

RELIGIOUS FEAST AND DANCE:
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION-RECONSTRUCTION AND SYMBOLIC
REBIRTH OF THE COMMUNITY AT MILIA (COSTANA)
IN THESPROTIA OF EPIRUS-GREECE

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The parameters of the religious feast and dance, contributing to the social and symbolic construction and regeneration of the community of Milia (former Costana) in Thesprotia, Greece, are examined and analysed, according to the methods of social-anthropology. These events take place during the celebration of the Birth of the Virgin on September 8th in the namesake village church bearing also the name of Labovistra. The religious feast and the dance are studied in comparison with similar manifestations of the community in other periods of the year such as Easter and Carnival. The community of Milia developed out of a cluster of hamlets and huts of the nearby village of Lia, some 150 years ago. So the study of the Labovistra rituals of the religious feast and the communal dance contributes to our understanding of the process of this development.

Introduction

The village of Milia (former Costana) in Mourgana, in the district of Philiates, Thesprotia, is the most characteristic example of the formation of a local community from scattered herdsmen's huts (*achouria* or *katounes*). I presented my earlier study of the social and administrative history of the community, which goes back at least 150 years, at the IV Development Conference for Epirus, held in Metsovo in October 2004 (Alexakis 2007). Here I shall simply mention briefly that the formation of the local community is linked with the corresponding development of the local cult, which, as I shall show, was not one and the same throughout this period of a century and a half. Specifically, the cult revolved initially and primarily around the family patron saints, and much later came to be focused on the community cult of the Virgin Lambovistra (Birth of the Virgin), reference point of which is the homonymous church at the centre of the village, which celebrates its feast day on 8 September.

Tradition has it that the former name of the village, Costana, derives from the sobriquet of the widow of a freedom-fighter named Costas. In 1959 the Prefecture of Thesprotia renamed it Milia, because the name Costana was considered to be of foreign origin and because the village had many apple trees (Gr. *milies*). However,

the villagers were far from pleased with this renaming (Ioannidis 1963, p. 4). Since 1999 Milia has belonged to the wider Municipality of Philiates, as a municipal district with its own president.

Before proceeding to the subject in hand, I consider it essential to present some data on the geography and the economy of the village. Milia lies at the foot of the Mourgana mountain range, which runs along the Greek-Albanian border. In its heyday the village had a population of around 350, but for economic reasons this has dwindled to such a degree that the community is in danger of disappearing. Today there are no more than 30-35 permanent residents.

The mixed-farming economy of the village was small-scale and anything but profitable. It was exclusively the concern of the womenfolk, who remained in the village continuously, whereas the men emigrated. In days gone by the village had 6,000-7,000 head of livestock. Today, each family has a few animals, 30-50, and some small plots of land, 0.5-1.0 ha., on which they grow mainly maize. So, the problem of subsistence was the basic reason for the male villagers' emigration.

Emigrants plied the trades of tinsmith, coppersmith, cooper and baker, settling in the large urban centres. Coppersmiths were active mainly in Larisa, Volos and other towns and villages in Thessaly, such as Tyrnavos, Farsala, Agia, etc. Coopers worked primarily in Central Greece and the Peloponnese, while bakers, in any case a more recent occupation, gravitated to Athens.

It is thus apparent that Milia is a village of emigrants. The men came back to the village in winter and left in spring, which means that they were absent for most of the year. Usually they departed after Shrove Monday and returned before the feast of St Demetrios (26 October). In recent years, however, emigration has assumed other dimensions as the women and children left with the men, and consequently whole families have settled outside the village.

It should be noted that these Epirotes also settled in countries abroad, particularly South Africa, where they were employed in various jobs. Villagers from Milia founded brotherhoods in Larisa, Athens and South Africa.

The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in summer 1982 and summer 2002. The material is complemented by published studies as well as by unpublished ethnographic/folklore collections.

Description of the religious feast and the dance, according to the ethnographic diary

First I shall describe the religious feast (*panigyri* in the local idiom) and the dance on the basis of the ethnographic diary. Then I shall proceed to their analysis and interpretation, starting from the description as well as from material in two video films and ethnographic data collected in the field (interviews, observation, etc.).

Saturday 7 September 2002 (eve before the feast).

I went out at 6 o'clock [early evening]. I went down to the restaurant of the hostel. A couple of women had a cauldron [in front of them] and were cooking. One was the wife of Takis Sbitas. She said they were making *yachni*—meat—rice, for the villagers to eat when they gathered after vespers. So, *Barba* Spyros [Sorogas] was not well informed. The woman said that they had not told him on purpose, as a surprise! I took photographs and I also recorded a little on the [video] camera.

At 7 o'clock the priest arrived from another village. Vespers lasted no longer than 30 minutes. The priest announced that the church had bought a ciborium and a myrrh casket (worth about 300,000 drachmas), as well as a set of vestments for the officiating priest. (This was a donation from Sotiris Genes.) About 20 people attended vespers, half were men and half were women.

In the meanwhile the food was ready. Some 25 individuals sat at two long tables. Food: beef with rice, *yachni*, tomato and cucumber salad, beer, wine. They also sang some songs. They were not exactly polyphonic. I'd say rather they were antiphonic. The men on the one side and the women repeated from the other side. (One woman, the wife of T. S., recited a Cretan *mantinada* [rhyming couplet] of mocking-sexual content. It seems she had been told it by the wife of Ch. M., who originates from Crete.)

This event was essentially purely communal, even though not everyone had come. E.g. absent were the Kremmydis family, Spyros Lontos and his wife, Photis Papazisis, Andromachi and some others, such as Thomas Sbitas, who had gone to a wedding in Perdika. But he'll be there tomorrow. Also missing were Thomas Poulos, whereas his sister was there with Angelos. They sat at random and mixed up. After all, as they said, almost all were relatives.

Sunday 8 September 2002 (Feast of the Birth of the Virgin)

I got up at 7:30. Preparation. By 8 o'clock the priest had already begun the mass. The psalms could be heard. At 8:15 the president of the brotherhood in Athens, Christos Bourdoukis, came and called me to go to the hostel of the brotherhood (the brotherhood had made [repaired] it), which was the old school, to drink a cup of coffee.

At 9 o'clock I set out for the church. Prior to that I had passed by the graveyard to see whether they had lit the lamps or candles. There were indeed some people there, such as Tasia Chinou from Glousta. She told me her folks were buried here, her mother. There was also a member of the Pilonis family, married (son-in-law) in Glousta. Inside the ossuary, in a candelabrum, low with earth, about 15 burning candles, just like in the ossuary at Mantamados [Lesbos] at the *panigyri* (sacrifice) of the Taxiarch.¹

¹ At the moment of the sacrifice of the bull, at the feast of the Taxiarch which is held on the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearing Women, the women go to the ossuary and light candles in the candelabrum (Alexakis 2001c:p. 333 and fig. no. 29).

In church, at around 9:15, some 40 persons. The church filled up towards the end of mass, at 10 o'clock. I met Apostolis Poulos, the teacher, as well as Thomas Sorogas.

By 11 o'clock a lot of people had gathered. The huge space below the hostel was full. There must have been about 200 persons. First the priest performed the blessing (*hagiasmos*) and then the people filed past and venerated the icon of the Birth of the Virgin and put money on a tray. It was perhaps for the priest. (Subsequently the icon was carried round by the priest once again and the people threw money into a basket.)

Food: *tzatziki* (yoghurt, cucumber and garlic dip), feta cheese, pies, local, cucumber and tomato salad, beef in tomato sauce with rice, beers, coca colas. They bought the drinks. They sat in kin groups (bilaterally). I sat with the Poulos, Sbitas families. That is, together with Apostolos Poulos. When I suggested we all sit together: Thomas Sorogas, Christos Bourdoukis, Apostolos Poulos. He said I ought to sit with the kin group. In the end I sat there. There was Thomas Poulos, Christos Poulos, Thomas's wife and her first cousin (male), who lives in Larisa, and a few others. Thomaina's (i.e. Thomas's wife) cousin was, as Apostolos told me, one of the last tinsmiths in Larisa and television stations had interviewed him repeatedly. When he retires, they are thinking about making his workshop into a museum.

The band was from Igoumenitsa and, as someone told me, the musicians are not gypsies. They began to dance after one o'clock. Men, women and children mixed up in the circle. There were no more than 25 persons [each time in the dance]. Usually they were less. Slow Epirot dances. Also the fast *Arvanitovlachiko*. I was surprised that they danced and sang the son "*Sto Vasiliko, t'omorpho chorio*" as well as "*Kontoula lemonia Vissaniotissa*".

There were lots of people from the surrounding villages. The Mayor of Philiates, Koliouisis, had come too, and the two new candidates, Dalas and Doumazos. All of them addressed the gathering, as did the president of the brotherhood. Apostolis told me that there were lots of people because it is also a pre-election period and everyone wants to be seen. Minor altercations between the president of the brotherhood and the retiring mayor, over the inauguration of the hostel. Kolelis was there too. (Takis Sbitas, who is a church commissioner, was involved in everything. Indeed, I learnt that he will be a candidate for president of the community, while Vangelis Sorogas will seek election to the council of the prefecture.)

The dance lasted until 3:15. After that only the villagers of Costana danced, until 4:15. People had already left. The dance took place under the hostel, which is a closed space used for social gatherings. Thomas Sorogas told me that the *panigyri* had changed and was more like the dances held by the brotherhood. In the old days it took place beneath the walnut trees. I note that in the past the graveyard was in front of the church and the dances also took place in front of the church. That means at Easter and Carnival, because there were no regular village *panigyria*

in the old days. I took many photographs, made sound recordings and shot one and half hours of video film.

Retrospection and synchronic analysis

In the description of the *panigyri* and the dance of 8 September 2002 there are many elements that are traditional, as well as elements that are innovative. I shall begin with the latter, taking into account also the recording of the *panigyri* and the dance on video: a) The dance took place in a large but closed space, as in urban centres. This was not because it was rainy weather, but because the *panigyri* has lost many of its earlier elements. I mention in this respect that the morning *panigyri* at Frastana (Kato Meropi), Pogoni, likewise takes place in the large hall of the brotherhood in the village. In any case, as I have said, the villagers declare a more general influence from Pogoni on the *panigyri* (cauldrons of food, collection of money thrown in the basket, some songs, certain dances, etc.² b) The second innovative element is that at this dance none of the women wore traditional “*tsamiki*” costume. The traditional costumes had been abandoned some time ago. Ioannidis tells us that in 1963 the local *tsamiki* costume barely survived. c) Another innovative element is that unmarried persons as well as children, boys and girls, joined hands in the dance, without any order by age or family status.³

The traditional elements, which moreover constitute the framework of the *panigyri*, were the two collections of money for the icon (church, priest) and for the community (carrying round of the basket), the visit to the graveyard and the

² The repertoire of songs was very rich and not exclusively Epirot. It seems that there is influence not only from neighbouring Pogoni but also from the places where the villagers work (Central Greece, Peloponnese, Thessaly). I mention a number of songs that were heard in order in the dance: 1) *Itia, itia moschoitia*; 2) *Den boro, mana, den boro*; 3) The fast *Arvanitovlachiko* (a kind of *Chasaposerviko*); 4) *Eseis paidia kleftopoula, paidia tis Samarinas*; 5) *Pera apo ton Kalama stis Mourganas ta choria*; 6) *Ti na kano Chaido mou*; 7) *Mou paringeile to aidoni*; 8) *Ena Savvato vradi, mia Kyriaki proi*; 9) *Aspro triantaphyllo krato*; 10) *Yanni mou, Yannaki mou*; 11) *Min me koitas sta matia*; 12) *Pano se ypsili rachola*; 13) *Mori Kontoula lemonia*; 14) *Esy pou serneis to choro*; 15) *Papas varej ta simantra*; 16) *Sto Vasiliko to omorpho chorio*. Several new folk (demotic) songs were heard too and many Epirot songs. They sang a lot of Epirot songs too at the communal meal yesterday evening, such as a) *Touto to kalokairaki*, b) *Epses me tin astrophengia*, etc. At the morning *panigyri*, however, frequently they played only instrumental music in between, mainly on the clarinet (clarino). The dance ended as it had opened, with the lament, and with a polyphonic/antiphonic song, but sung only by two persons with a microphone. One villager from Costana and the singer with the band. The instruments played were the clarinet, electric guitar, harmonium and tambourine. The dancers, men and women, held hands. They did not link arms at all, as they do in Pogoni, nor did they hold by the shoulder, as in other regions (Thrace and elsewhere). The dance circle, moreover, always moved clockwise.

³ Specifically, the dance started with five or six men, while very often elderly women, as well as younger ones, some holding a kerchief, joined the beginning of the circle. Nonetheless, the money was always thrown by men.

lighting of candles, the communal meal provided at the expenses of the community and the organizers. This last case of the communal meal, although a more recent custom at Milia, was traditionally habitual in many villages in the region. At Milia, in the old days, food was eaten in the houses at family feasts, Carnival and Easter. Also, the participation of visitors from neighbouring villages, such as Glousta (Kephalochori), Vortopia (Anavryto), etc., which shows the hetero-ceremonial character of the *panigyria* in the region's villages (Baumann 1992; Alexakis 2001b, p. 241, n. 23). Traditional too was the fact that the dance was held in a sacred place, beside the church and the later graveyard, and exactly above the space of the earlier graveyard. This practice harks back to early magical-religious symbolisms of the *panigyri* and the dance, as we shall see below. After all, rituals generally can be considered as configurations of symbols, a kind of "score" in which the symbols are the notes (cf. Turner 1967, p. 48). Here, *inter alia*, the continuity of the custom in the specific place is related also to the inertia of the space. Another traditional element, as recorded in the video film, is the formation of the spiral (coiled snake or snail, in the local conception) in the dance, which was open however and only in two lines (circles), as just a few persons were dancing each time. The likening of the dance to a snake is a more general concept in Greece. Indeed, in Thesprotia it is mentioned also in the songs, in which the dance is not only likened to a slow snake but to a snake approaching to seize its prey the partridge (metaphorically a beautiful young woman or a bride) (Alexakis 2001d, p. 85. Cf. also Karras 1996, where he likens the *Tsakoniko* dance to a serpent/dragon).

It has been observed already from the study of contemporary *panigyria* in Epirus, as well as in the rest of Greece, that these have now lost their magical-religious ramifications, while there has been a parallel reinforcing of their social symbolism, which is intended to secure the cohesion of the community through the gathering, meeting and entertainment of people who live far away as a consequence of emigration. We could say that the *panigyri* has been secularized. That is, the *panigyri*, whether a family celebration or a village one, is now a "meeting of people", a symbolic construction and reconstruction of the community. This is absolutely true of the feast of the Lambovistra (Birth of the Virgin) at Milia in Mourgana, which reinforces both the cohesion of the community and the sense of commonly "belonging", although there are no intra-community quarrels in the village, nor have there been in the past, excepting the competition over "leadership of the community", which in any case disappeared after the emigration of the males to such a degree that there is now a problem of succession of community leaders (Ioannidis 1964, p. 9).

However, this particular village *panigyri* in the form I have described is not very old. Essentially it dates from after 1950, that is, after the end of the Greek Civil War. According to informants, the villagers essentially imitated what took place in neighbouring Pogoni and they too began to bring out cauldrons of food. In earlier days, as I have said, the *panigyria* in the village were family affairs. Each

family in Milia venerated a guardian saint, whose icon was placed in the house icon shrine, and organized a family feast in his honour. These celebrations were held in wintertime, when the emigrants were back in the village (St Demetrios, St Athanasios, St Spyridon, and others).⁴ At these feasts the priest elevated the blessed bread and the celebrants slaughtered an animal. Then all the kin groups made reciprocal visits, relatives and friends congregated, ate, drank, made merry, sung and danced. This kind of family *panigyri* of course foresaw the cohesion of the family group. Family feasts versus village *panigyri* also denoted a loose community consciousness, which was to be reinforced in the post-war period. This is apparent from the way in which the members of the community sat in kin groups at the communal meal in 2002, as well by the dispersed houses at considerable distance from each other and the remote clusters of houses in the village. *Panigyria* in which there was more mass participation were held in rural chapels, such as St Marina, St Paraskevi and others.

So, how was community cohesion expressed in earlier days? Before going further, however, I should like to become more specific. Which community? Because, at the beginning, the community was continuously doubted by the kinship groups (Alexakis 2007). As I have said, the formation of this village as a local community has passed through various stages. Initially the village, or more exactly the family settlements, was subject to the neighbouring village of Lia. For this reason the village was called Kalyvia (*i.e.* huts). Lia was where people attended church and buried their dead. However, at some moment in the process of forming and consolidating the consciousness of the local community, it was decided not to do so any more. First the earliest church was built, between 1850 and 1876, low and close the river, below the hill (*diaracho*) on which the present church stands. The location of the graveyard in this period is not known. Despite my repeated questioning, the older informants did not mention a graveyard near the first church. This church was not used for long, because it was washed away by the river. There are various traditions surrounding this event and the rescue of the icon of the Virgin Lambovistra (the Virgin warned the priest in a dream of the imminent disaster from the swollen river). The community then became administratively independent, though not without objections from the “*koca basis*” of Lia (Ioannidis 1963, p. 4).

So, between 1880 and 1888 the old church with the *hayat* (covered passage) was built in its present position on the hill and the space around it, also on the hill, was used as a graveyard. In other words, the graveyard spread over the land where the hostel now stands, where the dance is held and where the monument to the war dead is built. Behind the church is the tomb of the priest (Archimandrite) Stavros

⁴ Specifically, the Poulos and the Genes family venerated St Athanasios, the Stamoulis family St Spyridon, the Boukouvalas, the Nanos, the Papacostas and the Belos families St Nicholas, the Sorogas family St Demetrios, the Liontos, Sbitas and Bourdoukis families the Virgin (Birth/Lambovistra) (Alexakis 1982).

Ioannidis (1873-1948). The later, i.e. the present church began to be constructed in 1955, with personal labour and monetary offerings of emigrant villagers. At that time too, in a modernizing spirit, the graveyard was relocated a short distance away and the ossuary was built. This is a moving away of the graveyard from the church, but not too far. The moving away of the dead, that is of the graveyard and the ossuary, is observed in many communities in recent decades. The whole project was supervised by the priest PapaVayos. Formerly the school playground was also right beside the church and the graveyard. The present school was built in 1935.

So, the locus of cult is situated on top of the hill at the centre of the village. Formerly the dance was held there, with men and women in traditional *tsamikes* costumes. This took place at Carnival and Easter, that is, it was a spring event. Dances and parties at Carnival and Easter were also held in family neighbourhoods and in houses. Elderly people remember that at Carnival the church offered *ouzo* and *loukoumi* (Turkish delight), and the faithful gave money for the church. In the Easter dance the priest himself took part, as was the case in other villages in the district.

In earlier days the dance was more important, when the *panigyri* still kept more magical-religious elements. Before the era of modernity, which begins at a different date for each village but at Milia is after the war (1950–1960), dance in traditional society is first and foremost ceremonial, a ritual act. It always takes place in a *locus sanctus*, which is the meeting place of two worlds: the world of the supernatural and of the natural, in this case the Upper World with the Underworld. The grave, however, is always considered the entrance to the underworld. This can be seen from the beliefs at Milia, and elsewhere, about the dances of supernatural beings (fairies, etc.) in the cemeteries or in front of caves, which appear in the form of whirlwinds and snatch people, especially the young (girls and boys), as well as by the spiral that the dancers form at Milia.

In all cases the spring dances are associated with the general rebirth of Nature, of society, of men. They are linked also with the return of the souls to the Upper World for 50 days, as is borne out by the memorial services held on Soul Saturdays and corresponding beliefs in Greece generally, as well as at Costana for this period and at Eastertide, with the associated rituals, such as visiting the graves on Maundy Thursday, making the soul-candle in the form of a spiral or an annular Easter biscuit, which was lit during Holy Week and specifically on Maundy Thursday (at the Twelve Gospels),⁵ and so on. It is then that the souls are believed to come out of Hades (cf. Alexakis 2001c, pp. 330–331).⁶

⁵ At Costana, for the service of the Twelve Gospels, a spiral was made of wax, which elsewhere in Greece is known as “*psychokeri*” (soul candle), and was kept at the end as an amulet. In other regions of Greece a soul candle is also made for the forty-day memorial service for the dead (see Bokou 1972, p. 58; du Boulay 1982, 1984; Alexakis 2004). Soul candles are lit to light symbolically the deceased’s path from the Upper World to the Underworld and vice-versa.

⁶ In many regions of Greece the removal of the bones, the disinterment of the dead which is called “*xestavroma*”, usually takes place between Maundy Thursday and Whitsuntide (Pentecost) (Alexakis 2001c, p. 333).

The transfer of the *panigyri* to September, when it is held today, is indicative of its shift towards the social symbolism – although it retained many magical-religious elements for several decades –, that is to the symbolic construction and reconstruction, as well as the cohesion and the solidarity of the members of the community, while concurrently projecting the hierarchy and the relations of authority (cf. Bell 1992, pp. 171, 178). It is shown also by the provisional transfer of the dance, for a few years, under the *diaracho* at the walnut trees, where there were shops as well as the first church of the Lambovistra that was swept away by the river. The above are related to the different characteristics of emigration and its qualitative differentiation now, with the settlement of whole families in the towns. The cohesion of the community is shown furthermore by the communal preparation and contribution of food at the communal meal, which was followed also by the offering of money by those who came to the *panigyri*.

If a minimal social cohesion was expressed by the community dances in the central church at Easter and Carnival, then what was and is the magical-religious side of the event and its significance in earlier days as well as today?

I should mention that men and women participated in the traditional dances, but not children. Unmarried girls did not dance; indeed, in the old days they did not even attend church. Only married women took part in the dance, wearing their formal bridal costumes. Other dances of married women in formal bridal costumes are always associated with initiation or fertility, or both simultaneously, particularly when held in cemeteries, churches or close to other special places, such as caves, chasms, etc.

The entire traditional process shows that at least in the wider region of Epirus, but at Milia too, the *panigyri* and the community dance, regardless of whether it took place on the feast day of a saint, at Easter or at Carnival, was subject to certain processes that were linked not only with social cohesion but with the rebirth of the community at an imaginary level, expressed with a particular symbolism.

We cannot understand these earlier events unless we link them with the occupations of these people, who left in spring and came back in autumn. The prevailing conception at all levels, imaginary, symbolic and real, was and is return and cyclic time (cf. Eliade 1949).

I shall come back to the view that I have supported previously (Alexakis 2001a, p.201 and n. 43) and which is confirmed also by the *panigyri* at Milia, that the bridal costumes are essentially hieratic costumes, that the dances of women in these costumes have a magical-religious and ritual character, and analogous ramifications, which are linked with the fertility of humans and, by extension, of Nature as a whole (cf. Philippidi 1975; Romaïou – Karastamati 1980). Consequently, they are linked with the general rebirth of Nature and of the community, in earlier times of the family. The dance of women (brides) in bridal costumes, in the graveyard, was aimed at conception and impregnation.⁷ The rebirth of the family

⁷ Noteworthy are the similarities in beliefs about conception and impregnation at another level with the beliefs of distant peoples, such as the Trobriand Islanders in Oceania, but incorporated in a

and of the community is achieved with the return or the revival of the dead. At Milia, furthermore, the community *panigyri* is linked symbolically with rebirth because of the dedication of the church to the Lambovistra, *i.e.* the Birth of the Virgin.

This is essentially a system that has now been deconstructed into its constituent parts, but in which some of its elements are still active, if not always consciously. In this system social organization and culture are articulated successfully (cf. Bell 1992, pp. 34, 49). For this reason a structural in-depth or transformational approach to the ritual and the *panigyri* is necessary (cf. McCauley – Lawson 2002, pp. 19, 67, 95), so that the non-conscious elements can come into the conscious. The bridal costumes at Milia and in the wider area of Philiates were hieratic costumes, if we bear in mind the symbols that were embroidered on the garments, on the *segouni* and the apron (butterflies, *i.e.* souls, moons, snails, snakes, phallic motifs, lozenges, trees/cypresses these too relating to the dead, etc.) (Photsis 1995, figs 19, 20, 21; Hadji-Katerinari 1991; Ioannidis 2006). The reverse is true too, if we bear in mind the words the priest chants from the Great Euchologion: “*My soul glorifies in the Lord. For He clothed me in a robe of salvation and a tunic of delight. As a bridegroom He put on me a mitre, and as a bride bedecked He adorned me*” during his ritual robing with the holy vestments, inside the sanctuary, when the Divine Liturgy commences, and consequently his likening to a bride (*Great Euchologion* 1851, p. 36).

In the district of Philiates, as well as more widely in Thesprotia, the so-called *tsamikes* costumes used to be worn, which had certain minor differences from village to village. They consisted of a white chemise and a *segouni* embroidered with the aforementioned symbols, frequently schematized or not in polychrome borders and braid trims. The formal bridal costume had a *segouni* edged with velvet. The apron was richly embroidered with the same symbols and had a fringed border. The women used to wear a cap on the head, and later a red kerchief with fringing, *grepes* and *zaves*. Around the waist was a sash, also fringed and on the feet were pigskin shoes (*tsarouchia*) with pompoms. The costumes in the region were made by specialist tailors from Tsamanta in Mourgana, who came to the village and stayed there for a couple of weeks or more.

Today these symbols can be seen in other pictorial representations, on fireplaces, bridal chests, ritual bread loaves (wedding *bougatses*, *kosoria*) and so on (Ioannidis 1963, p. 55, figs; Alexakis 1996, p. 175, figs 7, 8, 10–12). A common sight in the houses and the gardens are hanging snails (*gaselia* in the local idiom), which are intended to protect from the evil eye and also to ensure fertility, rich harvest and prosperity. And the snake too, as a fertility symbol that guides the water, is present in the central myth of the village, while the “household snake” is considered sacred and should not be killed, because this will bring misfortune to the family (death, etc.). The sloughed snakeskin (*phidorouti*) is considered to have potent protective qualities and villagers keep these skins in their house or on their

matrilineal kinship system, that the spirits of the dead ancestors (baloma) enter the women: cf. Malinowski 1954; Leach 1969.

person. In one case during my fieldwork in Costana, I was impressed to see a huge *phidorouti* (about 2 m. long), perhaps of a tree snake, stretched along the wall, high up, just above the wedding photographs of the children. I was told they had it “for good fortune”. The dragon (a large anthropomorphic snake) also has a central place in the village mythology, here associated also with the oak tree.⁸

At the social/familial level, the return of the dead with the birth, *i.e.* through the women, takes place with the custom of name-giving. In the old days, the naming after the grandfathers used to take place when they had died, which made the symbolism even more overt. If the child was given the name of the grandfather when he was still alive he was angry, because he considered it as tantamount to their desire that he die. So children were often given the name of their great grandfathers. There was, moreover, the conception that the child resembled the grandfather whose name he bore. That is, it was a rebirth (for this panhellenic belief see Alexakis 2003, and for ethnographic parallels see Hertz 1970, p. 67; Turner 1967, p. 7). Today, of course, the system has relaxed and the name is given even when the grandfathers are alive. The earlier family practice prompts the thought that the idea of the revival/rebirth of the community has its starting point in the revival/rebirth of the family, which is also the model of the related symbolism. Moreover, the snake too, as symbol of rebirth/revival, is considered as a rule a family symbol (cf. household snake).

However, the return of the dead is linked also with the disinterment of the bones in the graveyard and the ossuary, where the dance also took or takes place. This ossuary was constructed later by PapaVayos, after the graveyard was moved to behind the school. Until then, after the disinterment of the bones these were put in pillowslips and placed in the women’s gallery (*gynaikonitis*) of the church of the Virgin Lambovistra. The *gynaikonitis* was used only by married women, since, as said already, unmarried girls did not attend church. We observe in this case too the close relationship between married women and the dead, reflection of the need of their return and rebirth through them.

Specifically, the disinterment of the dead takes place five years after the burial. The relatives wash the bones in water and then the priest sprinkles them with red wine, which symbolizes blood and therefore revival/rebirth (cf. Alexakis 2001c, pp. 330, 365). They are left in the church for forty days, for mass to be celebrated. Subsequently they are placed in a chest on which is inscribed with the full name, the age of the deceased and the date of death. Social anthropologists who have studied these mortuary customs consider that the disinterment symbolizes the return of the deceased to the community (Danforth 1962, p. 61) and in many

⁸ Tradition has it that the relationship between the dragon and the oak tree is close, as is the relationship between the latter and St Donatos. St Donatos planted an oak tree which the dragon uprooted and ate the acorns. St Donatos slew the dragon and the dragon brought up the acorns from its belly, and an oak wood grew, stretching down to the sea (Ioannidis 1963, p. 256). In other cases too in Neohellenic mythology, the dragon is linked with the oak tree, e.g. that the oak tree sprouted from the dragon’s hairs or blood, or that the dragon guards oak trees, etc. (Alexakis 2001b, p. 245; 2001d, p. 94–95).

societies it is an occasion for social festivities (cf. Bloch 1982, p.216). In the Greek Orthodox Church, the disinterment of the bones of saints, which are considered sacred and miraculous, is always a celebration and a day of memorial for the event, which is dedicated in the festive calendar. In the course of the disinterment the relatives and friends frequently utter expressions such as “Welcome”, which is also heard very often in laments all over Greece.

However, the return also takes place with the disinterment of the bones in the places to which inhabitants of the community have emigrated and the transfer of these to the birthplace. Because emigrants as a rule left an order that they be buried in the graveyard of their native village or at least, if this was impossible, for their bones to be removed to there. They wanted their bones to be brought to the *locus sanctus*, the “*diaracho*”, as the hill on which the graveyard lies is characteristically called. This concept of the transfer and burial of the dead in their native village is panhellenic (see also foreign ethnographic parallels: Bloch 1982, p. 215). It is as if the graves and the community graveyard are used in the construction of an idealized map of the stable social order, as proposed by Bloch and Parry (1982, p. 35). But it is also associated with the rebirth of the dead.

However, it was not only the return of the dead in this way. On the occasion of the *panigyri* the emigrant males, and in recent years the families (and wives) who had left with them, returned to the village. That is, there was a need for everyone, living and dead, to be present in the sacred place then, because emigration was considered to be a “living death”. That is why the wives and mothers of emigrant men wore black kerchiefs, which they took off when the men returned. The return is identified symbolically and actually with the return of fertility, and has rich ritual associations (see Ioannidis 1963, p. 119). At the imaginary level, villagers believe that if they do not come back to the feast of the Lambovistra, the Virgin will not help them make good in their place of emigration. They say characteristically: “The Lambovistra has destroyed those who turned away from the village and have not come back” (Ioannidis 1963, p. 255).

This is a belief that continues to this day in Epirus and in Greece generally, of the rebirth of the family and of the community through the *panigyri* and the dance, but through women too. It is indicated also by the lighting of the candles in the ossuary on the day of the feast,⁹ which is usually done by the women. It is a symbolic summoning of the dead, in the same way as the lament with which the dance in Epirus always commences and concludes is a symbolic summoning. It should be noted that the earlier dance at Vissani, Pogoni, on 15 August, took place in the graveyard next to the church of the Dormition of the Virgin (now dedicated to St Nicholas). But there the later graveyard was moved away much earlier, in 1913, and a greater distance (at the church

⁹ The lighting of candles in memory of the dead during the *panigyri* is observed in many Epirot villages and I do not know the extent of this custom. It occurs also at the other end of the region, at Aghia Paraskevi (Kerasovo), Konitsa. There the women light yellow and red candles in the narthex of the church of St Paraskevi during the morning liturgy, at the *panigyri* for the dead, the souls, as they call it.

of St George).¹⁰ In the dance place of St Nicholas/Dormition of the Virgin, however, there are other peripheral symbolic elements (the plane tree, the subterranean water source, etc.), while the more general symbolic system at Vissani is much richer and has many other peculiarities (see Alexakis 2001d).

In conclusion, all the above can be linked with the symbols of the dead as well as with the bridal costumes, e.g. the moons, the snakes that are associated with the rebirth of Nature and of Man. But the snakes and sometimes the moons too, apart from their symbolism (of rebirth), are considered vehicles or conductors of the souls of the dead, in Epirus and in the rest of Greece. Consequently, the snakes as erotic symbols, because of their phallic shape, the women and the dead are closely related and interdependent in the symbolic and imaginary system of Milia, and of Epirus in general. So, in Milia too the anthropological theory that customs linked with death and the dead are simultaneously linked with fertility and rebirth is confirmed (see Bloch & Parry 1982, pp.4, 7, 10; cf. also Bachofen 1967, p.25). At Milia the *panigyri* and the dance, in their earlier magical-religious symbolism, allude to the union of the dead ancestors (grandfathers) with the women (brides dressed in ritual costumes) and their rebirth in the children/grandchildren-great grandchildren who bear their names.

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¹⁰ Dances in or near cemeteries, at Easter, Carnival or the village patronal feast, are commonplace in Epirus (see Milionis 1998, pp. 39-40) as well as in southern Greece (Oikonomou 2004, pp. 108-109, nn. 8, 15). In my view this is due to the historical development of many villages in Greece from family installations (*katounes*), where at some stage a church and a graveyard are established locally.

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