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Collective Memory and Poetic Justice in Galicia: a Study of the ‘Coplas del comandante Moreno’

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Abstract

This article consists on both a hermeneutic and an ethnological interpretation of the ‘Coplas del Comandante Moreno’, a popular ballad about certain events that took place in Galicia during the Spanish Civil War. By understanding the ballad as a case of collective memory, I answer the questions of why it was important for the people to keep it alive, how it reflects the way in which the community saw itself and what values it transmits. These answers address the social functions carried out by the ballad. I focus specifically on one of them related to its role as collective memory, which I call ‘poetic justice’.

Key words: oral memory, popular ballad, Galicia, Spanish Civil War.

Introduction

This is both a hermeneutic and an ethnological interpretation of the ‘Coplas del Comandante Moreno’, a popular ballad about certain events that took place in Galicia, next to the border with Asturias, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The hermeneutic approach treats the ballad as a meaningful phenomenon and interprets its meaningfulness regarding how, where and when it appears, and what it shows and suggests implicitly and explicitly. It is ethnological because this analysis is based on an ethnological methodology and makes this interpretation within the particular context of the specific culture in which the ballad originated and was transmitted. This is one of the approaches to the study of oral ballads defined by Teresa Catarella (1994, 473), and recently implemented by Arupjyoti Saikia to understand the significance of an Assamese historical ballad and the role of historical imagination and social memory in the Assamese nation building process (2012).

I do not provide a historical study. The aim of this article is not to determine the veracity of the events told by the ballad, although I refer to the historical context in order to situate the circumstances in which the text originated. In this sense, Thomas Beidelman defended, inspired by Émile Durkheim, that ‘Even if historically false, oral tradition may still be sociologically ‘true’ (1970, 75). This idea is, at the same time, a

methodology: even if the narrated events were fully or partially ‘historically false’, they are ‘sociologically true’, in the sense that they perform social functions. My proposal consists on looking for this ‘truth’, that is, the reason why these facts continue being told again and again. In the words of Catarella, ‘an orally transmitted poem must remain relevant and meaningful to survive’ (1994, 474).

Therefore, the general question this study seeks to answer is why this ballad was passed down. By understanding the ballad as a case of collective memory, I have sought to answer the questions of why it was important for the people to pass down the ballad, how it reflects the way in which the community saw itself and what values it looks to defend. In this way, the shared memory reveals a clear connection with the delimitation of a particular cultural and collective identity. These answers address the social functions carried out by the ballad. I focus specifically on one of them related to its role as collective memory, which I call ‘poetic justice’.

Versions and transmission of the ballad

This study is based on eight interviews that I conducted from February to June 2013 during several fieldwork visits and also on information that three of the sources sent me by email or via telephone after our meetings. My research also includes the consultation of other sources such as newspapers, historical information from books and articles and information provided by the Spanish Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory. An anthropological and ethnographic bibliography about Galician culture is included to reconstruct the context in which the ballad was created and passed down.

I have based this study on three versions of the ballad that I was able to find and collect. The first one was compiled by the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory in 2007 and was published in Internet on 26th November 2010.¹ One source, María Severina Murias, born in 1926, was recorded singing it. It includes 23 stanzas. I have called it ‘Version A’.

The second one was included in a compilation of popular songs entitled *Cántigas populares*, by Dorothé Schubarth and Antón Santamarina (1983, 203). This version includes the ballad (23 stanzas) plus two separate groups, each with four stand-alone stanzas. The ballad and the first group of stand-alone stanzas was compiled in 1981; the second group was compiled in 1980, all being from Ribeira de Piquín, A Fonsagrada. As far as I know these are the first written versions of the ballad. However, this compilation has not seemed to interfere in the oral process itself, which has continued until the present, as shown by the fact that I managed to collect different versions of the ballad transmitted entirely orally thirty years later. I do not find evidence to consider the written version as a ‘canonical version’ of the ballad, at least to the older generation I have interviewed. As such, it is important to consider the phenomenon described by the anthropologist Jack Goody in relation to the myth of the bagre: the written version he collected was considered to be orthodox by some locals. Goody was afraid that the written version -only one among the multiple versions available- was considered a reference by the locals, and that it stopped or interfered with the traditional mechanisms of modification and flexibility of the oral version. However, it is necessary to realise that the culture he was examining was a fully oral one; such is not the case in this study (Goody 1998). The book *Cántigas populares* was not widely distributed in the area of A Fonsagrada -it is not, for example, available in the local library- and none of my sources knew about it. This is ‘Version B’.

The third version I consider was provided by one source (Mario) who had written down the ballad exactly as sung by his deceased father.² Mario (born in 1962) and his

father (1920-2006) come from Pántaras, A Fonsagrada. Mario did not remember the exact date of collection, but he assured me that it was in the early 1990s. He sent me a copy of the written ballad by email on 11th April 2013. I have called it ‘Version C’. This is a very valuable testimony because this version includes three stanzas not included in the other versions.

One further testimony is very helpful for my reconstruction of the social functions played by this ballad. The stanzas that Alonso (born in Pereira, A Fonsagrada, in 1931) remembered are already contained in the other versions, but he added new details about the story and its transmission, which are also very valuable in this context. Alonso answered quickly and without hesitation when I asked how people learned the ballad:

Interviewer: *Como as aprendía a xente? Porque as repetían?*³

Alonso: *Sí claro.*

Interviewer: *Pero escribir non se escribían, ou?*

Alonso: *Como...? Pra que pasasen de unhos pra outros...? No, no, era de memoria, era de memoria.*

Interviewer: How did people learn it? Did they repeat it?

Alonso: Yes, of course.

Interviewer: But you did not write them down, did you?

Alonso: How...? To pass them down from one person to another...? No, no, it was passed by memory, by memory.⁴

The transmission of the ballad was strictly oral for over 40 years. There is no evidence of written versions circulating until at least the 1980s, as confirmed by the authors of the book which first recorded it (Schubarth and Santamarina 1983, 203). Oral and written culture have coexisted in rural Galicia until the present, with each frequently representing different levels of social relations. Written culture used to represent mainly the relations with official institutions, which were perceived as alien and distant, at least until the second half of the 20th century. Orality used to be the local and internal way of transmission and communication among neighbours and locals, at least until the 1960s, when this situation slowly began to change (Tolosana 2004b, 27-51). It should be taken into account that in 1940 23% of the population was illiterate or semi-illiterate in the province of Lugo, although the trend was decreasing: 14% in 1950 and 7% in 1981 (Vilanova and Moreno 1992, 303-343).⁵ It is possible to relate the coexistence of oral and written culture with the way in which the ballad was transmitted. The original transmission was oral in the generation of Alonso. However, one generation later, two of my sources decided to write down or record the ballad in order to preserve it –they did not trust their memories. One of them is Mario (already mentioned). The second one is Claudia (born in Pereira, A Fonsagrada, in 1957), who also provided me a written version of the ballad she had collected, during an interview conducted in Oviedo on 18th April 2013. I did not include this version in my study since she does not remember where she found it. She thinks that she found it in a local newspaper but I could not confirm it (regardless, this is the same version I call Version B). The influence that the different cultural perspectives of different generations have on the changes of collective memory was explained by Karl Mannheim (1952, 291) and mentioned in the context of the memory of Spanish Civil War by Paloma Aguilar (1996, 28).

The author of the ballad is unknown. It is also difficult to know whether it was written originally or if it was first composed orally, although if we take in consideration that the metric is quite good according to the standards, we can affirm that the first option is more probably (Niles 1994, 444). The author might have wanted to remain hidden against a backdrop of dictatorship and censorship. The same reason could also have

propitiated the oral transmission. Under non-coercive circumstances the transmission might have been different.

Content and historical context

The Ballad of Commander Moreno tells the story of the events that happened in O Acevo in 1937. All the versions recount that 16 men and Commander Moreno were coming back home from Asturias when they were allowed to spend the night in a barn in the hamlet of O Acevo (a highland crossing point in the municipality of A Fonsagrada, situated nowadays in the Autonomous Community of Galicia, very near the border with the Autonomous Community of Asturias).⁶ However, after pretending to help them, the owners of the barn went to the capital of the municipality, A Fonsagrada, to inform the Falangists about the presence of the 17 men, who were Republican soldiers –their belonging to the Republican army is not mentioned in the ballad. According to the ballad, the Falangists came and killed them all, except Commander Moreno, who managed to escape but was arrested and subsequently assassinated. The ballad relates that Commander Moreno was tortured before being assassinated and that he was interrogated ‘al derecho y al revés’, a colloquial expression meaning that the questions were perfidious and captious. The second part of the ballad varies more across the three versions; all of them, however, include a reference to the distribution of Commander Moreno’s personal effects among the Falangists and a moral condemnation of the events. There is also a common reference to the condemnation of the Falangists in the afterlife. In some versions this second part includes both references which would enable anyone living in the area to easily identify the actors and in effect makes veiled threats to them. According to several newspaper reports and some testimonies of locals, the events did not happen exactly like that. It is said that a few of the men were able to escape, not only Commander Moreno, but they were arrested and killed a few days later after a fight. It is also said that they received support from Republicans from Lugo. As I have stated before, it is not my aim to reconstruct the historical facts, and of course these reports and testimonies should be contrasted and analysed with historical methodologies.

There is one particular stanza that seems to be designed specifically to provide concrete information about the events regarding the date, place, and number of victims. It is one of the additional stanzas included in the first group of Version B, and it mentions the exact year in which the events took place.

<i>En el año treinta y siete</i>	In the year ‘37
<i>En el alto del Acebo</i>	In the highland of El Acebo
<i>Matasteis a dieciséis</i>	You killed sixteen
<i>Y al comandante Moreno</i>	And Commander Moreno

The Spanish Civil War had started one year before, but at this moment there was no front open in Galicia. In order to assure victory after a failed military coup and the breakout of the war, Francoist rebels focused on establishing complete control in the rearward, and this was the case for the area in question. This control would allow them to send people and resources to the front lines (Prada 2006, 167). Control was assured through the murder and repression of dissidents committed by militia members, Falangists, police forces and other supporting groups. At times, such actions were even sanctioned by the law or fell beyond its scope (Prada 2006, 169). The names of the killers often remained in the written and oral memory of Galicia. They did not try to

hide and, as part of a strategy to spread terror, they even eagerly advertised and exaggerated their crimes. The victims were mainly Republican soldiers, political leaders and trade unionists plus people of cultural significance such as intellectuals, teachers, and also people without any clear political affiliation (Prada 2006, 171; Grandío, Prada and Pereira 2011, 121-140). According to information gathered in several newspaper reports, the soldiers belonged to the Batallón Galicia, which had been fighting on the front open in Asturias (Romero 2007, 2).

Today, O Acevo still lies along the road connecting de Salime in Asturias to A Fonsagrada in Galicia.⁷ According to Schubarth and Santamarina's research, the ballad was known in the following municipalities (1983, 203):

- Villanueva de Oscos, San Martín de Oscos and Santa Eulalia de Oscos (Asturias)
- A Fonsagrada, Becerreá, Ribeira de Piquín and Navia de Suarna (Galicia)

According to my sources, it was also known in Grandas de Salime. This area totals 1,225 km². The area is rural and, as has happened in other rural areas in Spain, there has been a significant loss of inhabitants and the pyramid of population has been inverted.⁸

As classical and recent anthropological studies have demonstrated, different types of shared oral narratives have had a very important role in Galician rural culture.⁹ Sharon Roseman has emphasised the role of oral memory during and after the Dictatorship as a way of contesting exploitation, repression and censorship (1996, 839). This ballad played an important role in reshaping the power relationships of the area: it was not only a mode of surreptitious contestation against censorship, but also a way whereby locals affirmed their right to make their own history, that is, to imbue the events with a meaning more consistent with their perspective of justice. It can be also seen as a kind of political resistance 'to externally imposed [...] cultural meanings' and discursive expressions of power (Roseman 1996, 837). I cannot now go further into the ballad's political role, although it is a topic I would like to analyse in future work.

Form and structure of the ballad

All the versions of the ballad have octosyllabic lines and assonance in even-numbered lines structured in stanzas with four lines each. This follows the form of traditional Spanish 'romances' used both in oral literature and in the learned literary tradition. In the aforementioned compilation by Schubarth and Santamarina, the ballad is classified among the 'romances novos', 'new romances' (1983, 166). It is written in Spanish, except for one stand-alone stanzas compiled by Schubarth and Santamarina -I managed to collect a version of it, also in Galician- in spite of the fact that the customary language for communication in this area is Galician, and in the Asturian municipalities the dialect used is called 'Eonaviego' (González 2009/2010).¹⁰ As shown by Valenciano, most of popular ballads in Galicia have been transmitted in Spanish (1998, 12). According to Schubarth and Santamarina there is a tradition of oral literature in Spanish in Galicia, especially when the topics are not satirical or humorous. The text is also set to music: in the video accompanying Version A the source informant sings it from the beginning to the end. It is not an original melody, but one already known in the region and used for several ballads (Schubarth and Santamarina 1983, 20).

Considering that there is no 'definitive' version, it is not easy to analyse the structure of an oral text, since the stanzas have a changing order and the different versions include several original stanzas. In fact, there is not 'one' ballad, but several versions including shared and different stanzas, and a few stand-alone stanzas. Nevertheless, it is possible and useful to identify four parts in all the versions which share the same content. However, these parts do not always follow the same order.

First, the three versions contain an introduction that includes a reference to the hamlet of O Acebo, and a general overview that alludes to something everyone already knows:

(Version A)

(1) *Es ese pueblo de Acebo*

Pueblo de pocos amigos

Donde matan a los hombres

Después de tantos martirios.

(2) *Como ya están enterados*

En ese pueblo de Acebo

Mataron a dieciséis

Y al comandante Moreno.

(1) This hamlet of Acebo is

A very unfriendly hamlet

Where they kill men

After so much martyrdom.

(2) As you already know,

In this hamlet of Acebo

They killed sixteen men

And Commander Moreno.

This first section is included with small variations in the three versions; in Version B there is a change in the order – between stanzas 1 and 2 there are two more stanzas, while in Version A they are placed after stanza 2. A second section of the introduction of the ballad includes two stanzas with a reference to the author – the signature he/she left on Versions A and B:

(Version A)

(3) *Aunque soy un pobre anciano*

Y sin carrera alguna

Ya sé que voy caminando

Derechamente a la tumba.

(4) *Poco antes de morir*

Con gran sentimiento

Yo les quiero explicar

Este trágico suceso.

(3) Even though I am a poor old man

Without any education,

I know I am walking

Straight to the tomb.

(4) Shortly before dying

With deep feelings

I want to explain to you

This tragic event.

Old age implies recognised authority in this culture (Tolosana 2004b, 198-199; Tolosana 2004a). By presenting himself as elderly, the author tries to situate himself in a place where the words he is going to pronounce are legitimate and trustworthy. Saying that he is poor and lacks education is a way of drawing the author nearer to the public to which he seeks to transmit the message – the majority of peasants had not studied for more than a few years in primary school at that time. The reference to the author's upcoming death can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, it attempts to bind the public's attention: if somebody is going to die soon, his words are especially significant and definitive. On the other, this alludes to a kind of legacy that somebody wishes to leave for the future after his/her death. There is a clear intention to transmit the shocking facts. However, the author does not seem to seek to be remembered by his/her name. The ballad became something that the people shared, repeated and modified. Each person who recited this first part of the ballad became a new author who accepted being the voice of the witness and assumed the requirement of singing or reciting it 'with deep feelings'.

The second part of the ballad describes the events already summarised. In Versions A and B this part includes the same 11 stanzas (with small variations in verb tense) and in Version C it includes 12 stanzas (there is a new stanza and one of the stanzas included in the prior versions is replaced by one of the stand-alone stanzas included in the first group of Version B).

The third part includes a description of what happened after the killing of Commander Moreno and his men, including the distribution of his belongings. This part consists of three stanzas in Version A, five stanzas in Version B and two stanzas in Version C.

The final part includes judgments of the facts and various ways of restoring the equilibrium that had been broken with these events, which were perceived as immoral and unfair. It consists of five stanzas in Version A, three stanzas in Version B (all of them contained in the five stanzas in Version A) and four stanzas in Version C (all different from other stanzas).

The two groups of stand-alone stanzas included in Version B could be clearly classified into one of the four aforementioned parts of the ballad since they complement them or add similar information.

Collective memory

This ballad can be seen as an example of collective memory which performs several social functions: a historical function, an expression of the values and judgments of a cultural group, and a poetic way of making justice.

Since the term 'collective memory' was introduced in social sciences by Maurice Halbwachs, it has been criticised mainly because it would not be able to incorporate the role of individuals in the process of memory, emphasizing excessively the role of the social dimension of memory (Fentress and Wickham 2003, 13; Gedi and Elam 1996). Fentress and Wickham defend that Halbwachs' concept of 'collective memory' do not include the processes of thought of individuals, who would be seen as 'automatons' who have merely internalized the collective will (2003, 13). It is not the aim of this paper to discuss the links between individuals and society in the process of constructing a shared memory (although I offer an example below), nor the theory of Maurice Halbwachs. The term 'collective memory' is useful and suitable to describe the Ballad of Commander Moreno because the ballad is a particular reconstruction of events from the past (in this sense it is a kind of memory) and it is shared by a group of people (it is collective –social). Halbwachs emphasized the social frameworks of memory, and that is what better expresses the social function of this ballad: the process of collective remembering and building the memory. Even if it was created by one individual, the ballad was transmitted and re-shaped by the whole group. The following generations were educated in this way of interpreting these relevant events of the past. This is a collective, social process, not a personal one. But I do not intend to minimize the role of individuals, their processes of remembering, their capacity to modify creatively the ballad, to add new stanzas, or to evaluate the events and the ballad according to their individual values and judgement. By using the concept of 'collective memory' I want to emphasize the fact that the ballad is a collective phenomenon. Its historical function, the expression of common values and the 'poetic justice' function are all a consequence of this social dimension. One more reason to use this term is its frequent and justified use in the bibliography about the Spanish Civil War (for example Aguilar 1996, 25).

One of my already mentioned sources, Alonso, told the story of the events in a way that can be seen as a very good example of the relation between the individual and the society in the process of constructing a shared memory. He started with a few stanzas, and then he continued telling the story, sometimes using very meaningful words taken from parts of the ballad that he forgot, sometimes including stanzas in the middle of the story. The stanzas of the ballad that he remembered helped him to articulate his testimony. He did not witness the events –at that time, he was only six years old- but he accessed, through memory, a shared narrative that culturally shaped these events. For

Alonso it was important to be loyal to the oral testimony as it had been transmitted to him. When he was asked about what had happened in O Acevo, he felt the responsibility of giving a reliable testimony; for him, the most reliable one was the popular version provided by the ballad, which he completed with details he knew also from oral resources. Moreover, he distinguished implicitly between this testimony and his own opinion about what he told –even if his opinion did not differ from the moral position concerning the events, included in all the versions of the ballad. The tone of his voice changed, as well as the time he needed to articulate his speech. In giving testimony he needed to make pauses to remember, the tone was more neutral, more calmed. When giving his opinion he was faster and more passionate.

Even if this ballad cannot be considered an example of history (it lacks the characteristics of this social science), it performed a historical function: to preserve some information about the past¹¹. It is possible to identify the historical aim of a testimony when the purpose of a witness is to communicate facts of the past in order to better understand the past (Vansina, 1966, 64). Purely historical reasons would then be the reasons connected with the desire to know more about what happened. The transmission of this ballad includes an obvious desire to remember, to not forget these particularly shocking events and to communicate them. This desire to remember is linked to a reaction against the official history which, at this time, did not include events such as this:

Interwiewer: *Por que cantaba a xente a canción?*

Alonso: *Parécenos que a cantaban porque era xente nova... quizais non fose por ideas... tamén nos facían cantar na escola o himno da falange... 'Cara al sol, con la camisa nueva'... Nenos da escola... nenos de seis ou sete anos, dios mío... 'Cara al sol, con la camisa nueva que tú bordaste en rojo ayer' [he sings]. Ay dios mío...” /*

Interviewer: Why did people sing this song?

Alonso: We believe they sang it because they were young... not, perhaps, due to the ideas... we also were obliged to sing the anthem of Falange [official government political party] at school... ‘Facing the sun, in my new shirt’... Children at school... six or seven year-old children, my god... ‘Facing the sun, in my new shirt that you embroidered in red yesterday’ [he sings]. Oh, my god...

Alonso says that the ballad was sung ‘not, perhaps, due to the ideas’ (not because one was for or against one side or the other in the war) but as a kind of reaction against the songs they were forced to sing by the dictatorial regime.

Concerning its historical function, the ballad reveals a clear intention to preserve the memory of the number of victims, the date and the places where the events took place and where the bodies had been buried. All the versions include a clear reference to one pit beside the road. Moreover, Version A includes a reference to the fact that after the assassination the Falangists had to climb uphill until they reached the road, so the place was next to and downhill from the road. It is said also that torture was carried out ‘on the same road’ and Version C makes the place explicit, ‘in a ravine, next to the road’. Also, the exact year is preserved in one aforementioned stanza. Including an exact number of dead soldiers recounted in the ballad adds an apparently verifiable testimony to identify them: it is said that they were 16 of them plus Commander Moreno. This non-official history, together with the testimonies of the locals, aided professionals in 2007 in finding and opening the pits, identifying the corpses and burying them in a

cemetery. The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory found 11 corpses in one pit in 2007 and another one separated from the rest in 2008 (it was identified as Commander Moreno).

Traditions exist because they serve the interests of the society that conserves them (Vansina 1966, 95). The desire to remember and the desire to do so with its own discourse were two reasons the community conserved this testimony. At the same time, the specific mode of remembering represented by the ballad was shared by the whole community of mainly peasants living in rural areas, which reinforced their feeling of unity and collective identity:

Interviewer: *Cando se cantaba a canción? Cando se cantaban as coplas?*

Alonso: *Bueno, cantabase por aquí, pro que nun te oísen os guardias, que te mataban. Por aquí, sí, cantabase... [...]*

Interviewer: *Donde se cantaba esta canción?*

Alonso: *Cantabase nos pueblos, nas reunióis... cantabase pouco porque había que traballar muito.*

Interviewer: *Habería medo...*

Alonso: *Habería medo tamén...*

Interviewer: *Medo os vecinos?*

Alonso: *No... os veciños unhos de outros nun se desconfiaba...*

Interviewer: When did you sing the song? When did you sing the stanzas?

Alonso: Well, it was sung here, but if the guards overheard you, they killed you. Yes, it was sung here...¹²

Interviewer: Where did you sing the song?

Alonso: It was sung in the villages, at meetings... we didn't sing very much because we had a lot of work to do.

Interviewer: People would have been scared...

Alonso: People would also have been scared...

Interviewer: Were you afraid of your neighbours?

Alonso: No... the neighbours did not distrust each other...

The ballad was something they had in common, something that outsiders (institutions, institutional representatives, foreigners, etc.) did not share with them. Thus the ballad was something that made them different. At the same time the ballad was something that could be considered part of a 'shared world' as Hannah Arendt would have said: 'History is part of a world of references, the same as works of art, infrastructures or contracts' (1998, 96).¹³ They shared and transmitted the ballad to the degree that they shared the particular way in which the facts were told.

The ballad also includes a thorough identification of the people who committed the acts. These men are considered as particular individuals in the community but not a representative part of it. As Todorov states 'every community needs to present its past in the form of a story filled with moral judgements in which it plays a favourable role' (2001, 29). This community constructed this story with the aim of taking the position of a judge and of separating themselves from these men, branded guilty, and their moral position. I explain how.

The guilty parties are clearly identified in the text: the neighbours of O Acebo, pretending to be leftists, agreed to help the soldiers and then reported them, thus betraying them.¹⁴ The Falangists committed murder because they prevented the soldiers from defending themselves, tortured Commander Moreno and deprived them of a trial. This circumstance is suggested, although not explicitly included in the ballad:

(Version A)

(7) *Los del pueblo del Acebo
Diciendo de izquierdistas
Marcharon a Fonsagrada
Dar cuenta a los falangistas.*

(8) *Estos vinieron muy pronto
Aunque vinieron de lejos
Allí los asesinaron
Como si fueran conejos [...]*

(12) *Los martirios y tragedias
Que le han hecho pasar
Al comandante Moreno
Es imposible de explicar.*

(13) *Unos le dan bofetadas
Otros le dan puntapiés.
Otros le hacen preguntas
Al derecho y al revés.*

(14) *Y después de largo tiempo
Sin darle ningún sustento
Una partida de palos
Le daban por alimento.*

(7) The neighbours of El Acebo
Pretending to be leftists
Went to Fonsagrada
To tell the Falangists.

(8) Very soon after they came
Although they came from far away
They killed them there
As if they were rabbits [...].

(12) The martyrdom and tragedies
That they laid onto
Commander Moreno
It is impossible to explain.

(13) Some give him slaps
Others give kicks
Others ask him questions
From inside and from out.

(14) After a long time
Without giving him any food
A game of sticks
They gave him instead of food.

Remembering the names of the Falangists is a way of presenting the veracity of the testimony, thus a part of the historical function, and, at the same time, can be a way of trusting in a future trial or restitution. Remembering the names of the inhabitants of O Acevo was not so important because everybody knew them. A social group remembers the past by thinking about the future, not only about the past. The preservation of the killers' names was surely facilitated by the fact that they did not try to hide themselves, as I mentioned before:

Version B

(19) *¿Dónde está el reloj de oro
Del comandante Moreno?
Seguramente se gasta
En el pueblo del Acebo.*

(20) *¿Dónde está la cazadora
Del comandante Moreno?
Seguramente se gasta
Muy cerquita de San Pedro.*

(19) Where is the gold watch
Of Commander Moreno?
It is surely being used
In the hamlet of El Acebo.

(20) Where is the coat
Of Commander Moreno?
It is surely being used
Very close to San Pedro.¹⁵

(Stand-alone stanzas. Version B. Groupe 1)

*¿Dónde está la camiseta
Del comandante Moreno?
Seguramente se gasta
En Río Torto de San Pedro.*

Where is the shirt
Of Commander Moreno?
It is surely being used
In Río Torto of San Pedro.¹⁶

(Stand-alone stanzas. Version B. Groupe 2)

*¿Dónde va la cazadora
Del comandante Moreno?
Seguramente la tiene
Joselillo de Robledo.*

Where is the coat
of Commander Moreno?
It surely is with
Joselillo from Robledo.

*¿Dónde va el reló de oro
Del comandante Moreno?
Seguramente lo tiene
O Caielo de San Pedro.*

Where is the gold watch
Of Commander Moreno?
'O Caielo' from San Pedro¹⁷
Surely has it.

*E o xastre de Carballido
Como era tan lixeiro
Deull'un golpe coa culata
'Hala axiña pra furada'.¹⁸*

And the tailor from Carballido
Since he was so quick
Hit him with the buttstock
'Go quickly to the hole.'

Identifying the guilty parties is a way of particularising the negative values they represented. There is a deliberate intention by the community to avoid identifying themselves with these values; it seeks, in other words, to tell the story in a way that it can be remembered without feeling guilty for being part of such a community. Stanza 19 of Version A, included in this version alone, is very clear in this point:

(Version A)

(19) *No quisiera ser falange
Ni vecino del Acebo
Aunque me dean a Madrid
Y me regalen Toledo.*

I wouldn't like to be a Falangist
Nor an inhabitant of El Acebo
Even if they gave me Madrid
and Toledo as a gift.

The author or performer –anyone who sings the song– does not want to be in the position of having committed these acts, even if they receive a reward.

There is one particular stanza in Version C, also included in the first group of stand-alone stanzas in the aforementioned *Cántigas populares*, which alludes to cannibalism. It goes as follows:

(Version C, Stanza 19 and Version B, stand-alone stanzas)

*Falanges de Fonsagrada
Ahora estaréis contentos
No tendréis miedo al hambre
Con la carne que habéis hecho.*

Falanges of Fonsagrada
You are happy now
You won't be afraid of famine
With the meat you've made.

This stanza could be interpreted following the same line of preserving the community's morality. Cannibalism is one of the most widespread taboos in human cultures and is of course also taboo in this context. The reference to animals is repeated in other places of the ballad, such as when the killers are accused of killing the men 'as if they were rabbits' (all the versions). But this stanza goes even further, suggesting a comparison between their actions and their nature: killing them as if they were animals, and the fact that they acted like animals. People do not eat people, but animals do eat animals. Treating people as if they were animals transforms the agents themselves into animals. This can be seen as a way of symbolically ostracising the killers from the community of the human beings, treating them as monsters or animals. This, though, is

just one particular stanza, and I will show how the other judgments made in the ballad do not correspond with this characterisation. Instead, they seek to render justice by judging them as people, not monsters or animals.

Poetic justice

This ballad is a fine example of the assumption that memory should serve justice (Todorov 2000, 59). Todorov's analysis of the ways of making up for past injustice classifies it into three groups: the judicial sphere, the public life of the community (including symbolic or material compensation performed through political and cultural instruments) and the establishment of the truth about a community's past with the aim of restoring its unity (2001, 30).

In this case, the absence of a judicial reparation for the injustice parallels the lack of the inclusion of the events in the official history. The attempt to compensate for the injustice was performed symbolically, using a cultural instrument –orally transmitted poetry– already known by everyone in the community -because this method was an intrinsic resource of this culture. The anthropologist Lisón Tolosana confirmed the role of poetry in Galician culture: 'The poems poetize the experience in its moral dimension; they present the events in their moral profile. Moreover, the verses suggest and persuade, they emotionally incite to comply with the duty, to behave rightly' (2004b, 47).¹⁹

It is possible to identify three general ways of correcting any violation of the rules, whether contained in written and institutionalised legislation (law) or taken on as a community's common ethos. They are revenge, penalty and forgiveness. The structure of revenge is the *Lex talionis*: 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth'. This is a never-ending chain, since one revenge requires another one, and so on and so forth. Penalty is a kind of punishment, a way of making the guilty parties pay for what they did. Forgiveness is the way to stop the infinite chain of revenge and consequences, as Hannah Arendt emphasises (1998, 236). These three kinds of reparation are found in the ballad.

When using the term 'justice' here I am referring to the equilibrium which, based on their shared values, this community felt had been broken and which could in some way be restored. I am using the term 'poetic justice' because the ways of rendering justice in this case have all been constructed poetically using literary resources.²⁰

I explain first how the way of constructing the characters that represent the victims of this story implies a mode of poetic justice. The song establishes a difference among the 16 men and Commander Moreno. The 16 men:

1. Are never called 'soldiers.'
2. Are considered to be travelling 'legally.' All the versions of the ballad say that they had 'permission from the Government', which implies an acceptance of the legality of the Republican Government, even though this area was under the control of the rebels (the Falangists) that year.
3. Are considered to be travelling as poor men: they were sleeping in a haystack, 'without blankets or mattress', according to all the versions.
4. They were coming back home. This symbolic allusion to the 'home' is very important in a cultural context where the individual was defined in relation to his or her house, where the house had a moral, social, political and legal identity, as shown by anthropologists such as Lisón Tolosana (2004b, 76, 81-100). The right to come back home is considered universal and essential.
5. They were not allowed to defend themselves: they were killed like rabbits.

All of these characteristics of the 16 men enabled people to feel empathy for them. They were walking legally, they were poor, they were coming back home, they were victims of a betrayal. The community could easily identify with them in this role as victims, thus paralleling what Todorov called the ‘narrative of victimhood’ (2001, 30).

Commander Moreno received a different treatment. It is recounted that he suffered torture and it seems that this added suffering, together with his military rank, merit his remembrance as a hero. While Commander Moreno’s 16 men are presented as characters that should inspire empathy, Commander Moreno is presented as a character that inspires admiration, even if he did nothing special. The attribution of heroism can thus be seen as a means of poetic justice, the symbolic reparation consisting of remembering him as a hero. The points of this special treatment of Moreno in the ballad are as follows:

1. He tried to escape. Unlike the other men, he found an opportunity.

2. He was brave. In Version C and one of the loose stanzas collected in the book it is said that he was not afraid of death if he could avoid suffering and thus torture. In all versions, it is said that he was a ‘brave and honourable man.’

3. He did not receive a fair trial, only a mummery in which he was buffeted with questions ‘al derecho y al revés.’

4. Moreno’s murder and torture are retold with much more detail, and there are even descriptions of the torture. The word ‘martyrdom’ is used in reference to the torture. When Alonso told the story of O Acevo, he did not remember the stanza about the torture, but he also used the word ‘martyrdom’ when referring to it. Michael Richards mentions the use of the Catholic interpretation of the violent deaths during the war – including the idea of sacrifice and martyrdom– with the propaganda and the ideological interpretation made by the Francoist regime when it won the war (2006, 177). However, the use of this word reveals a popular appropriation of the Catholic notion of ‘martyrdom’ in order to interpret the violence against Republican soldiers as well. The stories of the saints recounting their martyrdom and sacrifices and emphasising their exemplariness have been a moralising and educative agent used by the Church. Thus the people had this cultural reference when they had to deal with such violent and shocking events in their own community.

5. In all versions there are allusions to Moreno’s possessions, which were taken from him after he was killed.

The ballad reaches its dramatic climax when, after killing Moreno, those responsible returned to the town of A Fonsagrada and allowed themselves to be seen openly with his gold pen, his military coat and his gold watch. This emphasises the cruelty and boastfulness with which the Falangists murdered him. In this climactic moment of poetic justice, the ballad uses sarcasm as a literary resource to intrinsically express a moral condemnation. It also uses repetitions to emphasise the moment. These stanzas are naturally included in all versions and go as follows:

*Con una buena zamarra
Del comandante Moreno
Paseaba en Fonsagrada
Al otro día un caballero.
Paseaba en Fonsagrada
Con la zamarra de cuero
Y un chistoso le decía
‘Qué buen mozo estás Moreno.’*

With a good coat
Of Commander Moreno
A gentleman was taking a walk
The next day in Fonsagrada.
He was taking a walk
With the leather coat
And a jokester said to him,
‘How handsome you are, Moreno.’

Secondly, I now analyse the ways proposed by the ballad of repairing the damage. It is possible and fruitful to classify them into two groups: the symbolic reparation comes from, on one hand, the community itself or its members and, on the other, from an exterior source. In two cases the reparation comes from within the community:

1. A threat of direct revenge appears only in one stanza in Version A. It says:

<i>Se oyó una voz que decía</i>	A voice was heard, saying that
<i>Si esto llega a cambiar</i>	If things change
<i>Los del pueblo del Acebo</i>	We will visit
<i>Los vamos a visitar.</i>	The neighbours of El Acebo.

In this case, the members of the community in the form of an unspecified ‘voice’—make the threat. And it is directed not against the Falangists, who could have an ideological reason to perform the assassinations, but against the inhabitants of O Acevo, who committed the betrayal.

2. The identification of the killers’ names, to which I have already alluded, is clearly an accusation that aims to preserve their names with a view towards for a future trial. There are references to the names of the killer’s hamlets, the name of their houses or their names and/or professions directly.

There are also three cases in which the symbolic reparation comes from outside the community:

1. There is an unspecific reference to justice included in all versions in a stanza that says that two women, the nieces of Commander Moreno, went to O Acevo. It seems to be an allusion to possible revenge, or at least a demand for accountability coming from the victim’s family. This fact does not seem to have any historical basis, so its function could be merely symbolic. The allusion to the family could suggest a reference to something that the killers should be afraid of: they could encounter a desire for forgiveness, but they could also encounter a desire for revenge. Version B refers to the women as ‘lights’, which could suggest that they could have a desire to know the truth, or it could also be a reference to their privileged position as victims, as if they were martyrs. It is important to realise that neither Commander Moreno, the soldiers nor their families belonged to this community. The ballad was created because the community where the events took place was concerned about these events, not because the victims were their relatives or friends. This allusion to the family is a reference to people who do not belong to the community but who could come and ask for those responsible to be brought to account.

2. Except in Version A, there are references to justice ‘after death’:

(Version B)	
(23) <i>Falanges de Fonsagrada</i>	(23) Falangists of Fonsagrada
<i>No podréis subir al cielo</i>	You cannot go to Heaven
<i>Porque allí está de portero</i>	Because there the gatekeeper
<i>El comandante Moreno.</i>	Is Commander Moreno.

This kind of poetic justice can be included in the category of penalty. It will come directly from Commander Moreno in the other world.

Version C combines justice ‘after death’ with forgiveness:

(18) *Falanges de Fonsagrada*
Si queréis subir al cielo
Tendréis que pedir perdón
Al comandante Moreno.

(18) Falangists of Fonsagrada
If you want to go to Heaven
You will have to apologise.
To Commander Moreno.

Even though it is not included in the ballad, I came across a story that seems to show a kind of ‘divine retribution’ for the inhabitants of the house where the soldiers were betrayed. According to this story told by several sources, after the betrayal the inhabitants of O Acevo lost all their children except one due to accident or terrible illness.

Conclusion

A historical reconstruction of these events has not been recorded and is not available. The most complete report is included in the newspaper *La Opinión A Coruña*, entitled ‘La balada del comandante Moreno’ (Romero, 2007). During the 36 years of the Francoist regime, censorship and restrictions to freedom of expression impeded or made such an account very difficult. At the same time, a trial to judge those responsible would have been unthinkable during the dictatorship, for obvious reasons. The transition to democracy saw the approval of Amnesty Law 46/1977, of 15 October, which included a blanket amnesty to all acts ‘with political intention’ committed before 15 December 1976.²¹ In accordance with this law, all crimes committed during the Civil War and the Dictatorship were forgiven without trial or reparation. This law sought to use a resource which I have not mentioned, oblivion, to annul the violations of justice²².

Accordingly, the Ballad of commander Moreno was the only resource to provide these two social functions –history and justice– for these events until 2009. Two years before, there had been approved the Historical Memory Law 52/2007, of 26 December, amid much controversy (Junquera, 2010, 9-22). Following this Law, the State provided funds for the descendants of disappeared victims of repression during the Civil War and the Dictatorship and their associations in order to find and identify them. However, the State did not assume directly this task. There was one of these associations, the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, which in October 2007 opened the pits in O Acevo, as I mentioned before. Moreover, a funeral was organised in October 2009 in A Fonsagrada. In this context, other symbolic reparations have been performed: a documentary entitled ‘Memorias rotas. La balada del comandante Moreno’, by Manane Rodríguez (2010), and a work of theatre entitled ‘Où vas-tu Pedro?’, by Manon Moureau (Paris, 2009).²³

The historical function –the conservation of the testimony of the events– was performed by the ballad through a careful inclusion of precise information about the place, date, development of the events and identification of guilty parties and victims. This historical function was also shaped by the community’s desire to exclude the acts of the killers and informants from their general approval, thus confirming and reinforcing their collective identity as a group based on different values.

The ballad also performs a function of poetic justice in two main ways. I have interpreted the construction of characters –soldiers and Commander Moreno– as a literary resource to hand down two kinds of judgement related to the effect that the ballad seeks to have on listeners and performers. The collective character of the soldiers can be understood from the point of view of what Todorov called the ‘narrative of victimhood’, in which the people can identify with the victims and organise the story around their suffering. The character of commander Moreno is constructed to generate

admiration in the audience, and portraying him as a hero can also be seen as a way of symbolically making reparation for his particularly cruel assassination.

Poetic justice is also provided by the ballad if we examine its content. It contains the three main ways of reparation: threat of revenge, penalty (trust in a future trial, as either a result of human or divine justice) and forgiveness. The story that the sources usually add to the ballad –the reference to the bad luck of the O Acevo inhabitants’ family members– is interpreted by the people also as a kind of punishment imposed by divine justice.

All these social functions explain, at least partially, why this ballad has been transmitted. At the same time, the persistence of the transmission confirms the extreme importance that this community has given to the construction of a story in which their values have been preserved and/or reworked, and their shared feeling of justice administered through different means of symbolic reparation in absence of a legal trial and material compensation. In no case was oblivion an option for them.

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¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWeHc6815Rg>, consulted on 4th December 2013.

² All the names are fictitious in order to protect the sources' privacy.

³ I have transcribed the conversations exactly as recorded. Both my sources and I speak the Galician dialect which is commonly spoken in A Fonsagrada (Lugo). All the translations from Galician to English are mine. Here the reference to the ballad is in the plural in the original, since the locals refer to the ballad in the plural, as 'as coplas', 'the stanzas', not as 'a ballad'.

⁴ All the fragments of conversations with Alonso are part of the same long interview I had with him in Pereira (A Fonsagrada) on 26th August 2013.

⁵ Semi-illiterate people are people who can read but cannot write.

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- ⁶ The autonomous communities only exist in Spain since defined by the 1978 Constitution.
- ⁷ A Fonsagrada is at once the name of the municipality and the name of the main village.
- ⁸ In the municipality of A Fonsagrada there was a population of nearly 15,000 inhabitants in 1940, when the ballad events took place; in 2007 it had a population of fewer than 5,000, nearly the 38% of whom were 65 years old and older according to the official statistics provided by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE).
- ⁹ One example explained by Lisón Tolosana are the ‘loias’ (also called ‘brindis’), short poems improvised and declaimed at social gatherings by somebody and directed against somebody else who was supposed to answer with another poem. Of special interest here are the ‘regueifas’, poetry contests. Lisón Tolosana has documented the following phenomenon: small poems invented during the ‘regueifas’ were repeated after a few years by people who learnt them –sometimes even after the author had forgotten that he/she had invented them–, but adapting their meaning to new present situations, thus condensing local values (2004b, 27-51; 2004a, 18; Valenciano 1998, IX).
- ¹⁰ This article includes the history and philological discussions about this dialect.
- ¹¹ For a discussion about the relation between memory and history, see Manzano 2010, 71-95.
- ¹² The word ‘nun’ is used sometimes in this dialect instead of ‘non’ (‘no’).
- ¹³ However, Hannah Arendt was considering written history, not oral stories.
- ¹⁴ O Acebo is a hamlet with one single house. When the people refers to ‘O Acevo’ (in Galician) or ‘El Acebo’ (in Spanish), they refer to the house where the events took place. The inhabitants of the house also had a bar at the time.
- ¹⁵ ‘San Pedro’ is the name of the parish to which the hamlet where the Falangist lived belonged.
- ¹⁶ ‘Río Torto’ is the name of the hamlet where the Falangist lived.
- ¹⁷ ‘O Caielo’ is the nickname of one of the Falangists.
- ¹⁸ This is the only stanza collected in Galician. One of my sources, Rafael (born in Sequeiro, A Fonsagrada, in 1955), also knew some Galician variations to this stanza: *E o xastrín de Carballido / como era tan apresurado / desde que taba morto / foille dar ca culata / do fusil pro furado*. This information was gathered during an interview with Rafael in Oviedo, on 18th April 2013.
- ¹⁹ My translation.
- ²⁰ Martha Nussbaum has popularized this term, but she uses it with a different meaning. In her book with the same title, she defends the role of imagination and ‘literary judging’ in order to improve the quality of legal judges and their impartiality (1995).
- ²¹ Law 46/1977, of 15 October, Article I. This law contradicts Article 7.1 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which Spain approved in 1979.
- ²² A defense of oblivion instead of memory is made by David Rieff (2012).
- ²³ Comeiro (2005) offers an interesting study of the role of cultural objects like literature, documentaries, films, ballads and songs in the expression of memories in Spain from the Civil War to nowadays.