

# Nestinar Feast in the Village of Stomanovo, the Smolyan Region

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## To cite this article:

Krasimira Georgieva Fileva-Ruseva. Nestinar Feast in the Village of Stomanovo, the Smolyan Region. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Special Issue: Music and Dance. Vol. 5, No. 5-1, 2017, pp. 37-47. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.s.2017050501.15

**Received:** August 25, 2017; **Accepted:** August 26, 2017; **Published:** August 31, 2017

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**Abstract:** The nestinar (fire-dancer) rituals, involving dances on embers, were practiced by the ancient Thracians. Today, they have been preserved in several Bulgarian villages in south-eastern Strandzha Mountain, as well as in the village of Stomanovo, the Rhodope Mountains, Southwestern Bulgaria. Such rituals are performed also in several villages in Northern Greece, where they have been carried over by migrants from Strandzha. While in the villages in Strandzha and in Northern Greece, Christian traditions have been overlaid on the ancient pagan ritual - the faith and devotion to Sv. Sv. Konstantin and Elena, for the inhabitants of Stomanovo (whose ritual I will describe in the present exposition), the ritual has not been Christianized - for them, it has remained a pagan Thracian Orphic tradition (well, the legendary Thracian singer and healer, Orpheus, creator of the "Orphism" belief system, lived in the Rhodope Mountains), an expression of the cult to the Great Goddess-Mother, her son Sabazios (Sun-Fire), Zagrey (the Bull God) and, as the people of Stomanovo described it themselves - a celebration of life, of fertility.

**Keywords:** Fire-Dancer, Dance on Embers, Pagan Feast, Sacrifice, Stomanovo

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## 1. Introduction

The tradition of nestinar rituals, an essential element of which is the dance on embers, is still preserved in several Bulgarian villages in south-eastern Strandzha mountain, among which is the village of Bulgari. Nestinar rituals are performed also in several villages in Northern Greece, where they have been carried over by migrants from Strandzha. In a sense, a similar ritual is also performed in the isolated mountain village of Stomanovo, Smolyan Region, Southwestern Bulgaria, which I will examine in this article.

All my attempts to track the roots of the fire-dancing feast in Stomanovo proved to be ineffective. I also have no reliable information on how old this ritual is. There is evidence "that as early as the 1820's, during and after the Crimean War, large groups from East Thrace and especially from inner Strandzha migrated to Russia, Bessarabia, Wallachia and the innermost parts of the Bulgarian lands" [7, p. 31], which, together with the similarities in the overall contents of the rituals, gives a certain basis to assume that the Nestinar rituals in Strandzha and Northern Greece have been carried over also to Stomanovo. In the rituals, however, important

differences can be found, the main of which I will point out in the course of the exposition and which give grounds to certain serious doubts in the above supposition. The most important difference is that, while in the villages in Strandzha and in Northern Greece, Christian traditions have been overlaid on the ancient pagan ritual - the faith and devotion to Sv. Sv. Konstantin and Elena, for the inhabitants of Stomanovo, the ritual has not been Christianized - for them, it has remained a pagan Thracian Orphic tradition (well, the legendary Thracian singer and healer, Orpheus, creator of the "Orphism" belief system, lived in the Rhodope Mountains), an expression of the cult to the Great Goddess-Mother, her son Sabazios (Sun-Fire), Zagrey (the Bull God) and, as the people from Stomanovo described it themselves - a celebration of life, of fertility. Another important difference is that while in Strandzha and Northern Greece, the ritual usually continues for three days, in Stomanovo it is celebrated only on 03.06, on the day, when, according to an elderly participant, the four elements - fire, air, earth and water - are in equilibrium, while the planets are aligned in a

specific way. In the present exposition I describe the ritualistic activities in Stomanovo, comparing them with information about the Nestinar rituals, more often in the south-eastern Bulgarian mountain Strandzha and more rarely - with the related to them nestinar rituals in several villages in Northern Greece.

I was invited to witness the ritual in Stomanovo, as one of all the guests. This gave me an opportunity to follow and describe in detail a great part of the ritual activities, but, unfortunately, I was not witness to what transpires in the house of the nestinari, nor to the preliminary preparation for the celebration.

## 2. Subject, Aims, Tasks of the Study

The subject of this study is the fire-dancing ritual in the village of Stomanovo, Smolyan, Devin municipality, the Rhodope Mountains.

The object of research are the similarities and differences in the conduct of celebration in Stomanovo and Strandzha villages.

The aim of the study is to describe the way of implementation and to present the specificity of the Rhodopes fire-dancing feast, which is significantly different from those in Strandzha and Northern Greece, clearly highlighting its features from the traditionally acting ideas of holding this feast.

As specific tasks, I see:

1. Description and capture of:

- The sequence of concrete ritual actions;
- The dances and the music performed on the individual elements of the holiday.

2. A comparison of the features of the fire-dancing feast in Stomanovo with that of the Strandzha villages.

3. Exploring symbolism of the feast, referencing it with similar symbols in other cultures.

3. The beginning of the celebration. The first ritual activities

There is a belief in Stomanovo that the ability to dance barefoot on embers, to foretell future and to heal people with energy - qualities, which are mandatory for the nestinar - are hereditary and are not within the capabilities of everybody. A central, leading figure in the nestinar celebration was Ivaylo Ayanski, who, in the words of Donka Stoyanova (a longtime participant in the nestinar ritual in Stomanovo and the wife of Ayanski), is a "mediator between the nestinari and the people", who had come to witness the ancient ritual. The attitude of locals and longtime guests clearly showed their respect for Ayanski, as well as a certain love and warmth - many of the guests simply called him by the diminutive Ivo.

Ivaylo Aleksandrov Ayanski was born in 1970, in the town of Smolyan, in the south-western Bulgarian mountain, the Rhodope. His grandmother - Rosana - was also a nestinar. Ayanski visited the Strandzha village of Bulgari and met with the main nestinar in that village, Baba Zlata.

The village of Stomanovo is located over the Tsankov Kamak Dam, on the road to Devin, beyond the village of

Selcha. It is situated on an area of 15.82 km<sup>2</sup> in a picturesque mountain region. The main source of livelihood of the locals is animal husbandry, they also raise several plant crops.

The celebration begins at 10 in the morning, with performances by the thick, low timbre of the Rhodope kaba (low) gayda (bagpipe) and the bright, piercing and saturated voice of a Rhodope female singer (Figure 1). *In the Pythagorean school of thought, music with its varied characteristics (modes, rhythms, timbres) is viewed as one of the ways of achieving a connection of the human being with cosmic life* [6]. In Stomanovo, music accompanied all ritual activities and sounded during most of the celebration. Throughout the day, no other music was allowed, except for folk music.



**Figure 1.** The Rhodope singer, Siyka Halbukova, and the bagpipe player, Atanas Mladenov.

Most of the participants in the event were dressed in authentic Rhodope costumes, the greater part of which were manually crafted and embroidered. The locals consider that the traditional costume protects the person from the energies of the earth (according to the people of Stomanovo, the earth radiates three different types of energy, not all of which are positive).

Accompanied by powerful Rhodope songs, the first ritual activity begins - watering and care for flowers. *In different beliefs, the flower symbolizes youth, love, harmony, perfection, but also the transience of beauty* [6]. In this way, in the beginning of the celebration, the people of Stomanovo call out to youth and harmony, but also express their care for their growth and successful development. On a balcony, wholly adorned with lavishly blossoming and stylishly



arranged flowers in pots, young girls carefully water the flowers (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Care for flowers.

The maidens carry a metal, most often silver, adornment on their forehead, with small chains, coins or silver beads pending from it, they often reach down to the middle of the cheeks, (Figure 3), covering the eyes. It is believed that in this way the eyes of the lass are protected from bad eyes. None of the married women was wearing such jewelry.



**Figure 3.** Maiden's adornment for the face.

Under the sounds of songs and instrumental melodies, the girls appear out of the house, which is generously decorated with pots of blooming flowers. On the street in front of the house, there is continuous dancing, different types of dances are performed. The vivid colors and unique lavishness of the costumes, in which the color red is predominant, the freshness of the maidens' beauty, the contagious energy of the folk dances (Figure 4) and the vitality of the music, from the very beginning of the celebration charge the participants and the observers with euphoria. In Balkan folklore, red has established itself as a symbol of the color of fire, of its power, but also of the female principle [7, p. 105].



**Figure 4.** Folk dances, accompanying the appearance of the maidens.

In one of the dances, a girl brings a stick and dances together with Ayanski (Figure 5), while the two of them are holding the stick. According to local beliefs, the tree, that a person carries, symbolizes his/her sins. At the end of the dance, the mediator breaks the stick, that was brought by the girl, in half.



**Figure 5.** A ritual dance with a stick.

Around 11 o'clock, the participants in the celebration head with dances and instrumental music for a field, sowed with rye.

At the field, the ritual of harvest takes place. *The religious meaning of the harvest is the crop yield, but also - the outcome, the judgement by God of the value of human deeds* [5]. The first harvester is Ivaylo Ayanski. He raises his glance and arms towards the sky for a heavenly blessing for the gathering of the produce to begin, after that he bends over the rye and reaps a single sheaf. He hands the sickle to a young man, who kisses his hand. The young man also extends his arms towards the sky, then bends over, reaps one sheaf and in turn hands the sickle to the mediator, who gives it to a girl. After she kisses the hand of Ayanski, takes the sickle from him, directs a prayer towards the sky and reaps her sheaf, the girl hands the reaped rye to the young man (Figure 6) and



returns the sickle to Ivaylo.



*Figure 6. Ritual harvest.*

The young man gathers together the sheaves of all girls and women, who are reaping. Clasping hands, Ayanski and the female harvesters sing several songs (Figure 7).



*Figure 7. Harvest song.*

Around 11,40 the local inhabitants and the guests of the celebration make for the house of the nestinari. A heavy rain is falling, but it does not disturb the participants. The house of the nestinari (in the Strandzha nestinari villages that building is called a "konak". In Stomanovo, the phrase "house of the nestinari" is used instead) is small, located outside the village, on the road to the spring. The walls correspond to the directions of the world, the porch and the entrance are to the south, while they can be reached over steps on the east side, clinging to the façade of the house. There is a metal fence around the house. Nothing else - neither the field with rye, nor the spring, nor the meadow, on which most of the rite is performed, is enclosed. From the house of the nestinari, on a woolen cloth with colorful decorations, but with predominantly yellow color, exquisitely decorated with woven yellow lace (Figures 8 and 9), a sweet bread, baked in advance and skillfully decorated with figures

of people, is brought out.



*Figure 8. Bringing out of the sweet bread from the house of the nestinari.*

#### 4. Blessing with Spring Water

The whole procession heads towards the spring, where the next rite act will be performed. The researcher Ruzha Neykova, citing different sources, describes the walk of the participants on the way towards the spring in the Strandzha villages as very fast – the nestinari are running, dancing, while the musicians play in a irregular meter <sup>7</sup><sub>16</sub>. According to that author, the running forward of the nestinari has the significance of "cleansing" of the way, which, together with the playing in a irregular meter, in other Bulgarian rites is also connected with banishing evil [7, p. 186]. According to Valeria Fol, who, together with R. Neykova has analyzed nestinari rituals in Strandzha and Northern Greece, the gradual movement from one key place of the rite to another "sanctifies" the spiritual territory of the nestinari community. "In this way, the protection of the village by patron saints is assured" [7, p. 71]. With these circulations, each year the borders of the own, organized space are defined and it is separated from the foreign, the unorganized. Thus, the division of good (thought of as order, harmony) – bad (connected to chaos) is activated [7, p. 72].

On the side of the wide mountain path to the spring, fragrant herbs grow, small drops of the freshly fallen rain shimmer as miniature diamonds on their leaves. I am describing this, because the sparkling cleanness of nature in Stomanovo, the views, the aromas, just as the bright colors, the inspiring colorfulness of the costumes and the contagious vitality of the dances, undeniably impact human senses and in unequaled way add their impression to that of the symbolism and of the emotional saturation of the ritual acts of the celebration.

*Most broadly, the spring symbolizes pure water, but also the origin of life.* At the spring, all present form a line, everyone kisses the hand of the mediator, and he gives them a small piece of the specially prepared ritual sweet bread (Figure № 9). In the villages of Bulgari and Gramatikovo, the ritual bread was kneaded with salt and had no decorations.

According to different beliefs, bread is a symbol of the need for food of all living beings, but also for spiritual food [6].



Figure 9. Ritual sweet bread.

At the spring in Stomanovo, another man, who has poured water from the spring in a copper cauldron, lets everybody drink from it. *Water in all religions is related to the life force, renewal, purification* [5]. The sprinkling with spring water, according to V. Fol [7, p. 74] has the meaning of a blessing of waters, of purification, while the copper cauldron, with which the water is taken from the spring, is one of the "objects of the cult" [7, p. 105]. The people, who want to, pour themselves more of the clean cold spring water, which they bring with them. The mediator Ayanski sprinkles over the celebrating people water from the copper cauldron, dipping in it a posy of geranium and roses, and with energetic movements sprinkles spring water over the gathered people. The posy, which Ivaylo Ayanski dips in the copper cauldron and sprinkles water with over the people, together with the remaining sweet bread, is wrapped in a woolen cloth with flower motives.

After this part of the celebration, all head for a wide meadow with cut grass. In the center of the meadow stands out a black circle of scoured from previous fires earth, with a diameter of about four meters. According to the locals, for years no grass has grown on this place, which each year on this day is used for the nestinari fire. A joyful celebration begins with songs and folk dances, in which join both the local inhabitants, as well as the guests, who have come from different corners of Bulgaria. This results in a colorful mixture of costumes and all kinds of garments, but that, which unifies all, who are dancing, is their exuberance and the bright cheerfulness of the folk dances and melodies.

## 5. Sacrifice

Around 13 o'clock, under a fruit tree (plum), a ram is slaughtered. *According to ancient beliefs, the ram is a symbol of fertility, primal life force, rebirth. Its character is described as a stubborn, tempestuous, magnanimous, generous, self-sacrificing. The old Mediterranean myths*

*connect the ram with fire, the color red, blood. In the Christian religion, which has inherited these beliefs and a large part of their symbolism, the ram is seen as a version of the Lamb of God, who agrees to be sacrificed for the salvation of people. The plum tree, which blooms early in spring, is considered to be a harbinger of spring, renewal, and, since its snow white blossoms bloom on the branches before the leaves appear - also, a symbol of purity and innocence* [6]. According to V. Fol, in the village of Bulgari, the place for the sacrificial offering is fenced by a wattle, and "fruit trees, mainly plums" have been planted in the enclosed area [7, p. 286]. As in the village of Bulgari, so in Stomanovo, the sacrificial animal is not forced, but has to be persuaded to willingly give his life. Donka Stoyanova shares that Ivaylo Ayanski has the ability to communicate with animals. The mediator offers water to the ram from his hand and the ram trustingly sips from the water (Figure 10).



Figure 10. The ram sips from the water.

After that, he feeds it with a small piece of the same ritual sweet bread, from which before he gave to the people at the spring. The ram calmly eats the morsel, too. Ivaylo sprinkles water - purifies - over the animal with the same posy of flowers, with which earlier, at the spring, he was sprinkling over the participants and the guests of the rite. It is considered that one of the significances of these activities is to persuade the ram to sacrifice itself. After that, the ram is turned over with its right side below it, so its head is leaning on the edge of the pit, which has been dug in advance. The blood of the ram has to be gathered in the pit. *According to all ancient beliefs, earth represents the mother; which creates life, while in the East-Asian mythologies, earth is the female principle, impregnated with blood, considered to be celestial semen* [5]. I was astonished by the fact that the ram did not make any attempt to struggle. An old legend, which I was told by the inhabitants of Stomanovo, goes that each year nature sent a stag for this sacrificial offering. The stag had to agree to sacrifice his life. One year, they did not wait for the stag to concede to sacrifice its life and they killed him forcibly. Since then, nature no longer sends a wild animal. So, they decided to offer a sacrifice of a domestic animal. A



version of this legend has spread also to the Strandzha nestinar villages [7, p. 273]. In Stomanovo, the blood of the sacrificial ram, which flows in the dug pit, is covered with soil. In this way the blood - the life force of the young animal - is absorbed in the earth and the sacrificial offering is sent to the Mother Goddess.

The fires for the preparation of the korban (sacrifice) have already been started. For this meal, prepared after an old recipe from Stomanovo, round and smooth river stones are placed on the bottom of the cauldron. Over them is arranged the cut meat and water is poured over it. The cauldrons are covered with foil and a tightly fitting metal cover, on which several heavy stones are placed (Figure 11). This is an efficient way to close the cauldrons hermetically. Thus, cooked with steam, the meat is stewed and obtains its typical mild taste, tenderness and specific aroma. The korban in Stomanovo is not prepared in the konak (the house of the nestinari), but outdoors, on the meadow, where the sacrificial animal has been killed and where the ritual dances are danced.



**Figure 11.** The cauldrons with the korban.

Again, it begins to rain.

## 6. The First Dance on the Embers

Meanwhile, the celebration continues. Ivaylo dances a horo, together with most of the participants. The musicians extend their tupan drums very close, directly in front of the face of Ayanski. Unlike the traditions in Strandzha, where the nestinar instruments are only a tupan and a bagpipe (most often two tupans and two bagpipes; at times, more performers have played), while in Northern Greece, a gadulka [7] participates instead of a bagpipe; in Stomanov, the orchestra consists of a bagpipe, 4 zurnas and 4 tupans. *The saturation of the percussions group with so many tupans is not a coincidence. In the mythology of Laos and African beliefs, the tupan is described as an instrument for invoking the benevolence of the gods* [6]. After analyzes of ritualism, V. Fol comes to the conclusion that the "sound of the tupan is God himself" [7, p. 96]. The researcher also states that "if the tupan is the voice of God in the form of a bull, the whistle is

the voice of God in the form of a snake" [7, p. 109]. In the Bulgarian nestinar rite in Strandzha, the larger number of musical instruments used to be connected to the expectation of prosperity. For the ritual dances in Stomanovo, now tupans with a nylon membrane are used, which have a significantly sharper, brisker and stronger sound than leather tupans. The music and the movements of the dance influence the nestinar and contribute for his gradual fall into a trance. R. Neykova also speaks about the impact of the music on the nestinari [7, p. 157 – 158; 167].

Embers are taken with a shovel from the fires, where the korban is prepared, and are thrown in the designated for the nestinar dance circle of scoured earth, where the nestinar Ayanski is already dancing. He dances on the just thrown live coals and stomps barefoot on the embers. The pants of the nestinar and his helpers are longer than their legs, they are open on the inside, about 22 centimeters above the bottom end, and are attached to the leg with a piece of cloth, around 1.5 cm wide, which goes under the foot (Figure 12). The lower end of the pants, which, together with the feet also touches the embers, does not burn, even the cloth strap under the foot does not burn.



**Figure 12.** The first dance on embers.

After the dance, two people hold Ivaylo, who is still in a trance and help him reach the chair, from where he begins to prophesy. He foretold of a powerful military union in Asia and of a violent pandemic.

## 7. Ritual Dances

A horo is started in a large open circle. Participating in this horo are locals, as well as guests, who have come from different corners of Bulgaria. In the middle of the circle, in a much smaller, this time closed, circle, begin a series of ritual dances, which the mediator performs with local maidens and married women. The common meaning of these dances is the hope for fertility, as well as the increase and multiplication of energy. In the first dance, all performers kneel, bend forward towards each other, holding hands, after which they stand up with arms raised upwards (the fingers of each dancer are still intertwined with the ones of the dancers, who were kneeling



on their left and right) and direct their gazes to the sky (Figure 13). These prayer movements are repeated several times.



**Figure 13.** *The first of a sequence of ritual dances.*

In the next dance, part of the group of performers, dance standing, in a small tightly closed circle, very close to one another, holding hands. Soon, they turn, facing outwards, continuing to hold each other's hands (Figure 14). The tight closeness of the bodies and the closed circle help for the unification and increase of the energy of the dancers. These figures are also repeated several times.



**Figure 14.** *The second of a sequence of ritual dances.*

Next is a dance, in which the maidens and the wives dance around Ivaylo. After that, he lies down, the girls and women separate into pairs and each pair jumps over him (Figure 15). This one and the next dance are related to the interaction between the male and female energy.



**Figure 15.** *The third of a sequence of ritual dances.*

In the next dance, Ivaylo is seated on the ground in the middle of a circle, while the maidens and women dance around him, holding hands (Figure 16).



**Figure 16.** *The fourth of a sequence of ritual dances.*

After the performance of all these figures, which according to long-term participants have a symbolic meaning, again is performed the dance with the stick (Figure 17), described above.



**Figure 17.** *The fifth of a sequence of ritual dances.*



The mediator performs the next dance, which again is for a pair, with the same girl. He draws her near him, wrapping around her back a long twisted shawl and, until the end of the dance, the two of them dance, united by the shawl (Figure 18). The dance has the underlying meaning of a marital joining.



*Figure 18. The sixth of a sequence of ritual dances.*

In the next dance, two men and four women perform. The men are in the middle. Part of the dance involves the men dancing, facing one another, in the middle (Figure 19), while the girls dance around them.



*Figure 19. The seventh of a sequence of ritual dances.*

After this dance, the men dance again in the middle, but with their backs turned against one another. Gradually, they approach each other and begin dancing, with their backs tightly leaning against each other (Figure 20). Two of the girls dance, each facing one of the men, while the other two maidens dance on the side. The locals believe that by leaning against each other, the dancers sum and increase their energy.



*Figure 20. The eighth of a sequence of ritual dances.*

## 8. Igniting of the Nestinar Fire

Around 17 o'clock, the pitrop lights the nestinar fire (Figure 21). In the village of Bulgari, the fire is lighted by a relative of the nestinari, while the pitrop (in the Strandzha villages, he is also called epitrop, vikilin), has the function of a leader of the nestinar rites [7, p. 287]. In Stomanovo, the pitrop has certain tasks, while leading is the role of the mediator - Ivaylo Ayanski. For the fire in Stomanovo, wood logs are aligned in the center of a circle, supported against each other. Thus, a cone is formed, which is empty in the middle. The pyre is lighted from there.



*Figure 21. Igniting of the nestinar fire.*

The fire burns from the inside part of the logs, and for a long time only smoke, and no flames rise from the top, over the cone of wood. The flames remain sheltered by the wood logs. In this way the rain, which is falling, does not extinguish the fire. Used for the nestinar fire in Stomanovo is only beech and oak timber. It is not allowed to burn other materials. *In the old religions, the oak is a symbol of endurance, longevity, power, greatness and wisdom, and for the Celts - of hospitality [5].* The oak is a sacred tree for the nestinari. They consider it "pure". When it is burned, it



reaches a very high temperature. According to the old traditions, each participant in the rite in Stomanovo brings a piece of wood, as a symbol of their sins. This wood is burnt in the nestinari fire, i.e. the fire itself is a symbol of purification.

This is followed by a dance, where two pairs of men and women dance, kneeling opposite each other - man opposite girl. They shake their bodies under the sounds of music in an irregular meter 98.

## 9. Evening Sofra

Around 19 o'clock they start arranging the festive spread, called sofra. In 2016, the celebration was visited by around 200 people, so the preparations took a lot of time. In Stomanovo, the meal is set upon the meadow, where the nestinari fire burns. Women in beautiful traditional costumes first lay on the earth long plastic sheets, and on them - white table cloths, edged with lace. In one part of the sofra, they place on a small table a very deep plate with the shape of an inverted cone; a stag is painted on its upper surface (Figure 22). This plate is left empty.



Figure 22. Evening sofra.

They bring out bread - large fluffy homemade buns, as well as yogurt. Behind the table, small three-legged wooden stools are arranged. In front of this table, on the ground and over the table cloths, they serve plates with the prepared korban, vita banitsa, banitsa with spinach, different types of baklava, semolina halva, small and large buns, yogurt (Figure 23). No beverages are served. Everybody, present at the celebration, is invited to the sofra. In the Strandzha village of Bulgari, the meal is different - served are bread, white cheese, green salad, korban (prepared with part of the meat of the sacrificial animal, salt, green onions and spearmint), rakia, mastika" [7, p. 291]. The meal was arranged in the konak, where were present "the nestinari, the vikilin, the pitrop, people from the nestinari families and the more prominent villagers" [7, p. 288]. The older women gave out fruits and bread. During more recent times (1994 - 1998), some of the guests were also present at the meal. Part of the korban is

handed out raw in small pieces from door to door [7, p. 291].



Figure 23. Evening sofra.

In Stomanovo, the dairy products, home made, and with milk from animals, which are grown in an ecologically clean region, are very high in fat and density. The sofra is around 30 metres long. All participants and guests kneel down on the ground and eat the delicious food served. It is raining heavily, but the bread on the sofra does not soak. The heavy rain does not quench the nestinari fire, either. *In many religions, rain is perceived as a symbol of the celestial influence on earth, in Indian belief, it is seen also as an embodiment of the benevolence of the gods* [5].

## 10. The Culmination - The Evening Nestinar Dance

Around 21, 40 o'clock, when it is already dark, a young man thoroughly turns over and smooths out the embers, left from the burning of the oak timber. With this the ashes, which had covered the live coals, fall and the incandescent redness of the embers is unveiled. Right after the man has smoothed out the whole circle, so there is no spot left, not covered by embers, the nestinari Ivaylo Ayanski makes his way through the observers, who are holding their breath, tightly surrounding the embers, and he begins to dance. This is the longest dance on embers and the culmination of the rite. This dance consists of numerous crossing, sometimes fast, other times - slowly, the circle of live coals. Ayanski trod and stirred through the embers with his feet (Figure 24). Sometimes he stood for a while in the circle, lifting his gaze towards the black sky and extended his arms up (Figure 25).

Ruzha Neykova [7] describes the melody, sounding throughout the dance on embers as having "a structure, built of motifs" [7, p. 193], in a duple meter and fast tempo. The researcher quotes the tempo from numerous recordings from different years, with which she reaches the conclusion about the relatively steady pace of performance - around 100 - 108 beats (same source). In comparisons of the symbolic meaning of music in different cultures [6], the opinion of Boethius is

quoted that "the faster the movement, the stronger the melody; the slower the movement, the weaker the melody" [6, p. 72]. R. Neykova mentions the "fastness and the accelerated, on request by the nestinari, rhythm..." [7, p. 193], i.e. she notes that the nestinari prompt the musicians to play faster. This concurrence of interpretation and facts gives grounds to assume that the faster tempo has a relation to maintaining the state of trance of the nestinari, that, maybe, they are influenced in a certain way by the fast music, by the repeating with minor changes rhythmic model of the tupan, by the regular meter, which, according to Neykova requires "concentration, tension" [7, p. 187].



Figure 24. Stirring the embers with feet.

Ivaylo did not pay any attention at all to the frequent flashes from the cameras of the guests. He was staring directly in front of himself, as if surrounded by inviolability. Unlike the described by V. Fol [7] observations of the dances on ember, the face of Ayanski did not express pain, but rather withdrawnness.



Figure 25. The dance on embers.

During one of the passes, the nestinar was accompanied by his daughter, who also trod the embers barefoot. The two were holding hands, while they crossed through the

smoldering coals. The dance continued until 22,10 o'clock. When it ended, two people were holding the mediator, who was still in a trance, and they helped him reach his chair to rest. After the end of the dance, according to tradition, each participant in the celebration throws a handful of soil over the embers, which gradually darken and turn cold. After that, many of the participants and guests take a small charcoal, which they bring home for good health. *Charcoal has the symbolic meaning of hidden fire, of conserved energy* [5]. With this the celebration concludes.

Many people from different parts of Bulgaria had come to the nestinar celebration - I met a group of 8 people from Svishtov and an elderly couple from Varna. There was a young family with a child from Plovdiv; they said that they have visited this celebration for 15 successive years. Present at the event were also three English families, who had settled in Bulgaria. Unlike the nestinar rites, held in the Bulgarian Strandza villages and in some villages in Northern Greece, which are performed in a small circle, and in which the dances on embers are performed in the yard of the konak or in front of it - in Stomanovo the rite was open, everybody was welcome, accepted with tolerance, personally blessed at the spring by the mediator Ayanski and invited to the evening meal. The ritual acts, however, as well as the ritual dances were performed by the chosen for that villagers of Stomanovo (although, parallel to the ritual dances, local inhabitants and some of the guests danced horos together at the sounds of the same music), while that part of the rite, which took place in the house of the nestinari, remained hidden from the gazes of the guests. The presence of the guests, even the recording of a live movie of the nestinari celebration did not affect in any negative way the rite and did not impede the strict following of its characteristic activities.

## 11. Conclusion

In the broadest of terms, the symbolism of the celebration had the following structure: during the first part of the day, the focus fell mainly on youth, the beginning of life, the harvest - evaluation of results, purification (through tasting, drinking the purity of the spring water and through the power of the element water), blessing, new beginning; then after the first logical center - sacrifice and death, needed to preserve the life of others, but also for something new, pure and powerful to be reborn in the future, the accent was moved onto energy: the energy of creation, the power of fertility, accumulation and multiplication of creative energy, until the culmination - the dance on live coals - on the embers, which are simultaneously a remnant of the burnt - sacrificed sacred trees with the help of which, through burning, the accumulated sins of people are destroyed (i.e. when taking on the sins of others, as is the meaning of the dance of the nestinar-mediator on the embers, this is also a sacrifice - a redemption of the transgressions of others), but also the preserved energy of the fire; the contact of the human being with the energy of fire, preserved in the embers, a new purification (now, through the element fire and through the



redemption of the sins of everyone by a single person).

The feast is held on a different day compared to the one in Strandzha, has a different duration and is based on different beliefs, ie. the differences are too significant to be ignored. Similarities affect the presence in Strandzha and Stomanovo of essential elements of fire-dancing rite. What is the relationship between these rituals from the historical point of view, will establish future scientific studies that involve specialists from different fields of human knowledge.

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