

ABOUT THE GREEK DANCE



By Alkis Raftis

Author & President of Greek Dances Theatre "Dora Stratou" in Athens as well president of the INTERNATIONAL DANCE COUNCIL OF UNESCO.

Tradition and folklore in Greek dance



In the study of cultural phenomena of various societies, past and present, dance is one of the most neglected areas. Greek scholars are by no means the only ones culpable since this is the case all over the world. Anthropological studies in Greece, such as psychology and sociology, are still in their infancy, while related disciplines such as history and folklore studies have an overtly philological bias. Thus it is hardly surprising that there are no studies on the social aspects of Greek dance, indeed this subject has not even been dealt with descriptively.

The scholarly study of dance is fraught with difficulties, not least the bourgeois attitude that dance and all things pertaining to it is a frivolous subject not meriting serious consideration. Dance has been opposed by the church, while successive governments have viewed it with hostile suspicion, fearing all forms of popular entertainment as potential sources of unrest. Dance was not respectable, it was for inebriates and mountebanks and only the advent of ballet rescued it from official disapproval, distinguishing it as an art. Vestiges of this attitude still prevail and dance is only acceptable when labeled as art, not as a means of popular expression.

Another obstacle which the researcher must overcome is the fact that dance is difficult to describe in words and even the notation systems - kinds of "movement shorthand" - are regarded as unsatisfactory by choreographers. Furthermore, as an expression of the body it must pass through the body in order to be fully understood. Visual impressions do not suffice. So the ethnographer must abandon his notebook and, literally and metaphorically, join in the dance, however shy or self-conscious he must make every effort to learn it.

Most prefer to hedge the issue altogether and conclude otherwise highly detailed accounts of a particular ceremony or custom with the stereotyped phrase "and then they dance". Indeed, in the course of consulting some 500 books on Greek folklore it has emerged that on average one paragraph per book mentions dance. The same is true of the

plethora of anthologies of "Songs of the Greek people" which say nothing about when, why and how they are sung and danced but simply treat them as if they were poems to be recited at school.

In recent years, however, there has been an encouraging trend abroad towards the holistic study of dance. That is, it is not only regarded as a creative expression, an art, but as a social phenomenon, the focus of study for diverse disciplines including choreology, which is to dance the equivalent of musicology to music. So, just as ethnomusicologists have begun to make inroads into the vast area of Greek music, so ethnochoreologists must study the wealth of Greek traditional dance. A multidisciplinary approach, involving historians, ethnologists, sociologists, psychologists and educationalists will not only help the dancer and choreographer, it will make a decisive contribution to a deeper understanding of Greek society also.

The term "traditional" is used so frequently, and often erroneously, that it should be defined here, at least with respect to dance. That component of culture which is bequeathed from one generation to the next is qualified as traditional. The term encompasses both the object and the manner of its use or production. For example, a house is traditional because it was built by the father as a home for himself, then his son and later his grandson. The blocks of flats built today are not traditional, not because they do not follow the old architectural style, but because they are built only for the occupier. He knows that his children will probably live in another house when they grow up, of a different style, in a different neighborhood, perhaps even in another country.

In the old days, the next generation did not only inherit a house from the one before, it also inherited the way of life associated with it, as well as the way it was built. The traditional house was built by traditional craftsmen who learnt their skills in a traditional manner and practised them likewise. Therefore, if we build a house today of the same appearance as that of our grandparents, however closely it may resemble it morphologically it will not be traditional because it has been built by men who have not acquired their knowledge as technicians and artisans traditionally, but have learnt it in schools through a non-traditional process.

Though simplistic, this example illustrates the essence of the concept and as such is equally applicable to dance. True traditional dance is an inextricable part of traditional society and is transmitted down the

generations as an organic part of its culture through the general process of acculturation. It is integral to that society, as opposed to intrusive, that is alien, temporary or current fashion. For example, before the War ballroom dances began to be danced in the villages; the waltz, tango and foxtrot. These dances have not, however, become traditional since not enough time has elapsed for them to be assimilated and transmitted to the next generation. They have been retained because they have persisted in the world outside the village, from where they were originally introduced.

During the last century the role of dance in traditional village life was completely functional. This is not the place to deal in detail with the major issue of the functional role of dance, except to say that in traditional society dance is at the very heart of social life, while, on the contrary, in urban industrialized society it is given marginal significance. Dance is always functional, it is always expressive of the society which dances it, but in modern society its function is partial or ancillary.

In pre-industrial societies monarchs, generals and high priests danced. They danced not only at festivals, nuptials and in places of entertainment but also before battle, after the chase, inside the church, as part of their education and at every public ceremony. Dance was as essential as speech. Nowadays one can be a gifted orator yet never have danced a step. Dance still exists, but today, like so many things in our society, it is only of partial importance, we can just as easily do without it or replace it with something else.

The first problem to be faced by any student of traditional dance is the meaning of the word dance. What we mean by dance today is not necessarily the same as what was meant in traditional society. The word dance nowadays tends to have choreographic connotations, referring to the execution of the movements; in the last analysis it means "doing the steps". "Learning the steps" is synonymous with "learning the particular dance". This is the case with the professional dancer who learns a choreography, that is a series of more complex movements to be performed on stage and through which he will project his own personal interpretation. Thus dance is viewed as a purely psycho-kinetic phenomenon.

Conversely, the archetypal meaning of dance is far more comprehensive, being much closer to the meaning given by the ancient Greeks who made no distinction between dance, music and song.

Movement, sound and word - all three rhythmical - were fused in the concept expressed by the word "orchesis" and when presented separately were merely partial aspects of a single reality. This still holds today in the Greek village, where the words of a song, its tune and the dance performed with it all comprise a single entity in man's mind.

Over and above this tripartite internal structure there is a multifaceted external correspondence. This type of dance, removed from its specific context, is meaningless, for it is not just the steps and movements executed by the dancer, it is his very body and costume, those who dance with him and those who sit around and watch. It is the music and the musicians, the song and the singer, the food and wine on the tables, those sitting and dozing, the keen-eyed old men, the mischievous children, the radiant faces filled with emotion, all these form part of the dance. Dance is everything which takes place before it and everything which happens once it is over. It is a stage on which the whole history of the village is enacted.

To single out the steps and present these as the dance is to depreciate it. And yet if one tries to read something about traditional dance all he will find is "books of footsteps" purporting to teach one how to dance by placing one foot this way and the other that. Needless to say, no-one learns to dance from such books and their only usefulness is to refresh one's memory, often erroneously, of a dance one has already learnt.

Greek dance today has a split personality. On the one hand there are those who dance the dances they learnt in their villages at weddings and panigyria, who very often know no other dances and are not interested in learning. When these people dance the entire history of their village, as lived and experienced by them, passes through them. Wherever they may dance their village is resurrected around them. They are the last link in the chain of tradition.

On the other hand there are those dancers who have never lived in a village or who left as children, those who learnt the kalamatianos at school and the chasapiko at a party, and those who can just manage to dance a tango or jive under duress. There are also the young people who belong to dance troupes, who puff and pant while dancing the pentoz"li kotsari have only seen Crete on the map and have only heard of the Pontics in jokes about them. These people dance folklore.

Folklore is the term used of traditional dance when performed out of its traditional social context. At first glance it looks just the same but in reality it is absolutely different. In its extreme form it becomes classical,

"character" dance in ballet. In other instances it is performed by companies, amateur and professional, presented as a spectacle or even done for physical exercise.

The principal characteristic of folklore dance is that it is not transmitted in a traditional manner but by a "reproductive process" involving dance-masters, gym instructors, television shows and even record companies. When dance is learnt through these channels it ceases to be traditional, mainly because the factor of choice is implicated. The teacher and the television producer choose which dances they will show and how, whereas fifty years ago the father in the village only knew one dance, say the ts˘miko and could only show this to his son.

There remains, however, the more difficult issue of the intermediate situation which is neither truly traditional nor totally folklore. The individual who dances the zeibékiko in the bouzouki-taverna - the modern version of the zeibékiko which is more like acrobatic disco dancing - neither belongs to the social strata expressed by this dance nor has ever had any contact with them. On the other hand he is not interested in creating art or spectacle, or even exercising as he dances. That is he has neither traditional dance education nor a folkloric one. Urban traditional dance, or popular dance as it is known, is a subject still awaiting sociological study.

In all the preceding remarks there are no implied value judgments. Traditional dance is neither deemed better than nor superior to folklore, popular, ballet or any other type of dance. Simply it is more rewarding to know what kind of dance we dance and, of course, to dance more often what suits us best. Greece is extremely fortunate in that local dances are still kept alive, and without state intervention, as is the case in other Balkan countries. In the rest of Europe dances are only preserved as folklore.

So great is the wealth of dances in Greece that it would be tragic if this dance heritage were allowed to disappear through lack of interest. Every day an old man dies, perhaps the last person to know an old dance which no-one has managed to film. And every day thousands of video cassettes record re-hashed spectacles shown on television and thousands of children are taught how to move their feet mechanically and meaninglessly, while at the very same moment the poetic movements of true traditional dance are disappearing forever.



HISTORY

Dance in Ancient Greece



All authors writing about the dances of the modern Greeks invariably feel obliged to state that these are the same as those of their illustrious forebears. Usually they quote an excerpt from an ancient text or include a representation from a Classical vase in support of the claimed continuity of the race, as if this needed proving. Such naivety merely seeks to conceal beneath a mantle of patriotism the lack of serious studies of modern Greek dance.

One could only argue in favour of choreographic continuity if it were demonstrated that the dances of ancient Greece included traits not found in those of other peoples and maintained in the dances of today. No such traits have been observed. All aspects of the dance of the Greeks, in both Classical and modern times, are paralleled in the dances of other peoples, whether in ancient civilisations, primitive societies or contemporary ones. This in no way detracts from the distinctiveness of the dances of Greece, for continuity and distinctiveness coexist in the dances of all people at all times and in all places.

Our information about dance in ancient Greece is sufficient to enable us to appreciate its role in society but totally inadequate for us to form any idea of how the dances were actually danced. Apparently several texts existed describing dances, classifying them according to type and explaining their provenance, but very few have survived and these only from late antiquity. They include Plutarch's "Banquet Topics" (Themata Symposiou) (90 AD), Lucian's "Dialogue on Dance" (160 AD), Athenaeus' "Deipnosophistae" (215 AD) and Nonnus' "Dionysiaca" (500 AD). Phrases and names connected with dance, as well as references to dance occasions occur sporadically in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Xenophon, Aristophanes and the tragic poets.

These diverse facts gleaned from the texts are supplemented by representations of dancers on vases and reliefs, what little we know about the music and metre of the ancient Greeks, as well as by general

knowledge about dance in other ancient societies. This material is so disjointed that it lends itself to a variety of hypotheses, interpretations and conclusions and only systematic and comprehensive research will shed light on what is essentially an enigma.

Since no Greek historians have dealt with ancient Greek dance we must rely on the studies by foreign scholars, the most important of which are those of Lillian Lawler and Germaine Praudhommeau. Both scholars have studied the iconographic material and literary sources, from the historical and the choreographic point of view respectively, and have reached quite different conclusions.

It seems, nevertheless, that neither the representations nor the texts and inscriptions refer to what we would define as traditional dance. Quite the opposite, they all deal with classical dances performed in the cities by well-trained amateur or professional dancers. Though we have no evidence about dance in the villages, it is quite possible that the spectacular ceremonial dances of the cities would have been based on contemporary folk dances.

When considering ancient Greek dance it is first essential to define certain terms for there is an innate danger, when confronting another culture, of attributing to it notions intrinsic to our own culture. For example, to the ancient Greeks the verb "chorevo" meant to take part in a chorus and did not have a kinetic dimension as it does today since in demotic Greek it means "to dance". It is the ancient Greek verb "orchoumai" which is actually semantically much closer to the concept of dance as we know it. The interpretation of representations of dance on vases, reliefs and in sculpture should also be approached with circumspection since these are not entirely realistic but subject to certain technical and aesthetic conventions.

The concept of dance is much narrower nowadays than it was for the ancient Greeks. For us the centre of gravity is the feet, which is why when we want to learn a dance we ask to be taught the steps. In ancient and primitive societies, however, dance has a broader sense that is not restricted to movements of the body. One may dance solely with the hands or even the head and face (as in the dances of the Far East), one may dance by simply standing upright (like the end dancers in our ts"miko), one may also dance without the movements being in any way rhythmic.

Another aspect of ancient dance still retained today is expressed by

the use of the verb "to dance" in the active voice. This is expressed in such phrases as "she dances the baby on her knees" or "we dance the bride's dowry" or "come on and dance the in-laws". In other words a person or thing can dance, we dance in honour of a person or thing. This peculiar use of the verb is unique to the Greek language and is not found in any other European tongue.

Another basic observation, equally applicable to the dances of primitive and ancient peoples, is the unity of dance, music and song, which are but facets of a single phenomenon. In ancient Greece one could dance a poem, that is one could express through body movements those sentiments aroused by the verses. This also explains why instrumental music had neither the autonomy nor the dissemination it enjoys today.

This concept has been preserved to a degree in traditional society where it is not at all uncommon for a song to have its own special dance and never to be sung without being danced. Similarly, music which does not accompany a song or dance, or both, is very rare. Furthermore, when a dancer in a village is asked to show the steps of a dance, he cannot do so without also singing the appropriate song.

It is not known whether there was any feature of ancient Greek dance which was an exclusively hellenic invention. No matter, it is not essential to attribute everything to a specific progenitor. Cultural innovations are not like technological inventions which can be patented. There is a continuous and constant interchange and assimilation of ideas and practices between neighboring peoples, augmented too by independent discovery or invention. It was the ancient Greeks, however, who pioneered the logical approach to dance, classifying its elements and, with their unique rationalism, organising its components into a unified system. We know a little about this system from surviving written testimonies. Three categories of dance movements were distinguished: *phor*“, *schema* and *deixis*, though on what criteria these were based is not clear and may be guessed at from disparate data. *Phor*“ was evidently analogous with the balletic concept of *port*, the deportment or posture, the mien, the manner in which the dancer carries his head or body (*port de tête*, *port de corps*) when standing or moving.

Deixis refers to the dancer's use of his arms or body to convey messages in sign language, through symbolic movements. The simplest example of *deixis* would be to point to something, to make a gesture.

Schemata were equivalent to the movements or poses in dance today. There were many, each with its own name and description, several of which have survived.

The foregoing classification is not particularly clear nor convincing. Nevertheless, from extant information on ancient Greek dance, phrases here and there in the texts and even the rare brief description of a dance scene, it seems that it was held in high regard, in particular for its educative qualities. It was generally agreed that dance was essential for the moulding of personality, as well as preparation for battle. Dance, along with writing, music and bodily exercise, was basic to the education system and many authors extol its virtues as a means of cultivating both body and soul.

The young men in all the cities of ancient Greece were taught dance. Indeed, according to Athenaeus, in Arcadia the expenses were met from the civic purse and the pupils staged an annual display of their accomplished skills which all citizens attended. Lucian tells us that the Thessalians had such a high regard for the art of dance that they dubbed their eminent citizens (ῥχονς) proorchestéres (lead dancers).

In Sparta bodily exercise was tantamount to a political creed and, indeed, in his "Politics" Aristotle censures Lacedaemonian training as being so harsh that it produced beasts and not men. They danced mainly martial dances and drilled to the rhythm of emvatiria (marches). Girls too were taught similar dance exercises which they performed in public. The Spartans not only danced before battle, they also fought with rhythmic movements to the strains of flutes.

All Athenian citizens were taught the art of dance and the youths of wealthier families had private tuition in dance, music and poetry from renowned instructors, orchestodidaskaloi. The famous general Epameinondas had received such lessons in Thebes and was a talented flautist, lyre-player and, like the tragic poet Sophocles, an accomplished singer and dancer. In the "Symposium" Socrates not only declares his love of dance but his desire to perfect his skill. The early poets were also known as orchestés since they not only trained the chorus in their plays but also gave private dance lessons.

In both the "Laws" and the "State" Plato eloquently expresses his belief in the virtues of dance. For him a man who cannot dance is uneducated and unrefined, while an accomplished dancer is the epitome of a cultured man. In his detailed exposition on the education of the young

music, bodily exercise and dance hold pride of place. He advocates that girls should be taught the same dance movements as boys, stressing that their teacher should be a woman and her instruction not tempered with Spartan severity. He mentions two mimic dances he considers suitable for boys and girls: the armed dance of the Curates, and the Spartan dance honouring the Dioskouroi.

The dance cited most frequently in the ancient texts is the pyrrhic which, Plato claims, faithfully replicates the hoplite's movements in battle: he moves sideways to avoid his opponent's blows, he withdraws to gather momentum, he attacks by leaping forward and doubles over to present only a small target. The pyrrhic seems to have been outstanding among the other known armed dances (such as the funerary *pylis*, the Cretan *orsites*, the noisy dances of the Curetes and Corybantes) on account of its formalized offensive and defensive movements, particularly important in training for combat. It evidently developed into a spectacular dance in later times incorporating many bacchic elements and eventually all traces of its martial origin were lost.

The parallel drawn today between the Pontic dance known as the *Sera* and the ancient pyrrhic is entirely arbitrary and untenable. The *Sera* is a group dance with strong movements and sudden changes, often followed by another dance performed by two dancers, the *Pitsh"k-oïn* (Turkish for dagger-play). Neither of these dances justify its renaming as the "pyrrhicheion". Similar spirited dances are found among ancient and primitive peoples, without necessarily being martial in intent. In some armed dances the weapons are brandished and clashed in order to ward off evil spirits (apotropaic dances). There are also dances with leaps, shrieks and synchronised movements designed to project the corporate strength of a group of males yet without obviously bellicose elements. Last but not least, it is quite common for dances depicting a duel between two men to be transformed into erotic dances when performed by a couple and vice-versa.

Another didactic dance with formalised movements was the "gymnopaedia" which must have been very like present-day eurhythmics or gymnastics (not aerobics because it was a slow dance). The gymnopaedia was the main dance of the Lacedaemonians and was performed annually in the *choros* a special site in the centre of the agora at Sparta. It must have been very similar to the pyrrhic except that it imitated the movements of a wrestler and not of a warrior, the dancers being unarmed and naked.

Both these dances were performed by youths and maidens, separately, to the accompaniment of the flute. Another dance, the hyporchema, on the other hand, was danced by boys and girls together, singing choric poems. Plutarch speaks of Pindar as a composer of paeans and hyporchemata, stressing that the arts of poetry and dance go hand in hand and that the hyporchema embodies both since it mimics reality in movement and words. But Athenaeus describes the hyporchema as a kind of dance-game, not unlike the comic dance known as the kordax.

The kordax, the dance associated with Comedy was looked down on and generally regarded as unworthy of serious men. It was danced by one or more persons, separately, making ridiculous and vulgar gestures to the music of the double flute. The later dance, the sikkinis, associated with satyric drama must have resembled the kordax but was much faster with effeminate gestures and devoid of symbolic content. The third type of drama, Tragedy, also had its own particular dance, the emmélia which presumably enhanced the events enacted on stage with apposite expressive gestures, measured and stately movements.

The names of many other dances are known but we have no idea how they were danced. For example, the hymnénaios, danced by the bride with her mother and friends, was quick with many twists and turns. The géranos danced on Delos by Theseus and his companions whom he had saved from the Minotaur, is described by Homer in the Iliad. Dances were performed in honour of the dead and of different gods. Local and bacchic dances were danced on feast days and at special ceremonies, such as the Panathenaea in Athens and others at Delos and Delphi, at symposia, during the vintage and a host of other occasions.

The dominant formation in all ancient Greek dances seems to have been the circle, open, closed or spiralling. Only Athenaeus refers to dancers in straight lines, as well as a "square-dance" on which he does not elaborate. As a rule men and women danced separately, rarely together. In the theatre the members of the chorus and the principal actors were all men. Women danced women's dances among themselves and dionysiac dances in the course of orgiastic bacchic festivals. Dancers were mainly amateurs, excepting those engaged to entertain the diners at symposia and who were considered to be of low social status.