



New Year's Initiation Processions of Teenagers: The Case of "Young Gegides" of Emporio, Eordaia

Karepidis K. Ioakeim

Msc. in "Folklore"

Doi: 10.2478/mjss-2018-0029

Abstract

The social coming of age is an issue in many – if not in all – cultures through the procedures of initiations. Such ceremonies have always existed since in the traditional societies the biological adulthood happens through the society – community. The fact that these ceremonies are old is proven through totem worships that have survived until today. Obviously in our era the conceptual core of these ceremonies has transformed since the adulthood is no longer a social issue but a legal one. So these processions have a new form adjusted to the social – historical and cultural circumstances. This article deals with this adjustment observing the ancient issue of initiation processions of teenagers (agermos) through a modern point of view. Specifically, with the excuse of the custom "Young Gegides" of Emporio, Eordaia, that takes place on New Year's Day, the article studies the way that these processions happen now in this community, their functionality and the meaning that is attributed to them not only by those who take part but also by the community. It also studies the reasons – the triggering events that led through time to these changes and finally to the adjustments and the way that these innovations became assimilated in the local community.

Keywords: processions, "Young Gegides", initiation processions, participants, ritual feast.

1. Introduction

Biologically speaking, coming of age is a special period and a pre – level of adulthood not only biologically but also socially. For the community¹ the moment – phase of adulthood is proof that the teen comes to a productive age and so he has to be integrated in the local community jumping from the role of the child to the role of the "man". This transition happens with initiation ceremonies where the "men- to- be" of the community are called to face various challenges, usually painful and hard. "This initiation is the actual learning of the rules of this specific society but it is also an experience that tests the strength or a personal sacrifice" (Puchner, 2010: 99).

Elements of the initiation challenges of the teenagers exist in the processions of the Twelve – Days Period and mainly in the New Year's group visitations which often include monster disguises, human disguises or the local traditional clothes (Puchner 2010: 121). With the term "procession" (agermos) we mean the ritual going around of a group of people in a place with magical – ritual movements and songs. The word comes from the ancient greek verb "ageiro" that means gather, something that still exists as long as there are still tips and treats. A characteristic of these processions is the temporary estrangement from the community and the family, the submission to

¹ With the word "community" we mean a group of people bigger than a family and less impersonal than an organized one or not, in a country of national groupness where the members are in a direct intrapersonal relationship every day or very often. Alexakis, El. (2001). *Tautotites kai eterotites. Symvola, syggeneia, koinotita sin Ellada-Valkania*. Athens: Dodoni. p. 182.

the informally or formally designated leader, the subjugation of their “ego” to the strict behavior rules of the community that are different from their daily routine², the knowledge of each role and the domination of a different hierarchy as long as there is a temporary overturn of the status quo (Puchner 2010: 100, 117; Van Gennepe, 2016:185).

In the New Year’s processions only male teenagers take part, something that according to Puchner (2010:103) is the result of the belief in the pre – capitalistic societies that boys up until their social adulthood are sexless beings unlike girls who by entering in adolescence the biological and social confirmation of their female sex happens at the same time. The processions mentioned before, that take place on New Year’s Eve or New Year’s Day, are a part of deterring and clairvoyance activities, something that is evident by the magic trenches on the place that the community’s animals live with custom – like *arotriosi* (cultivations), roping off of a place, processions, crossings and “zosimata”. Usually, during the circling are collected money, food and drinks which are either given for community services or are consumed by the procession members in a ritual symposium.

In the initiation processions funerary doctrines are often included. More specifically in some cases they think that during this time the souls of the deceased lie in the “upper” world or that the gates of the “underworld” are open and the dead can hear the living (Megas, 2007:52). They also include deterring activities or activities that refer to the earth because according to the folk beliefs during this period the water becomes sanctified, the winds are baptized, the sea becomes sweet, the sky opens at dawn and harmful half – human demons rule. Specifically, when the children enter a house, one of the participants - with parental and deterring qualities - stirs the ashes of “Dodekaimero”³ saying some special words (Polimerou – Kamilaki, 2013:31-38). Additionally, the noise from the bells and the disguise are also used as mediums to banish the harmful half – human demons (Politis, 1904:1275; Megas, 2007:58; Aikaterinidis, 1976:13-27). Consequently, actions with uncertain symbolism take place too, like the knocking of the main door with a piece of wood (Puchner, 2016:122).

2. Methodology

For the data collection and processing the principles of the ethnographic search were used. More specifically, during the collection part primary and secondary sources were used. In the primary ones we have the methods of archival, bibliographic and internet study, while in the secondary one we have the field – based study. The last one was found necessary since it is not complementary knowledge , but clear knowledge as long as the cultural phenomena cannot be interpreted and understood correctly, if we do not place them in the specific cultural and social context, where they meet and function, since if separated we have unavoidable quality changes (Ben-Amos, 1971:4). For the success of the field – based study it was essential to respect some parameters one of which was the correct choice of the informants, taking into account both quality and quantity. The quantity choice was a must because one informant was completing and correcting the other and the quality choice was a must too because the study for the “customs” and the “events” needs to be done intertemporally (to the axis of time) and synchronically (recording of its modern form).

In order for the interviews to be successful the non – constructed depth interviews were used (Lydaki, 2012:256), mainly in the form of discussion – narration, without the speaker’s interruption, since the important thing was the subjective experience of the event, in other words how each informant experienced the event and not what was happening exactly. But apart from the non – constructed, the semi – constructed interviews were also used (Lydaki , 2012:256), because the goal was to elicit specific information, but not without the possibility to collect personal experiences.

Then there was the classification and the cataloguing of the data and the part of studying and examining the material on a historic and comparative basis with the help of the scientific methods.

² With the word “daily routine” we mean the time that goes with or outside the formal moments of life but definitely within the limits of a specific social class. Meraklis, G. M. (2011). *Elliniki Laographia. Koinoniki sygkrotisi- ithi kai ethima-laiki techni*. Athens: Kardamitsa. p. 221.

³ The word “Dodekaimero” means holy twelve days from 24/12 up to 05/01.

The processing of the data was done through the psychological, social–historic and anthropological study. More specifically, through the methods of content analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis, biographical and narrative analysis, the psychological and anthropological study both helped. The first one helped to interpret the data of the study in an individual, diatomic, group and ideological level while the second one in a family, political and social – economic level. The social–historic analysis on the other hand, with the according method (Meraklis, 1989:19), brought on the surface the social and historic conditions that affected the reforming of the custom that is studied. Finally, we have the conclusions and the writing of the study based on the model of “thick description” (Geertz, [1973] 2003).

3. Emporio

Emporio (coordinates 40°29'00") since 2010 with the Kallikrates law is a local community of the kallikratic municipality of Eordaia in the district of Kozani. It is built amphitheatrically at a height of 690m. at the feet of Mouriki mountain. The river “Tsiroga” runs in the village a name that refers to the large amount of fish in it since the word “tsironi” in the local dialect means small fish. On the north the community skirts the village Foufa, northwest Milochori, southwest Vlasti and northeast Anarrahi. The capital of the district is Ptolemaida, 14km away from Emporio and they connect with a daily bus line. Emporio’s climate is continental, while in the summer it is hot during the day and cool during the night.

As for the name of the village, the most known version among the residents of the community and the villages nearby is that it comes from the fact that for almost a century (1840/1850-1960) the community was a powerful commercial center of the area (emporio means trade in greek). Others believe that the name came from the corruption of the word “amparka”, name of the village’s square because of the holds (ampari) that existed there during the Ottoman domination in Greece in order to store the “dekati” tax. However the most logical scientific view says that the name of the village comes from the etymologic analysis of the word “en + poro” which means at course – at the street where goods were traded from one area to another, connecting according to one version Monastiri (Bitola today) with Egnatia and according to another Kozani with Vlachokleisoura.

The former location of the village was approximately 3km wester than its current location, at the location of “Tsarnevo” (“tsarno” that in the local dialect means black + “ova” which means place). According to the last population census in 2011, the total population of the village were 804 residents. Most of them work in Ptolemaida both in the private domain and the public one. Many of them work at the factories or at the mines of The Hellenic Public Power and they also deal with agriculture and stock – farming. There are also others in the village that have as a profession the cultivation of farm products but they are not many. Finally, there are also the freelancers but they are few, and the stock – farmers who are even fewer (3 families).

The combination of the population varied depending on the historical period as long as the administrative role of the village contributed to the settlement of various cultural groups⁴. In the beginning of the 19th century the village consisted of the natives, greek – speaking and slavic – speaking, of the Ottomans and of a very small amount of people of other cultural groups. After the Destruction of Asia Minor and the population exchange the data changed. The Ottoman residents were transferred to Propontida, while 20 families from Smyrna and other 20 families from Gamisli and Kars settled in Emporio. During World War II families from the near Vlasti arrived at the village because the Germans burnt their village. Finally, there is also a small amount of other cultural groups that came at Emporio as daughters and sons-in-law.

Nowadays, the dominant population group is the “locals” or “natives” in which greek –

⁴ Emporio’s community played an important role through time. It is mentioned that from 1764-1861 it was the base of Moglenoi metropolis – today Florina- Prespes- Eordaia where the Metropolitan was Exarhos (the most predominant) of Upper Macedonia. During 1840/1850-1960 it was also a powerful commercial center of the area. In 1913 there was also an annex of the District Court and the Police, in 1924 there was a primary school with the first three classes and from 1929 a school for learning and displaying art related to the house. Of course, today, because the population is reduced nothing of the above exists apart from a primary school that is shared with Anarrahi.

speaking and slavic – speaking are included. This ambiguous meaning of the word is interesting. Most of those who belong in this group mention this term wanting to emphasize their long – lasting existence in this specific place and their historically established rights on it compared to the immigrants that came to the village after the Destruction of Asia Minor and the population exchange (Manos, 2004:54). However, the other national groups of the village and Eordaia in general, use this term to characterize all those who used in the past the slavic local dialect and their descendants⁵.

4. “Young Gegides”

During the “Dodekaimero” (Twelve Days) in Emporio many processions (agermos) happen, reaching their peak with the custom of “Young Gegides” that takes place in the morning of New Year’s Eve. It is so called because boys aged 6-17 take part. In the past the military service was the age limit for somebody to participate. Today because of the studies this is no longer a fact and they use adulthood as the age limit. Nowadays, the reason for the existence of the age limit is different. While in the past it was an obstacle for the participation of the younger ones in the adults’ custom, “Old Gegides”⁶, it is now a reason for participation.

As for the origin of the world “Gegas” or “Gegis” is someone who belongs to the Albanian race of Gegides⁷. They had distinct anthropological characteristics; husky, blond and blue-eyed. As far as religion is concerned, even though they had a low religious consciousness, most of them were Muslims and fewer Christians Catholics⁸. During the Ottoman Domination in Greece Gegides were exempted from paying taxes to the Ottomans and they used their own independent system of justice. In return for all these privileges they were obliged to participate in whichever battle the Ottomans asked them to. In Emporio the word “Gegas” is used wryly to point a scruffy and dirty man. In fact, when the elders wanted to make fun of somebody they said to him: “You Gega” (Karepidis, 2017:78).

The children wearing the “tsolias costume” – white male skirt with many folds (foustanela), white shirt, white pantyhose – and carrying crooks gathered where the instruments’ players were (Karepidis, 2017:86). Officially there is no longer a leader but unofficially the leadership is “given” to the oldest person so that he can ensure the normal carry out of the custom. He is actually given this honorable position by way “examination” for his promotion to the “Old Gegides” that it is to come. When a respectable number of participants is gathered, approximately 8-10 people, the participants and the players, “zournadia” as they are characteristically called by Emporio’s residents, go to the village’s cemetery. They do not go there with music and dancing but in a ritual procession where nobody speaks and no instrument plays.

When the procession reaches the cemetery the players will play their first song for the dead. There are many opinions concerning the meaning of this. Many of the residents think that this happens so that the dead can also listen to the music and rest their souls. Others consider it as a “thank you” gesture to the deceased ancestors who bequeathed this custom. Of course, the elders of the community claim that none of these is true. They specifically mention that the custom of Young and Old “Gegides” used to begin from the cemetery for practical reasons; the players came from the neighboring Anarahi that lies east of Emporio and the first place that they could meet was the cemetery. Throughout time, they started bringing players from other places and they still began from the cemeteries as it was a high spot and they could be heard by almost everybody in the village. But as long as this could no longer stand as a serious point anymore, they decorated it with the funerary element.

When all the above are completed, “Young Gegides” begin the circling of the village accompanied by the players. The circle is predefined – circumferential and inside the community –

⁵ Today the slavic idiom is used less and less by the elders whereas the younger ones barely know it.

⁶ At New Year’s Day the custom of “Old Gegides” takes place in which men over 18 years old participate.

⁷ Gegides were settled at the north of Albania close to the borders with Yugoslavia.

⁸ Their low religious consciousness is depicted in their proverb: “Ku është shpata është besa” which means that wherever lies the sword there lies faith too.

with small divergences that happen either because there are children “dressed” with traditional clothes and wait for the procession to visit their house so that they could be incorporated, or because there are children who in the end did not participate, even though the rest of “Gegides” waited for them. During the procession the participants do not sing carols, they only dance street dances and wish “Happy New Year” to those who open their houses. The melody mainly heard is “Santa Clause” (Agios Vasilis) and the melody of “Edeka” dance. In fact, in some places of the village the group dances 2-3 local or not dances, the most important one being the local dance “Skoukana”. Some of the participants have the role of collecting money⁹. They hold a box and they take the money from the passers –by that they might meet and from the houses that will open their doors at the sound of music. With this money they pay the players and the ritual symposium in the afternoon and if some money is left over it is shared among the children or it is donated to the community to enrich the school library, to buy computers for the primary school or it is given to the church.

When the circling is over and all the participants are incorporated in the group, “Young Gegides” end up in the afternoon at a common table in the center of the village where they start a feast with either local dances or dances from other areas of Greece¹⁰. This gathering is organized by a specific coffee house which – as mentioned before- is paid with the collected money from the procession. When the weather allows it the feast takes place outside, at the square. If not, then it takes place inside the coffee shop.

In reality, the local community gives the money and organizes a feast for the children and the teenagers of the community in order to initiate them to this local custom and so to the local cultural system and through this long test to evaluate their public behavior and its limits. Where the dance was held, until 2008, they also put a barrel for the children of the village that could be dressed but they were not. If so happened that such a child was passing by, the participants of the feast chased it up to where the square ended and if they caught it they put it in the barrel as a punishment. In fact, this action secured the participation of the young ones and thus the continuation of the custom. From 2008 the community thought that this “barbaric” punishment – as it is called by many residents of the Emporio - had to stop because it invades the free will and freedom.

The custom ends in the evening and every participant returns to his house. The end of the custom is marked by the last dance “Skoukana”. It is a local dance of Emporio danced in an open circle. Its name means “jump” in the local dialect, because the dancers make jumpy steps while performing it. The choice of this dance is not random. “Skoukana” is semantically space – time defined in the sphere of interaction; it exists only in Emporio so the participants recognize and accept the local identity of Emporio and it is only danced on New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day. Finally, the choice of this local dance has also got another function. It is a kind of a mental contract among the young ones in order to repeat this custom and so ensures the historical continuation of the community.

5. Conclusions

The traditions, from a folklore point of view, are considered historical and social phenomena transformed throughout time but preserving some basic characteristics of their initial form. So their adjustments to the social, historical and cultural conditions are not considered degraded or pathogenic forms of the initial one but a necessary constructive procedure instead, that makes the customs functional and active in every era and not relics of the distant past.

The initiative processions of teenagers of Dodekaimero (Twelve Days) and mainly of New

⁹ “Young Gegides” until 1977 did not take money from the villagers. They started to from the next year since the players started asking for money from them.

¹⁰ For “ritual symposium” see Chrisanthopoulou, V. (2010). “Fagito kai ethnotiki tautotita stis teletourgies tou kyklou tis zois ton Ellinon tis Australias”. *Ethnologia*, 14/2008-2010, 53-83. Athens: Chrysou-Karatza, K. (2008). “Trofes kai ethnotopiki tautotita ton Pontion sta Sourmena Attikis”. In M. Sergis (ed.), *Pontos: Themata laographias tou pontiakou ellinismou* (pp. 431-449). Athens: Alitheia. & Karepidis, K. I. (2016). “Politismiki diaxeirisi ethimou. To paradeigma is Enosis Pontion Sourmenon Ellinikou kai to tafiko ethimo”. *Arheion Pontou*, 56, 320-360, Athens: Council of Pontian Studies.

Year's were present in the changing procedure. An obvious example of practicing and transforming the customs is the community of Emporio, Eordaia with the custom of "Young Gegides" which takes place there at New Year's Eve. In this traditional practice the children and the teenagers of the village, boys aged 6-17, present themselves in their community, their public image is judged, the family's charm is publically judged, they incorporate the current social – historical conditions to the practice of the custom and finally set the base for a conversation between the past and the present, from which the community's future expectations will rise (Psychogiou, 2008:18-19).

References

- Aikaterinidis, N.G. (1976). "Metamfieseis Dodekaimerou eis ton voreioelladiko choro". In praktika B' symbosiou Laographias (pp. 13-27). Thessaloniki: Idryma Meleton Hersonisou tou Aimou.
- Alexakis, El. (2001). *Tautotites kai eterotites. Symvola, syggeneia, koinotita stin Ellada-Valkania*. Athens: Dodoni.
- Ben-Amos, D. (1971). "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context". *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (pp. 3–15).
- Chrisanthopoulou, V. (2010). "Fagito kai ethnotiki tautotita stis teletourgies tou kyklou tis zois ton Ellinon tis Australias". *Ethnologia*, 14/2008-2010, 53-83. Athens.
- Chrysou-Karatzas, K. (2008). "Trofes kai ethnotopiki tautotita ton Pontion sta Sourmena Attikis". In M. Sergis (ed.), *Pontos: Themata laographias tou pontiakou ellinismou* (pp. 431-449). Athens: Alitheia.
- Geertz, C. ([1973]2003). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Th. Paradellis (transl.). Athens: Alexandria.
- Karepidis, K. I. (2016). "Politismiki diaxeirisi ethimou. To paradeigma is Enosis Pontion Sourmenon Ellinikou kai to tafiko ethimo". *Arheion Pontou*, 56, 320-360, Athens: Council of Pontian Studies.
- Karepidis, K. I. (2017). *Laika dromena, topiki taftotia & politismikos metashimatismos. I periptosi tou ethimou "Kokkones & Gegides" tou Emporiou Ptolemaidas*. Athens: University Of Athens.
- Lydaki, A. (2012). *Poiotikes methodoi tis koinonikis ereynas*. Athens: Kastanioti.
- Manos, I. (2004). "O horos os meso gia ti sugkrotisi kai diapragmateusi tis taftotitas stin periohi tis Florinas". In Ev. Avdikos, R. Loutzaki, & Chr. Papakostas (Eds.), *Horeftika eteroklita* (pp. 51-72). Athens: Ellinika Grammata.
- Megas, A. G. (2007). *Ellinikes goitres kai ethima tis laikis latreias*. Athens: Estia.
- Meraklis, G. M. (1989). *Laographika zitimata*. Athens: H.Mpoura.
- Meraklis, G. M. (2011). *Elliniki Laographia. Koinoniki sygkrotisi- ithi kai ethima-laiki techni*. Athens: Kardamitsa.
- Politou, G.N. (1904). *Paradoseis B'*. Athens: P.D. Sakellariou.
- Polimerou-Kamilaki, Aik. (2013). "Otan svinei I fotia... I diaxeirisi tis tefras". In praktika epistimonikis synantisis 1-3 April 2013, *I fotia pigi tis zois, dynamis kai katharmou* (pp. 31-38). Mouseio Laikis Technis.
- Puchner, V. (2010). *Koinoniologiki Laographia: roloi-syμφerifores-esthimata*. Athens: Armos.
- Puchner, V. (2016). *Theatrologiki Laographia A': Ta dromena tis Elladas kai tis Valkanikis. Apo to magikothriskeutiko ethimo sti laiki diaskedasi*. Athens: Armos.
- Van Gennep, Arn. (2016). *Teletourgies diavasis: Systimatiki meleti ton teleton*. Th. Papadellis (transl.). Athens: Iridanos.
- Psychogiou, El. (2008). *"Mavrigi" kai Eleni: Teletourgies thanatou kai anagennisis*. Athens: Akadimia Athinon.