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PORTUGUESE BALLAD, ITS SPECIFICITIES AND OFFSHOOTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Abstract: Romance, or in Portugal *romanceiro* (collection of songs), is traditional poetry of medieval origin. It is particularly well preserved on the plateau of Trás-os-Montes in the northeast of the country. Characteristic of the rural environment, this ballad is particularly performed as part of certain agricultural work. Its melodies depend on the function of the song in social life. These ballads form part of a large repertoire, whose counterparts can be found across the European part of the Mediterranean.

Key words: *Romanceiro*, romance, epic poem, Trás-os-Montes, Renaissance poets, thematic cycles, communitarianism, harvest, ritual hours, syllabic melodies, Mediterranean ballad.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional music of Portuguese villages, which is passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation, has always existed separately from the towns. Even though today socioeconomic change and the influences of the media and new technology threaten its very existence, we can conclude that this music survives as a solitary bulwark.

A good example is the song called *romanceiro* in Portugal, which represents an offshoot of the European ballad, a folk song in verse created in the Middle Ages. *Romanceiro* (collection of songs) is an epic poem with historical-legendary content. The most beautiful examples of these folk songs have been preserved in the Mediterranean and, beyond, in the Balkans. With respect to this Pan-Mediterranean epic poem, the *romanceiro*, along with many other musical forms in this region, is an invaluable poetic-musical creation characteristic of the Iberian Peninsula. Further in the text we will examine the position of the *romanceiro* with regard to the ballad as a universal Mediterranean category.

More than a collection of songs (*romances*), the *romanceiro* is above all a repertoire of vocal music. The ballad is a form of sung poetry that has a fixed metrical form of octosyllabic verses with assonances in even verses. Romances most likely appeared in the 15th and 16th centuries – certainly not before the 14th century. Ballads were sung from their very inception, but they also existed in

recited form. In this case, music played the part of a ‘stabilizer’ of the text, which was crucial for the survival of the musical form.

Numerous Portuguese ethnographers and philologists studied and collected *Romanceiro*, among whom ethnographer José Leite de Vasconcelos and philologists Théophile Braga and Carolina Michaelis de Vasconcelos, who recorded numerous ballads across Portugal, stand out. Their studies prove that interest in this repertoire was primarily awakened by texts. Vieigas Guerreiro and Athaïde de Oliveira travelled across the Algarve province (Chaves), while Pires de Lima travelled through the Minho valley, and priests Tavares and Baçal across Trás-os-Montes. Romances were also recorded in Madeira and the Azores. However, the *romanceiro* was always studied more from the literary than the musical point of view.

Among the few collectors of ballad melodies, we should mention K. Schindler and F. Lopes Graça. It is thanks to them that musicologists can now compare the materials they collect with those recordings. Nonetheless, these materials are not numerous enough to provide us with a complete survey of the melodies of the *romanceiro* or to enable us to carry out their analysis and classification. Since there were no musicological or sociological studies on this musical form, I was the first to embark on that uncertain endeavour with two books: *Bread Song* (Le Chant du Pain) and *Romances from Trás-os-Montes* (Romances du Trás-os-Montes), which were both published by the Gulbenkian Foundation in Paris in 1998. My research in the villages on the plateau of Trás-os-Montes made a late contribution to the musicological and sociological knowledge of the *romanceiro*, at a time when this tradition existed more in memory than in everyday life.

In the 1950s philologists conducted a great deal of research into the origin of the *romanceiro*: particularly, C. Michaelis in Portugal and R. Menéndez Pidal in Spain. Recently, other Portuguese philologists such as L. F. Lindley Cintra, A. Dores Galhoz and D. Pinto Correia have also been studying this topic. Here we will not elaborate on the complex theory of the origin of romance, but we will say that the first romances were most likely parts of French medieval epic poems (chansons de geste). Menéndez Pidal believes that the epicenter of the *romanceiro* lies in Castile, where there exists an ancient tradition of epic poetry (Cid, Don Rodrigo, etc. in the 17th century). However, the Portuguese *romanceiro* developed under the influence of both old French and Galician epic styles (for example, *The Song of Roland* from the end of the 16th century, whose one sung episode I collected in Trás-os-Montes). On the other hand, the metrical norms and thematic materials

characteristic of Portugal are still present in today's *romanceiro*: the sentimental nuances and romanesque tone distinguish it from the elevated and strict epic style typical of Castile.¹

Created in the Middle Ages, ballads were spread throughout the Iberian Peninsula by jongleurs, who performed at squares and places of pilgrimage. The golden age of the romance was the 16th century. It was at that time that the romance entered the royal courts of the Iberian Peninsula and became highly esteemed in aristocratic and bourgeois circles that organised court festivities. The ballad also inspired important Renaissance vihuelists such as Luis Milán, Salinas, Vásquez, Narváez, Mudarra. At the time, composers and troubadours often moved from court to court; it was precisely on these routes that the Spanish and Portuguese ballads became interwoven. These melodies were recorded in important 16th-century music manuscripts such as *Cancionero de Palacio* (Madrid). Furthermore, the emergence of the printing press led to the appearance of collections of texts of romances. The 17th century is the end of the famous period of the ballad as a court form. From that moment on, the *romanceiro* entered history and reached us thanks to the power of oral transmission. Nowadays the *romanceiro* belongs to the rural traditions of Portugal and Spain.

The thematic material of the ballad is very complex because it preserves memories of the oldest chronicles of history and the most ancient European heroes whose exploits were the basis for the creation of legends. The ballad is an epic poem that sublimated romanesque characters (who have symbolic value) or poeticised the great drama of human destiny, including rural themes. Diverse themes from different epochs, therefore, intertwine and unite several chronologies. There are several thematic classifications of ballads, among which we will single out the classifications of Professor Cintra and the classifications of specialists in this genre such as Viegas Guerreiro and Dorez-Galhoz. They distinguish five thematic layers of the *romanceiro*: the historical-peninsular cycle (which is the oldest), the Carolingian cycle of epic character (which is very old), the romanesque cycle, the religious cycle (17th century), and the narrative cycle. The *romanceiro*, therefore, made an original synthesis of the historical themes of old Europe (primarily Spain and France), which merged with the rich range of autochthonous thematic materials of past and future times.²

¹ Anne Caufriez, *Le chant du Pain*, Fondation Gulbekian, Paris, 1998, pp. 89–98, 52–55.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 44–49, 89–98, 119–127.

BALLADS FROM TRÁS-OS-MONTES

Here we will discuss primarily the ballad from Trás-os-Montes for two main reasons: because it is the most representative and important Portuguese ballad, and because it is precisely in this region that its oldest forms have survived. Thanks to field research, these are also the ballads I have become directly acquainted with. The examples we have collected illustrate the aforementioned thematic cycles. For example, the inhabitants of the village of Gimonde sang to us an old ballad from the historical-peninsular cycle *The Death of King Don Juan of Castile* (15th century). Other ballads from the Carolingian cycle and numerous chivalric tales, which refer to the Crusades, illustrate the romanesque cycle.

In Trás-os-Montes, the tradition of singing and transmitting ballads is ingrained in the communitarian social system characteristic of the lifestyle of the inhabitants of this mountain range, which stretches along the Spanish Galicia. This is an agricultural-pastoral society in which the isolated villages function almost as independent economic units. It is a society that lives by growing cereal crops and raising cattle. Such a socioeconomic ‘communitarianism’, which is probably very long-standing, is based on the collective use of land (which was owned by the village in the 19th century) and the joint tending of cattle. The core of this system is a popular assembly (called *conselho*), which is led by a council of elected men and which functions as the consultative and legislative body in the village. The assembly protects the common law and solves the socioeconomic problems of the community. Until recently, this social system still partially existed; some villages in the regions of Lombardas and Serra de Barroso preserved this social model, while others kept only fragments of the system, which was becoming ever weaker. Nowadays, this social model still exists in the form of solidarity and reciprocity of favours. What has changed is primarily the division of goods, one of the deciding factors being emigration.

In keeping with this old ‘communitarianism’, the epic poem is most often sung collectively, that is, within a group. It is a common means of expression of all the inhabitants of Trás-os-Montes. Having inherited it from medieval jongleurs (as mentioned), the ballad was embraced by the rural community, which at the same time abolished the privileged position of the performer. Accordingly, the ballad moved away from the public scene and the talent of the individual artist and entered the compact circle of a tight-knit community, whose social structure strives towards social equality. Thus, for example, in long winter evenings the ballad was a topic of conversation and a collective

dance in which everyone actively participated and wanted to lead. In the season of major agricultural work, especially at harvest time, the ballad merged with the working community and circulated among the groups of harvesters in the fields. In those moments, the ballad became a signpost and a kind of dialogue. In a society organized in such a way there is no room for a solo singer of the epic poem to seduce the audience. In terms of status, the ballad singer is neither a professional nor a semi-professional musician. He is a member of the community in which everyone takes turns singing, encouraging each other.

In short, the *romanceiro* from Trás-os-Montes, a musical-historical epic poem, offers a vision of the world which strengthens social unity. It also informs the community, for which it represents the main means of expression.³

The Role of the *Romanceiro* in the Country

The functions of the ballad in the country are numerous and specific. With regard to the harvest, the ballad is the exclusive genre related to this activity. Depending on circumstances, the ballad is sung either informally or ritually. In Trás-os-Montes the ballad does not usually have a festive function, since in this region the inhabitants use the bagpipe for large festivities (both religious and secular) such as Christmas holidays or folk dances.

The hearth, as a symbol of the village, is a place of gathering and community. In Trás-os-Montes, the hearth has a key role since the winters are long (nine months, according to the inhabitants). This plateau practically has only two seasons – winter and summer. The villagers spend long winter evenings gathered at the house of one of their neighbours (or, they used to before the era of television). Evenings spent by the hearth, in the circle of family or friends, represent both a place for entertainment and a place for passing on musical knowledge, legends, and stories. The hearth is, therefore, the school of romance or ballad.

In this communitarian society, where everyone belongs to everyone, even when he sings alone, the inhabitant of the village is performing a common repertoire. Artistic creation does not consist in creating a new repertoire, but rather in interpreting the existing one. The ballad sung in everyday life represents an informal song that helps solitary people pass the time. Thus, it can be hummed by a peasant coming back from the field. The ballad also accompanies the muleteer in his

³ Ibid, pp. 140–156.

travels through the region, in which means of communication were scarce, and the shepherd tending to his flock. It makes the housework easier, including even the preparation of bread dough and the grinding of wheat. The ballad is also sung to stimulate the movements of weaving, rocking children, and during the collective peeling of chestnuts and almonds. The ballad is present during the picking of flax, especially the breaking of stems (which is done in a group, around the fire, *fogueiras*), combing, and spinning. We should also add that in rural music, the songs associated with certain activities are often ‘permeable’ and adaptable. This can account for the fact that ballads are sung along with other songs to accompany spinning.

However, the ballad reaches its highest intensity and fullness during harvest, which is quite a short period with liberal singing. The ballad is the exclusive repertoire of the harvest and accompanies the motion of the sickle. In that context, the interpretation of ballads is special and striking: it is sung ritually and represents a dialogue between the harvesters. We conducted research into the timetable of ritual singing in thirty or so villages along a vast geographical stretch from the plateaus of Miranda to Lombadas and Serra de Montesinho (north of Bragança). In the course of this research we documented the same customs in all the villages: at harvest time, ballads are sung ritually, several times a day, at specific times (dawn, noon, from two to three in the afternoon, at four, six and eight in the evening). Each time corresponds with a certain ballad. To illustrate, we will mention some of the ballads sung at that time.

At dawn: São João: ‘Manhanas de São João, pelas manhas do alvor’
 ‘The Morning Service of Saint John’

At noon: Alta vai a lua: ‘Alta vai a lua alta, mais que o sol ao meio dia’
 ‘The moon rises high, higher than the sun at noon’

At 2 PM: A Morena: ‘Levantei-me a passear, pela tarde as duas horas’
 ‘I went out for a walk, this afternoon, at two o’clock’

At 4 PM: Dona Eugenia: ‘Apeia-te ô cavalheiro, que haveis de merendar’
 ‘Dismount from your horse, knight, it’s time for you to eat’

At 6 PM: Agora baixou o sol: ‘Agora baixou o sol, lá para trás daquela serra’
 ‘The sun is now setting, yonder, behind that mountain’

At 8 PM: A filha do Imperador de Roma: ‘La serena de la noche, la clara de la mañana’
 ‘The freshness of night, the light of morning’

What also attracted our attention was that this ritual timetable of singing sometimes corresponded with the canonical timetable, characteristic of the Benedictine order, which was very influential in this region in the 16th and 17th centuries. It will be recalled that canonical hours are those during

which prayers and psalms are said and canticles and hymns are sung; they represent breaks in the daily schedule of the monks who farm the land or do other work at the monastery. We know that in Portugal this timetable was officially introduced in the 16th century, although it already existed traditionally. Originally, the canonical timetable was a way of following the movement of the sun and served to divide the day into equal periods of time (it was the Ancient Greeks that initiated this system). We have also observed that the content of the first verses of these ballads is directly related to the time of day when they are sung (see the above mentioned example). In Trás-os-Montes, this ritual timetable of singing, which corresponds with the canonical hours, is a remnant of a Benedictine custom. The measuring of time according to the position of the sun is also reminiscent of old sundials (made of stone) which the peasants from Trás-os-Montes used to place on the roofs of their houses.

We can conclude that the ritualisation of the song sung at specific times (6 or 7 times a day) leads to the mixing of religious rules and agricultural work. This is a form of folk liturgy (in the ceremonial and ritual sense of the word), which testifies to the sacred nature of singing ballads, whose performance is subordinated to the astral cycle and duplicated by the symbolism of time and, not coincidentally, expressed in the first verses.

As an instrument of group communication, in this region the ballad is also a signpost for the working groups of harvesters scattered across the hills. In these cases, the ballad slowly develops and is sung as an altered song in which certain hemistiches are repeated at regular intervals. The women (or men) from the villages, who are far away from each other, sing verses of ballads in the form of a dialogue, answering one another. In order for the singing partners to even vaguely hear the words of the song, the voices must reach very far, so they are often pushed to a paroxysm in order to project their voices across the enormous distances. It should be noted that these songs are sung in the feverish atmosphere of the harvest, which is also accompanied by drinking (much wine is drunk during field work). In this case, the song provides support for the labour because of the harvesters' state of exhaustion and sometimes borders on a trance. It is precisely in that atmosphere that the historical-legendary epic poems come to the fore and gain special strength, amplified in the wide spaces. The song offers and sublimates what has already become a mythical story, giving it full meaning and greatness. In short, harvest ballads are songs of a temporal-spatial character: spatial, because the voices must spread horizontally and very far, and temporal, because their singing is determined by the position of the sun during the day.

We should also add that the ballads sung during threshing are rare, since various repertoires correspond with this activity, including the remnants of ancient songs of medieval troubadours (Songs of Friends), which predate romances. The mechanisation of wheat threshing around 1930 reduced the importance of music, which was traditionally connected to this agricultural activity.⁴

Musical Forms of the Ballad

Melodies and texts of ballads developed differently. That is why a modern melody can suit ballads from a very old thematic cycle or those with archaic chanting. The opposite process is also possible. Melodies of ballads can belong to different periods of time, often difficult to determine, as is often the case with folk music. Certainly, the *romanceiro*, compared to other music repertoires, has preserved its old, perhaps even medieval melodic basis, with the pentatonic scale, partially modal melodies, free rhythms, and microtones.

Therefore, we can mention the fairly free adaptation of melodies with regard to the text as one of the important characteristics of the ballad repertoire. A certain melody can be adapted to different texts, just as the same text can be sung to several melodies. In short, melodies can change, while the texts are fixed (although there are numerous poetic variations). Incidentally, there are more poetic variations than melodic ones.

As for the harvest ballad, it is a monodic or monophonic *a capella* song, which most often has the form of a long tirade without rests. Even though the division into strophes also exists in entertainment ballads, it is never particularly prominent. The refrain seldom appears and is mostly based on the repetition of hemistiches, or consists of a conclusion which is called *remate* and has a moralizing or humorous tone. A good example of the first form, with two repeated hemistiches that form a strophe, is the ballad *Dona Filomena*, intended for entertainment.

Another element that determines the melodic structure of ballads in Trás-os-Montes is the social function of the song: it is what determines the choice of melody. One ballad (with the same poetic text) will have different melodies depending on whether it accompanies harvest or entertainment. Let us take, for example, the ballad from the romanesque cycle *Indo-eu por aí abaixo*, which is performed in three different situations. In the third example it can be observed that the melody used for harvest makes the text unrecognisable.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 167–174, 175–189.

EXAMPLE NO. 1: Village of Duas Igrejas (Miranda do Douro)

1. ÍNDO EU POR AÍ ABAIXO

[♩ = 44]

A₁
(A1) In-do e - - - u por a - í a-baí - - - xo

B₁
em - bus - ca do meu a - mor

A₂
(A1) En - con - trei um la - ran - jal

B₂
car - rega - di - - - nho de flo - - - - - res

Duas Igrejas, 1978
Chanteuse : Maria Helena Ventura

This ballad is sung while rocking children or as entertainment. The melody contains two reduced motifs (A and B), which microvary throughout the singing. The rhythm is undetermined. The number of syllables is irregular, which leads to irregularity of metric accents. Nonetheless, the accents often correspond with the stresses of the melody.

EXAMPLE NO. 2: Village of Gimonde (Bragança)

2. INDO-ME POR AÍ ABAIXO

[♩ = 74]

A₁

In - do - me - e - e por' i - a - bai - ai - ai - xo

em bus - ca a - a dos meus a - mo - o - oca

A₂

En - con - trei - ci - ci um la - ran - ja - a - al - (e)

carre - ga - di - i - i - nha de l' - lo - o - oca

Gimonde, 1983

Chanteuse : Catarina da Purificação Gouveia

This ballad is sung by a woman riding on a mule through the countryside. In the muleteer's song there is a drawing out of vowels, which should be associated with the motion of the donkey or mule. In this example, the third and seventh syllables of the verse, which are accented, are divided into smaller units. This division of the accented syllable is carried out in parallel with the division of the note with which the syllable corresponds and which, in this example, corresponds with the tone preceding the degree of the cadence of each hemistich.

melody sung by two alternating voices, contains melismas characterised by the penultimate syllable of the verse, which is typical of the Vinhais region. The melody is drawn out because it is repeated and contains more embellishments.

Harvest ballads are characterised by ornamental rather than syllabic melodies, with curved melismas and horizontal-type embellishments, while entertainment ballads (or those associated with other social functions) have syllabic melodies. Some of these melodies have only 16 or 17 notes (each note corresponds to one syllable) and their rhythmic structure is determined by the structure of the verses. However, there are also cases in which there is a disparity between the metric accent and the stresses of the melody, which occurs when the song begins with a monosyllabic word, a vowel, or an upbeat. The song is based on one or two varying reduced motifs, while the music phrase covers a hemistich or two verses. Therefore, the verse and the melody are most often synchronous.

Some of the melodies are of modal type, while others contain alternations of major and minor, with cadences in the third. The range of these melodies is often within a fifth or a sixth. The rhythm is free and fluctuating. Finally, the metric and rhythmic series do not always have an isometric relationship. For example, eight syllables can be accompanied by three, five, six or seven and a half bars.⁵

THE ROLE OF PORTUGAL IN THE BALLAD REPERTOIRE

Nowadays the ballad, as a historical-legendary song, can be found in the folk music of distant countries such as Italy, Greece, Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, the countries of former Yugoslavia and even France (in Corsica). Contemporary recordings are very limited and forms vary from country to country. Nevertheless, the appearance and coexistence of this repertoire in the entire Mediterranean region are surprising and make the ballad a universal musical form.

Here are some examples. In Romania, the ballad is called *haiduk song*, in Greece *akritic* and *klephtic song* (the akritic song is older than the klephtic and originates from Asia Minor, that is, from central Turkey and the Dodecanese Islands). Haiduks and klephts were outlaws, heroes in the struggle against the Turkish Empire, while akrites were warriors, soldiers of the Byzantine Empire. From the poetic point of view, these ballads are written in verses characteristic of the languages in which they are sung.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 216–228, 230–262.

Points of Contact between the *Romanceiro* and the Mediterranean Ballad

In terms of thematic materials, the Carolingian cycle, as well as the religious cycle and pastoral themes, can be found in Italy (especially in Sicily). Customs at the courts of medieval Romania can be compared to stories about the lives of infantas at Iberian courts. The historical cycle, which is very widespread in Greece and the Balkans, is less present in Portugal, but it can be said that the Turks are to the Romanian ballad what the Moors are to the *romanceiro*. As in *romanceiro*, some of the songs are epic in character, while others are predominantly romanesque.

On the musical plane, the forms of the ballad are diverse and range from songs to polyphony, from syllabic to extremely ornamental melodies. Some of them are based on a reduced motif that is repeated or microvaried, while others have extremely developed melody and rhythm (as is the case with the Greek *klepthic song*). The music scales of these ballads are difficult to compare with those that appear in Portugal (especially the Greek and the Romanian ones, which have a different structure). In addition, in the Greek-Balkan melody singing is often accompanied by instruments (most often the violin), while the Romanian ballad is accompanied by entire ensembles. In these regions, the instrumentation of the ballad gives a privileged role to the singer, the bard, who is invited to large festivities of the community.

Ballads have a manifold function in the societies in which they are sung. The Greek-Balkan ballad primarily serves as entertainment, while in Romania it accompanies weddings and large national holidays. In Greece, it forms part of ‘table songs’ (which are sung during group meals or banquets) or accompanies dance. There are many other functions of ballads, which will not be mentioned here.

The Specific Contribution of the Portuguese *Romanceiro*

From a diachronic point of view, Portugal’s contribution to the ballad is unique, because the Portuguese ballad is both a form of 16th-century court music and a form of medieval and even contemporary folk music. This repertoire of songs is on the border between erudite and folk music, so that the two traditions can be said to be intermingled in the ballad. We can even observe that nowadays the oral tradition is much richer than the written, that is, the one preserved in Iberian

manuscript from the Renaissance period (the collections of songs at the National Library in Lisbon and the Library of Fine Arts in Paris and the *Cancionero de Palacio* date from the 15th and 16th centuries).

These few written sources nonetheless testify to the extraordinary stability of ballads, bearing in mind the continuity of historical and contemporary texts and melodies (for example, the syllabic melodies from Renaissance song books can also be found in contemporary oral tradition). By contrast, with regard to the social functions of the ballad, the contemporary Portuguese *romanceiro* emancipated itself from the festive primarily dance character typical of the 16th century. The *romanceiro* also detached itself from the figure of troubadours and jongleurs parading in front of an audience.

Furthermore, written recordings, both poetic and music, are quite rare in the history of the Mediterranean ballad, but it seems that the Portuguese *romanceiro*, unlike the Greek-Balkan epic poem, did not have the role of a rebellious song, which, in these parts, was mainly directed against the Turkish sultan.⁶

Finally, Portuguese ballads were much more geographically widespread than other European ballads. As early as the 15th century, they had spread to the Azores, Madeira, Brazil, Timor and even as far as Goa. The ballad blossomed most fully in Brazil, as well as in Madeira, where valuable examples were preserved. Finally, it can be said that the ballad is the main form of traditional vocal music in Portugal.⁷

CONCLUSION

If we consider the Portuguese *romanceiro* in the Iberian context, we can say that it has preserved old themes such as French epic poetry (*Fluvent* or *The Song of Roland*) and even certain Spanish historical themes that have disappeared from the Spanish ballad. Moreover, the Portuguese *romanceiro* adopted regional thematic materials, including the Galician and the Algarvian. The literary characteristics of the *romanceiro* greatly differ from the characteristics of the elevated Castilian epic poetry: Portuguese texts are more emotional, more romanesque and, above all, more

⁶ Ibid, pp. 64–86.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 112–118.

poetic than the Spanish. In addition, the Portuguese *romanceiro* has kept the old melodic basis and the stylistically very refined performances that have disappeared in Spain. The ballad is most often performed *a capella* and is not accompanied by instruments, as is the case with the Greek-Balkan ballad (with the exception of Madeira). The Portuguese ballad has, therefore, detached itself from the figure of the professional musician who is invited to festivities and its performance rests on collective rather than individual knowledge.

In Portugal, the social role of the ballad became a predominant feature primarily in the agricultural calendar, unlike in other regions of the Mediterranean where the ballad mainly serves as entertainment. The sonic expansion of the ballad from Trás-os-Montes, which, at harvest time, assumes the form of a dialogue and follows the positions of the sun, is a unique phenomenon in Europe.

Summary

The *romanceiro*, branch of European ballad is a versified song originating from mediaeval Iberian Peninsula. Its complex thematic is based on different layers. In rural milieu of Trás-os-Montes (North East Portugal) ballad has been interpreted on different occasions, but above all during the harvest of cereals. In such context ballad becomes a kind of changeable song which, if sung for ritual purposes have had ornamented melodies, while if sung on other occasions its melodies were usually syllabic. Thus, ballad function determines its melodic lines.

In Portugal the oral tradition is richer than a written one of which we have a few testimonies in Renaissance song books. The distribution of the ballad was in those times widespread and it reached as far as Madera, Azores, Brazil and India (Goa).

Portugal ballad has preserved old Spanish themes and its literary, mostly romanesque character differs from noble Castellan epics. Its melodies are very old and its essentially collective performance practice, aims to unification of social body.

Portuguese ballad (or *romanceiro*) has its counterparts in many South European countries such as Italy, Greece, Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, countries of ex-Yugoslavia, and France itself. On thematic level we can say that Turks could be found in Romanian ballad as Moors could be found in *romanceiro*. Each of these countries designates differently the ballad and melodies that are quite different are sometime accompanied by an instrument.