

OBSCENITIES IN VERBAL DUELS – FIGHTING WITH WORDS (BASED ON SCOTTISH AND GEORGIAN VERBAL DUELLING RHYMES)

Thea Shavladze

Assoc. Prof., Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Georgia, t.shavladze@gmail.com

Abstract

Verbal dueling is widespread all over the world (Greece, Italy, Arabia, Japan, Turkey, etc.). We may find examples of verbal dueling in the folklore of many cultures (Italian *Contrasto*, Puerto Rican *Relajo*, Georgian *Kapiaoba - Leksaoba*, English and Scottish *Flyting*, Afro-American *The dozens*, etc.). Scientific literature on verbal duels of different cultures is large and complex (A. Dundes, R. Abrahams, J. Leach, M. Glazer, V. Pagliai, D. Schwebel, E. Koch, S. Sowayan). Some of the scholars aim at studying one particular type of verbal battle, typical to one culture only, others compare and contradict versions of these contests. Scientists have studied the topic of verbal aggressiveness in poetic duels, have drawn parallels between verbal duels and rap battles, investigated the connections between oral traditions and literary works.

The aim of the article is to compare two different types of verbal duels (*kapiaoba / lekshaoba* and *flyting*) of two different cultures – Scottish and Georgian and to see similarities and differences between these traditions, to examine their lexical and stylistic value. More precisely the goal of the author is to scrutinize the texts of oral verbal duels and study the examples of insults that comprise obscenities and profanities.

The analysis revealed that *Flyting* and *Kapiaoba* are ritualized forms of exchanging insults, almost amounting to a competition. Despite the harsh and elaborate exchange of insults, and violent language, they are intended as a jovial form of entertainment. They have more similarities than differences. Similarities are found in dramatic situation, structure, content. The insulting word types coincide with each other: 1) dirty words (words referring to sex and excretion); 2) blasphemy and profanity; 3) animal abuse in which a human being is equated with an animal). Differences between *kapias* and *flytings* are in setting (*Kapias* – at wedding parties, birthday parties; *flyting* as an activity is solely confined to the court) and the degree of threats and insulting words. *Flytings* are more aggressive than *kapias*. *Flyters* use a collection of foul and abusive epithets in succession. They directly address their opponents and use a long list of abusive compound words and adjectives. In *Kapias* duelists are more reserved in using harsh words and try to soften offensive words with euphemistic ones. The language used by Georgian duelists is metaphorical; implicit meaning reside in most of the words and is less abusive.

Keywords: verbal duel, *Kapiaoba*, *Flyting*, obscenities, folklore, rhyme.

1. INTRODUCTION

Verbal duel is considered to be a genre of argumentative language that entails exchanges between two persons that challenge each other to a display of verbal skillfulness in front of the audience (Pagliai, 2009:63).

Quite different definition of “verbal dueling” is given by D. Schwebel in the article “Strategies of verbal dueling.” According to him “Verbal dueling is the artful exchange of rapid non serious insults between two or more participants, usually performed in informal circumstances (Schwebel, 1997:326). Nearly the same definition of “verbal dueling” is given in Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics where we read: “verbal duel is the competitive exchange of usually obscene insults and invectives between at least two parties (Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics, 2005:4929).

According to the definitions given above, we may conclude, that there are two types of verbal duels: 1) verbal dueling that aims to show verbal skillfulness of a participant to the audience; 2) verbal dueling that aims at exchanging insults between participants; Both types of verbal duels are characterized by dialogic form.

V. Pagliai in the article "The Art of Dueling with Words: Toward a New Understanding of Verbal Duels across the World" writes about different forms of verbal duels: "Verbal duels can be highly structured or more free-flowing; some traditions use rhymes, while others prefer alternate forms of parallelism. They can be performed primarily by men or women or both; they can be done by children or by elderly persons. They can be insulting or praising; They can be improvised or memorized or even written down, sung or spoken" (Pagliai, 2009:64).

My aim is to compare oral traditions of two different cultures and pay attention to the usage of obscene words (insulting words) in verbal duels. I am interested in what the oral poets aim at using aggressive language, is it a part of the competition and playing with words or they really aim at threatening or insulting their opponents.

The methods used in the paper are the following: comparative-contrastive method, the method of linguistic observation and descriptive method. The empirical material is taken from XIX-XX century Georgian *kapias* and Scottish 'The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie' translated from the Middle Scots by Kent Leatham and "The Flyting between Montgomery and Sir Patrick Hume of Polwarth."

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Verbal dueling is widespread all over the world (Greece, Italy, Arabia, Japan, Turkey, etc.). We may find examples of verbal dueling in the folklore of many cultures (Italian *Contrasto*, Puerto Rican *Relajo*, Georgian *Kapiaoba-Leksaoba*, English and Scottish *Flyting*, Afro-American *The dozens*, etc.). But it should be mentioned that verbal duels differ from culture to culture. For example in Georgian folklore verbal duels are of two types: **Shairoba** (verbal dueling rhymes with no insults) and **Kapiaoba-Leksaoba** (verbal dueling rhymes mostly with insulting, scabrous words). In the first case skilled duelists use wordplay and rhetorical flourishes against each other, in the second case, one may hear a lot of insulting words. In England and Scotland there is a famous competition '**Flyting**' where two poets verbally attack each other and exchange insults.

The tradition to compete in lyrics by challenging and answering each other through lyric improvisations is called "**Kapiaoba**" in Georgia. "Kapia" as a word is of Arabic origin (*khapia*) and means "Rhythm." It is a type of rhyme that is satirical or humorous in its nature. *Kapia* as a folkloristic genre was born in Pshavi, one of the mountainous regions of Georgia. But when migration of the inhabitants of Pshavi and Khevsureti started, *Kapias* were spread to Khevsureti (another mountainous region of Georgia) as well. It is not easy to create *Kapias*. Creators need wide knowledge, quick mind and ability of improvisation. If the participants of verbal dueling do not answer the opponents immediately or take the insulting words as an offence, they are defeated. So every participant of verbal dueling "*Kapiaoba*" knows that bitter humor and scabrous words should not be taken directly. At the same time it is forbidden to use scabrous words purposely. In the past *Kapias* were sung, today they are spoken. In the past *Kapias* were monologic, but today they are dialogic. *Kapias* were heard mainly at weddings, at birthday parties but verbal duels were forbidden to be conducted at funerals. Before verbal duels started, the participants drank alcohol. After they had drunk enough, the merriment and competition started. Poetic competition was attended by a big audience. The opponents were afraid of each other's bitter words as they were afraid of their enemy's sword. They tried not to make any mistakes in behavior, as they might be mocked because of their misbehavior during verbal battles. The audience memorized *Kapias* and passed them down from generation to generation. Folk poets who were able to create *Kapias* were called "bechav-sabraloni" (lit. poor ones) [15]. The best creators of *Kapias* were: Aleksii Tsvetshvili (Frushka), Giorgi Mgeliashvili (Khru Giorgi), Shete Khabuneishvili, Aleksii Chincharauli, Vakhtang Tvarelashvili, Vakhushvi Kotetishvili and many more.

The tradition of creating *Kapias* is still preserved in Georgia. Many youngsters living in Pshav-Khevsureti still hold competitions of verbal battles. In modern life *kapias* are found on Internet. If in the past face to face communication was necessary in verbal battles, nowadays verbal battles are conducted via Internet. Folk tradition - *kapiaoba* still remains as one of the most popular folk performances in Georgia.

As for **Flyting**, it is the oldest tradition of the British. *Flyting* is a ritual, poetic exchange of insults practiced between 5th and 16th centuries in England and Scotland. The root of the word "Flyting" is the Old English word "flitan" meaning "quarrel." Examples of *flyting* are found throughout Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature. *Flytings* appear in several plays of W. Shakespeare. In Anglo-Saxon England, *flyting* took place in

a feasting hall, only in the 15th and 16th centuries flyting became public entertainment. The flyting in Scotland was a poetic contest recited before the king to establish who was a better poet. Flyting was mostly popularized by Scottish poets - Makars who would engage in verbal contests of provocative, often sexual and scatological but highly poetic abuse. From the eighteenth century onwards flyting lost popularity because of its rude language. But in the twentieth century it gained popularity again and appeared in modern dramas such as Beckett's "Waiting to Godot." Some scholars (Perks, Szasz, Flynn and Mitchell) see similarities between flyting and 20th century Afro-American culture and the rap battles in modern Hip Hop. If we look through the history of flyting, we may see that flyting was an oral genre at first but transformed into a literary one. Today it is not only a social phenomenon but a literary genre as well.

Flyting occurs when two rival poets are contesting each other by means of creative insults, the more inventive the better. In other words, flyting occurs when two persons assail each other with tirades of abusive verse (Koch, 2015). Culpeper says that the purpose of the insults is to attack face and cause social conflict and disharmony (Culpeper, 2003:1546). According to Parks, the aim of flyting is not only to put the flyer down, but to establish and provide selfhood. Cochran believes: "the main point of Flyting is self-assertion, not triumph over the opponent (Cochran, 1979:192).

During the competition two poets verbally attack each other for several rounds. The subject of the attack could be extremely personal such as the poet's appearance, morals, social background, family, history and even one's poetic skills. It is filled with obscenity and humor.

According to Clover (1980:452) each flyting consists of claim, defense and counterclaim. The first and the last parts consist of insults, threats, curses which relate to the future.

As it is seen, in verbal dueling one may hear a lot of insulting words. But it is interesting what types of words are meant under the term "insulting words." According to E. Leach (1964:28) verbal abuses are of three types: 1) dirty words (words referring to sex and excretion); 2) blasphemy and profanity; 3) animal abuse in which a human being is equated with an animal [6].

3. RESEARCH RESULTS BASED ON GEORGIAN "KAPIAS"

The thorough study of Georgian kapias revealed that three types of insults can be found in it. The first one is connected with the usage of scabrous language. In Georgian Kapias, oral poets use not only scabrous words that are harsh for the listeners' ear, but euphemistic words softening the harsh words, and having the humorous effect on the audience. In the following extracts:

"Emegas is urchevnis
Modzebnos tavis ferio
Mtsareebs vetkvi leksebsa,
Tuki ar daakenebsa"
„sul ert adgilze mkidavis
Magis azrebi kvenani"

One of the duelists uses euphemistic phraseologism "daakene erti adgili" (literally stop moving one place (bottom)), while the other uses "sul ert adgilze mkidia." Georgians have two colloquial phrases to denote that something has no significance for them. One of them is "sul fekhze mkidia" (it hangs on my legs), the other is "ert adgilas mkidia" (it hangs on one place (male sexual organ)). Both phrases show indifference of the speaker. Both poets participating in verbal duel avoid using names of the sexual body organs (bottom and prick) and replace them with more polite lexemes that create humorous effect and infuriate neither the opponent, nor the audience.

The duelists continue verbal battle in the same way, now replacing human's sexual organs with euphemistic names: *sakidela* (something that hangs) and *sachintvela* (something that is used for defecation). The extract below contains threat towards the opponent, if he does not stop using bitter words against his opponent and announce his defeat, he will be "devastated" by the opponent:

"Zirfesvianad amogtkhrit
Shen da shen *sakidelasa*
Sul tkuilad ki atsvaleb

Ase mag *sachintvelasa*.”

In spite of the threat, the opponent does not stop fighting with words and here the second duelist again uses euphemistic expression “*kvitlad gadaferva*” meaning “to shit.”

“Nurts chem *sakidels ebghreva*,
Mikhedos tavis kerasa
Arts am chem *sachintvelashi*
Urchevdi didkhans tskerasa.
Pirveli daundo aris
Momkhvdur marjveda chkvletavsa
Meorets ar apatiebs
Sul kvitlad gadaferavsa”

The analyzed examples show that rude language is peculiarity of *kapias*, but Georgians are reserved in using harsh words that may harm the opponents’ feelings. They use euphemistic phrases replacing taboo words and having humorous effect.

In the following example the first speaker wishes his opponent to be his dog. The first speaker compares his opponent to a barking dog that never stops barking and tells him “it would be better if he had more useful job to do – to take care of the domestic animals.”

1st duelist: “*Chemi dzagli gkmna Givargi*,
Dagabam bakis akhlosa
Ra kepa mogtskindeboda,
Shaminakhamdi sakonsa
Sam dgheshi ertkhel gachmevdi,
Tsiv tskalsa, aslid katosa.”

The opponent tries to laugh at an insulting word “dog” called by the first duelist implicitly and answers him in the following way:

2nd duelist: “*ertkhel rom aveshvebodi*
Tsols davuglechdi patronsa”

Here we see the threat from the second duelist: “if I were your dog, I could *tear your wife into pieces*.” The last phrase is euphemistic and metaphorically means “to rape the opponent’s wife.”

During analysis I came across the examples of cursing and swearing in *kapias*.

1st duelist: *Shemimts saflav gametkhara*
Beber katso chagarao
2nd duelist: *aba, to beber katsi var*
Dedashensats shemkarao.

In the example given above, one of the opponents wishes death of the other “I would happily dig your cemetery and bury you,” calling his opponent “a grey old man.” The insulted one does not get angry but advises the opponent’s mother to check his old age. The second duelist implicitly means “to have sexual connection with the opponent’s mother” in the phrase “*dedashens shemkara*.”

Another example of cursing is found in the example: “*mitsitamts amogevsebis, chemad dzviro, skhivistvis iafo*” [12]. The speaker is a man who seeks sexual connection with a woman but is rejected by her. The man curses her in this way: “Let the god fill you vagina with soil.”

Studying the examples of Georgian *kapias*, I marked attention towards ways of addressing and found out that oral poets often use names of certain animals, insects or reptiles for calling their opponents (insulting name calling). In the example: “*ras ikbinebi magoneb buzankalsa da kelasa*” – the speaker compares his

opponent to a whame and a wasp that bite continuously. In other kapias the names of a snake, a dog and a bee are mentioned. The similarity between the animals, insects, reptiles mentioned above and oral poets participating in verbal battles is in their sharp bites.

The analysis showed that Georgian oral poets have a great ability to turn phrases, to say the same thing in different ways and express ideas in veiled metaphors and figurative language. In kapias the insulted person laughs at the insults, regardless of the possibility that they may be taken personally.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS BASED ON SCOTTISH “FLYTING”

There are only three Scottish full-length flytings now extant, ‘The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy’ (c.1503), ‘The Flyting between Montgomery and Sir Patrick Hume of Polwarth’ (c.1583), and an exchange between Sir David Lindsay and James V dating from c.1536. In this part I will base my analysis on “The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy” and “The Flyting between Montgomery and Sir Patrick Hume of Polwarth,” that are the earliest surviving examples of Scottish Flyting.

In the book “The Literature of Scotland” the author of the book R. Watson gives some kind of information about William Kennedy who was a famous poet of 15th century. Dunbar was his contemporary and a good poet of that time as well. Both of them were well-educated. Dunbar was educated at St. Andrews University and Kennedy earned the degrees of Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts at Glasgow University. Besides Kennedy was a man of good family (Watson, 2006).

In “The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy” Dunbar mocks at Kennedy’s knowledge of Gaelic and his country manners (*Your traitor’s tongue sings with a Highland scream; A Lowland ass could make a sweeter sound*). Kennedy criticizes Dunbar’s Lowland origins, claiming that the English connections of Dunbar’s ancestors make him a traitor of his king and Scotland. He calls Kennedy “a naked, begging bard.” By the 16th century “bard” was a term of abuse.

Dunbar also concentrates his attack on rival’s personal appearance (*You look like the crows already ate your cheeks; dismal-eyed, gray-visaged*). Dunbar uses a lot of harsh words against Kennedy (*brigand, begger, gaping fool, gallows-bird, lousy, lunatic*) that could easily infuriate the opponent. Besides there are some swear words like (*bloody bitch*) in Dunbar’s speech.

In his speech one can find many examples of dirty words referring to sex and excretion (*cunt-bit; anused; Your balls droop below your dress; shit; bloody bitch*). Dunbar uses abusive words to mock at opponent’s appearance, cowardice, knowledge and threaten him. Dunbar’s speech ends with a cascade of insults:

*Heretic, lunatic, pickpocket, your fortune is cheated;
Bloody bitch, muddy ditch, quail, cock, or I shall quell you [14]*

Quite different types of insulting words are found in Kennedy’s answers. He mainly uses animal names (*ape, owl, worm, werewolf, scorpion, dragon, damned dog*) against his opponent.

*Wild werewolf, worm, and venomous scorpion,
Damned devil’s son, despicable dragon [14];*

Kennedy is in favor of using insulting words connected with devil (*damned devil’s son, Lucifer’s lad, Devil, a foul fiend’s infernal design*) and supernatural creatures (*dirty-faced dwarf, ignorant elf*).

This literary work includes the earliest recorded use of the word “shit” as a personal insult. Kennedy and Dunbar both use word “shit”: *A shit without wit, only cheap tawdry tricks*.

Kennedy intends to defame his opponent by questioning his sexual orientation and uses euphemistic word “sodomite” against his opponent (*sodomite, separated from the saints in heaven*).

Flyting shows more aggression towards the opponent than kapias. Duelists’ every word, every expression is insulting and aims at defeating an opponent with harsh words.

*Conspirator, cursed cockatrice, crow from the Pit,
Turk, trickster, traitor, despicable despot,
Ireful spider, Pilate apostate,
Judas, Jew, juggler, Lollard laureate,
Proven pagan, sworn Saracen, sin-ridden simonite,
Mohammedan, abominable bugger-by-night,
Devil, damned dog, insatiable sodomite,
With Gog and Magog are you grossly glorified [14].*

The precise meaning of many of the insulting words is often in doubt even among expert scholars (e.g. a pair of Lothian hips – Lowland backside???, Carling’s pet – old hag’s fart???).

Meloney in her dissertation thesis “Flyting: some aspects of poetic invective debate” compares Dunbar and Kennedy’s parts and sees differences between their swear words. She says: “Thematically, Dunbar’s part of the flyting is made up of sheer abuse, mocking threats; Dunbar’s method involves a catalogue of vilifying variants carried along by the swinging rhythm of alliteration. Kennedy, on the other hand, concentrates on a series of chronicles: first, he alludes to the devil-born ancestry of his interlocutor; he follows this up with a brief narrative of the shameful part played by the traitorous Dunbar during travels in Prance and England as a begging friar. The poet concludes his flyting with an outburst of invective, evidently intended to match his adversary’s final stanzas” (Meloney, 1964).

I completely share the point of view of the scholar concerning sheer abuse that comes from both duelists’ mouth. They have more similarities than differences.

“The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy” consists of over 500 lines in which the two poets verbally assault each other with increasingly creative insults. They attack each other’s heritage, appearance, and poetical skills. The language of their dispute is violent.

“The Flyting between Montgomery and Polwarth” in the court of James VI is another prominent example of flyting that is written in the same manner as “The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy.” Montgomery compares Polwarth to a sheep or a mouse among thorns – underling his cowardice. There are cases when Montgomery is compared to a foul beast and venomous viper. Polwarth calls Montgomery “a spiteful spider” because of his rude language. Patrick Hume jeers Montgomery’s genitalia and calls him “a man with a cunt died runt. It seems that Patrick tries to feminize his opponent and accuses him of having dead penis like a dried up and decayed tree stump. Some critics understood Partick’s jeer in different way. Patrick mocked at Montgomery’s wife who dominated at home. Patrick uses words denoting sexual organs in threats, for example:

*And of thir twa take thou thy chose,
For thy awin profite I procure thee,
Or with a prick into thy nose
To stand content, I •all conjure thee [16]*

It is known from history that the winner of the verbal battle was Montgomery who used mild insulting terms. It is Polwarth who gives a 66 line last word that is full of lavatorial lexis.

*Fley’d foole, mad muile, die with doole on an aike,
Knaue kend, Christ send ill end on thee now,
Pudding wright, out of sight, thou’s be dight like a draike,
Jock blunt, thrawin frunt, kisse the cunt of the Kow,
Purse peiler, hen steiller, Cat killer, now I quell thee.
Rubiatur, fornicatur by nature, foull befall thee [16]*

Despite the intensity of threats and insulting words, it seems that poets did not take it seriously. Flyting was a public performance enjoyed by the poets themselves, the king and members of the court. It had playful intention.

CONCLUSION

1. Flyting and Kapiaoba are ritualized forms of exchanging insults, almost amounting to a competition. Despite the harsh and elaborate exchange of insults, and violent language, they are intended as a jovial form of entertainment.
2. They have more similarities than differences. Similarities are found in dramatic situation, structure, content. The insulting word types coincide with each other: 1) dirty words (words referring to sex and excretion); 2) blasphemy and profanity; 3) animal abuse in which a human being is equated with an animal).
3. Differences between kapias and flytings are in setting (Kapias – at wedding parties, birthday parties; flyting as an activity is solely confined to the court) and the degree of threats and insulting words. Flytings

are more aggressive than kapias. Flyters use a collection of foul and abusive epithets in succession. They directly address their opponents and use a long list of abusive compound words and adjectives. There were cases in the life of medieval Scotland when flyting caused tension among flyters and the problems caused by flyting were so severe in certain parts of the country that it came to be banned in public places.

In Kapias duelists are more reserved in using harsh words and try to soften offensive words with euphemistic ones. The language used by Georgian duelists is metaphorical; implicit meaning reside in most of the words and is less abusive.

4. Kapias and flytings are still popular. Kapias have retained their folkloristic character, though have modern forms in Georgia; Flytings lost their folkloristic character, transformed into a literary genre and gave birth to modern rap battles.

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