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From Homeric Poetry to Cretan Balladry: The Daskaloyannis Song**Abstract:**

Cretan songs suggest Cretans have to protect their land because their ancestors also fought for it. Performing them is a social activity that provides a means through which places become “ours”. In order to show that, we examine “The Daskaloyannis song”, an oral heroic poem consisting of 1,034 rhyming couplets, with detailed references to toponyms and sites that map out the Cretan arena as an integral part of local memory, identity and morality. The study re-visits the Homeric epics and the formulaic theory as Cretan bards mediate tradition, refine cultural stereotypes, cultivate notions of home and idealize a heroic past.

Key words:

Cretan music, rhyming couplets, Homeric epics, oral heroic poetry, place-based education

Prelude

The island of Crete became part of Greece only in 1913, its inhabitants having managed to remain autonomous through a “rebel attitude”. The Cretan mountain-dwellers are particularly famous for their sustained resistance to “foreign” occupation, particularly in reference to a “tainted” Ottoman past due to the presence of the Turks, who landed on the island in 1645, conquered it in 1669 and controlled it until 1898. Cretan music performances consolidate is-land (--in the sense of “being one with one’s land”) identity: Certain lyrics suggest Cretans have to protect their land and be strong because their ancestors fought for it as well.¹ Here I argue how Cretan singing is a social activity that still provides a means by which people recognize identities and how places, such as the island of Crete, through singing become “ours” (Hnaraki 2007: 64).

In order to do so, I examine “The Daskaloyannis song”, a Cretan oral heroic poem that consists of 1,034 lines, all of which are rhyming couplets, namely distichs of two 15 iambic syllables lines, each one being a completely self-contained statement. The song narrates the 1770 Sfakia rebellion against the Ottoman rulers, prompted by promises of Russian aid, and focuses on the treacherous invitation of Ioannis Vlachos or Daskaloyannis

¹ Stokes’s (1994) main argument that music informs our sense of place is also the case with Cretan songs.

(1722 or 1730-1771) to Heraklion by the Pasha, where he was captured and flayed alive. The composition informs us that Barba-Pantzelios, a cheese maker from the village of Mouri in Sfakia, dictated the song to lector Sifis Skordilis, who wrote it down in 1786.

Typically sung from memory and by men only, this historical narrative is intimately wedded to the principal musical repertoires for communal feasts and celebrations. The current study re-visits the formulaic theory and the Homeric epic as Cretan bards --who survive on mountain villages-- and their narrative, particularly iconic poems, mediate tradition, refine cultural stereotypes, cultivate notions of home and idealize a heroic past. The Daskaloyannis song, in local dialect, allows a rare glimpse into the various trajectories that connect southwestern Crete to the rest of the island, a charter myth, so to speak, with detailed references to toponyms and significant sites that map out this arena as an integral part of local memory, identity and morality.

The story behind the song

The Cretan heroic myth is rooted in several revolts against the Turks. Of those the most magnificent was that of Daskaloyannis, whose grand conception was to re-establish the old order, to restore *romiosyne* (namely, Greekness).² He failed, but, unlike others who have gone down to history in comparative anonymity, he was lucky in having a chronicler (Llewelyn 1965: 81). Daskaloyannis was one of the wealthiest men in Crete. His name translates to “John the Teacher”, “teacher” being a mark of respect to his education (--his actual name being Ioannis Vlachos). He spoke foreign languages and wore European clothes. He owned a fleet of ships which traded throughout the Mediterranean, and, in the course of a commercial expedition to the Black Sea, he met the Russian Count Orloff and became, without realizing it, a pawn in Russia’s strategy. The song, however, shows that the Russians deceived Daskaloyannis (Llewelyn 1965: 82). The depressing story of retreat before the Muslim army, which outnumbered Daskaloyannis’s force by about thirty to one, is told in detail by Pantzelios (Llewelyn 1965: 83).

In Crete, “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 *mandinadhes* genre, namely fifteen-syllable rhymed couplets, improvised on the spot --today also “performed” via cell phones and/or facebook--, which constitutes the major form of folk poetry on the island. “In a

² “Master John with all his heart wished Crete to be Greek” reads the 10th line of “The Daskaloyannis song” (1947: 15).

society governed and defined by the spoken word, history takes on a more fluid, malleable character, and over time can be 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).

At the same time, on the island of Crete, the persistence of the heroic age into the present, the geographic isolation of villages such as the ones located at the Sfakia mountainous areas, the recitation of old poems such as the long epic romance *Erotokritos*³ and the creation of new ones, the absence in the heroic poems of supernatural or shamanistic elements and the presence in them of a humanistic epic mentality, all these make Cretan folk poetry an interesting laboratory (Notopoulos 1952: 228-9), even though a fair amount of what the songs tell us can be corrected by documents located, for instance, at the Turkish archives in Heraklion, the capital of Crete.

For instance, our poet, Barba-Pantzelios, exaggerates Sfakia's autonomy and the strength of the Turkish forces used to crush the revolt. In his account, Daskaloyannis offers to give himself up whereas his uncle, Protopappas, appears hostile to the revolt and ends up voluntarily accompanying Daskaloyannis to the Pasha. Lastly, the date of Daskaloyannis's execution is wrong as he was imprisoned for about a year and then put to death, whereas in the poem, his martyrdom immediately follows his defiance of the Pasha.⁴ Because of the 16 years between the actual event and the song's composition, several parts of it have taken mythical aspects. However, the departure from those historical facts serves one purpose: to help make the story heroic (Llewelyn 1965: 86-7).

"The Daskaloyannis song" was first published in 1874 by Emile Le-grand, based on a copy that was given to him by Iosif Manousoyannakis, and was broadly circulated and re-published by various editors soon after.⁵ Today, we know of approximately ten shorter variations that have stemmed out from that same epic, the longest one being of 85 verses long. Those versions were the result of the singer's mnemonic abilities but also the audience's expectations (Petropoulos 1954: 231-2). By having been able to read it, several people have also been able to perform by memory

³ An archetypical long epic romance composed by Vitsentzos Kornaros in early 17th century Crete, consisting of approximately 10,000 fifteen-syllable rhymed verses in the local dialect (Hnaraki 2007: 124).

⁴ Daskaloyannis was imprisoned for about a year and was put to death in June 1771.

⁵ In 1888, Emmanuel Vardidis edited that work again whereas, in less than a year, the song was re-edited in Athens by Pavlos Fafoutakis, followed by Bortolis (in 1939). Lastly, in 1947, Vasilios Laourdias offered us the first autotelic publication of that song, something that proves its literary value (--also explaining why we have used this publication mostly for the present study) (Kapsetakis 2007: 4-5).

parts of the song and thus commemorate the historical events it remarks. The main topics dealt in the song are the preparation of the rebellion, the Turkish expedition, the invitation by the Pasha, the return of the Daskaloyannis's companions to Sfakia as well as the sad devastation of that area.

Daskaloyannis believed that the uprising was possible, so he overcame internal reactions and organized the movement at Sfakia in the spring of 1770. He was counting on Russian help and the fact that the terrain was quite inaccessible made a potential Turkish raid difficult. However, the Turkish reaction was formidable. Sfakia was destroyed whereas no Russian assistance came. Some women and children managed to get to other parts of Greece (--such as the Peloponnese and the island of Kythera) whereas some others managed to escape to the Samaria Gorge. Daskaloyannis, in order to calm the Turkish rage, handed himself over on 17 June 1771 and suffered a horrific death (--he was skinned alive in front of his brother who was driven insane) at Heraklion, the capital of Crete.

Dancing with the heroes

In addition, the mythical dimensions of the song are being revived through a major Cretan dance, the *pedozalis* that 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. According to the local legend, the organizer of the great Cretan rebellion, Daskaloyannis, invited violinist Stefanos Triantafyllakis or Kioros from the villages of Lousakies-Kissamos to attend the meeting of the local chieftains 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) and twelve music phrases in honor of the twelve leaders of the revolt (Tsouhlarakis, web). Moreover, the name of the dance, namely "five stepped", is purely symbolic and stands for the fifth attempt to free Crete from the Turks.⁶ Tradition says that, until the early 1960s, the performers used to call out the name of the captain that corresponded to each musical phrase, this way honoring the memory of Daskaloyannis, his chief comrades and their revolt.

A basic form of communal communication consists of people performing together. What is enacted and created through such activities is the

⁶ 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 "koutsembadianos" or "ka(r)tsimba(r)dianos" (Tsouhlarakis, web).

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).⁷ 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).

Place-based songs

As in Homeric balladry, the characteristics of several heroic Greek folk songs, typically sung from memory, become formulaic tools for carrying meaning. Similarly, the Daskaloyannis song functions as a common identifier of the people who perform it at communal events, employing characteristic melodies, musical rhythmic and metrical structures, calling them to be place-conscious educated human beings, by re-examining the impact of places on culture and identity and embracing one's political role as place maker.

Its lyrics describe and refer to specific landscapes surrounded by mythologies and histories, ancient and modern and, as a result, their stories function both ideologically and ideally. When one is familiar with the place where history has been born, one can feel information and perceive it differently. At the same time, when someone knows the history of one's place, then "spaces" acquire a different substance. Wouldn't a good history lesson be the one that spoke to us in our own language, of our own land's history and nature? And, wouldn't it best if that was achieved via familiar lyrics and tunes?

Mere looking at the mountains inspired and still reinforces on Cretans power during hardship because mountains are "tangible signs of ancient time in the landscape, perceived and identified with a revisited, living past". They are "topographical memory places", namely sites evoking a sense of continuity, hybrid places "compounded of life and death, of the temporal and the eternal, endless rounds of the collective and the individual, the prosaic and the sacred" (Nora 1996: 18 & 15). They stop the flow of time and inhibit forgetting, resulting to a "mountain theology" which exists in the protracted endurance or resurrection of myth and history, language and text.

⁷ In the same sense, anthropologist Caraveli (1985) deals with the "symbolic village community born in performance".

The Samaria Gorge

For example, the Samaria Gorge at the Sfakia province, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and a Wildlife Refuge of the EU's Natura network of protected areas, has played an important role in the local culture in terms of folk narratives and values.⁸ The free and ascetic life of the Samaria wild goat (*Capra aegagrus Cretica* or *kri-kri*), which comprises a hymn to freedom and the will to live, has acquired an emblematic significance and personifies gallantry and love of freedom, values that represent Crete in general.

The ancient Greek word "sfax" means "land of gorges".⁹ The role of Samaria in the history of Crete has been leading as it provided refuge, a safe passage and a base for revolutionary activities. Its inaccessible land and physical isolation offered protection and a place where military equipment could be stored, with a natural bay that was used as a point for receiving supplies by sea (Chaniotaki-Smyrlaki 2008: 129). It is a living example of a harmonious relationship throughout the centuries between humans and nature. In fact, many of the historical events that defined the course of the island would not have had the same result were it not for the Samaria Gorge (Papavasileiou 2008: 70).

A Cretan rhyming-couplet characteristically says that "if you wish to learn what the Sfakian land produces, ask the gorges to tell you of Daskaloyannis". Even though the song recounts the Cretan sacrifice, it is also full of toponyms that prove the relationship of place to people (Kapsetakis 2007: 3). In the Samaria Gorge, every speck of earth, for those who know the place, has its own name (--a microtoponym, we may say). For instance, on lines 455-464 of "The Daskaloyannis Song", Barba-Pantzelios eloquently describes the effort the Sfakians made to save the women and children hidden in the Samaria Gorge, the shelter for life and den of freedom (Chaniotaki-Smyrlaki: 131):

The Turks are capturing many shores, they are heading to Ayia Roumeli;
The families are leaving, they exit at Linoseli.

⁸ It is the longest gorge in Europe (--15km), an internationally recognized "sight" which was declared a National Park in 1962, with a reputation from antiquity until our days. It places Crete on international environmental maps and, as a tourist attraction, it has contributed significantly not only to the growth of the economy of Sfakia but of the whole prefecture. Humans have lived within and around the gorge, developing an almost self-sufficient economy with activities that have resulted in the natural protection of the park and sustainable development (Papavasileiou 2008: 70).

⁹ More on this by the German linguist and archaeologist Deffner (130-1) who also believed that "whoever walks in the mountains and the gorges can only turn into a gallant man and love Freedom" (101).

At an attempt to enter the ravine, at the bottom of Samaria,
 At the Portes they met with Yannis Bonatos.
 So they battle with him and he makes them turn back.
 They passed Eliyia and yet he draws near them.
 Others also came straight in from Xyloskalo,
 Turning upside down any families they found.
 Few were guarding and suddenly they fell upon them;
 They only manage to arrive at Neroutsiko where they shored them up.

The legacy of those revolutionary times can still be felt a century later through the notion that Crete is somehow quintessentially free, self-sufficient and “tough”. While the song transmits an interpretation of the past, it is 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 resistance 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 in such songs from the lifestyle qualities associated with “being a true Cretan”.

From Homeric poetry to Cretan balladry

Revolts are the main theme of songs which glorify the strongly ingrained Cretan ideal of gallant living and dying. In many of them, Apostolakis detects the Homeric questioning concerning the worlds of the living and the dead (--as in the popular tune “Gold World, Liar World”, 1993: 382). Notopoulos argues how Cretan bards -- who still survive on the mountain villages of Sfakia and Psilorites -- and their narrative poems are imbued with the same code of honor that characterizes Homer and his warriors (1959: 10). He goes on further to show how these revolutionary ballads accompanying contemporary Cretan feasts (--the so-called “songs of the table”) relate to the ancient Greek symposia.

“The audience cannot tell whether the story imitates life or life the story”, he claims (1964: 45), depicting how the formulaic texture found in Cretan songs agrees with the way epic Homer was performed at communal gatherings and the songs were passed down from generation to generation via minstrels.¹⁰ For example, Daskaloyannis’s response to the Pasha King Leonidas had also given. The farewell scene with his wife reminds us of

¹⁰ Several heroic Greek songs, indeed, composed by “illiterate” bards commemorate the ensuing revolts and have retained the basic structure of older historical poems: the formulaic prologue followed by the narration of the event and concluded by an epilogue which gives us information about the bard.

the one between Hector and Andromache. Moreover, the hero's self-sacrifice also identifies with the Greek Orthodox Christian belief.

In addition, "The Daskaloyannis Song" has retained the formulaic prologue with the invocation to a higher being and the announcement of the hero and the theme of the poem followed by the narration of the event. It concludes with a quite long epilogue which gives us information not only about the bard but also the circumstances of the composition and a description of his poet friend who dictated the poem to him under the Holm-oak.¹¹ The structure of the poem is permeated with parataxis with approximately 40% of it devoted to speeches that make the story dramatic (Notopoulos 1952: 249). The similes and metaphors reveal the beauty of nature, contrasting its eternity with the transience of mortality.

Memoryscapes

All in all, Cretan folk poetry is capable of cultivating both a sense of place and ecological awareness along with a duty to one's home. It carries literal messages of environmental themes that can function as cultural vehicles, keeping alive the distinctive nature and culture, the "scent" of Crete. After all, "hearing" who we are through folk poetry makes everything around us become part of our life stories. Learning to listen to what places are telling us is the pedagogical challenge of place-conscious education.¹²

Collective memories turn the singer into an organic historian. 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 ritualized process of remembering historic facts through songs inspires and encourages us to remember our past not only in an attempt to preserve it but, most importantly, in order to prepare for the future. Through tough periods of crises not essentially financial but mostly ideological, the notions of the Homeric "*arete*" (virtue), the Christian "*thysia*" (sacrifice) along with the modern Greek "*levendia*" (gallantry)

¹¹ The addition of the epilogue (--something unusual as most oral heroic poetry is anonymous) technically known as *sfragis*, is quite a regular feature in Cretan poetry. The same feature is found in the paintings of the Cretan-Venetian school in the 16th-17th centuries (e.g. by El Greco, Notopoulos 1952: 235).

¹² Education can serve the social and ecological well-being of particular places. This intervention is important for place-based educational theory and suggests the possibility of broader discussions about education as a means for dealing with interrelated social and ecological issues and for effecting socioecological change wherein the social and ecological are held to be inextricably interdependent (Ball and Lai 2006: 270).

can and should be re-visited through songs like the “Daskaloyannis” one (755-8), where the “We” stands before the “I”:

Firstly for my fatherland, and secondly for my faith,
Thirdly for the Christians who live in Crete.
For even if I am from Sfakia, I am also a child of Crete,
And to see the Cretans in torment hurts me.

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Od Homerovske poezije do kritske balade: Daskalojanisova pesma

Kritske pesme sugerišu Krićanima da čuvaju zemlju jer su se i njihovi preci borili za nju. Njihovo izvođenje je društvena aktivnost koja obezbeđuju sredstva kroz koja mesta postaju "naša". Da bismo to pokazali, proučavamo "Daskalojanisovu pesmu", usmenu herojsku pesmu koja se sastoji od 1034 rimujuća kupleta, sa detaljnim referencama na toponime koji mapiraju kritsku arenu kao integralni deo lokalnog sećanja, identiteta i moralnosti. Studija se osvrće na homerovsku epiku i na formulisanu teoriju gde kritski bardovi uređuju tradiciju, rafinišu kulturne stereotipe, kultivišu predstave o domu i idealizuju herojsku prošlost.

Ključne reči: kritska muzika, rimujući kupleti, homerska epika, usmena herojska poezija, obrazovanje zasnovano na mestu