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Big Fat Green Rhymes: Unfolding the Environmental Clue of Cretan Songs

Abstract:
One type of Cretan songs, the *rizitika*, created by the inhabitants of Western Crete, suggests to Greeks, through lyrics that describe various Cretan landscapes, they have to protect their land and be strong because their ancestors fought for it. This paper shows how Cretan songs mediate traditions, reinforce cultural stereotypes and reconnect Cretans with their roots as Cretan souls, through music performance, identify with the soil of Crete.
Key words:
Cretan music, *rizitika* songs, music ecology, place-based music education

Place-based Singing

Place-based "Greek" wanderings can be traced back to Aristotle (*Physics*) who argued how "The power of place is remarkable" to the contemporary folk poet of the island of Crete who sings "The good rhyming couplet (*mandinadha*) isn't randomly built; it must contain stone, soil and water from Crete". On a Mediterranean island between East and West that serves as the crossroads amongst three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia, musical expression has historical significance and is connected to the fight, the resistance and the rebellions against the Turks, who landed on Crete in 1645 and controlled it until 1898, as well as the Germans, who invaded the island during Second World War.

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. Cretan music performances consolidate *is-land* (--in the sense of "being one with one's land") identity: Certain songs suggest locals have to protect their land and be strong because their ancestors fought for it through lyrics that describe various Cretan landscapes surrounded by stories, ancient and modern.

Stokes's main argument that music informs our sense of place (1994) is also the case with Cretan songs. Singing informs a sense of place and claims land. As a social activity, it provides a means by which locals recognize territories that become "theirs". In this paper I focus on one genre of such songs, the *rizitika*, and argue that they are place-based, an integral part of local memory and morality (Papalexandrou 2007: 169). I also 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).[1]

Songs of the Foothills

The *rizitika* were created by the inhabitants of Western Crete who dwell in the White Mountains, shepherds' lands. Their name derives from the Greek word "*riza*", which means root. Thus, *rizitika* are the "songs of the foothills". They are perceived as the basis of life, similarly to how the roots of a tree are the source of its nutrition, in other words, a direct and solid link to Mother Earth. They have diverse lyrical functions but make symbolic use of nature images, which convey meanings of independency and freedom in an allegoric, yet obscure to an outsider way, something what enabled partisans throughout different periods of occupation to organize resistance.

Such songs function ecopsychologically, creating a strong sense of belonging. As American Indian literatures promote and teach the interdependence and connectedness of all living things, likewise Cretan folk poetry centralizes landscape and places its recipients within an environmental context. After all, place is not only physical, but ideological as well (Dreese 2002, pp. 8 & 69). Beside its geographical specification, it carries deep meanings too.

This kind of deeply felt sentiment toward a place also defined by geographers as *topophilia* Solomon investigates in his "Mountains of Song and Musical Constructions of Ecology, Place and Identity in the Bolivian Andes" where locals "duel" landscapes and "sing" places (1997). In the case of the *rizitika*, the use of local dialects takes audiences in villages where various idioms unique from place to place exist. As the poetic texts promote an ethic of "the wild" and reinterpret Cretan rebellious identity in the service of environmentally minded place awareness (Ball 2006: 275), Cretan rhymes are judged in relation to the larger social and historical context of each community.

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 (--such as in the popular tune "Gold World, Liar World", 1993: 382)[2]. Notopoulos argues how Cretan bards --who still survive on the mountain villages of Sfakia and Psilorites-- and their narrative poems

[1] Certain parts of this article are further negotiated on a forthcoming book chapter (Hnaraki 2011).
[2] For the full lyrics of this song, please refer to the last part of this article.

are imbued with the same code of honor that characterizes Homer and his warriors (1959: 10).[3]

When listening to Cretan mountain songs one can immediately relate them to Byzantine chanting. Because Cretans communed with donkeys or horses, the song rhythms follow the pace of those animals sounding like "horse marching". The melodies are many and the singers never achieve unison for each man sings in his own pitch and in such a way that his own voice is not lost in the group singing. These songs might be raucous to the Western ear but are full of the gusty vitality of the Cretan mountaineers (Baud-Bovy 1960: 83). Traditionally, women are not solo singers; however, they know the lyrics and occasionally join the chorus by repeating them "silently".

The songs are mainly vocal and male. A soloist leads such performances and introduces each stanza, whereas an informal choir repeats them similarly enough to responsories. They are made up of a variable number of fifteen syllables verses worked out in stanzas. A stanza consists of an entire line and the first hemistich of the following one; all the stanzas begin with the repetition of the last hemistich of the previous one, so that they are all interconnected, thus making the song strophic.

During the performance, each stanza is sung by a soloist repeated by a second group, or a group repeated by a second group, with no variation of the verbal text; by contrast, minor variations in the musical interpretation of the melody are common. The style of choral singing is heterophonic: the performers carry the same basic melody with some individual melodic or rhythmic variations.

The iterative technique is connected with the group partaking in a common psychological condition with the necessity of reaching and manifesting emotional contact and accord. It is a symbolic expression of one of the most basic forms of interpersonal relationship and for its structure it may be named "iteration in consonance", to emphasize the search for a group emotional relationship through the members' collective resonance in a common action.

Such songs are integral to the principal musical repertoire for communal celebrations all over Crete. 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 call-and-response

[3] Several songs 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.

singing, a relationship shaped according to an ideal of cooperation and socialization of the group's values.[4]

The performance requires extreme precision in the processes of memorization and rendition of the verbal and musical arrangement specific of individual songs. Such a complexity emphasizes the ritual character of performing the *rizitika*, implying that their particular communicative code is shared by the singers. In turn, they find in this musical genre a performative outlet for their own collective identity, which cannot easily be accessed by others, as it requires an in-depth knowledge of the oral tradition of the group. 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). Viewed through Dawe's lenses, Cretan songs are socially constructed and made meaningful within the Cretan island society (2004: 1). As a result, a man's ability to sing a song has an importance which is being evaluated.

When the singers perform together, in unison, they may sound cacophonic as each one is acting "egoistically" but for the common good, in loud, unison voices of personal caliber (Baud-Bovy 1960: 83). What is peculiar to the performance of the *rizitika* is that, when performers sing the lines, they elaborate them according to a particular technique called *apoghaermata* or *andighaermata*. That is, they split the lines into fragments, breaking up words as well, and proceed to repeat incomplete parts of lines in a kind of "stammering".

Echoing Eco-Musicologies

According to Magrini (2000b), there is a distinction between two ways of performing the *rizitika*, the "goat" and the "sheep" style. The first refers to a style widespread in the mountains, characterized by a "head voice", the frequent use of the singer's high register, and particular emphasis on melodic decoration, performed with great dexterity. By contrast, the "sheep" style, which is widespread in the plains, is closer in some respects to the style of the Byzantine chant. It employs a "chest voice" and is less ornamental. Both styles are characterized by great resonance.

Cretan land embodies the deeply felt everyday experiences of carrying on agriculture and pastoralism. Names of Cretan music genres denote such relationships, such as the "goat" (*gitsikia sousta*) or the "sheep" (*provatisios horos*), the "tree heath-evergreen shrub" (*priniotis*) and the "rose" (*rodho*) dances. Locals refer to the love repertory that stems from the plains or the valleys, in opposition to the one associated with the mountainous, wilder "areas".

[4] 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).

Timbres of instruments and singing styles serve to construct and evoke place-based identities. Cretan singers embody the roughness of the landscape of their "native" foothills, such as the legendary Mount Ida where, according to ancient Greek mythology, Zeus grew up and the birth of music and dance took place, wishing to be compared to an everlasting-resilient mountain or a Minotaur-beast hidden in a cave. Musicians of the mountainous parts add bells to the bow of their string instruments for the sounds to resemble the "eagles" (*gherakokoudhouna*). They even enlarge the original sizes of their instruments so as to mimic the "thunders" (*vrondolyra*).

Cretan folk song lyrics use images borrowed from the physical environment, the fauna and the flora of the island. Similar to how Tuvan singing was born in Tuva, a Russian republic situated on the Mongolian border, out of the culture of sheep and reindeer herders using mimesis of horses, rhythms and other metaphors taken mostly from the natural environment (Levin 2006: 73-124), Cretan folk song lyrics use images borrowed from the physical environment, the fauna and the flora of the island, such as the eagles or the mountains. I have chosen to speak further on two images, those of the eagle and the wild goat.

According to Greek mythology, the golden eagle was Zeus's friend, a symbol of strength, courage and justice and a good omen, which he kept by his side at all times. In Byzantine heraldry, the double-headed eagle represented the dual sovereignty of the Emperor (--secular and religious) and the dominance of the Byzantine Emperors over both East and West. According to a Greek folk song, an eagle grasped the head of the last Byzantine Emperor, Constantine Paleologos, so that the Turks wouldn't loot it. The Cretan eagles are unique to the Mediterranean, biologically strong birds, that reside on steep rocks, harsh mountainous and gorge-type areas. They are endangered species, protected under the "Life program of the European Union".

An example of a Cretan *rizitiko* song that refers to an eagle is the one that describes that bird seated on a high mountain, at the edge of a cliff, all wet and covered by ice, asking for the sun to rise, so that the snow melts away from its wings and the frost from its fingernails. "The Eagle" symbolizes the Cretan rebel and rebel heart in general and depicts the misfortunes of Cretans who were trapped in caves during severe snow storms and/or the activities of Cretan guerillas captured by the Turks who were impatiently waiting spring so that they could once again ascend the mountains, and, from that height, announce the island's liberty, stirring up national sentiment. That song has been performed several times at wedding celebrations I was present at. It was also performed on November 4, 2009, for the 80th birthday of the Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durrës and All Albania by his former student, Cretan-born and currently the Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and all Africa, Theodore the 2nd.

According to Hadjidakis, the afore-mentioned song describes the activities of rebel Michail Vlachos, a Cretan guerilla who was eventually captured by the Turks and executed on the central common of Heraklion on February 1857 (1958: 114). In the song, he is impatiently awaiting spring so that can once again ascend the mountains of the Omalos region, and, from that height, announce the island's liberty and stir up national sentiment. The author of the poem is reported to be the fighter Stefanos Dalis, a participant in the 1821 Greek war of independence (Kaloyanides 1975: 21 and Hadjidakis 1958: 113-4).

The second image, that of the wild goat (Capra aegagrus Cretica or *kri-kri*), comprises a hymn to freedom and the will to live. Cretan-born Zeus, after all, was nourished by the milk of the wild goat Amalthea. That animal had sacred significance for the Minoans, something attested on several wall paintings, vessels, seals and coins. In Cretan poetry, the wild goat, also an endangered species unique to the island, 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.

Take for instance the popular *rizitiko* song which talks of wild goats and kids, tamed deer, where the singer is asking the animals to provide him with information on "where they live, where they are staying at during the winter". The response by the "wild" flock is that "they live in the precipices, the cliffs; the steep peaks are their winter quarters, the caves in the mountains are their ancestral home". Apart from being performed at private and communal feasts, that song has been identified with different periods in Greek history that deal with guerilla- and anti-totalitarian feelings.

Let me mention here that the Muslim inhabitants of Crete listened to the music of the Cretan instruments, danced the same dances with the Greeks of Crete and sung (almost) the same tunes. However, they avoided the performance of "mountain songs" because they knew most of them included anti-Turkish symbolisms and "love metaphors" purposefully misleading.

Place-conscious Education

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 270, pp. 2006).

Poetry and music are important and pervasive in Cretan students' everyday life. They have entered technology in many ways, as electronic greeting cards, facebook groups, twitter and text phone messages. Thus,

they can constitute a tool in the educators' hands which, in a unique way, holistically develop students' personality. In other words, they are able of promoting the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students as well as their mental and physical development. Nowadays, these art forms are a subject of school curricula in different parts of the world, expected to also develop students' skills, knowledge and attitudes that will eventually transform them into responsible and active citizens.

With an eye towards future generations, art and music education aim at raising students' awareness so that the way one lives affects the world around one's *ecos*. It is crucial for students to acknowledge that all aspects of the environment, local and global, living and non-living, relate and influence each other and therefore need to be sustained in harmony. Concurrently, it is equally crucial for students to acknowledge that they constitute part of the environment with which they are "inextricably interdependent" (Ball and Lai 270, pp. 2006). In other words, students and the environment have a symbiotic relationship; they affect the environment and the environment affects them. It is this symbiotic relationship that students need to, first, acknowledge and, secondly, sustain in balance for otherwise the consequences will be disastrous for all.

Moreover, students in this way are given opportunities to appreciate their own *ecos* so that in future appreciate the *ecos* of others as well. Students' sustainable development also becomes an aid to their intercultural understanding for issues of identity and belonging, similarity and difference, human rights and responsibilities. Thus, all aspects of student's identity become meaningful for they are connected to several aspects of their environment. Students acknowledge the critical relationship between poetry, music and *ecos* and learn to create opportunities to relate to other cultures. To put the aforementioned issues in education practice, educators need to re-conceptualize their educational values, aims, content and practices. This re-conceptualization of education provides the basis for establishing students' sustainable development.

Cretan folk poetry holds a strong potential to sensitize students to the environmental or ecological aspects of a place through which they learn and discuss numerous topics, issues and problems. Specific subject-matters which stem out of Cretan rhymes may include human pain and nature, endless love and nature, fate and nature, religion and nature, musical instruments associated with feelings of love and happiness, distant love and color in traditional costumes as well as migration and economic poverty.

Upon reading and analyzing the afore-mentioned Cretan folk poetry, the educator can ask the students to identify and discuss how the symbiotic relationship between nature and man is conveyed as a result of the specific culture and time. For instance, students might be asked to explore how locality influences composing, to comment on the use of natural elements and how they illustrate certain occasions, to compose a song that portrays

various feelings, to relate objects from their environment with meaningful aspects of their life, to simulate sounds that portray the sentiments of people from other parts of the world, to specify how certain lyrics have social and economical associations, to talk about the moods of the composer as well as to produce sounds from their local context and relate them with certain emotions.

In short, students' knowledge, skills and understanding towards sustainable development are broadened since Cretan poetry conveys the importance that nature plays in local and global cultures but also in personal identity. Educators could create interactive kits through which students learn to value and care for their home by a) identifying lyrics that have social and cultural associations, b) recognizing how locality influences composing, c) commenting on the use of natural elements to express feelings, d) discussing how voices and instruments are associated with certain feelings, e) relating objects from their environment with meaningful aspects of their life, f) simulating sounds that portray feelings of people from other parts of the world in specific time and place, g) producing sounds from their local context related to feelings and h) composing their own rhymes or songs.

For the Kenyan Kikuyu, music is not just for entertainment, it is also used to remember history. It reinforces levels of consciousness and an appreciation of one's tradition. It develops ethnic and politic identities, inspires and encourages remembering history (Wilson 2006). Similarly, Cretan singing brings back memories of "our" land, resistance and liberation.

Place-conscious education human beings can examine the impact of places on culture and identity and embrace one's political role as place maker. Cretan folk poetry, such as the *rizitika,* can educate the youth through environmentally sensitive spirits. 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?

Back to the Roots

It is also important to underline that the afore-mentioned ideals have survived in time but also in space. Today, these songs are still performed in the areas they were created. At the same time, they have also become a strong symbol of identity for all the people of Crete and Greece. They have even exceeded Greece's borderlines, coming to function as a common language amongst Greeks globally. This way, through commonly shared

phraseology, the individual pain becomes collective and the personal a refraction of the collective.

Several are the Cretan music groups who pursue "authentic" (--thus strictly male and vocal, versus mixed-gender and occasionally instrumental and/or mixed with pop sounds and instruments) singing of Cretan songs. Several also are the Cretan artists who include mountain songs performances in their repertory. Legendary Psaradonis gives to the singing style of these songs a unique, pioneering approach, which embodies the roughness of the landscape of his "native" foothills of legendary Mount Ida and the island of Crete in combination with the timbre of his vocal performances and *lyra* playing.

The performance of mountain songs is welcomed by the younger generations on the island of Crete and by Cretans all over the world who maintain webpages even facebook groups, encouraging and promoting the preservation and teaching of this music genre. Such songs are included at the Greek school books and are part of the repertory of national school feasts.

The following lyrics myself and my Drexel Study Abroad in Crete students witnessed performed on July 24 2010 at the Cretan village of Meskla as part of the memorial activities held in honor of late Drexel University President Constantine Papadakis, a native of that village. As the religious services and officials' speeches came to an end, a group of local men stood by the bust of Dr. Papadakis --which now overviews-- the central square of Meskla singing:

Oh golden word, o silver world, o gilded globe of beauty,
Who, liar, managed to enjoy, exhaust and outwear you?
I, liar world, enjoyed you --but will not win you over!
On foot I walked on mountains, riding a horse on plains,
A passer-by…

All afore-mentioned poetry has functioned (--and still functions) as a common identifier of the group of people who perform it at communal events because of characteristic melodies, musical rhythmic and metrical structures. As in Homeric balladry, the characteristics of several heroic Greek folk songs, typically sung from memory, become formulaic tools for carrying meaning and textual recall.

All in all, Cretan songs serve as cultural fertilizers, capable of consolidating grounds and cultivating notions of home. By re-localizing and ecologizing them we can teach our audiences to be responsible to their home, socially and ecologically aware of their island. As Cretans realize that "no man is an island", they are conscientiously returning to their roots, using Cretan songs 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, as in the story of Adam and

Eve, they are too made out of soil, and that, in order to examine their souls and thus know themselves, they would have to keep performing island songs.

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Maria Hnaraki

Velike mrsne zelene rime: otkrivanje ključa životne sredine u krićanskim pesmama

Jedna vrsta kritskih pesama, *rizitika*, stvorena od strane stanovnika zapadnog Krita, sugeriše Grcima, kroz tekstove koji opisuju različite kritske pejsaže, da moraju da štite svoju zemlju i budu jaki jer su se njihovi preci borili za nju. Ovaj rad pokazuje kako kritske pesme povezuju tradicije, jačaju kulturne stereotipe i iznova povezuju Krićane sa korenima, dok se kritske duše, kroz muzička izvođenja, identifikuju sa tlom Krita.

Ključne reči: kritska muzika, rizitike, muzička ekologija, prostorno bazirano muzičko obrazovanje