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Dance and embodied memory in a small town of Kynouria: St Nikolas' Snake and "Tsakonikos" Dance

Abstract:

This paper focuses on the study of embodied memory through the shared social experience of the "Tsakonikos" dance in Leonidio, a village in the Peloponnese. In this study, the dance is seen as an embodied practice, as a way and field, where the existing notions are realized while abolishing the binary relationship between body and mind. The body and its movements are not a passive object but a subject, creatively interconnecting the sentiment with the knowledge. Combining, on one hand, the tradition of the snake in "Platanos" and generally the snake in the conscious and unconscious expressions with "Tsakonikos" dance on the other, it is inve-

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stigated whether the bodies of the dancers can be considered as vehicles of cultural information, through which the past is textualised and maintained. The negotiation of the matter shows that “Tsakonikos” dance constitutes a powerful symbol of the identity of the place, embodying through selective movements and functional objects prototypes of relationship between humans and external procedures “ensuring the common history and common destiny” of the society in Leonidio. The snake-like dancing form of “Tsakonikos” dance is deployed for the community to negotiate the cultural conventions of the past in a present framework.

Key words:

embodied practice, “Tsakonikos” dance, snake, collective memory, symbolic practice, cultural conventions.

The Issue

Easter celebrations have always been one of the most important cultural events in folk tradition practice in Greece not only for their magical-religious nature but also because of the fact that they are mutual related with the Greek independence and the liberation from the Ottoman domination. The *Lambri* or the *Lambrogiortia*, which are how Easter is also called, as well as the wishes that go along with it, constitute a code of communication, where religion is mingled with politics while at the same time it coincides with ancient rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960), relating to the transition, the passing from one era to the next.

Easter celebration is presented with prestige, thus attracting visitors not only from Greece but also from abroad. The image of six hundred lit hot-air balloons that embellish the starry sky of Leonidio on the Easter night and the dances that follow the next afternoon at the central square, right after the mass of Agape, all constitute a spectacular image that reflects the collective myth of a community. Within this celebrational atmosphere, the people of Leonidio remember, manage and negotiate the past but with conditions of the present.

Beyond the prestige of the celebration, our interest in the specific issue was aroused, through the constant questions posed by a guest, who visited St Nikolas Monastery, where as local people claim a part of the spine of a huge ancient snake is kept along with other old manuscripts. Based on oral local tradition, Lenidiotes narrate a story about the snake, which is being reproduced for a long time. Additionally, they stress as well on the symbolic expressions that are related both to the shape and the position that “Tsakonikos”³ dance holds in Easter celebrations. Following the above, our

³ “Tsakonikos” dance with its snake-like, labyrinthin schematical imaging and its five-beat rhythmical pattern that refers to the ancient Greek paeans, has attracted the interest of great many researchers, since it collects all those necessary elements

study deals with the ways people negotiate collective memory through its reproduction in customary dancing practices.

As Bastide (Bastide 1970, 88-90) argued, in order to study collective memory, concerning religious and ritual phenomena, we should go beyond the spatial-symbolic analysis, the “symbolic Geography”, and focus our attention on the “physical geography”, the movements registered on the bodies of the dancers, on the “motor memory” that accompanies the ritual celebrations. It is on the same embodied practices of the ritual that Connerton (Connerton 1989, 72) also concentrates his interest, in an effort to investigate how societies remember, saying that during the ceremonial practices the bodies represent and maintain an image of the past, while the very realization is full of meaning.

Connerton maintains that the practices of oral cultures are transferred through tradition as tradition and that the images of past knowledge are preserved through ceremonies. He believes that the past is sedimented and somehow amassed in two ways: with the incorporating practice and the inscribing practice (Connerton 1989, 72).

The rituals constitute a privileged space for the construction of collective forms of action, the shaping of a cultural identity and the preservation of social cohesion (Turner 1981). At the same time, they add to a repertoire of symbolic schema, through which the community borders are reinforced and its members find a meaning in the everyday life (Cohen 1985), as long as the rituals, though bounded in time and space, are porous and, therefore, important beyond the ceremonial actions to the everyday life of a community as a whole (Connerton 1989, 45).

It is about the “commemorative” rituals that commemorate the past on the basis of the present and ensure the continuance of social memory, introducing at the same time new interpretations, thus permitting its negotiation while preserving its continuance (Zerubavel 1995). The act, verbal or not, tends to obtain a certain style, that is already decoded under a rule, repeated, and then, the past becomes contemporary again after this conscious reiteration. “Words, rhythm, body movements, symbolic natural objects all recall an image from the past, through which the community or the group

that are evidence of the “mythical” past of the contemporary Greeks, it supports the ideology of nation-state and ensures the continuity of the Greek nation. For many researchers this dance is the crane, that is, the dance that Theseus danced in Delos. For others, it represents orchestrally the battle between Apollo and Python, while another theory, based on the origin of the Tsakonians from the Dorians, claims that it is a war dance (Sakellariou 1940; Kousiadis 1950-1951; Sarris 1957; Papachristou 1960; Mpikos 1969; Merikakis 1969; Stratou 1979; Dimas 1980; Likesas 1993; Karas 1996; Mpekyros and Tsaggouri 1996; Petakos 2003; Tirovola 2003).

is formed in reference to its ‘background myth’, whereas this continuance with the past is dictated through standardization and accomplishment” (Zografou 2006, 77).

The self-evident relationship between the commemorative and embodied practices, since the first cannot exist without the second, shows that the past can be preserved in the mind through the physical customary memory that “sediments the body” (Zografou 2006, 78). People recall as members of a social group (Halbwachs 1950, 33) and their memory is directly related to the social framework into which they fall.

The ceremonies and the symbols have the ability to arouse the collective sentiment (Durkheim 1961). The collective memory⁴ is used and based on symbols. In other words, it works as a symbolic ritual that is formed in correlation with the system of symbols internalized by the members of a cultural group.

In this study, the dance is seen as an embodied practice⁵, as a way and field, where the existing notions are realized while abolishing the binary relationship between body and mind. The body and its movements are not a passive object but a subject, creatively interconnecting the sentiment with the knowledge. “Tsakonikos” dance constitutes a powerful symbol of the identity of the place, embodying through selective movements and functional objects prototypes of relationship between humans and external procedures “ensuring the common history and common destiny” (Smith 2000, 117) of the society in Leonidio.

The place and its apparition

Braudel (1987) thinks that a culture is above all a place, a space directly connected with the identity that relates to relationships interwoven with history (Auge 1995). It is a space on which and in which the intertemporal stamp of civilization is imprinted, in a framework structured according to the history of the inhabitants and their collective myth (Nitsiakos 2003, 27).

Leonidio is a small town situated in the south east of Arcadia, with a population of 4,000 people. In 1977, it was characterized as a “traditional settlement” due to its architecture and, in 2010, the Ministry of Culture

⁴ The notion of collective memory is first used by M. Bloch (1920), a term later used by M. Halbwachs (Halbwachs 1950; Halbwachs 1922a).

⁵ For the meaning and use of the term more analytically, look Csordas 1990. For the approach of the dance as a “embodied” practice, look Cowan 1990 and Zografou 2007.

characterized the old town “historic place”⁶ due to the archaeological findings of the prehistoric town of Prasies. Leonidio also stands as the biggest and most important center of the wider area, known as “Tsakonia” that includes nine villages and two settlements. Regarding the descent of Tsakonians, researchers believe that the area was first inhabited by the Dorians. Up until recently the “Tsakonian Language”, a local dialect, was still preserved, tracing its roots back in the ancient dorian language (Lekos 1920; Veis 1961; Vagenas 1971; Romaios 1955; Petakos 2003b).

In Plaka, the port area of Leonidio, the temple of St Leonidas can be found (Agie Lidi in the Tsakonian Language) after which Leonidio was allegedly named when Christianity was established (Ikonomou 1870; Zarnanos 1881; Vagenas 1971). Between the town and the beach lies the agriculturally productive flatland of Leonidio, which stretches in 6,000 square meters, where almost all goods are produced in abundance, such as citrus fruit, vegetables and olive trees.

Deeply in the plain of Leonidio, inside a double cave, the monastery of St Nicolas of Sintza can be found. It dates back in the 13th century and its oldness is witnessed in a patriarchal document of 1622. According to oral tradition, it was founded by the Byzantine emperors (Vagenas 1969). In the area there are several caves that the archaeological research claims to have been inhabited since the neolithic era as sketes for hermits or even as shelters during the wars.

St Nikolas is honored with grandeur in the area of Leonidio. Apart from the fact that he is the Patron saint of mariners, he is also related to the impetuous waters that climb down the mountains. St Nikolas Monastery is the link between the ancient world and Christianity, since in this very place the ancient myths and the ancient religion are connected with Christianity and the contemporary history of the place. We become witnesses of the fact that the holly grounds remain sacred throughout the centuries and that monasteries, churches and chapels are often located in the same position where the ancient temples and the sancta used to be “always haunted by God’s presence” (Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1989, 15).

According to tradition, in the area of Platanes there used to be a huge snake, which hindered the pilgrims, mainly from Spetses and Hydra to go to St Nikolas monastery. Since the 18th century, the ship owners from Leonidio along with those from Spetses and Hydra had been building ships with shared capitals and manned their ships with crew from these areas (Kostaras 2002). Eventually, three people from Spetses managed to kill the

⁶ A place is characterized as historic, when its morphology, urban planning, architecture and construction traits, as well as its overall built-up environment have been maintained to a great degree unchangeable (Law 1469/50).

beast, “whose head could fit seven oka of wheat” (Pitselas 1986) and to deliver it as a loot to the monastery. Some other versions of this story claim that the snake was killed by people of Kranidi or by corsairs. Part of its spine can be found in the library of the monastery, along with other valuable manuscripts, gospels which are still displayed nowadays.⁷

Celebrating Easter

Easter in Leonidio is known for its unique traditions not only within the borders of Greece, but also abroad, therefore, those days the place is overwhelmed by visitors from all over the world. On the night of Christ’s Resurrection, at midnight when the priest cries “Jesus has risen”, six hundred aerostata (hot-air balloons)⁸ are lit and launched simultaneously from the five parishes up in the sky, creating a spectacular picture, probably one of a kind inside and outside Greece. The sky is filled with small lights that reach the stars until they become intergrated. A few meters away people light a bonfire in order to burn the “*afano*”, a type of bush that is used as a effigy of Jude. Fireworks and crackers of all kinds swarm about completing this magic atmosphere, turning the night into an endless setting of light and sound.

Fire as a pivotal element of folk culture can be characterized as an archetype motif and, in traditional practices, it works as a shield of protection against *miasma*. It is considered that the perimeter covered by the fire

⁷ Relevant information on the traditions of the place is offered by Lekos (1920, 14), who mentions that the inhabitants narrate that the plain of Leonidio used to be inaccessible and impassable most probably due to the thick and wild vegetation but also due to the presence of a huge snake, most likely a python. This snake was greatly feared by those who wanted to cross the plain. It mostly impeded the pilgrims coming from the islands of Spetses and Ydra, who used to pay a visit to the Monastery of St Nikolas, located in the heart of the plain. Some inhabitants from Kranidi were obliged to kill the snake and transfer it to the monastery, where still today several huge spine bones can be seen. According to other testimonies, some people from Spetses killed the beast, whose “head could fit seven oka of wheat”.

⁸ The aerostata (hot-air balloons) are made of durable pieces of paper, imported from Italy, in red, yellow, blue and green colors. In order to construct one they use 16 pieces of paper glued with flour glue. On the upper part they fold the paper making a dome, while on the lower part they stick a reed round the end of it. On the reed, wires are placed like a cross, on which they place *Kolimara*, that is a piece of cloth soaked in oil and petrol. When this is lit, the air inside the balloon becomes hot and then they release them high up in the sky. For more about aerostata, look the article: Pateraki M. and A. Cheilari. 2016. Diekdikontas ena kalitero mellon: Ta aerostata kai o Tsakonikos sto horo tis Agapis os simantika politismika tehno-urgimata. *Hronika ton Tsakonon* (forthcoming)

is protected against any negative energy and restricts the expansion of any *miasma* that might be reincarnated in supernatural creatures. The sound of the bells is also considered to have the same function, which along with the fireworks etc. are also common in many places in Greece (Audikos 2014, 222-226).

On Sunday afternoon, the inhabitants of Leonidio and thousands of visitors swarm in the central square of the town, where the mass of Agape takes place, during which the Gospel is read in the Tsakonian Dialect. Later on, girls and boys dressed in traditional costumes (foustanela and Tzoumpe) dance traditional local dances, the first of which is “Tsakonikos” dance. All visitors are welcomed to join the dance.

“Tsakonikos” Dance took its name from the region, Tsakonia, and still nowadays is considered to be the representative dance of Tsakonia. In the past, this dance would close the celebration. This change in the order is not random and is connected with the ancient Greek correlations that were attributed to the dance due to the use of the Tsakonian dialect in the song of the dance in the past (Cheilari 2015). The incorporation of the dance in the flow of Greek culture from the antiquity to the present, within the historic frame of forming the Greek identity, has given it prominence thus characterizing it as a national cultural product and a means of promoting the place. During this exact dance, they release up in the sky a number of colorful and unique in shape hot-air balloons.

The “Tsakonikos” Dance and its snake-like movements

Tsakonikos is one slow, one fast. In the slow, you have to be placed and upright with the legs working very slowly, while in the fast, you make twists and turns and the snake-like movements that you turn with your back outside, you make the snail-like movement, you close the coil, you close it and then you open it again.

The choreography of “Tsakonikos” Dance is structured in a slow-paced rhythmic movement that accompanies the repeated motif of the dance and is nowadays rendered with the song “Sou ipa mana pantrepe me...”. The absence of bending and improvisation throughout the development of the dance, even in the second faster part, in combination with the tight holding of the dancers that are men and women mixed, attributes to the dance a vivid ritual dimension.

The dancers move led by the first dancer, the leader, who directs the dance outside the shaped circle with swerves and reverses. In other words, the dance begins in a circular shape of open circle with a direction to the right and later on, the leader of the dance turns left and starts coiling. This way, a snail-like coil is created. This coiling lasts as long as the slow

part of the song lasts. In the fast part, the leading dancer turns his back to the second dancer and so do the rest of the dancers. Therefore, the leader starts to uncoil from inside out and the whole circle starts reversing.

While this swerving is still in progress, the leader makes a move again towards the direction of the circle and this way a huge snake-like effect is created. In the fast part of the song, the leader turns towards the second dancer creating a “bridge” holding a handkerchief on his right hand and all the dancers pass through that “bridge”. We have to underline that the second and the third dancer never leave hands, instead they hold each other rather tight. Afterwards, the leader turns left and passes in front of all the dancers. Finally, the leader moves to the right to make again a circle, closing the dance to form a semi-circle exactly as it started.

The descriptions of informers in combination with the contemporary performances of the dance converge to the opinion that it is about a geometrical dancing shape that refers to imitative snake-like movement. The slow wavy movement of the bodies of the dancers, in combination with the structure of the dancing motif (five-beat rhythmic pattern with slow suspension front and back) and the snake-like movement all create a picture of a slow-pacing snake that coils and uncoils under the guidance of the leading dancer⁹ that end up to a semicircular formation.

Commentary

Snake-like dancing forms or “labyrinthine” type are also encountered in numerous rituals not only in Greece but also in the wider part of eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans (Mladenovic 1980, 63; Blagojevic, 32-40). Also, the snake on a theological and folk level is loaded with controversial symbolisms that have survived through the Greek traditions and magical acts of the Greek people. However, although in the bible it is identified with the woman-devil and as the extension with the evil, in Greece this connection is not always negative.

In several traditions, even in the worship of Mary as a virgin mother (bride ever virgin), the snake worship element prevails instead of the theological one (Alexakis 2008, 53). According to several researchers, the imitative movement of the snake refers to the prevailing chthonic worship associated with vitality, fertility of the soil as well as female fertility, repro-

⁹ The musicologist S. Karras (1996) relying on overt snake-like movements and the “paioniko” pace, claimed that this is God’s battle with the Python, the snake of humidity, disease and epidemics. C. Petakos (2003) considers that this dance started as a spell, imitative and magic act, a “totem” cult in snake.

duction and renaissance (Vernikos 1976; Ntikmbasanis 2002; Alexakis 2002; Alexakis 2008).

This dimension about fertility is intertemporal and widely spread, originating in the realm of fantasy from the sexual act and the conception. As Ricouer argues, fantasy can be characterized as productive when heterogeneous systems simulate and, through an extension of their polysemy, become homogenous. The meaning of a point/symbol firstly derives from the inner dynamics that defines its structure and from the intention of the subject to refer to its outer world (Ricouer 1994, 526, 528). The shape of the dance has a head and a tail and the simulation of Tsakonikos dance with the snake rediscovers a reality that emerges mainly from the realm of sensory, emotional, aesthetical and moral values that render, as noted by Ricouer, the world inhabitable.

The snake, by a number of researchers, relates to the coil, and, as a shape, it is widely recognizable (Jennings 1998). It is encountered in the nature, in animals (rams, snail etc) and in plants (grapevine, ivy etc) connected this way with the civilization in general. As a combination of male and female, of line and circle, it expresses completeness and because it has to do with movement, it is considered to be the ultimate symbol of the universe and the relentless spiral movement of the planets (Ntikmbasanis 2002), while, at the same time, it is a symbol of accumulated power.

According to Alexakis (2002, 85,89), due to the wide variety of snake-like ritual dances as well as due to its presence in various decorative folk motifs (female bridal clothes, male clothes, aprons, carpets etc) that are not only decorative but also symbolic, it becomes evident that the coil in the Greek traditional culture is the vehicle of the transition from one world to the other, from one cosmic dimension to the other, thus constituting it a symbol with fertilizing, protective, but also deterring function.

It has been argued that its symbolism is modular, only one part of which is the communicative. In the local culture, the snakeskin is considered to be a good-luck charm that protects people from any harm. Sometimes the people in Leonidio used to keep it along with their icons, in the hut in their orchard for the protection of their harvest or they would give it to their children when they moved to a new house.

The snake is also common as a decorative motif on the bridal clothes, and more specifically on the “tzoube”, the red felt overcoat of the Tsakonian costume, where snake-like motifs are embroidered at the low back part of the costume, from under the arm to the waist. Moreover, snake-like embroidery can be found at the side seam line of the “tzoube”.

It should also be mentioned that snakes can be seen on the buckle of the belt of the bridal costumes, where snakes and acorns are mixed as symbols of fertility and protection, relating to the female pelvis. Besides, the snake along with the cross and the owl were present as a decorative

motif on the Tsakonian banner of the revolution that was displayed in Leonidio on the 16 March 1821, as it is described in the historic poem “Lakaina” by T. Oikonomos and depicted by P. Tsaggouris, a school teacher in the primary school of Leonidio. Although for the people of Leonidio the snake on the banner has a negative connotation and symbolizes the Turkish conqueror, nevertheless even with this negative connotation, it is connected biblically to fertility. The Tsakonian people of Constantinople, according to Petakos had given the name “Ofis” (meaning snake) to the coastal settlement that they had founded (Petakos 2003). What is more, in Leonidio, if someone is travelling long distances and encounters a snake, it considered to be a good omen (Rousali-Diatsintou 1971; Kostakis 1994).

To conclude, in this text, there has been an effort to highlight the importance of “Tsakonikos” dance as a symbolic practice, through which the community recalls and deals with the past in a present framework. The snake can be defined with terms of the animal kingdom or of human making (the head and the tail of the dance), whose multiplicity and complexity adds to its dynamics. In combination with other extensions and projections, such as the decorations on the belts and the shirt of the bridal costume, or on the revolution banner, its oldness (St Nikolas Monastery) and its incorporation in the Easter celebration, the image of “Tsakonikos” dance is deployed for the community to negotiate the cultural conventions of the past in a present framework.

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**Плес и отелотворено сећање у малом месту у Кинурији: змија св.
Николе и плес „цаконикос“**

Овај чланак се бави сећањем, отелотвореном у заједничком друштвеном искуству „цаконикоса“, плеса из Леонидија, села на Пелопонезу. У овом истраживању, плес се сагледава као отелотворена пракса, као начин и поље разумевања постојећих представа, при чему се поништава бинарни однос између тела и ума. Тело и његови покрети нису пасиван објекат, већ субјекат, и креативно повезују сентимент са знањем. Разматрајући традиционалну представу о змији у Платанесу и, начелно, у свесним и несвесним експресијама, с једне, и плес „цаконикос“, с друге стране, испитано је да ли се тела плесача могу сматрати преносиоцима културних информација, којима је прошлост текстуализована и очувана. Показано је да плес „цаконикос“ конституише моћан симбол идентитета места, отелотворујући одабраним покретима и функционалним објектима прототипе односа између људи и екстерне поступке који „обезбеђују заједничку историју и заједничку судбину“ друштва у Леонидију. Змијолика форма плеса „цаконикос“ је развијена да би заједница пренела културне конвенције из прошлости у савремени оквир.

Кључне речи: отелотворена пракса, плес „цаконикос“, змија, колективно сећање, симболичка пракса, културне конвенције.