

The contribution of the local cultural association to the present-day celebration of traditional carnival custom of lighting the fanoi bonfires in the Kozani region of Greece

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The lighting of the fanoi (great bonfires) is a carnival celebration observed in the region of Kozani in Greece.

Aim of Study. The purpose of this work is to investigate changes in the structure, execution, content, place and time of the fanoi celebration after the takeover of its organization by a local cultural association.

Material and Methods. The data was collected using the ethnographic method and participative observation. For data analysis a comparative study of the organization, structure and content of the celebration was carried out before and after 1997 with the use of anthropological method.

Results and Conclusions. The study shows that the time, place and duration of the celebration have changed. Singing and dancing occupy today a prominent position during the lighting of the fanoi. Although some young people attempted to introduce modernist elements to the custom, these were rejected by both young and elderly members of the community.

KEY WORDS

ritual, traditional dancing, cultural associations, modern society, modernism.

Introduction

It is 2 p.m., Sunday, February 14, 2010. An entire neighborhood in the north of the village is in a state of disarray. It is their turn to light the fanoi – great bonfires, but the weather conditions are not favorable at all. It has been snowing continuously since Saturday evening and the forecast is ominous. It will be snowing through Sunday until Monday. “We will light the fire regardless! It was raining on Wednesday and we couldn’t do it. Are we going to relent because of the snow?” asks a 50-year-old father of two boys. “Don’t be precipitant, Kostas. Let’s ask the others first. Will the women be able to sit for the whole night in the cold? Will the others come?” asks uncle Giannis, the eldest of the company. Four or five women present at the meeting promptly answer in one voice: “What do you mean ‘will we be able’, uncle Giannis? Of course we will. It’s a sin not to light the fire this year”. Presently, four elderly women, who appear to be agitated, arrive and join the conversation. “What! Aren’t we going to light the fire this year? Shame on us to back down because of this snow! We’ll help in any way we can”.

The cause for the scene described above was the cancellation of the fanoi on Wednesday because of the continuous rainfall. Its expected cancellation since Monday signals the

end of Carnival, part of which are the fanoi and the beginning of Lent for people to prepare themselves spiritually and bodily for the advent of Easter.

The carnival celebrations in Greek traditional society aimed at aiding the earth to vegetate through rituals of magical and religious content such as dances and events with or without masquerades. Masquerading, feasting and dancing, the commemoration of the dead and the lighting of fires in the crossroads (Epirus and West Macedonia) constituted homeopathic attempts at fructification and vegetation [1]. Referring to the carnival and masquerading Kiourtsakis [2] writes that, “As the term Carnival refers not only to the homonymous movable feast of Western Christianity (our Apokries), but to any traditional feast which includes in its rituals masquerading, mask events and habits which reverse the normal order of things etc., irrespective of the time of the year it is performed, the name attributed and the special customs that constitute it”.

Since the 1950s migrations of population within Greece as well as emigration abroad have vastly contributed to the rupture of the traditional way of life [3]. The terms on which the traditional society was based, i.e. its social and ideological homogeneity, have been overturned. The rapid urbanization and industrialization of the means of production have

resulted in changes of people's behaviours as well as their culture, leading to the development of new ways of life.

The massive establishment and operation of various cultural-dancing associations further exacerbates this condition. The mediating role of cultural bodies in the social and cultural life of local communities is particularly important. This is so because the activity of the cultural organizations is twofold. On the one hand, they preserve external manifestations of traditional life, and on the other, they reproduce these manifestations within the framework of a well-defined and dominant folklorism. By dealing with the cultural events of an area and attempting to successfully merge tradition with modernity, dancing associations, for example, intervene in the entire cultural procedures of the area and transform the traditional society in indirect, but nonetheless, specifically defined ways [4, 5, 6, 7].

Within this environment Carnival, which relies on new social and ideological relationships as well as policies, acquires a new form and function, and its entertaining character becomes more prevalent [8]. Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier [9] are quite clear on the issue "The phenomena of civilization in their diversity are omnipresent within the bosom of modern societies. Belonging to the general framework of 'modernization', which creates new cultural products and consumerist goods, traditions are newly rediscovered and acquire a new form and function".

Aim of Study

The research question in the present study is whether the lighting of the fanoi in our days by a local cultural association in Kozani in Greece constitutes the survival, revival or creation of a new custom. The study follows the evolution of the fanoi lighting from the 1950s to the present, with the ultimate aim of investigating possible changes in the execution, structure, content, time and place of the ceremony as well as the function of the custom without proceeding to bipolar judgments such as spontaneous vs. scheduled or traditional vs. invented. The concept of space is also bipolar in the present work. On the one hand, the whole village is conceived as the locus of fanoi lighting, and on the other the bonfires of each neighborhood are seen as a special cultural area. We could claim that the event of fanoi lighting and the area of its occurrence resemble a theatrical play. The execution is the play with its constituent parts being the fanoi in particular neighborhoods.

The year 1997 is an important point in the timeline of the present study since it was that year that the organization of the custom in question was undertaken by a local cultural association.

Methodology

Data collection was carried out with the use of ethnographic method [10, 11, 12, 13], participative observation [10, 14] and original sources. More specifically, the original material for the study came from long-term on-site research aimed at the collection of information regarding the place of the custom in both the traditional and modern society of the village. It comprised mainly oral testimony taken from

open-type and semi-structured interviews [15] as well as from local records of the fanoi custom (1997-2010). Within this framework, semi-directed interviews were conducted among the villagers with the aim of collecting information on the timeless presence of the custom in the local community.

With regard to their age the interviewees were divided into three groups. The first group consisted of individuals born in the first decades of the 20th century, an era during which the sense of belonging to a circle of relatives, village-community, age group or race was very strong. These people display powerful ties with the dancing tradition of the village. They have learned to dance by taking part in various dancing events or they have learnt it from their parents [16]. When these respondents referred to a particular dance as the favourite dance of their parents or grandparents, this helped us to determine its chronological placement and constituted important historical evidence [17]. Today, they continue dancing, albeit less than in the past, maintaining a critical attitude towards the young and their new fashions. They dance at particular events, such as a grandson's or a granddaughter's wedding or some other important community event such as making bonfires during Carnival time.

The second group of interviewees consisted of individuals born just before or after the WWII when dancing still held a great part of its traditional character [3]. Thus, they could easily recognize the changes in the dancing customs. They oppose, just like the interviewees from the first group, the changes that the young introduced and the manner in which they danced.

The third group consisted of individuals born after 1960. They were still teenagers when the dancing associations knew their days of glory and when Greek traditional dancing took a new direction [18]. They did not have clear views on the formalities of traditional dancing since they have learned dancing in the dancing associations under dance teachers' instructions [19]. When they lead the dance they are inclined to introduce movements unknown to the previous generations or improvisations not affirmed by tradition [20].

For data analysis, a comparative study of the execution, structure, content and function of the dancing custom prior to and after 1997 was carried out with the use of anthropological method.

The Community

Platanorevma has been a municipal province of the Greek municipality of Servia since 1999 and is now administered by the Kozani prefecture. It is located at the foot of the Pieria Mountains at the height of 475 m, 31 km from Kozani.

During the Ottoman occupation the village was known as Ortakioi. After the liberation of Macedonia and its integration with the Greek state the village was known as New Ortakion and in 1946 it was renamed Platanorevma because of the large number of the plane trees growing in the area. The present-day village is the product of consolidation of three villages: New Ortakion, Palaiogratsano and Moshohori. In 1928 building plots were given for settlement and in 1937 the first families from Moshohori and soon after from Palaiogratsano moved to the area. The settlement stopped

temporarily after the outbreak of WWII since many people chose to stay in the neighboring Serbia and Kozani for safety. Their return and final settlement took place in the 1950s when the village counted 230 families from which 180 came from Moshohori, 30 were native born Ortakians, and 20 from Palaiogratsano. The Varsami, Dalamitrou, Karanota, Lazarioti, Balta and Tzoutzia families are reputedly the oldest in the village since living mainly in the Ortakioi area.

According to the 2000 census, the village population is 1,112 residents. The majority of them are cattlemen and farmers and many work in power plants nearby.

On the verge of the traditional and the modern

In 1997 the local cultural association took over the custom of the fanoi lighting. It was a landmark moment in the history of Platanorevma. The reason for the takeover was the decreasing popularity of the event and its attendance.

The preparations for the organization of the fanoi burning ceremony under the auspices of the cultural association began at the end of Carnival in 1996, with a disappointing attendance (according to the village residents). The board of the association and the community decided there should be one fanos in each neighborhood and one in the central square of the village supervised by the cultural association during the carnival week. This meant the lighting of five neighborhood fanoi and one central fanos, since the village consists today of five neighborhoods. It was also decided that the central fanos would be lit on Quinquagesima Sunday, and drawing lots determined the weekly order of fanoi lighting for the neighborhoods. According to the draw results Krania burnt the fanos on Tuesday, Paliomylos on Wednesday, Pyrovoleio on Thursday, Trohalia on Friday and Kioski on Saturday. Finally part of the expenses was to be covered by the association and the community.

Contemplating the past

Mrs. Iphigenia, an 85-year-old lady had an explicit view of the change in the fanoi organization: "No, my son. I'm not going to attend the fanoi another year. What was all this, yesterday? I felt very ashamed. In my time only men spoke of these things, late at night, when the women and children had left. Weren't there any other songs to sing? What about 'Militsa' or 'Konstantakis'?" The reason for her anger was the songs that were sung and the way her neighbours danced last night during the lighting of the fanoi in the neighborhoods. The songs were the so-called 'xinendropa', that is, brazen, impudent songs with lines of sexual content accompanied by dancing of the males in a relative manner.

But let us go back in time, through the reminiscences of the people of Platanorevma to find out about the manner in which they had celebrated the last Sunday of Carnival. "We didn't know either Pancake Day or masquerading. We all awaited with great anticipation the Great Carnival to sing and dance, all the neighbours, around the fire. The village back then was small, three neighbourhoods in total. The locals were around thirty families and the neighbourhood was all relatives. You see, the Matskohorites and the

Palaiogratsanites had not arrived yet. They lit the fanos properly after the war".

The lighting of the fanoi had been closely related to the custom of 'forgiveness'. The fire was not lit until all the relatives had stopped by the house of the eldest family member to ask for forgiveness for whatever unpleasant situation had occurred between them the previous year. Only after the last relative had passed would the whole family eat together and forgive each other. All the younger ones would kiss the hand of the elder and ask for forgiveness.

"After dinner we could go down to the crossroads and prepare the wood for the lighting of the fire. Don't think of a big one like those that children light today. We lit the 'fanos' with the wood children brought from their homes. In later years, when those who dance today were children, we prepared the wood for the 'fanos' for days. You see, the competition with some of the Matskohorites about who would light the greatest fire, had begun. Mother prepared a bottle of tsipouro and appetizers to treat the neighbors; grandmother took her stool and we all went down. Even grandmother went with us and sang on that day despite being a widow of two men. But when she lost her son in the war she stopped coming. She would sit in the window and look at the others dancing and singing. Who knows what she thought?"

When the adults came down the fire was already burning strong and we, the children, had started singing and dancing. Then we would step aside and one by one they would start jumping over the fire whispering something. Years later I learned what they said since I myself had to say it. Well, what they said was 'psil-psil stous akatnous' meaning let the fleas go away from us to other neighbourhoods. Grandmother used to say some other things but we never learned what it was. When I asked her once her answer was "I'm saying some things of my own so that wheat will grow and we'll have bread".

"It was then that the greatest enthusiast of the neighborhood would start singing and people would start dancing. You see, we didn't have any musical instruments or knew any other songs. We knew only our own songs, 'Militsa', 'Konstandakis', 'Ti thela ki s'agapousa', 'To louloudi tis Monemvsias' and 'Kondoula Lemonia'. There were some years when Zvarnogiannis gaitatzis (the bagpiper) from 'Daskio' would come to the village. But he also played our own songs. Our parents did not use to sing such impudent, as they call them today, songs. They might have sung them but only when they had drunk a little more and we had left. Nor they sang songs from Pontos and such. We didn't know them back then. In dancing we grabbed each other with no order. We were all relatives more or less so we had no problem who would hold whom. No one came from other neighborhoods, nor did we go to others. Only an occasional boy, when he wanted to see some girl, he went to her neighborhoods. We danced the round dance, tsamiko, or three steps. Oh, and the xekopo (scattered) dance also. Without it there was no Carnival".

And she concludes by saying: "In the old times the fanoi were for the family and the neighborhoods. We gathered all, we sang, danced and the adults ate and drank. We never stopped lighting fires even when the German occupation

came. It was a custom that had to be done for the crops to do well. Not like today. What business is to have songs that are not ours? It is unheard of for the fanoi to burn for so many days. Each neighborhood lit a fanos but only in Carnival. But those were different times, and these are different times too. Today children want Brazilian girls”.

Transformations of the ceremony of the fanoi lighting. The structure, function and celebration of the fanoi today

Mrs. Iphigenia and the other elderly villagers are absolutely right. They speak of an age with completely different characteristics than the present. They speak of an age during which the local community relied on collectivity, as a result of homogeneity of the village population, which was expressed both in its financial and social organization as well as its culture, and which relied financially on the annual crop. On the contrary, today's society relies on a new and totally different financial and social system. The accumulation of goods and the detachment of work and other activities from the aggregate of society, as well as their transfer from specific times and places to other ones defined by their needs, are some of the characteristics that condition contemporary societies. Within this environment it is only natural that there have been changes in the tradition of lighting of the fanos.

According to Mrs. Iphigenia's narrative, the neighborhood and the family, in a broader sense, were the participants and protagonists in the fanoi lighting both before and after the war, up to the 1980s. Potentially, this means that the number of the fanoi equaled that of the families, that is, around thirty. The only instance in which a family did not light a fanos was when it was in mourning.

Today the neighborhood is the exclusive organizer of the fanoi lighting and the family has relinquished its role in this as a result of the village's population growth. The homogeneity of the village population until the 1940s was disturbed since, as we saw earlier, after WWII the families from Moshohori and Palaiogratsano settled in the village. Thus, new neighborhoods were created in the village increasing their number to five today. This is the number of the fanoi in the village today. More specifically the fanoi of Kioski and Paliomylos are lit by the locals, the fanoi of Krania and Pyrovoleo by the people of Moshohori, and the Trohalia fanoi by the residents of Palaiogratsano. Finally, the village cultural association itself lights the sixth central fanos.

The successful lighting of the fanoi and the worthy representation of the neighbourhood demands long-term organization and preparation but also massive participation of neighbours. Indeed, the lighting of the fanoi and its resulting success function as bonds of cohesion, and the rallying in the neighbourhoods in the Quinquagesima week is impressive and contributes significantly to the bonding of its members. A characteristic example was the cancellation of the Paliomilos fanos lighting in 2005 due to the death, shortly before Carnival, of an individual who had actively participated in his neighbourhood's fanos lighting.

The shift of the fanoi lighting in time and space is yet another result of the expansion of the village population and the undertaking of their realization by the cultural

association of the village. The growth of the village and the broad participation of people demand an open and convenient space. Thus the place of the lighting was transposed from the crossroads to the squares or wide community plots. More important though is their transference in time. In the traditional village community the fanoi were lit exclusively on the night of the last Sunday of Carnival. The lighting of fanoi in individual neighbourhoods imposed the temporal shift of the celebration and thus, since 1997 until today the time of fanoi lighting has been the last week of the Carnival (Tirini). Only the main fanos, i.e. the fanos organized by the cultural association, is lit symbolically on Cheese-Fare Sunday, which is the last Sunday of the Carnival.

The local residents of the village did not accept this temporal shift easily. They put forth the argument of alteration of tradition since, among other things, the fanoi functioned as a cathartic fire. “When we jumped over the fire we cleansed our bodies to prepare them for the great days ahead”, our interviewees say. On the contrary, the custom became easily and happily acceptable by the non-native residents since it offered them the chance, which they did not have until then, to participate in joint community events along with the indigenous people, and constituted for them an indirect recognition of their presence at the communal events.

The lighting of the fanoi by the neighbourhoods provides the chance of presenting itself to the rest of the village and the redefining of its identity, which also means its otherness [8]. One of the media used for the realization of this aim is masquerading. Thus, the men of the Kioski fanos dress up in local traditional costumes and the members of the Krania and Pyrovoleo fanoi dress up in the local Moshohori costume, while the members of the Paliomylos fanos put on the miller's costume, inspired by the mill – the main characteristic element of their neighborhoods. Finally, the members of the Trohalia fanos masquerade in various styles of Carnival costumes.

Changes can be also seen in the structure and the content of the fanoi as well as in patterns of participation. In traditional society, as we have seen, only the families participated by singing and dancing local songs and dances. Today, the etiquette that has been established specifies that a particular neighbourhood should light a fanos every night and that it be visited in no particular order by all the other fanos neighborhoods. The visiting communities attempt in this way to be the last ones to reach the fanos, which is honoured since they believe that the last fanos will be the most impressive and will attract the attention of all the present. The arrival of a fanos is announced over the loudspeakers and is accompanied by the music and singing that characterize the neighbourhoods. After the visiting fanos has performed a dance, its leader climbs the platform for the exchange of presents and a short improvised theatrical play with sexual implications takes place. Before he goes to the area designated for visitors in order to be treated by the neighbourhood women of the, he will perform two or three dances of his own choice.

Every neighbourhood tries hard so that its own fanos does not present any weaknesses and be recognized as the best one. There is no reward but for the people of

the neighborhoods positive comments suffice. One of the means used is also the presence of an organized musical group that offers the possibility for wild dancing and revelry. There are no criteria for the invitation of such a group. The choice is made from the available ones since there are similar events taking place in the whole area of Kozani, and it becomes quite a difficult task to find one with higher standards. The songs and dancing performances depend on what the participants wish to hear. Thus it is not strange to hear songs or see dances from such distant areas as Thrace, the Peloponnesus or even the Greek islands as well as from various cultural groups such as residents of Pontus.

Finally, a modernist element attempted by the Krania fanos was the performance of a Brazilian dancing group of half-naked dancers in 2005. The participants showed their discontentment by leaving. No such attempt has been made ever since by any fanos communities.

Ruptures and continuations in the celebration of the fanoi lighting

In traditional societies there was a deeply rooted belief in people that in specific periods of the year there were supernatural powers in the earth, crucial to their survival, and they had to propitiate them by the use of verbal or non verbal behaviour in order to have them on their side and secure the fertility of the land and the welfare of the animals.

Carnival, celebrated by the Christian church between two great observances: the Dodekaimeron (twelve day period) and Great Lent, is a body of customary events with a precise: to secure vegetation and fruitfulness [1]. The changes that the Greek society went through after the end of WWII and the rationalist thinking of modern man have led to the rejection of such convictions and their importance to modern man, especially in big cities.

Platanorevma is one of the villages in Greece where people used to light fires at the crossroads during Carnival and through singing and dancing attempted to placate the supernatural powers. The changes in the composition and homogeneity of the village population, both due to the settlement of people from neighbouring villages and emigration – many village residents emigrated to Germany, Australia and the United States – did not stop the celebration of the custom. It might have lost its initial purpose of worship and its entertaining function is more prevalent today. The local cultural association has decisively contributed to the fanoi celebration since 1997.

The social changes affected the whole procedure of lighting the fanoi and a result of this has been a combination of old and new traditions as well as creation of new ones. Transformations can also be observed in the time and place of the celebration with a time and space shift in its execution. The result of this is the increase of its duration from 1 to 6 nights. More important still, in our view, is the temporal shifting of the custom to another time, different from the traditional one, something that still bothers the elderly native residents of the village. On the same day, i.e. Cheese-Fare Sunday, the fanoi of the cultural association are lit up in an apparent attempt on the part of its members to strengthen the communal identity.

Changes can also be observed in the participation and the content of the custom. What began as a family celebration is now the celebration of the neighborhood and the village. Everyone participates in every fanos. Even though in the first years there were some protests regarding the manner of celebration and everyone's participation, eventually the universal participation of everyone, indigenous or not, was imposed and the village presents a unified collectivity. Moreover, the presence of an organized musical group led to gradual dropping of the local repertoire and the presentation of a hyper-local musical-dancing repertoire followed by a prolongation of its duration.

Finally, the creation of new traditions such as the exchange of presents and the presentation of singular theatrical plays with sexual content can be also observed. The attempts of some 'fanos' to present dancing groups foreign to the local tradition, such as the Brazilian half-naked ballet, failed and were quickly abandoned.

In conclusion, we can claim that the lighting of the fanoi today at Platanorevma constitutes the survival of a tradition since even today there are elements which have come down from the lighting of the fanoi by the village's traditional society, while at the same time it functions as a symbol of cohesion and strengthening of the communal identity and offers the chance to the villagers for a temporary reversal of their daily routine and spare time to develop and improve their interpersonal relationships. Yet, it is also a revival since new elements, previously unknown in the traditional society, have been added. It is of little interest whether they are traditional or not. The local community still enjoys them overlooking all their negative elements.

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