. Still, it is not an exclusive concern; many rebetika deal with other themes, either unrelated or tangentially related with love: hashish-smoking, drinking, being broke, mother love, homesickness. Overall two dominant moods pervade the rebetika, complaint and sadness on the one hand, enjoyment of life on the other. The two are intimately connected.

Love in the rebetika has no spiritual overtones; it is whole, rounded,

emotional and physical, with no distinctions and no hierarchies of moral worth. Because of their origin in the *Lumpenproletariat*, the rebetika exhibit a sexual emancipation far in advance of Greek society as a whole. To love a woman, or a man, means sleeping with her, or him. (I should note here, incidentally, that the hero in the rebetika, the first-person narrator or third-person actor, is generally male; where there is a female heroine her attitude is usually a mirror-image of the male's. In many songs, the first-person hero is reversible, male or female depending on the sex of the singer.) Coincidence of emotional and physical relationship is taken for granted. If one does not make out, it is because the loved one does not want him, does not love him, or is far away, not because of any moral or religious scruples. The rebetika are casual about all this, neither aggressively immoral nor anti-conventional. Marriage is often mentioned — as proof of love and of serious intentions. The betrayed lover, however, may or may not be a spouse, it does not make that much difference; it is the betrayal that matters, not the technical element of adultery.

Love songs are often courting songs; the rebetika are no exception. There are a few delicate serenades, like "*The Dawn's Minore*":

*Wake up, my little one, and listen,
Listen to dawn's song,
It's written for you alone
From the crying of a soul.*

Or more passionate songs, like the famous "*Open Up*" by Papaioannou, rising like a scream of pain in the night:

*Open up, open up, I can't stand it
Stop now, stop torturing me.*

But the songs where the loved one is being wooed, where love's consummation lies in the future, are in the minority. In most cases, it is the return of the loved one that is sought, it is the re-establishment of the relationship — love has already been consummated, it is its continuation that is being nostalgically desired for the future. The rebetika express a strong feeling of lack, absence, nostalgic desire; emotions toward the future are founded mostly on happy memories of the past. This is indeed true of most rebetika, not only those dealing with love; the homeland, the family, or even the happy moments of potsmoking, are seen most of the time as being in the past; they are perceived from the distance of a deprived present.

The particular reasons and factual (fictional) context of nostalgia, desire, and complaint vary: the song may celebrate courting, bemoan betrayal and separation, resentfully reject after betrayal, or sorrowfully celebrate the last night together.

*You came in tears one evening
To our corner in the tavern
But it is too late now to revive
The love, the love you killed.*

* * * * *

*Tonight it's for us the very last night
Tonight stay till morning and keep me company
* * * * **

*Dawn, when it comes, I fear it so
For you will go and I'll be alone*

In most instances it is the feeling of missing, of loneliness, of despair, that is described, not the person whose absence is said to cause it. That person may indeed not exist. It may be love that has brought about the singer's sadness and despair, but it may be some other cause, social, political - metaphysical, if you will. Tsitsanis' famous "Cloudy Sunday" may refer to the woman who has gone away; but there is no woman's name in it, no explicit reference. Who knows what the composer meant, when, at the worst period of German occupation, he wrote the song - and who cares? For those who have heard it, for those who have danced to its music or sang it, when happy, sad, drunk or nostalgic, the feeling it expresses has a life of its own, an existence independent of any precise cause:

*Cloudy Sunday,
You are like my heart,
It's always clouded over,
Oh! Jesus Christ and Virgin!*

*You are a day like that
On which I lost my joy
Cloudy Sunday
You make my heart bleed.*

It is not only love that makes us sad and unhappy (or for that matter happy and joyful). The rebetika clearly recognize this; they sing the pains and troubles of being broke, of wearing old clothes, of losing one's worry beads, the joys of drink, dance and hashish. Poverty, money troubles, come back again and again, in a myriad of forms; from Markos' good-natured complaint:

*Those who have lots o' money
I wish I knew what they do with it*

to bitter denunciation:

*Waves have not scared me, snows and hurricanes
The way you have scared me, accursed poverty.*

to cynicism:

*In today's world, everybody knows it,
Man's strength is in his wallet.*

to concrete and touching worries:

*My jacket is wearing out,
My sorrow will kill me,
And I am sad, very sad,
That I can't buy another.*

A favorite character of some composers, especially Tsitsanis, is the

“fallen aristocrat,” the erstwhile respectable young man who has been ruined, because of a woman or for other unspecified reasons. Now he is a bum, a shame to his family, and he has given up:

*From high up to low down,
From much to little,
Look at my condition in life;
From the top step
Down to the last I have come.*

The symbol is transparent, whether we take it to refer to the refugee, to the half-urbanized peasant or to everyone living through a “transition period.” Its persistence in the rebetika is significant. It suggests indeed a high degree of intuition, if not consciousness, on the part of rebetika composers.

It is not true that all rebetika are dark, sad and morose. No doubt, many are, probably a large majority; this is a point which will come up again later. But there are innumerable happy songs, too. They celebrate drinking, smoking pot, having a good time at the tavern, in bed, or just taking one’s girl for a walk. Some of the best sing the praises of the rebetika themselves, their composers, their singers. The enjoyment these songs describe is essentially simple, intense, without guilt feelings. A man enjoys his dancing, and that of his companions; man and woman enjoy each other’s happiness, as when the man promises:

*Tonight at the tavern,
God knows what will happen,
And if you get up to dance,
No glass will be left unbroken.*

or when the woman demands:

*I want you to take me to the bouzoukia tonight,
For my pleasure spread the bread freely,
And when I dance, clap your hands,
If you love me, if you love me.*

And there are finally the exotic songs telling of dreams of Oriental palaces, as seen in turn of the century chromolithographs, with harems, of course, and ease, and comfort, and joy. *Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, luxe, calme et volupté.* Most of these are pretty poor both as lyrics and as music; very few escape from banality and give voice to oniric wishes for other lands, “lascivious, erotic negresses,” and perpetual joy.

Another major theme of the rebetika is hashish-smoking. It is indeed one of their main claims to curiosity, if not fame. It is almost exclusively hashish they deal with; hard drugs are rarely mentioned and then only in derogation. But hashish smoking is casually and sympathetically treated. The pot-head is one of the boys, not necessarily better but certainly no worse than those who are straight. Smoking is placed on a par with drinking, so much so indeed that the songs are easily bowdlerized into drinking songs, as they have to be on most records, since there has always been censorship of recordings

of "immoral" songs. So that, "the cat who went for a walk" and now:

*...sits there and wonders
Where can he find a roach
To fill his head, to get stoned*

changes his concern on the record:

*He sits there and wonders
Where can he find good wine
To fill his head, to get high.*

There is nothing very exotic, exciting, or extraordinary in potsmoking, the way the songs tell it. Its joys are extolled quietly, softly, with no effort to proselytize. At most, the songs' argument is libertarian; in another jargon, they only ask, "let me do my thing":

*Even though I smoke hash
I bother nobody.*

Potsmoking is thus seen as part of having a good time: listening to the bouzoukia, dancing, smoking. It is at the same time linked with a special group; it is not everybody who does it, only the tough guys, members of the same guild, a small one, in fact, where each knows everybody else. It is in their references to the "heroes" of this guild that the rebetika come the nearest to, although they still do not achieve, an epic style.

Hashish-smoking is illegal, of course, and therefore the rebetika's hero, the first-person actor, is a criminal. One has somehow the feeling in the early rebetika that this is not his only infraction, although the other ones are far from clear; the "criminology" of the rebetika remains to be elaborated. The vague criminality of the songs' heroes, quite real in the earlier periods, more of a metaphor in the latter ones, imports a diffuse feeling of struggle, or better, for "struggle" is too strong a word, of resentment against authority — against what the hero calls "world," "society," "life." By and large the rebetika express the point of view of the downtrodden, of people living under oppression. While the rebetika are remarkably non-political, with very few well-hidden exceptions, it is no accident that they flourished during a period of unusually harsh and rigid political oppression in Greece: the Metaxas dictatorship (1936-1940), war and occupation (1940-1944), Civil War (1944-1950). To suggest that the rebetika were covert acts of political revolt would be incorrect, for this was not their role. They were rather escape valves for a diffuse feeling of oppression, of unhappiness with things as they are, and of uncertainty as to alternative political or social futures. For it is important to stress that the rebetika's heroes may resent and try to evade authority but they do not reject it, they do not contest its legitimacy. In such acceptance without obedience, the rebetika exhibit once again their profound ambivalence.

The Atmosphere of the Rebetika

Even from a brief glimpse of the rebetika one is left with a certain impression of their atmosphere, their mood. Resignation, passivity, hopeless-

ness, permeate them. Life is seen as bleak and sad, society as unjust and harsh. Both are accepted as such. The hero in the song complains, cries, despairs, but does not really rebel or fight. No wonder they are constantly attacked as being morose and fatalistic. Yet, while these features of the rebetika are real enough, it would be improper to stop at them and not go any further.

In their being "morose" the rebetika are not unique among Greek songs. A great proportion of Greek folk songs have always been sad or plaintive. There is a strange and profound sadness; it is no simple complaint, no mere fear and desperation. It is hard to classify, far less dismiss as morose or plaintive, the poetry of a people who insist on singing at a wedding:

*On a Friday, on a Saturday evening
Mother, you were chasing me away,
From my family home,
And my father, he too tells me: Go away!
I am going away crying.*

As far back as 1885, Nicholas Politis, the father of Greek folklore studies, had this to say:

In the folk poetry of our nation, the songs which express a feeling of profound melancholy and pain, and which affect sorrowfully a listener's soul, are so common that a learned and profound student of the national literature considered, although not without some exaggeration, this to be the main characteristic of the poetry of the Greek people.

Acceptance of life and society in the rebetika goes beyond mere resignation. It signifies a profound affirmation of living. Perception of reality as essentially unpleasant, insecure and dark does not lead to denial but to affirmation of life. Their despair is an existential experience which leads to a pessimistic but positive undertaking of the burden of living. The celebrations of love, the feasts and nights at the tavern are not external, alien, preoccupations, they are part of a whole; they are a human response to the discovery of the futility and pain of the human condition. The individual in the rebetika retains a deep sense of personal identity and integrity, in spite, and almost because, of the poverty, injustice and oppression in which he finds himself. He is thus passive but not defeated; his is the passivity of strength, founded on consciousness of long tradition. He is acutely aware of his own impotence in the "world," but he is not giving up. Without seeking to change the world, he proceeds to make his bed in it, to love, to get high on hashish or on wine, to dance, to sing - in a word, to live.

At the same time, the rebetika at their best achieve that transcendence of the specific stimulus which is characteristic of genuine art. Starting as the expression of the peculiar concerns of a small untypical group of potheads and losers, the rebetika have managed to express the essential realities of the human condition, in a manner which is very Greek and at the same time very contemporary. It is no paradox to assert that, in their own manner, the rebetika have much in common with the poetry of Kavafy, the most aristo-

cratic and cultured but also the most modern of contemporary Greek poets. There is in both a profound reflection of the Greek tradition: deliberate, pedantic, and acutely self-conscious in Kavafy, naive, unlearned, almost unconscious in the rebetika - each reflects indeed different sides of the Greek tradition, the literary, *logia*, one in the case of the poet, the folk, demotic tradition in the rebetika. Both are deeply ambivalent, both forcefully express the moral ambiguity of contemporary man, as he passes from tradition to modernity, from security and slow change to constant risk and rapid transformation. To achieve this, they both give up the poetic, lyrical, language of earlier poetry and express themselves prosaically, casually, almost banally. I do not underestimate the differences, and I do not propose to raise the rebetika's modest poetic achievements to Kavafy's artistic heights. Yet it remains true that, not only do they both express a similar human condition, but also the devices they use are, if not similar, at any rate analogous.

A Melancholy Conclusion

One must conclude on an unhappy note. The rebetika are songs of transition from tradition to modernity. Because of that, they are a fragile and vulnerable art form. Folk art depends for its strength on its tradition, and the rebetika haven't had the time to build a tradition of their own. Indeed, in their short life they have moved through several quite differing periods, corresponding to at least three distinct audiences. First, a shiftless potsmoking *Lumpenproletariat*, then a working class beginning to acquire an identity and a consciousness of its own, and, finally, a broad national audience across social classes. A folk art is in a way very commercial - it is closely linked to, depends on, and responds to its audience. Success, therefore, such as the rebetika had, can be fatal. The relative isolation of their first decades, because of general disapproval and of other special circumstances, allowed the rebetika to flourish. Their discovery and general adoption disoriented them. Like good folk artists, the makers of the rebetika continued to respond to their audience, but it was now a very different audience: a broad heterogeneous one, bombarded by the media, corrupted by pop tunes of all kinds, unable to dance to the rebetika's music, and unwilling to adopt or even tolerate their original life style. Essential constraints of the form were removed, such as that of writing music and songs for dancing, not for theater-type performance.

While a few traditional rebetika composers are still very active, there are no young ones, no new stars - at least among self-educated musicians, as distinct from the "serious," legitimate-music composers (Hadjidakis, Theodorakis, et al.) who have turned to the rebetika for inspiration. The latter bring their own learned methods and styles; their purposes widely differ from those of authentic rebetika composers. Their example and respectability has encouraged more and more Tin Pan Alley imitation of rebetika tunes and features.

Looking back now it seems as if the rebetika were inherently an ephemeral art form. Weak, vulnerable, open to influence and temptation, they flourished for a brief time and are now apparently on a steep and unavoidable decline. The simple metaphor of human life of Eftychia Papagiannopoulou's song fits sadly the story of the rebetika.

*Everything is but a lie,
A breath, a breeze,
Like a flower we'll be cut
By a hand at dawn.*

*Life has two doors,
I opened one and came in
I walked around for a morning
And by twilight
I went out the other.*

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