



Melody, Its Relation to Different Languages

Source: Atiya, Aziz S. (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), p.1730,1.

The relation of various languages to Coptic melody is a study still in its infancy. Comparison of pieces sung interchangeably in different languages could help identify the nature of change as well as indicate roughly the age of certain hymns whose texts have been identified in ancient manuscripts.

The titles and rubrics for many hymns designate various linguistic origins (for the texts at least), with most being noted as *Rūmī*, that is, from Byzantium, or “the New Rome,” as it was once known. Burmester referred to a number of Greek troparia from the Byzantine offices which are also used in the Coptic office. Further, as has been mentioned, several Psalis show affinities to Greek. Other hymns are designated as *Beheirī*, from northern Egypt, *Sa’īdī*, from southern Egypt, or *Masrī*, from the central part of the country. Each region has its own distinctive dialect.

Initial investigations have revealed that when texts are sung interchangeably in different tongues, the melodies remain essentially intact. For example, in the Easter hymn, “Remember me, O Lord” (performed on Good Friday during the Sixth Hour), which is sung in Coptic (ἀριπαινεὶ ὦ Πάσ), and then in Greek (μνήσθητί μου χύριε), the music does not change with the language. Other examples could be cited.

Scholars have observed that, with the translation of the liturgies and numerous hymns into Arabic, those melodies put to an Arabic text have tended to become simpler, shorter, and less ornamented than the original Coptic version. Fear has been expressed that the Coptic melodies sung in Arabic may lose their genius and character, especially where extensive vocalize is concerned. However, the few studies made of pieces sung interchangeably in Coptic (or Greek) and Arabic seem to show that the basic melodic lines and rhythms are kept intact, and that even the ornamentation is maintained to a remarkable degree. The Easter song reserved for Maundy Thursday, “Judas, Judas...”, may be cited as an example. Nonetheless, conclusions must await much further comparison.

Other hymns written originally in Arabic (*madā’ih*) have been introduced into the liturgy in relatively recent times. Those well acquainted with the age-old traditions aver that despite the popularity of the attractive melodies and rhythms of the *madā’ih*, these newer hymns contain little of theological or spiritual value.

Further, Copts now maintaining residence in foreign lands have begun to perform their liturgies in French, English, and German. Experts once again express fear that, with this trend, the unique style and flavor of the true Coptic melodies will be absorbed into new expressions unable to reflect their distinctive heritage. They feel that Coptic music must be sung in the Coptic language if it is to express the spirituality of the ancient church.

MARIAN ROBERTSON