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Tradition and Modernity in a Dance Ritual Performance (*dromeno*): the example of *gynaikokratia* in a community in the prefecture of Serres, northern Greece.

Summary:
The cultural heritage of the prefecture of Serres is rich in Modern Greek ritual performances (*dromena*). The ritual performance (*dromeno*) with its contextual components – the ceremonial, the celebrants and the audience – constitutes a cultural practice. Through this the community incorporates new situations into its tradition and through these it manages both its past and its present. Even though today the folk ritual performances known to us through the processes of tradition are not held for the same reasons as in the past, they are nonetheless elements of the local folk culture and a significant index of the region's development. In this paper we refer to the custom of *gynaikokratia* (lit. women's rule), which is enacted each year in the community of Monokklisia. We shall focus on the social function of the dances, in the context of the ritual performance, in order to see how a cultural phenomenon does not remain static and unchanged over time but evolves as a dynamic and historically determined process, which is subject to social and political manipulations and negotiations. The study is based on primary ethnographic material gathered in the course of fieldwork (participant observation, interviews) in the community.
Key words:
Dance ritual performance (*dromeno*), Babo, dance, *gynaikokratia* (women's rule), midwife, Prefecture of Serres, Monokklisia.

Introduction

> *'The issue is not so much which things have ended, but with what we replace, we who are living, as with every thing in life, within the wear and change, the things we think are ended ….'*
>
> George Seferis, Delphi-Amorgos, August 1961

Northern Greece is distinguished by a host of folk ritual performances (*dromena*), which display great diversity and cover the entire annual cycle. The prefecture of Serres in northern Greece is a region which, because of historical circumstances, has received a large number of refugees. As a result, there, as in the wider region of Macedonia and Thrace in general, many folk ritual performances which the refugees brought from their lost

homelands and which are part of their cultural heritage have been added to the already existing customs of the indigenous population.

According to the theatrologist Walter Puchner, ritual performances are progeny of precursors of the magical mentality and are celebrated in the a-logical belief that they will secure a good year for the community. They declare a semeiotic system of social praxes that observe an established ceremonial, even in their repetition, are binding on the community, heighten the sense of 'we' and represent symbolically the identity of the group (Poucher 1985: 44). Through these *dromena* the community incorporates new situations into its tradition and manages both its past and its present (Nitsiakos 2003: 87). Even though today the folk ritual performances that we know of through the processes of tradition are not held for the same reasons as of old, they are nonetheless elements of the local folk culture and are a significant index of the region's development. As mechanisms of mediation, cultural *dromena* transfuse the cultural legacy from one generation to the next, ensuring the biological and cultural reproduction of the traditional micro-societies (Datsi 2002: 79).

This paper presents a folk dance ritual performance in its social space as an inextricable part of the customary community behaviour. It examines the social function of the dances in the framework of the *dromeno*, and observes how a cultural phenomenon does not remain static and unaltered over time, but evolves as a dynamic process, historically determined and subject to social and political manipulations and negotiations.

The custom in question is enacted annually on 8 January in the communities of Nea Petra, Charopo, Ano Kamila, Mavrothalassa and Monkklisia, in the Prefecture of Serres in North Greece. These are communities in which the population is of refugees from East Thrace and Roumelia, who settled in Greece after 1920-1922, with the exchanges of populations.[1] Earlier, the custom was called 'babo's day' or 'babo günu'[2], from the Tur-

[1] The refugees left their homeland in Eastern Thrace because of the political conflict between Greece and Turkey in the period when the two countries were being reformed after the end of the First World War and their present frontiers were fixed. On 27 September 1922, the major retreat of Hellenism commenced. The countless caravans of wagons rolled westwards. Correspondingly, Turks moved from Greece towards Turkey. All these migrations were ratified by the Treaty of Lausanne, works on which began on 8 November 1922 and which was signed on 24 July 1923. Today Eastern Thrace belongs to Turkey.

[2] From the Turkish word *gün* (= day) and *babo* (= old woman). Perhaps the word is associated also with they mythological figure of Baubo. Moreover, in the neighboring village of Kala Dendra the main Christmas dish, stuffed intestines, was called '*babes*'.

kish words *gün*, which means day, and *babo*,[3] which means old woman or midwife, since the person honoured was the village midwife, while in East Roumelia it was called 'Babiden'. The gulf between the midwife and the grandmother/old woman, which is the epicentre of the two variations of the celebration, is bridged perhaps if we bear in mind that the two roles frequently coincided in the same person (Foteas 1976: 8) and that these two roles were special, at least with regard to the respect befitting the person who held them (Bakalaki 1982: 69). Today, the custom has been renamed '*gynaikokratia*' (lit. women's rule), a term that the older members of the community find unacceptable. Perhaps it was named thus because of the strong female presence, as well as because of the fact that the more recent improvisations give power to the women and reinforce the impression of the absolute domination of women (Samsaris 1985-86: 249). On this day the women leave behind their everyday chores and cares, and make merry. Temporarily, they acquire a social status different from the usual one: they participate in activities and move in spaces that for the rest of the year are for them more or less taboo.

At the core of this particular *dromeno* is dance, which is an integral structural element and functions either as 'paramount' contributor to or as framework of the whole customary ceremonial. M. Zografou succinctly defines as a dance *dromeno* those dance systems that are used in the framework of a more or less closed community life and are structured by impromptu and inter-related symbolic dance actions of magical-religious expediency. They are governed by strict convention and observe during their repetition an established ceremonial, they take place on a certain date, are traditional, inherited and signify the identity of the group (Zografou 2003: 261)

The ethnographic material has been collected in the course of fieldwork, which commenced in 1973[4] and was conducted in all the communities of the Prefecture of Serres. Through interviews with the women participants in the custom, as well as with very old men and women who remembered the custom as it was celebrated in the old days in the homeland, we gathered information relating to 'then and now'.[5] Concurrently, each year we have participated actively in the events, thus experiencing the custom 'from inside'. Among the communities that observe the custom in the Prefecture of Serres, the differences are minimal. For this reason we shall focus on the *dromeno* held in the community of Monokklisia, which,

[3] In Greece the word Babo means old woman. The refugees from Eastern Thrace used the same word for the midwife (Gr. Mami).

[4] 1973 is the year in which I settled permanently in the Serres region: prior to then I lived in Athens.

[5] Today, most of these informants are no longer alive.

perhaps due to publicity given it by the Mass Media, has become known all over Greece and attracts the attendance of more spectators than in the other villages.

The Community

The community was founded in 1923 by refugees from East Thrace and a few locals (*dopioi*) from the nearby destroyed village of Karajakoi.[6] The refugees came from the villages of Petra (50 families) and Kalyvia (25 families) in East Thrace. Some of them settled in the village of Karajakoi and others in the adjacent Turkish *çiflik*. Karajakoi was too small to accommodate the large influx of refugees and most of them found shelter in the village church, while some were accommodated in houses and others stayed in small wooden huts (*paranges*) on the Turkish *çiflik.* However, their stay in this village was brief because the River Strymon flooded and destroyed it, and they were forced to relocate one kilometer higher up, where a church (Gr. *ekklesia*) stood, There, together with other refugees, they set up a new village, which they named Monokklisia. In 1927 the çiflik was expropriated and shared out temporarily among the landless residents of the new village. The first official land allocation took place in 1937. Others followed in 1960 and 1963. Fortune smiled at last on the refugees.

According to the 1981 census, the population of the community was 475 persons. Their main occupation is agriculture, while involvement with stock raising is limited. Although the community is considered relatively prosperous, its members face the various problems of rural life and a large percentage of young people move to the major urban centres.

The custom in the homeland

According to information from refugees, in old Petra, as they call the village of origin in East Thrace, each year on 8 January, the feast day of Saint Domnike, the married women enacted the customary dance *dromeno* of the midwife (*mami* or *babo*). With this custom they honored the mid-

[6] During the Macedonian Struggle, 1900-1908, this village (Bulgaran name Karadžovo) was headquarters of a Bulgarian gang which Kapetan Mitrousis, with the help of Gourmas, chief of the armed irregulars, succeeded in exterminating in one night (7/8 November 1906) (Samsaris Petros, TThrakiotika ;Ethima sti Miniklisia Serron, Komotini 1985-86, 6ος tomos Thrakikis Epetiridas, p. 232, n. 3 [Samsaris P. Thracian Customs at Monokklisi, Serres, Komotini 1985-1986, 6th volume of Thrakiki Epeteris, 232, n. 3]).

wife because she helped them in the difficult moment of childbirth. Through different rituals performed in the midwife's house and far from the gaze of men, the women anticipated the achievement of fecundity and the ease of parturition, by holding various phallic fertility symbols and using methods of homeopathic magic.[7] The absence of men from the celebration gave women the opportunity to enjoy themselves at this all-night feast in a closed space, in a spirit of bawdy hilarity.

The roots of the custom should be sought in the distant past, possibly in Antiquity. Perhaps they go back to the worship of some ancient fertility deity. The precise historical or mythological relationship of Babo with ancient rites (and the degree to which seeking such a relationship is desirable) is a highly complex issue. C. Romaios (Romeos 1944: 104) places Babo's day together with other Thracian cults in a cultural complex whose roots go back to the pre-deity or totemic era. Kakouri (Kakouri 1963) also focuses on the continuity between Thracian and ancient Dionysiac cult, while in the view of Bakalaki (Bakalaki 1982) the word 'Babo' possibly derives from the name "Vavo", which means uterus and belongs to a mythical figure associated with Dionysos. Specifically, "Vavo", and some other mythical beings that sprouted from the earth met with Demeter when she was searching for Persephone. In order to entertain the goddess, Vavo lifted up her skirts and showed her Iakchos,[8] who was laughing inside her belly (Kerinii 1968: 254-4).

It is known from the textual sources that in Antiquity women offered sacrifices to Genetyllides, Attic deity of childbirth, as well as to Eilioneia, Argeian deity of childbirth (Jessen 1910: line 1150). According to Pausanias (1,1,5), the festival in the former's honour was a women's affair. It is known too that in Antiquity women in Crete, Delos, Athens, Orchomenos, Chaironeia, Tanagra, Argos, Tegea, Olympia, Sparta (in the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia) honoured Eileithyia, deity of the pangs of childbirth, by offering various gifts such as garments, headdresses, locks of their hair and wreaths (Samsaris 1985-86: 248). Comparable phenomena are attested in ancient Egypt (Foteas 1979: 679). Lucian informs us of the Haloai festival in which women participated and from part of which men were excluded. He emphasizes in particular the women's mirth during the festival and their obscene jokes (Scholia on Lucian. Dialogues of the Courtesans, VII, 4). Pausanias (VII 27, 9-11) tells of another festival in honour of Demeter, from which not only men were debarred but even male dogs. Men were

[7] Homeopathic magic is the mimesis of some expected event that pre-empts it.
[8] In mythology, Iakchos was an ancient god. He was worshipped in Athens and Eleusis, together with other major deities, Demeter and Kore.

strictly excluded from the Thesmophoria festival as well (Lucian, Amours, 10)

In the Modern Greek bibliography there are several references to the custom of Babo, as this was celebrated in East Thrace and Roumelia. The earliest of these describes the feast in Adrianople in 1886. This custom belongs in the domain of female rites and as such it is a phenomenon that resembles some modern as well as ancient women's festivals. The domination of women on Babo's day recalls the feast day of the Virgin Mary at Villia in Attica (Οικονόμου 2004: 133) and the 'let's burn the distaff' custom celebrated in some villages of Pieria on Easter Tuesday (Michail-Dede 1987: 89)

From the oral testimonies we have gathered, we have chosen those of Evangelia Salachori and her husband Costas, who were refugees from East Thrace and described the custom exactly as they remember it:

'…… *We are Thracians and our village was called Kalyvia. I was then about 17 years old and I remember everything. Of course, I did not take part in the custom because I was unmarried, but with the other girls we watched it …. In any case, when we came here a few years later, after we'd settled in well, we made all the customs …. We called this custom 'Babo's day'. The women, dressed in their best costumes, went to the midwife's house and each one offered her a bar of soap and a towel, and they also held a jug of hot water. Then they put the soap in the midwife's hands and all together they poured the water on her, so that the baby, as they believed, would be born quickly. Then they wiped her hands and the women kissed them. At midday they brought food from their homes to the midwife's house, in order to eat all together and to begin the second part of the celebration with dances 'the* baboyortia*'. Some women, before going to the midwife's house, gathered all together and with the* gaida[9] *playing in front, they went dancing in the streets. When the procession reached the courtyard, the women who were already there also joined the dance. The midwife came out of her house holding a baking tray with pie and then the circle dance stopped and a dance began – we call it* synkathistos *– which the midwife danced alone while sharing out the pie. The women who had not yet given birth and those who were now too old to give birth were not allowed to take part in the celebration, because they believed that they bring bad luck. Those women who could not have children were not held in much regard by the others. They called them heirless. Then, they all went inside the house and there, after the food, the* [male] *musician would play*

[9] The *gaida* is a wind instrument made from animal skin, i.e. a bagpipe.

the midwife's tune[10] *for her to dance by herself. The midwife's dance was followed by* zonaradika, *in which all the women took part, as well as other Thracian dances …… Afterwards they took the midwife out and went to the coffee shop, where the made merry late into the night ….*'

The ritual open dances performed by women in a single circle are associated with the fecundity primarily of humans, but also of animals, as well as the fertility of the earth (Kurath 1956: 288-290).

Vasilis Lantzos, describing the same custom in the region of Roumelia, notes that: 'The midwife got up and danced alone, and the other women clapped hands rhythmically. At some moment, the midwife asked them to give her a bar of soap and water, and proceeded to practical methods of homeopathic magic. Specifically, while she was dancing, she opened her legs and bending over in front to wash her hands she deliberately squeezed the bar of soap in her hands so that this slipped to pass through her open legs and fall behind her. This act of the midwife's during the dance symbolized the climactic moment of parturition: as the bar of soap slid easily from the midwife's hands, so the baby should come out easily from the woman's body. This symbolic ritual act of the midwife's during the dance reflected the desire of all the women present' (Lantzos 2007: 186).

Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that in many rituals there is the representation of a desire (Rhees 1990: 70). 'Every ritual is a kind of language, which means that it translates an idea' (Mauss-Hubert 2003: 100). As anthropologist Marc Augé points out, included among the express aims of a large number of rituals is exorcism of the barrenness of women and protection of their fertility (Augé 1999: 49).

Undeniably, the honours accorded to the midwife are linked with her role in facilitating motherhood. Beyond this, however, the midwife's position is special also because her role is one of the few female roles that allow some public activity and prominence in the community.

The dance ritual performance today

The dance ritual performance of the midwife was brought by the refugees from East Thrace to various villages in North Greece, in which they settled. According to information we have gathered, in the early years of settlement the women enacted the *dromeno* exactly as they did in the homeland. However, there are no testimonies relating to the use of phallic

[10] This is one of the two different *karsilamades* that the local dance repertoire includes, and is in 9/16 time. Cf. also Lantzos Vasilios: Kinonikos metashimatismos ke horeftika dromena: to paradigma tis imeras tis mamis I babos, in *Εθνολογία 13,* Athens, 186.

models. They still kept the magic framework of the childbirth customs, which, as Meraklis points out, 'was slow in becoming redundant and in some places continues to exist to varying degrees to this day' (Meraklis 1996: 19).

In studying the dance *dromeno* over the past decades, we observe that the consequences of the 'folklorization' of folk culture are most obvious in ritual performances. The magico-religious framework recedes and tendencies to prettify and to dramatize the custom appear. What remains from the complex functionality of the representational customs is the amusement and entertainment. From the 1950s onwards, many elements that made up the dance *dromeno* of the midwife began gradually to wane, on account of significant changes taking place in Greek society. As consequences of the advance of science and the spread of education, people moved away from the superstitions of the past, and their belief in a mythical reality gradually weakened, with the result that ritual performances in general lost not only their magical character but also their social expediency (Lantzos 2007: 199, Zografou 1989: 134). Michalis Meraklis observes that, as a rule, magic and science negate each other, and wherever science is introduced magical practices in general lose ground. When the functionality of magic in ritual customs loses its mythological substrate, it is transformed into entertainment, liberated from magical ties in form and rid of 'metaphysical' expediencies (fertility, harvest, good year) in content.

In 1963, the women in the village of Monokklisia created the 'Lysistrate' Association of Married Women, which is housed in a special building next to the community administrative building, and they named the village square Amazons' Square. The history and the development of the association is linked directly with the celebration of the *dromeno* of '*gynaikokratia*' (women's rule), a term modern and misleading, since it does not refer to some system of social organization but simply denotes that on this day the women customarily 'rule', that is they have the leading role.[11] The association is funded by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and the Prefectural Self-Government, in order to enact the custom. Although its activity is limited, its existence nevertheless gives the women an opportunity to take part in public affairs. It functions also as a forum for discussions on feminist and other issues.

In its contemporary form, this dance ritual performance is simple and concerns the social relations between the sexes and the roles of men and women. Basic characteristic of Babo's day is the lifting of the rules that

[11] Ekaterinidis Georgios:"Laika Dromena ke archiako iliko tou Kedrou Laografias tia Akadimias Athinon" in *Laika Dromena, Praktika 1ου Sinedriou Komotini* 1994, 102.

regulate the daily life of women and the replacement of usual female conduct by behaviors that are normally male models. In the morning the women gather in the association's office and from there, to the accompaniment of music, they make their way, dancing, to the house of one of the members, who acts the role of the midwife. They offer her the essential gifts – towel, bar of soap and flowers. After washing her hands, they kiss them, and then they put the midwife on a cart and take her all round the village. The washing of the hands is a token of purification, while the gifts and the flowers given to the midwife are cult gestures. All the women accompany the procession, dancing as they go. The procession ends in front of the association's office, where the women form a large open circle in order to dance. Even today, the position of the women in the dance circle is by age: the older women to the fore and the younger ones to the rear. The women dance Thracian dances, such as *zonaradikos*,[12] *baitouska*,[13] *synkathistos*,[14] *syrtos*.[15] However, in addition to these dances, which also define the participants' cultural identity, they dance also dances of the wider region of the Prefecture of Serres, as well as of Macedonia. On comparing these with the dances that were danced in the old days, according to our informants, we ascertain that then, in each particular phase of the dance ritual performance one particular dance was danced, which had its own special meaning. Now, the women dance a wide repertoire of dances, they have replaced the *gaida* (a *par excellence* Thracian instrument) with the *zournas*[16] and very often their dances are accompanied by *klarino* (clarinet), percus-

[12] The *zonaradikos* is the dance genre distinctive of East Roumelia and Thrace generally. Depending on the occasion, it is danced in an open or a closed circle by men and women simultaneously. The rhythm is six-beat 6/8 (3+3) and the six steps of the dance are the basic dance motif. The name presumably derives from the fact that the hands are held from the sashes (Gr. *zonaria*). See Pantsidis Ioannis, O ellinikos horos stin ellhniki paradosi ke h didaskalia tou, Aiginio Publications, Aiginio.

[13] A dance known throughout Thrace as well as in the wider region of East Macedonia, danced on all occasions and always to the accompaniment of musical instruments. It is danced by men and women in an open circle, in 5/8 time.

[14] The *synkathistos* is a pair dance danced either by two women or two men, facing each other, with different manner of interpretation for each sex and in four-beat rhythm. The two persons are positioned opposite one another, quite close, and move in a circular or straight course. The rhythm is 7/8 (2+2+3) with quick execution. See Loutzaki R, Marriage as a dance event. The case of the refugees from East Roumelia at Mikro Monastiri, Macedonia, *Ethnographika* 4-5, Nafplion 1984-85, 171.

[15] The *syrtos* is a circular dance, danced by men and women in seven-beat rhythm.

[16] Shawm, a percussion instrument widely disseminated in the region of Serres and in Central and East Macedonia generally.

sion instruments, violin, *laouto*, etc. Indeed, towards the end of the celebration, when weather conditions oblige them to move indoors, to the space of the association's hall, their dances end up in *karsilamades*, *tsifteteleia*, *zeibekika*, and so on.

Concurrently, from the morning on this day, one woman dresses up as a traffic policeman, to direct the 'traffic' in a humorous manner, and she has a very bad time if some man dares to come between them. The women charge an entry fee to the village, the proceeds from which go to the association, and in response to the presence of television cameras the women enhance the theatricality of the event, not always in good taste. On this day the coffee-shop owners do not appear in their coffee shops. The women undertake this task. The same applies to the butcher and to almost all the male trades and professions. The men stay at home, look after the children, sweep the floors, wash the clothes and cook. Consequently, the custom can be classed in the same category as other ritual phenomena distinguished by the temporary substitution of culturally accepted behavior by behaviors that in everyday life would be considered out of place, obscene, provocative, offensive or in general prohibited. For the interpretation of such reversals of role models, Max Cluckman proposes a theory of rebellion rituals, namely rituals which, through the reversal of model roles, give the opportunity for expressing the conflicts and contradictions existing within the society. Rebellion rituals are encountered exclusively in societies presenting cultural and social stability, where the existing order is not doubted and where an organized rebellion is inconceivable.[17]

Turner (1974: 166) basically agrees with Cluckman's theory when he says that rituals that include the reversal of social status 'not only reinforce the order of the (social) structure but also reinstate the relations between the existing, historical individuals who occupy (different) positions in this structure'. That is, according to Turner, participation in reversal rituals temporarily liberates people from their specific social positions and allows them to associate equally, directly and spontaneously, to participate, that is, in a situation that is in opposition to the model of the society as a system of ranked social statuses. In the case of *gynaikokratia*, for example, 'the liberation' that the celebration brings functions differently for the women than it does for the men.

When we asked the women why they keep the custom today, since this has been disconnected in their consciousness from fertility and childbirth, as was the case in its old form, they replied that today for any problems concerning fertility and child-bearing all women consult medical science

[17] See Cluckman 1954 and 1955. Bakalaki (1982: 71) and Lantzos, op. cit., 192, also approach the custom on the basis of Cluckman's theory.

and do not resort to acts of homeopathic magic. The community uses this dance *dromeno* as a means for renewing its cultural cohesion, in order to confirm the continuity and the relation with the birthplace. The dispersed community returns to the community hearth and the dance performed in community space, in the space-symbol of community life, unites all the participants. Thus, the dance ritual performance of the 'midwife' is at one a reconstitution of the community and a reinforcement of the cultural identity of its members.

Today the dance *dromeno* is exploited as a tourist attraction. The women's interest is focused on increasing the attendance of visitors each year. The arrival of visitors in buses, from villages near to and far from Monokklisia, in order to take part in the events, confirms the importance of the celebration as an opportunity for expression and escapism from daily roles for the women. The example of *gynaikokratia* shows that the fact that a custom has become a tourist attraction does not entail the non-functioning of the custom for those who celebrate it.

In summary, we would say that *gynaikokratia* or Babo's day is a custom that is now well known all over Greece. The roots of the custom should be sought long ago and possibly in Antiquity. In the celebration of the custom in the old days, at Petra in East Thrace, purely ritual elements can be discerned. The custom was enacted by women of reproductive age and through various ritual dance performances, which were accompanied by fertility symbols, the participants anticipated conceiving a child and giving birth to it easily. Concurrently, the women accorded the appropriate honours to the most revered person, the midwife, who was respected by the community at large.

After the 1950s, women's dance activities of magical character began gradually to disappear. New elements were added to the custom and the meaning of it was altered. Today, the cultural association has assumed responsibility for organizing the dance ritual performance as a folklore event, adding contemporary and other elements in order to make it more appealing to spectators. It is a fact that, as a rule, the revival in such cases takes place in a manner that ignores, to a greater or lesser degree, the earlier forms of the *dromeno* it 'revives'. The groups involved in the folklore attraction, either as performers or as spectators, usually organize these events in their own way – and primarily in their own taste – without awaiting and without wanting the contribution of specialists. However, in the last analysis, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Professor M. Meraklis notes '*... how and when these events have moved away from their old form, nevertheless, on account of the fact that they satisfy the sentiment and the associated expectations of today's public, they offer valuable data for our knowledge of the behaviour of this public, for knowledge of its*

aesthetic, social, ideological, etc., trends and inclinations: and this is very important ...'.

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