

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MODERN GREEK CALENDAR CUSTOMS ASSOCIATED WITH FIRE: TRADITION AND CONTEMPORANEITY

SVETLANA SIDNEVA

This article addresses some Greek traditions associated with fire: pirovasiya (fire-walking, which is also performed in some other regions of the Balkans; for example, in Bulgaria), the burning of Judas, and the fires burned during the Shrovetide carnival in Ioannina. The sources of the study were fieldwork and material from tourism sites describing regional customs and traditions.

Keywords: *calendar customs, fire, Modern Greek, traditional culture.*

Članek obravnava nekatere grške tradicije, povezane z ognjem: pirovasiya (hoja po žerjavici, ki jo izvajajo tudi v nekaterih drugih balkanskih regijah, na primer v Bolgariji), zažiganje Juda ter prižiganje kresov v pustnem času na Ioannini. Študija temelji na terenskem delu in na materialu, zbranim na turističnih straneh, ki opisujejo regionalne šege in tradicije.

Ključne besede: *koledarski rituali, ogenj, moderno grško, tradicionalna kultura.*

In recent times, modern societies have been taking an increasing interest in traditional culture. This stems from the desire to determine national identity, which turns out to be an extremely challenging task in this era of globalization and leveling of cultural differences. At the same time, the “performance” component of some rites is utilized for commercial purposes. As a result, the original meaning and spirit of the rites change and are reinterpreted. In some instances, this is so much the case that it leads to modern myth-making and contamination by different cultural traditions that were originally divorced from each other.

The rituals that use fire are the most “profitable” or “fruitful” from this point of view. Initially, for traditional culture, fire was an integral part of many rituals associated with any festival. To name just a few, these included burning effigies and sacred plants during the Shrovetide carnival, the Yule log, and St. John’s and May fires. In this case, fire was regarded as a sacred object, the source of heat and light. Fire could also be a mediator between people and the other world (e.g., the customs of burning ritual food for the dead, sacrifice in a fire, etc.). Fire also had healing and purification functions. Fire could be perceived as a destructive element that must be treated with respect (e.g., all sorts of prohibitions: no foul language in front of a fire, not stamping it out, not putting it out, etc.).

Thus, for traditional culture, the performance aspect of fire rituals was initially secondary. Now the situation has changed.

This study examines some Greek traditions associated with fire: *pirovasiya* (fire-walking, which is also performed in some other regions of the Balkans; for example, in Bulgaria), the burning of Judas, and the fires burned during the Shrovetide carnival in Ioannina. The sources of the study were fieldwork and material from tourism sites describing regional customs and traditions.

Pyrovasiya, or fire-walking, as part of *anastenaria* exists mainly in the region of Serres in the village of Ayia Eleni and some other villages of northern Greece: Melike, Langadas, and Makrolefke. The practice was originally dedicated to the festivals of the patron saint of the village, St. Helen (20–23 May), and was strictly connected with the church calendar. In folk tradition, there are several legends that tell about the origin of the wonderful ability of *pyrovates* ('fire-walkers') to walk unharmed on hot coals. The main motif of these legends is saving icons from a burning church and granting the wonderful gift of walking on fire to the rescuers. Some informants that tell legends may add a "historical" connotation to its original interpretation. They might say, for example, that the church was set on fire by the Turks. The action may be located in the informant's village. In the "classic" version of the legend, St. Constantine's Church in the village of Kotsi caught fire in the year 1250. The villagers heard the icons groaning and went into the church to rescue them. Their descendants moved to Langadas (in northern Greece) in the 1900s, taking the icons and the tradition of fire-walking with them. However, there are oral or online print versions of the legend in which the story of the year 1250 is set in Langadas.

Traditionally, the rite was performed as follows. On the eve of the festival, those intending to participate gathered at a place called *kontaki*, where they put the icons of Sts. Helen and Constantine and musical instruments and bells to be used during the ceremony. The participants spent the night of 20 May with prayer and music and entered into a trance. Sometimes an animal (a young black bull) was offered as a sacrifice. On 21 May the first walk was performed on the coals left after the bonfire kindled the day before.

Currently, there are cases of deviation from tradition, or academic reflections on the rite. Because many researchers trace the festival to the Dionysian cults that existed in Thrace, sometimes *pyrovasiya* is used in performances that are not connected with Christian tradition and that exploit the legacy of antiquity, as evidenced by such notices:

The pyrovasias event was held in the Eleusis region (19 Jan. 2009). The day began with a tour of the sanctuary of Eleusis and continued in private (kindly given by one of the pyrovaton) with preparing the pyrovasias event. The organizers of the event were members of the non-profit company "Garden – Mythical Greek Daily," who took care of lighting and fueling the pyre and the hospitality and dinner offered to the participants. It was preceded by a recitation of Orphic hymns to the deities Hestia, Hygieia, Demeter, and Dionysus. Watch the video, set in an exhilarating climate, accompanied by the sounds of drums and shouts of "Io Bacchae"; most of the attendees briefly abandoned reason and turned to the path of the heart. They took the path of fire, eliminating illness and death, showing how everyone has a Dionysus Zagreus inside himself that can freely convert to Dionysus. (Pylē Iasōnos 2009)

It should be noted that in this case the calendar loses its meaning; the dates shift. The date 19 January does not coincide with the day honoring Sts. Helen and Constantine and cannot be explained by the ancient pagan tradition of the Eleusinian mysteries. It is known

that the ancient ritual of Demeter and her daughter, when the hymns dedicated to the goddesses and to Dionysus and Triptolemos (according the Orphic tradition) were sung, was held in February or in September.

Something in the *anastenaria* becomes a performance for the tourists. Such a festival may be held at any time, regardless of the ritual calendar, although the Greeks seek to follow the tradition. The program from the site “Anastenaria-tours” is typical:

The anastenaria take place yearly on May 21 and last for 3 days at the towns of Lagkada - Thessaloniki, Agia Eleni - Serres, Meliki - Verria and Mavrolefki - Drama. Every year the following land tours are organized to watch the tradition: ... a 3 days tour to the region of Serres, visiting the lake of Kerkini, watching the “anastenaria” celebrations at the village of “Agia Eleni” near the town of Serres and visiting Vergina on the day of return to Athens. Departure from Athens on May 20 and return on May 22. (The Anastenaria fire walking ritual of Greece)

In this case, one of the purposes of the tour may be to become acquainted with the tradition and its survival. In Bulgaria, *anastenaria* may be presented as a “tavern-show” on any day. Some tourist sites write about the healing power of *anastenaria*, present the “anastenaria-tours” as a “health promotion program,” and try to involve tourists in participating not only as spectators but as real actors. It seems strange, taking into consideration the fact that traditionally only a select group had the ability to walk unharmed on hot coals, but the potential clients of a travel agency that proposes “anastenaria-tours” may read the scientific explanation of the phenomena and even the instructions (in this case partly “occult”) on how to attain the required condition for fire-walking.

There are curious cases of mixing absolutely diverse traditions. The term *anastenaria* becomes, as it were, a common noun, a synonym for any kind of fire-walking. On one of the Russian sites, for example, there a headline “Nestinarstvo in India” or “Hindu-nestinar walks on fire” (Amen Ra 2011). The creators of another tourism site assert that the *nestinaries* are descendants of Indian yogis! It is worth noting that the etymology of the term remains controversial. Some researchers presume that the word is derived from *neštinar* or *ištinar* ‘sage person’, ‘who knows’ or from the Greek word *estia* ‘fire’ or *nestia* ‘fast’. Popular belief claims that the term is derived from the Greek verb *anastenazo* ‘moan, groan’. This reflects a kind of cultural heritage dispute between Bulgaria and Greece. However, there are cases in which the Greeks and Bulgarians hold a joint celebration. Clearly, in this case the ritual is illustrative in nature and initiated by the cultural centers, and not by a closed community in which “knowledge” or the “gift” is hereditary, as it was earlier:

This year the cultural center of the village of Brontivo, Bulgaria hosted the events of the custom in Ayia Eleni Serres for the first time. (Omogeneia 2008)

In northern Greece, there is also another ritual associated with fire, which is held during the Shrovetide carnival. In Ioannina the people kindle fires called *dzamales*, *dzores*, or *dzorabines*. They stack logs and demolish various objects in a particular place, from which they

kindle a bonfire after sunset. Sometimes there is a real competition between city districts or even between schools to see who will make the biggest fire. People dance and sing around the fire. The fire's name, *dzamala*, is rather interesting and controversial. In fact, it has become the name of the participants in the rite, which had no direct relation to fire. The ritual was held in autumn and repeated during the winter carnival. It was a ritual to ensure crop fertility (a producing rite) or crop safety (an apotropaic rite). During the ceremony, the death and resurrection of a man, a god, or a totem animal was played out and at a deeper level this imitated the death and resurrection of plants. The rite was called *Dzamala* ('camel'). It may be dedicated to the Feast of St. Demetrius (October 26). St. Demetrius was linked by popular etymology to grain (*dimitriaka*). In Greek archives and research publications, there are many descriptions of the ritual. The main idea was a masquerade. The participants in the celebration put on sheepskins and bells and danced. Sometimes they built a kind of wooden skeleton (frame) and covered it with skins. Four young men hid themselves under this construction and moved the "camel" (Εγκυκλοπαίδεια 2008; Kakouri 1965; Λεκάκης 2009; Μέγας 1992). According to another version of the celebration, a man dressed as a woman was called *Dzamala*. Other participants called *dzamaldes* danced with "her" and this created a situation of rivalry. One "fan" of *Dzamala* "killed" the other, beating him with a branch. *Dzamala* mourned the hapless suitor. When the "killer" approached the "dead" man to "take off his skin" (literally "tear" it off), he was immediately resurrected. Women gave grains of wheat to the performers (Μέγας 1992). During the Shrovetide carnival, a similar ritual game was performed, but sometimes it could



Figure 1. Ritual fire »dzamala«, Shrovetide, Ioannina 2010. (Photo: S. Sidneva)

have a different name; for example, *Kalogeroi* ('monks'). For the "murder" the participants used a cornel tree branch. Then the two players of the game were harnessed to a plow and had to go around the square. Fire was not necessarily present in the ceremony, especially during the autumn rite. Later there was a mixture of the two rites: the Shrovetide fire and *Dzamala*. The etymology of the fires, as mentioned above, is controversial. A more obvious etymology is the origin of the word from the Arabic word for 'camel', although the Greeks give other explanations of the word, even taking it back to ancient Greek *damala* 'log'. This idea is questionable, taking into consideration the use of zoomorphic costumes by the participants and burning of the symbolic image of a camel in some regions, although now the traditional zoomorphic costumes are no longer in use (Figure 1). The people wear mass-produced carnival costumes such as devils, angels, wizards, and so on. Sometimes the central fire is set up with the assistance of the municipal services and the advertising and the invitations are published on websites. In this case, the celebration may be reconstructed more "accurately" according to archival data and research publications.

The ritual calendar may assume a political-historical meaning. On websites describing the festivals one can find the idea that they helped to unite the Greeks during the Turkish conquest, as something reminiscent of an ancient Thracian ritual and thus a more ancient history.

Another interesting custom is timed at Easter: the burning of Judas. As a rule, it is held on Holy Saturday. The young men bring logs, branches, and trash to the main square of the village, construct an effigy symbolizing Judas, and light a large fire. The festival is especially popular on the island of Crete, where an interesting story about Judas is recorded. According to this story, the prophet Nathan prophesied to the pregnant mother of Judas that her child would become a great fire and burn the world (Στρυβακτάκης 1999). The U.S. State Department's *Religious Freedom* report called the ritual politically incorrect due to a mistranslation of the term: the burning of the Jews instead of the burning of Judas. The head of the Greek Orthodox Church had to defend the practice, saying that the ritual had to do only with Judas, who betrayed Christ. Another interesting case is the burning of Angela Merkel's effigy. This shows the influence of history and politics on the calendar. One can trace the stages of rethinking tradition. The Christianization of the ceremony made Judas the main character instead of the pagan incarnation of winter. The German chancellor took the place of Judas as the personification of the "new evil" that must be overcome.

There are some curious modern "beliefs" associated with fire. These include bans on the use of gas burners or other "modern" means of kindling a fire, or otherwise the fire will not be "true." The fire is also not considered "true" if it is produced by firecrackers or flares. In the ritual it is important to use real wood. However another tradition in conjunction with a historical event contradicts these beliefs. Its location is the town of Vrontados on the island of Chios (etymologically connected with the rite because *vronti* means 'thunder'). Many tourism sites describe an unusual celebration of Easter, during which the people launch rockets from the roofs of two churches (St. Mark's and the Red Madonna), trying

to hit the bell tower of the opposing church. This is a relatively new custom. It appeared in the nineteenth century. The Greek sailors used real guns (cannons) to fight off pirates and to celebrate Easter. When the island was occupied by the Ottomans, the conquerors prohibited the use of guns. So the ship owners replaced the confiscated cannons with rockets. It was a kind of political and religious protest. The Greeks did not want to neglect their tradition. Today, this tradition emphasizes the importance of the spectacular aspects of fire rituals. Travel agencies use it to attract more tourists (CarniFest 2012). However, an interesting fact is worth noting. Now, the participants in the event give the rockets the names of ancient or medieval epic heroes: Achilles, Digenis, and so on. It shows various aspects of Greek national identity, and the connection with ancient and Byzantine heritage, and with ancient myths and folk epic. For the participants, the *rouketopolemos* ‘rocket war’ becomes something like a sports event, a competition between two “teams” representing two churches. The winner is the one that hits the opposing bell tower more often. There are even “fans” among the parishioners, who may place bets.

In conclusion, many rituals using the “cleansing” power of fire are alive in modern times, thanks to its spectacular nature. As in ancient times, this is a reason for association and communication between people. Considered as a way to return to basics, but endowed with new meanings, some rites lose touch with the calendar cycle. There is contamination of cultures, and a mixture of academic and traditional folk motifs.

REFERENCES

Amen Ra

2011 Hozhdenie po ognju i Agni Gajjatra mantra (<http://amenra.ru/?p=2201>).

Anastenaria Fire Walking Ritual of Greece, The.

(<http://www.tours2greece.com/tours/traditions/anastenaria.htm>)

CarniFest

2012 Rocket War in Chios Island

(<http://www.carnifest.com/carnivals/Rocket-War-in-Chios-Island.asp>)

Εγκυκλοπαίδεια του Ελληνικού Χορού, Ευρετήριο: E-EAFE2

2008 Τζαμάλα, Χορός σε έθιμο μεταμφιεσμένων σε καμήλα στη Θράκη (http://www.dance-pandect.gr/pds_cosmos/pop/pop_lhmma_gr.php?oid=E-EAFE2&ActionP=Play&mode=Med&Obj=T&id=E-EAFE2&aa=1)

Kakouri, K. J.

1965 *Dionysiaka: Aspects of the Popular Thracian Religion of To-Day*. Athens: G. C. Eleftheroudakis.

Λεκάκης, Γ.

2009 *Αναστενάρια, ένα πανάρχαιο θρακικό έθιμο με αρχέγονες ρίζες στην Καππαδοκία*. Θεσσαλονίκη.

Μέγας, Γ.

1992 *Ελληνικές γιορτές και έθιμα της λαϊκής λατρείας*. Αθήνα.

Omogeneia.ana-mpa.gr

2008 Αναβιώνει το έθιμο “Αναστενάρια” (<http://omogeneia.ana-mpa.gr/press.php?id=2926>)

Πύλη Ιάσωνος

2009 Πυροβασία στην Ελευσίνα (http://www.schizas.com/site3/index.php?id=327&option=com_content&task=view)

Στιβακτάκης, Αντ. Εμμ.

1999 Θρύλοι και παραδόσεις της Κρήτης. Σμυρنيωτάκης εκδ.

TRANSFORMACIJA MODERNIH GRŠKIH KOLEDARSKIH ŠEG, POVEZANIH Z OGNJEM. TRADICIJA IN SODOBNOST

Dandanes se prvotni pomen in duh določenih šeg in navad pogosto spreminjata.

V sodobni komunikaciji se pojavlja več grških šeg, povezanih z ognjem, npr. hoja po žerjavici, ki se tradicionalno izvaja v nekaterih severnogrških krajih na dan svetega Konstantina in Helene; velikonočna šega zažiganja Jude; kresovi svetega Janeza in drugi.

Vsi ti obredi so zanimivi, saj ustvarjajo nova besedila z nenavadno zmešnjavo različnih kulturnih tradicij, mešanico znanstvenih in ljudskih motivov, posebno v razlagi »zdravilne moči ognja«.

Šege, povezane z ognjem, se lahko izvaja ne le v okviru krščanskih, ampak tudi praznikov, ki črpajo iz dediščine antične Grčije, kar se izraža v nekakšni »rekonstrukciji« starejše tradicije. »Spektakularni« del nekaterih obrednih praks pa navadno uporabljajo v komercialne namene.

Dr. Svetlana Sidneva, Department of Foreign Languages
and Regional Studies, MSU Lomonosov, 119361 Bolshaya
Ochakovskaya 27/36, Moscow, Russia, lucia80@mail.ru