

Dialogues in Rhyme: The Performative Contexts of Cretan *Mantinádes*

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In Crete, a tradition of rhyming couplets, the *mantinádes*, is still widely used to shape one's thought into a sharper, more expressive form. These short, communicative poems contain two rhyming fifteen-syllable lines and a full, independent meaning. Even today, new poems are constantly composed and new and old poems are sung and recited in a wide range of performance contexts. Until the 1980s, this poetic model was extensively used in feasts and other singing events, as well as in the casual verbal discourses of the oral village communities. During the last thirty years, the society and the ways of communication have undergone major changes in Crete. Although oral composition and performances continue to take place, it is more likely that an outsider encounters these couplets today as songs performed by professional musicians, in written form, or in daily TV and radio shows. However, one of the chief means of understanding the way local people mentally contextualize even these modern performances is to return to the oral arenas. Some of these still exist as current practices, whereas some are present mentally since they have been lived through by all adult generations. The main aim in this article is to explore the basis for the local experience of meaning and creativity associated with the poetic language of *mantinádes* with regard to the appearance of the poems in the different kinds of performances.

Similar local models of short, contextually extemporized poems have been common in most societies, but just how they function as communication and self-expression is less comprehensively known and researched. Today, most of these traditional, short poetic languages have already disappeared; *mantinádes* in Crete still provide a good opportunity to observe how a communicative, versatile oral poetic language works. Even if many collective forms of oral communication are already remote to contemporary citizens, many individuals continue this verbal tradition. Moreover, the disciplines focusing on verbal arts provide today a good ground for understanding communicative performances. Methodologically, the research of two anthropologists, Michael Herzfeld (1981; 1985a:141-49; 1985b) and Charles Briggs (1988), has been especially influential on short, conversational forms. They both emphasized that the *local focus* in the use of these verbal forms is on situational meaning and communicative creativity. The objective of my research is to show how, in addition to being a vehicle for communicative creativity, the poetic model is also a remarkable vehicle for self-expression and artistic creativity in the composition of poems. This side of the poetic tradition serves as a bridge when entering modern society.

My acquaintance with the Cretan tradition dates from a period of studies as an exchange-student at the University of Crete in Réthymno in 1997. Since then I have returned many times and spent several years conducting fieldwork.¹ This paper, and the forthcoming dissertation, is largely based on participative, dialogic, long-term fieldwork and focuses on the local experience among the contemporary poem-culture, with a perspective on the past as far as still recollected by the local oral history. My main experience is from central Crete, the Departments of Réthymno and Iráklío, but I have conducted several field trips and interviews in the eastern and western parts of the island as well. From 2001, while conducting fieldwork, I have lived in a small village in the Milopótamos valley, in the Department of Réthymno. I will refer to this locale here as the “Village.”



A view of the Milopótamos valley and the Psilorítis mountain range. Photo by the author.

¹ I first studied in Réthymno from February to June 1997. I returned there to study and to conduct fieldwork for the whole academic year 1999-2000 and part of 2000-01, when my stay was supported by a grant from the Greek state. I completed my Master’s thesis on the theme in February 2003. The ongoing long-term doctoral research began in 2004 and has been made possible by a three-year grant (2004-2006), and a six-month grant (2007) from the Finland’s Cultural Foundation as well as a grant from the Finnish Literary Society in 2007. I spent eight months continuously in Crete in 2004, and thereafter have returned at regular intervals for stays from two to six weeks up to this date. During the spring of 2001, when we first rented a house and integrated ourselves into the life of a small village in the Milopótamos valley in Central Crete, and in 2004, my Greek partner, Giánnis Hatziharalámpous, participated as a co-fieldworker in most field trips and experiences.

Earlier research already attests to the creativity and multipurpose uses that are characteristic of the register: the versatile format and improvisation typical of *mantinádes* were structurally studied as early as in the 1930s by the Swiss ethnomusicologist, Samuel Baud-Bovy (1936). During the 1970s and 1980s, American anthropologists and folklorists conducted field research widely in the Mediterranean area, and Anna Caraveli (1982, 1985) and Michael Herzfeld (1981, 1985b; also 1985a:141-49) contributed important studies on the dynamics and meaning of the social poetic communication with *mantinádes* in Crete, Rhodes, and Karpathos. Another contributor to this field is Pavlos Kavouras, who wrote his dissertation on the “poetics of exile,” the social discourse through poem performances (1991).

Among the other cultures nearby, many parallel traditions are encountered: for example, Steven Caton (1990) has shown in detail how conversational forms of oral poetry are composed and used in the situations of contest and conflict, and Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) has introduced the meaning of short emotional verses sung and recited by Bedouin women and young men.²

A closer look at the Cretan tradition of singing, reciting, and composing *mantinádes* challenges one to focus on the *individual experience of creativity* in the use of the traditional poetic language. By this phrase I refer to the creativity and meaningfulness of each person’s experiences. These include one’s artistic, recreational, self-expressive, or communicative experiences from the perspective of each person’s very different background, intentions, and competence. Making rhymes attracts the masters of communication as well as those composing their first verses, and both experience creativity in this poetic activity. Although it is interesting to consider the competence in, or the textual or communicational results of, the process of making or performing a poem, my primary focus will be on capturing this experience.

In broad terms, my research focuses on how tradition and individuality interact in this kind of oral poetry that I refer to as *dialogic*. By this term I mean that the primary nature of these short poems is dialogic, communicative. People communicate through poems, in the concrete dialogues of singing or reciting poems. People also communicate with the tradition and the poems themselves, in their inner emotional dialogues and in composition. Poems are thus in *explicit* dialogic relations to other poems and performances, or to the whole tradition. Dialogism, and dialogic intertextuality between performances and texts, is a broadly recognized phenomenon (Bakhtin 1986), and textual and contextual features are somehow in dialogue most probably in all verbal registers and genres (see, e.g., Briggs 1988). The naming of such short, communicative registers as dialogic oral poetry, or dialogic registers, is an effort to point to their special, essential characteristics, and to place them among the ecology of traditional oral poetics.³ In the forthcoming dissertation I will elaborate on a theoretical frame for dialogic oral

² For Arabic traditions see also the articles of Jargy, Haydar, Sbait, Sawa, and Sowayan in *Oral Tradition*, 4 (1989); for couplets in the Balkans see Kligman 1988, Lockwood 1983, and Sugarman 1988; in Turkey see Bartók 1976; in Malta see Herndon and McLeod 1980.

³ John Miles Foley proposes the word ecology (or ecosystem) to characterize the coexistence of different “species” of oral tradition in natural societies (Foley 2002:188-218; 2005:75-78). These species can be recognized as scholarly genres (epic, lyric, lament, genealogy, folktale, and so forth.), or they can be indigenously identified (Timonen 2004:84-157). Special dialogic registers have existed widely in traditional societies, and people have also used other registers dialogically (see espec. Tarkka 2005 and Tarkka forthcoming), although during the earlier research paradigms, researchers and collectors did not notice this phenomenon or did not regard such registers

poetry. In this dissertation, the subject of my research is the poetic register itself, the social and individual motivations and values in the use of the tradition, the variety of performances, the technique of composition, the meaning of the poetic idiom as a mental model, and the interaction and coexistence of oral and literary.

The focus of this article is on the performance of *mantinádes*, and especially on the multitude of the *possible* performance arenas. I will use the notion *performance arena* in the sense introduced by John Miles Foley (1995:8, 47-49): beyond the physical environment where the performance takes place as a *virtual* arena, where the meanings and references carried by the *register*,⁴ the shared special language of expression, can be expressed and understood economically. I concentrate here on the oral performance arenas, which I think also form a necessary basis for any conversation on the performances in the written or media arenas. I have grouped these oral arenas into the following five frames: first, the sung performances 1) in a *glénti* (feast), 2) in a *paréa* (a get-together of a group of friends);⁵ and second, the recited performances 3) embedded into speech (proverbial, referential, meditative, etc), 4) telling a story of a past performance, 5) presenting poetic inventiveness.

I will first introduce some general characteristics of the verbal tradition, then describe the traditional singing performance arenas as they were up to the 1980s, and as they are in their present forms, and then proceed to the recited performances. In the end I will briefly summarize how this traditional dialogic communication with poems is immanent even today.

One must take into consideration the reality that the local differences in the ways people traditionally celebrated and entertained musically are remarkable across eastern, central, and western Crete. Although the presentation of these forms can only be suggestive here, I wish to include some major lines, since a national myth constructed in middle of the twentieth century of the lyra (*lira*; see below) as *the* original musical instrument largely still prevails in many sources presenting what is referred to as “Cretan” music. *Mantinádes* are, however, “*said*”⁶ and *made* similarly throughout the entire island. They have also been popular in other southern Dodecanese islands.

The Register of *Mantinádes*

Historically, the poetic model of the *mantináda* was created when end-rhyme, with the introduction of new Western literary models, became established in the fifteenth century when Crete was governed by Venetia. This end-rhyme bound together two of the already established Byzantine *dekapentasilavo*, fifteen-syllable metrical lines. The new model became established

valuable or appealing. Research on conversational folklore forms occurs mainly during the last three decades of the twentieth century, and is taken up by scholars carrying out long-term fieldwork in a community.

⁴ For the use of the term register, see Halliday 1978:31-35, 110-11; Hymes 1989:440; and Foley 1995:15-17, 49-53.

⁵ In standard Greek the word *paréa* generally means “company.”

⁶ The Modern Greek verb *léo* means “to say,” but in connection to songs it also means to “sing.”

both as a unit of composition in the popular literary romances of the Cretan school (especially predominant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and in the narrative folk songs, *rímes*, and as independent oral couplets, *mantinádes*. The essential characteristic of a *mantináda*, other than fulfilling the requirements of meter, rhyme, and poetical virtues, is that it contains an independent meaning within the short two lines.⁷

Mantinádes form an oral poetic tradition where an idea, a short story is ideally encapsulated in a poetic picture, which is drawn with quick, referential strokes in the frames of the tightly rule-governed traditional metrical model. The language closely resembles natural language, but the poetic pictures, metaphors, and the metrical mold make it clearly differ from everyday speech. Dialectal Cretan forms are extensively used at all the levels of language. The model is structurally extremely versatile and the ideas that are expressed are limitless: many of the poems are romantic, erotic, or emotional, but *mantinádes* can as well comment on or negotiate a situation proverbially, they can greet, tease, or satirize a person, they can state a general philosophical idea, or they can express personal views on life. Besides the communicative, argumentative dimensions of the poetic language, the community highly values poetic virtues and individual inventiveness.

In Crete, creativity in the use of the tradition is seen both in the composition of new couplets as well as in the clever, apt contextual use of a poem in a singing or speech situation (Amargianákis 1988:328; Herzfeld 1985a:141). In performance a *mantináda* is thus a contextually and personally loaded argument, and/or a presentation of the person's poetical skills. Between performers it is a *parole* in a communicative chain of verses. Poems can be textually extemporized on the spot (*epi tó pou*), or the poem can be selected from the person's poetic reserve to meet the needs of the situation. The poetical reserve contains a variety of traditional poems and poems made by the performer, or by another known singer or composer.

Today the skill to compose a poem extempore in the situation is becoming rare. This skill is appreciated, but it never was the only or the most important standard for successful performance: what counts is the skill to create *meaningful* poems and to have *good timing* in a performance. Most contemporary composers, even those who have the talent to extemporize, emphasize that meaningful new poems are more likely to spring up in the composer's mind in privacy, when he or she is contemplating something personally felt or experienced. Situational new poems are brought forth in performance, but personal, philosophical life-story poems can be created any moment when important inner or outer impulses make poem out of a thought, an experience, or a feeling. These poems can then be "announced" at once to one's immediate circles, or held for a later time when the right contextual moment arises.

Three poems can serve as an illustration of some structural and expressive differences between the poems that have been extemporized due to an outer situational impulse and those

⁷ For more information on the literature and society of Venetian Crete, and the origins of the metrical model, see Holton 1991; Beaton 1980; 1989; Alexiou and Holton 1976; for detailed study on the metrical form and poetic means, see Baud-Bovy 1936, Kavkalás 1992, 1996, 1998; and Sykari forthcoming. The "couplet" form that is common in many cultures is most often conceptualized and written in four lines and with the rhythmical pattern abcb (many other rhyme patterns also exist). According to Alexiou and Holton (1976:22-25), the most probable origin of the Greek *dekapentasilavo* is the structure of popular poetry, a combination of lines that are octosyllable and heptasyllable. Contemporary Cretans also often write a couplet in four half-lines.

that have “come down” through an inner thought, an emotion. The first poem is from the repertoire of the coffee-tavern owner Simisakogeórgis (Geórgos Sifákis) from Réthymno. He told me that he enjoys situational extempore composing but qualifies these compositions as being mere *distiha*, couplets; *mantinádes* are the poems that contain a deeper philosophical idea and have poetic virtues. This poem was improvised during a stream of conversation with two female customers, one of whom he learned was from the island of Hios, which is known for its mastic, from which chewing gum is made. He also learned that this woman worked in the Town Hall (*dimarhío*). This all took shape in the following couplet:

Θά 'ρθω μια μέρα να σε βρώ μέσα στο δημαρχείο
Να δώ αν δουλεύεις ή μασάς μαστίχα απ' τη Χίο!

I will come one day to meet you in(side) the Town Hall
To see if you are working, or chewing mastic from Hios!

This poem is a humorous comment entirely bound to the communicative situation.

In the second example the poem is also improvised in a conversational situation. During my last trip to Crete in September 2007, Kostoúla Papadogiánni from Iráklío told me about a situation that had taken place recently. She and her husband had entertained a group of guests at their village house, and one male guest had especially admired the way her husband helped her during the entire evening. This guest had then asked Kostoúla if her husband really is always like this, so helpful. She answered with a *mantináda* in her warm, emotional style:

Μοιάζει με δίφορο δεντρό π' όλο το χρόν' ανθίζει
γιατί τσ' αγάπης μου νερό τη ρίζα του ποτίζει

He's like a twice-bearing⁸ tree, which blooms all the year
Because the water of my love waters its roots⁹

The first half-line is structurally connected to the situation, referring to a person, but the poetic picture that follows is universally lyrical, and in dialogue with many traditional elements of erotic *mantinádes*.

⁸ A tree that bears fruit twice a year—thus flowers nearly continuously, and often bears flowers and fruit at the same time (in Crete, especially lemon and orange trees).

⁹ “Since – of my love – the water – the root of it – waters.” Due to the different grammatical structures in the Modern Greek and English languages, it is difficult to adequately translate the Greek poetic use of syntactic structures and inflectional forms, which are, however, extremely meaningful for this short couplet form. Verbs are conjugated, nouns and also articles (feminine, masculine, and neuter) are declined in four cases in standard Greek. Idiomatic and poetic language often uses articles elliptically to refer to extra-textual entities. A native speaker understands these references intuitively from the context, but in the non-native translations of songs and poems this often causes confusion.

The third example occurred during the same trip in Crete in September 2007. Antónis Stefanákis in Zarós told me his news by reciting the following *mantináda*. For some years he has been involved in a major building project, and the final cost had required a huge personal loan. The poem refers to the pains of now finding the money for the monthly repayments:

Βάσανα στ' άλλα βάσανα, πίκρα σε άλλη πίκρα
 'Όσπου να γιάνει μια πληγή, ανοίγει άλλη δίπλα

Trouble on other trouble, bitterness on bitterness
 Until one wound gets healed, another opens beside

This poem composed earlier by Antónis, and brought forth by him in our conversation, reflects his situation and emotions; it is very balanced, crystallized, and proverbial in form. It is thus also easily reusable in other relevant contexts.

Local differences also emerge in what is valued: in eastern Crete, as in the nearby islands Karpathos and Kasos, the emphasis seems to have been much more on immediate improvisation, whereas the philosophical and poetic weight of what is said seems to characterize more the region of central Crete. In the past, the mental performance arenas were thus different in the different communities: in western Crete, one “wrong” *mantináda* could be a reason for serious conflict, whereas far eastern Crete, Sitía, has been famous for a singing culture that is teasing, mocking, and (among males) sexually openly suggestive. Even there, quarrels and fights were common in the *glénti*, in weddings; however, as the violist Vaggélis Vardákis from Ierápetra observed, if people saw that someone was getting angry then the following was said:

Με τα κολοκυθόφυλλα, δεν κάνουμε ντολμάδες
 μηδέ και παρεξήγησεις έχουν οι μαντινιάδες

With zucchini leaves, we do not make dolmades
 Neither do misunderstandings have *mantiniádes*¹⁰

The differences in local mentality likewise reflect the women’s freedom to participate in public events: the western Haniá and Sfakiá, and the mountainous pastoral areas, generally are well known for extreme patriarchy as well as for the suppression of female participation in public discourses, whereas in eastern Crete, in the agricultural and fishing lowland cultures, active female participation in public performance was the rule (for further information, see below).

While the society has changed and people and their occupations have moved from closely knit village communities to urban or to semi-urban environments, during recent decades, new forms of communication have also adapted the *mantinádes* to new vehicles. The composition of *mantinádes* is a very common hobby today, and poems are sent to the media and presented daily on radio and television programs (it is often said that television has replaced the *paréa*, the “get-

¹⁰Throughout eastern Crete the form of the word *mantináda* is *mantiniáda* (pronounced “mantinyáda”).

together”). Poems are printed in newspapers, in booklets of personal poetry, and in anthologies. Responding to new technology, poems are also widely exchanged through mobile phone messages by composers and by the active tradition-bearers.

Poetic expression as well as the negotiation of contemporary local identity takes various forms: the use of the rich Cretan dialect and metaphorical language is fundamental for many active composers, while other composers apply a markedly modern and prosaic vocabulary. The adult Cretans who have lived through the more discreet ways of communicating that largely prevailed until the 1980s (especially between the two sexes), generally despise these modern forms, because much of the allusive, decorative poetic vocabulary and the inner musicality of the poems has been lost. Whereas in the old metaphorical expression a boy wanted to become a basil plant in the garden of the loved one, to be watered and cared for by her, today there are songs that go straight to the heart of the matter.

Even today the composition process is oral, but poems are preferably written down later. Although oral poems that have been written down aim more towards poetic rather than situational meanings, many current practices show how natural the interchange between *oral as action* and *literary as store* can be in an oral culture. For example, poems are often learned from written collections especially in order to have a large repertoire for singing in the quick, thematically progressing situational improvisation in *paréa*. As a result, the best poets sing their poems many times to test their musicality before printing them in collections.

Cretan Music and Dance

If one asks Cretans, they define two main performance arenas for *mantinádes*: 1) *glenti*, the collective feast with music and dance in life-cycle festivities, carnival time, and yearly village festivals, and 2) informal singing with *paréa*. Both these events have been important performance arenas in which verbal creativity has become one with music and dance, and socially significant discourses have taken place among the members of the community. In traditional singing events up to the 1980s, *mantinádes* have served as the essential language of all communication, from creating an atmosphere and sense of solidarity to verse contests and detailed personal messages. The Cretan musical tradition has continued without interruption, although in a changed society.

Cretan dance music is an important vehicle for verbal expression in *mantinádes*. Except for the *rizitika* songs of western Crete (see below), the calendar songs, and a small number of other songs, all of which are performed vocally without instrumental accompaniment, most Cretan music consists of instrumental dance music. These instrumental forms were and are performed at all major feasts, with some intended especially for informal singing in a *paréa*. Their lyrics are almost without exception *mantinádes*. The poetic text can be fixed to the melody, or the musical form can support extempore singing and versemaking (especially the *kontiliés*). Improvisatory *kontiliés* and the “loose” singing style, *himatikó*, have been extremely popular in eastern and central Crete. All Cretan dance music is performed in 2/4 time (the *sirtá* also in 4/4). Of the asymmetrical rhythms that are popular on the mainland and largely in the Balkans, the once common *kalamatianós* (7/8) is rarely performed today.

From the great wealth of local dance music forms, five types are mainly performed today. Of these, the instrumental *kastrinós* and *pentozáli*, and the *soústa*, which has fixed lyrics, have established musical forms. The *kontiliés* and *haniótikos sirtós*, which can serve as a vehicle for verbal expression along with *mantinádes*, were instead developed zealously by many local musicians during the early twentieth century (see Amargianákis 1988:327-28; Deiktákis 1999; Kaloyanides 1975; Williams 2003). Both *kontiliés* and *haniótikos sirtós* consist of melodic formulas that offer the creative musician an opportunity to improvise by creating new variations as these formulas are repeated many times (for details, see Kaloyanides 1975:139-50).

With the exception of the *sousta*, all of these and most other local dance forms are line dances.¹¹ The *haniótikos sirtós* is today the most popular dance in feasts, as everyone knows the basic steps. The *kontiliés* (or *siganó pentozáli*) is performed only at weddings as *horós tis nífis*, the bride's dance; this is the first dance after the wedding ceremony, during which *mantinádes* are traditionally sung to her. The main importance of this musical form is as a vehicle for improvisatory singing.



The workshop of Antónis Stefanákis in Zarós. Stefanákis constructs all kinds of stringed instruments. Visible here are two *laouíta*, two *bouzoukis*, and a *laouíta* (hanging on the wall); situated on the table are half-made *lyras*. Photo the by author.

¹¹ A comprehensive description of Cretan dances is available in Tsouhlarákis 2000.



Antónis Stefanákis still makes reed pipes (called the *habióli* or *thiambóli*, depending on the region) and he is most likely the last one in Crete to play this pastoral instrument. Photo by the author.

mantinádes might have come as a “parcel” to Crete during the Venetian times; this can be interpreted etymologically from the most probable origin of the word *mantináda* < *mattinato* (= a morning song, a serenade-type vocal song).

The main instruments played in Crete today are the *lyra* (*lira*, a fretless bowed lute with three metal strings), the *laóúto* (also *lagouíto*; a large, long-necked¹² fretted, plucked lute with a pear-shaped body), the violin, the mandolin, and the guitar. The pastoral mountainous areas, which in the past had a tradition of wind instruments (reed pipes; bagpipes in Lasíthi), no longer have this tradition.¹³ The *laóúto* and the violin are the oldest melodic instruments. They were introduced through the urban areas during the period of Venetian occupation (1211-1669), and they appear in Cretan literary documents beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *laóúto* and later the mandolin have been used especially for singing in informal *parées* and for *kantádes* (serenades).

Some assume that

¹² Not to be confused with *ouíti*, the short-necked Arabic lute, which is also played in Crete and Greece but very rarely.

¹³ For the instruments and their history, see Amargianákis 1988:329-30; Anoyanakis 1972, 1991; Papadákiis 1989; Tsouhlarákis 2004 and also his website: <http://www.tsouhlarakis.com>.



A *paréa* in Irápetra, with Egglezonikolis on the violin. The photograph was taken during the first half of the 1960s. Photo courtesy of Vaggélis Vardákis.

The violin has been played in eastern and western Crete since Venetian times, and it remained the principal solo instrument in dance music there until the latter half of the twentieth century. During the time recollected by the local oral history, in eastern Crete the violin was accompanied by the mandolin and by a small double-membrane drum, *dauláki*; in the western area the *laóuto* accompanied the violin. The violin was an expensive instrument since it had to be made by a master and ordered from Italy; thus, the new instrument that was introduced to the island during the eighteenth century from Asia Minor, the *lyra*,¹⁴ quickly became popular especially in the central and rural parts of the islands. The lyra could be made cheaply from local woods by skillful craftsmen and even by musicians themselves. In the *glénti*, the *lyra*-player or violist is responsible for melodic elaboration and variation, and he is often also the main singer, alternating between the vocal and instrumental sections. Before the twentieth century, the *lyra* was played alone with the accompaniment of tiny bells attached to the bow.

¹⁴ The pear-shaped (“Cretan”) *lyra*, which underwent an evolutionary process in the first half of the twentieth century, is played in the southern Aegean islands: in Crete, Kasos, and Karpathos. The first mention of this type of an instrument called the *lyra* by Greeks dates back to the tenth century from Asia Minor. It is known to have been played in Crete since the eighteenth century, but how and when it entered this area is unknown (Anoyanakis 1991:259-75).



Antonis Papadomanolákis on the *laouíto* and Kostas Kiritsákis on the *lyra* during a performance at the *mezedopolio* Mesostrati, Rethymno. May, 2007. The *lyra*-player alternates between singing and playing. Both photos by the author.

During the first half of the twentieth century, many talented local musicians introduced new influences into the traditional Cretan styles and thereby enriched them. The Ottoman occupation in Crete came to an end, and the Orthodox Greek refugees from Asia Minor, who replaced the Muslim Cretan population (culminating in the forced population exchange in 1922-23), were mostly from urban, intercultural towns and regions. These refugees brought a strong musical tradition that enriched the local music during the fertile middle-war period. Moreover, local and expatriated musicians cooperated extensively.

During this middle-war period, the *zigiá* (pair) of one *lyra* and one or two *laouíta*, which was formed in central Crete, became the emblematic ensemble that is today widely identified with “Cretan music.” The *laouíto* was now used especially for rhythmical accompaniment, but when there are two *laouíta* in the *zigiá* the other may play melodically, a phenomenon that used to be more common in western Crete. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Cretan musical expression continued to flourish and many of the musicians became well known internationally.

Meanwhile, a political “purification” campaign in Crete interpreted the violin as a “foreign, non-native instrument.” With this erroneous interpretation by Simon Karrás, the director of the folk music programs at the national Greek radio, the use of the violin in the performance of Cretan music was banned in all radio programs in 1955.¹⁵ Karrás later admitted his error, but the prohibition was never officially lifted.¹⁶ This ban, and the simultaneous electrification of the *lyra-laouíto* ensemble, now suitable to perform on stage with loudspeakers, gave superiority in power to the *lyra* throughout the entire island. Several violists in western Crete continued their tradition in this difficult situation, but especially in eastern Crete these developments caused the acoustically performing generation of violists to withdraw in the 1970s.

¹⁵ The full history is narrated in Papadákis 1989:42-47. See also Tsouhlarákis 2004.

¹⁶ See also Brandl 1991.

The far western and eastern parts of Crete, and their respective violin performance styles, differ clearly from each other. The performance practices in eastern Crete were markedly bound to the social, improvised communication in the local society. In the most popular local dance form, the *angaliastós*, it was the dancers who improvised *mantinádes* one-by-one to each other (this practice is unknown elsewhere in the island). The break-up of the traditional acoustic performance setting and the loss of the repertoire arranged for violin resulted in a quick loss of this rich musical and verbal tradition.

In the mountainous, rural areas of western Crete, the prefecture of Hania, the main form of entertainment has been and remains the performance of slow, crystallized narrative songs called *rizítika*. These are sung by a male voice and choir that repeats the verses, without instrumental accompaniment, to a slow, free rhythm. *Mantinádes* are sung at the beginning of the event and at the end of each song. Today, *mantinádes* connected to the *rizítika* performances are mainly traditional, in line with the reason for the celebration. Until the 1970s, however, a competitive exchange of reciprocal *mantinádes* could be improvised in the beginning or in middle of the feast. In these areas, the dance music and instruments were and are played in the villages solely for dancing during the evening of a marriage or during other major feasts; in the past, musicians were brought in, especially from the far western area of Kissamos, which was famous for its violinists and *laóúto*-players. Entertainment during the get-togethers and shared festive meals consists of singing *rizitika* songs.

A Common Arena: the *Glénti*

In the village communities, annual and seasonal celebrations, such as the village saint festivals and carnival time as well as life-cycle feasts (especially marriages and baptismal celebrations), formed the main means of common entertainment. All members of the village took part in these festivities, and friends and relatives travelled on foot and by donkeys from other villages in order to participate. This was an important opportunity for young people to see each other, and a time for covert communication through secret eye-contacts and sung poems, which is the most that could be dared in this society of honor and shame.

The *glénti* is the feast, the entertainment after the ritual acts and religious ceremonies. The village saint festivals start with a mass in the evening prior to the day. The principal mass is conducted early in the morning, and followed by the breaking of a special sweet church bread, a Lenten food, or another food typical of the day. The culmination of



The *panigiri* of Saint George (the 23rd of April) in Así Goniá, 1997. Photo by the author.

the festival is the evening *glénti*. A traditional wedding feast lasted for several days and consisted of a huge repertoire of *mantinádes* sung at various moments of preparation, and before and after the ceremony. Still today, in some of the bigger villages, the women perform traditional *mantinádes* when they prepare the bride and the groom. *Mantinádes* can also be sung during the metaphorical game, when the escort of the groom comes to fetch the bride to take her to the church. In earlier times it took hours or days for the procession to make its way from the village of the groom to the village of the bride, and singing was the natural pastime.

In the traditional format of a *glénti* held in the village square, the musicians sat in the center in traditional peasant chairs, which were half-turned towards each other. Initially, musicians would assume the main responsibility for the singing, but little by little other performers who were known for their voices and repertoires gathered tightly behind them. When the dance began, the dancers formed a circle around the musicians. The people sitting and standing formed a circle around the dancers. As a result, performers, dancers, and audience were all near each other.

The first selection of *mantinádes* to be sung depended on the reason for the festivity, and they were often traditional. Later themes were developed according to the personal and communicative aims, although always in accordance with the most important rule: poems must be performed dialogically, in succession and thematically interconnected. One theme was taken up, and *mantinádes* on this theme were sung until it was exhausted; only then could a new theme be introduced.

During the feast and after the men had consumed a fair amount of wine and *raki*,¹⁷ the exchange of *mantinádes* readily took the form of a competitive verse duel between two or more villagers. These duels could serve as a domain for competitive and offensive male discourse. In patriarchal pastoral society, these competitions often dominated public performance practices. For example, many stories are still told of the conflicts between eager son-in-law candidates and fathers who rejected them contemptuously, as well as of the shame of singing old, hackneyed *mantinádes*.¹⁸

Duels could also support discourse of an erotic nature between a woman and a man in those villages and areas where women were free to participate. Many adult informants state that this practice was pervasive in the first part of the twentieth century. The shift in the public role of women to lamenter is attributed to the Second World War, owing to the great loss of human life during that time.

In eastern Crete, in addition to these big feasts, dances were typically organized every Sunday in villages where there were girls of marriageable age. As described to me by the violist Vaggélis Vardákis from Ierápetra, and also in the foreword to the collection of *mantinádes* by María Lioudáki (1936), beginning in the morning, young men went around the village and asked the parents' permission for the girls to participate. During the afternoon, the dance was organized

¹⁷ Strong homemade brandy that is distilled from grapes.

¹⁸ For descriptions of verbal duels, see Herzfeld 1985a:142-46, with an extended discussion in Herzfeld 1985b; for a parallel tradition in the village of Olympos in Karpathos, see Caraveli 1985 and Kávouras 1991.

in a spacious house, on a square, in the courtyard of a church, or in the shade of a big tree near a well. The girls went there with their mothers, but it was mainly the younger ones who danced. As Lioudáki explains, “in these dances the young boy in love always found an opportunity to declare with *mantinádes* his love or pain, sorrow or joy to the loved one, even anger to the unfaithful” (1936:i).

In this area the popular *angaliastós* was always the first dance to start the *glénti*. Here a girl, who was placed at the beginning of the line (alternating between girls and boys), started the singing. She improvised a *mantináda* for each participant, then left her place to the next in line, and in this way a full round was danced. I asked Vaggélis Vardákis why the role of the woman in the performance was so important in eastern Crete. He responded that even though the woman was not free in the society, her ability to perform and improvise by singing and dancing during a social occasion was regarded as an important demonstration of a woman’s ability to maintain her social identity as wife and householder. Nevertheless, when Vardákis inquired of his teacher why a woman always started the singing in this improvisatory dance, his teacher answered, “because women have a much better command of words.”

During the 1970s, most of the weddings or baptismal *gléntia* were transformed from village squares to special permanent or seasonal commercial centers of entertainment, *kéntra* (sing. *kéntro*). These were built first in the urbanizing centers after the Second World War, and from the 1970s onward throughout the whole island, inspired by the (politically launched) wave of interest in the endemic musical tradition (Kapsoméno 1987:15).



A marriage *glénti* in an open-air *kéntro* in Anógeia, September, 2006. Photo by the author.

Today, the festivities and *glénti* may still take place in a village-square setting, but this happens less and less frequently. The *panigíria* (village saint festivals) and the marriage celebrations that still command a large audience in Crete (from one to three thousand guests) are often transferred from village squares to the *kéntra*. In the village where I work, the baptismal feasts, which typically have about 300 guests, are organized in the village square, or during the winter in the village society building, more often than in a *kéntro*. The village still has one marriage every two or three years as well (when the number of guests is reduced to around 1000, which the square can accommodate).

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The organization of these festivities in the village is an amazing collective effort, in which reciprocity, and a sense of solidarity, is shared among the relatives, co-villagers, and friends involved. During the summer season, well-known Cretan musicians participate in *panigiria* in different villages nearly every day, either in the *kéntra* or in the village square. In the latter case, the village society or the local athletic society can organize the events, and the profit from the food and drinks sold provides the necessary income for its activities. Successful villages have good organizations and regular feasts, advertised with posters throughout the community.



A local ensemble in a baptismal *glénti* held at the village society's festival hall. Milopótamos, October, 2004. Photo by the author.



Parents, godparents, and close relatives begin the first dance to the *sirtós* tune. Photo by the author.

The musical and singing activities in these festivities are entrusted to professional musicians, and creative audience participation takes place mainly through dance. The dances are booked with the head musician for a family or *paréa* on behalf of one of its members. Each group then takes turns dancing when announced. The musicians either sing traditional verses or verses from their own repertoire, which may contain their own compositions, but most often consist of *mantinádes* written by a *mantinadológos*, a *mantináda*-poet (it is generally thought that musical and verbal creativity are different, and that only rarely are both present in one person).

During the late hours, and after warming up by consuming alcohol and partaking of the social atmosphere (just like in the traditional village environment), a *paréa* may take up a most traditional dialogue in *mantinádes*. Often, when the *glénti* starts to break up and the large audience has dispersed, a *paréa* of those most involved (for example, the bride's male relatives, the groom, the father, and the godparent) gathers in front of the musicians and is given the microphone to sing. Audience participation in singing is also a very popular part of late-hour performances in the music clubs in town during the winter season.



The *paréa* of the father and godfather singing *mantinádes* at the end of the evening. Photo by the author.

The society has changed, and there is a critical local attitude as well. The shift of the feasts from the village square, where musicians played acoustically and sat in the middle of the space, to a setting where musicians are raised up on a bandstand and the music is mediated electrically by amplifiers, has been abrupt. The modern star culture around the “name” musicians and the use of powerful amplifiers without professional sound engineers often result in high noise levels. For this reason many adults avoid the contemporary *gléntia*. Many critical voices also point out that a person’s individuality when performing and improvising was traditionally displayed in disciplined, virtuous ways. In modern Cretan society, however, interpretations of individuality can be quite egocentric in nature (see also Dawe 1996, 1999).

Entertainment Among Friends



A *paréa* in Ierápetra during the early 1960s. Manólis Egglezákis plays the violin. Photo courtesy of Vaggélis Vardákis.

Until recently, the informal gatherings of a *paréa*, a circle of (male) friends or relatives, took place regularly in a *kafeneíon* (a traditional coffee-bar where men pass their time) or a village square. Even further back in history, these gatherings took place in turn in houses in a village. These encounters were the most common arena for singing or reciting verses. All my informants affirm that in the lively village communities a *paréa* was formed on the flimsiest of pretexts. Although the Second World War and the accompanying social change reduced such collective manifestations, the

sharpest privatization of performance habits in Crete has taken place since the beginning of the 1980s, when television became a permanent fixture in every *kafeníon* and living room, and the possession of cars became common.

Since the 1980s commercial entertainment has replaced much of the self-made collective local culture. As a consequence, the role of a musical *paréa* is now clearly that of an optional pastime, whereas until the 1980s it was the only option for casual entertainment among men and an important arena for social discourse. As the *mantinadológos* Aristídis Hairétis from Anógeia puts it, although everyone currently yields to these *parées*, they don’t take place since “there is not the first person to make it happen.”

A clear decrease in collective traditions has been evident even during the last eight years of my own fieldwork. In my village eight years ago, during the summer the generation of teenagers still gathered to barbecue, sing, and play nearly every evening at a spot a little outside

the village. As young adults this generation is now occupied with work and studies elsewhere, and as a result such meetings are now extremely rare. The primary school children nevertheless gather to perform at the village feast place; at least one boy always plays a traditional instrument, and many other children learn *mantinádes* by heart from records and written collections, and also practice their composition.



A contemporary *paréa* in Rethymnon on the 3rd of November, 2007. The *lyra* is played by Antónis Pavlákis, the *laouta* by Giánnis Apostolákis (left) and Giánnis Markogiánnis. Photograph by Dimitris Politákis, courtesy of Geórgos Sifákis.



After midnight, a *paréa* has gathered around the two musicians who began the performance, and new performers now take turns. Mesostráti, Réthymnon. May, 2007. Photo by the author.

Even today, among those most dedicated to Cretan music and song, traditional musical *parées* do form. During feasts, or due to a private celebration, people come together to perform privately, and there are taverns and *mezedopolía*¹⁹ that encourage people to perform. A musical *paréa* is most likely to gather around at least one instrument—the mandolin, *laouta*, lyra or violin—but the lack of an instrument is not an insuperable obstacle. *Mantinádes* are sung in turns by fluent singers, or if possible by all present one-by-one in a circle, with each song always thematically connected to the previous one.

The most common mode of such informal singing, in the musical form of *kontilies*, is the following: a singer begins the first *dekapentasilavo* (fifteen-syllable) line, and the *paréa* repeats it (during this time the singer has time to think of the second line when improvising verses). The singer then sings the second line, whereupon the next performer immediately takes up his turn; thus the second line is not repeated. Digressions of various lengths are

¹⁹ These are small, intimate, traditional-style places that serve *meze*-plates and traditional drinks: carafes of wine, *raki*, and ouzo. They are very popular among young adults and students as well; the number of these places in the old town of Rethymno, for example, has grown significantly during the last five years.

inserted, and lines may cover two or more musical cycles; dipartite or tripartite structure is the rule when singing to the *sirtós* tune.



Mantinádes sung to the *kontiliés* with one *lyra* and two *laóúta*. Performance in Arólithos, Iráklío, 2000. Singers: Nikifóros Aerákis, Gialáftis (Aristeídis Hairéti), Pologíannis (Giánnis Aerákis). Recording used courtesy of Geórgos Sifákis. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/24i/sykari#myGallery-picture\(15\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/24i/sykari#myGallery-picture(15))

As in the *glénti*, the most important requirement is that the poems sung are linked thematically so that they form a dialogue. If the first theme taken up is love, or sorrow, or friendship, or whatever else, one's poems must address this theme until it is exhausted; only then will a new theme be introduced. That new focus can be developed in the natural run of poems sung, for example, by someone picking a word, an expression from the previous poem, but completely changing the angle. A theme can likewise be shifted on purpose, as in this extemporized example told to me by Geórgos Sifákis. In a *paréa* gathered in his *mezedopolío* the Mesostráti in Rethymno, one evening many poems were sung about Charos, death, and he wanted to change the subject:

Δεν είναι φεγγαρόλουστο το αποψινό το βράδυ
Μα επά να σταματήσουμε τα λόγια για τον 'Αδη

This evening is not illuminated by moonlight
And here we'll stop the words about Hades

Each singer has his own repertoire and style, and when an effective new composition is presented others will show in admiration. As Mítsos Stavrakákis, a well-known *mantinadológos* explained, even in the old days one could not really know if such a new poem was improvised on the spot or merely presented for the first time. He said that he himself often holds onto a new poem until he can surprise others with it; during a singing occasion he would not even introduce the suitable theme himself but wait for someone else to do so. Thus, as I already noted above, the *ideal of improvisation* may be conveyed in a traditional environment through textual as well as through contextual improvisation (the apt introduction of a poem in an appropriate situation).

Twenty years ago, these *parées* also gathered to perform nighttime serenades, *kantádes*, near the house of an attractive girl. After affirmative eye-contact with the girl (for example, in a collective *glénti*), a boy in love would gather a group of three to five boys and set forth singing and playing for the girl's village—all the better if two boys had the same interest and their singing consequently became competitive. *Kantádes* were always performed collectively, for in this society it would have been problematic, even dangerous, to approach a girl alone.

A *kantáda* can also have another form and meaning: until recent decades, during the late hours of any *glénti*, a *paréa* might start going around the village from house to house. Food and drinks were served to them, and a chicken might even have been cooked for a soup to refresh throats tired from singing. In my village, even ten years ago, *parées* were formed to visit the homes of the celebrating heroes of the day during name-days, when traditionally a banquet is organized at home for friends, relatives, and passers-by.

Recited Performances

Musical performance arenas and the musicality of the poetic expression are essential parts of the verbal tradition. I have described the traditional forms of singing and entertainment in some detail, because the dialogic nature of the communication in the *glénti* and *paréa* is implicitly present in the contemporary mental conceptualizing of the tradition and poetry. Today, *mantinádes* sung by professional musicians still introduce this communication within the tradition and the collective values expressed by that tradition.

It is important to notice, however, that even if *mantinádes* are emblematic of the popular Cretan musical life, a good deal of the oral composition and traditional dynamics breathe silently underneath public events and surface only on private occasions between friends and families. *Mantinádes* were always tied to the situational, communicational meaning and moment; in Crete, this poetry was never the “contest poetry” improvised in public spaces in a style that seems to characterize the western Mediterranean and especially the contemporary Basque *bertsolaritza* poetry (see Armistead and Zulaika 2005; Garcia et al. 2001).

In the recent past as well as today, the idea of performance in Crete is far from exhausted by naming the traditional singing performance contexts (or media environments). In practice it is much more common to be drawn into poems for the purpose of citing, referring, recollecting, and telling stories, and for presenting and negotiating poetic inventiveness. In many villages there are still people who are told to weave everything into a *mantináda*, to “say it to you at once.” In earlier times, poems were widely embedded proverbially in everyday speech situations, and they were recited to tease or to provoke a poetic dialogue, a verbal duel. As shown by Michael Herzfeld (1985a), at the end of the 1970s poetic verbal duels were still an important form of establishing and shaping one’s identity in communities where improvisatory, performative skills were required as evidence of a man’s social worth. In the women’s world, poetic expression likewise played an important role, and many contemporary poets and musicians emphasize the role of their mother or grandmother as a paragon of poetic self-expression and poetically philosophical way of speech in everyday life.

The story recounted immediately below will help us understand some elements of casual, local performance discourses. It is based on my own experience of actual performances of a single, recent composition in September 2005:

We had been sitting and talking with Antónis Stefanákis, 68 years old at that time, about his life and *mantinádes* at his workshop in his village. Leaving the workshop afterwards to walk 100 meters down to the village center to eat and spend the evening with the *paréa*, Antónis presented me with a *mantináda* that he had recently composed:

Στα χέρια σου έχεις τις χαρές αυτές που εγώ στερούμαι
Κι’ είχα μισή και σ’ έψαχνα για να τη μοιραστούμε

In your hands you have the delights, the ones that I lack,
Once I had half, and I was looking for you, to share with you that

The initial motivation for the poem was an encounter with a very beautiful girl. She had the “delight” of exceptional beauty and a very pleasant personality. Antónis’ poem admires this girl who has all these good qualities, which he does not have, and tells his wish to be able to share just a little bit of something good with her from his side. The poem, however, speaks to “you,” so it can be addressed to any other person as well. The Greek word *hará* means “joy”, “delight,” but in plural (*harés*) it can also mean “skills” or “a wedding.”

Antónis told me that after composing this poem, he recited it to his friend, a peer poet and musician. He now presumed that the friend would certainly re-use it somehow if we happened to meet him, since he had very much appreciated the poem.

On the road, we first stopped in a small clothing shop to try on some jeans, which Antónis had requested from the woman owner before. The jeans were fine, but the trouser legs had to be shortened. The woman promised to do this, just as she had always done. Then, as a “thank you,” Antónis uttered the same *mantináda* to her—this time placing emphasis on the concrete idea of the delights she had *in her hands*.

After we had eaten in a very small tavern, sitting at one of the few outside tables, a man came from across the street and put two peeled cactus fruit on the table in front of us, reciting: *Κι’είχα μισή και σ’έψαχνα . . .* “Once I had half, and I was looking for you . . .” This was the friend who valued the poetic picture and the traditional idea of sharing whatever little you have, as well as his invitation to come and join him.

Here, the new poem has been recited after its composition to a friend, a peer poet. The poem is performed in social, circumstantially motivated communication in the shop. The poem is re-used by the poet, and by another performer, to refer to and recollect earlier discussions and meanings. Antónis’ friend quotes a part of the poem to refer to the idea of sharing, both as approval of Antónis’ poetic skill in capturing the idea in a *mantináda*, and within the social discourse as an invitation. Antónis’ recitation before the shopkeeper is also a performance, or a reference, for me. And now I tell a short contextualized story of past performances, which is likewise a typical local form of discourse.

This example shows that a performance of a *mantináda* can occur in several kinds of performance discourses:

- 1) *as a social communication*: a poem uttered extemporaneously to fit the face-to-face circumstantial context (to the shopkeeper),
- 2) *as a performance for displaying poetic inventiveness* (here between active poets and to me: to show the quality of the poetic form and the contents of one’s new poem; to share the meaning and values)
- 3) *as a reference*, a recollection by re-using an already heard poem (between those present in the former recitations)
- 4) *as a short, contextualized story* of a performance in the past (for someone who has not been present at the given situation)

Except for the telling of a story, where contextual information is given sparingly, all these communicative forms are extremely short, highly referential, and allusive. A compact recitation contains a long story, and decoding it requires extensive local and interpersonal knowledge.

Anna Caraveli, who has researched Greek folk songs in other areas, notes that the nature of the Greek folk song performance tradition is generally extremely referential (1982:129-33). Besides the short, referential rhyming distiches, longer songs are also fragmentary and often left unfinished in performance in other parts of Greece. An intense referentiality may therefore be understood as typical both of the Greek mentality behind verbal expression in general, and of the short, apt poetic language of the *mantinádes* favored in Crete.

Poems Embedded into Speech

The improvised proverbial and phraseological use of *mantinádes* in speech is certainly restricted more to the traditional way of life in a village environment, and is also becoming rare in Crete. These verses are composed on the spot, or memorized, and the poem is uttered without preparation, on the spur of the moment. The goals of these verses are various—from greeting, joking, or creating atmosphere to expressing one’s feelings, opinion, or interpretation of something physically actual or referentially present.

Such a *mantináda* often is recited to affect the direction of the conversation or situation, just like the uttering of proverbs or proverbial sayings in many other cultures. In Crete, as in Arab cultures (see espec. Caton 1990), the poetic verbal duel has been a socially established form of quarrel and negotiation. Herzfeld observes that “in a community where manhood requires a constant exhibition of performative skill, the clever *mantináda* can reduce an opponent symbolically without giving him the chance to respond in any other domain” (1985a:144). This observation is part of his description of the uses of verses and other means of the manly “idioms of contest” in a Cretan mountain village (1985a:123-62). Even if verbal contests have today lost their role as a serious negotiation of social worth and boundaries, communicative situations contain many interpersonal and circumstantial elements that can unforgettably be negotiated through such metaphorical expression.

I will turn to a few experiences in which I was myself both the reason for and the addressee of the poetic expression, which will allow me to comment on the part of the interpreter (although of course, I was not able to respond with *mantinádes*!).

On a walking day trip I took alone in southern Crete in 1998, I stopped in a *kafeníon* to rest. It was midday and very hot, and I conversed with some older men, seemingly frequent guests of that place. I began to feel hungry and, upon my inquiry, the tired owner agreed to prepare me a lunch of what the house provides, salad and eggs. The other men left to have lunch at their homes, and the owner started cooking for me as well as for himself. It became clear that his wife, who normally had a cooked meal available every day, had traveled to visit their adult children in Athens. The owner and I started our meal, and suddenly, in middle of our casual conversation (he had been partying all night in the absence of his wife), he got the idea that I must stay to party with him that evening in the nearby village. I thanked him for the offer, but told him that it was not possible. He kept on insisting and I kept rejecting his offer, until finally he burst into *mantinádes*:

Είσ' όμορφη, είσαι σκληρή, είσαι και πεισματάρα
Και πως πληγώνεις μια καρδιά, δε δίνεις μια δεκάρα

You are beautiful, you are hard, you are stubborn too
And that you hurt one heart, you don't give a penny

I was very taken by his summoning the poetic tradition for help, but I told him that he must understand that I was not able to stay; having a long, exclusive relationship with my partner, I could not hurt him by staying and partying with a strange man. Now he resorted to exploiting all his poetic powers:

Χωρίσαμε προσωρινά, μη χάσεις την ελπίδα
Μα την καρδιά μου κυβερνάς σα ναυτική πυξίδα

We were separated temporarily, don't lose your hope
You govern my heart like the compass does the sailor

Δε θα μας ξεχωρίσουνε οι στρατηγοί τσ' Ευρώπης
Γιατί αγαπηθήκαμε εις τον ανθό της νιότης

All the Europe's armies will not tear us apart
Because we fell in love in the bloom of the youth

And so on he continued with other romantic verses. I told him that even though his *mantinádes* were great, I soon had to leave. I asked him if I could write down these *mantinádes* (which I did). When he then realized that I "knew" *mantinádes*, he became even more ardent: he would recite me thousands of them if I would stay! But finally I got up to leave, and he was disappointed and commented:

Πολλά τα δέντρα που ανθούν μα λίγα που καρπίζουν
Πολλ' είν' εκείνοι π' αγαπούν μα λίγοι που κερδίζουν

Many are the trees that bloom, but few the ones that bear fruit
Many are the ones who love, but few the ones who gain

He was using traditional *mantinádes* on this occasion first as a provoking statement, then to create a confidential and understanding but also romantic atmosphere, and finally as an interpretation of that frustrating situation. Even if my staying was just an impulse he had at the moment, the poetic discourse took the challenge very seriously. From my perspective, I was allowed to misread the seriousness, and to stress instead the flirting playfulness.

When my Greek partner-to-be, Giánnis Hatziharalámpous recited a *mantináda* for me during our first conversation, the situation was quite different. He was born and grew up in Athens, but had spent the previous eight years mainly in Crete. Although he by no means was

able to make verses, he was familiar with *mantinádes* from the repertoire of the local musicians with whom he played. We had never met before, but having spent some evenings in the same *paréa*, where he was performing, and after keen, continuous eye contact between us all this time, one evening we were talking together. I told him of my interest in *mantinádes* at last and that I was returning to Crete after the summer in order to carry on fieldwork research on this traditional poetry. He looked at me and said:

Να κάμω θέλω ταραχή σαν το κακό Γενάρη
Να ρίξω χιόνια και νερά, άλλος να μη σε πάρει!

I want to create disorder like the evil January,
To throw snow and water, so that no one else will get you!²⁰

Within the tightly knit village communities this veiled, metaphorical way of talking via *mantinádes* was the only way to declare emotions between the two sexes. Even on this occasion, the atmosphere created by this romantic utterance changed the frame of reference of the following discourse completely. With the playful metaphor and the romantic aura represented metonymically by the mere deployment of the register, he had opened his heart, but safely. I now willingly interpreted the challenge as he intended it, but if I did not have corresponding feelings I could have downplayed his words without the situation becoming embarrassing. What was crucial was how much the right timing in code-switching to the traditional poetic register can mean, how much information can intuitively be packed into a short poem, and how immanent the simultaneous contextualization²¹ process is. Connected with the previous example, this experience also shows clearly how the freedom of interpretation by the addressee corresponds to the freedom of the performer to encode the metaphorical utterance. In such poetic discourse, using the register gives access to communication in a special performance arena, and the contextualization process either renders the results valid in the “real life” or not. The rules are fair enough.

The above *mantinádes* are examples of proverbial recitations. The performer uses the poem(s) intending to affect or change the course of the ongoing conversation or situation. The same, of course, happens in singing events, within a more ritual and prepared frame.

A *mantináda* can also occur in the stream of a conversation, in the nature of an inner discussion or philosophical statement that is aroused by a memory or the present situational context, associated with the person’s worldview or with the interpretation of a personal life situation. When I first began my field inquiries, after having read a great deal of literature about the communicative uses and meaning of verbal arts, I was overwhelmed by how frequently I encountered people, especially many older people, who recited poems outside of any conversational, situational context (or at least any context that I would have been able to

²⁰ This *mantináda* is traditional and known from the repertoire of the *lyra*-player Psarantónis.

²¹ Charles Briggs (1988) points out that instead of talking about context, something that exists or happens “around” the verbal expression, we have to focus on the process of contextualization in which those participating in the verbal act negotiate the meaning of the words in an ongoing process.

understand as such). The meaningfulness of these poems was, however, further enhanced by affirmative eye contact or a common phrase like “see, it has a lot of meaning.” In the course of the years, I came to grasp the power of the presence of the traditional poetic universe as a mental frame of reference, as an inner dialogue, and the satisfaction felt in a poetic picture that corresponds with one’s feelings and thoughts, that depicts a life story (and brings the psychological release of others having felt the same).

For example, in the village where I have lived, when we sat down to discuss the *mantinádes* for the first time with two old women who became important informants and friends, one said casually quite soon after we had got started:

Μοιάζει η καρδιά μου μ’εκκλησιά που λειτουργιά δεν έχει
Μόνο αν μπει κανείς βοσκός να μη βραχεί όταν βρέχει

My heart is like a church that is not used for religious services
[It is used] only if a shepherd goes in, to avoid getting wet when it rains

She continued by saying: “As it is, it tells you It has a lot of meaning!” Here she was referring to the typical Greek small churches or chapels that are located a little outside the village and even in very remote places in the countryside. These are built to honor a certain saint and often have a modest liturgy only on that saint’s day, in striking contrast to the central churches that conduct regular weekly liturgies, and which, except during these liturgies, are often frequented on a daily basis by locals and visitors who light candles in memory of their loved ones. Later on, we learned that this was indeed how she felt her life to have turned out: her husband and many close relatives had died, and although she had children and grandchildren she regretted that her full life had already effectively passed.

As was demonstrated earlier, *mantinádes* can be embedded into speech as referents to past situations, in which the reciter and hearer(s) have both been present. Such recitals are mutual entertainment: they refer to the given past situation itself (praising or commenting on the individual communicative or compositional skill displayed in that situation), and they also praise the unity of the interlocutors (speech community) by showing how well-equipped the people sharing the same tradition can be in decoding these short, highly referential messages.

***Mantinádes* as Stories and Recollections**

I have used the term “proverbial” to refer to the poems, which, once uttered in the stream of an ongoing discourse, emphatically evoke a personal view through the authority of the traditional idiom. They also somehow affect the trajectory and texture of discourse. These are the real *mantinádes* for many Cretans with roots and memories in the old tightly knit village life. Therefore, even if *mantinádes* are rarely performed proverbially any longer, past performances are recollected as stories.

The local people tell many stories about the communicative situations in which someone had the last word with a *mantináda*. They also like to relate stories about a sudden turn of events,

cleverly commented on via an immediately uttered *mantináda*. People even characterize and memorialize persons through the *mantinádes* associated with them.

These stories celebrate the individual's skill at improvising and reproducing ready wit and dexterity in words, and are in that way similar to the referential citing of *mantinádes* uttered in past contexts when among the speech community. For an outsider, the situation is explained to the extent necessary for grasping the point, and the *mantinádes* appear as the punch-line of the performance, often followed by comments and explications. As recounted by Kóstas Kontogiánnis in October, 1999:

Once we were in the village, we were a *paréa* and we drank water from the spring: one bows down, drinks water, drinks the next; the moment when I bow—this happened really—the spring stops! It was a spring, it was running water, and the spring stops, and I say:

Σκύφτω στη βρύση για νερό μ' αυτή με μια στερεύγει
 Ιντά 'καμα τση μοίρας μου κακό και με παιδεύγει?

I bow to the spring for water but it runs dry at once.
 What evil did I do to my fate so that she mocks me?

We, that is, in Crete, we have the parable: “even if you go to the spring it will run dry.”
 That is, you are unlucky and even if you go to a spring that runs, it will stop running. This happened to me.

Local folk musicians were important people in the villages because the informal entertainment and *parées* gathered mainly around them. For example, the unmarried self-taught *liráris* (*lyra*-player) in the village who had died some twenty years ago was remembered by an interviewee with the following story. In the past, the village was famous for its lack of water supplies, until the united village committee had water pipes constructed:

A *paréa* who had also a *lyra*, in the neighboring village, was making fun of our village.
 The other village's *liráris* said:

Καλό χωριό είν' και (το Χωριό), μα έχει ένα ψεγάδι
 'Όσπου να πάνε στο νερό, τσουκνώνει το τσουκάλι

This village is a good village, but it has one shortcoming;
 Until they get to the water, the cooking-pot gets burnt.

Our village's *liráris* responds:

Το πως δεν έχουμε νερό δεν είναι προσβολή μας
 Κασίδα στο ελάχιστο δεν έχει η κεφαλή μας

That we don't have water is not an insult for us
Scurf, even a little, does not have our head²²

Our *liráris* then recites another *mantináda* that redirects the blame and hints that there are people in the other village who have scurf on their heads, but my interviewee does not remember the words of this *mantináda*.

The other *liráris* then said:

Τω μερακλίδων τα χαρτιά εγώ τα διορίζω
Παράξενο μου φαίνεται πως να μη σε γνωρίζω

The cards of the merry-masters are assigned by me,
It looks odd to me that I don't recognize you

And our *liráris* recited the following:

Αν θες να γνωριστούμενε να μ' έχεις τω χεριώ σου
Βρες μου μια χήρα Κατσαμά νά 'ρχομαι στο χωριό σου!

If you want us to get familiar and to have me in your hands,
Find me a widow from among your kin, and I will come to your village!

These stories and recollections reflect how the people value the words as *events* (Herzfeld 1981:139). At first, the event and the inventiveness of the words can be a completely “insider” experience, but it can be retold in new forms and can even take on a new shape and meaning altogether. New associations create new events and new stories (Caraveli 1982:132-35).

Half a year after my initial longer stay in the village in 2001, I returned again. My friend, Déspina, who was 71 years old then, had composed poems about our friendship and about my forgetting the people in the village. I had called her some weeks before I returned, and immediately after that she had met with another old woman with whom we used to keep company, and had extemporized the following poem:

Μια φιλενάδα έκαμα από τη Φιλανδία
Βέρα τηνε φωνάζω 'γώ, κ' εμένα λέει θεία

One (woman) friend I made from Finland,
I call her Vera, and she calls me aunt

²² Scurf was seen in those days in Greece as a mark of not washing and being dirty.

They told me that at the moment she had extemporized this poem they had laughed until their stomachs ached, and could not hold back their laughter even now (or ever after). I did not quite understand what was so funny about the poem, and they explained that with regard to her calling me by my name, and by my calling her “aunt,” these references meant that she had to be extremely old, with one leg in the grave already, since I am an adult myself (born 1962), a mother of an adult daughter, and not a child who would call any woman outside the family an “aunt.” They found this image very amusing.

Some years later we sat next to each other at a table during a feast, and when someone referred to my home country in our conversation, Déspina tried to recollect which country I was from. I remembered the above-mentioned poem, which contains this information, and saw that she was also striving to think back to it in her mind. When she triumphed over having found the answer, I recited the poem to her. She could not believe that I had followed her thought so well, and after we had recalled “our” moments of fun with the history of the poem, she now told this new story of my “psychologizing” her to the others.

Presentation of Poetic Inventiveness

I introduced earlier the presentation of a newly made poem as a performance. Some years ago I had the idea that in past village communities the conversational, circumstantially relevant extemporized performances must have been the most meaningful ones. When I asked about people’s experiences and opinions about the poetic tradition, and while I listened to the local and personal oral history, I always inquired about this matter. Sometimes the answer was negative: in many districts of central Crete, as in the village Korfés near Iráklío, which is famous for its serious *parées* and quality *mantinádes*,²³ people understood that I was referring to the habits associated with eastern Crete of teasing, mocking, or making fun with *mantinádes*, and made a point to clarify that this particular style was not much appreciated in their village. But could a poem be recited in a moment of daily life, outside the ritual singing events? Of course, they responded, if one had created or heard a good new poem, one could present it to others, for example when coming to the *kafeníon*.

Many answers like this one presented themselves until I realized the importance of the local focus on individual poetic creativity and inventiveness as such, and the reality that evaluating success in “capturing a theme” needs few words between those who know each others’ repertoire and performance history. When I assimilated this observation, I also began to notice references made by the *mantinadológoi* themselves to this phenomenon of “announcing” new poems publicly. In September 2006, I asked the *mantinadológos* Aristeídis Hairétis (well known for his sarcastic poems and expressive descriptions) if he felt an immediate need to announce a newly created poem. He answered me by stating: “Think, when a baby is born, isn’t it such a joy that you run around the village to tell it to every one? A poem born is like a newborn baby, you have to tell it to others!”

²³ See also Papirákis 2004.

This “presentation of poetic inventiveness” is a discourse in which the individual ability to express oneself and capture meaningful ideas, structures, and values of the surrounding reality and tradition in a poem is performed, received, and evaluated without any necessary conversational or situational frame. This discourse is a vital mode of being in the performance arena for the active composers and their immediate circles in Crete.

Dialogic Oral Poetry in Crete

In this paper I have provided examples of how Cretan *mantinádes* appear in a variety of oral performances. These performances span a broad spectrum from the singing or recital of poems within the frames of a feast or informal singing event, to the casual proverbial utterances embedded in speech, to stories told about past performances, and finally to the presentation of poetic inventiveness.

The poetic register used in these performances is both a reservoir of fixed poems and a flexible, shared model for new compositions. The register is used for communication, self-expression, and artistic and recreational aims in lyric, philosophical, sarcastic, humorous, and proverbial tones. The poem-language is essentially a special way of speaking. It helps people to express the meaning potential of their everyday lives and social relations, but it also serves as a source of potential meaning.²⁴

Mantinádes are therefore essentially a dialogic register of oral poetry in two ways: first, conversationally, as utterances exchanged in communication between people. This was evident in connection with the traditional *glénti* and *paréa*, and in the stories told about the witty utterances in past performances. Second, the register is also dialogic mentally, as an inner dialogue, where crystallized poetic pictures become matched with personal emotions and perceptions of life situations, and where, in the minds of poetically creative individuals, inner and outer impulses take shape in new poems, in composition. In these dialogues, people use memorized poems or compose new ones to tell others or to conceptualize for themselves what they think, feel, wish, or want to say.

Although most of the spontaneous forms of collective self-expression are lost, much of the *traditional* is still mentally immanent. All the adult population has a living experience of the village oral performance practices; Cretan folk music and dance forms enjoy an uninterrupted continuation and huge popularity today among the young as well; a typical Cretan wedding hosts the whole population of the original villages of the bride and the groom (from one thousand to three thousand guests); and musical *paréa* is an emblematic unit of social presence for Cretans. Traditional festive and recreational arenas, even if mainly professionalized and commercialized nowadays, are not conceived of as being a memory of something past. The poetic mold enables individual self-expression that is also relevant to people today, while the traditional oral register carries values, authority, memories, and meanings from past times and performances, and gives access to a shared way of speaking.

²⁴ I thank the anthropologist Timo Kaartinen for coining this phrase to express my idea as discussed in our e-mail communication in May 2007.

Since *mantinádes* were always appreciated as an individual poetic practice as well as a mode of communication, they have not lost their meaning and disappeared from modern society, where the veiled metaphorical expression is no longer the necessity it used to be in the traditional, closely knit village environment. The strong local identity has helped the local music and dance tradition to be highly valued, and *mantinádes* as an emblematic part of this tradition are still heard in every celebration and daily television and radio programs. When we understand the more subtle, less framed utterances of the *mantinádes* as performances, as I have done here, it is easier to understand how people contextualize the contemporary, seemingly contextless recitations and the poetry that has been written down. Poetic creativity is evaluated, stories are told, and emotions are expressed in the form of mobile phone messages just as they used to be expressed in casual utterances between those familiar with each other. Today the poems appearing in print and media environments are received by many as a theme to be elaborated on, much as one used to elaborate during the singing of a *paréa* (with the addition that women also frequently perform in these modern arenas). Poetic dialogue in a living poem-culture is thus an ever-ongoing process to which individuals contribute with no necessary setting or frame.

A dialogue is formed of poems as individual utterances that respond to the other people's words (Bakhtin 1986:69) and to one's personal experiences. The locals perceive these poem-utterances as textual products in their own right, but always as products in a process as well. The versatile poetic form is a source of inventiveness for individual composition. The people appreciate good, telling poems by eagerly referring to them, and they produce new meanings through the poems at individual moments. In the course of time these individual compositions become shared property, a part of the tradition. Composing and using poems is an improvisatory process, wherein the textual elements are connected through the poetic means, aesthetic aims, and values inherent to the register, to the emotional world, and to the expressive needs of the person. A *mantináda* is a fixed poem, a text, but never a lone, isolated text: it is part of a process, connected to the tradition and to the communicative and/or mental dialogue of the person and the moment.

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