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Boules: The Carnival of Naoussa. Folklore or Symbolism?

The *Boules* of Naoussa is taking place during the Carnival period. It is a dance event that incorporates a variety of elements from Greek history, tradition and religion. This paper describes the event, with reference to the special costumes, and the specific songs and dances that this includes. It also endeavors to retrieve its connection with Ancient Times, Byzantine Times, and later years, shaping an amalgam of influences and conceptions. Finally, it goes beyond the surface, trying to determine the meaning of this dance event, not as a simple custom, as most scholars face it, but as a reflection of Greek identity.

Key words:

Boules, Naoussa,
dance-event, mask,
symbolism

The custom of *Boules* is a dance-event taking place every year at the town of Naoussa, in Northern Greece, during the period of the carnival, the weeks just before Easter, and comes from Ancient Times. We call it as dance-event because it combines traditional dancing with acting, or we may say it consists of sketches accompanied by traditional dancing and singing in the form of a dialogue. Indeed, the custom of *Boules* follows the implications of Ancient Greek Tragedy, holding the Dionysian character, but with different ending. That is probably the reason that researchers and historians maintain that this custom has its origins in Ancient Times. However, according to Christos Zalios, teacher and researcher, it is probably related to rituals of tribal initiation ceremonies, such as the ritual of becoming an adult. During that the young man, dressed in woman's clothes and led by unmarried men of the tribe, are instructed its secrets. By taking off the woman's clothing and getting dressed as a man, the young men will symbolically become a man (Zalios 11/2/2007).

The custom of *Boules* incorporates the local tradition, the myths, the legends, the songs and the heroic fights of the people from the town of Naoussa. It follows specific schedule arranged in advance according to a very strict oral tradition. This includes firstly the forming of the group (*boulouki*), based on certain rules. Secondly, the people taking part in the event must be young males. Thirdly, no women take part in the event. That is why for the feminine role, that of the bride-

Boula, there is a man who wears women's costume. And finally, the costumes and the attitude of the young men must follow traditional rules, and the musical instruments, and the dancing remain the same as in old times. It is very important that this dance-event always follows the same route throughout the town. This means that anyone who is interested in gathering the *boulouki* should know this specific route as well as the names of the streets and the neighbourhoods of Naousa.

The forming of the group starts before Carnival begins. In older times the men who took part in the *boulouki* varied between six to twelve people, while today more people take part in the event, particularly children are mostly encouraged. They define their leader and get ready for the event, with particular attention to the costumes they wear. The silver coins and necklaces they wear on their costumes, is the most significant part of this dance-event.

On Saturday evening, a day before the Carnival day, the dressing up of the young men starts. It is like a ceremony that goes on all through the night, where women of each house sew the silver coins and the necklaces on the costumes. When the dressing up finishes, a specialised man puts on the head of each young man the scarf (*taraboulo*) and the mask. The young man is ready and waits for the music to invite him to join the group. Nowadays, this process starts early in the morning of Sunday of the Carnival.

Music is basic element of the custom. With the sound of the drum and the clarinet today, or the *zournas* in past years, the group *boulouki* starts the dance-event.¹ The musical instruments, while playing a free rhythmic melody, called *Zalistos*, pass by the houses of all the young men who participate in the group and call them one by one to join the group. When musicians play the song of *Zalistos*, the Boula comes to the window or to the balcony of the house and welcomes the group, which came to invite him. He stretches his hands up and moves his chest to the right and left, so that the coins that hung from his costume make noise. The more noise he make, the stronger he shows to the others. The noise of the coins symbolises the robustness of the men. During the Turkish occupation men, dressed as *Boules*, made that noise to express their urge and their enthusiasm for revolution. Then the young man greets all the people of the house and everybody who helped him to dress up. When the young man comes to the front door of the house, he makes three times the sign of the cross and then he greets all the people who came to gather him. Nowadays, the men do that symbolically commemorating the days they left their houses to join the fight against Turks and become thieves. This moment was very emotional and the noise from the coins strengthened their courage. Afterwards, the group starts their way in pairs, to meet and invite the next Boula, while the musical instruments play the dance of *Zalistos*.

The bride-Boula is getting ready in the family of the man who plays this role. It is a role that must be acted in a serious and proud manner. The bride-Boula

¹ One of the most famous players of the *zournas*, in the area of Naousa, and even beyond this, is Vaggelis Psathas (1936-), honorary doctorate of the Music Department of the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki (27/5/2008).

has to kiss the hands of all the people of his house and then he has to kiss the hands of all in the group, the musicians as well as of the people at the time there. So now, the group has two *Boules* and one bride-boula in the middle. Then they continue walking and dancing singing and inviting more people old and young ones. More and more people join the group (*boulouki*), who walk in the following order. The boys, who do not wear a mask, go first and then the older ones follow. The younger *Boules* come next, in the middle is the bride-Boula and the oldest *Boules* come last together with the leader of the group. Right behind the leader are the musicians, who receive orders by the leader for the repertoire they must play.



Picture 1 – The traditional wedding of Naousa 6/3/2011 personal archive

The *boulouki* moves towards the meeting point, The Town Hall, at 12 o'clock, where everybody waits for the *Boules* to come and take the permission from the mayor. On the way the musicians play a slow and sad song. When they are outside the Town Hall, the musicians play the *zalistos* and the *Boules* dance in pairs now, moving their chests so that the coins make a great noise. When the mayor gives permission and announces the start of the event, the instrument of *zournas* plays the song 'Kato stis Roydos', which is danced by the *Boules* as *sygathistos* traditional dance, similarly to the first dance performed in the traditional wedding of Naousa. It is important here to point out that this song is chosen on purpose here. The relics of the song are 'Kato stis Roydos, sti Roydopoula, Tourkos agapise mia romiopoula' (which says that a Turkish man fall in love with a Greek girl). This misled the Turkish people of those days, making them believe that the event was a wedding feast, whereas the bride was a man, not a woman, and the purpose of the event was, the young men to collect money and food for the Thieves and rebels lived up in the mountains, to send and transfer messages, and to find new young men who would be brave enough to join the fights against Turkish Occupation and become rebels. The following picture is from the traditional wedding from Naousa,

held in the main square of the town. Today, it has been part of the dance-event of *Boules*, held just after the symbolic permission of the Mayor.

The *boulouki* moves slowly from the Town Hall, dancing the *Patinada* accompanied by the musicians playing the song ‘Os Pote Palikaria’, towards the first neighbourhood, where they stop and dance. When they reach the place where three streets meet, the clarinet players play the *Patinada* of ‘Sanidas’. After that they pass through the narrow lane of Christides, the present market place, and they come out at the Burnt Houses (Kammena) where they stop again and dance the *Patinada* of ‘Chontrosouglá’. In the following, the group reaches the square of Pouliana and then the square of Batania, where they dance the *Patinada* of Ypsilantis. Then they move towards the Vasileos Konstantinou Street dancing the *Patinada* ‘Milis o Periphanos’, and going to the park of Naoussa. A lot of citizens of Naoussa wait there to admire them and vote the best dancers.

They keep moving around the city of Naoussa, dancing, singing and making noise with their costume’s coins and their swords they keep in their hands. From the park they move to the St George’s church, dancing the *Patinada* of ‘Kambana’, then to St Mina’s church and from there they go to the crossroads of Maggavelas next to St Mary’s church. From Maggavelas to the Alonia Square the musicians play the song called ‘Kateva katou Lenko’. There nowadays, a great feast is always held, like a short sketch or a parade, usually by people dressed up in costumes with a more satirical perception. Their themes are related to the political and social recent facts of their society or of the country. The following picture is from a sketch which criticizes the politicians of Greece. In this neighbourhood the members of the group, who live nearby take off their masks.



Picture 2 – Alonia Square Naoussa 6/3/2011 personal archive

After the great feast at Alonia and while walking to Galakia, the clarinet players play the *Patinada* ‘Den s’arizan t’alonia Maria’. *Boules*, dancing to the rhythm of the *Patinada* of ‘Chontrosougla’, pass by the Bended Plane-tree the crossroads of Latsis and Lamnias and they come out again to the Burnt Houses, where they dance their last dance.



Picture 3 – Naousa, Neighbourhood of Alonia, the famous old plane tree 6/3/2011 personal archive

This time the men leaving nearby this neighbourhood take off their masks. At the Burnt Houses the group starts dispersing, some of the *Boules* return to their homes to continue the feast with their relatives.

The great feast of Carnival Sunday is repeated on the last Sunday, the so called ‘Tis Tirinis’, with the same and even more Dionysian spirit. On the next day, the so called ‘Clean Monday’ the dance-event goes on similarly, until the evening. The dancing repertoire is very specific, consisting of the following dances: *Zalistos*, *Syghathistos*, *Papadia*,² *Old Papadia*, *Davelis* (similar to *Papadia*), *Sotiris*, *Ni-*

² This dance is fast, in 3/4 rhythm and is accompanied by an instrumental piece without lyrics. People stand in a circle and only the leader of the group dance, while the rest of them just move their chests, so that the coins shake and make noise. Only near the ending all dancers join the leader.

zamikos, Melikes, Moustabeikos (11/16),³ Sarantapente, Souda, Makrynitsa and of course Patinada. On the other hand the bride-Boula dances very little of the above dances. Her dance repertoire consists of different dances, like Nizamikos,⁴ Sarantapente, Melikes and Souda or Moustabeikos. The most known is the Makrynitsa dance. It is a dance with significant symbolism. It is a lamentation and a tribute to one of the most glorious pages of Greek History, the holocaust and the total destruction of Naousa by the Turks in 1822. It is danced as commemoration to the women and girls who committed suicide then by falling at the waterfall of Arapitsa in Naousa, to avoid Turks.

The costume consists of the very famous *fustanella*, short white pleated kilts, which is shorter in length to that of the Peloponnesus and of the mainland; the shirt, in white colour; and the vest, which carried chains of florins and trinkets criss-crossing their chests. They were called 'asimia', which means silver, because they were made of pure silver. They were usually Turkish, Austrian, or French coins from the 17th, 18th and 19th century. Their purpose was to protect the young men from the enemy, instead of shield. Today, the coins are imitation of these old ones symbolically used, and thereby they are much lighter. Additionally to that, the women always sew several trappings of Christian origin, such as saints' objects, or just crosses. The following pictures show the silver accessories and the different trappings on the vest.



Picture 4 – Naousa 6/3/2011 personal archive

³ According to Samuel Baud Bovy, at his book *Dokimio gia to Elliniko Dimotiko Tragoudi*, Nafplion, 1984, p.101, this dance is met in Naousa mainly during the Christmas period

⁴ It is men's dance met in Naousa and the region around it, danced mainly in the Carnival of Boules. It is a circled dance with nine movements in 4/4 rhythm, starting slowly and gradually increasing its tempo. It is note worthy that most men's traditional dances from Naousa, like Papadia and Davelis, end up as Nizamikos dance.



Picture 5 –Naousa 6/3/2011 personal archive



Picture 6 – Naousa 6/3/2011 personal archive

One may criticise negatively the combination of pagan features with Christian ones, seeming contradicting elements. However, this is the unique meaning of this custom, which differentiates it from the rest carnivals of Greece; the combination of the Dionysian spirit and character with the Christian elements. The costume of the *Boules* creates effectively this mixture, combining the trappings with the crosses and the mask with the saints' object.

Very important are the wide silky belt, the leather belt which covered the main wide belt, and served as wallet, or usually as gun case. The very famous *giataghani*, is the case for the knife, while significant part of the costume are the silver coins and chains, and all the silver pieces sewed on the vest at the front and also at the back side, which made a particular noise symbolizing the 'awakening of the earth'. Finally the most important part of the costume is the *face*, which consists of a mask and a fabric belt, which ties around the head of a *Boula*. The mask is made by plaster covered with wax and painted white with all the details of a man's face, made by specialists. The influence from the famous Dionysian masks is more than apparent. Of course the costume includes various other accessories that complete the folklore set of clothes. The following pictures show quite clearly the costume and most of its parts.



Picture 7 – Naousa 6/3/2011 personal archive

The costume of the bride-Boula is identical to the traditional costume of the bride of Naousa. The only difference is on the skirt which has hoops underneath so that it is inflatable. It includes the *Face*, which has feminine characteristics, red chic and lips, whereas on the head there are flowers and ribbons. However, the fact that a man is dressed woman reminds us of the Ancient Greek Theatre, where no women took part, and the feminine roles were played only by men.



Picture 8 – 6/3/2011 personal archive

In order to appreciate even more this event of Naousa, we should mention the history of Naousa in the years of Ottoman Empire. The people of the area of Naousa had high privileges offered by the Turks, because the area was very rich and offered great products. No matter how much benefited they were, they chose to help decisively the Revolution of 1822 against Turks, and that was the reason the town was totally destroyed by them in April of 1822. It is this disaster that this event

symbolises and every step of this dance-event is directly connected to the commemoration of the Revolutionary years. Precisely, during those days the rebels from the mountains took advantage of the Carnival period and dressed up in order to return to the town. The costume and particularly the Face helped them to walk around the people of Naousa and being protected from the camouflage. The role of the bride-Boula was very crucial. It was her (meaning him) that by being dressed as bride could talk to everybody and could ask for money from the people. The dance helped them create a festival feeling which made the attempt successful. Therefore, this event helped the Revolution against Turks in 1822.

According to Baitsis the custom started in 1706, one year after the first forced gathering of the boys by the Turks. He maintained that the young men of Naousa were dressed in guerrilla costumes wearing masks, hiding their faces from Turks, and they sewed the silver coins on their vests, instead of armour, protecting their chests. By this way they commemorated the gathering of young Greeks by the Turks in 1705 (Baitsis 2001, 28). Theodoros Ziotas, in his book *Boules tis Naousas* (2003), gives the etymological explanation to the word *Boules*. Specifically, he maintains that in Latin the word *Bulla* means jewellery, silver craft, or necklace, either for the women's belts, or for the men, a meaning that is directly connected to the costume of the *Boula* of Naousa (Ziotas 2003, 21-23). On the other hand, the verb created by the word *Boula- Boulono-* means in the region of Epirus, cover up. The *Face*, the most significant accessory of the costume, indeed covers up the faces of the men. Therefore, the name *Boules* is successfully applied to this event and is not incorporated metaphorically but literally.

However, some historians refer to this dance-event as *Genitsari and Boules*. Where the name *Genitsari* comes from, though? Some historians have given two reasons. Most of them, like Baitsis and Gavriilidis supported the direct link of the event with the God of Dionysus and the festivities dedicated to him. Particularly, they said that the word Dionysus paraphrased becomes *Gianysus*, and then *Gianytsarus (Genitsaros)* (Zalios 2007). Zalios supported the idea that the term *Gianytsaros* (or *Genitsaros*) was added to the original name of the event *Boules*. He related this term to the illegal character of the *Boules*. He maintained that due to the arbitraries they made, they were given the name of *Genitsaros* in later times. We should mention here that according to the Historical Dictionary of Modern Greek language, under the word of *Genitsaros*, writes "...the man who makes arbitraries". (Academy of Athens 1980)

During the Turkish Occupation, all Greeks had to carry a light when they walked out during the night. This was a rule that every Greek should follow and whoever did not had punishments. However, *Boules* did not carry this light while walking, dancing and singing in the streets of Naousa during the night. This was one of the arbitraries they made. Secondly, their costume itself was not the usual traditional one and therefore it was regarded as illegal. Thirdly, the *Face*; their mask covered their faces and thereby nobody could recognise them. And finally, and most significantly they carried swords, something illegal for those years. Therefore, it seems that the name *Genitsaros* and *Boules*, that it was attributed to this dance-event referred to the illegal life of *Boules*. However, after Revolution, when the

event was a commemoration of that past tragic historical moment of Greeks from Naousa, the use of the name *Genitsaros* fade in time, and thereby it remained only the name *Boules*, as still people call it today.

The significance of this dance-event is its symbolic meaning. It incorporates so effectively both, Pagan tradition from Ancient Times with Christian tradition and Greek history; the Dionysian spirit of the mask and the dancing, which reminds us of Ancient Greek tragedy, combined with the crosses and the trappings of Christian origin on the costumes, blended with great historical moments of Greeks. This is *Boules* the 'Carnival of Naousa'.

Unfortunately, after the establishment of the Modern Greek State there was a complicated dilemma, between the "Dionysian" origins of the nation against its oriental Byzantine elements. Modern Greeks would have either to consider themselves as direct successors of Imperial Orthodox Byzantines, or they would have to reject their daily cultural life rooted in their religious beliefs and accept the Pagan past, despite that this debate was primarily expressed and imported by western scholars. They viewed the Classical Antiquity as part of their own identity, while Byzantium for them was east and heteronymous.

Constantinos Paparigopoulos, at his writings on Greek history in 1860s and 1870s, argued that the continuity between pagan classicism and Byzantine Christianity could only be appreciated through a totally new concept, created from the amalgamation of the above features; bringing forth a new term, the "Helleno-Christianity" (Paparigopoulos 1955, 10). This term implied a continuity, which demanded the integration of several ingredients into a single historical synthesis. I regard that the symbolic meaning of several Greek customs, or dance-events, like that of *Boules* answers the debates of several historians and politicians about the contradicted identity of Modern Greece, which incorporates the Ancient Greek identity with that of Byzantium and Christianity.

Translated by author

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Ана Бабали

Булес: карневал у Науси Фолклор или симболизам?

Булес је обичајни плес који се одражава сваке године у граду Науса, у северној Грчкој, у време карневала у недељама које претходе Васкрсу и потиче из античког доба. То је плесачки догађај који обједињује разноврсне елементе из грчке историје, традиције и религије. Овај рад описује тај догађај, са освртом на неке посебне обичаје и специфичне песме и игре које ту спадају. У раду постоји тежња ка успостављању везе са античким добом, византијским периодом и каснијим епохама, да би се уобличио један амалгам утицаја и идеја. На крају, иде се даље од површине у покушају да се одреди значење овог плесачког догађаја, не само као простог обичаја, како га већина научника описује, већ као одраза грчког идентитета.

Кључне речи:

Булес, Науса,
плесни догађај,
маска, симболизам