

**Maria Hnaraki**  
mh439@drexel.edu

## **Cretan Identity through its Dancing History**

### **Abstract:**

Dances are threads that have fashioned the fabric of Cretan society since ancient times. Histories are being performed to show the concrete links between past and present and are thus transformed into living communal memories which constitute a rich source of knowledge and identity, speaking for a poetics of Cretanhood.

### **Key words:**

Crete, identity, dance, mytho-musicology, dancing history

### **Prelude**

Crete, a Mediterranean island, serves as a connecting link between the so-called East and West. Located at the crossroads between three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia, Crete has also embraced many influences (such as Arab, Venetian, and Turkish). Its forms of musical expression have been interpreted historically and connected to the fight, the resistance and the numerous rebellions against the Turks (particularly in reference to what is widely perceived in Greece as a “tainted” Ottoman past), who landed on the island in 1645, conquered it in 1669 and controlled it until 1898. In more recent times, an active resistance was raised against the German invasion during the Second World War. During such periods, in order to claim their land, Cretans sang and danced (Hnaraki 2011, forthcoming).

Cretan dances function as threads that have fashioned the fabric of Cretan society since ancient times, providing authentic evidence of the continuity of Crete’s popular tradition and rhythm. Despite modernization, which can be found in many places all over Greece and Crete, especially nowadays, dance is still a common means of expression for most Cretan people (Hnaraki 1998, 63). In a sense, dance is an important representation of Crete’s traditional culture, or, in other words, Cretan people are what they dance.

Crete became part of Greece only in 1913, its inhabitants having managed to remain autonomous through a “rebel” attitude. Cretan music performances consolidate *is-land* (in the sense of “being one with one’s land”) identity: Certain musical pieces suggest Cretans have to protect their land and be strong because their ancestors fought for it as well. Stokes’s main argument that music informs our sense of place (1994) is also the case with Cretan music. Here I argue how Cretan dancing is a social activity that still

provides a means by which people recognize identities and how places, such as the island of Crete, through dancing become “ours” (Hnaraki 2007, 64).

### **Performing Cretanness**

Historian Hobsbawm defines “invented tradition” as “a set of practices...of a ritually symbolic nature” that “automatically implies continuity with...a suitable historic past” (1983, 1). Moreover, according to Nettl (1996), a unique, particular role of music is to reconnect the present reality to a remote past. To achieve this, the Cretans choose dance symbols. The persistence with which the revolutionary and historical stereotypes were and are still presented in Cretan documents reveal that the connotations of those images are considered necessary to spread a new sense of Cretan history. This way, the dances examined here become a symbol of Cretan ethnic identity and their dancers heroes. Even though “invented” and or “re-invented”, they take on a life of their own, truly becoming custom and reality in the musical and cultural life of modern-day Crete.

Dancing is central in the Greek culture as Greeks talk through their body: Through body language they create a dialogue between the western-Apollonian-order and the eastern-Dionysian-chaos. Greeks act life; indeed, as Zorba, their kinsman, they dance it as well. It is apparent that their stories are more connected to the body than to the brain. In such context, folk dancing becomes for Cretans and, by extension, for the Greeks, a primal non-verbal behavior, an authentic voice, a deeper body language which expresses the beauty and agony of living (Hnaraki 2009, 32).

Dance, after all, is a body dialogue with its questions and answers. Cretans travel with an open chest and closed eyes. Their dancing teaches unity and pride, the take-off. The dancers deal with God; they speak a language that cannot be interpreted, but felt. As “Zorbas the Greeks”, they have hundreds of things to say, but their tongue just can’t manage them, therefore, they will dance them for us. By doing so, they subconsciously and creatively use dancing as a therapeutic means of self- and psycho-analysis, as they manage to liberate themselves by healing their egos (Hnaraki 2009, 25).

A feature of Cretan music and dance, namely the traditional ritual-protocol of dancing in an open circle with the intermingling of genders and ages, establishes and fulfills the concept of community (Hnaraki 2007, 99). As the dancer loses herself/himself in the dance, as she/he becomes absorbed in the unified community, she/he reaches a state of elation in which she/he feels themselves filled with energy beyond their ordinary state. And at the same time, feeling herself/himself in complete and ecstatic harmony with all the fellow-members of their community, the dancer experiences a great increase in feelings of amity and attachment towards them (Hnaraki 2007, 101).

Furthermore, the touching that takes place in these types of dances conveys a sense of camaraderie, unity, and strength. Dancing, in this sense, also gives one the feeling of security. By touching, the dance produces a condition in which the unity, harmony and concord of the community are at a maximum and in which they are intensely felt by every member. Holding hands with people also give one happiness and security (Hnaraki 2007, 101).<sup>1</sup>

Bottomley suggests that “collectivism is literally embodied in the form of dance and the shared code of communication between dancers” (1987, 7). She views Greek circle dances as a ritual of solidarity, offering a “cultural hegemony” opposing rule of the Ottoman Empire (1988, 7-8). In fact, dancing performed as cultural survival is an important practice signifying the sense of national identity and independence because it becomes a representation of both the expression of resistance to domination and the expression of freedom (what Bottomley terms as “the spirit of resistance”; 1992, 86). In this context, Greek folk dancing serves to strengthen cultural identity in modern times, especially amongst the Greek diaspora communities. Through performance, the ordinary folk manage to retain their cultural heritage and collectively remember it by commemorating the dances of old as national heroes and celebrating the value of nationhood (Riak 2007, 52).

Dance is communicative behavior, a “text in motion” or “body language” (Hanna 1979, 4-5). Through dancing, Greeks express their feelings and thoughts, because dance for them can be a physical instrument or symbol for feeling and/or thought, a double representation of the inner and the outer world. It is an expression that comes out from the dancer, expressing her/his personality, individual past and emotional situation. On the other hand, the feeling that comes out of this environment is the one that her/his surroundings impose upon them, and which unavoidably is being expressed throughout the dance, the music they listen to, the people who dance with them or look at them, the occasion under which they dance, all the past of the social team that they belong to (Hnaraki 2007, 101).

### **Mytho-musicologies**

The predominant belief among Cretans nowadays is that the art of dancing originated in Crete. Cretans were, in fact, acknowledged as the masters of dance. They were extolled by the Greeks as exceptional artists and acknowledged as the masters of dance (Sachs 1937), a common belief being that the best Greek dancers in modern times come from among the de-

---

<sup>1</sup> This feature of Greek music is particularly beneficial for emotional stability as both listening to and performing music in a group setting have been shown to be successful means for emotional self-regulation, emotional expression, and relaxation.

scendants of these people (a reputation for excellent dancing also referred to in the Homeric poems (Makreas 1979, 18-22).

The roots of the Cretan dances are deep. Tradition credits Rhea, the mother of gods (daughter of Uranus, the sky, and Gaia, the earth), as the one who taught dance to the ancient inhabitants of Crete, who considered it a special gift, proper for their religious ceremonies. The dances performed during rituals in Crete were very orgiastic in character and they brought people to ecstasy (Hatzidakis 1958).

Testimonies coming from the Minoan era prove the general belief that dances were predominant in Minoan Crete. Moreover, there are historical testimonies which depict that music had a significant place in the everyday life of the Minoan Crete: Cretan people used it in order to educate the youth and particularly in order to shape their ethos and character. Notably, after the end of Cretan wars and battles, all of the Cretan people were danced (Hatzidakis 1958).

Cretans are mentioned in Homer<sup>2</sup>, Hesiod and Euripides as dancers, whereas their mythical role has been much enlarged by later “classical” writers such as Plato and Apollonius of Rhodes. Greek mythology sets the birth of music and dance in Crete. For example, it is believed that Theseus, while coming back from Crete, danced with his colleagues a dance that resembled the turns and the curves of a labyrinth.

Another very popular myth on the island of Crete says that, in order to conceal the cries of baby Zeus, so as his father Kronos not to find and thus devour him, the ancient inhabitants of Crete, the Kourites, performed a vivacious, leaping dance, the Anoyanos *pidihtos*, still performed at the historic town of Anoya that is located at the foot of Mt. Psiloritis (otherwise known as Mt. Ida), the highest mountain on the island<sup>3</sup>. Rhyming couplets performances, *mandinadhes*, namely improvised, fifteen-syllable, in iambic meter, proverbial, rhyming distichs, devoted to Zeus accompany such music and dance rites, raising monuments in history and memory while simultaneously shaping what “being from Crete” is.

Herzfeld (1991) examines the “ownership” of history in his case-study of the Cretan town of Rethymno in relation to what he calls “social” and “monumental” time. Following a similar path, several Cretan music scholars trace in local dances elements of a “glorious” Greek past. Revolts are oftentimes the main theme of performances which glorify the strongly ingrained Cretan ideal of gallant living and dying. Song lyrics that accom-

---

<sup>2</sup> Significant is the description of Achilles’ shield in the Iliad when Homer, amongst others, remarks that the labyrinth was Ariadne’s ceremonial dancing ground, “a dancing-floor where young men and women were dancing” (590-606).

<sup>3</sup> An invocation of Mt. Ida (Psiloritis) stands for strength, endurance, honor and pride. Because that mountain has served as a stronghold of revolution and a rampart of freedom, it is perceived as the soul of Crete.

pany such dances describe and refer to various Cretan landscapes surrounded by mythologies and histories, ancient and modern and, as a result, their stories function both ideologically and ideally.

### **Cretan Dance Style**

Cretan dancing can be of two broad categories, dragging (*syrtó*) and leaping (*pidihto*). The first category refers to the movement of the feet over the ground in a dragging or shuffling motion, and the second to a springing, hopping, jumping, stamping, or leaping foot motion. There are also some dances that contain elements of both. The most popular form of these dances is the open circle with the regular handhold position. In this position, and when facing the chain of dancers, the arms of the people who dance resemble the letter W. The hands of the dancers are held out to the side while their shoulders are high with an almost right-angle bend at the elbow. Another popular Cretan dance form is the straight line in which the outstretched arms are placed on the shoulders of the adjoining dancer (Petrides 1961). Finally, like most Greek dances, the Cretan dances proceed counter-clockwise.

Most of the Cretan dances follow the traditional ritual protocol with the open circle and the order of participation according to gender and age ranking within the family and the community: elderly men, younger men, elderly women, younger women, children. In Crete, older persons enter the dance first, and then younger ones, men first and then women. With the intermingling of genders and ages the concept of “community” is being fulfilled in the Cretan towns and villages (Hnaraki 1998, 45).

Generally, in Cretan dancing, the pose of the body is dignified and upright. This characterization varies slightly according to the sex and the type of the dancer. As many of the dances are done in a circular chain formation, arm gestures are practically excluded. The leader often leaves the chain and dances singly.

Facial expression is also important. Performers are happy and serious at the same time. Happy because they dance, they are enjoying the dancing, they are celebrating the wedding event or example, and serious because they are going to be judged by the community on their performances and because it is through their dancing tradition that they must represent the community and themselves in the best way (Hnaraki 2006, 100).

Most of the Cretan dancing consists of open, single curved lines or serpentine. Progressive step movements shift directly over the advancing foot. Overall, the quality of movement in this type of dancing is clipped and nervous with smoothness primarily attributable to the fact that the feet are kept close to the ground. There is variation between slow and quick steps with emphasis upon a gradual increase in speed. The great diversity of rhythms and their combinations results in many types of steps and figures (Makreas 1979).

The lead dancer in Crete executes complicated solo steps consisting of whirls, turns or lively jumps. Movement is towards the right with a head dancer leading members of both sexes around a ground pattern best described as half-moon. Idiosyncratic variation is encouraged, usually occurring at the head of the line where the leader can indulge in various hand slaps, slaps on thighs, soles and heels, in addition to numerous leaps, turns and acrobatic movements (Makreas 1979). In Crete, usually the first dancers are also the ones who pay for the dance. They “order the dance” and the song that they prefer. They start the dance. The relatives and friends of the first dancer may also offer money to the musicians and take part to the dancing.

All Cretans, men and women, are given the opportunity to lead. Often, when it has been offered, one is obligated to assume the position at the head of the line, however briefly, and even if she/he knows no *fighures* (acrobatic ornamental steps). After this, she/he retires to the rear of the line. Sometimes, the position is passed on to the person immediately to the left of the lead dancer. This is accomplished by act of the lead dancer who steps in front of the person dancing on her/his left. She/he takes the left hand of this person while moving to the left and thereby maintains her/his presence at the front of the line. This is mostly done when two men serve as the catalyst for each other’s acrobatic maneuvers (Hnaraki 1998, 50).

Because most Cretan dances are danced in an open circle, usually it is the first dancer (*brostaris*) who takes the initiative. Good dancers must also improvise. The position at the head of the line of dancers is considered the most important, because the person (usually male) who orders the song has the privilege of dancing first; it is to him that the musicians direct their playing and from him that they can expect gifts of money. The first dancer leads not only literally, by drawing the other dancers with his body; it is also the first dancer’s prerogative to set the tempo and the steps, and to execute improvisations. The first dancer is, thus, set apart from the other dancers; for the watching public, this dancer is the object of vision and of commentary (Cowan 1990, 103).

Women’s postures in Cretan dancing reminds one of the ancient Minoan goddesses of fertility, holding snakes on their opened hands and exposed chest. This is particularly the posture that women have when they come in the middle of the circle to perform turns and other dancing figures. That is because women hardly move their torsos while they keep their arms in an open position in opposition to men, who keep their hands behind their back, especially when dancing in a couple. Generally, Cretan women are expected to dance demurely but with a proud posture. Their torso has to remain stable and upright, while nothing moves from their waist to their head (Hnaraki 1998, 52).

Cretan men give the impression of cranes while dancing, trying to imitate the flying of these birds --flying that symbolizes their desire of being independent, free. Cranes and eagles are birds that one can particularly observe in Crete and that have often been associated with the pride and the *levedia* (manliness, upstanding appearance, generosity). This pride and *levedia* of Cretan men explains their upright position, which helps them to face and to pass through the difficulties of life with their heads proudly held up (Hnaraki 1998, 53).

### **Cretan Dance Events**

Cretan dances are integral to the principal musical repertoire for feasts and celebrations in the villages, communal-type of parties, above all engagements, marriages and baptisms, even memorials and funerals, but also for simple banquets, family and friendly gatherings. They are orally passed down from generation to generation though, today, several Cretan traditional dancing schools also exist.

An arena for the expression of both individual identity and the negotiation of community boundaries in Crete is a celebration called *ghlendi* (Hnaraki 2007, 66). Dances performed at *ghlenda* (pl.) form the main means of common entertainment as all members of the village take part in these festivities ideal for communal communication. The *ghlendi* incubates the emotional state which strongly reflects the moods of the participants, an interplay of emotions. During this interplay, feelings of stability and calmness reflect a fixed structure of the event (Riak 2003, 213).

Amongst Greeks, Crete is famous as the island where music and dance were born, a place where the best events, in which dancing, singing, drinking, eating, and merrymaking, become panegyric. Through revolutions and periods of subjugation, the Cretans refined the Greek notion of the *palikari*, a hero who defies death to defend liberty and who, during times of festive celebrations, displays his gallantry by showing off his dancing skills. It is the concept of the *levedis* and the *meraklis* who bring *kefi* (high spirits) to a party, turning simple events into festive celebrations of life. A *ghlendi* starts with slow dragging dances and it gets faster and louder as the *kefi* increases and reaches its pinnacle with the girls dancing with swirls and turns that are fascinating to watch, and goes to the leaping (*pidihtos*) dances and crescendos with men (*palikaria*) dancing, showing off their mastery.

A basic form of communal communication consists of people dancing together. What is enacted and created through musical activity is the collective interaction which develops in the group's socialization, and which, through the performance, activates the thick web of social relationships synthetically expressed with the term *parea* (namely, group of friends). Through the feast, the *parea* celebrates itself and its members, developing,

through the chosen practice of singing and dancing, a relationship shaped according to an ideal of cooperation and socialization of the group's values (Hnaraki 2011, forthcoming).<sup>4</sup>

The performance requires extreme precision in the processes of the rendition of the dancing figures. Such a complexity emphasizes the ritual character of performing Cretan dances, implying that their particular communicative code is shared by the dancers. They, in turn, find in this dancing genre a performative outlet for their own collective identity, which requires an in-depth knowledge of the oral tradition of the group.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, music-making in Crete is more than simply an activity: rather, being "good at making music" is a fundamental aspect of being "good at being a man" (Herzfeld, 1985). Moreover, Cretan music is socially constructed and made meaningful within the Cretan island society (Dawe, 2004, 1). As a result, a man's or a woman's ability to perform a dance as the leader and improvise has an importance which is being evaluated. Children also participate to the performance but they only get voice as they grow up to be men or women. Older people usually are expected to judge the dancing abilities of the performers as they are considered to be the wise authorities of the local group, representing, to the best, the society that produces them.

In such contexts, music-making requires the possession of a profound perception of various existential issues as well as of the dynamics between individual and group, and between tradition and creativity. The great ability of the Cretans consists in handling these issues through a sophisticated and conscious use of the word and the body, generating forms of musical expression laden with a multiplicity of individual and social meanings (Magrini 2000, 455).

In local memory and identity such experiences have shaped a very distinct sense of pride, toughness and independence that feeds on centuries-old memories of resistance to foreign invaders and defense of local autonomy and freedom at all cost. The dances' meaning is judged for its performing and social appropriateness in relation to the occasion but also the larger social and historical context of the community (Caraveli 1985).

The legacy of these revolutionary times can still be felt a century later through the notion that Crete is somehow quintessentially free, Greek, self-sufficient and "tough". While the dances transmit an interpretation of the past, they are also a tool for learning the central values of Cretanness: the courage, audacity and worth of the brave, the ability to face risk, the strength of character, the wisdom, the shrewdness of reasoning, the resi-

---

<sup>4</sup> In the same sense, anthropologist Caraveli (1985) deals with the "symbolic village community born in performance".

<sup>5</sup> Such an example is the first dance performed traditionally at Cretan weddings, devoted to the bride.

stance against the trials of life, the love of honor (*philotimo*), the hospitality, the importance of friendship and, above all, the sensitivity to the wide range of human emotions vis-à-vis nature, life and death. It would be difficult to separate the qualities of the hero envisioned performing in those dances from the lifestyle qualities associated with “being a true Cretan”.

Dancing at these festive events is a highly structured social practice with rules that vary from one locality to another. According to Cowan (1990), in addition to striving for exuberant *kefi*, locals in these events “perform” gender, class, political and regional identities negotiate power relations, express solidarity or rivalry with kin, neighbors and friends. Through the dancing expression, that is an important part of the Greek perception about life, Cretans feel both free and united. Here, I believe, we should take into consideration the Cretan-born writer’s, Nikos Kazantzakis’s epitaph: “I have no fear, I have no hope, I am free!” This is what to be Cretan is, and this is how vitally the Cretans through their music, dance and song represent themselves, because, according to a popular rhyming distich (*mandinadha*), “the branches should never forget their roots, because if the roots perish, the branches will also wither.”

### **Dancing with the Heroes**

Today there are five clearly distinct types of dances in Crete. There might be more, of local significance only. Among the dances most performed is the *Chaniotis* or *Chaniotiko*, a circular dance which is also called *syrtos*. The name *Chaniotikos Syrτος* indicates that this is a “shuffling” line dance from the city of Chania. The leader of this dance, in interaction with the music, performs various hand-slaps on thighs, soles and heels, does numerous leaps, turns and acrobatic maneuvers, while the line moves smoothly and evenly. According to the feeling of the music, the dancer moves vigorously with sharp, quick steps or very smoothly, almost daintily. The whole circle may move a little forward, then back. *Chaniotikos Syrτος* is the most popular Cretan dance and, because of its popularity with composers and musicians, among the most musically complex and virtuosic dances (Hnaraki 1998, 42-43).

*Pedozalis* (meaning five-stepped dance, five dizzying steps or giddy five step rhythm) is another characteristic Cretan dance. It is springy and energetic, working up to a great speed. The name of this dance means “*pede*”, thus, five, “*zala*”, thus, steps, and is typical of tricky, fast-stepping dances. The *pedozalis* is a line dance in which the participants clasp one another’s shoulders and perform steps classified as leaping. The dancers move with increasing speed and perform intricate steps on the spot (Hnaraki 1998, 43-44). Frequently, this dance breaks up into smaller groups which perform somersaults while in line, the leader always elaborating on

the basic steps and leaping through the air. As the dance draws to a close, the small groups once again take their places on the line (Petrides 1961).

Both of the aforementioned dances have been “mythologized” by local history as part of the Cretan musical folklore. Let us mention here that oral tradition is strong on the island of Crete and indeed in all of Greece. “With a population that was historically to a large degree illiterate, the spoken word and storytelling took on tremendous importance as conveyors of collective memory, local history, and an outlet for exercising creativity and imagination” (League, forthcoming). An example of this is the aforementioned *mantinadhes* genre (fifteen-syllable rhymed couplets), improvised on the spot (today also “performed” via cell phones and/or facebook, for instance), constitutes the major form of folk poetry in Crete. All in all, “in a society governed and defined by the spoken word, history takes on a more fluid, malleable character, and over time can be subtly (or not so subtly) reworked and mythologized until it reflects a version of reality that most suits the purposes and desires of its tellers and listeners” (League, forthcoming).

Legends related to the origins and birth of Cretan music and dance pertain to the two of the afore-mentioned dance forms, the *syrtos* and the *pedozalis*. More specifically, it is acknowledged that the Cretan *syrtos* was developed in Chania province, most likely in the region of Kissamos, and spread to the rest of Crete from there, hence the name of the dance *Chaniotikos* (namely, in honor of its place of origin). There is one characteristic melody labeled as the *protos syrtos* (or *Chaniotikos*)<sup>6</sup> which is considered to be the original one from which the dance sprung from and was created.

It is believed that in ancient times the dance served as a necessary means of expression and encouragement in cases of war. Moreover, a local legend says the dance was coined as *protos syrtos* and was composed by Cretan soldiers who participated in the failed defense of Constantinople against the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The Sultan allowed the Cretans to return home due to their bravery, which resulted from their refusal to surrender for several days after the City’s fall. They, in turn, settled down in the region of Kissamos and kept performing those melodies till the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. That same year, a wedding was organized at the Chania village of Loussakies so as to gather important local leaders and plan a rebellion against the Turks.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the first musical rendition of the dance is attributed to Triantafyllakis, the violinist from the villages of Loussakies, Kissamos, Stefanos Triantafilakis or Kioros (Tsouhlarakis, web) who reworked the three hundred-year old melody, giving the opportunity to the performers to create a dance as both a symbol of the revolt and a way of honoring the memory of

<sup>6</sup> The melody that generally follows it is called the *protos* (first) *Kissamitikos* (from Kissamos).

<sup>7</sup> A rebellion which, according to tradition, was discovered by means of treachery and put down.

the Cretan warriors of 1453 (League, forthcoming). The *Chaniotikos syrτος* became popular in that region and was performed until the Greek revolution of 1821.<sup>8</sup> It then spread to the rest of the island, carrying its revolutionary and epic character, particularly during the two World Wars, by being varied in both style and expression.

The second dance under examination, the *pedozalis*, is perceived as an ancient, *pyrrichean* dance form, namely a war dance that served to test the footwork and agility of the dancers in ancient times. Its present form and name are attributed to the period of the Daskaloyannis Revolution (1770-71). According to the local legend, the organizer of the great Cretan rebellion, Ioannis Vlachos or Daskaloyannis (1730-1771), invited the same violinist, Triantafyllakis, to attend the meeting of the local chieftains while they were planning the rebellion, and to compose a dance for them as a symbol of the revolt. That is why the dance has ten steps which commemorate the day of the meeting (October 10, 1769), namely when the people of Sfakia (south, western Crete), made the decision to go ahead with the revolution against the Turks, and therefore its music consists of twelve music phrases (parts) in honor of the twelve leaders of the revolt (Tsouhlarakis, web).

The name of the performance, namely “five stepped dance”, is purely symbolic and stands for the fifth attempt to free Crete from the Turks (even though there are more steps). Tradition says that, until the early 1960s, the people of the western Crete, while dancing the *pedozalis*, used to call out the name of the captain that corresponded to each musical phrase, in this way honoring the memory of Daskaloyannis, his chief comrades and their revolt.<sup>9</sup>

### Memoriscapes

The afore-mentioned stories should be examined under the lens of oral tradition. Even though they may not always be supported by historical evidence, the legendary narrations of the instrument players and the locals contain, to some extent, some truth. What is significant to be observed is the function they serve in the Cretan dancing folklore and the great degree

---

<sup>8</sup> The “Greek War of Independence”, also known as the “Greek Revolution” was a successful war of independence waged by the Greek revolutionaries between 1821 and 1832.

<sup>9</sup> Among those who took part in Daskaloyannis Revolution was the great war-chief Iosif Daskalakis or Sifodaskalakis from the village of Ambadia, Rethymno. Sifodaskalakis survived the revolt but was crippled in his left leg. According to tradition, some years later, Captain Sifis wanted to dance the *pedozali*. The musicians and dancers adapted the rhythm of the to the dance steps of a lame man. This performance became part of the tradition of the Amari-Rethymno province as “kout-sambadianos” or “ka(r)tsimba(r)dianos” (Tsouhlarakis, web).

to which they are propagated in the community right up until today as they manage to connect the individual members of the community, who participate in their retelling and in the relevant music and dance activities, to a greater, grander reality and group identity. More importantly, those dancing stories have contributed to the way Greeks --and, by extension, the rest of the world-- view Crete since the local group identity has, throughout the ages, passed beyond the boundaries of the island of Crete, becoming part of Greek history, especially in reference to what is widely perceived as a tainted Ottoman past.

It is important to stress that, from 1803 onwards, “Greekness” characterized every aspect of Greek cultural output. During the waning days of the Turkish Occupation and in the early years of the newly-established Greek state, Greek literature and music had to be equal to the great traditions of Europe. Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (1982) analyzed the intense attempts toward the formation of a Greek, national identity, the general speculation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Balkan region and the European trends of beautification and romanticism. He illustrated how Greek folklore was (and is) a cultural weapon, an ideology, in other words, which promises cultural continuity and an uninterrupted, unsullied national unity from antiquity to today. Even today, Byzantium and Ancient Greece are viewed as the progenitors of and constitute a vibrantly relevant reference point for modern Greek culture, “a golden age since when the purity of the original Hellenic culture had suffered endless contamination and enfeeblement” (Herzfeld 1982, 44).<sup>10</sup>

When those dances are performed, the legends are being reincarnated, reminding one of the Greek struggles for freedom. In a sense, they function as a local history lesson, as, oftentimes, elders take time to explain to the younger audience the deeds of their ancestors, referring to specific names and facts. This way, the past unites with the present constituting the ethics of gallantry (*levedia, palikaria*) and love of honor (*philotimo*), thus the essence of being Cretan is diachronic. Most of those stories do not remain only on the oral levels, in informal conversations that may take place in socialization spaces such as coffeehouses, for instance. In addition, they are used as part of the formal education of the young; they are proudly presented as authentic in local history books and other media, such as websites, assuring that the ideals of Hellenism and Christianity will continue to be honored and respected.

### Performing Gallantry

---

<sup>10</sup> Similar concerns were expressed by Cretan born writer Nikos Kazantzakis through what he coined as the comparative, syncretic “Cretan gaze”, namely a vision of Greece that synthesized its cultural history: Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic, Byzantine and modern, of course including its ties to the West and the East.

The era Cretans live in today is one of turbulent globalization; but yet “their’s” relies on a past of many histories and a future of many expectations. As they craft a notion of “Cretanness” for broader and outside consumption (Hnaraki 2007, 131), a process of a highly flexible “creative construction of ethnicity, is increasingly common” (Stokes 1994, 16).

On the island of Crete, the music industry has become a strong and unifying force in the construction and maintenance of a pan-Cretan identity. Dawe (2007, 153-154) argues how Cretan music provides a distinct local sound in a global soundscape, an alternative to the range of foreign goods entering the island and a reminder of home to Cretans worldwide. Moreover, Herzfeld (1991, 78) identifies the characteristic idiom of Cretans to be able to adjust to the necessities of the times and calls for “a poetics of tourism”, a term he justifies by the fact that “through their adjustment, Cretans grasp and steal the change from the teeth of the commercial shark.”

Theoharis Xirouhakis, Professor of Physical Exercise, Dance Instructor and Choreographer, founded in 1978 the first School for the instruction of Cretan Dances in Chania-Crete under the name “Giving birth to the gallant men of Crete” (*Levedoyenna Kriti*). As he states, this attempt of his “sprang out of pure love for the brave dances and the beautiful Cretan traditions.”<sup>11</sup> Over 20,000 students, as young as four and as old as seventy years old have graduated from this School and have participated as dance teachers and lead dancers in many Cretan associations both in Greece and abroad.

Mr. Xirouhakis was born at the village of Gramvousa in the area of Kissamos-Chania. Since he was a young child, he enjoyed hanging around with old, talented dancers, performing at the weddings and the village feasts. As soon as he joined the University of Athens, he was asked by his Professor to become the leader of the University’s dance group, a position he kept till his graduation.

Along with his group members, consisting of both younger and older people, he has given over 1,200 performances at several festivals both in Greece and abroad. They have appeared in many television programs, receiving international acclaim and good critical reviews. Since 1981, many groups from several European countries and the United States come to Chania every year to attend his dance seminars and become familiar with the cultural heritage of Crete<sup>12</sup> He, himself, has extensively traveled abroad to promote and teach Cretan dancing at several Cretan Associations. For instance, in 1983, in Florida, he organized the first competition of Cretan dance groups amongst 72 different associations in the United States.

---

<sup>11</sup> All quotes associated with Mr. Theoharis Xirouhakis relate to personal communication I had had with him during June-September, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, the cultural part of the educational program of the Pancretan Association called “Dias” (Zeus).

In addition, Mr. Xirouhakis has undertaken the organization, composition and performance of several ceremonies for large national and athletic events, such as, for instance, the closing ceremony of the 1<sup>st</sup> World Championship of Young Track Athletes in Athens at the Olympic Stadium, as well as the three opening ceremonies of the international track games called “Venizelia”<sup>13</sup> in Chania-Crete. During the last couple of years, his School has been turned into a traditional association with the aim of promoting Cretan culture and thus he recently participated with some of its younger dancers in the ANT1 television network show “Greece, you have talent”, where it received the second place, in an attempt to show that “in Greece not only modern music and dance, acrobatics and magicians exist, but also Greek folk traditions expressed through dancing.”

After a great deal of studying and effort and more than twenty years devoted to the dissemination and promotion of “our” heroic dances and cultural heritage, Mr. Xirouhakis created in 1992 two videotapes under the title “The Soul of Crete,” which depict the birth and development of Cretan dances throughout history to the present time. These programs showed customs and traditions, dances, songs, the natural beauty, archaeological treasures and whatever was the best that Crete can show to its guests. The second tape of these series focuses on the teaching and learning of Cretan dances.

During the last two years, Mr. Xirouhakis created two more DVDs and compiled everything into an album of 5 DVDs under the same title, “The Soul of Crete,” which include a variety of features: 1. special feasts, such as the godson’s celebration that follows all of the old customs and traditions; 2. natural landscapes, such as the Cape of Gramvousa with its enchanting beach of Balos; 3. the young dancers, the hope and future of our country performing in various locations such as Kissamos and Falassarna; 4. a rich dance show at the Venetian harbor of Chania with dancers of various ages and great artists; and 5. young dancers performing several new choreographies in the first international competition of the TV ANT1 “Greece, you have talent” where they won second place and captured the hearts of all Greeks.

Many Cretan culture and political authorities speak fondly of Mr. Xirouhakis’s work and his contributions to traditional feasts and Cretan ceremonies. Today, his company consists of 70 dancers of various ages from 4 to 30 years old who wear traditional costumes and are ready to perform anywhere they are invited. 12 *lyra* (three-stringed instrument, the symbol of Cretan music) players, 2 *violin* players, 19 distinguished *laouto* (a Cretan version of the lute) players, 95 dancers and 30 Cretan folk singers collaborated in the production of the 5 DVD series. Mr. Xirouhakis is also well-known as a choreographer. Inspired by Cretan history, tradition and folklore,

---

<sup>13</sup> Named in honor of Eleftherios Venizelos (1864-1936) from Chania, an eminent statesman as well as charismatic leader in the early 20th century (--the Athens International Airport is also named after him).

he has created several dances. For the purposes of this study, we will closely examine two of them, “The Battle of Crete” and “The Meraklidikos”.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Battle of Crete & The Meraklidikos**

“The Battle of Crete” was created in 1991 in order to honor all those who fought and gave their lives in that historical battle that took place on May 20, 1941. Horrifying pictures and reports such as the ones related to the Massacre of Kondomari<sup>15</sup> inspired Mr. Xirouhakis to create that dance. Since his childhood, “the historic battle was an event carved in his fantasy mostly due to the narrations he himself heard at the coffeehouses of his village where he also encountered and had the chance to speak with several wounded villagers”. Those atrocities were the reason that, when the celebrations for the 50 years from the Battle of Crete took place and a singing competition was established by the Prefecture of Chania, he asked to participate by creating a dance.

On the second DVD of the series “The Soul of Crete”, which focuses on the teaching and learning of Cretan dances, “The Battle of Crete” is included. Mr. Xirouhakis views that historic event as “one of global significance and chose to pay tribute to the heroic warriors via his choreography.” Let us briefly note here that “The Battle of Crete” took place during World War II and began on the morning of 20 May 1941, when Nazi Germany launched an invasion (the first mainly airborne one in military history) of Crete under the code-name “Operation Mercury” (where “parachute rangers” were used on a massive scale).<sup>16</sup> Greek and Allied forces, along with Cretan civilians, defended the island. After one day of fighting, the Germans had suffered heavy casualties and none of their objectives had been achieved.

The battle lasted about 10 days and was unprecedented in many ways, but mostly because it was the first time the German troops encountered mass resistance from a civilian population. In fact, because of the heavy casualties suffered by the paratroopers, Adolph Hitler forbade further large scale air-

---

<sup>14</sup> Another choreography of Mr. Xirouhakis is that of the “young Zorbas”, based on the popular soundtrack of the 1964 film “Zorba the Greek”, “continuing to spread the aroma of Crete” (Xirouhakis, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> It refers to the execution of male civilians from the village of Kondomari in Chania-Crete by an ad hoc firing squad consisting of German paratroopers on 2 June 1941 during World War II. The shooting was the first of a long series of mass reprisals on the island of Crete and was orchestrated in retaliation for the participation of Cretans in “The Battle of Crete”.

<sup>16</sup> Crete has great strategic importance in the Mediterranean. The harbor at Souda Bay in Chania was the largest in the Mediterranean, an ideal base for naval operations. Control of the island was desirable to both the British and Germans as it would give them greater control of the Mediterranean, the northern end of the Suez Canal and North Africa.

borne operations. His strategic plan was interrupted by a small island in the Mediterranean while his master plan to invade Russia before the coming of winter had to be postponed, which caused thousands of Nazi soldiers to lose their lives as they were not prepared to survive the harsh Russian winter.

The dance devoted to the aforementioned historical event has been performed on several occasions, usually “Battle of Crete” anniversaries, in both Crete and abroad, not only in the town of Chania but also in Germany, Australia and the United States, places where Cretan diaspora communities reside. Mr. Xirouhakis based the dancing figures on moves he “witnessed in mountainous villages where the tradition is kept authentic.” While choreographing, he spoke and danced with old, outstanding dancers, and collaborated with folklorists, university professors and specialists in teaching folk dances. He utilized all of these resources and simultaneously added his own, personal character, “embodying it to the dance meter, ethos and style.”

The dance depicts the spontaneous resistance of the Cretan people to the German *parachuters*, the body-to-body fighting, but also the victory feast. At the same time, it provides the message of the great battle: Cretan people were born free: always to live, fight and give their blood for their freedom. The music of the dance is composed by young Cretan music artist Dimitris Vakakis<sup>17</sup> and its lyrics by Mr. Xirouhakis. Its lyrics are in the traditional *mandinadhes* format and translate as follows: “Black birds covered the Cretan sky and old Mt. Psiloritis roared. All together, the brave ones of Crete, old men, women and children, burst forth like lions for the scared idea in order to show the barbarians that Crete cannot be taken over, and even when burnt by enemies, its soul is invulnerable. In order to give the message to the whole world that the Cretan neck does not bend to foreign rule: It was born free and will live free, so hear this well in both East and West!”

The “Battle of Crete’s” melody starts slower and when the lyrics repeat it becomes faster. This allows the creation of a dance that is both dragging and leaping in nature. Several dancing figures that take place such as the so-called “cuttings-little heels” --when the music cuts off and the dancers hit the heels of their shoes--, the high jumps, the turns and the plain slaps on legs. Its choreography consists of three parts. Part one is called “attack and defense” and shows the spontaneous resistance of the Cretan people who used whatever they could find in order to fight. During the battle scene, the dancers do not hold hands, to show “readiness for attack, alert”. Part two is the “body-to-body fight.” As a wild animal<sup>18</sup> reacts to an enemy which approaches its lair and threatens its young by stamping its

---

<sup>17</sup> He was born in Chania in 1974 and expressed his interest in Cretan music when he was two years old.

<sup>18</sup> In Cretan music, the wild goat serves as a metaphor for the rebel heart that does not succumb to any yoke and breaks free even from the prison of the mind (Ball 2006: 298).

legs and attacking with fury, similarly the Cretans react to the all-powerful enemy who approaches and threatens their existence: they stamp three times to frighten it. With loud cries, the body-to-body fight follows and, finally, the destruction of the enemy ensues. Lastly, the warriors make two turns to check to see whether more of the enemy appear.

As soon as the warriors realize that the danger is over, they celebrate their triumph in the third part, with fast, *pyrrichean* (in the mood of a war) steps, one turn and a frantic moment of jumping movements takes place on the spot. This is the way the choreographer, Mr. Xirouhakis, chose to depict the celebration of Cretan soul's victory which did not succumb to the war's fury. According to him, "the body may have oftentimes been proven weak to the Germans who kneeled upon the European powers but the soul of the Cretans did not break, but struggled, remained straight and thus won." On the DVD series, Mr. Xirouhakis concludes "his-story" with the following: "Till the sun rises and strikes Mt. Psiloritis, Crete will stand up, fight and feast ... I am from Crete, an island that does not bend, does not age, and, when enslaved, it will always be free in order to give freedom lessons."

*Meraklis* in the local, Cretan dialect stands for the happy enthusiast who shows affection to his object, in other words, the satisfied connoisseur who also embodies artistry in all of his actions. In 2009, Mr. Xirouhakis created the "Meraklidikos" dance to portray joy and *kefi* (high spirits). The dance, which is part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> DVD of the series "Soul of Crete", is filmed at the Church of Santa Irene at his native village of Gramvousa and Mr. Xirouhakis conceives of it "as all of us who love Cretan tradition and its gallant dances."

"Meraklidikos" is a rhythmic, pleasant dance, conducted in small and sharp, jumping steps. In combination with its music accompaniment, a joyful and "high spirited" temperament is created. Its steps are simple and easy so that anyone can perform it. The dance has many vivid musical turns and figures such as the "little heel", the "high strikes and jumps", the "dimension" and the unique "*meraklidiki*", which gave its name to the dance. All movements accentuate the grace and the gallantry of the dancer who, in order to execute them well, needs to pay careful attention to the details of the dance. Another goal of this dance is to excite the first dancer and thus create the mood for improvisation.

The music of the dance is composed by *lyra* player Alexandros Xirouhakis<sup>19</sup> and the lyrics mostly by his uncle-choreographer, Mr. Xirouhakis<sup>20</sup>: "When the *meraklis* is born, God gives him the grace, thus no one can ever deprive him of it. The *meraklis* always distinguishes himself because of his dancing steps: they are modest, gallant, as if he is painting! The *meraklis*

<sup>19</sup> On the DVD and on the Cretan lute, Manolis Balomenakis performs.

<sup>20</sup> Except the first verse, which is traditional, and the last, which is composed by Mr. Nektarios Leounakis (Xirouhakis, 2011).

gives joy and makes a table-feast proper: He is always the first in manners and ethics, a bastion of the heart. The eagle<sup>21</sup> and the *meraklis* do not cry when suffering; instead, they turn their pain into song and perform it”.

It is interesting to observe that the first dance, the “Battle of Crete”, refers to a historical event whereas the second, the “Meraklidikos”, wishes to embody the spirit and the essence of being Cretan. In both dances the handhold position resembles the letter W. Comparing them to the ways that gave creation to the *syrtos* and the *pedozalis* we realize how the performing myth-making tradition repeats itself even several years after. It is to the hands of the future, now, to judge how well these “new” dances will stand and whether they will disseminate in the years to come.

### **Cretan Dance Poetics**

All of the afore-mentioned compositions underline the significance of history for the Greeks as well as their strong connection to a place, the island of Crete. Mythologies surrounding gods and heroes are being reborn through music and dance performances to show the concrete links between past and present through a chronological continuation, preserving one’s tradition. Their stories remind us that history repeats itself and it is at the past, therefore, one needs to look before proceeding further. Greek myths are performed, underlying the existence, from antiquity to today, of a whole ritual and not a mere poetic text or melody, something that enables their reincarnation into “folk” or “artistic” tragedies, with ultimate goal a “catharsis”.

As Cretans realize that “no man is an island”, they are conscientiously returning to their roots, using Cretan dances as a way of doing so, as part of an understanding that Ulyssean nostalgia is not an illusion but a valid response to who one is. Through that pathway, they are confident that, in order to examine their souls and thus know themselves, they would have to keep performing Cretan dances.

All works mentioned create sound- and memory-scapes that travel one to the island of Crete. They function ecopsychologically, creating a strong sense of place and belonging, which is not only physically and geographically but also ideologically specified. Conclusively, this deeply felt sentiment also defined as *topophilia* transforms those performed experiences into living communal memories, which constitute a rich source of knowledge and identity and speak for a dancing poetics of Cretanhood.

---

<sup>21</sup> Cretan eagles are unique to the Mediterranean, biologically strong birds, that reside on steep rocks, harsh mountainous and gorge-type areas. They are symbols of freedom and independence, oftentimes portrayed in Greek folk poetry.





### **Bibliography:**

Aligizakis, Agisilaos. 2005. *Cretan Dance: Art & Physical Education*. Heraklion-Crete: Sistrion.

Ball, Eric. 2006. "Folkism and Wild(er)ness: Observations on the Construction of Nature in Modern Greek Culture." *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 32, No. 1-2: 7-43.

Bottomley, Gillian. 1992. *From Another Place: Migration and the Politics of Culture*. Sydney: Cambridge University Press.

----- . 1987. "Cultural, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Representation." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 8 (2): 1-10.

- Caraveli, Anna. 1985. "The Symbolic Village Community Born in Performance." *Journal of American Folklore* 98 (389): 259-286.
- Cowan, Jane. 1990. *Dance and the Body Politics in Northern Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dawe, Kevin (ed.). 2004. *Island Musics*. New York: Berg Publisher, 2004.
- Detorakis, Theoharis. 1994. *History of Crete*. Iraklion-Crete.
- Hanna, Judith. 1979. *To Dance is Human. A Theory of Nonverbal Communication*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press
- Hatzidakis, Georgios. 1958. *Cretan Music: History, Music Theory, Songs and Dances*. Athens-Greece.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1991. *A Place in History: Monumental and Social Time in a Cretan Town*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 1985. *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 1982. *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology and the Making of Modern Greece*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Hnaraki, Maria. 2011. "Souls of Soil." In G. Baldacchino (ed.) *Island Songs*. Lanham MD: The Scarecrow Press. Forthcoming.
- . 2009. "Speaking without Words: Zorba's Dance." In the *Bulletin of the Ethnographic Institute* 57 (2): 25-35. Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA).
- . 2007. *Unraveling Ariadne's Thread: Cretan Music*. Athens, Greece: Kerkyra Publications.
- . 2006. "Speaking without Words: Cretan Dance at Weddings as Expression, Dialogue and Communication." *Folklor Edebiyat* 45 (1): 93-106.
- . 2004. "Is King Zeus Alive? Dance Mythomusicologies in the Mountainous Crete", October 2004. *Arxaiologia* 92: 68-75. Athens-Greece.
- . 1998. "Speaking Without Words: Cretan Dance at Weddings as Expression, Dialogue and Communication." M.A. thesis, Indiana University, Bloomington.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. 1983. "Introduction: Inventing Tradition." In Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaloyanides, Michael. 1975. "The Study of Cretan Dances: A Study of the Musical Structures of Cretan Dance Forms as Performed in the Heraklion Province of Crete." Ph.D. thesis, Wesleyan University.
- League, Panayotis. "Rewriting Unwritten History: Folklore, Mass Media, and the Ban of the Cretan Violin." *A Festschrift in Honor of Hellenic College Dean Lily Makrakis*. Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press. Forthcoming.

Magrini, Tullia and Roberto Leydi (eds.). 2000. *Vocal music in Crete (CD with booklet)*, Berlin: International Institute for Traditional Music; Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways.

Makreas, Mary. 1979. *Cretan Dance: The Meaning of Kefi and Fighoures*. M.A. thesis, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Nettl, Bruno. 1996. "Relating the Present to the Past: Thoughts on the Study of Musical Change and Culture Change in Ethnomusicology." In *Music & Anthropology* 1.

Petridis, T. and Petridis E. 1961. *Folk Dances of the Greeks. Origins and Instructions*. New York: Exposition Press.

Riak, Patricia. 2007. "A Cultural Interpretation of Greek Dance." *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 33 (1&2): 39-59.

----- . 2003. "The Performative Context: Song-Dance on Rhodes Island." *Modern Greek Studies (Australia and New Zealand)* 11: 212-227.

Sachs, Curt. 1937. *World History of the Dance*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Stokes, Martin (ed.). 1994. *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*. Oxford and Providence: Berg.

Tsouhlarakis, Ioannis: <http://www.tsouhlarakis.com/English.htm#Dances>

Xirouhakis, Theoharis. 2011. Series of interviews and personal communication during July-August-September. Chania and Heraklion, Crete.

## **Marija Hnaraki**

### **Kritski identitet kroz njegovu plesnu istoriju**

Plesovi su niti koje su od antičkih vremena tkale tkaninu koja predstavlja kritsko društvo. Trenuci iz istorije se izvode da bi prikazali konkretne veze između prošlosti i sadašnjosti te se stoga transformišu u živa sećanja zajednice stvarajući bogat izvor znanja i identiteta kad se govori od poetici koja predstavlja samo krićanstvo.

**Ključne reči:** Krit, identitet, ples, mito-muzikologija, istorija plesa