

Women and Men in the Tsámikos: A Dance of War or Peace?

Laura Shannon

A recent online discussion among circle dance teachers on the tsámikos as a war dance inspired me to gather my thoughts and write this article, which appeared in The Grapevine in 2007.

The tsámikos, with its thrillingly acrobatic variations, is known as the quintessential men's dance, and is even reputed to have been danced as a preparation for going to war, but that is only half the story. The tsámikos as *women* dance it is not so well known, perhaps because most folk dance teachers are men, who understandably teach dances in the style most natural to them. But the women's tsámikos is a hidden treasure. Its slow-quick pulse contains the mystery of the heartbeat of the mother earth, in whose generous and loving presence we tenderly place each step. I believe this tender, earthy, heartbeat quality, as expressed in the soft yet strong steps of the dancing women, speaks of the time before war.

Tsámikos is one of the most popular and widespread dances on the Greek mainland, and that indicates that it is also one of the oldest. We can discern in it elements of the two most ancient Greek dance patterns: the zigzag Syrtos / Sta Dhio, and the three-measure Sta Tria, which I believe encodes the symbol of the Tree of Life. Both of these symbols express natural cycles of ebb and flow, dark and light, summer and winter, while the Tree of Life itself represents the Mother Goddess once peacefully worshipped throughout the same geographical area where the Sta Tria dance family – and the tsámikos – are still so popular today.

In its synthesis of polarities – slow and quick, open and closed, right and left, stillness and movement – the tsámikos can help us hold the mystery of the balance of the opposites, which Jung identified as the key to psychological wholeness and inner peace. Tsámika also give us a chance to practice keeping our balance as we change direction, thus metaphorically guiding us through sudden changes in our own lives. This is one reason women often dance tsámika at weddings, as rituals to mark moments of major change. And if we can find the courage to surrender to its revelation of the mysteries of life, death and rebirth, the women's tsámikos has much to teach us.

One tsámikos song begins: 'Oh, you dancing women, where do you have your men? Up on the mountain, with the sheep, where the wolves pass. Once every moon we see them...' Even today Greek women and men tend to inhabit different social spheres, which draw even farther apart in the realm of rituals around dancing and music, fasting and feasting, and other rites of passage in life, birth and death.

This division of gender in culture explains how men's and women's tsámika have developed separately in terms of both steps and style. But how can the same rhythm serve as both a dance of war for men and a dance of peace for women? To understand this mystery, let us look more closely inside the 3/4 tsámikos rhythm itself.

According to Reinhard and Cornelia Flatischler, a threefold vibration is one of the rhythms our bodies naturally recognize, and where we instinctively feel at home. They say the triple beat focuses attention inwards and creates an inner movement towards turning. (The turn is both a common variation in the tsámikos and a universal symbol of transformation.) Under the laws of physics, the 3/4 beat is created by a faster vibration than the basic 2/4 beat. Thus the tsámikos rhythm generates a sense of greater energy and excitement, just as we feel when the pace of our own lives accelerates towards major change, as in the time leading up to a wedding, or as we imagine warriors might feel before entering conflict.

The basic tsámikos phrase, as men dance it, visibly expresses this feeling of excitement and energy, fitting four steps within one 3/4 measure ('STEP-2-3 STEP' or QQSS), with the most rapid movement occurring right at the start of the phrase. At the same time, the slow-quick pulse of the tsámikos rhythm, with the stress on the second offbeat, naturally gives a sense of a slower pace and time for preparation. Crucially, this latter aspect is what is emphasised in the women's tsámika, where the first three quick steps are typically replaced by one slow step, so that the basic tsámikos is reduced to a two-step phrase ('STEP (hold) STEP'), and the 'faster' step – still slower than the men's quick steps – comes at the end of the phrase rather than the beginning. In this way the men's tsámikos creates a sense of rushing forward, acting or initiating, while the women's tsámikos gives a feeling of holding back, containing or preserving.

Men and women in the tsámikos also improvise differently at the head of the line. Years ago in my dance notes I described the difference thus:

“The creativity which enables each individual dancer to choose how she ornaments the ‘breathing spaces’ [in a women's tsámikos] is very different from the way men improvise in Greek dance. Men's variations tend to rely on showier, larger movements which challenge dancers technically and allow them to shine for a moment in the spotlight as they lead the line. However, there is an inner shining enabled by these women's dances which I love, which can be shared by all women in the line, and is not restricted only to the dancer who is leading.”

This mysterious, grounded, radiant quality is present in all of the fifteen or so women's tsámika I have learned over the years, and is precisely what has led me to seek them out. Their beautiful, subtle steps and style are indeed quite different from the standard men's tsámikos – if they're danced in the old, traditional, women's way. However, changing gender relations in Greece and other Balkan countries allow men and women to dance together much more than they used to, and a mixed circle inevitably takes on the dance style of the men. As women become accustomed to dance with bigger steps and showier variations, it is not uncommon to see a woman dance 'like a man' even when dancing with other women. While it can be thrilling to see a woman command a line in such an extroverted manner, it's very different from the way women used to dance, and the old style seems to be vanishing to make way for the new.

Luckily, there are still plenty of grandmothers alive and dancing in the old way. The older women have their own, more restrained art of improvisation at the front of the line, which seems to me to emphasise connection, rather than competition, with the other dancers. This self-expression opens the most secret door to the dancing soul, and this door is open to foreigners, too.

Occasionally, tradition allows women and men to dance together and to preserve the essential quality of the women's tsámikos. One example is a tsámikos from Dórida, near Delphi, which Dimitris Triandafyllidis says is the one tsámikos in all of Greece where the mixed line is led by a woman, and the men dancing behind her adapt to her pace and style. I saw another example this past winter during Carnival, when I learned a women's Sarakatsani tsámikos now danced by settled Roma in the village of Flámbouro, near Serres. Both women and men dance it with the restrained style and small, sensitive steps normally associated with the women's tsámikos.

More recently, at a wedding, I watched the groom and his friends from the Agrafa region of Northern Greece dance their ritual tsámikos known as Kleistos Choros. It begins with a 4-measure tsámikos pattern in a closed handhold ('kleistos' means 'closed') and changes to a form of Sta Tria. They consider Kleistos to be a very old dance, danced only at weddings and on Easter Sunday. I had the good fortune to be one of the wedding musicians, so I could not join the circle, but I will never forget how the men and women danced, with the kind of solemn collective focus and silence which I have found more often among circle dancers than among partying Greeks.

Whether in Greece or in our circles worldwide, I feel deeply inspired whenever I witness men and women intently dancing together with such perceptible reverence. It's another vibration my body recognises, where I feel at home. Such experiences awaken an ancient cellular memory of the distant past, the time before war, when peace reigned in Old Europe. I also choose it as my hopeful image for the future. May all of us – women and men, Greeks and non-Greeks – open our hearts to the teachings of the women's tsámika. They invite us to come together to honour our quiet strength and our stamina, not – as I see it – as warriors, but as enduring sentinels of ancient tradition.

Further information:

I honour all the male teachers, particularly Joe Kaloyanides Graziosi, Steve Kotansky, Dimitris Triandafyllidis, Yiorgos Lazarou, and Dimitris Barbaroussis, who respectfully preserve and transmit women's tsámikos steps and style.

The circle dancers' internet discussion group can be found at: friends@CircleDanceNetwork.org.uk.

My theory on the connection between the sta tria / pravo dance family and the symbol of the Tree of Life is more fully explored in my articles 'Simple Dances: Where Do They Come From, Where Do They Lead?' and 'Dances of the Great Mother: Three-measure Dances and the Tree of Life' on www.laurashannon.net

More information on the physics and metaphysics of rhythm can be found in Rhythm for Evolution: Das TaKeTiNa Rhythmusbuch by Reinhard Flatischler.

I went to Flambouro and other villages in northern Greece with a research seminar organised annually by Yvonne Hunt. Next year's Carnival trip dates: March 1-10, 2008. Contact Yvonne at yhunty@yahoo.com.

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