Cretan dances

The Cretan dances are part of the rich cultural history of the island and have always been a way of expression for the Cretans.

Along with the Cretan music, the numerous Cretan dances are used to show their inner feelings and emotions,

their joy or sadness and of course love. Many of these dances are deeply affected by the ancient Minoan dances

and especially the ancient pyrrhic dance. Throughout the rich Cretan history there have been many different dances

with many variations depending on the area of the island that we are studying or the events that have created or inspired them.

Nowadays, we have four main dances that are being danced all around Crete which are Syrtos, Maleviziotis, Pentozali and Sousta.

Syrtos

This dance is linked to the worshipping Minoan dance of the ceremonial services. This can also explain the fact

that the dancers hold each other´s hands in a circle and keep a certain distance. There is a great number of melodies (musical tunes)

for syrtos that are particularly interesting. The “first Chaniotikos” and the “second Chaniotikos” or “Kissamitikos” (from Kissamos)

are known all over Crete. These melodies are the basis for the modern Cretan “syrtos”, known better as “chaniotikos syrtos” (from Chania).

It is a ceremonial and revolutionary dance, modest and dynamic at the same time, which is part of the Cretan life

and is being performed all over Crete. The first dancer makes improvisations but his turns, the bend of the waist

and the “talimia” (a move where you lift one foot to the side and tap it with your hand) are few, modest

and controlled comparing to other. Whensyrtos is performed only by men, certain rules must be followed: the first dancer gives

a handkerchief to the second one and they start dancing with their hands being at the height of their shoulders while the rest,

holding each other´s hands down, walk after the first two. In the second turn the “first dancer” performs some improvised movements

and in the third turn he does a number of figures while the second one holds him for support as he jumps in the air to perform the “talimia”.

Then he leaves from the front and goes at the end of the dancers. The second becomes first, the third becomes second

and so on until everyone becomes first. This whole process symbolises the captain who along with the second-in-command

they “drag” the fighters to the battle. In the same way that a chief gives orders and the second-in-command follows

and learns while the rest follow the orders. In case of injury or loss, the second-in-command becomes first and has a new deputy.

It is very common for the Cretan woman to dance first in this dance. Her dance has modesty and grandeur, is gracefull

and harmonical as she varies her steps and does “tsakismata” (bends of the waist) and turns but she avoids exaggerating or making jumps

and “talimia” as men do. Contrary to what a man would do, she puts emphasis on her dancing expression

and that is the reason why she uses a few figures. When “syrtos” is danced only by women, they break the circle quite often,

come in front and make turns around themselves with their hands free and then return back to their position.

The traditional Cretan uniforms that women usually wear at festivals or other celebrations are unique in style and may vary from area to area.

Maleviziotis or Kastrinos Pidichtos

Maleviziotis, which is also called “kastrinos pidichtos”, is considered a war dance and is known and danced all over Crete.

Its roots can be traced back to the ancient Cretan dance “Orsitis”. The term “orses” or “ortses” describe the jumps

and the twisting movements of the first dancer as he comes up in front to perform them.  
This dance is called “Maleviziotis” as it first appeared in the region of “Maleviziou” within the Heraklion prefecture.

Nowadays it is also known as “kastrinos pidichtos” as it was danced in Heraklion also known as the “Kastro” (=castle)

from the fortress at Heraklion port. It is considered a dance of central Crete that was spread both to the west

and the east during the 1920s while in Chania it was also called “kastrini sousta”. It can be danced by both men and women,

who are holding each other´s hands at the height of their shoulders with their arms bended. They start dancing in a circle

and then in a straight line. The basic steps of the dance are sixteen (eight forward and eight backwards). The accompanying music,

is mainly performed by a lyra or a violin accompanied by a lute or mandolin or some times by more rare instruments

like a bulgari (looks like a “long” lute) or ascombandoura (an instrument similar to the Scotch gaida which is made from leather).

Any dancer can “lead” the dance by leaving the circle and going to the front. The dance structure of Maleviziotis

allows the first dancer to perform a number of improvisations and show his skill and his creativity. A really good performer

will vary his step with skillful jumps and sittings down, with talimia and stampings of the feet on the ground,

with pauses, spins and even spins in the air (orses) etc.

Pentozali

With the rise to power of Catherine the Great as the empress of Russia after the assasination of Peter,

heir to the throne, with the help of her lover the general Gregory Orloff, high hopes were born in Greece.

The brothers of Gregory Orloff, Theodore and Alexei, who were both in the army, have made promises

that the Russians were planning to liberate Greece and so they misled the Greeks to an unsuccessful insurrection in 1770

which is known as “Orloffika”. One of the Greeks that was misled by these promises was Ioannis Vlahos or Daskalogiannis,

a merchant and ship owner from Anopolis, in Sfakia. He was wealthy and was considered as a leader with his way of thinking

and his actions and he was particularly eloquent and smart. He was educated and could speak foreign languages,

and so he was knows as “daskalos” (teacher). “Daskalos” became “Daskalogiannis” and he instigated an insurrection in Crete

in 1770 which started from Sfakia and was known as the “Daskalogiannis revolution”. As he was expecting Russia’s powerful help

he invited in the autumn of 1769 all the elders and his chief-fighters from the villages nearby to discuss and organise

the future insurrection of the Greeks. Even though there were some hesitations, in the end everyone trusted him

and agreed to begin the fight against the Turks. There was even a legend that helped to convince everyone:

“The time has come for the Greeks to liberate themselves from the Turks with the help of the blonde people” that is the Russians.

The leaders of the revolution were 12 men and Daskalogiannis was their captain. According to tradition, Daskalogiannis

and his captains decided to dance a new war dance. This dance, was performed only by men holding each other from the shoulders

as a symbol of their mutual support and the cooperation and trust among them. It was named “pentozali”, “pente” means

five in Greek and “zalo” means step in the Cretan dialect, so it was the fifth step, the fifth attempt of the Greeks

to liberate themselves from the Turks. Unfortunately the revolution resulted in a bloodshed as the Russian help never arrived.

Daskalogiannis and many of his generals were killed but the “pentozali”, the dance of Daskalogiannis´ revolution, survived

and today is the most popular Cretan dance. A piece of pottery dated to the 13th century BC that was found in Kamilari Herakleion

with a picture of the ancient Cretan dance “yporchima” , where four men dance in a circle holding each other from the shoulders,

could be evidence that this dance has ancient roots. Pentozali is a way for the Cretan people to express their fighting spirit,

their undying desire for liberation and their heroic soul. Through the centuries women started dancing the pentozali as well.

According to old musicians and dancers the dance became well known to the rest of Crete in the 1920s. The music in 2/4 time is played

either by a violin or lyra accompanied by a lute or mandolin and sometimes ascompadoura.

Traditionally the first dancer in the “pentozali” does not separate from the group and make individual moves

but he stays in front following the same movement as the rest. However, what happens often is that the first dancer will create

a group of men only, in front of the women, which does not follow the basic steps of the whole group but perrforms

the step variations of the dance in a straight line. The main characteristic of these variations is the “paties”, the multiple stabs of the feet

on the ground, a really impressive and vigorous dance move. It is said that they stand for the volley of bullets from the Cretan weapons

in the battles against the Turks. The women during this dance do not perform any figures as a group or come to the front

to become first dancers. The “pentozali” is a kind of a memorial service to Daskalogiannis, his men and the revolution

and for for this reason modesty and respect should be shown. One thing that should be pointed out is that traditionally “pentozali”

does not have a quick and a fast rhythm nor is there a slow and a quick “pentozali”. The modern distinction into “slow”

and “quick pentozali” was created in the 1950s and from then on it is being danced Rethymno, Chania and Herakeion

and is known as “Rethimniotiko sigano” , “Chaniotiko sigano”and “Herakeiotiko sigano” which have eight, ten and six steps respectively.

Sousta

The Cretan love dance, which is usually danced by one or more couples, has many elements from the ancient pyrrhic dance.

This can be seen by the way in which it is danced. The men and the women start dancing in a semicircle, holding each other´s hands

at the height of their shoulders with their arms bended. After dancing a whole circle they are split in two teams (one of men and one of women),

the one facing the other and having a distance of a few meters between them. Then, they approach each other dancing

and a kind of a dance dialogue takes place between them. They touch each other, the one passes under the arms of the other,

they part, they embrace, they come closer and go away again. All these make a beautiful and theatrical dance.

It is like a “battle” to conquer each other, to fall in love and become a couple. The man with vivid hand gestures

and virile steps tries to intrigue her while the woman with cute steps and gentle beautiful moves at one moment she approaches him

and gives him hope while the next one she avoids him. In the end we have a union. The name “sousta” was given to this dance

during the Venetian sovereignty (1204-1669), susta in Italian means the spring, as the three basic steps of the dance look like

little jumps and make the dancers´ bodies look like being pushed by a spring jumping up and down. The quick rhythm of the music,

which can have a lot of variations gives the chance to the couple to have a great freedom of movements. The accompanying music,

in 2/4 time is played either by a lyra or a violin, accompanied by a lute or mandolin and sometimes an ascompandoura depending

on the area. The couple usually matches appropriately so that they can perform the traditional dance patterns.

The dance dialogue between the two requires contact and a coordination in their moves that often becomes

a small competition of improvisations between separate dancers or even couples.