

Dancing and music in symbiotic groups: the example of the Vlachs-Armani of Seli Imathias-Greece

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Abstract:

Dancing and music are cultural phenomena through which a community defines itself and integrates in its tradition all the elements that considers more suitable for its development. One of the most significant development stages of a community is the meeting with the «other», the «stranger». This study examined, through the records of three generations informants, the development and the transformation of the musical – dancing identity of the Vlachs-Armani people of Seli Imathias as a result of the interaction with the musical–dancing tradition of surrounding society. The structural analysis of Seli dances showed that Selian Vlachs kept most of their traditional dance and musical elements although in many cases they adopted elements of the symbiotic groups. This probably led on the development of an ethical code used by the Selian members to communicate each other as well as with the symbiotic groups.

Key Words: cultural groups, cultural identity, traditional dancing and music, surrounding society

Introduction

Identity as a concept has been and still is today a subject of interdisciplinary research. Its definition and delineation is in the center of the scientists' attention such as psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists. Their common point is the ascertainment that identity is nothing more but a conceptual construct which is subject to a continuous and long term procedure of formation under the influence of historical, social, political, and cultural circumstances and facts (Maratou– Alipranti, 2000).

On the contrary, the way of identity forming constitutes their point of disagreement. The completely opposite viewpoints feature as a starting point the bipolar frame of «us» - «they». On the basis of this bipolar frame two theories have been developed about the way of identity forming. The first theory gives significance to the «us» and in this case the formation of communal identity materializes by «the inside». It is composed by the group's own members. That is the identity of the group is specified by the way that the individuals realize and define themselves (Cohen, 1982). The second theory approaches the identity formation from «the outside» and its delineation is realized by the others. This means that the communal identity is defined by the way the «others» perceive, delineate and define us (Kellner, 1992). In this theory «the others» consist an important factor in identity delineation since identity is directly related to the common elements which unite a group of people as well as the elements which differentiate them from others (Weeks, 1990).

These two approaches of identity formation have met with serious objections and opposition as to their legitimacy and thoroughness. According to Sutton (Sutton, 1994), when the identity delineation is realized with the «others» being the single and exclusive criterion, then its complexity is trapped within bipolar of the type man – woman, me – other. Stokes (1994) and Vrizas (2005) on the other hand, hold that when it is delineated strictly by the very members of the community, then the relationships and conflicts with the «others'» identity are overlooked.

Modern scientific views reject the unilateral identity formation and accept a formation model which entails both the «self» and the «other». According to Intzesiloglou (2000) the communal identity is defined both by the idea that the members of a social group have about themselves and the communal «we» as well as the impression the «others» maintain about that specific social group and its members.

However, what do we mean precisely and what is the exact meaning we ascribe when we refer to the communal identities? According to Erikson (1974) «...the sense of identity means being one with yourself as you grow up and develop. At the same time it implies a sense of kinship with the concept of a community as an entity unified with its future, its history or its mythology».

References to the past make up an important factor for the formation of a group's communal identity as well as the negotiation of its position in the world (Dimitriou-Kotsoni, 1996). The birthplace as memory, and the

existence of a common long tradition and cultural continuity not only link the members of a group with mutual bonds, not only express and confirm the existence of a common identity but also enforce its formation (Intzesiloglou, 2000). Moreover when we refer to cultural groups, apart from their common past, the specific way of its integration to the broader Greek society on an economic, cultural and ideological level constitutes an important factor of socio-psychological sense of identity (Vergeti, 1994).

The degree of psychological rapport among the members of the team and working for the group are elements that define the content of the common identity. The content of identity is also indirectly dependent on the degree of social cohesion since it affects the degree of rapport among the members of the group. The stronger the social cohesion is, the stronger the rapport among the members becomes. The cultural elements and practices constitute significant factors in the strengthening of social cohesion since culture is a reference point for common identity and indicates not only «who we are» but also «what we are» (Tsaousis, 1978).

The dialectic relationship, which exists between a social group and the surrounding social environment, is also imprinted on the constant readjustment of the social totality's common identity. This is so because according to Barth's (1969) theory of limits the cultural identity of a community is not the aggregate of previously defined characteristics but a social and cultural construct stemming from its history. This readjustment concerns mainly the evolution of cultural models and redefining of social limits (Vergeti, 1994) and it is realized through conditions which have not been chosen by people but are predefined by the historical conditions which form the broader social environment as well as the others' identities (Pashalidis, 2000).

According to Royce (2002), dancing is considered to specify identity. Other researchers (Panopoulou, 2001) support that dancing not only is considered to be simply an «ideal» expression or a part of the culture, but also intervenes in the cultural identity's formation, relying on the fact that dancing is carried out by people for other people so as to depend on the connections among them and generally by the total frame reference in which the aforementioned connections are formatted and reproduced.

If we focus our attention on the kinetic form of dancing and how it presents itself in the narrow borders of the community, we observe that each Greek community isolates those dancing elements which it deems pertinent and forms its own dancing repertoire, its own ways of expression and performance so as to realize a particular feature in place and time, its own dancing tradition. Within the framework of the aforementioned tradition there is always margin for individual initiative without straying off its limits and conventions with which the dancer improvises and in this way the potential to show his dancing capability and dexterity is presented as well as the chance to be marked out. It is obvious that there is a dialectic relationship between dancing and the Greek society since the dancing expression of every era and every community works as a communication tool among the members of the community so that the members organize their social life and the social life in turn, influences and forms the dancing expression.

The aim of the study was to investigate through the records of three generation informants, the dynamic of development and the transformations of the musical–dancing identity of the Vlachs -Armani people of Seli as a result of the interaction with the musical–dancing tradition of local population of Imathia, considering the relations between autonomy and interdependence which are observed between the local symbiotic groups and the dominant society by which they are surrounded.

In this study we understand the Vlah -Armani music and dancing as historical, dynamic and mutable practices, not as static cultural phenomena that cannot be subject to change; practices through which the Vlachs-Armani negotiate their collective identity and otherness in each historical circumstance. Bourdieu's view (1977) that «dancing and music consist cultural practices through which the community manages its past and present, reconstitutes itself on a symbolic level, and incorporates in its tradition elements of modern developments in a dynamic way», became the theoretical framework on which the data analysis was founded.

The society

A string of important historical events towards the end of the 18th and during the 19th centuries (Koukoudis, 2001) was the reason that the Vlah populations left the semi nomad villages of Grevena and settled in areas of central and eastern Macedonia-Greece. In 1876 a group of 30 families from Avdela, a Vlah village from Grevena area, founded the first hut settlement on the foot of Mt. Vermion after a ten-year wandering in areas of central and eastern Macedonia. The constant progress of the settlement was the reason that other Vlachs-Armani seminomads also came and settled, mainly from Avdela but also from villages Samarina, Perivoli and Smixi. The outcome of this was that in the beginning of the 19th century the village numbered more than 300 families and until the first decades of the 20th century it was the third most populated settlement of the county of Imathia behind Veroia and Naousa. In Vlah-Armani language the name of the village is “Selia di ngios”, “Lower Seli”, but its residents are known as Avdeliates, since most of them originate from Avdela but they are also known as Veriotes or Verianni Vlachs because Veroia was an economic and administrative centre (Koukoudis, 2001).

Seli evolved in accordance with a model based on Vlah villages from Grevena while the majority of its people followed the life of the semi nomad stock farmers. Their most common occupations were those of the cheese producer, the merchant, the logger, the mule-drivers and the tailor. In terms of language no significant differentiations can be observed. The Seli Vlachs-Armani preserved in their new environment the linguistic idiom

they spoke in their initial settlements. Many men spoke Greek fluently, but also Turkish due to their contacts with the administration or various trade transactions. On the contrary, until 1912 most of the women spoke only Vlah and probably are the women who preserved the use of the Vlah language within the families (Koukoudis, 2001).

Symbiotic groups and surrounding society. The evolution of the musical-dancing identity of the Seli Vlachs.

Veroia and its surrounding villages, Naousa, along with the native residents of the villages around it, were mainly the surrounding society within which the Seli people became active socially and economically. The native dwellers of Roumlouki (region of Central Macedonia) and the lowland areas of Pieria and, after 1912, the dwellers of the villages around the Axios river, Kilkis and Lagadas formed the broader social framework within which the Seli Vlachs-Armani developed social and other relationships.

In this environment the people of Seli organized their life and gave shape to their new collective identity, based on their common experiences, their historical course and their common adventures during their wanderings around Macedonia before settling down in the slopes of Mt. Vermion. Yet, their life was mainly formulated around the perception of «we» versus the «others – strangers». The Seli people though, gave a different meaning to the «we» not only in relation to the «others», that is, the «natives» of the area, but also in relation to the other Vlachs-Armani of different or even the same origin. “They are not like us” said the Seli people for the natives or the Seli Avdeliates referring to the Perivoliates and the Gramoustianous Vlachs-Armani. “They are not from the proper stock” they said when referring to some families within the same community. One can only perceive the tendency they had to present themselves as a society of great cohesion, to project their image-identity on the dominant society but also to differentiate within the boundaries of their population unity, even their own community since, the community «as a whole consisted the social lieu in which each one sought his partners» (Nitsiakos, 1991).

This broad area contributed to the powerful social cohesion of the community and the formation of its collective identity along with the concept of «the other» since it helped them to recognize and define themselves through this area, to identify their relationship with the other members of the group but also their historical continuity.

The cohabitation with other population groups led them to the creation and preservation of very strong friendships, a result of the customs of reciprocity (Nitsiakos, 1991) since they consisted living elements of their social organization and were breeding conditions of their economic and general social relationships. To the aforementioned it should be also added the occurrence of sponsorship (Serbezis, 1999), since its use allowed the creation of social relationships beyond the margins not only of the community but also of their population cohesion. However, they avoided intermarriages until the sixties with non Vlah populations, which subconsciously worked as a shield of protection of their distinctiveness or, according to their own reports, of their «pride».

In this environment the people of Seli and the locals constituted broader population cohesion, two concentric circles (Kyriakidou – Nestoros, 1975) where the communication between them from unavoidable and necessary was developed to a way of life with a constant cultural give and take. This continual complementation led to alleviation procedures of several differences among them, while there were clear and intense borderlines. It seems that this unavoidable mutual supply did not left uninfluenced the dancing, including of course the music and the song, which as a living organism, is developed and adjusted to the changing conditions of society (Alexakis, 1992).

Focusing our attention on the kinetic form of dancing and how it presents itself in the narrow borders of a community, we will observe that each community has chosen and adopted a commonly shaped aesthetic code of dancing expression. Thus, we notice that each community isolates those dancing elements which it considers suitable- steps and way of their execution, rhythmical patterns, patterns in place – and forms its own dancing repertoire, its own ways of expression and performance having as a result the materialization of an individual feature in place and in time, its own dancing tradition, its own dancing identity.

However, as previously mentioned, the dancing identity does not remain static and unchangeable during time. Dancing as a social phenomenon entails the possibility of readjustment to specific social, economic, historical and political shuffle of local society.

In an attempt to study the dancing of Seli one sees the many common elements with the dancing of their metropolitan centers. More specifically, their slow and dynamic motion, movement in place as it is called, distinguishes them during which an emphasis is placed on the majesty and the upright build while the heavy foothold is underlined (Tsiamitros, 2000). Emphasis is placed mostly on the leg movements, with many of them requiring special dancing abilities. On the contrary, the hands’ movements are limited with the palm hold and the hands bent in the elbows or straight down. The dominant dance formation is round with a heading to the right while sex and age are criteria of positioning the dancers in the circle during the formal dancing occasions of the community such as weddings or fairs. The men are positioned first and women follow. Among men and women the elderly go first and the younger ones follow. Oftentimes children were an indispensable part of the dance.

For the most part the dances are of the type “in three”, “in two”, “round” dances, “beratika” and of course “Tsamikos”. The prevailing rhythms are those of 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 5/4, 7/8 as well as the combination of 3/4 with 7/8 (sirtotsamika). The improvisations of the male first dancer, with turns and sittings in the slow dances “in two” and “Tsamiko” not only is considered to be a basic element of the dance, but we could claim that it is almost an imperative and a proof of the dancer’s special merit and dexterity. On the contrary, the model of the female first dancer of the period was an even and modest dancer with no variation or improvisation in her dance (Filippou et al, 2003). The Seli woman dances in this manner also evenly, with no sittings or special improvisations, she impresses with her Spartan dance.

Initially those dances were accompanied only by singing mainly in Vlah or Greek. The songs that prevailed in Seli are primarily homophonic but also antiphonal between men and women. Later on they were dressed with music, with the violin being the first instrument – according to oral traditions – that accompanied the Vlah songs, since it was the instrument that was able to follow the fluctuations of the Vlah melodies. The clarinet, the flute and the tambourine were also incorporated in this pattern forming a company that was called “avgiliili” by the Seli people, meaning the violins. The term, used even to this day by the elderly, is testament to the different composition of the company during the first years of their settlement.

The first great differentiations in the musical-dancing identity of the Seli people are observed during the 1920s whereby the composition of the musical company is diversified. The pass from the “violins” to the “brass” instruments and from the 1950s onwards to the ‘ntaouli’ and the ‘zournas’ signifies, on the one hand the arrival of unknown melodies to the Selians and on the other the creation of a specific way of melody rendition as well as their corresponding dances.

One of the first results of the constant mutual cultural feedback is the rendition of Vlah songs into native melodies. A characteristic example is the song “fiata niika” performed during weddings and which was adjusted to the 11/8 (4+3+4) rhythm of the “Marina” melody and with the specific rhythmic analysis $(E\varepsilon+\theta) + (\Theta) + (\Theta+\varepsilon)$ (Serbezis, 2004). Even the moderate developing rhythmic tempo of “Marina” was adopted by the Seli people. On the contrary, the kinetic part of the dance remained as it was danced until then, that is a round dance “in two”.

The melody and the dance “45” are another case of music adoption by populations of the surrounding society and its adaptation to the Seli dance models. It is a variant of the melody “Trita Pata” of the Naousa area, which the Seli people performed with a round dance in two, not the dancing steps we meet in Naousa. With the further addition of alternating rhythmic tempo, the final form of the dance became exclusively Selian.

The “Zaharoula” dance is known in the broad area of Macedonia and is performed by both men and women. Its rhythmic model is that of 2/4 and the round dance “in three” becomes the kinetic equivalent. The people of Seli maintained the rhythmic model and changed not only the rhythmic tempo of the dance, converting it from stable to developing, but also the kinetic part of the dance where, instead of the dance “in three”, they danced kinetic motifs adopted from the populations of Naousa and the surrounding villages referring to the “Nizamiko”, “Raiko” and “Baidouskino” dances.

Another characteristic example of the mobility of cultural elements between a symbiotic group and the surrounding society is the production of verses adapted to melodies, which originated in populations of the broader area. Several dancing melodies, representative of the surrounding society were given lyrics in Vlah while the kinetic model of the round dance in two was kept for their dance rendition. In many cases, the specific kinetic model was transformed from slow and dynamic to faster and hopping whereas in others it was adapted to an alternating or developing rhythmic tempo. The “Daliana” song and dance is performed with the melody of “Maria” from Roumlouki, the satirical dance and song “My Tana, they fooled you” is rendered with the melody of the “Moustabeiko” dance from Naousa. Moreover in the “Patrona” melody and the “Colourful Tsourapia” dance of the Naousa area, the lyrics were adapted in Vlah. The aforementioned melodies of the native population were particularly cherished by the Seli people who danced to them in every occasion, even from the period between the two wars.

Finally, the adoption of musical and kinetic models without modifications by the Seli people is one more example confirming the view that in the collective identity formation of an ethnic group, “the other”, “the stranger” contributes to a significant degree. The Seli people, accepted, loved and danced dances like various ‘patinades’, mainly in a round formation. “Gaida”, “Karaisouf”, “Baidouska”, “Hasaposerviko”, “Syrba” were danced with the same melody and kinetic models but with the dancing character of the Seli dancing tradition. Since everyone acknowledged the special demands and difficulty of those dances, only the most able and competent Seli dancers performed them.

The contribution of “the other” to the formation of an cultural group’s identity, through the intake of cultural elements, cannot be realized without limitations or without a good measure of judgment. Elements befitting the style of the group are adopted which also impress with the degree of difficulty and dexterity they command. But the foundation of the cultural-dancing identity remains unalterable. This consists of dances, which possess an emotional value for the group since they refer to the common historical past of the group, and thus represent an element that boosts the group’s social cohesion. Such dances are “Leonidas” with a musical tempo of 5/4 (3+2) and rhythmic analysis $\{(\Theta+E\varepsilon+E\varepsilon) + (\Theta+\varepsilon)\}$ (25).

From the above it can be ascertained that the dancing identity of the Seli Vlachs is composed by dances which originate in:

a. Their ancestral centers and are not affected by the dancing identities of the native populations such as “Leonidas” and several melodies mainly performed with dances of the ‘in two’ or ‘in three’ types’.

b. Dances the accompanying melody of which originates in the musical tradition of the native populations and on which lyrics in Vlah have been adapted but the kinetic part of the dance was preserved. It should be noted that the verse existed before albeit with another musical accompaniment which was abandoned. A characteristic example of this is the wedding dance “fiata niika”.

c. Dances the melody of which is a variant of a dancing melody belonging to a cultural group of the area while the kinetic part consists of motifs from the Seli dancing tradition. The variation lies in the fact of the change of the rhythmic tempo in the initial melody as well as in its development from moderate to alternating as demonstrated in the “45” dance.

d. Dances the melody of which was preserved without changes. The kinetic part of the dance changed with the adoption of kinetic models that refer to dances existing in the surrounding society, such as “Zaharoula”.

e. Melodies of the surrounding society in which Vlah lyrics were adapted and, depending on the case, either the kinetic model of the round dance ‘in two’ was preserved, as in “Tana” or “Dailiana”, or the existent kinetic model was preserved and was mainly performed by the “competent” Seli dancers, e.g. “Patrona”, “douaou fiati tou ar’ sboou”.

f. Dances the melody of which as well as the kinetic part directly refer to music and dances of the surrounding society such as “Gaida”, “Baidouska”, “Hasaposerviko”.

By examining the relationships of the Seli people to other cultural groups of the area, relations which determine to a significant degree the exchange of cultural elements, we can observe that the Seli people developed a broad network of economic and social relationships which extended from Veroia and Naousa to the villages of Thessaloniki and Kilkis. Veroia and Naousa and secondly the lowland villages of Alexandria and Pieria became the foremost centres of economic and social activity. The question that arises is whether the relationships with the populations of those areas are imprinted on the formation of the new collective-dancing, Vlah identity.

Our discourse indicates that identity is not a fingerprint indeed (Navaridis & Christakis, 1997) but the result of a continuous exchange of elements between the “inside” and the “outside”. The “inside” – “us” is the Seli Vlachs and the “outside” – “others” is the people of Naousa and the dwellers of the Alexandria and Pieria county. From the dances of the above populations they obtained kinetic motifs and adjusted them to their music, while, on the other hand, they adapted lyrics in Vlah to music originating in the musical tradition of those populations.

Instead of an epilogue

It is acceptable that identity is a long course, a long way with many stages and many crossroads. It is a course in which history confers with politics, economics and criticism. A course in which people construct their collective-cultural identity within conditions not chosen by themselves, within conditions defined both by their traditions as well as various circumstances they encounter each time (Pashalidis, 2000). From those, the most important circumstance is none other than the meeting with the identity of the “other”. The symbiotic group of the Seli people or the Veriano Vlachs-Armani, a part of the broader cultural group of the Vlachs-Armani, linked its own musical-dancing tradition and identity to the corresponding ones of the cultural groups within the area in which it identified itself. Dominant element of this link, as found by the structural analysis of the Seli dances, is the preservation of the kinetic model in two, irrespective of the musical metre’s structure in the melodies of the surrounding society which were loved and adopted. All the aforementioned elements constituted necessary structural components and completely representative for the creation of an ethical communication code among its members both within and outside of the community.

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