

# The Sacred and The Secular in Dance: One Dance, Two Different Functions

Eleni Filippidou

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the "sacred" and "secular" character of the Xesyrtos or Gikna dance in the community of Asvestades in Thrace in Greece. In particular, this paper intends to highlight the difference between the "sacred" and the "secular" and the way this dichotomy is reflected in the dance under study. Data was gathered through the ethnographic method. The sacred/secular dichotomy, as proposed in Leach's (1976) theoretical model, is used to analyze the data. Further, Laban's notation system (Hutchinson, 2005; Koutsouba, 2005), was used to record the choreographic compositions of Xesyrtos or Gikna dance, while for the analysis of their structure and form, as well as their codification, the structural-morphological and typological method of analysis was applied. Finally, for the presentation and interpretation of the data, Geertz's model of "thick description" (2003) was adopted. From the data analysis it was found that the Xesyrtos and Gikna dances are danced in exactly the same way, but are clearly separated and demarcated based on the intentions of the community residents related to the performed function of the dance event.

**Keywords:** Dance, Dance Function, Ethnographic Method, Sacred, Secular.

**Published Online:** July 19, 2023

**ISSN:** 2736-5514

**DOI:** 10.24018/ejtheology.2023.3.4.119

**E. Filippidou\***

School of Physical Education and Sport  
Science, National and Kapodistrian  
University of Athens, Greece

(e-mail: filipele@phed.uoa.gr)

*\*Corresponding Author*

## I. INTRODUCTION

'Gikna and Xesirtos'. Two names that correspond to the same dance, which is danced in the region of Greek Thrace. In Greek Thrace, the Xesyrtos or Gikna dance is a basic dance of the region's dance repertoire, which means that it is danced by all the ethno-cultural groups that live there. In the area of Didymoteicho, located on the northern side of Thrace, there is the paradox that the dance phrase of this dance is found with two names. After asking the local residents why this happens, they gave the answer that the dance is the same, but the dancing occasion is different, hence the different name. Specifically, the first name refers to the dance that is danced at the public dance of the festival, while the second name refers to the dance that is danced at the wedding ritual of K'na. Therefore, in the first case the dance is performed at a social event, while in the second it is part of a ritual process.

The above leads the research into the study of the "secular/sacred" dichotomy (Leach, 1976). This dichotomy first appeared in Durkheim's theory of religion (Durkheim, 1915). Durkheim named it sacred and profane dichotomy. According to this theory, the theory of religion is largely based on the concepts of the sacred and the profane. The term profane refers to issues that are not considered sacred or religious, but are considered secular in nature. These issues can include behaviors of people as well as places. The term sacred means the opposite of profane. It refers to things connected with religious purposes and related to God. These things may include beliefs, customs or things respected or revered by a religious group or individual.

Durkheim considers that religion is the most basic and fundamental institution of any society and constitutes integral part of human social life, and also considers that many other institutions stem from religion or are influenced by it to some extent. In his book, "The elementary forms of religious life" theorizes that every religion consists of three common core elements: a) a sacred object, b) a set of defined beliefs and practices, and c) a moral community of believers.

According to him, the sacred object and the concept of its sanctity are the focal points of any religious system. The idea or awareness of the sacred creates a clear distinction in the minds of believers between the community of believers and the sacred object. This distinction inspires awe, reverence and worship. The sacred, therefore, is that which inspires awe, reverence and worship. Durkheim considers that the ritual is an example of the sacred. Ritual is the collective behavior of the community of believers according to their established belief system. This behavior is the expression of awe and reverence that the sacred object

inspires. Therefore, the ritual itself is sacred, while as an example of the profane he considers ordinary elements of everyday life, such as the secular way of life.

The distinction between secular and sacred was also mentioned by Leach (1976), who did not deal with religion, but with cultural structures. According to him, the perception of the world depends significantly on the words we use to describe it, to place persons or things in a relationship with each other. He calls these words signs or symbols and considers them to acquire meaning only if they are contrasted with other opposite symbols. According to him, when symbols are used to distinguish one category from another they create artificial boundaries, which can be either temporal or spatial. Referring to the spatial boundaries, he distinguishes the sacred spaces from the secular spaces, considering that the sacred is unnatural, timeless, ambiguous and marginal, while the secular is natural, temporally finite, clear and central.

Based on the above, the aim of this paper is to highlight the "sacred" and "secular" character of the Xesyrtos or Gikna dance in the community of Asvestades in the region of Thrace in Greece. In particular, this paper intends to highlight the difference between the "sacred" and the "secular" and the way this dichotomy is reflected in the dance under study. Doing a quick search of literature sources on topics related to the secular or sacred in dance, it was found to be sparse. In fact, it is found that the academic research (Devi, 2018; Dimopoulos *et al.*, 2013; Karlis *et al.*, 2009; Kraus, 2009) is even smaller than the non-academic literature. But even the non-academic literature has only to do with the sacredness of the dances and not with the sacred/secular dichotomy (see indicative: Amoda, 2001; Hayes, 2013; Roth, 1997; Winton-Henry, 2009). This fact constitutes the importance of this paper.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Data was gathered through the ethnographic method as this is applied to the study of dance (Buckland, 1999; Giurchescu, & Torp, 1991; Koutsouba, 1997; Sklar, 1991) and based on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources refer to data gathered through fieldwork that was carried out at the region of Thrace and particularly in the community of Asvestades from 2021 to 2022. Primary sources refer to the data coming from in-situ research, through interviews (open-type questions for semi-structured interview and unstructured interview) and through participant observation (Sklar, 1991; Buckland, 1999; Crang, & Cook, 2007) combined with simultaneous audio and video recording of the inhabitants of the community. Secondary sources refer to the review and use of existing literature and were based on the principles of archival ethnographic and historical research (Gefou-Madianou, 1999; Lydaki 2001).

The sacred/secular dichotomy, as proposed in Leach's (1993) theoretical model, is used to analyze the data. In particular, according to Leach cultural structures are based on binary coding, as, according to Leach, a sign or symbol acquires meaning when it is distinguished from some other opposite sign or symbol. Laban's notation system (Hutchinson, 2005; Koutsouba, 2005), was used to record the choreographic compositions of Xesyrtos or Gikna dance, while for the analysis of their structure and form, as well as their codification, the structural-morphological and typological method of analysis was applied, as it is applied in the Greek Traditional Dance (Karfis, 2018; Tyrovola, 1994, 2001). Finally, for the comparison of the choreographic compositions of the dances, the comparative method was used (Holt, & Turner, 1972; Ogurchov, 1983).

To finish, for the presentation and interpretation of the data, Geertz's model of "thick description" (Geertz, 2003) was adopted, which simultaneously includes the description and interpretation of the ethnographic data, as an interpretive process.

## III. DATA ANALYSIS

### A. The Ethnographic Context and The Xesyrtos or Gikna Dance

The region of Thrace and in particular the Prefecture of Evros is located in the northeastern tip of Greece, on the natural border of the country with Bulgaria to the north and Turkey to the east. According to the Kallikratic division of the administration of Greece implemented in 2010, Evros is divided into five municipalities: Alexandroupoli, Orestiada, Didymoteicho, Soufli and Samothraki. The community of Asvestades, which we are studying, belongs to the municipality of Didymoteicho and is 14 kilometers from the town of Didymoteicho.

The village of Asvestades is located in the northeastern part of the prefecture of Evros and is built in a low hilly and wooded area, near the bank of the Erythropotamos river. Asvestades got their name from the lime that the residents of the community produced until the 60s (Asvestis mean lime in Greek). As for the origin of the community's residents, they are said to be local Thracians, who belong to the ethno-cultural group of the Marides like other 12 villages of the Erythropotamos area. These villages of Marides are (except Asvestades) Koufovouno, Kyani, Asproneri, Vrysika, Mani, Karoti, Sitochori, Poimeniko, Ampelakia, Patagi, Neohori, and Sterna.

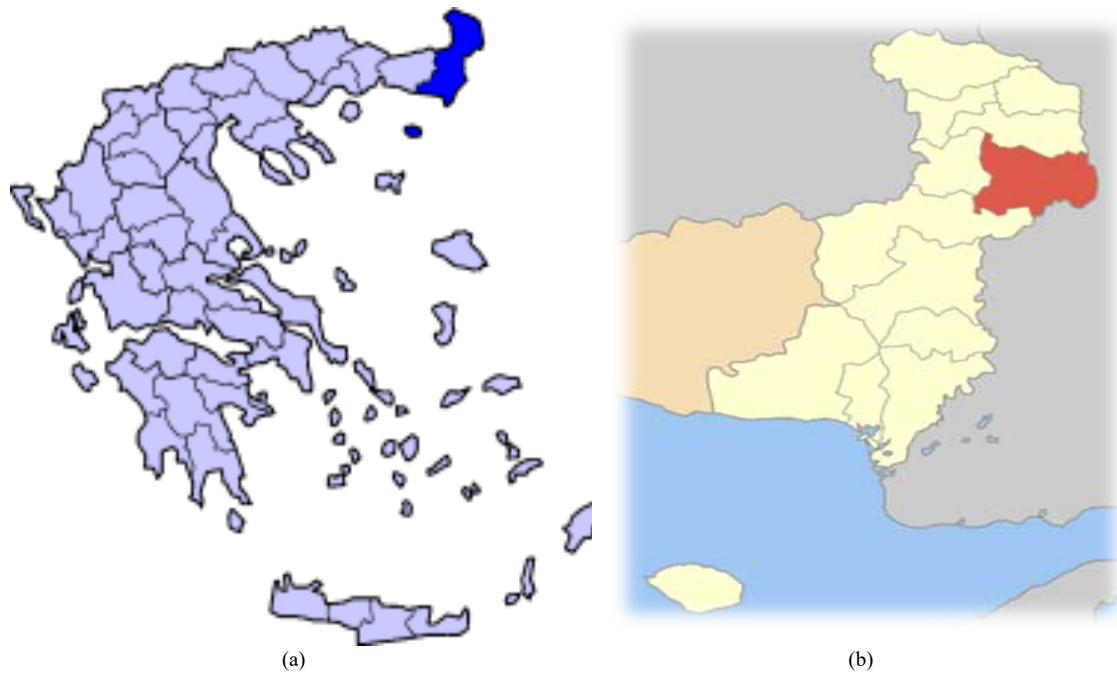


Fig. 1. a) The Evros prefecture and; b) the municipality of Didymoteicho.

The Gikna or Xesyrtos dance is danced throughout the Evros region and is one of the most basic dances in the dance repertoire of the region along with Zonaradikos. These two dances are found in every community of the Evros region and show variations from region to region. Otherwise, for example, they are danced in the municipality of Orestiada and otherwise in the municipality of Didymoteicho. But even in the municipality of Didymoteicho we will find small differences in them depending on the community that performs these dances, due to the various ethno-cultural groups that are active in the area.

The “Gikna” or “K’na” is a wedding dance event that enjoys great popularity in Africa and Asia (Filippidou, 2018). This dance event is also performed in Greece, specifically in the region of Thrace, which borders with Turkey. That dance event seems to enjoy an overall acceptance and popularity in the wider area of Thrace, as it is performed by most of the ethnic groups of the area, and, in fact, is still alive up to today in several cases (Filippidou, & Koutsouba, 2020). The dance event is performed on the eve of the wedding, mainly at the bride’s house (Filippidou, 2010, 2018; Filippidou *et al.*, 2018, 2019). When this ritual is completed, dancing begins with the first one in the line holding in his right hand a sacred object of the ceremony, which is the three lit candles (Filippidou, 2010, 2018; Filippidou *et al.*, 2018, 2019). This sacred object is a plate of dough on which three lighted candles are placed.

The same dance is also performed outside the wedding ceremony, at the public dance of the community festival. This time the dance is free from the sacred object and the participation in it is widespread as the whole community participates in it. In this case it shows improvisational freedom, displaying dynamic movements and enthusiastic shouts of the dancers. In general, the dance in the public dance of the community festival displays a dynamic and differs noticeably in its component elements from the dance that accompanies the wedding ritual. Below is the comparative and concise table of the component elements of the Gikna and Xesyrtos dance, from which the differences and by extension the artificial limits of Leach's theoretical model of bipolar culture will be seen.

TABLE I: COMPARATIVE AND CONCISE TABLE OF THE COMPONENT ELEMENTS OF THE GIKNA AND XESYRTOS DANCE

PARAMETERS	GIKNA DANCE	XESYRTOS DANCE
Form	Unilateral dance form.	Unilateral dance form.
Dancers' position and gender	Women.	Men in front, women following.
Space	Yard of the house.	Community square
Handle	W (with the first dancer holding a sacred object).	W
Tempo	Moderate and stable.	Dynamic and stable.
Function	Sacred dance, danced in the wedding ritual of K'na.	Secular dance, danced at the public festival of the community.
Musical accompaniment	Song.	Music accompanied by a song.
Method of interpretation	Complete absence of improvisation. The dance is not accompanied by enthusiastic shouts from the dancers.	Strong presence of improvisation. The dance is accompanied by enthusiastic shouts of the dancers.

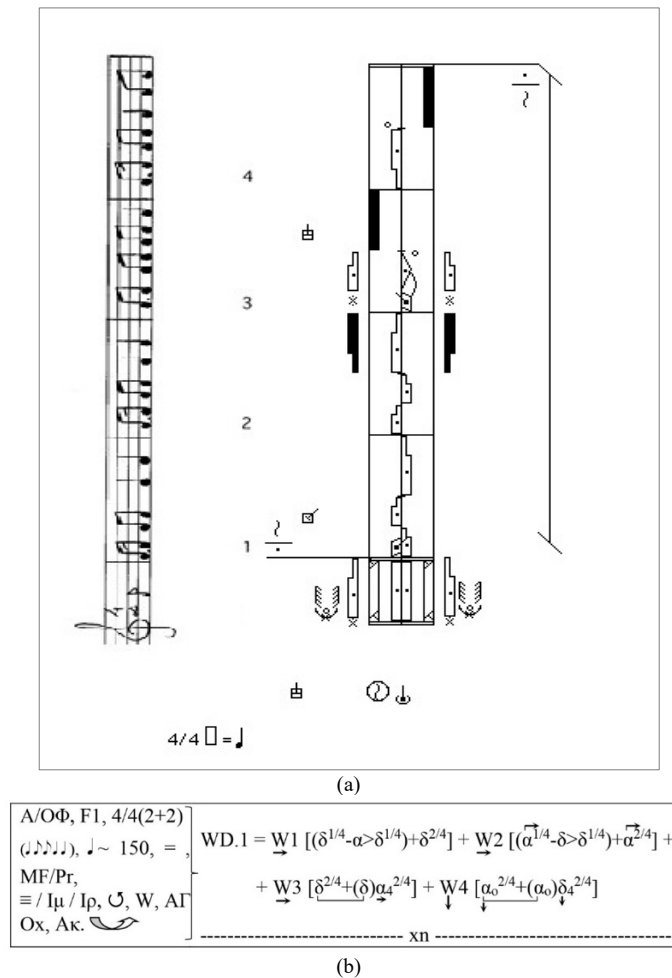


Fig. 2. a) Dance notation and; b) kinetic type of Gikna dance of Asvestades.

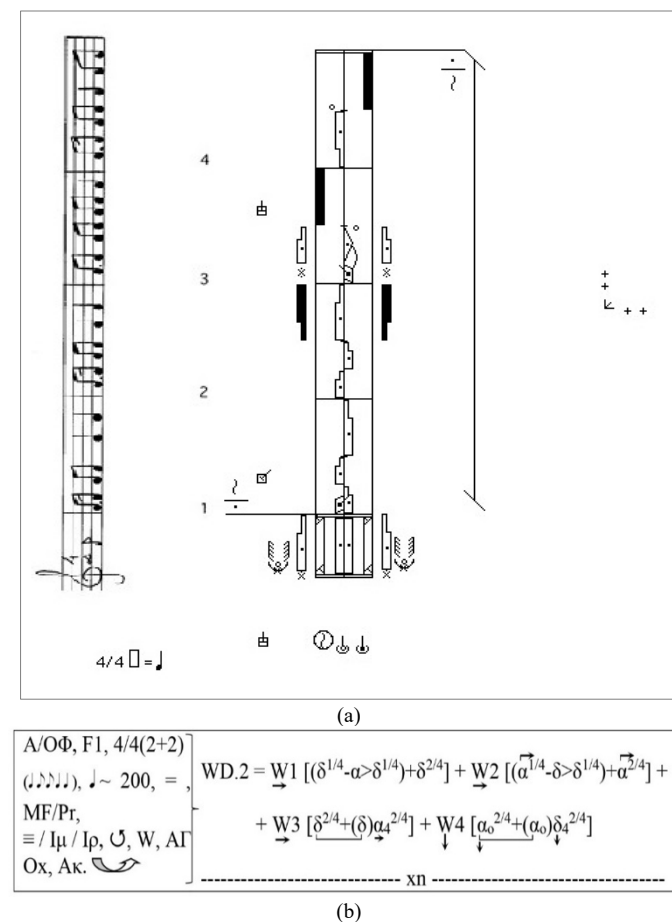


Fig. 3. a) Dance notation and; b) kinetic type of Xesyrtos dance of Asvestades.

### *B. The Sacred and The Secular Dance in Asvestades, Thrace*

From the presentation and processing of the ethnographic data it was found that the choreographic composition of the Xesyrtos dance is the same as the choreographic composition of the Gikna dance. Their diversity, which results in them receiving different names and consequently being distinguished, has to do with their functionality. Thus, the Xesyrtos dance is danced in social gatherings, such as the public dance of the festival, having a secular character, while the Gikna dance is danced at the wedding ritual of K'na, having a ritual-sacred character. Therefore, the first dance can be characterized as secular, while the second sacred. This differentiation results from the following factors:

#### *1) From the dance floor*

The inhabitants of Asvestades dance the Xesyrtos in the community square during the secular celebration of the community on May 21 and in the secular phase of Bey's carnival custom or in the courtyard of the Cultural Association of Asvestades during the dance party organized by the Cultural Association every summer. In contrast, the Gikna dance is only performed in the courtyard of the houses, during the K'na wedding ceremony. And this happens because the "sacred" dances are not danced anywhere and cannot be performed in the same place as the "secular" ones, but only in the place where the ritual was performed, in order to achieve its goal, which in this case is prosperity and the human procreation of the newly married couple. This fact is confirmed by the theoretical model of bipolar culture, as Leech argues that the sacred is marginal, while the secular is central determined.

#### *2) From their implementation time*

The Xesyrtos dance is danced on specific dates and specific periods of time, such as the Feast of Saints Constantine and Helen on May 21st, the season of Apokria (Carnival) and during the summer period. On the other hand, the Gikna dance is performed throughout the year, whenever the sacrament of marriage is scheduled to be celebrated. This fact is confirmed by the theoretical model of bipolar culture, as Leech argues that the sacred is timeless, while the secular is temporally determined.

#### *3) From the way they are performed*

In Xesyrtos there is a strong presence of improvisation with the men doing seats and kicking the legs during the dance, while the women can rhythmically tap the fingers of the right hand when they are in the first position of the dance. On the other hand, in the Gikna dance there is a complete absence of improvisation and there is a presence of a sacred object, which the lead dancer holds in her right hand. Also, it should be noted that the Gikna dance is completed with only three songs, which when they are completed, the dance is also completed, a fact that does not happen in the Xesyrtos dance. Finally, the Xesyrtos dance is accompanied by enthusiastic shouts of the dancers, a fact that does not exist in the Gikna dance. This fact is confirmed by the theoretical model of bipolar culture, as Leech argues that in some cultures silence (here the absence of enthusiastic shouts) is equated with the sacred, while noise (here the presence of enthusiastic shouts) is equated with the secular.

#### *4) From the gender of the dancers*

It is a fact that in the cases where "secular" dances are presented, the presence of both sexes is considered equal and a given (Dimopoulos *et al.*, 2013). This also happens in the Xesyrtos dance, in which both sexes participate. There used to be a definite order and hierarchy. In particular, the oldest danced in front and the youngest danced behind. Also, in the first places of the dance were the men, followed by the women. Today, this fact continues to a certain extent, however women are also placed in the first positions of the dance, if they wish. On the other hand, the Gikna dance is danced only by women, while men are restricted to the role of spectator.

#### *5) From the musical accompaniment and the tempo*

The Xesyrtos dance used to be accompanied by bagpipe in combination with song, while today we can see the presence of other musical instruments in it, such as clarinet, oud, violin, davul (drum with two sticks) and darbuka (goblet drum). On the other hand, the Gikna dance is accompanied only by women's singing, without the presence of musical instruments. According to Leach (1976), culture often uses artificial noises (as here the sound of a bagpipe, to mark spatial or temporal limits). Further, the Xesyrtos dance is characterized by a fast tempo, in contrast to the Gikna dance, which has a slow tempo.



#### IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this paper was to highlight the "sacred" and "secular" character of the Xesyrtos or Gikna dance in the community of Asvestades in Thrace in Greece. In particular, this paper intends to highlight the difference between the "sacred" and the "secular" and the way this dichotomy is reflected in the dance under study. In order to achieve this aim, a fieldwork was carried out at the region of Thrace and particularly in the region of Didimoteicho and especially in the community of Asvestades of northern Evros region. For the interpretation of the data the sacred/secular dichotomy, as proposed in Leech's (1993) theoretical model, was used.

From the processing and analysis of the data it is found that the Xesyrtos dance and the Gikna dance have the same structure and form, but they present differences in a number of parameters. This is because the inhabitants of Asvestades set clear dividing lines between "sacred" and "secular". Thus, they attribute to the Gikna dance awe, reverence and worship, accompanying it only with song, with calm and humble movements of women, without enthusiastic shouts and with a sacred ritual object. On the other hand, the Xesyrtos dance is characterized by a fun and entertaining character, as improvisation is intense, the accompaniment of musical instruments causes loud shouts of joy from the dancers who interact with the musicians, a fact that is also influenced by the tempo of the dance, which is fast and dynamic.

Finally, it is established that the Xesyrtos and Gikna dances are danced in exactly the same way, but are clearly separated and demarcated based on the intentions of the community residents related to the performed function of the dance event. According to Leach's (1976) view when something is cut off from its environment and placed in another it changes meaning. Thus, the Gikna dance is identified with the "sacred", being a dance that accompanies a ritual and when it comes out of its performing environment it is identified with the "secular" element, which leads to the feeling, but also to the confirmation of the opinion that the limits have a special significance (Leach, 1964).

#### REFERENCES

- Amoda. (2001). *Moving into ecstasy: An urban mystics guide to movement, music and meditation*. London: Thorsons.
- Buckland, J. Th. (1999). Introduction: Reflecting on dance ethnography. In T. Buckland (Ed.), *Dance in the Field. Theory Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography* (pp. 1-10). Great Britain: Macmillan Press.
- Crang, M., & Cook, I. (2007). *Doing Ethnographies*. London: SagePublications
- Devi, R. (2018). *Urban Kali: From Sacred Dance to Secular Performance*. (PhD thesis). Australia: School of Art and Media, University of Wollongong. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1/359>
- Dimopoulos, K., Tyrovolas, V., & Koutsouba, M. (2013). The "sacred" and the "secular". The distinction them in the performative procedures and dance practices in the community of Krania Karditsa. In *Proceedings of 35th World Congress on Dance Research* (pp. 1-6). Athens: Cid.
- Durkheim, E. (1915). *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*. Macmillan.
- Filippidou, E. (2010). *Recycling the tradition: The dance in Nea Vyssa, northern Evros*. Alexandroupolis: Municipality of Vyssa
- Filippidou, E. (2018). *Crossing the borders, uniting the people. Cybernetic dance approach at the "K'na" Thracian wedding event in Greece and Turkey*. Ph.D. thesis. Athens: Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/45499>
- Filippidou, E., & Koutsouba, M. (2020). Dance and Socio-Cybernetics: The dance event of "K'na" as a shaping component of the cultural identity amongst the Arvanites of Neo Cheimonio Evros, Greece. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 7(2), 30-49. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/342>
- Filippidou, E., Koutsouba, M., Lalioti, B., & Lantzios, B. (2018). Cybernetic approach of the "K'na" dance: The construction of ethnic and national identity in Nea Vyssa, Thrace, Greece. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2), 17-29. <https://content.sciendo.com/view/journals/mjss/9/2/article-p17.xml>
- Filippidou, E., Koutsouba, M., Lalioti, B., & Lantzios, B. (2019). The construction of national identity through cybernetic process: The example of "K'na" dance event in Greek and Turkish Thrace. *European Review of Applied Sociology*, 12(18), 13-31. <https://content.sciendo.com/view/journals/eras/12/18/article-p13.xml>
- Geertz, C. (2003). Thick Description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz (ed.), *The interpretation of cultures. Selected essays* (pp. 1-30). New York: Basic Books.
- Gefou-Madianou, D. (1999). Culture and ethnography. From ethnographic realism to political criticism. Athens: Ellinika Grammata.
- Giurchescu, A., & Torp, L. (1991). Theory and methods in dance research: A European approach to the holistic study of dance. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 23, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/768392>
- Hayes, J. (2013). *Soul and spirit in dance movement psychotherapy: A transpersonal approach*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Holt T.R., & Turner, E.J. (eds.). (1972). *The methodology of comparative research*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hutchinson, A. (1977). *Labanotation. The system of analyzing and recording movement*. London: Dance Books.
- Karlis, V. (2018). *Greek traditional dance: structure, form and typology of Greek traditional danceability*. (PhD thesis). Athens: School of Physical Education and Sports Science, National Kapodistrian University of Athens.
- Karlis, S., Tyrovolas, V., & Koutsouba, M. (2009). "Sacred" and "secular" dances in the ritual "gianitsaroi and mpoules" in Naoussa, Macedonia. In *17th International Congress of Physical Education & Sport* (pp. 2-3). Komotini: Democritus University of Thrace. <http://www.phyed.duth.gr/undergraduate/images/files/congress/2009/abstract/Dance.pdf>
- Koutsouba, M. (1997). *Plurality in motion: Dance and cultural identity on the Greek Ionian Island of Lefkada*. Ph.D. thesis. London: University of London. <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00028536>
- Koutsouba, I.M. (2005). *Notation of dance movement. The passage from prehistory to the history of dance*. Athens: Propobos.
- Kraus, R. (2009) straddling the sacred and secular: Creating a spiritual experience through belly dance, *Sociological Spectrum*, 29(5), 598-625. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732170903051383>
- Leach, E. (1964). Anthropological aspects of language: Animal categories and verbal abuse. In E.H. Lenneberg (eds.), *New directions in the study of language* (pp. 23-63). Cambridge: MIT Press.

- Leach, E. (1976). *Culture and communication: The logic by which symbols are connected. an introduction to the use of structuralist analysis in social anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511607684>
- Lydaki, A. (2001). *Qualitative methods of social research*. Athens: Kastaniotis Publications.
- Ogurchov, P.A. (1983). Comparative-historical method. In *the Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (pp. 298-299). Athens: Akadimos.
- Roth, G. (1997). *Sweat your prayers. Movement as spiritual practice: The five rhythms of the Soul*. New York: Penguin Putnam.
- Sklar, D. (1991). On Dance Ethnography. *CORD Dance Research Journal*, 23(1), 6-10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1478692>
- Tyrovola, V. (1994). *The dance "sta tria" in Greece. Structural-morphological and typological approach*. (Ph.D. thesis). Athens: National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Department of Music Studies.
- Tyrovola, V. (2001). *The Greek dance. A different approach*. Athens: Gutenberg.
- Winton-Henry, C. (2009), *Dance. The sacred art: The joy of movement as spiritual practice*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing.



**Eleni Filippidou** is a postdoctoral researcher at the School of Physical Education and Sport Science of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens with a scholarship from the Hellenic State Scholarship Foundation and Lecturer in the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences and Techniques of the French College Idef-Universite Paris13. She is a graduate of the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and holds a Postgraduate and Doctoral Degree in Folklore-Anthropology of Dance at the same university.