Dance and Negotiation of Identity: A Case Study From Northern Greece

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This study focuses on a dance event (choroesperida = dance evening) in a small community in Northern Greece. The community comprises Dopioi (= locals) and Vlachs, who have lived in the same village since 1960, keeping watertight boundaries between each other. In this context, we shall try to show how a dance event can lift the impermeable boundaries between two ethnic groups, and how cultural identities at dance events of this kind become objects of negotiation and are transformed in the course of the performance.

Keywords: dance, identity, negotiation, northern Greece, Serres

Introduction

That dance is a symbol of identity and consequently defines boundaries between social and cultural groups, is a commonly held view in anthropological approaches to it¹. Furthermore, it has been ascertained that social structures do not convey meanings or messages. This is done by symbols. Consequently, in order to understand the collective consciousness of a community, it is essential to study its symbols, and one such symbol is dance (Alexakis, 1992, p. 71). Dance, as a cultural element, adapts to the changing conditions of society and culture.

By focusing our ethnographic interest on the ball (choroesperida = dance evening) held by the Cultural Association of Oinoussa, we shall try to show how, through a dance event, the third generation endeavors to moderate the cultural, political, and social differences within the community. Oinoussa is a small village with a mixed communities², located close to the town of Serres. The community comprises Dopioi (= locals) and Vlachs, who have lived in the same village since 1960, keeping watertight boundaries between each other.

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¹ See indicatively Giurchescu (2000) and Desmond (1997).

² In the Prefecture of Serres, to which the village of Oinoussa belongs, the logic of mixed villages applies mainly to those in the plains and has been associated more specifically with settlements in which the *çiflik* system was imposed in Ottoman times, and in which there were non-Greek-speaking populations. By contrast, in the villages in the foothills of the surrounding mountains, there was no such cultural cohabitation in this period, since even in those villages from which people left, there was no subsequent settlement of incomers. With the installation of the Asia Minor refugees after 1922, all except one of the non-Greek-speaking villages in the Lower Strymon basin became mixed, See Lafazani (1997). However, there is reference to the co-existence of Vlachs and locals in the area of Mount Menoikios from the early 20th century.

... We were not in concord with the locals. They were inferior to us... We even held our religious feasts separately. We attended mass together and then we danced in different venues...

... The Vlachs were in our face all our life. They took our village (Chionochori) and then, when we came down to Oinoussa, they came here too.... No way would we give a girl (in marriage) to or take a girl (in marriage) from the Vlachs... With them everything is different... dances, songs, customs, costume...³

Here we shall try to show how a dance event can lift the impermeable boundaries between two ethnic groups, and how cultural identities at dance events of this kind become objects of negotiation and are transformed in the course of the performance. However, the lifting of the strict boundaries between the cultural groups does not necessarily entail the disappearance of pre-existing collective identities, as some researchers tend to argue—probably starting from acceptance of the simplistic bipolar explanatory model of “assimilation-preservation of imperviousness and identity”⁴. Specifically, in mixed communities the symbolic and the cultural boundaries are not broken down, and, as studies by several anthropologists point out, “the boundaries are kept despite the flow of people between them” (Agelopoulos, 1997).

In traditional society, in addition to weddings, important dance events were religious feasts (panigyria) and celebrations. The religious feast was for the rural community—and for the urban in many instances—an opportunity for rest and respite from the daily round. Dance was and is the central component of the religious feast, an opportunity for individuals to present themselves through these festive practices and to be evaluated by the “others”. Dance was not merely a form of entertainment (Avdikos, 2004), it was a basic vehicle for the process of socialization through touch, which is why people of both sexes considered dance events as advantageous opportunities for assessing the possibilities of future marriages.

Change in social conditions, with mass migration to the urban centre of Serres, removed the social framework of the aforesaid events. Dance was transferred to venues of entertainment and balls are the most important event in the winter calendar of Cultural Associations. The very word ball alludes to some kind of grandeur. The ball began in the prewar years as a social event of the haute bourgeoisie in Athens and gradually spread to the provinces, incorporating foreign dances alongside the Greek ones⁵. However, in the region of Serres, the term ball was not adopted fully and was soon replaced by the term dance in its wider sense. Thus, in addition to its narrow sense, the term dance means also the group of dancers and the dance event, which may last several hours and at which dance, food, entertainment and sanctity are interwoven in an event in which dance has pride of place (Zografou, 2001). According to Cowan (1990):

... This type of dance event has a characteristic organization of the space, time and activities. It is an activity in which the gathering of the inhabitants of the community is not accidental, but is to a degree staged by an association, where the organizers can intervene and modify the usual practices for good mood. The arrangement of the persons and the objects in the dance, and the flow of the dance are regulated, so that an order enters the experience of the celebrants. (pp. 134-136)

Even though the outcome is in the last analysis indeterminate (Moore, 1977, p. 219), the event is normally organized, so that it moves from an initial emphasis on formality, restriction and hierarchy, towards an

³ Interview with a local resident of Oinoussa, September 24, 2004.

⁴ For issues of identity in general, see Hall & Gay (1996); Loutzaki (1999). The Association as Milieu for dance activity. In *Music of Thrace. An interdisciplinary approach: Evros*.

⁵ For these kinds of balls see Cowan (1990).

atmosphere without formalities, with dominations, disorder, and lack of hierarchy; in other words, an atmosphere of “anti-structure” (Turner, 1969).

The special circumstance that helped us to formulate the problem and to understand the dance event is that for the first time after coexistence in the same space for almost half a century, Dopioi and Vlachs have formed a village Cultural Association and created a dance troupe in which young people from both groups, Dopioi and Vlachs, participate: Eleni (Dopia) and Tania (Vlach) (2004) make the following comments:

... The dance troupe should have been formed long ago, thus breaking down the differences between us.... We too wanted to take part in cultural events organized by the Prefecture... but how would we go? As Dopioi or as Vlachs? When we want to say “we” in Oinoussa, what do we mean by “we”? Which “we”, Dopioi or Vlachs? (personal interview, February 6, 2004)

The community, despite the conflicts within it, regulates by negotiation its relations with the collectivities, thus, securing the conditions demanded for its conservation and reproduction (Lafazani, 1997, p. 104).

This is obvious in the discourse of the younger people of the community, from both the ethnic groups (Vlachs & Dopioi),

... For the community to continue to exist and to be maintained, it must have satisfactory reasons for this, and it aims to develop also the appropriate cultural and social relations... On the contrary, bad relations (in their opinion) have negative effects on people’s potential and trap them in the social margin. (personal interview, September 22, 2004)

The young people of the village, whose concept of social relations differs from that of their elders, have tried to temper the impermeable and impassable boundaries between the two groups by creating the Cultural Association⁶, as well as through marriage practices⁷. It is their common decision to present through the association a supra-local dance repertoire, so “constructing”, in a way, a new dance identity which will represent the community to the outside world, to the “others”. However, in addition to the activities of the association, both Vlachs and Dopioi cleave to their own morals and mores, and at social events, each presents their own dances and songs too. Vlachs can join the Vlach Cultural Association “Yorgakis Olympios” of the Prefecture of Serres, based in the town of Serres, which is the hive of activity for all the Vlachs in the prefecture.

The differences between Dopioi and Vlachs focus on language, dance practice, and traditional costume which for each community has particular value and symbolism. Their dance, a unity of word, sound, and movement, which the members of each population group have processed orally, fulfilled a series of functions, transmitting information on the identity of the dancer and the modes of differentiation of the two sexes. Concurrently, it classified the age categories, the familial and social status, the ceremonial capacity, or even how kinesics is managed as formal and informal, sacred and secular.

By confronting dance mainly as process⁸, the present study aims to reveal the multiple meanings, messages,

⁶ The association is an organized group of people with common aims, the founding of which is linked mainly with the initiatives of individuals who originate from one place and are active in creating a cultural cell of local or supra-local ambit. As an institution, it has supported multiple readings, most of which converge on: (1) the continuity and unity of Hellenism; (2) the economic support of the community; and (3) the education and entertainment of its members. see Loutzaki (1999). The Association as Milieu for Dance Activity. In *Music of Thrace* (p. 230).

⁷ In recent years, the first marriages between Vlachs and Dopioi have taken place, cautiously, despite the objections of the older members of the community.

⁸ “That is ‘a living organism’, which is created, develops, resists influences, is altered, continues to exist, resists, dies, relives, is transformed, completes, supports” (Loutzaki, 1998, p. 216).

and symbolisms that are inscribed in the dance practices, and how through these the various collectivities negotiate their identity.

Methodologically, the present study is based on fieldwork and participant observation. Specifically, we attended the annual balls of the Cultural Association of Oinoussa, from 2002 to 2005. These balls were videoed and interviews were held with several informants, who: (1) were involved in various phases of organizing and promoting the balls; (2) were associated with the dance activity of the association; and (3) were not only older and participated in the audience, but also as dancers-merrymakers.

In the present study, the annual ball of 2005 is described and analyzed.

The Community

The community of Oinoussa is built in the southern foothills of Mount Menoikios, at an altitude of 130 m., and lies seven km. east of the town of Serres. It was established in 1927 by the mass relocation of Dopioi inhabitants of the neighbouring village of Chionochori. The Byzantine name of Oinoussa⁹ was Trevaisena, later Dervaisiani (Samsaris, 1998). According to both Dopioi¹⁰ and Vlach¹¹, members of the community, Oinoussa is named after wine (Gr. oinos). When the locals lived in Chionochori (Karlikoÿ), they cultivated many vines and produced considerable quantities of wine.

... And here, a little further up, we had the vineyards, That's also why we gave the name Oinoussa, from the wine. If we'd had a little sense, we could have carried on tending vines and become wine-producers, but.... The church of the

⁹ On the basis of the handmade potsherds observed on the surface of the adjacent "Begos" hill, we deduce that the area was inhabited from prehistoric times. The finding of a Roman cemetery and the remnants of fortifications of the same period, on the top of "Vlaselnikos" hill leave no doubt about the later founding of a Roman vicus and fort. The site continued to be inhabited without interruption in the Byzantine Age, as attested by the Byzantine single-aisled chapel south of the village, as well as during the period of Ottoman rule, see Samsaris (1988).

¹⁰ Dopioi is a term used for a population category of autochthons. This term has, of course, its own historical provenance, which is linked with the distinction between autochthons and refugees. In the Serres region, according to Papakostas (2007), two categories of Dopioi can be distinguished: those who spoke only Greek, who are to be found in the area of Mount Pangaion, the Darnakochoria, the area of Nigrita and the area of the town of Serres, and those who spoke a particular Slav linguistic idiom, which in the wider region of Serres was called "Voulgarika" (= Bulgarian). They call themselves Dopioi, wishing to emphasize their long relation with and their historically founded rights to the land and the region. From fieldwork as well as from textual sources, it emerges that in the early 20th century the inhabitants of Chionochori were Dopioi Orthodox Christians who spoke "Voulgarika". However, according to oral testimonies, their Mass in the church was celebrated in Greek. After the demarcation of the frontiers in 1913, several of them left for Bulgaria. A significant number of Dopioi left also during the Civil War, abandoning their properties. The enlarged Greek State in the early 20th century was constituted around the central ideological axis of Greek ethnicity (Hellenikotita). Any deviations from the structural elements of Hellenikotita (religion, doctrine, and language) were deemed problematical. The remaining Dopioi of Chionochori, in claiming their Hellenikotita welcomed the Greek school and the teacher, and sided with the Greek case. Today, the Dopioi have been incorporated fully in Greek society and what distinguishes from the others is cultural differences. On the basis of personal observations, it seems that the Slav linguistic idiom is used only by the very old as language of the house, as an act of nostalgia and proof of emotional association with their tradition, ancestors and folk culture. The young people declare that they do not understand to the linguistic idiom of their grandparents.

¹¹ In Greece, the Vlachs are an ethnic group with distinctive cultural differentiations. Historical circumstances in Greece, as well as in the wider region of the Balkans, resulted in the creation of bilingual populations. The Vlachs are bilingual, speaking Greek and Vlach (a Latin idiom). In the region of Serres, the main mass of Vlachs originates from Avdella and Grammousta in western Macedonia, forming two respective groups, the Avdellians and the Grammoustians. A smaller number comes from Aspropotamos near Trikala, Livadi on Olympos and from other parts of Epirus. In the late 18th and early 19th century, they settled in the Serres region, either co-existing with other population categories or founding pure Vlach villages in the north part of the Prefecture, on the slopes of mounts Belles and Menoikios. Up until the 1960s, they were herders, with a nomadic or transhumant way of life. Today, the number of sheep and goats has decreased appreciably and most Vlachs have moved to the urban centres of Serres and Thessalonica, finding employment in other sectors. For the Vlachs in the Prefecture of Serres in general, see Panopoulou (2001).

Saints Anargyroi at Chionochori was built by us. Because we had no water, our people made the mortar for the bell tower with wine.... (personal interview, March 23, 2003)

According to the 2001 census, 485 persons are registered in the community, several of whom reside in the town of Serres. Concurrently, several people from Serres have built permanent homes in the community. In its spatial layout, Oinoussa is divided into two settlements: the old settlement, which is on the south side of the village and consists of one-storey or two-storey houses that were built in the 1930s; and the new one, in the north part of the village, which consists of two-storey houses built in the late 1960s, when Chionochori was abandoned completely. In the lower neighborhood, around the church, are the houses of the Vlachs, who are either those who stayed in Oinoussa after the civil war or those who took the houses of local fugitives in the early 1950s. However, the houses actually belong to Dopioi, because when they first settled in the village they had their warehouses there, which they converted into houses in which to live. The upper neighborhood includes houses built by Vlachs who abandoned Chionochori in 1968.

The Vlachs settled in the north of the village out of necessity, since for many years—and even today—most of them were herders and access to the mountain and their sheep pens were easier from there. Today, with the assistance of the Municipality of Serres, an enormous modern stock-raising park has been created and the byres/stables have been moved away from the courtyards of the houses. The Dopioi were agriculturalists. They owned small tracts of cultivable land at the foot of the mountain, where they also had small barns in which they stored their harvests. The ethnic division of labor—herding (Vlachs)/agriculture (Dopioi)—ascribes to the former a sense of cultural superiority.

In addition to the Dopioi and the Vlachs, several Serraians have built luxurious homes on the north side of the village, attracted by the good climate and natural beauty, as well as the fact that Oinoussa is only 10 minutes away from the town of Serres. This has brought an escalation in the price of building land. In 1968, the church of the Saints Anargyroi was built in the old square between the two settlements. The community office was also built a short distance to the north, resulting in a shift of the village centre. There are two cafeterias in Oinoussa, frequented by middle-aged and young people, one belonging to a Vlach and one to a Dopios, which are known respectively as “upper” and “lower”¹².

Today, the division of labor is to a lesser degree ethnically determined and the bipolar opposition stock raising (Vlachs)/agriculture (Dopioi) has been transformed into the corresponding wage labor self-employed/farming (Kallinomou, 2003, pp. 50-88). This fact enhances the greater degree of adaptability shown by the Vlachs to the new urban milieu of the region, which began to take shape after 1980¹³.

The Dance Event: The Association's Annual Ball (2005)

The 2005 annual ball of the Oinoussa Cultural Association was to be held on Monday 26 December, at 8 p.m., at the “Potamaki” restaurant, the day before we made arrangements with friends to go to the dance. At the

¹² It is worth noting that 1,500 m north of the community is the location “Phaneromeni”. On the south, steep and abrupt limestone scarp of the precipitous “Vlaselnikos” hill, within a shallow rock-shelter at a height of about 5.5 m above the ground, is a Byzantine wall-painting of the Virgin Hodegetria, with the Christ-child on her right hand (dexiokratousa), accompanied by two angels. The fresco is in poor condition, due to human destruction and the effects of the elements.

¹³ It is characteristic that in a table given by Kallinomou (2003), it is mentioned that in 1999, of a total of 74 Vlach households, 10 were involved in agriculture and stock raising, 15 with trade and free-lance professions, 20 with wage labor, while 29 were pensioners. The corresponding figures for Dopioi were 37, 4, 14, and 16.

entrance to the restaurant, we were welcomed by the lady members of the committee, who were stunningly dressed. They seated us at the table reserved for official guests, because our company included the Mayor of Serres. The room was rather small for events of this kind. At the entrance to the venue was a lovely Christmas tree bedecked with colorful baubles and at the windows were twinkling fairy-lights. The columns in the room were also decorated for the festive season. People began gathering, and in less than half an hour the room was almost full. The satisfaction of the committee members was obvious. The association ball is a 'collective' celebration and the young people of the community have struggled considerably to establish it and to attract as many people as possible. Maria, a Dopia member of the committee, commented:

For the past month, I've been going to "my people", from house to house, to deliver invitations and to persuade them that they must come to the ball. I faced difficulties because many of "our people" don't accept the founding of the Association, since we had a Cultural Association before and it dissolved, because the Vlachs wanted to dance only their own dances at performances, and we left, we didn't agree to it. (personal interview, April 20, 2005)

The committee members, whose chief concern is to get the participation of all inhabitants of the community, with the aim of projecting its collective image to the "others", are acutely aware of how each person faces the situation prevailing in the community. The absence of those who could participate in an event such as this but are not present is considered as declaring their lack of support. For the committee members, the large participation of people confirms the Association's strength. It is also a precondition for exuberance and high spirits (*kefi*), which if kindled, will be cited as proof of this strength.

Almost all the companies were made up of couples; most of them were linked by ties of kinship rather than of friendship or neighborliness. However, all belonged to the same ethnic group. The kinship model that is emphasized at this event, the patriarchal nuclear family, has an explicitly *petit-bourgeois* character. It included the man, head of the household or the family, who takes his wife out to have a good time. Whereas at the wedding feast, for example, kinship relations are emphasized, here the nuclear family is projected as an autonomous economic and social unit (Cowan, 1990). In the additional classifications, concerning the placement in space, division by generations could be discerned. Younger persons were sitting at the tables at the back of the room, while the more elderly were sitting at the front tables. There was also a division between the Vlachs of the town and the Vlachs of the village, whereas the Dopiai were sitting all together.

Several men passed by our table and greeted the Mayor Serres—primarily those who vote for him—and then went on to greet friends or relatives at other tables. The women remained seated in strictly formal position. They were dressed up to the nines for the occasion. After all, an important aspect of the self-presentation of a woman celebrant at this dance is the way in which she literally embodies signs or symbols of her family's affluence, through the clothes and jewelry she is wearing. The practice of conspicuous display of the family's good clothes on the women's bodies, with basic space of display the space where people dance, is deeply rooted in the traditional culture of Greece (Cowan, 1990).

The president of the Cultural Association welcomed the guests, and after announcing the purposes for which the event was being held, as well as the aims of the association, he introduced the Association's dance teacher. The dance teacher, in his turn, introduced the band, which was at the back of the dance floor and comprised a

clarinet, a harmonium, drums, a violin, and a laouto, the player of which was also the singer. There was a bouzouki on one chair, indicating that it would be used later for playing another kind of music.

Scene 1: "The Dance"

The little children of the Association, about 15 girls and boys, appeared first. The young dancers looked around them somewhat embarrassedly, in the hope of spotting someone they knew. When the teacher gave the signal, they started to dance. The first dance was a "syrtos sta tria"¹⁴, the second a "chasapia"¹⁵, and the third a Thracian dance the "podaraki"¹⁶.

The audience applauded the little dancers, who then left the floor, and the dance troupe came on. It was made up of young girls and older women, in Vlach and Dopies costumes, mixed up in the circle. There were no males in the dance group, as youths and older men refused to take part in the Association's activities. However, Vlachs originating from Oinoussa but who live in Serres are active members of the Vlach Cultural Association based in the town.

The Vlach females were more light and airy in appearance than the Dopies. This image was enhanced by the Vlach costume, particularly, the dress, made of cerise hand-woven cloth, and with multiple pleats (*lagiolia*). We were told that all the costumes were authentic. On the head, they wore a small cap embellished with colored beads and gold coins (*flouria*), over which was the kerchief, which too was brightly colored and elaborately tied. Rows of *flouria* hung on the chest, the number of rows showing the economic standing of each girl. The apron was of velvet with lavish lace trims and around the waist was a fine beadwork belt. The knitted hose were multi-colored and the shoes black.

By contrast, the costumes of the Dopies were replicas of old ones. We were told that no authentic costumes exist and the new ones made were based on old photographs or certain garments/accessories that had survived as heirlooms. The costume comprises a long dress to just above the ankle, over which is worn a black sleeveless jacket, the *sayaki*, bordered all round with three rows of red braid. On the head is a silk kerchief of the same color as the apron, on the right side of which, just above the ear, is affixed a small spray of flowers. Though beautiful, these costumes gave the women a more restrained mien.

The dance teacher presented the program of the dance troupe, which included dances from both mainland and island Greece. Vlach dances which define the dance identity of the Vlachs in the Prefecture of Serres, as well as dances of the Dopioi of Oinoussa were not danced. This was in fact one of the terms set at the founding of the new Cultural Association. The "zonaradikos" (Loutzaki, 1983, p. 85), "syrtos sta tria" (Zografou, 2001), "trechatos" (Prantsidis, 2005, p. 193), "lytos" (Prantsidis, 2005, p. 256), "baidouska" (Prantsidis, 2005, p. 105), "Makedonikos syrtos" (Prantsidis, 2005, p. 205) and, last, the "Makedonikos antikrystos" (Prantsidis, 2005, p. 253) made up the dance repertoire, which was performed with great gusto. The handhold depended on the

¹⁴ Characteristic dance of the region of Epirus, to three-beat, or even four-beat rhythm. It is danced also in western Macedonia, Thessaly, and central Greece. It should be noted that motif of the dance is one of the most basic kinetic schemes that are encountered in all regions of Greece, irrespective of names, rhythm or other differences, see Prantsidis (2005), p. 261.

¹⁵ A dance encountered all over Thrace, as well as in Macedonia. It has a two-beat rhythm, sometimes accompanied by instrumental music and sometimes by song. It is danced by men and women, see Prantsidis (2005), p. 88.

¹⁶ A dance danced by refugees from northern Thrace at Kitrous, Pieria, who originate from the village of Bana. It is danced in an open circle by men and women, mixed, who hold hands with arms stretched downwards, see Prantsidis (2005), p. 125.

dance. At the end, after most of the female dancers had left the dance floor, a couple consisting of two girls, one Vlach and the other Dopia, remained briefly, dancing one opposite the other, and then left, to return in a short while wearing strikingly modern clothes.

Scene 2: “Dancing All Together”

The president of the Association then spoke and invited the official guests—the two parliamentary deputies from the Prefecture of Serres, the Mayor of the town of Serres and representatives of Cultural Associations in neighbouring villages—“to open the dance”¹⁷. The band began to play a “syrtos”. At first, the mayor and the parliamentary deputies accompanied not the members of the committee, but a few persons who are distinguished symbolically from the rest of the celebrants by age, gender, and office. Among these, three were Vlachs and one was Dopios. Two of them were former presidents of the Community of Oinoussa, prior to its inclusion in the Municipality of Serres with the “Capodistrias” reform of local government, while the third was one of the most economically powerful. The others gave them this priority. The committee members encouraged the others too to join the dance, and so the circle began gradually to enlarge. At first, most of the participants were females, while the males remained seated as spectators. Each person who got up to dance did not join the circle immediately but waited until a relative or friend passed in front of him, in order to take hold. In this phase, the grouping was based more on ethnic groups than on sexes. The band did not play a specific tune, but a continuous medley in the syrto rhythm. At regular intervals the musicians also played some Thracian melodies (“Thrakiotika”), which are particularly popular in the wider region. This did not go on for very long, because the dance and the music repertoire then changed. Popular (“laika”) songs and dances, and tsiftetelia replaced the traditional ones. In this phase, there was not one single circle, instead there were small groups, the one dancing opposite the other. A woman can only participate in dances of this kind if there are relatives or friends of hers on the dance floor.

Around midnight, which is very early for an event of this kind, the first companies of Dopiai began to take their leave. When we stood up to say goodbye to one such company, George Dopiai, the oldest person in it, said to us: “We simply compromise”.

When we asked him why he did not dance, since he was such a good dancer, he replied: “These aren’t ‘our’ dances and I don’t know them”.

Maria, a Dopia dancer who showed great interest in keeping the Association going and heard the discussion, commented: “This way, things are better. The older people may not be satisfied, but we want to dance. I don’t like them commenting that we can’t agree on the dance. We’ll show our identity at ‘our’ weddings and ‘our own events’”.

The evening continued with the same repertoire. Later, the band played a heavy zeibekikos. The president of the association, who was a Vlach, went onto the dance floor and began to twirl and sway to the rhythm of the music. Almost all those still at the venue kneeled around him and clapped their hands to the beat. As the music changed, two young men—this time *Dopiai*—continued the dance. None of the women were clapping hands. The closed society of Oinoussa did not allow women to breach the local sexist constants.

¹⁷ Cowan remarks: “The expression “open the dance” merits our attention. The verb “to open” is not just a poetic way of saying “to begin”, but recalls propitious openings (for example the bride who “opens her house”, as well as “spring” itself. The term dance is also ambiguous, even though it refers of course to the dance event as a whole, “the opening” takes place graphically—and once again non-verbally—with one dance” Cowan (1990).

As ethnographers of Greece have observed, the zeibekikos is a dance through which men create their individual identity, always on behalf of a more general entity, of their family, village or circle of companions (Pipyrou, 2004, p. 57). It is the dance of the “wise guy” (mangas), which promotes the dancer’s masculinity and the “egoism”¹⁸. When the president ended his dance and sat down at the table, he said to us:

If you want to see Vlach dances, come to “our dance”, which will be held next month. There we dance only Vlach dances (Vlachika), all night long until the morning. If we Vlachs don’t hear the clarinet, we don’t feel that we are dancing. For us, the dance is interwoven with the song. You’ve seen what happened here? They all got up and left. (personal interview, November 12, 2004)

Even though the purpose of organizing the dance was to bring together the two ethnic groups and to project a group of dances accepted by all to the “outside world”, internal discriminations were not avoided completely. The evening was apparently not to the liking of the older people, who were not satisfied by the kind of music and songs. On the contrary, the young people, although at first they kept some distance from one another, ended up, after the older people had left, all dancing together.

Conclusions

The ethnographic paradigm of Oinoussa raises many questions and lends itself to multiple readings of the dance phenomenon. One first ascertainment is that the dance offers fertile ground for cultivating a peculiar sense of collectivity in a community with discrete ethnic groups. This is possible through practices of tempering the ethnic differences (Alexakis, 1992). However, this presupposing is a dynamic process of negotiation, in which the cultural symbols which cause tensions have to be downgraded.

Thus, the choice of dances in the program of the dance troupes that appear is by no means fortuitous. This is a corpus of dances which was constituted and promoted through the mechanisms of the Greek nation state. Climax of these mechanisms was education, through which was promoted the concept of a single and solid national dance culture (Loutzaki, 2008; Manos, 2002; Papakostas, 2007b), in which dance difference lies only at the level of form and there is no mention of cultural otherness. The practices of the cultural-dance associations, whose activity is based on a romantic rhetoric about tradition, move in the same direction.

In the case of the dance groups that participated in the ball, we observe that a “panhellenic” and in general terms an “a-local” dance repertoire is mobilized¹⁹, and not a program of pure Vlach or Dopioi dances. This tactic aims at neutralizing and immobilizing the concept of localness. For this reason, the Cultural Association does not project the particular ethnic dance identity of the Vlachs or the Dopioi, so as to avoid giving the one primacy over the other.

It seems, however, that in the free glendi too in the context of the ball, a common dance formation is shaped, which promotes the hybrid communication between Vlachs and Dopioi. Parts of this formation are the syrtos, the tsifteteli, the laiko, the zeibekiko, as well as dance forms familiar (Papakostas, 2007a) to both ethnic groups (e.g.: Thrakiotika). However, the dances, which are performed at balls, present “homogeneous” and “panhellenic” characteristics, since they were configured through local societies’ contact with urban models and modernity in

¹⁸ For the concept of egoism in the ethnographic paradigm of Greece, see Campbell (1964), Herzfeld (1985), Cowan (1990), and Kirtsoglou (2004).

¹⁹ For a critique of the term, see Papakostas (2007).

general. This new convention, through homogenization of the merrymaking process, sets a new framework of discussion between the ethnic groups of Oinoussa, in which the tensions between them are defused temporarily.

In conclusion, we observe that there exists in the mixed communities a wide field of inter-ethnic syntheses, competitions, conflicts and negotiations. Folk culture, specifically dance, is a dynamic domain of expressing the above phenomena. Through dance events, the individual ethnic groups endeavor to enhance their particular identity and to realign ethnic relations.

It emerges from the ethnographic paradigm of Oinoussa that this process is not fulfilled and is articulated with the historical and cultural context prevailing each time. Dance as a cultural phenomenon whose performance is placed outside daily life, offers the preconditions for extracting some conclusions on the relations and the ambitions of the individual ethnic groups of Oinoussa.

In the case of Oinoussa, the modern dance phenomenon of the ball sets a new framework of constituting the cultural identity of the mixed community. What is at stake in this process is the projection of an imagined dance identity, through decolorizing the individual ethnicities.

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