

Dance and Performance: Performing the Wedding Ritual Outside of Its Context

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is a statute that seeks the reproductive union of the two genders, and the customs that accompany it are performed continuously even to this day. Nevertheless, this is not the case in the community of Pentalofos in Evros prefecture in Greece, where the wedding customs have stopped being celebrated, mainly due to the lack of new people in the community and therefore the lack of weddings. These customs are now experienced in a different way by the members of the cultural association of the community, who represent them outside of their context, in a different time and place. Thus, the aim of this paper is to study the wedding customs in the community of Pentalofos in the Evros region in Greece, treating their representation as a planned performance. The collection of research data was carried out with the ethnographic method, as this applied to the study of dance. For presentation and data analysis Geert's model of 'thick description' was adopted, as in ethnographic method the analysis and interpretation of the data is done simultaneously. Finally, for the interpretation of the research data, the performance theory was used, according to which society can be seen in the light of a dramaturgical perspective, i.e. as a theater, where the performers unconsciously play multiple roles. From the analysis of the data it was found that the revival of marriage customs was a theatrical performance, which included an organizer, two coordinators and many actors. The women of the cultural association have functioned as actors with specific roles and the rituals which they performed was lost a degree of their character, but women experienced the performance of marriage rituals in a different way. For them, the wedding customs were a different experience, in a different reality.

Keywords: Dance, Ethnographic Method, Performance Theory, Wedding Customs.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2007, as a late researcher, as I had just received my degree from the University and only a short time before I had started researching the object of dance, I found myself in Pentalofos, Greek Thrace, in order to record the dances of this community (Fig. 1). The priming for my visit to the community was a television show of folklore interest on a local television channel in the area. In this show, the Pentalofos Women's Association presented some of the community's dances, as well as some of its songs. As the dances were staged to be shown on a television show, the dancers' movement was stylized, but the dances also seemed to be enriched to look impressive, following the dictates of a performance.

Watching the TV show and the impressive dances that were presented in it, I became interested to see if these dances are actually danced in the same way today or if they were modified like that in the context of a performance, in order to be shown on television. So I got in touch with the local cultural club, where I asked them to dance their dances for me. Having met a lady who knew the Board of Directors of the cultural association of the community, in which she was also active, Ms. Keratsio, my access to the field was relatively easy. Ms. Keratsio introduced me to the president of the association, Ms. Zoe, who volunteered to gather the members of the association, in order to present me the dances of the community, as she did. This was my first visit to the research field.

From this visit the members of the association were pleased that a 'stranger' was interested in their dances, and after two weeks I received a telephone call from the president of the cultural association, who informed me that the ladies of the association, if I would also like, they would like to show me the wedding customs as they were performed in their community and which they considered to be different from the other wedding customs of the area of Evros.



Fig. 1. With the members of women association of Pentalofoi.

Marriage is a statute that seeks the reproductive union of the two genders, and the customs that accompany it are performed continuously even to this day. As a ritual of passage custom (van Gennep, 1960), as it relates to the transition of man from one social situation to another, it is made up of a large number of actions. And this is because this transition is considered to bring with it the harmful effects of demons, which are dealt with through symbolic actions. Skouteri-Didaskalou (1984) states that "(...)at the level of concepts the change of status from single to married is simply a change of categories at the level of speech, but at the level of social action, the change needs a ritual, that is, it needs a predetermined, appropriate symbolic action for the person who changes category to cross the artificial border between the two categories (...)" (p. 120). According to Loukatos (1960), this is also the reason why marriage customs still endure compared to other traditional life customs that have lost their functionality. According to him "(...)marriage endures (...), because peasants and townspeople are afraid of its magical effects and find it difficult to get out of its traditional requirements..." (p. 49).

Although marriage customs are still celebrated in various regions of Greece, this is not the case in the community of Pentalofoi, where they have stopped being celebrated, mainly due to the lack of new people in the community and therefore the lack of weddings. Perhaps this was also the reason for the motivation of the members of the association to represent the customs of marriage, that is, for their oblivion about them. They didn't care if they would be presented on a TV show, if they would be seen by a TV or any other audience, they were just interested in representing the marriage customs and experiencing them, even if it was done in a different way, that is, even if it was done outside of their context.

The above data lead to the study of the custom of marriage under the terms of the theory of performance. Thus, the aim of this paper is to study the wedding customs in the community of Pentalofoi in the Evros region in Greece, treating their representation as a planned performance.

II. METHODOLOGY

The collection of research data was carried out with the ethnographic method, as this applied to the study of dance (Buckland, 1999; Giurchescu, & Torp, 1991; Koutsouba, 1997; Sklar, 1991). Ethnography (from the words *nation* and *write*) is the systematic study of people and cultures (Filippidou, 2022a). Cultural phenomena are investigated through ethnography, in which the researcher observes society as an object of study (Filippidou, 2022a). Ethnography is the medium for written cultural observation of a group, which is why this method was chosen in this paper (Geertz, 2003). The data collection was based on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources refer to data gathered through in situ research that was carried out at the region of Thrace and, particularly, in the community of Pentalofoi of Evros prefecture from April 2007 up to July 2008. Primary sources refer to the data coming from in-situ research, through interviews (Rubin, & Rubin, 2012) (open-type questions for semi-structured interview and unstructured interview), and the participant observation combined with simultaneous audio and video recording of the inhabitants of the community. Secondary sources refer to the review and use of the existing literature and were based on the principles of archival ethnography (Stocking, 1992) and historical research (Adshead, & Layson 1998).

For presentation and data analysis Geertz's model of 'thick description' (2003b) was adopted, as in ethnographic method the analysis and interpretation of the data is done simultaneously. Finally, for the interpretation of the research data, the performance theory was used, according to which society can be seen in the light of a dramaturgical perspective, i.e. as a theater, where the performers unconsciously play multiple roles (Goffman, 2006; Niora, 2009; Schechner, 2006; Turner, 1982).

III. DATA ANALYSIS

A. The Ethnographic Context

Evros is a multicultural region, located in the northern part of Greece. In this region, the area of Trigono, in its northwestern part, is of particular interest, where a wide variety of rhythms and dance forms can be observed, as the geographical position of the area makes it a crossroads between Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey (Filippidou, 2011; 2018).



Fig. 2. The region of Evros in Greece.

The area of Trigono is characterized by population heterogeneity, because it harmoniously coexists with native groups and refugee groups, mainly from the area of Adrianopolis (Edirne, Turkey) and Northern Thrace (today Bulgarian Thrace) (Filippidou *et al.*, 2010). Some of these groups have their own distinct music and dance tradition and some others, in their long history, have lost their dance identity and have adapted to the dance habits and customs of their fellow citizens. One of the communities of Trigono is Pentalofos, which is inhabited by purely local population (Filippidou, 2022b; Filippidou *et al.*, 2008).



Fig. 3. The area of Trigono in Evros, Greece.

The inhabitants of Pentalofos claim their Constantinople (today Istanbul in Turkey) origin, a fact that can only be ascertained from oral tradition, which has been involved with many fictional accounts and has produced a variety of versions (Filippidou, 2022b; Filippidou *et al.*, 2008). According to this tradition, the inhabitants of Pentalofos moved to the area where the community is today, in 1453, after the fall of Constantinople. Of these residents, approximately 40 families settled in the area of Ormenio. The fact is, however, that Pentalofos is inhabited by a purely native population, with its music and dance idiom similar to that of Greek Thrace (Filippidou, 2022b).

During the years of the Ottoman Empire, Pentalofos was called Bestepe (five hills in Turkish language) and was the seat of a municipality that included the villages of Aspalo, Palestra, Drepano, Bara and Gialia. In 1960 it numbered about 1,850 inhabitants and was a prosperous community. But from then until 1970, a wave of immigration begins, which turns into a mass exodus, since a large part of the population of the community of Pentalofos immigrates to countries mainly in Europe, as well as to other continents (Filippidou, 2022b; Filippidou *et al.*, 2008). At the same time, since 1980 the rest of its population has been accumulating in the big cities of the prefecture, resulting in a dramatic decrease in its population, which today has an average of around 70 years.

B. *The Custom of Marriage in Pentalofos*

According to van Gennep (1960) the outcome of the rituals of passage, as is marriage, is completed through three stages. The first is the stage of separation from a social situation. The second is the stage of transition or marginalization, which is also the liminal phase, during which the people who experience it leave the position they were in and within a specific space-time framework actions are taken to acquire new position, new role and new identity. The third stage is that of incorporation, which is their definitive integration into a new social situation and by extension into a new role (Turner, 1967; 1982).

In all three phases of the performance of the wedding rituals, the dance plays a central role and is of great importance not only for the smooth outcome of the wedding ceremony but also for the life of the members of the community. In the first two phases the dance has a sacred character, while in the third phase it has a secular-entertainment character, as the ritual is completed and the feast of the sexes and the couple's relatives follows. However, the most important stage, with the most wedding customs, is for the residents of Pentalofos the stage of marginalization. During this stage, it is considered that there are demons that try to 'destroy' the marriage, so the rituals of purification and good luck are many (Filippidou, 2018). In particular, this stage included two basic customs. The custom of 'Milia' and the custom of 'Gikna'.

The dance event of 'Milia' (apple tree) took place on Saturday night, i.e. one day before the wedding ceremony, at the groom's house. It was a custom, which symbolized the fertility and the binding of the couple. In particular, on Saturday night, the women, relatives of the groom, decorated the 'Milia' singing songs depending on the occasion. After the songs and the decoration, the dance began, to validate this magico-religious ritual. Throughout the ceremony, there was a 'guardian' of the 'Milia', who protected it from the attacks of the male guests, who were attempted to steal its apples. According to the locals, the 'guardian' symbolically protected the family and contributed to its consolidation. On Sunday night they danced the 'Milia' again, which this time was accompanied by men's songs, the so-called 'gamotragouda', i.e. obscene songs with obscene content. In this case only married couples participated in the dance (Filippidou *et al.*, 2016).

On the other hand, on Saturday night at the bride's house, the wedding dance event of 'Gikna' was holding (Filippidou, 2018). This event was taking place the night before the coronation (the day before the wedding ceremony) (Filippidou, 2010). Specifically, the night before the coronation, three first-crowned and newly-married girls, make the 'okna' (henna) in a bronze or clay 'tashi' (plate) and place three lighted candles inside it, while during its preparation of henna, relatives sing three songs depending on the occasion (Filippidou *et al.*, 2011). When the henna is ready and, to validate what happened, the dance begins, which essentially validates the ritual that preceded it (Filippidou *et al.*, 2011). The dance of the 'Gikna', which in Pentalofos is called 'Babisious' (Filippidou, 2022c) begins with the oldest woman of the house, the 'babo', holding the 'tassi' with the lit candles, after first placing a coin inside it. Then, one by one, the relatives dance the 'Gikna' after first placing a coin in the tashi, i.e. depositing money in it and after kissing the hand of the first dancer. After all the relatives dance it, they paint their fingers with henna, in order to show that there is a "relationship of joy" between them (Filippidou, 2018; Mousiadis, 1986; Sotiropoulou, & Tsiaka, 1990).

Both of the above wedding customs, the 'Milia' and the 'Gikna' were considered to have magical and cathartic properties and powers, which protected the bride and groom from the 'evil eye' and the demonic, while cutting them off from their previous social status, during their transition to their new social status, i.e. during their transition from single to married, protecting their fertility (Filippidou, 2018; Filippidou *et al.*, 2012).

C. *Performing the Custom of Marriage out of Its Context*

Early in the morning the women of the cultural association gathered in the association hall and awaited my arrival. When I arrived, I found them rehearsing and discussing which woman would enter the dance at the front, which one at the end, and generally about how they would arrange themselves in the circle. The role of the coordinator was assumed by the president of the association, Ms. Zoe, as well as another lady, a member of the club, Ms. Loulouda, who knew well the songs that accompanied the wedding customs.

As soon as the consultation they had with each other was over, they turned to me, asking me if I was ready, to begin the representation of the wedding customs. So, I gave my consent and the women started. Their representation had to do with the last two phases of the marriage. Initially they started with the custom of 'Milia'. They decorated the 'Milia' singing songs according to the occasion and then started dancing around of the 'Milia'. The role of 'guardian' was assumed by Ms. Milko, after an assignment given to her by the president of the association, who did not participate in the performance, but was watching, was coordinating and gave explanations to me. Also, during the 'Milia' dance, the women took on the role of 'thieves' of the apples of the 'Milia', since there were no men to steal them. Therefore, during the representation of the 'Milia' custom, the women sang and danced and stole the apples, simultaneously taking on many roles, male and female roles.



Fig. 4. Snapshot from the presentation of wedding customs in Pentalofos of Evros.

After the end of the representation of the 'Milia' custom, the women were, mentally, transported to the bride's house, in order to performance the 'Gikna' custom. The representation of the custom took place again in the association hall. One woman took on the role of the bride, three other women took on the role of the first-crowned women, who sang and placed the henna on the hands of the woman playing the role of the bride, while the rest of the women watched. After the henna application was over, the Gikna dance began, in which all the women participated, dancing three different choreographic compositions. After I asked the coordinator why this was happening, she replied that these choreographic compositions were danced from time to time in the community and the women felt that they should all be included in the performance.

After this wedding custom was completed, the women were taken to an outdoor area across from the association hall, in order to revive the wedding customs that were held outside, before the coronation, and specifically the customs that took place in the bride's house. There they represent the farewell of the bride, who leaves for her husband's residence, and danced the bride's farewell dance. The woman who played the role of the bride was placed first in the dance and the others followed. And in this case women assumed many and varied roles, both male and female. Finishing the wedding customs and in the same outdoor space they presented the secular wedding dances, which were held after the end of the wedding ceremony.

From the above, it is understood that during the performance of wedding customs in the community of Pentalofos Evros, the pre-planned element dominates. This is perceived by certain parameters which are the following: a) the representation takes place at a predetermined time, which was decided jointly by the researcher and the participants. b) The representation takes place in a predetermined area which is the hall and the courtyard area of the cultural association and not the interior of the bride's house and the courtyard area of the bride and groom's house. c) The representation is carried out only with the participation of women as the association consists only of women. d) This results, in the representation, women taking on a variety of roles, male and female, performers and spectators. e) In the representation women are forced to change the established standard of the customs, since all the above elements force them to do so, as the conditions of representation are different and, f) during the performance there was an organizer (the researcher) as well as coordinators (Ms. Zoi and Ms. Loulouda), who either guided or intervened. Despite this, the participants felt a special joy, both during the representation and after its end, which came from the representation of the customs that had been stopped years ago, and from the realization of the researcher's purpose. Despite the different context of performing wedding customs and the variations they suffered due to different circumstances, women experienced wedding customs in a different way.

IV. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to study the wedding customs in the community of Pentalofos in the Evros region in Greece, treating their representation as a planned performance. To achieve this aim, the ethnographic method was used for the collection of the data. For the presentation and analysis of the data, Geertz's model of "thick description" was adopted, and for the interpretation of the data, the performance theory was used, according to which society can be seen in the light of a dramaturgical perspective, i.e. as a theater, where the performers unconsciously play multiple roles.

From the analysis of the data it was found that the revival of marriage customs was a theatrical performance, which included an organizer (the researcher), two coordinators (Ms. Zoe and Ms. Loulouda) and many actors (the members of the women's association). Therefore, the representation of marriage in the community of Pentalofos in Evros manifested itself in dramatic terms, as the women assumed the role of the actor and 'staged' a performance.

The women retrieved from their memory the wedding customs they had performed in the past and re-enacted them as faithfully as they could, but in a different context (Royce, 2005) and with different circumstances, so they did not follow the established terms of the wedding formal. However, women may have functioned as actors with specific roles and the rituals performed may have lost a degree of their character, but women experienced the performance of marriage rituals in a different way. For them, the wedding customs were a different experience, in a different reality.

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