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**The Boules of Naoussa in northern Greece:
a ritual of the Carnival, its historic evolution
in the 20th century and its role in the modern social
and cultural life of the city**

Abstract:

The use of the mask is common in the theatre (tragedies, satyr plays and comedies) in ancient Greece and is traced back to the worship of God Dionysus. Throughout the following centuries, multiple sources and evidence also suggest that masks and special disguise maintained their importance during ceremonies and rituals all over the Greek territory. Several such rituals occur upon the Apokries (Carnival), a period of time just before the Lent, the forty-day fast before Easter Sunday. The Lent is most significant for the Eastern Orthodox Church.

One such custom, the Boules, takes place every year in Naoussa, north-western Greece, during the two weekends between the beginning of the Pre-Lent season and Pure Monday. The participants are exclusively young men dressed in traditional costumes and masks called “The Face”. Most of them wear traditional men’s costumes and impersonate the “Janissaries”, while one man wears a woman’s costume and impersonates the “Boula”. The “Janissaries and Boules” wander around the streets of the city all day long dancing to the sounds of live music. All the inhabitants of the city attend the custom. However, during the past few years, thousands of visitors also flock to Naoussa to watch the celebrations. This increase in its popularity has paved the way for the evolution of Boules. In this paper an attempt is made to examine the influence of new circumstances, as well as the role that this custom plays in the modern social and cultural life of the city and the wider region.

Keywords:

Boules, Janissaries, Naoussa, Prosopos, Carnival, Western Macedonia.

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Introduction

The rituals associated with the use of mask (*prosopída*) and *costume* in Greece is examined through a number of perspectives and approaches which lead to the formation of two conflicting views. The first one concerns the timeless and integral continuity of the Greek civilisation from antiquity to this day, which is found in the folk culture of the countryside. This opinion was supported primarily by the “romantic” Folklore of the early 20th century and it is often reproduced extensively, not in scientific journals but mainly in the press either local or rarely national.²

On the other hand, the perception of the continuity of a ceaseless and perpetual civilisation has been criticised sharply both by recent folklorists, after the 1970s, and by the point of view of social Anthropology and Ethnomusicology, during the last three decades, which create a continuous and systematic scientific discourse in Greece (Herzfeld 2002, 137; Herzfeld 1998, 28; Geertz 2002, 239).³

The massive internal migration from the countryside to the urban centers after the end of the civil war in Greece (1944-1949) and the abandonment of the provincial communities by the end of 1980, create a new reality. Nowadays, in certain cases, urbanism leads to total depopulation of mountain and semi-mountain regions. Meantime, from the early 1990s on, immigrants mainly from Albania, are massively admitted. Many of them settle in the Greek province. During the next two decades, the migratory and refugee flows come from several countries, mainly of Asia, most of which settle in urban centers.⁴

In this particular new context, science is expected to describe and delve into the understanding of the cultural constituents. Since the early 1950s, a new environment has been formed that will have a catalytic effect on the evolutionary course of “tradition” (Kavouras 1992, 50). On the one hand, the new residents of urban centers seek to transfer rural rituals in the form of reconstructions to the cities. This has begun to take place on a large scale after the fall of the dictatorship in Greece (1967-1974), and since the 1980s massive cultural associations and unions have been established by the heterogeneous residents of large urban centers.

² On the matter of masks in the carnival events and its relation to respective ceremonies of the antiquity, see Zaliou (2013, 12-23) and Deinopoulos (1995, 162-165) On the criticism concerning the perception of romantic Folklore in Greece, see Kyriakidou - Nestoros (1987: 34-35) and Kyriakidou - Nestoros (1993, 89-92).

³ Milios attributes the positivity or negativity of the ideology of the nation to the beginning of the creation of the Greek state, as a derivative of the “gradually spreading urban relations”, thus, involving social classes in his point of view of the matter (Milios 1997, 283-314)

⁴ On the formation of the new environment, during recent Greek history, from the point of view of social sciences, see Pavlou - Skoulariki, edit. (2009).

On the other hand, during the same period, cultural associations are created constantly in various communities of the Greek province. The members of these associations are now taking action in order to carry out communities/urban centers’ rituals that are dwindling because participation is not obligatory. In other cases, they bring back rituals that in the past took place in the region, but they had ceased.

In this context, we will make an effort to understand the conditions under which the custom of the town of Naoussa known as “Boules” or according to another possibly more recent version “Janissaries (Yenitsaroi) and Boules”, is taking place today.

Case study (the custom)

The custom takes place in the town of Naoussa in northwestern Greece during the carnival period; that is the period before the forty-day fast performed by Orthodox Christians before Easter Sunday. The procedure of the ritual takes place on the first weekend and it is repeated the next one as well, with some differentiations regarding its finale. The basic concept of the event is groups of young men in disguise wandering around the town’s streets, accompanied by live music performed by a pair of musicians, who play *ntaouli* and *zournás*.⁵

According to the informant, Dimitris Papakonstantinou, who was born in 1929, the name of the custom is “Boula”: “We used to call it by that name until the 1940’s. That was when it was held for the last time. Then, it stopped for 15 years, until 1954. In ‘54 elder people tried to bring back the custom. We were eight people in total. Seven of them had lived before the war and I was the youngest. Now I am the oldest; the others are dead. I was in one *bouloúki* (a group of people). Before the war there were two *bouloúkia*. Now there are five”. He also mentions that today the name of the custom is “Janissaries and Boules”, a name that he does not accept: “The name changed after the ‘70’s”. Some people from Naoussa read it somewhere and they started calling it *Janissaries and Boules*. I disagree”.

⁵ The instrumental ensemble that consists of two musicians, in Greece, is called *zygiá*. The combination of these two instruments, *zournas* and *daouli*, was a very common composition throughout the country of Greece. Nowadays, it can be seen widely in some regions of Macedonia, while in the rest of the country, with a few exceptions, it has extinct, see Anogeianakis (1991, 162-182).

The mask and the main parts of the costume

Everyone involved in the custom recognizes that the mask, or “Prósopos”, as they typically call it, is one of the main characteristics of the Boulas’ appearance. The majority of masks in each bouloúki consists of male figures, hence the moustache. In each bouloúki there is a female figure, the “bride Boula” as it is typically mentioned by the participants, with different mask features which suggest that it is a female face and wears a woman’s costume.

The mask crafter, Michalis Tomtsis, states that the moustache is groomed upwards in order to show pride, while the president of the cultural association “Janissaries and boules”, Aristides Tosios, considers it a sample of aggression and battle mood which derives from the era of the “Turkish Occupation”.

Michalis Tomtsis says that he started taking up the role of “Prósopos” since his children started wearing a “face” themselves in 1988, having as an example an older sample. A few years later, in 1997, he created a workshop with his wife and then with his daughter where he makes uniforms and the mask: “She has created the mould and on the basis of that, I make the face” (Fig. 1).



In his description of the creation of the mask, he mentions that he makes the “Prósopos” with canvas and natural wax. The mask takes the shape of the face and it is painted with light oil paints. The whole procedure is time-consuming and requires several hours of work. The final form of the face is relatively elastic due to the natural wax and it is adapted to each face that wears it (Fig. 2). The mask is only crafted with natural wax, since if paraffin is added it will break. The mask has a pleasant smell, because of the use of natural wax.



The main parts of the costume⁶

- Bétsfes: Men’s underwear consisting of woolen socks, covering the leg in all its length to the ankle.
- Kodéla: White shirt with very wide sleeves, which are embroidered to the edges and the shoulders. The embroidery is handmade.
- Foustanéla: Basic element of the costume. It consists of 400 to 450 leaves in triangular shape (delta). Each one of them starts at about 1.5 cm and reaches about 15 cm. As opposed to the other regions of southern Greece, it does not cover the knees of the masquerader with its length.
- Pislí: Sleeveless waistcoat with two parallel embroidered pieces of fabric sewn on the back.
- Thórakas: It is placed on the front of the chest and there are coins sewn on it. An average thórakas weighs 5 kilos, while a big one weighs 8 kilos. The Yordan, a piece of jewelry for the neck, is placed on the top of it.

⁶ For the description of the costume’s parts, see Agorastos (1979, 13), Baisis (1979, 14-15), Zalios (2007) and Michalis Tomtsis, oral testimony, 2015.

- Zostíres or zonári: A cloth belt that is placed on the waist.
- Seliáchi: Made of leather, it is placed in front of the zonári.
- Maphési: A triangle shaped handkerchief, it is placed on the same area.
- Taráboulo: Fabric which reaches up to four meters and is tied elaborately with the mask.
- Prósopos: The mask covering the face of the dancer. It takes almost two hours to tie the mask with the taráboulo.

The preparation at home

Nowadays, the process of getting dressed begins on Sunday morning. In the case that I have recorded through local research, the house of each dancer is open to the public. Close relatives, as well as a crowd of people from the dancer's neighbourhood go to his house. There, the dancer's mother treats everyone who is attending with sweets and tsipouro. Everyone greets the dancer who is in the process of wearing the costume and they congratulate him and his family.

The dancer is in the living room, the "official" part of the house. The main responsibility of having the dancer dressed is on his father, along with the help of his mother and a neighbor who is close to the family. In the living room where the dancer is getting dressed, there are several relatives and neighbours, as well as young children who watch carefully the process. Each of the close relatives of the dancer places on him a part of the costume until the process of dressing is completed. The dancer says that he is anxious about the process because he wants the custom to be completed successfully. Every new visitor of the house greets the young dancer with a handshake, and in return he responds with a triple jump on one leg. When he jumps the sound caused by the silverware, which has already been placed on his chest, is heard (Fig. 3).



According to Aris Tossios, until 1960-1965, the dancer's preparation and his disguise into a Boula started the night before.⁷ The eldest Yenitsaros, who had participated as a dancer in the past, supervised the whole procedure. Dimitris Papakonstantinou, the eldest still alive who had participated in this custom when it started again in 1954, mentions: "The silverware, the face and the belt were placed on the dancer by different people each. The specialist who would put the mask and the tarávollo on the dancer would arrive last. When those last parts were on we could not get undressed as it happens now". Tossios adds that in the past, the pieces of silverware were sewn one by one and that is why the process would last many hours. He also says that "in this custom, in which only men participated, there was a hierarchy from the oldest to the youngest". Women were spectators of the custom and they helped in getting the man dressed and preparing the meal. After they had finished embroidering the silverware on the chest and big part of the costume was completed, the mask was put on. The silk cloth is almost four meters long. Consequently, it had to be tied in an elaborate way. It was not sewn but tied so that the dancer would not take off the mask until the custom ended. Nowadays, the process of having the dancer dressed is completed when the mask is placed on his face.

⁷ Tossios Aristeides, president of the "Janissaries and Boules" Association, oral testimony, 2015.

The course of the custom

When the process of having the dancers dressed in their houses is completed, the gathering starts.⁸ The bouloúki accompanied by the music of zournás and ntaoúli moves around the town and gathers the dancers. Nowadays, a member of the association's council will set off with music and head to the first dancer's house. The Janissaries do not still dance, they form pairs or triads and go from house to house. In each house the Janissary goes out on the balcony of the house, raises his hands and shakes his body three times in order to greet the people who come to collect him (Fig. 4).



The handshake between the participants of the ceremony occurs with a triple bounce in order for the coins to make noise. After the dancer exits his house, he stands at the door, he kisses his mother's hand, he crosses himself three times, he "greet" the representative of the bouloúki or the leader of the custom. Then, the gathering of all the dancers follows. After the process of the gathering is completed, they head to the lord of 8 Dimitris Papakonstantinou, the oldest person to participate in the custom, describes the process of the march as follows: "After Boula is dressed, (the bouloúki) goes from house to house and collects them. (Boula, who was dressed at home) goes out on the balcony, he greets the people as he should, he goes out, he greets the leader with a specific greeting and they start walking all together, when they all gather, they head to the Town Hall. There, they walk around for a while and the leader goes to the Mayor to ask his permission. Afterwards, they pass from every neighbourhood, each neighbourhood plays his own song, the *patinada* (a parade with music and dance) has its own song. We were dancing in each neighbourhood and each cross-road. We were dancing at the house of every Boula as well. We used to take off the prósofos (the mask) in an area called 'kaména' (burnt). Now they take it off in an area called 'alónia'. Monday was a day that we dedicated to ourselves and to our own houses. The undressed the Boula on Monday night to Tuesday daybreak".

the town who today is the Mayor. There they get the permission to perform the custom. The leader of the group enters the City Hall along with the bride, they get the permission by the town's Mayor and the bride gets the tip, as defined by the custom (Fig. 5).



After they have danced an improvisational dance on specific motifs outside the Town Hall with the leader as the first dancer, the second dance is danced by the Boula (bride) and it is called Makrinitza (Fig. 6). From there they follow a specific course around the old borders of Naoussa. In each triódio (cross-road) the bouloúki stops and dances in circles. Each dancer dances first when they get near his neighborhood. When the course comes to its end, they arrive at the square of the area

named “alonia” and that is where the dancers take off their masks.⁹ That usually happens in the evening, at the sunset. Nowadays, since there are many bouloúkia with many people, it takes place after 6 o'clock in the afternoon. Michalis Tomtsis mentions that the bouloúkia of the “Janissaries and Boules” Association disperse here, in the area called “kamena” at the central square. The other two bouloúkia, “Davelis” and “Leventia”, disperse down to Ai Giorgis church, because most of them are from that area. There, the dances become more cheerful and the elderly also dance dressed with their everyday clothes; they also start singing (up to that point the songs are only instrumental).

On the next day, on Monday, the bouloúkia is gathered at the leader's house. Without a predetermined route and after having removed the mask from their face, they wander around the streets, accompanied by musicians, they pass by the houses of the members of their group and they have fun, in a process which is visibly looser, without a strict ritual. On the following Sunday and on Pure Monday, the same ritual takes place again.

The music (instrumental) accompaniment

Throughout the day, from the beginning of the gathering of the bouloúki to the evening's end, the whole process is carried out with the sound of zournás and daouúli. According to the 34 year-old zournás player, VaggelisPsathas, they start playing from 8:30 a. m. until late in the evening at 9:30 p. m. without a pause. He claims that he has been playing the zournas at Boules since he was 11 years old with his grandfather or his father. He says “it is tiring but if your soul is in the event, in what you do, there is no fatigue. The boys (who are dancing) give me strength. The one gives strength to the other”. This pair of musicians plays pieces of free rhythm which interact with the first dancer's freestyle dancing and which often end up in a strong rhythm, while the dancers respond fully and integrate the tension in their movement. The sound of these two instruments is heard throughout the city, since there are five bouloúkia wandering the streets at the same time. It is clear that the instrumental accompaniment plays an important role in the performance of the custom (Fig. 7).

⁹ Michalis Tomtsis, a mask crafter, mentions the tradition of the sun says that the masks should come off as soon as the sun dawns. Now, you might have a girl who wants to see your face, you might take off the mask when the group stops at psarádika (area name), others might go to a cross-road or to narrow street in order to have a cigarette. Back in the day you could not take off the mask, since it was sewn and could not be removed. An old man once put on the cap and the mask can now be removed. Back in the day, the young men who were smoking, they had to cut holes through the old mask. Today, the mask can be removed without being damaged.



The organisers of the custom and its impact to the town's life today

The event stopped taking place for about 15 years, during the Second World War. Until the 1970's it remained a process which was organised independently, while each neighbourhood took care of its performance and made sure that the appropriate rules of behaviour were followed. For this reason, the bouloúkia were much smaller in number of members.

From the 1970's onwards, the organisation of the custom passes from the neighbourhood (an activity performed by everyday people) to the supervision of the Association “Janissaries and Boules” and later, to the supervision of the “Ntavelis” and “Leventia” Associations. According to the description of the association in the official website of the Municipi-

pality of Naoussa, the Association “Boules and Janissaries” is responsible for the “protection and promotion of the immaterial cultural heritage of Naoussa and especially for teaching the dances and the custom of Naoussa, the traditional dances, songs and local history”.¹⁰ There are similar descriptions for the other two associations who have their own bouloúkia.

The president of the association, Aristides Tosios, says that the custom has deep roots and is separate from the Carnival, because during the Carnival period spontaneity and disguises are the dominant elements of the events, while this particular custom has a strict ritual and it is governed by specific codes of behaviour, concerning “the dancing, the way the janissary and the boula are constructed”. These are differences that differentiate it from the rest of the activities. He also constantly mentions several elements of the custom, which he attributes to the Greek Antiquity, as well as to the struggle of the Greeks for national independence during the period of the Ottoman Empire: “Today, the custom is considered to have arrived to us by the rebel fighters of that period, kléptes and armatoloi. There are two basic elements. The male element is the Janissary, who could also be found as Boula, which means the rebellious spirit expressed by bravery, with some basic elements on the costume. And the female element, the bride, otherwise mentioned as Boula. The prósofos has a moustache pointing upwards, which is ready for war. The custom also represents something else. It is a matter of national consciousness and identity. No slavophones are involved”. He considers that the association maintains the “authentic form” of the custom and he is against its “commercialization”. That is why the vice-president of the association, Lazaros Mpiliouris, states that “during the performance of the custom, the visitors are not allowed to enter the bouloúki”. The organisation of the custom, however, takes place simultaneously and in communication with the municipal authorities of the town, who support the process in every possible manner.

The custom of Boules during the carnival constitutes without a doubt a benchmark for the inhabitants of the wider area of Naoussa. This custom is constantly mentioned on mass media, especially over the last two decades, and it is presented as an alternative event during the carnival, compared to other carnival events taking place at the same time in Greece. Over the past few years, a number of specials have been made on television programs, as well as documentaries dedicated to the custom. Moreover, a lot of relevant journal articles have appeared in the Panhellenic press, in columns of cultural and travel content.

¹⁰ <http://www.naoussa.gr/city/culture/associations/index.htm> admission in 25.09.2018

This publicity has an impact on the celebration of the custom. Thousands of visitors both from the surrounding area and from different parts of the country follow the bouloúkia in the town's streets. The inhabitants/informants constantly promote the custom as the offspring of the Greek revolution against the Ottomans and more often than not trace it back to corresponding rituals of the Greek antiquity.

The high number of visitors during the custom celebration is a result of its continuous promotion by the organisers themselves. The organizers' intention is to attract more and more people that will follow the process.¹¹ From this derives the effort of each participating association to present the largest group (bouloúki) that will “parade” on the streets.

The conversion of the process into a commercial “product” that ought to have specific characteristics such as the ones visitors expect to see, differentiates the performance of a process from its traditional purpose to a re-performance, a spectacle which must be performed not only based on the participants themselves, but also on the visitors/tourists who have come to see what they are already aware of.¹² On the other hand, the participants themselves experience the process front of hundreds of amateur filmmakers who are constantly interfering with the dance ritual in order to take photographs or to videotape at all costs. In other cases, during the parade and especially in the central square of the town, the crowd gets mixed with the dancers' group (Fig. 8).



¹¹ For the “economic, political and ideological” aspects of the folklore festivals, see Finnegan (1992, 124).

¹² The matters of folklore and tradition are extensively examined by Kavouras (2010, 29-88) On the matter of the management of cultural heritage, he cites the following interesting opinion: “Societies that fight for their cultural independence from the modern hegemony, by emancipating themselves ideologically, they turn into markets of cultural distinctness, thus proving a basic imperialistic circumstance of capitalism” Kavouras (2010, 36).

Conclusions

The custom of “Boules” or “Janissaries and Boules” is a very special and typical ritual that takes place in the small town of Naoussa in the pre-carnival period. The origins of our custom are unknown, its existence is witnessed in the late 19th century. The custom was interrupted for about 15 years, during the Second World War, until 1954 when it started to take place again. Since the early 1970s, cultural associations have been set up in order to undertake fully the organization of this custom. In the last decades, it has been widely promoted, resulting to the high increase of the number of visitors in the area during the period of the custom’s performance.

The transition of the event from a self-organized local ritual to an organized and fully controlled process, results into changes in the evolutionary process of the custom. These changes stem from the need to “save” it, “project” and “promote” it, as mentioned by the new entities involved. The number of the participants in the bouloúkia has doubled. Dancing in the streets of the town has now taken the form of a choreography which is taught to the members of the associations throughout the year. The promotion of the custom forces it to comply with the norms and rules of a spectacle, which ought to be performed as advertised to the visitors.

On the other hand, the compliance with the strict ritual that governs the process of the custom is not contradictory with the experience of the young men themselves and of their close relatives who participate actively in the custom. From the moment of the dressing process of Boula at home, the participant focuses exclusively on this role, undistracted from anything else. After all, they consider themselves part of the “continuation” of a “tradition” intertwined with the history and the present of their land.

Figures

Fig. 1: The making of the mask.

Fig. 2: The “prósopos” of boula.

Fig. 3: The process of dressing the boula at home.

Fig. 4: The encounter with the bouloúki (mob of people).

Fig. 5: The leader of the bouloúki and the bride boula take the Mayor’s permission for the execution of the custom.

Fig. 6: The dance outside the Town Hall.

Fig. 7: The instrumental accompaniment. A duet (zygiá) ofournás and ntaóúli.

Fig. 8: The crowd gets involved with the dancing in the streets.

Pictures: Record of L. Efthymiou, 5-6/3/2015.

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Λαμπρος Εφθymiου

Науске Буле у северној Грчкој: карневалски ритуал, његова историјска еволуција у 20. веку и његова улога у модерном друштвеном и културном животу града

У древној Грчкој, употреба маске била је уобичајена у позоришту (у трагедијама, сатиричним комадима и комедијама) и потиче од обожавања бога Диониса. Током наредних векова, многобројни извори и докази указују на то да су маске и специјална прерушавања задржала свој значај у церемонијама и ритуалима широм грчке територије. Неколико таквих ритуала се јавља током Месопусне недеље (грч. Αποκριές [Αποκριες], тј. карневал), у периоду непосредно пред почетак Великог четрдесетодневног поста, који предходи Васкрсу. Овај пост је најзначајнији у Источној православној цркви.

Један такав обичај, Буле(с), одржава се сваке године у Науси, у северозападној Грчкој, током два викенда, између почетка периода пред пост и Чистог понедељка. Учесници су искључиво младићи обучени у традиционалне ношње и са маскама под називом Лице. Већина учесника носи традиционалне мушке ношње и глуми Јаничаре, док један човек носи женски костим и глуми Булу. Током целог дана, Јаничари и Буле лутају улицама града, плешући уз звуке живе музике. Сви становници града учествују у обичају. Међутим, у протеклих неколико година, хиљаде посетилаца се окупљало у Науси да гледа прославу. Овај раст популарности отворио је пут еволуцији обичаја Буле(с). У овом раду, покушано је да се испита утицај нових околности, као и улога коју овај обичај има у савременом друштвеном и културном животу града и шире регије.

Кључне речи: Буле, Јаничари, Науса, Просопос, карневал, Западна Македонија.