

KALANDA – CHRISTMAS CAROLS IN MACEDONIA

REPORT OF A FIELD SURVEY

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THESSALONIKI

In the very last year of the nineteenth century an English folklorist made a field study in Macedonia. The whole of Macedonia, at that time, belonged to the Ottoman Empire, but there lived in this area, besides the ruling Turks, the ruled Greeks, Slavs (Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians and others), Albanians, Vlachs, Jews, Gypsies, etc., etc. In a word, Macedonia was one of those regions which might justly be called *a melting pot of races*.¹ In reality, however, none of the races was willing to *melt* into any other, and their mutual enmity which very often precipitated atrocities was attracting the attention of all the world.

Notwithstanding the harrassing interference of the Turkish authorities notorious for their red-tapism, the Englishman succeeded in obtaining remarkable results mainly in the Greek-speaking parts of Macedonia, thanks to his own patience, sociability and excellent knowledge of the language, which together with good health constitute *sine qua non* of any field researcher. His name – G. F. Abbott – is still well remembered and respected by students of the ethnology of Macedonia, because he left us a very witty record of his travels, *The Tale of a Tour in Macedonia*, London, 1903, and an academic work, *Macedonian Folklore*, Cambridge, 1903 (reprinted in Chicago, 1969) which laid the foundations for all further work in the field.

From the folkloristic point of view he characterized the Macedonia of that time as follows:

In the Near East, as elsewhere, Western civilization is doing its wonted work of reducing all racial and individual characteristics to a level of dull uniformity. The process, however, is much slower in Macedonia than it is in countries like Egypt, Greece, or Roumania. The mountainous char-

¹ T. Yada (comp.), *History of the Eastern Europe*. Tokyo, 1977, p. 215. The chapter on modern Macedonia was written by A. Naono.

acter of the province, the backward state of commerce, lack of security, and the conspicuous absence of means of communication obstruct the progress of foreign influence. The same causes keep the various districts, and their inhabitants, separated from each other. To these impediments are further added the barriers of languages, creed, and race, all tending to foster that luxuriant wealth of superstitious growth, which makes glad the heart of the folklorist.²

What changes have occurred in the general conditions described by Abbott? What has happened to the *melting pot*, i.e. the mixed habitation of diverse races? Are the old folk songs still sung by the inhabitants of the area? — finding answers to these questions was the main aim of my trip to Macedonia.

Eighty years ago Abbott entered Macedonia across the northern frontier via Uskub, the Islamized name of the present Skopje, the capital of Yugoslavian Macedonia, from where he travelled southward by train to Thessaloniki. This town may be better known to the Western world by the name of Salonica. My trip, however, began immediately at Thessaloniki where an airplane had carried me in less than an hour from the capital of Greece.

The primacy of this town in Macedonia has never been questioned since Biblical days. It was, writes my predecessor, a cosmopolitan port and a city of many tongues, had a population just under a hundred and fifty thousand at the turn of the century, of which Jews were between seventy and ninety thousand, the rest being divided between Greeks and Turks. Since then the town has grown quite rapidly. Official Greek statistics show that in 1971 the population reached 345,799,³ the second largest in all the country, next only to Athens. Every tourist is certain to be impressed by the rows of magnificent modern buildings on the sea front and downtown streets. But a much more amazing and decisive change was the disappearance of Turkish rule and the subsequent complete Hellenization of the town: Abbott was right when he said that the Jews and Turks were birds of passage.⁴ It also has become quite difficult to find in the town and its vicinity any of the Slavic elements which had been so conspicuous since the days of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the inventors of the Slavic alphabet. Rare exceptions included a small newsstand on the quay selling outdated copies of *Pravda*, and several book stores where a considerable number of Soviet books were displayed. Really, so far as the availability of Soviet publications is concerned — a shopgirl assured me — Thessaloniki surpasses by far the capital with its population of 2.5 million. It turned out, however, that these Russian books were not for Slav-speaking

2 G. F. Abbott, *Macedonian Folklore*. Cambridge, 1903, p. 1.

3 *Population de la Grèce au recensement du 14 mars 1972*. Athens, 1972, p. 82.

4 G. F. Abbott, *The Tale of a Tour in Macedonia*. London, p. 21.

citizens but for Greeks who had learned to read Russian. To this group belong the participants in the civil war after World War II, who had taken refuge in the Soviet Union and were now beginning to come home again after a quarter of a century's absence. But the number of these repatriated Greeks being not great, their influence on their homeland is supposed to be almost negligible either in the way of life or in the sphere of ideology.

There are in Thessaloniki two academic institutions engaged in the study of Macedonian folklore: *Etaireia Makedonikon Spoudon* (the Society of Macedonian Studies) and *Idruma Meleton Chersonesou tou Aimou* (the Institute for Balkan Studies). Both organizations are equipped with remarkable libraries, to which I was fortunate enough to gain access.⁵ I listed all the books indispensable for my study, making use of card catalogues in the reading rooms, and began to purchase those of relatively recent publication, most of which had been issued under the combined editorship of the two institutions. Meanwhile I came across a very interesting book *Ta demotika tragoudia tou n. Serron* (*Folk Songs of Serres Prefecture*), compiled by G. Kaftantzis, Serres, 1978 (on the cover, but 1977 on the title page).

Although the book had been published recently, it was impossible to find on the shelves of any bookshops in Thessaloniki. As I was enchanted by the book, I visited the library of the Institute for Balkan Studies every day and made excerpts from the book. At last, on December 21st I left for Serres. Christmas was drawing near.

SERRES

It took about two hours by bus to get from Thessaloniki to Serres. G. F. Abbott had been obliged to travel the same distance – with a detour, of course – by train almost half a day. The automobile has gained the upper hand over the railway not only in Macedonia but all over Greece.

To tell the truth, I had long desired to visit Serres. Every student of Macedonian folklore is expected to be acquainted with the following passage from Abbott's *Macedonian Folklore*.

My real harvest was gathered in the thoroughly provincial towns of Serres and Melenik, the townships of Demir Hissar and Nigrita, and the villages adjacent thereto.⁶

Melenik now belongs to Bulgaria. Without a visa it was out of question to

⁵ My acknowledgements are due to the amiable polyglot woman librarian at the Institute for Balkan Studies, Mr. D. Samsares of the Society of Macedonian Studies and Prof. A. Kiriakidou-Nestoros of Thessaloniki University.

⁶ *Macedonian Folklore*, p. 1.

go there, to say nothing of doing fieldwork. This means that there have arisen new barriers, more ideological than nationalistic, of which Abbott had never dreamed.

Serres in former days appeared very exotic to foreign eyes.

There are few towns in Turkey more thoroughly and delightfully Oriental in appearance than Serres: its narrow, crooked, silent lanes and blind alleys, with the projecting upper storeys of the houses often meeting in a close embrace overhead; its roofed bazaars perfumed with the drowsy spices of the East and always cloaked in mysterious twilight; the glorious green vines and the purple wistaria trained across the roads; and the many mosques and *khans*, are all suggestive of a Haroun-al-Raschid world.⁷

Serres nowadays is not particularly different from other Greek provincial towns with the same sinuous roads, the same white plastered houses and even with the same remaining traces of Turkish rule. My first impression was that the town was filled with young soldiers in military uniform. This reminded me at once of the fact that eastern Macedonia with Serres as its capital had been under Bulgarian occupation during the so-called Macedonian War in 1912 – 1913 and also during both the World Wars. The boundary is less than 35 km from Serres.

Arriving in the town, I put up at the Hotel Park which is graded C by the Greek Tourism Organization. It was my financial situation that obliged me to choose it, but the hotel, located in the very centre of the town, and facing the well-cared for park (whence the name of the hotel), proved to be more convenient than any other hotel in the town for my purposes. Moreover, the advice of the aged owner sitting always at the reception counter and an ex-sailor Japanophile cook was of great help to me.

The first thing I did in Serres was to pay a visit to Mr A. Kolokotronis, the director of the local newspaper, *Proodos* (*Progress*); the above-mentioned book by G. Kaftantzis had been printed by this newspaper. Thanks to the kindness peculiar to the Greek people, I found myself in half an hour in the office of the compiler of *Folk Songs of Serres Prefecture*. He was a practicing lawyer who seemed about sixty years old. There sat across the big desk an old man, perhaps his client. Mr Kaftantzis did not seem surprised to see an unexpected visitor from Japan. As soon as he knew what I had come for, he told me bluntly that I should ask for a copy of his book the next day at the newspaper office. The next morning at last I was able to get the promised book, but the lawyer had sent a message saying that he was busy and had no time to see me.

⁷ *The Tale of a Tour in Macedonia*, p. 71.

Feeling as if I had met an old friend again, I began to read the book from the beginning. The preface may be summarized as follows:

The population of Serres prefecture has not been staple. The result of compulsory migration was that the ethnic composition of the population has changed considerably. Located at the crossroads of Macedonia, this region was swept by 17 waves of migration during the 12 years from 1912 to 1924. Immigrants who poured in from Thrace, the Black Sea, Caucasia, Asia Minor, Bulgaria and Roumania contributed to the formation of a new community.

Historically, even after the Turkish invasion in 1383, Greeks formed the majority in Serres and lived in their own communities not mixing with other races such as Turks, Gypsies or Jews.

But now few of the old residents remain in the town of Serres. Most of them moved to Thessaloniki, Athens and other regions during the difficult years of the two World Wars. The circumstances, of course, differ from place to place. Judging from distinguishing traits in language and clothing, the inhabitants of some towns and villages are descendants of people who immigrated from other parts of Greece.

The Vlachs and Sarakatsani each form their individual groups. They live mainly in mountain areas . . .

This anthology contains the most beautiful and most typical folk songs from the above-mentioned ethnical groups.

I was most interested in *Kalanda*, i.e. Christmas carols, and found one specimen in *Folk Songs of Serres Prefecture*.

It was in autumn of 1900 that Abbott visited Serres. Seemingly he had no occasion to hear *Kalanda* in this town. But he describes the custom in general which was popular in all Macedonia.

At evenfall (on Christmas Eve – Y. N.) the village boys form parties and go about knocking at the doors of the cottages with sticks, shouting “Kolianda! Kolianda!” and receiving presents. Both the custom and the sticks are named after this cry, which, like its variants to be noticed in the sequel, is an adaptation of the Roman and Byzantine term *Kalendae*.⁸

Fortunately, a Roumanian author, M. Beza, records one of the songs meant to be sung after the cries of “Kolianda” in his book which was published in 1928:

⁸ *Macedonian Folklore*, p. 76.

Colinde, Colinde
 Christ was born
 In the stable of oxen
 For fear of the Jews
 The horse uncovered Him
 The ox did cover Him.

Strictly speaking, this song had been sung, he writes, in Macedonia among the Roumanians as well as among the Greeks and Slavs.⁹ It is supposed that each ethnic group sang this song in its own language.

Early in the morning of December 24th, equipped with a tape recorder, I took a seat in one corner of the lobby of the hotel. The first party appeared at half past nine. Two boys opened the heavy door with a bang and shouted to the owner behind the counter "*Na ta poume?*" (Shall we tell?). Not waiting for his answer, I shouted back in haste "*Na ta peite!*" (You may tell!). It was a stylised password on this occasion. They were both, it turned out later, thirteen years old and schoolmates. Standing at stiff attention, they sang loudly in unison with one of them ringing a triangle throughout. This was only the beginning. Six parties in all dropped in before noon. Only one party of them was a trio, all the others were two-man, or more accurately two-boy, parties. One party consisting of brothers, 13 and 10 years old, was apparently Gypsy. Their origin was betrayed by their looks and the plainness of their clothes. No one carried a stick and all the boys pronounced clearly *Kalanda*, but not *Kolianda* or *Kolinde*. Through the window I noticed two or three parties of girls but, to my regret, none of them dared to open the door of the hotel.

To each boy who "told *kalanda*" I presented a ten drachma coin. Other lodgers who happened to be in the lobby also cleaned out the change in their purses.

The *kalanda* I heard and recorded on tape that day was as follows.

Kalin spera arkhondes
 An ine orizmos sas
 Khristou tin Thia Gennisi
 Na po st'arkhondiko sas.

Khristos gennate simeron
 En Vithle'em ti Poli
 I ourani agalonde
 Kheri i fisis oli.

⁹ M. Beza, *Paganism in Roumanian Folklore*. London, 1928, pp. 5-6.



Kalanda recorded in Serres on December 24

En to spileo tiktete
 En fatni ton alogon
 O Vasilefs ton ouranon
 Ke pi'itis ton olon.

S'afto to spiti pourthame
 Petra na mi ragisi
 Ki o nikokiris tou spitiou
 Khilia khronia na zisi.

The first three stanzas are included in a collection of Greek folk songs published more than a hundred years ago, A. Passow's *Popularia Carmina Graeciae Recentioris* (*Folk Songs of the Modern Greek People*), Athens, 1860.¹⁰ The words are the same except for very trifling differences. I remembered at once also that a relatively recent anthology by Susan and Ted Alevizos, *Folk Songs of Greece*, N. Y., 1968, contained the same song together with notes and English translation, which I shall quote here.¹¹

Good day gentlemen,
 And if it is your desire
 To hear about the Divine Birth of Christ
 I will relate it to your household.

¹⁰ A. Passow, *Popularia Carmina Graeciae Recentioris*. Athens, 1860, p. 217. Here "Kalin spera" (st. 1, 1.1; Good evening) and "i fisis oli" (st. 2, 1.4; all nature) are printed respectively "Kalin imera" (Good day) and "i ktisis oli" (all creation).

¹¹ Susan and Ted Alevizos, *Folk Songs of Greece*, pp. 60-61. As for the notes, Alevizos' second version is the same as that of Serres.

Christ is born today
 In the city of Bethlehem
 The heavens are jubilant
 All creation rejoices.

In a cavern he is born
 In the horses' manger
 The King of the heavens
 And the creator of all.

Only the fourth stanza may be peculiar to the region of Serres.

In the house where we came
 May not split the stone wall
 And the lord of the house
 May live thousand years!

Interesting enough, this stanza is identical with the first stanza of a New Year *kalanda* in Kaftantzes' anthology.¹²

I asked all the boys in vain, if they knew any other *kalanda*.

My presumption that *kalanda* in Serres had almost lost their special characteristics was substantiated by another fact. In the afternoon of the same day I rode by bus to a village called *Provatas* some 10 km west of Serres. Mr G. Barbas with whom I had got acquainted in the lawyer's office had invited me to his house. It was a pure rural community with about 1500 inhabitants, producing mainly rice and tomatoes. There, too, I heard the song beginning "*Kalin spera arkhondes*" sung with exactly the same melody.

On Christmas day the telephone rang in my room. It was Mr Kaftantzes. Unexpectedly he invited me to Christmas dinner. The lawyer who had looked so stern and sour in the office was very mild and hospitable at home. He was not only a folklorist, but also the author of a voluminous history of Serres and a poet whose works were included in several anthologies of contemporary Greek poetry. After the dinner, the gorgeousness of which I will refrain from describing here, he and his wife brought me in their car to the nearby village of *Agion Pneuma*. It was a mountain village situated to the east of the town. Mr and Mrs Kaftantzes seemed to be well known among the villagers.

But, alas, here the boys and girls sang us, too, that same *kalanda* "*Kalin spera arkhondes . . .*". It was, they told, the only Christmas carol they knew.

¹² G. Kaftantzes, *Ta demotika tragoudia tou n. Serron (Folk Songs of Serres Prefecture)*. Serres, 1977, p. 163.

We may probably conclude that all over Greece, including Macedonia, the *kalanda* is rapidly becoming homogenized.

What have remained unchanged from the past centuries are the bustling bazaar held every Tuesday morning near the park and the world-famous *philokseni* (hospitality) which Abbott mentioned especially in the chapter on Serres in his book.

As for the co-existence of different ethnic groups, only the Vlachs are showing signs of success in the vicinity of Serres. There are in Kaftantzēs' anthology many songs of the Vlachs. His mother, Madam Anna, still hale and hearty, sang for me in the Vlachian language a *klephtic* song belonging to the most popular genre of Greek folk songs. She was born a Vlach herself. The most important informant for Kaftantzēs was Yiannis Fakes – an elderly Vlach running a prosperous meat shop with his son in the centre of the town. Through the good offices of Mr Kaftantzēs I saw him and recorded on tape quite a number of his songs which he sang partly in Greek and partly in Vlachian.

Besides some mountain villages whose inhabitants are exclusively Vlachs-shepherds, Vlachs live also in the towns on the plain and are engaged in various professions. It may be said that from the standpoint of culture they are merging peacefully into the Greek community, indeed, at the cost of their own language.