The Anastenarides' dance on fire in Neo Kosti¹, second approach: the past and present memory of Kosti and of Eastern Rumelia (actual south Bulgaria)

In May 2015, France Schott-Billmann² invited me for the second time in her research team³ at Neo Kosti, which is a very picturesque little village

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¹ Neo Kosti is not the name of the village that I studied. I changed the name to keep discretion.
surrounded with mountains, in the area of Serres (Macedonia, Greece), and I watched for the second time the Saint Constantine and Helena's feast (with famous dance on fire), which took place every night from the 20/05/2015 to the


3 Dancer, anthropologist and psychoanalyst, France Schott-Billmann studied the Anastenarides for a long time in Langada (an other Macedonian village near Thessaloniki) then she studied them in Neo Kosti 2013. In the team, there also D. Stergiopoulos (ethnomusicologist), K. Stavrour (Teacher of greek history, greek folk dances and primitive dance), M. Dracopoulos and E. Chatzigeorgiou (Teachers of primitive dance), C. Robert (engineer), and several dancers and choreographers. We stayed in Neo Kosti from the 19/05/2015 to the 24/05/2015. We were not allowed to note or to take pictures or videos during festival. Thanks to the team for helping me in the quest of inquiries.

4 About St Constantin, see P. Maraval, Constantin le grand, empereur romain, empereur chrétien (306-337), Tallandier, 2011 with a bibliography ; B. Lançon et T. Moreau, Constantin auguste chrétien, A. Colin, Paris, 2012, with a selective bibliography.

In this place live some Anastenarides, part of the Greek refugees who were expelled from Eastern Rumelia, (former Northern Thrace, then autonomous region of the Ottoman Empire, inhabited by Rums (Greeks), Bulgarian and Turks and actually south Bulgaria, close to the Black Sea) by the newly born Bulgarian state since around 1906 till 1924. They settled in the course of the years in Thessaly, Eastern Thrace, Western Thrace, Macedonia, Athens etc... The main village where the greek Anastenaria was practiced in Eastern Rumelia was the greek village of Kosti and its surrounding area close to Agathoupolis at the coast of the Black Sea. Often, the Anastenarides stayed since around 1912 in a few villages of Macedonia, not far from Thessaloniki. Not all the Greeks of Neo Kosti (around 1000 inhabitants, but 500 from Pontos), originating from Eastern Rumelia are Anastenarides and not all the Anastenarides are from Eastern Rumelia, a few of them being from Pontos. In Neo Kosti the Anastenarides are integrated but cut themselves from the others by their practices and their memory of past. We noted last year the pope of the village does not like them. One of the themes of this congress is about the Black sea, and Kosti, in Bulgaria is not very far from the Black Sea. So, in first, we decided to question the memory of the Anastenarides. What they know about their past and their family past? What they know about Bulgaria? What Bulgaria gives to them in the dance? So we will watch the ritual dance with this idea. In second, we know that actually, the Anastenarides wanted to go to Kosti last autumn and we want to know what they did and if they became friends with Bulgarian, and Bulgarian Anastenarides and if they exchange about their practice. So we question also their present time.

I- Neo Kosti facing Kosti: the memory of past

1- the story of a trauma and the funding myth

We know around 1912, after the first Balkan war (Greece which was independent since 1830, Serbia, Bulgaria against Ottoman Empire), there was a second Balkan war: Greece and Serbia against Bulgaria, which lost the war and a part of her earnings. Macedonia was shared between Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. Thrace was shared between Bulgaria and Turkey. The area, where is located Mount Strandza and where the Anastenarides lived, stayed in Bulgaria.

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6 It is a special interpretation of this feast by the Anastenarides. In the few villages where the Anastenarides live, feast lasts several days and the Anastenarides practice dance on the embers. In the other parts of Greece there is no choreography on fire and festival is only the 21/05.

7 Thanks to K. Stravrou for these informations.

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Bulgarians gave choice to the Greeks who lived in Rumelia: stay and become Bulgarians, or leave Rumelia. A lot of Anastenarides left Rumelia to go to Macedonia and it was a contemporary diaspora. They settled in a few villages of Macedonia in the areas of Serres, Drama, Thessaloniki and Veroia/Veria. This diaspora is not the only one: since 1915, Turkish chased Greeks who lived in the area of Black Sea. So in the 1912-1915 years, there were a lot of diasporas and traumas for the Greeks who lived in Macedonia, Thrace and Pont and moved westward. Greeks parts of Macedonia and Thrace with the new migrants, evolved into a melting-pot context.

The founding myth of dancing on fire is connected with the Greeks who were expelled from Kosti by the Bulgarians in 1912. The myth tells that one night, in ancient time, fire occurred in a Greek church where there were icons. Greeks heard icons, which groaned. They went into fire to seek them and they saved them. Nowadays, each dancer who walks on the embers, reproduces this foundation myth and each Anastenaris can believe that he is requested by St Constantine to save him.

My project was to ask if the Anastenarides have some family in Kosti or in other places of Bulgaria. Several Anastenarides are connected with Bulgaria or other spaces of migration. A young man, horse breeder, anastenaris since 2000, is connected with Turkey. Turkish constrained his family, who lived in the area of Trapezont to speak Turkish language instead of Greek. We hypothesized that this trauma was during or after the war between Greeks and Turkish in 1919-1922, which finished with a treaty and an exchange of population in 1923. One million five thousand Greeks went to Greece but

11 Thanks to K. Stavrou who attracted my attention to this point and see notes 12 and 14.
300,000 Greeks stayed in Pontos and Cilicia and were obliged to become Muslim and to speak Turkish. Later, the horse breeder family came to Thessaloniki, before establishing in Neo Kosti. I know some Anastenarides lived special stories. Several families came from Bulgaria. I wanted to interrogate them about their recollections when they were child, and to know if their parents and their granddads or their grandmothers told about their past. I asked these questions:

Εχετε οικογενεία στην Ανατολική Ρωμυλία ή στην Βουλγαρία; Do you have family in Eastern Rumelia or in Bulgaria?
Ο πατέρας και η μητέρα σας μίλησα περί οικογενεία στην Βουλγαρία; Did your father and your mother speak about their family in Bulgaria?
Ο παππούς και η γιαγία σας μίλησαν περί συγγενείς στην Βουλγαρία; μέγαλο γόνεις της μητέρα σας; μέγαλο γόνεις τους πατέρα σας;
Did your grand father and your grandmother speak about their family in Bulgaria? mother's grandparents? father grandparents?
Ο παππούς και η γιαγία σας έγραψαν στους συγγενείς στην Βουλγαρία; μέγαλο γόνεις της μητέρα σας; μέγαλο γόνεις τους πατέρα σας;
Did your grand father and/or your grandmother write to their family in Bulgaria? mother's grandparents? father grandparents?

Some people have families in Bulgaria but sometimes only by marriage. The 21 May, I met a Greek woman who speaks bulgarian: she is not from Neo Kosti but from a other village very near and she is married with a bulgarian who is not from Kosti but from an other area of Bulgaria, closer to Neo Kosti. For three sisters from Neo Kosti the connection is more important: the paternal grand father 's family is bulgarian. But now, these three women have no family in Bulgaria, only friends in Kosti. I spoke also with a man from Thessaloniki who do not have connection with Bulgaria: he is not a anastenaris and he is here because his daughter is an anastenarissa. He told me the story of the two Balkan wars: in his narrative, the Bulgaria is connected with war and Bulgarians are the ennemies. Kosti is the place where people saved icones. And Anastenarides are all thracian people.

2- the place of the funding myth during the practice

two villages, Bafra (8 km near Thessaloniki) and Nea Bafra (area of Serres), founded in 1920 to establish Greek migrants from Minor Asia, see M. Zerva, "Assimilation linguistique et processus de minoration", Lidil, 44, 2011, 125-136. URL: http://lidil.revues.org/3147

15 I know that the grandfather for the Anastenarides, the pappous is also the ancestor 's name an St Constantin 's name
First time when I saw the dance in 2014 I cried because I was thinking about the myth and the desire to save the powerful icons. I did not see this type of motion on the Anastenarides' faces but others motions as impatience to dance. I cannot think as an anastenaris or an anastearrisona because I am not them but I am sure the myth is very present before and during their dance. This is not a simple walk on fire as practice it Americans, without connection with their religion. We know that young dynamic managers sometimes follow training periods with walk on fire to improve their strength. They have to overcome their fear and they have a technical approach. The Anastenarides practice is a religious act, without technical character. But their dance is not as other religious rituals in the world, even maybe in India or elsewhere a god requests the faithful. The Anastenarides walk on the embers only if St Constantine requests them. If St Constantine calls them, they can walk. They dance on the embers with powerful icons, the shirts of these icons or some silk scarfs, which touched powerful icons. When they look and kiss the icons, they are in worship and when they touch the jackets of the powerful icons, they are in sanctimony. I ask them the place of the myth in their dance, if this place is the same each evening. I asked the first and the third questions, but not the second:

Όταν χορεύετε, έχετε την μνήμη των εικόνων στην Βουλγαρία;
When you dance, do you keep memory of the icons of Bulgaria?

Όταν χορεύετε, θέλετε να σώσετε την εικόνα του Κωνσταντίνου;
When do you dance, do you want to save Constantine's icon?

Τι νιώθετε όταν χορεύετε με την εικόνα του Κωνσταντίνου;
What do you feel when you dance with Constantine's icon?

For all the Anastenarides, the icons are very important. No one remains indifferent because the powerful icons are very ancient (beginning of XXth century ?) and came from Bulgaria: they were sometimes restored but they are the originals icons from Bulgaria and only these powerful icons give incombustibility. But the Anastenarides do not think about the myth especially when they dance. A woman thinks about her grand father and when she speaks about him, his motion increases. The horse breeder is a very vehement man when he dances with powerful icons, but he does not want to think about anything when he practices firewalking. He wants to clean his spirits before dancing and to relax.

16 We use the term powerful, as suggest F. Schott-Billman, because all the icons are sacred for the Anastenarides but only the ancient icons brought from Bulgaria are powerful.
19 Last restoration of Constantine and Helena's icons was made at the time of an astenarissa's grandfather. Thanks to Daphné Stergiopoulou, ethnomusicologue for translation of this last answer.
II- Neo Kosti facing Kosti : the memory of present time

1- connections between Neo Kosti and Kosti nowadays

We know that the Anastenarides from Kosti wanted to go to Kosti during last autumn. We were very interested by this project because it gives a new representation of Bulgarians for Greeks : Bulgarians are not only the hereditary enemies. Greeks can create other relations than war. We wanted to know if the Anastenarides from Neo Kosti travelled to Kosti and if they became friends with Bulgarians, and Bulgarian with the Anastenarides and if they know the Bulgarian festival Nestinartsvo. So I prepared some questions:

Πάτε στην Βουλγαρία το περασμένο έτος. Μπόρετε να διηγήθετε ;
You went in Bulgaria last year. Can you tell about it ?

Είδατε Στρανζα ; Τι νιώθετε περί τον ;
Did you see Mount Strandza and what you feel about it ?

Τώρα έχετε φίλους στην Βουλγαρία ; Μπόρετε να διηγηθετε ;
Now, do you have friends in Bulgaria ?

Στην Βουλγαρία, είναι μία γιορτή που ονομάζεται Νεστιναρτσβο. Γνωρίζετε την ; Μπόρετε να διηγηθετε ;
In Bulgaria there is a feast which calls Nestinartsvo. Do you know it ? Can you tell about it ?

I asked the first question. We learned that unfortunately the Anastenarides could not go to Kosti and we think, alas, it is because of financial reasons (so I could not ask the second question). I know that the price of bus ticket from Thessaloniki to Bourgas is around 30 euros for a simple trip, 60 for a round trip. We are very sad that poverty not allows a so interesting project. I knew also that the horse breeder learned alone bulgarian and we exchanged some words in this language. Some families have already friends in Kosti, even if they could not go

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to see them. All the Anastenarides know the name of the Nestinartsvo festival, and they think the content of this feast is very close to the Anastenaria

2- Exchanges ? intercultural relations ?

We wanted to know if the Anastenarides would exchange about their practice, if they could go to Kosti one day :

Μίλησατε στους βουλγάρους περί πρακτικές
Did you speak with Bulgarians about your practice ?
Θέλετε να καλέσατε ίνα χορέουν μαζί σας για την Αναστενάρια ;
Do you want to invite Bulgarians to dance with you for the Anastenaria ?
Θέλετε να καλετήκατε ίνα χορεύουν μαζί σας για την Νεστιναρτσβο ;
Would you like to be invited by Bulgarians and to dance with them at the Nestinartsvo ?
Νομίζετε ότι σας και βουλγάροι έχετε την ίδια κοινοτούρα ;
Do you think you and Bulgarians have the same culture ?

For all the Anastenarides from Neo Kosti, Hellenic and Bulgarian cultures are very close but, first, they feel Greek. They want to go to Kosti but together, as says the horse breeder : he is not interested by a trip to Kosti without the group.

In conclusion, we can say that the memory of Kosti and the Bulgaria is very important during the dance, although it is not expressed by the revival of myth. The myth is really present in the dance, even people does not thinking about it when they prepare or practice firewalking. The powerful icons are the originals of Kosti and that gives strength to the dance. And as says J. Sarno in the title of her book Le icone che danzano, do not forget that these are not the people dancing but the icons.
Fig. 1: Bulgaria is very close, behind the mountain
Fig. 2 Drawing of interior of the Conaki by MH Delavaud-Roux