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Collective identity and dance in modern urban Greece

Abstract : The aim of this study is to trace the way some cultural groups demonstrate their identity through dance in the contemporary urban society. The survey follows revelry with folk music, singing and dancing organized by a local cultural troupe on the occasion of a feast day. The collection of the ethnographic data relied on long standing observation and the video recording of the revelries between 2000 and 2005. Further information was gathered with the means of a closed questionnaire and open question interviews. In the process of the material two theories were mainly employed: the performance theory and the theory of collective identity in postmodern culture. To sum up, we would say that dance as presented on the feast day reflects the local "multicultural" society's characteristics. It retains its dynamic with its entity, function and content to be composed of agricultural and urban features. Dance continues to exist since it has the potential to adjust to each time social, economic and historical circumstances.

Key words: traditional dance, collective and cultural identity, cultural troupes

Introduction

The night has fallen on 25 July 2000 and we head for Saint Paraskevi, a district of Veria that lends its name to the local church. The next day would be the Saint's feast day. Now, we are in the church yard and soon the icon's procession will be over. Hurried festival participants stride to the nearby open – air little theater where the festivities will start any time now. Folk dancing groups across the country take part one after the other. The time is nearly 11, and some grumble the show is too long: "We've seen much of them, haven't we?" or "Aren't we supposed to dance as well?" His age? More than 65. Needless to say he wasn't the only one that kept complaining. A woman near him murmurs in Pontic. Some young men confront the festival's organizer: "It's time we started dancing". Less than five minutes later the presenter gives the green-light for all to join in.

New musicians appear on stage, a lyre-player, the other holding a tabor. Pontic tunes fill the air. The first dance is called "Omal", and inspires the long-waiting merry-makers, especially those in the front rows, to give up their seats and dance to the music. All in a circle. As if driven by a force, the older take the lead and the younger follows. Next tunes are "Lachana", "Tic", and "Kotsari" as more and more people stream into the circle. From the way they move and dance it is easy to distinguish who are Pontic and who aren't.

In a while, a new round of instrument players emerges. Clarinetists, trumpeters and a tabourer who can't wait to accompany themes from Macedonia, Thrace and Epirus. Peoples are still gathering in the place. The seniors prefer dances they identify more with but the less aged fail to make any distinction. While dancing elderly women cautiously try to steer clear of females who don't bother their position in the cycle. In fact, they do their best to squeeze among gentlemen. Drops of sweat run down the faces of some who take a breath. Others stop into the cycle. A young lady dares to take the lead in the dance only to provoke poignant remarks such as. "Well, just think she is in marriageable age and dances like that, I'd feel ashamed in her shoes while she was dancing Tsamiko". Her wrongdoing was that she raised her legs a little too high and sat too deep by female standards.

The scenes described above are part of the ethnographic material which was accumulated between 2000 and 2005 during the feast day of Aghia Paraskevi, the patron saint of the district that has the same name. Every year the local troupe holds a festival in the yard of the church and invites folk dancing groups from all over Greece to participate the festivities along with the locals. People's attendance is high and marked with cheerful festival goers. The assortment consists of any social class, age or gender. They all dance in one and only circle.

Veria is the capital city of the prefecture of Imathia, a part of the Greek region of Macedonia. The district of Aghia Paraskevi was first inhabited by refugees from Asia Minor and Pontus at the turn of the last century. Until then the area had been uninhabited and the recreation ground of the time was considered rural area by the citizens of Veria. There was a boost to housing development of the district from the 70's on thanks to populations of the country who came here and settled in. Those were people from nearby villages (Daskio, Rizomata), towns such as Kozani, Grevena and Kilkis and the regions of Epirus, Thrace and the Peloponnese.

The aim of the research was to study the way in which cultural groups reveal their identity through dancing in the modern urban environment. It will be accomplished by looking into the social and cultural background, the scene where revelries and dances occur during the feast day of the patron Saint (Alexakis, 1992).

Methodology

In order to gather the ethnographic material we used long-lasting observation and we videoed the festival 2000 – 2005. Questionnaire and open interviews added to the data.

The questionnaire included questions regarding demographic features of the locals such as gender, age, origin cultural identity, time of residence and finally any memberships of troupes of the district.

For the process of the ethnographic material we used the performance theory in combination with the concept of collective identities in modern society.

Theoretical framework

Performance theory and collective identity

The material we collected led us to adopt the performance theory (Turner, 1987; Schechner, 2003) combined with collective identity theory (Erikson, 1974) so that we would be able to analyze and interpret the way through which individuals realize their collective – social identities during dancing activities in an urban environment.

The performance theory's outlook on society embraces performance analysis terms, based on a fundamental assumption: that society would be considered the stage on which individuals seem to act a wide range of roles. It is the audience's approval or contempt that will decide whether the roles were

successful or not. The difference between the viewpoint of social life as a kind of theatre and the theatre itself is that in the theatre the relation between actor and audience always remains consistent unlike real life situation where the roles change constantly and in many fashions.

The performance theory in this research is combined with the collective identity theory in the contemporary world.

When we refer to collective identities we seemingly mean a group. The formation of the collective identity of those who make up a group is shaped not only from the group members and what they think of themselves- but also from the others- and their attitude towards them (Kellner, 1992). Kroger (1996) defines the identity as the balance between the person's view of themselves and how the others view it.

The collective identity of a group is formed over common experiences they go through as well as the global climate of the social situation that defines individual and joint activities. The sense of togetherness of a group depends on social coherence. The greater the latter the more they associate with one another. Cultural features affect, to a great extent, social coherence, since culture is the benchmark of social identities and expose who we are (Tsaousis, 1978).

Culture, as a framework of live and memories, functions in three dimensions: Recognition, integration, participation. The members of a team recognize each other, integrate into the society and obtain their social identity through culture (Tsaousis, 1978). Cultural traits, among them dance, demonstrate the cultural identity and at the same time determine it (Koutsouba, 1999).

Cultural identity changes with time. It is affected, moulded and altered by common experiences, expectations and collective memories of the society (Hall, 1996). As a result, the type of the society into which an individual is integrated plays a significant role in the form of their identities.

In traditional communities, local identity appears strong due to geographical isolation, the particular historical background and local customs. In this case, social etiquette is set and any factors that could possibly affect it are limited (Vergeti, 1994). In the fast – moving world we notice considerable decline of the existent patterns. Therefore the formation of identity becomes more complicated and occurs at a personal level only.

Frequent modifications to identity and the cultural characteristics of others reveal the dynamic that identity has. Any identity alteration is the way out of crisis and the start of another to the extent that the new identity prevails and functions as the latest foundation on which social coherence is intended to flourish (Vergeti, 1994).

The reality is different in contemporary cultures. Social trends are profoundly diverse and fluid. Consequently, identities seem complex and hard to define. What is more, state integration plans limit further individual differentiation making identity distinction problematic (Vrizas, 2005).

As far as the modern Greek society is concerned, the increasing social diversity as well as the fact that Greeks participate in various activities, impede a clear and cohesive identity which in turn leads to a crisis at both personal and public level (Intzesiloglou, 2000).

Festival and collective identity

The festival's organization itself sets the goal of our research. On one hand there is the tradition (music, song and dances) that contrasts with the present and on the other hand exploration of the past seen from today. As tradition we mean the culture that developed and thrived in the rural areas where the most inhabitants came from.

In this phase it is essential to point out that we look into tradition away from the place it was born and existed as a reference point of people's cultural identity. Locals' moves to other places and the time passed make memory an important decisive factor of tradition. The time of memory (Kyriakidou-Nestoros, 1993) and its mechanisms (Skouteri-Didaskalou, 1996) are main causes for the creation of new relationships between rural and urban populations, tradition-past and modernism-present.

The time factor is by far the most problematic and at the same times the most significant of the meaning of a festival, especially when it is held under modern conditions. The celebration is a temporary pause of time and intends to distract people from their daily routines. It is also the place of memories and the field where the future of the community is planned. The festival involves an exceptional perception of a "non-time" period that comprises the past, present and future (Stoeltje, 1992).

It provides fertile ground for collective memory and the memory of collectiveness instills a sense of togetherness into the participants. Furthermore, the festivities demonstrate and underscore the prevalence of the community as a whole. Common food, singing and dancing unite the festival goers and create symbolically a community of feelings and ideas (Cohen, 1985).

Findings – Conclusions

The study of modern cultural events, like festivals, requires that we take seriously into consideration the time-factor and its aspects. And this is because festivals are inextricably connected with rural societies and the past-regardless of the fact that today they are held in an urban environment- and cause an extraordinary ephemeral time diversion.

In this case the religious celebration is the occasion for the organization of the festival, an institution that unites and revives the identity of the community.

And the question that arises is: Whose past? That of Asia Minor? Or perhaps populations from Kozani, Grevena and the Peloponnesse? Or even young generation born and grown up in the district? But this is what they have in common since they share the same place and everyday experiences. What associates them with the past is the place of origin and their parents' accounts.

Music, singing and dancing are the main features of festival. Through the music and the songs the merry – makers are trying to return to the past and its values in a process that brings them closer to each other. However, if we notice the songs and the dances they choose, the way in which they are holding together, the position of the woman in the circle and how she dances, the role of the musicians and their coordination with the dancers, we will discover that the attempting revival of collective spirit is attained under modern conditions, that is the current social organisation and the position of a person in a group. The festival is the outcome of the present financial and social situation and therefore reflects it.

Only the elderly are still resisting, trying to live up to traditional models. This happens because their bodies refuse to change techniques they already know (Mauss, 1950) from customs – "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1972). Another reason might be that their mentality and habits change at a slower pace than social and economic elements (Meraklis, 1994)

Some may wonder what is the bond of the today festival with tradition and to what extent it remains genuine. Others would say, somehow thoughtlessly, there is no connection at all and would be keen to label it as out of fashion, fixed and manipulated (Skouteri-Didaskalou, 1996). We "yes there is connection indeed although we have to admit not as faithful". And how would it be possible for the festival of the present to be completely faithful to it when tradition re-emerges to cover the needs of modern times? What is more, what is the dynamic of tradition? Shouldn't it be to reinterpret the historical past as it is perceived in the present and place it onto the modern world? According to Noyes and Abrahams (1999) such activities do not oppose to tradition and its authenticity; on the contrary, they produce tradition and contribute to maintenance of team spirit in future, invoking their origin which is common.

Some persistent may ask: how is it possible for people who learnt dances at their local troupes, which means out of the tradition procedure, to dance in a traditional fashion? Or while dancing tunes from other regions and other ethnic groups doesn't it lead to levelling of Greek folk dances? Having said that, they tend to overlook some facts in modern Greece. To begin with, it is very unlikely to find primary reproduction of the dancing material since it occurs in traditional communities only and not in modern ones where what

happens is secondary process of teaching based on the triangle teacher-material-student (Serbezis, 1991; Serbezis & Goulimaris, 2001). Greek society has long ceased, since 50's, to belong to traditional world. Another matter that some fail to take into account is that endogamy, a significant factor for the perpetuation of traditional communities, has vanished. Exogamy, on the other hand, favours the integration of close communities into larger groups and results in the homogenization of population. That in turn marks the loss of importance ethnic groups once had. Third and most important, in our view, is that they forget people's emotional drive to join a team. And the young who were born in Veria's urban environment feel the need to put down roots since they are sometimes treated as strangers by natives. Unfortunately it wouldn't be otherwise when the not aged have little connection with the district.

All in all, we would say that dance as presented in the festival of this study gives us the opportunity to observe the modern multicultural community with its characteristics. Dance retains even today its dynamic and its form, function and content are made up of a rural and urban features. Dance continues to exist having the potential as a social event to adjust to each time social, financial and historical circumstances.

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Kolektivni identitet i igra u savremenoj urbanoj Grčkoj

Cilj ovog rada je da prati na koji način neke kulturne grupe demonstriraju svoj identitet kroz igru u savremenom urbanom društvu. Posmatrana je jedna terevenka kroz narodnu muziku, pesme i igru, što je organizovala lokalna trupa u toku jednog festivala. Dugotrajnim posmatranjem i uz upotrebu video zapisa sakupljena je etnografska građa u periodu od 2000. do 2005. godine. Dalje informacije dobijene su uz upotrebu zatvorenog intervjua i otvorenih pitanja kroz razgovor. Studija je analizirana uz pomoć dve glavne teorije: teorije performansa teorije identiteta u postmodernoj kulturi. Ukratko, rekli bismo da igre koje se igraju tokom festivala predstavljaju izraz "multikulturalnih" karakteristika lokalne zajednice. Dinamika, funkcija i sadržaj sastoje se iz mešanih poljoprivrednih i urbanih elemenata. Budući da ima potencijal da se prilagođava vremenu i društvenim, ekonomskim i istorijskim okolnostima, igra nastavlja da postoji i traje.

Ključne reči: tradicionalna igra, kolektivni i kulturni identitet, kulturne grupe

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Identité collective et danse dans la Grèce urbaine
contemporaine

L'objectif de ce travail est de suivre de quelle manière certains groupes culturels manifestent leur identité dans la société urbaine contemporaine à travers la danse. Une beuverie accompagnée de musique folklorique, de chansons et de danses, organisée par la troupe locale au cours d'un festival, a été observée. Par une observation durable à l'aide d'enregistrements vidéo, les matériaux ethnographiques ont été recueillis dans la période entre 2000 et 2005. Des informations complémentaires ont été obtenues grâce à des interviews structurées et des questions ouvertes posées dans des entretiens. Cette étude s'appuie sur deux théories principales: la théorie de la performance et la théorie de l'identité dans la culture post-moderne. En bref, on peut dire que les danses exécutées au cours du festival représentent l'expression des caractéristiques "multiculturelles" de la communauté locale. Leur dynamique, leur fonction et leur contenu contiennent des éléments agraires et urbains mêlés. Etant donné qu'elle dispose d'un potentiel nécessaire pour s'adapter à l'époque et aux circonstances sociales, économiques et historiques, la danse continue à exister et à durer.

Mots-clés: Identité collective, la danse, la théorie de la performance, la théorie de l'identité dans la culture post-moderne, Grèce urbaine contemporaine