

SYMBOLISMS OF FERTILITY AND REBIRTH OF NATURE

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EASTER CELEBRATIONS

Easter is the most significant celebration for the Christian world. Closely associated with Spring, Renaissance and Rebirth of nature it incorporates rituals and customs that can be traced back to antiquity.

In Greece and in Cyprus Easter -else known as *Lambri* or *Anastasis*-Resurrection-incorporates not only the religious element of Christ's Resurrection but also is the most significant spring celebration, symbolizing the joy of people for the revival of nature and the beginning of creativity.

The selection of Easter date is based upon complex calculations, aiming on the one hand to be discerned from the Jewish feast (Pessah="passage"¹) and on the other hand to take into consideration the astronomical circumstances. The eclipses of the sun and moon followed by cosmic turbulences created beliefs with huge symbolism.

Similarly to the rest of the customs of the annual cycle, the majority of the customs have survived, mostly in the countryside, whereas in the cities only those that are closely related to the ecclesiastic customs have been preserved and maintain a strong societal character.

The Easter period is preceded by 40 days of Lent during which the believer gradually prepares for the joyful message of Christ's Resurrection.

The highlight of Easter celebrations is the Holy Week, an extension and intense experience of Lent, bearing all the characteristics of a "gradual procession and support of the faithful to the -multiple times recounted from the Evangelists- suffering of their Teacher". The Holy Week, from an ecclesiastic, ritualistic but also ethnographic view, is full of symbolic actions contributing to the understanding of the Divine Drama. Simultaneously it ensures the participation of the believers in the revival of the Passions, death, mourning and the catharsis that comes from Resurrection with the victory of life over death. For these reasons the character of most rituals is intensely religious.

The Church prepares the believer by showing gradually the suffering of Christ and his martyred procession. The processions follow one another, from the prophetic speeches of Christ, to the betrayal and arrest, to the grand trial by Pilatus, the arrival at the Cross, the Burial and of course the much anticipated Resurrection. The people experienced and shared all the stages in the procession towards Golgotha, mourned with the Holy Mother and cried for the "beautiful young God". With the certainty of the Resurrection preparations run in parallel for the celebration-the painted red eggs, the sheep, the whitening of the houses. The awakening of nature and the arrival of spring are dominant throughout the religious and folklore ritual.

¹ Easter is also known as *Pasha*.

In the pages that follow a short presentation of the rituals that comprise the Easter celebration takes place.

Emphasis is given to those that survive to our days and mostly those dominating the Greek speaking Orthodox (Greece and Cyprus) where the relationship between the religious and folklore rituals has survived, from Lazarus Saturday to the Sunday of the Resurrection. Before proceeding to the analysis of the Easter customs and rites, attention should be given to some important **cultural issues** and **values** reflected in the ritualistic practices and their vehicles.

Easter festivities are marked by a great emotional value, which is expressed by the dramatic character of the liturgy and the overall theatrical nature of the festivities, especially in the Mediterranean Orthodox world. Almost similar are the characteristics in the Balkans or those of the Slaves in the East. In the whole of the Orthodox Christian East, all the ritualistic practices are assigned to women and children². Although the ritual of the Orthodox Church is assumed by the priests (men), women are almost exclusively involved in the dressing of the Epitaph (Holy Sepulchre) and in the other preparations in the houses and in the Church. The almost exclusive participation of women in the practices celebrating Easter is explained by the fact that women are linked with fertility and growth, they give life and birth. Therefore all the customs and rites related with the death and resurrection of nature and humanity are dependant on the feminine knowledge and competence³.

From Lazarus Saturday to Easter Sunday

Songs (*agermoi*) and customary events (*dromena*)

Resurrection is preceded by Lazarus Saturday along with Palm Sunday, while the songs (*agermoi*) of Lazarus Sunday, bearing his name (*Lazarus agermoi*), are widely known and popular⁴. That day, compounded by the cheerful Evangelical tale of the resurrection of the dead (John 11, 1-44) and the following day with the triumphant entrance of Christ in Jerusalem (John 12, 12-19), brings a positive message and foretells the Resurrection of Jesus.

Lazarus Saturday, also known as First Easter (*Proti Lambri*) is rich in customary events that are geographically spread and vary locally.

All are clustered around the Lazarus rise and include:

- Lazarus's songs (*ayermoi*) sang by boys and girls announcing Lazarus's resurrection while carrying baskets with freshly cut flowers and collect the eggs of Easter⁵.
- The baking of bread-made figures depicting of Lazarus that carry a pre-resurrection symbolism (Aegean Islands), as well as the procession of effigies on flowery funeral beds of Lazarus (Epitaph) made out in rough shapes and colourfully decorated (Cyclades, Crete, Ionian, Epirus)

² In the West the main tasks for the organization of Easter manifestation are mostly assigned to men.

³ See Yvonne de Sike, *Fêtes et croyances populaires en Europe, au fil des saisons*, France (Bordas) 1994, p.48, ff.

⁴ Although spring festivities spread across the Balkan area, they only have religious character in the Greek-speaking parts.

⁵ The custom is well known in the continental part of Greece; from Macedonia to Thrace and central Greece to the Peloponnese, - but also in insular Greece (Dodecanese islands) and Cyprus. In Epirus the youth are accompanied by large bells and woods having an apotropaic symbolism.

The songs dramatically narrate the story of Lazarus, which is also played out as in an open-air theater, with the intention not only to recount the story but achieve a psychological catharsis and experience the “resurrection”⁶.

The making of the effigies takes place the night of the eve of Lazarus Saturday by women and children with coloured ribbons or baked breads (Lazarus bread) in human form, often in the shape of a puffed up baby (with eyes made out of raisins). The origins of this lay in the Byzantine iconography where Lazarus (resembling a small mummy) is portrayed as dead surrounded by mourners who are aware however of his imminent resurrection the next day.

In the insular Greece, Lazarus breads are distributed in the dead man’s soul⁷. Groups mostly of girls but also of boys, holding in their hands the spring idols used to walk around the houses of the village-on occasion even neighbouring villages, sing a narrative lament and offer well-wishes to the owners of the houses for the coming spring. The groups are always welcome, since the wishes and the praises offered in the second part of the songs are connected with harvest. In some areas like Epirus, the songs/carols are accompanied by large bells whose purpose is to drive away the evil.

In some cases only girls participate in the songs of Lazarus (named *Lazarines*) while married women are excluded. The reason for this is that Lazarus had only sisters. In Western Macedonia, Thessaly, Central Greece and Peloponnese the custom had an intense social character since it offered to girls the opportunity of coming into contact with the micro-community of their village, walk around the houses show off their skills and become known as potential brides.

In the old days, the *Lazarines* met a week before, every night at a different house, until they learned the long religious song and the wishes they would offer to the residents. The *Lazarines* hold a basket decorated with flowers in which they place white eggs offered by the housewives. In some cases they place in advance an egg in the basket, inviting thus the residents to give them many eggs, which they will paint bright red and consume on Easter day.

In certain areas (Zagorohoria in Epirus) they used to decorate the baskets to resemble small epitaphs with bells or handkerchiefs surrounding them, a herald of Resurrection. The flowers used for decoration in some areas-mainly in Cyprus- are usually yellow, the color of death and often bear the name “Lazarus”. In the entrance of the houses they set up a “*strange but believable representation of Lazarus rebirth*” while girls cradle Lazarus look-alike idols to which they sang the carols. The songs themselves either long or short, are usually mixed in format especially in the Aegean islands where they contain many praises (leading to the expected tip)⁸.

There is a variety of ways and forms in which the custom has been presented over the years in Greece. The evangelical tales and iconography played a significant part in this however the

⁶ Demetrios Loukatos, *Easter and Spring Customs*, Athens 1988 (in Greek).

⁷ The same custom can be found in Bulgaria.

⁸ In Cyprus where Saint Lazarus is a popular saint, we encounter an extensive religious song but also a more demonstrative representation of the resurrection-especially in Larnaca. According to tradition, in his second life, unsmiling because he had already faced Hades, Lazarus lived in Cyprus and was in fact the first bishop of Kitio, what is now known as Larnaca, where he also died. His sarcophagus can be found in a crypt underneath the name-part church in Larnaca. The day of his celebration is connected to various other customs, like abstention from work or washing of the body to avoid the evil. Groups of children, preserving the custom, used to go from house to house singing the religious song according to various local traditions, while carrying palm-trees decorated in flowers. In certain areas they used to re-enact the resurrection at the end of the church service.

custom itself could have begun as a religious mystery⁹ and then crossed over being recreated by the public who sought through the personifications to experience and enjoy the element of the “Resurrection” that they associated more with the farming, bucolic and general rebirth and productivity of nature.

The custom later on changed to include the procession of Lazarus effigy for well-wishes, or the offering of baked effigies (*lazaroudia*), songs (carols specifically) which focused either on female presence (*Lazarines*) or driving away evil (Bells) or announcing Spring.

Lazarus’ Saturday, before nightfall, is considered the most appropriate time to prepare the **palm leaves** that will decorate the churches the next day, Palm Sunday. The gathering of palms in the old days was undertaken by single women, to ensure childbearing. Usually they wore green and red colours and once they finished collecting the palms they danced in tune to the respective songs and thump each other with a branch to ensure their health and to ensure fertility. The bundles are then transported to each parish. The blessed palms along with the flowers will be distributed to the attendees and be kept at their homes to drive away the evil. In the rural areas they used to knock the bundles in the fields, the trees and the vineyards. In Skyros it is believed that cattle-breeders awaited the palm leaves of the church to reach the paddock, knock each of the sheep with a palm leaf so that they could begin the milking to produce the cheese on time. In the islands they brought in the church along with palm leaves, olive and bay leaves. Those were kept by the housewives in the family altar and used them as incenses to drive away the evil spirits of the “evil eye”.

The customs of Lazarus’ Saturday and Palm Sunday, especially the carols, are interconnected with the customs of the Holy Thursday and Holy Friday and the **lament of the Holy Mother**, a non-ecclesiastical lament song¹⁰ that has been preserved in many versions (more than 256) oral, handwritten in manuscripts (from the 14th century and on) and printed (from the 19th century). The lament is a piece-in-verse narrating the personal drama of the Holy Mother and describing indirectly the human destiny of Christ from the cradle to the grave.

It is a mourning song with a geographical and timely continuity incorporating ancient Greek traditions (Adonis), medieval poems and theatrical performances (Erotokritos, Abraham’s sacrifice), magical (for the harvest) and social habits that spread across today’s Turkey, Bulgaria and Albania. In some variations a female figure slips into the Holy Mother’s lament song, named Saint Kali-an ancient Greek divinity that was said to express the disapproval of the public opinion¹¹.

Related to the rituals of Holy Thursday is the “**ceremony of the basin**” (known as *Niptir*). It is a symbolic representation, testified to being presented in Constantinople, Jerusalem and Cappadocia and today taking place only on the island of Patmos. The main performers are the Father Superior and the monks of the monastery of St John the Theologian. The reenactment follows a particular scenario based on the scripture of the Holy Testament, which has been preserved in two manuscripts known from the 19th century. The ritual starts on the 11pm of Holy Thursday in one of the squares of the island’s capital (*Chora*); Christ is played by the Father Superior, the 11 Apostles are represented by 11 priests and one laic plays Judas. All the scenes include symbolic actions. The central scene is the symbolic washing of the Apostles feet by the Father superior.

⁹ Like the *Niptir* ecclesiastical ritual taking place in the island of Patmos.

¹⁰ Bertrand Bouvier, *Le Mirologue de la Vierge I. La chanson populaire du Vendredi Saint*, Genève 1976.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Holy Thursday and Holy Friday are related with **funerary customs**¹². It is a common practice for women to visit the cemeteries and to decorate the graves with flowers. The most important event of Holy Friday is the evening **procession of the Epitaph**, led by the liturgical flags and the cross and in some places accompanied by local bands playing funeral marches. In most places a women chorus sings special songs contributing to the atmosphere of devotion. On the islands the procession of the Epitaph takes place close to the sea. In the old days there was a custom to bring in the main doors of the houses the costumes of seafarers lost at sea. The procession of the Epitaph is closely related with the popular customs, the purification of the houses and the lands, and the commemoration of the dead, because according to ecclesiastical tradition Christ visited Hades and met the souls of the dead.

In general the Epitaphs gather all the power of the Holy Week. Therefore sick and weak people used to pass three times under the Holy Sepulcher hoping to receive the blessing to bring them good health.

Among the common Easter customs is the **burning of Judas**. It is happening in the most of Greece¹³ and is related with the purifying fires aiming at drive away the evil. The burning takes place in the afternoon of the Easter Sunday, usually in front of the Church or in the central square of the village. The making of Judas effigy is simple and almost similar in all parts of Greece. It is made of straw and rags filled in with gun powder while a gourd is used for the head. In some variations they put in the effigy's hand a purse symbolising the Judas 30 silver pieces of Christ betrayal. The effigy is placed in the top of a pile of logs or it is hanging from a tree and burned. Many scholars see in this custom some of the most ancient traditional practices related with prolific and fertility figures symbolizing the vegetation¹⁴.

Easter symbols

It is well known that ritual symbols constitute an integral part of the festivities lending a special interest to each ceremony. With the passage of time, the mobility of the people and the consequently exercised cultural influences, new symbols are added to those already existing or others are abolished.

A short description of the most common symbols linked with Easter celebrations follows.

The eggs

The eggs and mainly the painted red ones are largely known in the whole Orthodox world¹⁵. Their preference is interpreted by many different ways. Considered as source of life and of perfection, the egg symbolises in the Christian years, as in the past, the rebirth and good fortune. The red, a powerful and apotropaic colour, has been related to ancient Greek and pre-Christian traditions (e.g. Adonis and Attis¹⁶ etc) and is linked with Christ's blood that is

¹² E. Karpodini-Dimitriadi, Les jours des morts en Grèce: temps et ceremonie, *Pact/Eurethno Actes III*, pp. 123-126.

¹³ The custom is also known in the whole southeastern Europe and also in some parts of western Europe (e.g in Lorraine, France)

¹⁴ See Walter Puchner, *Popular theatre in Greece and the Balkans (a Comparative study)*, Athens 1989, p. 74

¹⁵ For the symbolic meaning and usage of the egg see also Marie-Christine Anest-Couffin, Le temps mythique et l'oeuf dans le calendrier populaire grec, *PACT/EURETHNO: Actes IV*, pp. 124-132.

¹⁶ Attis whose faith and ritual originate in Western Asia, especially in Phrygia, appears to have been a god of vegetation, and his death and resurrection were mourned and rejoiced over at a festival in spring. Attis legends and rites are much alike to those of Adonis, a very complex cult figure of ancient classical times. He is an annually –renewed, ever youthful vegetation god, a life-death-rebirth deity, venerated especially by women, see Sir James George Fraser, *the Golden Bough*, 1922

considered as a mean to drive away the evil. The eggs are dyed read usually in the morning of Holy Thursday, which is also called Red Thursday (*Kokkinopefti*). The dyeing of the eggs follows a specific ritual (e.g. the pot which is used must be preferably new) carried out by women and young girls who sometimes decorate them with different figures (e.g. birds) or signs (flowers, marguerites) called thereafter frilled or embroidered eggs. Women used to keep eggs which remained uneatable because of the Lent and they offered them to the children singing carols on Lazarus Saturday. In the Easter day the eggs were the most simple and plentiful food.

The custom of dying eggs has been subject of research by many scholars, especially by those dealing with comparative mythology. A comprehensive presentation has been carried out by the Greek Professor Stilpon Kyriakidis¹⁷, who accepts that the use of eggs during Easter is linked with the ancient deities of vegetation, -those of Adonis and Attis in particular- who were adorned at the end of March and an element of their worship was the egg. It is well known that the Christian church tried to abolish many of the pagan rituals, albeit unsuccessfully. Therefore the church adapted many of them by adding a new religious and spiritual meaning. In this category falls also the egg.

The egg is the symbol of Easter par excellence (Easter without eggs is no Easter) and for that reason it became a present with many variations (chocolate eggs, caramel eggs, eggs made by metal, cloth etc). The Easter eggs have according to the tradition great power, which is transmitted to those who are celebrating. Women use to bring with them Easter eggs in the church, so that the service would be read over them (called *evagelismena* eggs). They are considered as having miraculous powers and one of them is kept in the home iconostasis for good fortune and fertility. Sometimes they touched with these eggs the forehead of ill people or used part of the egg shell to incense the house for a better fortune. The magical power of the egg is also transmitted to winners when cracking the Easter eggs. Keeping intact the egg during ‘egg tapping’ is a sign of good health, while greetings follow a specific ritual; “Christ has risen” and the answer must be “He truly has risen”.

In some rural areas women bring Easter eggs in the cemeteries (e.g in Lakonia, South of Peloponnese) and leave them on the graves of the departed, because according to the tradition the souls mingle freely with the alive between Easter and Pentecost since Christ visited them before its Resurrection.

Candles and flowers

The candles are dominant during the whole of the Holy week. They are distinguished into two main categories: white and yellow. Yellow are used during the funeral ceremonies. They are lit up in the evening of Holy Thursday as well as during the Epitaph procession on Holy Friday. As it happens with other Easter symbols they are considered to have miraculous working powers. Therefore part of the candles of Holy Thursday is kept in the houses as an amulet. In insular Greece (e.g. in Paros Island¹⁸) they keep candles from the Epitaph procession in the house and they throw them into the sea or lit them up to smooth storming weather. Candles (white, red, or richly decorated) are used on Easter Sunday, a day of

¹⁷ Stilpon Kyriakidis , Easter Red eggs, VIII Byzantine Studies Congress in Thessaloniki, *Proceedings III*, 1957, pp.5-13.

¹⁸ Another interesting element of the Easter celebrations is the procession of the epitaphios at the village of Marpissa, which has an interesting particularity; the procession stops 15 times and at each stop a part of the mountain is lit up and there, children re-enact scenes from the Holy week: entry into Jerusalem, the prayer of the Mount of Olives, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

rejoicing after the mourning of the Holy Week while fire crackers, squibs, fireworks are let off across Greece. They aim at driving away the evil. The same meaning has the **smashing of pots** nosily in the streets on the island of Corfu. On Holy Saturday, around 11.00 am women throw from their windows into the streets ceramic vessels full of water.

Similar meaning has the sign of the cross marked on the lintel of the houses by the Easter candles that the faithful bring with them. It must not be forgotten that Resurrection is celebrated in spring, a period of rebirth of nature. Candles, but mostly flowers are considered to have significant power, especially those used on Holy Friday but also during the whole Holy week¹⁹ an indication of the rebirth and renewal of nature and the beginning of a new life.

In some areas (mainly on Northern Greece, town of Serres) women used to place candles mingled with flowers in front of their houses during the Epitaph procession. They also put on a table of flowers, candles and incense around the icon of Christ on the Cross. Close to this they also placed small ceramic pots in which they have previously planted lentils or barley, which blossom very easily. This custom is linked to the ancient **Gardens of Adonis**²⁰.

Flowers decorating the Epitaph are considered to have significant power and it is a sign of good fortune to be distributed among the believers by the priest after the end of the procession on the evening of Holy Friday or during the service on Holy Saturday.

Easter Bread (Tsoureki)

Easter Bread (*kouloura*) is also an important element of Easter celebrations aiming at bringing into the house power and better fortune. The baking of Easter bread usually takes place in the morning of Holy Thursday and in most cases is decorated by simple or more sophisticated designs made by the same dough, while read eggs are also used as decorating elements²¹. All these decorating elements have a symbolic and apotropaic character aiming at transmitting to human beings life and power. *Tsoureki*, is also baked, a kind of sweet bread, paste with sugar, eggs and seasoning, also in different shapes and decorations in an advancement of the Easter bread²².

The Lamb

Ecclesiastical symbol the lamb denoting Christ according to the Apocalypse comprises the power of the victory over death. In the whole Mediterranean civilization lamb, and especially the newly born, is the expression of the renewal of nature happening in spring. Its destiny was

¹⁹ Flower wreaths are offered as vows on Holy Thursday to the Christ on Cross. They are also put them on the graves of the departed on Holy Friday; White or coloured for the young, purple for the elderly.

²⁰ Adonis according to the myth was so beautiful that Aphrodite fell in love with him. He died at the tusks of a wild boar and Aphrodite asked Persephone to allow him return to life annually for six months. According to some legends as Aphrodite sprinkled nectar on Adonis dead body, each drop of his blood turned into a red flower (rose or anemone). In honor of Adonis were special feasts in ancient Greece (*Adonia*) celebrated by women, who planted in baskets and swallow pots (**Gardens of Adonis**) wheat, barley, lettuces, fennel and other quickly germinating but also quickly dying plants, as it similarly happened with the premature death of Adonis. They also would put statues of Adonis made by wax, laid out as corpses and lamented. For detailed and literary version of the story of Adonis see Obidius *Metamorphoses*, X, 525 and 708. For contemporary custom see also George Megas "the garden of Adonis in Serres" *Serraika Chronika*, v. 9, Athens 1979, pp 187-194.

²¹ According to their designs they are characterised by different names.

²² To the same category falls *Flaouna* (deriving from the medieval word flaon, flan) a kind of sweet bread popular in Cyprus and the *Sfougato*, in Corfu.

to be sacrificed in order to secure this renewal. According to Mythology a lamb was sacrificed in spring in the Lerna Lake (Central Peloponnese) in order to assist Dionysus to search his mother Semeli in the Hades. Symbol of the Jewish traditions, lamb has been associated with Christ, (Father God's Lamb) sacrificed to bring the Redemption to people. In the first Christian times the most common representation of Christ was that of the shepherd, which has been changed after an order (Canon 82) of the Synod of Constantinople (Quinisext Council) in 692 according to which a representation of Christ as a lamb was forbidden. Ever since, the representation of Christ on the Cross would be the only one to be used.

However lamb, especially roasted, remains as the main Easter food in the whole orthodox world. The custom of roasting lamb is very popular in the whole of Greece. In some places of Northern Greece (mostly in Thrace) it was a common practice the priest after the church service in the morning of Holy Saturday to visit all the bakeries and bless the roasted lamb, while being offered as a reward, a piece of it. The lamb is also connected with magical predictions. The house lord would interpret the signs on the lamb slope and predict what happen during the year at his house, at his land and more broadly in the world.

Easter Popular Athletic Games

Since Easter is not only a religious, but also an ancient inherited rural spring feast, it is significantly important to be celebrated in open air and rejoiced with music, dances and athletic games, the latter aiming at showing up the power, the skillfulness and the community spirit. Such athletic games are spread all over the Orthodox Balkan countries and they mostly take place on **St George's feast day** (23rd April), marking the starting of summer period. They continue to take place on Easter Sunday in many places of continental and insular Greece presenting similarities with the ancient Olympic Games but also with games that happened in the Byzantine Hippodrome. In these games only men take place. The prize of the winners is usually a lamb while they offer to their beloved women attending the game a kerchief to wear around their neck. The most popular games are the race, the horse race, the high or long jump, and wrestling.

The swinging ritual: the Greek Aiora (Αιώρα)

One of the most interesting Easter customs is the *Kounia* (swing) mainly taking place in some Aegean islands (e.g. Kythnos) but also in Cyprus²³. On Easter Sunday, a swing is set up on a tender tree (fertility) or in the town's main square in which boys and girls dressed sometimes in traditional costume take a swing followed by traditional songs. The custom has a recreational but also a social character since it represents the engagement of young women in search of a husband. It is an opportunity for young girls to show up their courage, competitive and athletic spirit, characteristics of an ideal bride. The custom derives from the ancient Athenian Festival of Flowers (*Anthesteria*), one of the most popular ancient Athenian festivities celebrating the coming of the spring. Following the mythological tradition it was linked with the myth of the Athenian King Ikarios, who was given the wine by Dionysos. The villagers thought, after drinking it, they have been poisoned and killed him. His daughter Erigone hanged herself from the tree under which her father lay. Athens was then struck by

²³ The Cypriot ritual is linked with the wine. Until recent years, the Cypriote families which possessed a pointed arch in front of their house use to hang a swing for their girls, and the movement of the *Aiora* (swings) was followed by a traditional song.

plague and they were advised by the Delphic oracle to introduce the annual rite of *Aiora* in order to appease Erigone's spirit. Therefore children (boys and girls) used to swing from trees. The contemporary rural custom of swing has as main aim the joy, fun and good luck²⁴.

Customs of Easter Week

The celebration of Easter continues throughout the whole week after Easter, during which time rural communities abstained from work. In old times, this week had a significant social character, offering the opportunities for social contacts amongst villages, families and especially between professions (financial arrangements), thus fostering economic and social relationships.

In some rural areas celebrations and dances continue to take place during the Easter week. It is worth mentioning the dance of **Trata**, a traditional commemorative²⁵ dance performed by women every two years in Megara in Attica, on the open space in front of the small church, known as Saint John the Dancer. According to Folklorists it is an ancient mimic dance (hauling of fishing nets) performed to secure success of the fishermen²⁶. In South Euboea (Karystos) people used to dance every Thursday for three weeks after Easter in order to moderate the destructive effects for the plantations of the north wind. Similar dance (the dance of Master North Wind) was performed in Sifnos (Cyclades).²⁷

The Easter week is also associated with funerary customs. In some places the relatives of the departed used to visit them in the cemetery on the Easter Monday leaving offerings on their graves (red eggs, bagels, or bread and cheese). According to tradition the souls mingle with the living for 50 days from Easter to Pentecost. A series of customs also known as *Russoulia* are known across the Orthodox Balkan countries and in Russia. Scholars link the name of the custom with the *Rosalia* or *Rosaria*, a spring festival of ancient Romans, which was later on developed to a funeral feast during which they put flower wreaths over the graves²⁸.

Easter Monday is related to customs aiming at bringing good luck and fortune. Similar is the character of the customary litanies during which a procession of icons takes place, through the streets and crossroads of the villages. Similar processions take place 25 days after Easter in order to secure the growth of vineyards²⁹.

Easter customs and rituals hold a particular interest since they combine religious and ancient traditions that survive until today as testimonies of the rich traditional life and culture. They combine symbols and practices, which have a special value for the traditional societies and communities and secure the relationship among people, thus reaching contemporary societies

²⁴ The same custom is spread across Eastern Europe and Russia.

²⁵ It is believed to commemorate the building of the chapel during the Ottoman rule aiming at preventing Turks to benefit from a spring being on the site, which had a fertile effect on women who drank it. It is told that the dance commemorates their success to build the chapel in one day.

²⁶ See John L. Tomkinson, *Festive Greece: A Calendar of Tradition*, Athens 2003, pp77-8., and George A. Megas, *Greek Calendar customs*, Athens 1982, p. 111.

²⁷ George A. Megas, *ibid*, p. 178

²⁸ The feast was also connected with the tombs of the martyrs of the early Christian years; it became very popular in Bulgaria as evident from the various inscriptions. According to some traditions the souls of the departed come back as evil fairies (*russalia/rosliile/rusalki*) and chastise people for their wrongdoings; thus they have been associated also with the spirits of the water and the river (Russia). See George A. Megas, *ibid*, p. 208 and Walter Puchner, *Popular theatre in Greece and the Balkans (a Comparative study)*, Athens 1989, pp 54-57

²⁹ See G. Aikaterinidis, "Spring customs of popular cult from Serres", proceedings of the *1st Folklore Symposium of Northern Greece*, Thessaloniki, 1975, pp14-19.