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"Green Rhymes: Raising Ecological Awareness Through Cretan Songs"

Slide #1

In Crete, composing and performing folk poetry is a social phenomenon, a creative process which asks for audience participation and interaction. Outcomes of such synthesis are the rhyming couplets called *mandinadhes* as well as the mountain songs called *rizitika*. My suggestion is a "natural" reading of such poetry which asserts that the texts of the poets negotiate identities and express Cretan ideals and values in the service and spirit of an environmentally minded place consciousness. All in all, folk poetry and ecology are diligently interconnected and thus the use of poetry as an educating means can raise ecological awareness.

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Ecos in Greek means home, in the sense of a family, a household, a house, a large estate or even a village, whereas in the heart of the Greek *logos* knowledge, reason, the expression of thought and reckoning exist. Here I propose a folk poetry approach in the service of both *ecos* and *logos*, which encompasses a harmonious and balanced way of *bios* in today's global communities, where earth is *logically* everyone's home.

Ancient Greeks had perfect knowledge, sympathy and comprehension of the beautiful in nature, and they were capable of profoundly and deeply expressing it via their art forms. A re-introduction of such an approach ecologizes the discourse of Cretan folk literature and teaches audiences to reinterpret certain conventional metaphorical uses of nature imagery as environmental messages.

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The Cretan *mandinadha* is a fifteen-syllable, in iambic meter, proverbial, rhyming distich.[1] It is an integral component of Greek folk poetry and a very characteristic form of poetic and musical expression in contemporary Crete. In addition to serving as entertainment, *mandinadhes* are a means of expression for masculinity and a forum for discussing local issues, providing an opportunity for Cretans to express and debate their respective philosophies of life.[2]

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Live traditions of *mandinadha* contests to which improvisatory skills are central are still prominent.[3] Such performances shape Cretan identity dynamically and symbolically since, to be considered a legitimate Cretan, one must know *mandinadhes*. Surrounded by nature, Cretan folk poets absorb images, metaphors and similes, and create folk poetry which reconciles humans with their environment.

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Crete was under the Ottoman rule for almost 250 years. To express their resistance, Cretans performed *rizitika*, namely "songs of the foothills". These songs made symbolic use of nature images, which profoundly conveyed meanings of independency and freedom. They became a strong symbol of identity for mostly the inhabitants of the *rizes* (thus, "roots"), which are traditionally lands of the shepherds.

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Yet today, *rizitika* function as a common language amongst Greeks globally. Take for example the song "Clear skies" (*Xasteria*), which simply asks for better weather. We performed that song in unison at both the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and the Greek Embassy in Washington D.C. last spring, amongst lots of emotion and nostalgia, as it brought back memories of struggle for freedom. For the former Ambassador of Greece to the

U.S. Mr. Alexandros Mallias, nature depictions in that song evoked recollections of his tenure in Geneva as Press officer during the 1970s Greek military regime:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILSXxrLcSV4&feature=related

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Both *mandinadhes* and *rizitika* are place-based because they recognize value in the Cretan folk and their language, and the Cretan landscape itself. A conscious reading of such poetry proves identification with a place, the island of Crete, as well as a critical awareness of its landscape and nature. For instance, Cretan bards perform "The Song of Nida", which chronicles the bravado of the village of Anoya inhabitants during a victorious battle that decided the fate of the plain circa 1870.[4]

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The Nida plain has always been a valuable pasture for the numerous flocks of sheep and goats of this community. The song allows a rare glimpse into the various trajectories that connected the plain with the village of Anoya, with detailed references to toponyms and significant sites.[5] All in all, for a Cretan, such poetry functions ecopsychologically, creating a strong sense of place and belonging. It centralizes landscape and places its recipients within an environmental context.[6] (♫)

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In the poetry the folk poet composes, the first lines introduce the audiences to a simile that presents a natural image.[7] For example, a hymn to freedom and the will to live is the wild goat, which serves as a metaphor for the rebel heart that does not succumb to any yoke. It is so often referred to Cretan folk poetry that it becomes a metaphor for the wild Cretan heart that rebels against the mind and, as an endangered species unique to the island, a symbol of Cretan wilderness.

Take for instance the popular *rizitiko* song which talks of wild goats and kids, tamed deer, where the singer is asking the animals to provide him with information on "where they live, where they are staying at during the winter". The response by the "wild" flock is that "they live in the precipices, the cliffs; the steep peaks are their winter quarters, the caves in the mountains are their ancestral home". Similarly the *mandinadha* "make me, my god, a wild goat, to lead a dance of the heart on top of a ledge until I die" raises notions of "wilderness" via rich use of nature as well: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfZ3n7AQyv0

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Other symbols of Cretan cultural identity are certain plants. One example is the herb dittany (*dhiktamo*) which derived its name from the Greek version of Zeus (thus, *Dhias*). Oftentimes, the metaphorical use of the wild flower signifies that a woman's unruliness makes her more difficult for a man to conquer erotically, yet also more attractive to him than tamer women who are symbolized by cultivated flowers, such as the basil, a plant which for Cretans stands as a signifier of female beauty and dignity.[8] Other Cretan natural imagery would make use of the moon and the sun, symbols of beauty and love, several animals, such as hares[9] and various birds, amongst which are partridges[10], nightingales[11] and audacious eagles:

Slide #11:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyVk-Ds_xA8

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Cretan merits are also reflected on tall and stable mountains that are part of the Cretan civilization since antiquity. For instance, an invocation of the mountain Psiloritis brings to mind its widespread use by *mandinadha* composers as a metaphor for masculine Cretan strength, endurance and pride. Psiloritis for the Cretans has become a point of reference; it has served as a stronghold of revolution and a rampart of freedom. [12] It is the highest mountain in Crete, the place where, according to Greek mythology, Zeus was born.[13]

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Through folk poetry Cretans "hear" who they are, as everything in nature around them, waves, rocks, gorges, oceans, wisely becomes part of their life stories. They are grateful to the landscape which, via folk poetry communal sharing, affirms their identity and ties to their local macrocosm.[14]

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Poetry and music are important and pervasive in Cretan students' everyday life. They have entered technology in many ways, as electronic greeting cards, facebook groups, twitter and text phone messages. Thus, they can constitute a tool in the educators' hands who, upon reading and analyzing Cretan folk poetry, can ask the students to identify and discuss how the symbiotic relationship between nature and man is conveyed as a result of the specific culture and time.

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For instance, on July 25, 2005, I recorded my grandmother, Eleni, composing *mandinadhes* at her summer house in Tsoutsouros, somewhere in central-south Crete.[15] As we were sitting at the terrace of the house, right in front of the beach, gazing at the endless blue, my grandmother started giving me advice for life, using proverbial speech, all in the Cretan traditional *mandinadhes* format. Amongst those lyrics are the following: a) "I sit and I meditate, as if I am about to paint a hagiography, why is the sea water salty but the fish saltless?" and b) "I enjoy sitting and crying by the beach, and narrate each one of my burdens per wave". (♫)

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To the afore-mentioned example we could ask our audience to identify sounds from the natural environment, such as, for instance, the ocean water heard on the background of the recording, and then proceed to comment on the feelings of the composer, which in this case is

my grandmother. We could focus on the Greek word for sea, "θάλασσα" (*thalassa*), which carries the whisper of soft waves gently caressing a rock, somewhere in the Aegean, and speak for the Heraclitian notions of fluidity and hidden harmony, explaining "why we cannot step the same river twice".

We could also meditate on Greek language further by examining why non-native Greek speakers have a hard time perceiving what Homer called "οίνωπας πόντος" (wine-dark-sea) and Odysseus *nostos* ("νόστος"). After all, the modern Greek word "νόστιμος" (*nostimos*) stands for the one who, from the Homeric Odysseus to the contemporary Greek, has journeyed and arrived, has matured, ripened, and is therefore tasty and, in extension, useful.

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We could continue talking about critical global issues, such as the water situation the Mediterranean. Moreover, we could expose the audience to a specific geographical and climatic specification, such as the one at the south part of Greece, where the sea is called Libyan due to its proximity to the homonymous country in Northern Africa: Are you familiar with the rare "Dew Men" phenomenon that takes place in southwestern Crete's Frangokastello?: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrydIGzxk1Y&feature=related

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Lastly, talking about fish and salt, we could make allusions to the local economy and the salt production as well as the healthy Mediterranean Diet, along with an exposure to the Minoan sea culture as it's promoted via the unique project "Thalassocosmos" (Sea World) at the "Cretaquarium" and the Hellenic Center for Marine Research.[16]

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All in all, Cretan folk poetry can provide for us today, our threatened planet, not only inspiration for ecological concern and action but also an ethical base that could strengthen the panoplies for such action through an experiential learning opportunity. By re-localizing and

ecologizing Cretan rhymes we can both teach our audiences to be responsible to their home and call for Cretan inhabitants to become socially and ecologically aware of their island.[17]

Cretan lyrics may function as cultural vehicles that keep alive the distinctive nature and culture, the "scent" of Crete.[18] They are capable of cultivating both a sense of place and ecological awareness along with a duty to one's home. The extensive use of the Cretan language and folk imagery through them are themselves expressions of the Cretan spirit that promote the importance of developing environmental sensibilities. Such experiences may "metamorphose" and reconnect us to our own naturally creative energy.

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If "An Inconvenient Truth", to borrow the title of Al Gore's eco-friendly film, is today's "Emo" reality, then we may consider of becoming natural bodies. One way of achieving so, is via Cretan folk poetry's path, which, by re-connecting poetry to Crete, is conscientiously and synaesthetically integrating poetry with Nature and Art.

Appendix: Song Lyrics

ΠΟΤΕ ΘΑ ΚΑΝΕΙ ΞΑΣΤΕΡΙΑ

Πότε θα κάνει ξαστεριά, πότε θα Φλεβαρίσει,
να πάρω το τουφέκι μου, την όμορφη πατρόνα,
να κατεβώ στον Ομαλό, στη στράτα των Μουσούρων,
να κάνω μάνες δίχως γιους, γυναίκες δίχως άντρες,
να κάνω και μωρά παιδιά να κλαιν' δίχως μανάδες,
να κλαίν' τη νύχτα για νερό, και την αυγή για γάλα,
και τ' αποξημερώματα για την καημένη μάνα.

ΤΡΑΓΟΥΔΙ ΤΗΣ ΝΙΔΑΣ

Μαύρη κορφή, Χελιδονιές και Καυκαλοσπηλιάρα,
Και Μαύρος Κούμος κι Άσπρο Αρμί, και του Σκοινάκου η Σκάλα.

Άσπρον αρμί ανατολικά, εκειά' ναι ο κερχανές μας,
Στση Φριάς τ' αναβολέματα θέτουν οι έγκαλές μας.

Άσπρον Αρμί ανατολικά, κι ακόμη παρακάτω,
Είν' των Κεφαλλογιάννηδων Ανωγειανό μιτάτο.

Βρωμόνερο και Ζωνιανά, Σίσαρχα, Καμαριώτη,
Λειβάδα, Αξό και Ζωνιανά, έτσα τα λέν' κ' οι πρώτοι.

Από'κει δα τα σύνορα να βγει τα Κορατσίνια,
Π' αξίζει κάθε πατηχιά μια χαχαλιά τσικίνια.

ΑΓΡΙΜΙΑ ΚΙ ΑΓΡΙΜΑΚΙΑ ΜΟΥ

Αγρίμια κι αγριμάκια μου, λάφια μου μερωμένα,
Πέστε μου πού 'ν' οι τόποι σας και πού τα χειμαδιά σας,
Γκρεμνά 'ναι μας οι τόποι μας, λέσκες τα χειμαδιά μας,
Τα σπηλιαράκια του βουνού είναι τα γονικά μας.

ΣΕ ΨΗΛΟ ΒΟΥΝΟ

Σε ψηλό βουνό
σε ριζιμιό χαράκι
κάθεται αϊτός βρεμένος,
χιονισμένος ο καημένος
και παρακαλεί τον ήλιο ν' ανατείλει.
Ήλιε ανάτειλε... ήλιε ανάτειλε!

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Notes

[1] The word *mandinadha* derives from the Italian "mattinata", namely, "early morning serenade".
[2] Important is the communal aspect of this poetry. Collective action is the most significant aspect as it expresses and confirms group solidarity (Panopoulos 1996: 9).
[3] Oftentimes called *kontaromahies*, which translates to "fights with poles", or *drakarismata*, namely "collisions". It is easy to compose the first line. The complementary, the second and rhyming one, requires better skills. These compositional strategies are important devices the performers use to gain authority and recognition.
[4] An immensely rich oral tradition has preserved a large archive of memories of epic wars fought over rights of pasture against the rival community of the village of Vorizia on the south foothill of Mount Ida (Kalokyris 1970: 27-32).
[5] Papalexandrou 2007: 169.
[6] From the perspective of the critique of nationalism, Leontis (1995) looks at how literature and geography interact in the construction of a homeland according to the logic of national culture. After all, place is not only physical, but ideological as well (Dreese 2002: 8 & 69). Beside its geographical specification, it carries deep meanings too.
[7] Such a device creates curiosity and increases the expectation of the lines to follow (Vavoules 1950: p. xiii).
[8] In this light, conventional praise for wildflowers or gardens running wild can be read as being as much about the beauty of wild plants as about women: A *mandinadha* connotes not only an unhappily married woman, say, but also the wrongfulness of humankind's mindless domination of other species (Ball 2006b: 289). Other familiar lyrics refer to basil, a plant which for Cretans stands as a signifier of beauty and dignity, and compare it to the virtues of a woman: "My basil with your curly leaves stand where you are, so that your lovely smells can be spread all over the world" (Hnaraki 2007: 67).
[9] See, for instance, Kalokyris 1970: 143-44.
[10] Images from the life of that bird, which is considered pretty and delicate, are used to describe the merits and values of the woman from the village of Anoya. Young men use that type of speech to express their feelings for a young lady during various feasts (several *mandinadhes* examples on Kalokyris 1970: 140-142).
[11] In Greek folk poetry, birds oftentimes symbolize the immigrant Greeks. Stathis explains further the use of specific birds in the Greek folk songs (2004: 276-279 & 667).
[12] McColley speaks of "mountain theology (2007: 62). Many cultures regard mountains as sacred places or sites of prophetic revelation. A "mountain" *mandinadha* example is "My Madares of Chania sky high Ida's peak/Lasithis' Dicte ranges, sad Crete, to you I speak" (Spyridakis 2004: 168). Mere looking at the mountains inspired and still reinforces on Cretans power during hardship (Rackham and Moody 1997: 275). For instance, an invocation of the mountain Psiloritis brings to mind its widespread use by *mandinadha* composers as a metaphor for masculine Cretan strength, endurance and pride: it signifies Cretan identity and sense of place of one's physical surroundings (several *mandinadhes* examples on Kalokyris 1970: 122-125). As Charles Briggs (1986) discusses regarding verbal performances, "contexts are not simply situational givens, they are continually renegotiated in the course of the interaction" (25).
[13] Crete's mountains are home both to wild folk who possess rare and distinctively Greek virtues as well as to rare and distinctive wild plants and animals. Several authors refer explicitly to the interrelationship of ecological discourse and the preservation of distinctive cultural identities (Ball 2005: 7).
[14] Similarly, Hopi elders are grateful to the landscape for aiding them in their quest as spiritual people (Silko 1996: 275).
[15] This is track 15 on the Hnaraki 2007 accompanying the book CD.
[16] http://www.cretaquarium.gr/indexen.php
[17] Ball 2006a: 294.
[18] Ball 2005: 8.