

Agia (Saint) Paraskevi's Feast as a Means of Shaping the Native Collective Identity in Dimitra, Prefecture of Serres, Greece

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Abstract

The formation of dancing identity is a constant between cultural elements' exchange, especially in areas where different ethnic groups are living. Dimitra, is a village where locals are living with refugees from Pontus, Asia Minor Eastern Thrace as well as Sarakatsans and Vlachs. On the 26th of July's evening, a feast, where all the villagers are taking part, is organized by the local cultural club. The purpose of this study was to examine the formation of Dimitra's people's collective identity as this it occurs during the fair-dance of Agia Paraskevi (Saint Paraskevi). The survey took place in the village "Dimitra", prefecture of Serres, on July 2012. Collection's data was based on the ethnographic method, the participatory observation, from the part of the researchers, and also on the use of primary and secondary sources. The information were, mainly, taken from oral testimonies of people who took part in the feast and it consists a response to open-ended questions for a semi-structured interview. In this paper, the theory of performance theory is combined with the theory of the formation of collective identities in contemporary postmodern Greek society in order to analyze and interpret the way in which individuals represent their collective-social identity through a dance performance. The analysis shows that the people of Dimitra are between two levels of awareness of their identity: the local identity and in the refugees' culture which creates cultural identity. The feast is a great opportunity for the villagers to dance and, through their dance, to display both their particular cultural identity, by dancing dances from their particular cultural group, and to make well known that they are now part of the same community, participating in public dances.

Keywords: cultural groups, performance theory, traditional dance

1. Introduction

The word "πανηγύρι" (panigyri – feast) is etymologically derived from the ancient Greek word of Aeolic dialect "ἀγορία" (agyris - marketplace) which is produced by the verb "ἀγειρώ" (ageiro) which means bring people together (Stamatakos, 1999). This word's meaning remained the same through the years and it is still meaning people's gathering on the occasion of a religious feast. The feast was an opportunity for fun and carefree moments. It was a meeting place, as it gave the inhabitants or the people of neighboring villages the chance of a reunion. Through these festivities, residents of nearby villages got to know each-other. It could be argued that except of worship, the most important function of a festival in the traditional society was people's communication. Through the festival, residents reorganized their social relations and renewed their community cohesion.

During the feast, collective memory and the memory of collectivity were shaped up and emerged, by creating participants the sense of "belonging together". In addition, community's collectivity is promoted and highlighted through the festival itself and the activities that compose it. Common food, common songs and dances unite participants and create, in a symbolic level, a community of people, feelings and meanings (Cohen, 1985; Pitsi & Filippou, 2014; Filippou, 2015).

The aim of this study was to determine whether the feast have stored up its unifying function between residents from different cultural groups in the village of Dimitra, of prefecture Serres, as well as to investigate if it has contributed to

the production of a common collective identity.

2. Collection of Ethnographic Data

The survey was conducted in the village of Dimitra, prefecture of Serres, in July 2012 and involved village's feast that were taking place on the occasion of *Saint Paraskevi's celebration

Data's collection was based on the ethnographic method (Buckland 1999; Gefou-Madianou, 1999; Giourchescu, 1999; Kaeppler, 1999), as well as on participatory observation from researchers' side, and the use of primary and secondary sources. Specifically, the primary factual information came from fieldwork (Lange, 1984) and has to do with collecting useful information for people's organization and participation in the revelry that is taking place on Saint Paraskevi's day in the local cultural association. The information were mainly taken from oral testimonies, of people who took part in those festivities and it consists an answer to open-ended questions for a semi-structured interview (Filiat, 1993), i.e. facts collection emphasizes participants' testimonies, whose memory is particularly stronger when is referring to experiential situations (Samuel & Thompson, 2002). Furthermore, all the feast's phases were recorded. The secondary information was collected from relevant bibliography.

3. Performance Theory and Collective Identity

The ethnographic material which was gathered, led us to adopt the performance theory (Schechner, 2011; Turner, 1987) combined with collective identity theory in the contemporary world (Erikson, 1974), in order to analyze and interpret the way in which individuals represent their collective- communal identity throughout a dance performance in the rural environment of modern Greece. Moreover, the viewpoint of Bourdieu (1977) that "dance and music are cultural practices through which community is trying to manage her past and present, to reconstruct herself on a symbolic level and to incorporate elements of modern developments into her tradition, in a dynamic way", was an aid to the theoretical framework of data's analysis, and that's because we understand community's dance and music more as historical, dynamic and mutable practices, rather than as static cultural phenomena, that cannot be changed.

First of all, performance theory, which proposes a vision of society in terms of performance analysis, was selected (Schechner, 2011; Turner, 1987). This theory uses a fundamental metaphor: facing society as a theater and the members' life as a play where people - "actors"- seem to impersonate many different roles. The approval or disapproval of the audience is the one that will determine whether and to what extent the requirements of these roles were rendered correctly. The difference between the consideration of social life as a kind of theater and theater per se, is that in theater the relationship between actor and spectators is always stable and unchanged, in contrast to society, where the roles rotate continuously in many different ways.

To make the above more clear, an example of how a society intervenes in the formation of the male and female sex will be cited. Every society has multifarious tools and labyrinthine mechanisms, through which she implements clear rules that every member is required to embrace, reproduce and fulfill faithfully. Simultaneously, the limits of tolerance towards various breaches of gendered practices are defined, since they are set in these rules, as well as the punishments applicable to the infringement of these rules. When it comes to men, the common characteristics attributed to their role are usually power, imposition, control, competitiveness, toughness, aggression and violence. In contrast, the female's role's characteristics are weakness, discipline, sensitivity and passivity (Butler, 1988). According to performance theory, the better an individual displays the characteristics attributed to his role, the more of a man/actor or a woman/actress he/she is, and the more he/she has the approval of the community-audience.

In this paper, performance theory is combined with the theory of collective identities' formation in contemporary postmodern Greek society. According to this theory (Erikson, 1974) "The sense of identity means to not be inseparable from yourself as you grow up and develop. It also means the unchanged sense of kinship with the perception of community as a single entity in union with its future, its history or its mythology".

4. Community and Symbiotic Groups

When the term "community" is referred by someone, it is presumed that he does not only means its political dimension i.e. residential, socio-economic and administrative concept, but certainly her members' sense that they all belong to the same entity/group, the sense of "belonging somewhere together" (Nitsiakos, 1991). The community, through the experiential and psychological acceptance of the idea of "belonging somewhere together", claims and gains her autonomy and independence from political and geographical factors. In this way, the future members of community will

be connected with each others through common ancestry, manners-customs and memories, i.e. their common culture and common history (Filippou, 1993).

In traditional societies, life does not display great and profound changes in short periods of time. As a result, the already produced culture appears to be the identical one, in contrast with the previous generations. Participation in this one and only culture is the result of participating in the common way of life, which was imposed for centuries by the Turks. In this way, a new communication system is created by the Greeks, which is based on the spoken language. This system results from the everyday member's communication and the relationships within the family and neighborhood, and for that has the power to shape them (Cohen, 1985). Orality is the communication system through which, all the accumulated knowledge is transmitted to future generations more like a natural process rather a conscious choice. In those societies, socialization and new members' entrance are the exclusive concern of local community and they are the result of the education and cultural reproduction that are taking place exclusively in the local community. The experiences of each cultural group are not transferred by hereditary but they are assimilated right by future generations through orality and experiential participation. The experiential participation in community's rituals like dancing bridges the gap between people's lives' crucial stages and adjusts community's reality by shaping the viability and the future of the community (Filippou, 1993).

5. Feast and Collective Identity

Feast's organization itself sets the axes of our research. On the one hand there is the tradition (music, singing and dancing), which is completely opposite to the present, and on the other one, there is the negotiation about the cultural identity of yesterday, in modern social terms. Tradition is perceived as the culture that was developed and molded in rural areas in the past.

Now it is important to emphasize the fact of tradition's negotiation, partially out and away from the place where it was created and from where it was the benchmark of people's cultural identity. The local heterotopia (to transfer a custom from its original environment to an urban modern place) and temporal heterochronia (different performances in time, from traditional to the contemporary times) make the memory an important and determinant factor of tradition. The time of memory (Kyriakidou-Nestoros, 1993) and its mechanisms (Skouteri-Didaskalou, 1996) are the reasons for the creation of new relations between the rural and urban culture, between tradition and past, modernity and present.

The factor "time" is the most problematic and, at the same time, the most decisive of feast's meaning, especially when it is taking place within contemporary cultural phenomena. The feast is a temporary time's stoppage and is meant to distract man from the daily routine. From the one side, it works as a place of memory and from the other as a place where community's future is being planned. Thus, the time of the feast is a peculiar timeless time that encapsulates all its three dimensions i.e. past, present and future (Stoeltje, 1992).

During the feast, collective memory and the memory of collectivity were shaped up and emerged by creating participants the sense of "belonging together". Furthermore, community's collectivity is promoted and highlighted through the festival itself and the activities that compose it. The common food, common songs and dances unite participants and create, on a symbolic level, a community of people, feelings and meanings (Cohen, 1985).

6. Results - Discussion

Afternoon on 25th of July, 2012, Dimitra. The small village looks much bigger today. We could say that its population was doubled. People from Dimitra, who are currently residing in cities like Serres, Drama and Thessaloniki, have now come to the village. Today it is the eve of Saint Paraskevi's celebration and in the evening there will be a procession of the Saint's icon. Some people have even come from Athens. For the same reason, people from nearby villages have also come in Dimitra. For them all, participating in such a celebration is not only for entertainment but it's also a chance for a reunion with fellow villagers and friends. The D.P. says: "Of course we will celebrate together. Saint Paraskevi is what unites us. It's absolutely impossible for us not to come to her feast. And of course, we'll go to the feast and dance together".

At the same time, in the courtyard of the village's elementary school, youths are in turbulent. Right here, tomorrow night, the annual feast will be held, which is the meeting point of all the people who come from Dimitra, no matter where they happen to live. Some are arranging chairs and tables and others are preparing the stage where the musicians will play. Others are assigning the jobs to be done by tomorrow evening as well as what everyone should be doing during the feast.

We approach and ask the expected number of participants. We found the answers more than fascinating. The organizers expect at least 400 to 450 people, while all the village's inhabitants are about 300. "Yes," answers N. "but just

know that 300 are the permanent residents. There are as many, perhaps even more, as those who live outside the village and we expect many of them. Last year people came from Athens just to participate in the festivities. And there will also many come from the neighboring villages. Last year, almost 420 people attended the whole feast. This year, we hope to gather at least the same number of people". Almost everyone we talked told us exactly the same thing.

Tomorrow's participation is expected to be great, regardless of the economic crisis that all the people are facing. For this reason and thanks to organizers' sensibility on that situation they have reduced the price of entry as well as the prices of drinks and food, so that all the people can be able to participate. The young men and women went to bed at dawn. There were many chores that needed to be done, if we want have everything ready for feast's following days.

It was fortunate for them that many people asked who will be the musicians that are going to play the following night and if people had to make a table reservation. The messages were optimistic for next day's participation. So, everyone went to sleep happy renewing their appointment for the following (July 26) afternoon.

On 26th of July at 10 pm in the school yard. They are all in their positions, according to yesterday's plan about work's division. The musicians are already on the stage, tuning up their instruments. There is clarinet and kementzes (Pontiac Lyra). Tabor isn't missing, since it is necessary for the dances of all village's cultural groups. There is even a violinist in the orchestra. But there aren't any people yet, not even a single group. However, calm prevails among organizers. "There is no problem, it is still early and it is hot today", says S., who, along with K., are responsables for the entrance. And they were right. It is ten o'clock and the thermometer does not descend from 35 degrees C.

Musicians were beginning to play the song "Milo mou kokkino - my red apple" when the first group makes its appearance. The time is already ten to eleven. The organizers are excited. The first group was a big one. They ask a table for 20 people and they were not villagers. The messages are very optimistic. Suddenly, people start appearing in groups, as if they were waiting for someone to make the start. At quarter past eleven, all the tables are full and there are still people coming. Young lads were carrying chairs and tables to serve all the people. According to S. and C., more than 450 people had came.

After some region's acoustic songs, the president of the local cultural association gets the microphone and thanks all the participants for their presence at the feast. And with the words "let the party begin" he started to dance. Other members of the association followed him. Soon, the dance floor was full of people. The songs, "Milo mou kokkino - My red apple", "O diamantenios o Stavros - The diamond cross" and many others follow one by one. People were dancing all the time. We asked young people about the cultural group of those who are dancing. A young man, P., about 19 years old, answers in a bright tone "there are no people from Pontus or Asia Minor, or Thrace or natives. We are all coming from Dimitra", and he leaves us to serve the people. Another young member of the association informs us that the family of P. is mixed by saying that "P. is obsessed with the village. As you may have guessed, for him there are no Pontiacs or natives. We are all the same since we live in the same place. And you know, perhaps he said all these because his parents are from different clans".

Enough time has passed by dancing "Syrtos". Sometimes, instruments stop playing and people sit at their tables, but not without protest. There are complaints that they have not even started dancing and they (the musicians) are having a break, regardless the fact that they have been dancing for forty-five minutes so far. But they were wrong, because the composition of the orchestra is changing and a gentleman, not particularly aged, get on the stage with a kementzes in his hands. He begins to play "Tic" and the people went in a hurry back to dancing. Almost everyone is up and their haste makes us believe that everyone is from Pontus. But we are wrong. "The way they have been dancing shows up their true origins. At least the older ones' movements demonstrate clearly their cultural group. Most of them are Pontiacs. Some are Thracians and some from Asia Minor. However, the majority dances in the same way. Their dance's expression does not refer to any cultural group. Everybody dances identically, which makes us believe that they come from mixed families or at least, that they have learned dancing somewhere or by someone who was not paying attention to the particular expression of dance that each cultural group has.

Our thoughts are being confirmed by A. who knows the reason for our presence in the revelry. "I know what you're thinking", she said. "You are certainly thinking about who is what. I will get you know immediately". And she continued: "those eleven, named... are Pontiacs, those ... are from Asia Minor, those over there ... are Thracians and these ... are Vlachs. The rest, who are from the village, are of mixed families".

The dance is continuing with Pontiac music and songs for more than half an hour. A person dance "Omal", "Empropis" or as it is known to the most of us "Lahana" and "Kotsari". The situation always remains the same. All attendees get up to dance with the same mood, whether they originate from Pontus or from another region.

For the next 25 minutes the program includes Thracian music and songs. People have been dancing "Zonaradikos", "Baidouska", and "Ksesyrtos". And the scene is repeated. Everyone participates, people from Pontus, Asia Minor and Vlachs. Although, were the Thracians who lead the dance.

Suddenly the music stops and from the microphone someone can hear the following: "and now the 'Sun' for the best man." And the musicians start playing the song "Sun" and some groups get up to dance "Tsamiko". In the circle everyone can discern a Vlach, seven Thracians and two Pontiacs, three from Asia Minor, three natives and many who are not coming from the village. Then for a while, for about ten minutes, Anatolian rhythms are heard. "Syrtos" and "Karsilamas". Once again, all participants dance together. People from Asia Minor and Pontus dance to "Georgitsa" and "Roumpalia", "Apo kseno topo- From a foreign land" and "Aftos pou serni ton horo - The one who leads the dance".

It is now past two. Songs from all cultural groups in the village have been heard and danced. Most people have left after having praised the organizers for holding such a successful feast. It seems that everyone enjoyed his participation and they had all left satisfied. Musicians continued to play some Zeibekikos for the remaining ones.

The young men and women of the cultural association sit at a table and discuss relaxed, by drinking beers and eating from what's left. From their faces one can understand that they were making their calculations. They're all happy. And this is reflected in their words. "We did it, this year too. More than 500 people have attended our feast. In fact, we sold 516 tickets. This year the feast has achieved its goal. She brought again the people of Dimitra together. They were joined with each other and with people from neighboring villages".

The study of cultural phenomena in Modern Greek society, such as the feast we described above, obliges us to consider the time factor and its dimensions. And this is because the feast is inextricably linked to the agricultural society and referred directly to the past, regardless whether it is performed today and causes temporary cancellation of the linear time course. In this case, religious celebration is simply an opportunity for the organization of the feast, which is basically a unifying institution that fortifies the community's identity. This is also obvious from the words of D.P. who said "We will celebrate together. Saint Paraskevi unites us".

Always, according to the words of the D.P., the feast of St. Paraskevi will unite the residents of Dimitra across the past. Which residents though? The nine families who come from Asia Minor? Or maybe those who come from Pontus or the Thracians? Or even more those in mixed marriages? And if the founders of these families maintain their particular cultural origin, what about their children? What about the second and third generation? Is P. justified, in this case, by just saying "there are no individual groups. We all come from Dimitra"? And which past? The past of the people of Asia Minor, Pontiacs or Thracians? Or maybe that of Sarakatsans, Vlachs and natives? Or those were born and raised up in Dimitra? But this is common for everyone since they share a common place and common experiences. The only thing that connects them to their past is their parents stories. Reality has surpassed such questions. And what is this reality? It is the mixed families which are the majority and oblige people from Dimitra to move on two levels of their identity: awareness the common local identity and that of the displaced person.

Years ago, the spoken language's idiom, the different cloths and way of cooking, the different attitudes and values were the differentiating elements for Dimitra's inhabitants. Their modern historical course, though, drives them towards the development of a generalized local identity, named "the creation of a new cultural identity". Music, songs and dance are the main parameters of such a feast (Filippou, 2014). Through songs and dance a unification is attempted as well as participants' return to their past and its values. However, if someone looks carefully at which songs and dances are selected, the way in which participants have been dancing, women's position in the cycle and how they danced, musicians' positioning and their relationships with the dancers, he will certainly understand that the attempted simulation of collectivity was succeeded in accordance with modern social organization. The festival is a creation of current economic and social conditions and so it reflects the current economic and social reality.

And today's social reality is the coexistence of clarinet, lyre, violin and tabor which absolutely represents all the residents of Dimitra. The current social reality is the coexistence of all the inhabitants of Dimitra in the same circle, dancing the same dances. During the two and a half hours that the feast lasted, people listened to and danced to Pontiac (for about an hour in total) and Thracian (about half an hour) and Asia Minor songs (Syrtos, Karsilamas, Zeibekikos). There were also Tsamikos and Syrtos of Macedonia. Only some elderly people, the first inhabitants of Dimitra, still stand up against by trying their participation to come up with traditional standards. This, perhaps, is due to their body's resistance to change the techniques it has learned (Mauss, 1950) through ethos (habitus) (Bourdieu, 1977) or due to the fact that cultural behaviors and attitudes change at a much slower rate than social and economic structures (Meraklis, 1994).

Some may wonder what the relationship between current feasts and tradition is, and how authentic they are (Filippou et al, 2006). Some would respond, probably uncritically, that there is none and they would describe festivals as folkloric, prefabricated and manipulated (Skouteri-Didaskalou, 1996). We would answer "yes there is a relationship, not completely trusty though". And how could it be when tradition returns through the social needs of modern society? Moreover, what is the dynamic of tradition? Is it not to reinterpret the cultural past in modern terms and to integrate it in modern social life? According to Noyes and Abrahams (1999) similar events do not oppose authenticity and tradition but

quite the opposite; they create tradition and help collectivity to maintain in the future through the invocation of common descent.

For this invocation, local cultural association is played an important role, as he not only interferes with the cultural process and production but also participates actively in shaping public collective identity, since the organization of the festival is the result of his own action.

7. Conclusions

1. The people of Dimitra prove to be good operands of identity roles during the festival of Saint Paraskevi.
2. The festival is an appropriate place to highlight and promote collectivity in the community.
3. The people of Dimitra move on two levels of their identity: awareness the local identity and the refugee culture that creates cultural identity.
4. The feast of Saint Paraskevi is an opportunity for the villagers to dance and through their dance to display both their particular cultural identity, dancing the dances of their particular cultural group, and to make well known to all that they are now part of the same community, participating in joint dances.

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