

Chattista (Cyprus couplets)

(Kypraia Foni- Kalos irtan oi ksenoi mas)

In Cyprus, the spontaneous production of lyrics by everyday folk is a centuries-old tradition which continues to this day.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that one is hard-pressed to find a Cypriot who has not composed even one rhyming line. There is however a large category of people for whom what's known as "chattisma" is a way of life.

"Chattista" is the name given in Cyprus to couplets composed spontaneously by the people (something akin to Cretan "mantinades"), with "chattisma" being the competitive creation of couplets by two or more individuals. The word "chattista" derives from the local dialect's verb "chattizo", meaning "to fit together / to match", and implies the matching of one line with another through rhyme, and the matching of one couplet with another as regards both thematic approach and meaning.

The "chattista" generally fall into four categories:

1. Isolated "chattista", which have been uttered and repeated from time to time by eponymous and anonymous creators, of a rich and varied thematic content, such as:

Of love, of work, of emigration, of the swing, sayings, "millomena" (bawdy), those of a philosophical mood and others.

2. "Chattista" which are traded back and forth between individuals known for their spontaneity and talent for producing such couplets on, as it were, the fly. This is usually the case when two individuals meet for the first time and replaces the more traditional greeting.

3. "Chattista" heard at a one of the island's many relevant competitions, having a specific theme.

Such competitions are usually held within the scope of village or town fairs, and other large festivals such as "Kataklysmos" (Whitsun), with the contestants being two or more. The theme (usually of an amorous content) is set, each contestant presents one "chattisto", and the winner is he or she who, at the end of the contest, produced the better couplet in the eyes of the public or a relevant panel of judges.

4. “Chattista” with a competitive nature, traded back and forth between two individuals.

These competitions are held at the venues mentioned above. If there are many competitors, then a draw is held to determine who will face who. The winners of each pair then proceed to another draw, with the process repeated until only one pair is left, from which the final winner will be pronounced. Certain rules are adhered to in such contests. A fundamental rule is that the second contestant (the responder), should answer with a “chattisto” appropriate to that sung by the first. Should the responder wish to change the subject, he or she should do so through a clever connection with the preceding couplet, i.e. latch onto something said by the first individual and give the contest a different direction. Those who cannot respond lose. Those taking their time in responding give the right to the first contestant to proceed with a second couplet, something which counts in the first contestant’s favour.

These contests usually develop into intense verbal altercations during which strong words are exchanged, with these however considered permissible within the scope of the contest, with no-one’s nose being put out of joint.

The judging panel’s final decision is based on: correct rhyme and correct rhythm (which in “chattista” is a simple or compound 15-syllable metre), readiness and promptness in responding, topical, clever and appropriate responses, originality and, finally, the overall picture presented by the competitor.

Something similar, in a quasi- but not strictly competitive character, takes place between the two dancers after the third “kartzilamas”, with this stage of the dance being known as “traoudistos” or sung. The musicians shift the melody from that of the “kartzilamas” to the “isha” (a voice with many variations on which the couplets are sung) and the dancers sing “chattista” of a primarily amorous nature, with each one’s attempt to outdo the other obvious for all to see. Between the couplets, the musicians play various interludes, during which the dancers continue to dance around each other while also thinking of their next couplet.

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