

CHAPTER 17

***Zeibekiko* and *chasapiko* in rebetiko song**

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This paper is an attempt to show how two dances, already known as traditional dances in some regions of the Greek-speaking areas, came to be spread out all over Greece during the period of the 20th century through the medium of rebetiko song.

In this presentation the term *rebetiko* will be used to refer to the period that started with Markos Vamvakaris' entrance into discography (1932) and extended until mid-1950s or early 1960s. In the preceding period (known as the "Smyrneika period"), we note that in the discography there was a fairly even spread of dances and rhythms among all the dances popular among the Greek-speaking populations of Asia Minor and Istanbul, i.e. *zeibekika* (in various rhythmic variations), *chasapika*, *tsiftetelli*, *karsilamas*, *syrtta* and others, as well as the off-rhythm but popular *amanedhes*.

Examining the Vamvakaris discography on 78 rpm records, we find that there are about 80 *zeibekika* and 88 *chasapika* out of a total of 174 recorded items. So the question has to be asked: why the marked preference for these two rhythms?

First, let us look at the *chasapiko*: this dance was known from older epochs in many regions of the Greek-speaking world: eastern and central Macedonia, Thrace, Asia Minor, eastern Aegean islands, the Dodecanese and elsewhere. However its home was Constantinople and its surroundings. The only older reference I could find was from the letters of Mme Chenier's, written in the second half of the 18th century.

Madame Chenier, the Greek Elisaveth Sandi-Loumaki, was married to the Frenchman Louis Chenier in Constantinople and the couple settled in Paris. Among other dances Mme Chenier also describes the "Arnaoutiko Dance", as she names it, a dance danced in Constantinople during Easter festivities. It was performed by the *kassap oglan*, that is by the butchers of Constantinople, the Makellarides of the Byzantine times, the origin of which she describes as "Greek Macedonians". The dance and its steps are not described in detail; the description is centred on the ritual movements in her effort to connect the dance to ancient times, to the army of Alexander the Great, to imitation of victorious battles etc. I will not go into details but will note that the dancers "...stay in a row one next to the other and hold each other's belts, so as to keep even closer. They all make the same steps and act as one single body." There are two leading dancers and a small row of dancers after them, all armed with knives, bars and whips. The main row that follows, some few hundreds, do not hold "arms". The word *chasapikos* is not mentioned at all. I also note that *Arnaoutis* (*Arnavut*) is the Turkish word for Albanians, which the Turks even today link, for older times, to the profession of the butcher (*kassap*) in Constantinople. So we are talking of the official yearly dance of the butchers' guild.

Even though Mme Chenier's evidence is not sufficient, one could suppose that probably the dance described is the *chasapikos* that we know or some direct ancestor, which was spread from Constantinople to adjoining Macedonia (or vice versa!) as well as to a number of regions in close contact with the imperial capital.

Let us now come to *zeibekiko*. If *chasapiko* was a *politikos* (Constantinople) dance, *zeibekiko* was *smyrnaikos* (from Smyrna). More precisely, it is a dance connected firmly to the Zeybeks, a warrior tribe which was found in the last centuries in regions of western Turkey, mainly in the Aydin aerea and up to Izmir or further down, as well as extending eastwards. The origins of the Zeybeks have never been adequately defined, and this gives

freedom to non-experts to name label them as Turks, Greeks or Phrygians according to taste.

Zeibekiko too, was known and popular in several regions where Greek-speaking populations were or are still found: Western Turkey, Thrace, the islands of the Eastern Aegean, the Dodecanese and Cyprus. But neither *zeibekiko* nor *chasapiko* can compare with the popularity of, for example, *kalamatianos*, *tsamikos*, *syrtos*. Nor can they be seen as typical dances of a certain region, such as the *zonaradikos* for Thrace, the *pentozalis* for Crete etc. So how are we to explain the almost total dominance of those two dances in the rebetiko song genre?

To researchers familiar with Carnival folklore as well as with similar activities or customs of the Christmas period, the custom, or better the necessity, of the people to perform masquerades during these days, and also to perform activities of a theatrical or mimical character, is well known. These are very ancient customs originally performed for the prevention of evil, but also to invoke fertility, which is announced with the turn of the day in the Christmas period or with the announcement of the coming of Spring during Carnival time. Such activities are common in several regions, as the whole of northern Greece, Thessaly, Crete, the “Maidens” of Pelion mountain or the “Zeibekia” of Syros or of Rhodes (Archangelos village). Disguises often include theatrical activities that involve the figures of the “Doctor”, “Jew”, “Bridegroom and Bride”, “Negro” and others. Let us take a closer look at the second case (the island of Syros), as described in a scientific research published 1913:

From the second and until the last Carnival Sundays, together with various masquerades promenading in the streets of Syros, the “Zeybek” groups also promenade, composed of 20 to 30 young revellers...¹

Having described in detail the clothing of the “Zeybeks” (a description which coincides precisely with what we know of the typical ritual clothing of the Turkish Zeybek), as well as the appearance of the Bride, the Bridegroom, the “Lord” and the Negro, the researcher then goes on to describe the evolution of the Carnival ritual, which includes the “abduction” of the Bride, the robbing of the rich visiting Lords, the sentencing to death and execution (by fire) of the Negro, the Lords’ guard and further activities but mostly dance. The dances are executed by the “captain”, the group’s leader, his “wife” and the lads themselves. Several groups are brought together every year by districts. On the last Sunday of Carnival all the groups unite and dance together. At the head of the group there is always the Turkish half moon, permission having already been requested from the Turkish consulate, a permission which was always granted. In former times two *kindelia* (*iki telli*, a type of *bozuk*) were accompanying the dances; today a “*laterna*” is used.

Let us now look into a further description, given by none other than Markos Vamvakaris:

During Carnival over there (in Syros) we had the “Zeibekia”. Up to forty people gathered together. They would open up a dance school, before Carnival and would learn to dance the *zeibekiko*, *chasapiko*, *serviko*, *chasaposerviko*. On Carnival the festivities would start. The first Captain was the leader. He would dance very well. All were men, no women. There were several roles: the captain’s wife, the chaser, the captain’s son (who was me one year), the negroes, two negroes who pretended to be ‘stealing’ the captain’s wife, all men. Every Sunday we would pay a *laterna* to play and we would dance together in the streets. On weekdays we had only a *tarabuka* (small tambourine). *Zeibekiko*, *chassapiko*, *serviko*, these were the three dances that I would dance, most of all *zeibekiko*. All this happened in Syra; every district had this custom.²

We note the remarkable concordance between the account of the scientific research and Markos’ personal memoir, captured almost a full lifetime later. But there are some further notes: in Carnival activities exoticism is a must, especially in urban societies and Syra

was urban. In rural districts we have traditional ancient daimonical shapes such as the male buck, ugly old men, bell bearers etc. But in both cases, there is a need for something to coincide with role playing: we are no longer the familiar faces of Yorgos, Yiannis, etc. but something different: Zeybeks. And as a proof, we do not dance *syrtos*, *ballos* and the familiar dances but *zeibekiko*, *chassapiko*, *politiko*, *serviko*, *tsiftetelli*. Dances unknown in Syros at times other than Carnival. Hence the “dance school” that Markos describes, where these dances were taught formally. In no Greek city at the turn of the 20th century did dance schools exist where traditional dances were instructed. And the final exotic touch, the Turkish half-moon accompanying the revelers.

So Markos grew up in Syra experiencing these performances. He enjoyed them and not only did he not forget them later, he recalls and is proud of himself towards the end of his life:

Me, dancing, if you could see me fifteen years before, you would be amazed. [...] “Dance”, they would say and I started immediately. They could not believe their eyes. They said to my father, “your son is an excellent dancer”.³

Then comes Markos’s migration to Piraeus (1917), which approximately coincided with what Greeks call the Asia Minor catastrophe and the ensuing settlement of refugees at breathing distance from Markos’ place (1922). So when, later, he started listening to bouzouki and playing as well as writing songs, his musical world consisted of the following: (a) the music that he brought with him from Syros; (b) music he was gathering from unknown, marginal players of the district (*mourmourika* and *koutsavakika* as well as other songs from the low life milieu; (c) music heard on gramophone records, i.e. Smyrneika melodies and rhythms of the days and (d) experiences from the immediate environment, i.e. from the refugees. With his clear preference for *zeibekiko* and *chasapiko* already declared, it is with no difficulty that we can answer our initial question: from the rich palette of rhythms offered for adoption, i.e. *tsiftetelli*, *karsilama*, *zeibekiko*, *chasapiko*, *servika*, *syrtas* and *amanes*, Markos picked up the ones that directly appealed to his heart: *zeibekiko* and *chasapiko*. As he said characteristically, when asked about e.g. *tsiftetelli*: “Those ones we didn’t know”. He wrote just one *tsiftetelli*, very few *syrtas*, some *servika* and one or two *amanedhes*.

Of course, a major factor in his preference was the appeal to the audience. In those days songs first needed to pass the test of audience acceptance from the orchestral podium or, at least, from the coffee house, before the artist was encouraged to suggest them to the companies for recording and the company was ready to accept. So it is not unimportant that Markos was living in Tambouria, next to Drapetsona, but was roaming around at all coffee shops and *tekes* of broader Piraeus, met people, loved the refugees (not typical with the majority of established locals...) and had them all as his audience.

With his entrance into discography, 1933 practically, his songs find extraordinary acceptance. The so-called “Piraeus School” establishes itself rapidly and it is not long before new musicians come up, who will later play top or important roles in the evolution of rebetiko. But the successful coupling of *zeibekiko* and *chassapiko* is not touched by anyone. During the whole evolution of rebetiko these two dances continue to be by far the most popular. Only towards the end of the creative period of rebetiko, which coincides with the emergence of what is today called “*laiko*” (pop music, more or less), around the end of the 1950s, are further rhythms introduced (or reintroduced) in the discography but this is connected to the “Indian” era, the establishment of Kazantzidis and other parameters and goes beyond our subject. Perhaps one genre is worth mentioning here, the so called “orientals” or “exoticals” of Tsitsanis, which however were relatively short-lived, as well as the so-called “*mangiko valse*”, which also disappeared quickly.

Conclusion

Concluding, it is worth making two important observations, one on *chassapikos* and one on *zeibekiko*:

Chasapiko, in conjunction with the world wide acceptance of the film “Never on Sunday”, gave birth to a new fashion dance, the *syrtaki*, which persecuted our musical and aesthetical feeling for quite some decades. Today the *syrtaki* is history but genuine *chasapiko*, after the troubles it has suffered from the former, can very hardly be found performed properly at spontaneous gatherings and similar situations.

With *zeibekiko*, however, something much more important happened: a genuine and centuries-old traditional dance, a warrior dance of the Zeybek tribes in western Turkey, a dance with a very strictly defined ritual, clothings, rhythmical and musical forms, gave birth to a genuine urban popular dance of modern Greece, focused on the personal expression of the performer rather than the needs of the society, and all this in a strongly liberal choreographic environment. A dance born, developed and formed in less than half a century, but which was much loved and which continues to be danced even today (of course with all the negative influences of our times) all over Greece or abroad, wherever Greeks are having good times. And, most important: a dance which has been left to develop by itself, with no external intervention by commercial or academic parameters. A social and choreographic phenomenon of which I do not know a similar example in the 20th century, anywhere in the world.

NOTES

1. John P. Sideris, “The Zeibek (Carneval Customs of Syros)”, *Laographia* No. 4 (1913-14), Athens (in Greek).
2. Angela Keil, *Autobiography of Markos Vamvakaris*, Athens 1978.
3. *ibid.*

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