



**NATIONAL INVENTORY
OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE
OF GREECE**

**BULLETIN OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL
HERITAGE ELEMENT**

***AI-GIORIS (AI-GIOR') – SAINT GEORGE
OF NESTANI***

1. Brief presentation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Element

a. Under what name is the element recognized by its bearers?

Ai-Gioris [Αϊ-Γιώρης – Saint George] *Ai-Gior'* [του Αϊ-Γιώρ', του Αϊ-Γιώρ', τον Αϊ-Γιώρ']

b. Other name(s):

Ai-Gioris tis Nestanis [Αϊ-Γιώργης της Νεστάνης – St George of Nestani], *to ethimo tou Ai-Giorgi sti Nestani* [το έθιμο του Αϊ-Γιώργη στη Νεστάνη - the custom of Saint George at Nestani].

c. Brief Description:

The custom of *Ai-Gioris* [Αϊ-Γιώρης] takes place on the feast day of Saint George in Nestani in Arcadia. Very early in the morning, the participants, both men and women, called *Ai Giorites* [Αϊ-Γιωρήτες], climb to the top of the rock of Goulas [Γουλάς], which towers above the village. Most of them are dressed in the local costume and carry shepherds' crooks [glitses – γκλίτσες] decorated with flowers and wild celery. There, "on the threshing floor of Goulas", as the feast song goes, they hold their first dance, singing a cappella. Then, still singing, they retrace their steps, descending from Goulas and, following a predetermined route, they end up in the village main square, where they hold their final dance.

d. ICH Domain

X oral traditions and expressions

☐ performing arts

X social practices- rituals- festive events

☐ knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

X traditional craftsmanship

☐ other

e. Region where the element is to be found:

The event takes place in the village of Nestani in Arcadia, built at the foot of Mount Artemision,

15 kilometres from Tripolis, on the borders with the Prefecture of Argolis. The village, which is built amphitheatrically, has striking traditional architectural elements, like the big square full of plane trees. Behind the village, as one looks out from the main square, rises Goulas, an impressive hill/rock; beneath it, is the Byzantine monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary *Gorgoepikoos* [Γοργοεπήκοος], which used to be the parish church in the 14th and early 15th century. The monastery was built in the 11th century, possibly on the ruins of a Sanctuary of Demeter. The festivities for Saint George take place every year on the rugged rock. On its summit, is the old settlement of *Tsipiana* [Τσιπιανά], a small town that flourished in the Frankish era; its ruins can still be seen today. The inhabitants' main occupation was primarily pastoral/agricultural. The Nestaniotes cultivated their

cereals and put out their flocks sheep and goats to pasture in the Mantinian Plain and the slopes of Mount Artemision, as well as in the area mentioned by Pausanias as the *Argon* Plain, which floods in winter and cannot be cultivated.

f. Key words

Agios Georgios [Άγιος Γεώργιος – Saint George], *Panegyria tou Agiou Georgiou* [πανηγύρια του Αγίου Γεωργίου – Feasts (*Panegyria*) of Saint George], *Nestani* [Νεστάνη], *Tsipiana* [Τσιπιανά], *Goulas* [Γουλάς], *poukamisa* [πουκαμίσα], *glitsa* [γκλίτσα - shepherd's crook], ***agrioselino*** [αγριοσέλινο – wild celery], *Monastiri Panagias Gorgoepikoou Nestanis* [Μοναστήρι Παναγίας Γοργοεπηκόου Νεστάνης - Monastery of the Gorgoepikoos Virgin of Nestani]

2. Identity of the bearer(s) of the ICH element

a. Who is/are the bearer(s) of the ICH element?

All Nestaniotes (or non-Nestaniotes), men and women, who participate in the custom or have participated in the past.

b. Further information regarding the element:

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3. Detailed description of the ICH element, as it is found today

The custom of *Ai-Gior'* [Αη Γιωρ'] takes place in Nestani, on the day of Saint George's feast. Preparations start days earlier, when a group of volunteers climbs Goulas hill, to clean and decorate the Saint's little chapel. The celebrators [*Ai-Giorites* -Αη-Γιωρήτες] prepare their equipment a day earlier. On the morning of the feast, almost before daybreak, a number of small groups, in local traditional dress, begin the difficult ascent of the rock of Goulas. They carry sweetmeats, Easter cookies (*koulouria*). *Tsipouro*, wine and the Saint's banner. Once they have arrived, they gather wild flowers, as well as an endemic type of wild celery, with which they decorate their shepherd's crooks. Over the last years, a service is held in the Saint's chapel on Goulas, by the priest of the Monastery of *Gorgoepikoos*.

Once Holy Mass has ended, the celebrators gather outside the chapel, to sing their first song and begin their first dance on the threshing floor of Goulas. On that day, all songs and dances are performed a cappella (without the accompaniment of musical instruments). There are two categories of songs, those of the procession-descent, and those sung during the dancing. The songs are rendered antiphonally, with the first group singing one verse, and the second group repeating it. The dances are performed in a double circle - with the men forming the outer circle and women the inner one – with a *syrtó* and *kalamatiano* rhythm. Dancers hold each other by the arms, with their

crooks held high above their left shoulder.

Then, at around 9 a.m., the participants set off, beginning their descent along the rough paths leading to the Monastery. The arduous steep route downhill does not lend itself to singing. Once they have all gathered on the road, at a short distance from the Monastery, they form a procession, divided into two informal groups. Singing antiphonally, they make their way towards the Monastery. The groups are mixed, including both men and women, comprising of rows of six, with the men forming the first rows of each group and the women following. The participants proceed with arms linked, supporting their crooks with their left shoulders. The group singing a verse stops walking and moves forward again once it has ended. Usually, to keep things better organized, the person with the greater experience of the custom undertakes to regulate the order in which the songs are to be sung and the pacing of the procession.

The songs are alternated with no strict sequence. Nevertheless, at every phase of the procession, certain songs prevail, while the main song of the feast is the song of *Ai-Gioris* (Saint George). The procession is led by the person who has undertaken to carry the Saint's banner. Lately, a horse with its rider also leads. Upon entering the Monastery, the songs cease and the celebrators, in turn, worship the icon of the Virgin *Gorgoepikoos*. They then add laurel leaves from the tree in the churchyard to their crooks and have a drink of water to quench their thirst.

Then, the celebrators, together with those who did not climb Goulas, but await the procession at the Monastery, either dressed in the traditional *Tsipianitiko* costume, or not, depart from the Monastery and, without ceasing their song, proceed to the threshing floor of the chapel of Saint Nektarios, where they continue their dance. The groups are reorganized, to resume their procession towards the village.

The village church of the Annunciation – *Ieros Naos Evangelistrias Nestanis* - is their next stop. The celebrators pass outside the church and continue towards the steps, where they sit and sing. They then begin their dance, at the spot where the Threshing floor of Papagiannis used to be in the old days, right below the church. The groups thus continue, having become larger, since more and more people join them. They head towards Nestani's main square, where the final and largest dance takes place, under the shade of the huge plane tree. The groups are welcomed by crowds of locals and people from the surrounding areas. This final dance will last the longest compared to all the preceding ones. Cheers and whistling are the signal marking the end of the dance and the procession.

The route the celebrators follow, having gathered at Goulas and having held their first dance, is: Monastery of Gorgoepikoos, Saint Nektarios Threshing Floor, Church of the Annunciation at Nestani, Papagiannis Threshing Floor, Main Square.

4. Location/facilities and equipment connected to the performance/ practice of the ICH element

The locations inextricably connected to the practice of this custom are the following:

Goulas, the immense rock towering above the eastern section of the Mantineian Plain. Its peak is at an altitude slightly less than 1,200 metres. That is where the chapel of Saint George is to be found; annually, the inhabitants of Nestani begin their descent from this spot, celebrating the Saint's feast. It is also where the pathway begins, which, after a 1,100-metre trek and a 150-metre descent, leads us to the historic Monastery of the *Gorgoepikoos* Virgin.

On the western slopes of Goulas, above the village, at an altitude of 680 metres, is the **Monastery of Gorgoepikoos** [*Ιερά Μονή Γοργοπηκόου*]. The monastery is a thirty-minute walk from Nestani and is close to the villages of Louka, Artemisio, Kapsia, Pikerni, Sagga and Simiades. The Monastery of *Gorgoepikoos* was founded in 1030 A.D., and is built on an archaeological site, with a great tradition of worship. It must have existed as a monastery before 1536, since its recorded property at that time indicates that it must have already been in existence for at least one century. The miraculous icon kept here is attributed to the Evangelist Luke. The Monastery safeguards important relics, icons, manuscripts, parchments, as well as the remains of Saints (Papagiannis, 2004).

Church of the Annunciation at Nestani [*Ieros Naos Evagelistrias Nestanis-Ιερός Ναός*

Ευαγγελιστρίας Νεστάνης]: The church was built in 1840 by Lappas, the best architect of his time, who sometime later also built the Cathedral of Athens. (*Mitropolis Athinon*). For a church of that size to be built in those days, a great number of top-quality materials were required. Thousands of cubic metres of stone arrived from distant Barberi (Mount Alision). The church's foundations are more than 5 metres deep and the walls are over 1.20 metres thick.

Papagiannis' Threshing Floor [*Το Αλώνι του Παπαγιάννη - To aloni tou Papagianni*] -Papagiannis' Threshing Floor is just a short distance from the Church of the Annunciation at Nestani. It is named after a fighter of the 1821 War of Independence.

The local traditional dress usually worn on the day of the custom's celebration is as follows: men wear a white shirt and trousers. On top, they wear the *poukamisa* [πονκαμίσσα], a loose-fitting shirt made of white handwoven fabric with gray and red prince de galles checks. It consists of a skirt with loose pleats and a body with pleats sewn with white stitching, long sleeves and a collar, like contemporary shirts. On their heads they wear a *koukos*, a black cap that looks like a Russian cap (shapka ushanka).

Women wear an *asprofoustano* [ασπροφούστανο - white dress] consisting of a handwoven petticoat, a white dress, also woven, with a sleeveless top and a pleated skirt. The bottom border of the dress has patterns woven in it and the *harbalas* [χαρμπαλάς], a separate section from other handwoven fabrics. The weave is achieved using the sprang technique, with hands and thin sticks. The *bolka* [μπόλκα] is worn over it, which is an overcoat of torso length and long sleeves. Tied around their waist, they wear a pleated apron with a pocket with a *harbala* in a contrasting colour on the right and bottom. They wear a yellow or white headdress tied in a particular fashion (Kakouri, 1978).

The banner preceding the procession, according to testimonies, was made in the early '80s. It depicts Saint George and has been embroidered by a village seamstress, probably named Aspasia. The reason the banner was added to the custom has not been ascertained, nor do we know if it is an initiative of the community or some donation. A possible reason might be to emphasize the religious nature of the feast.

5. Products or material goods in general which are the outcome of the performance / practice of the ICH element:

6. Historical facts relating to the ICH element

Although this is an age-old custom, there exists no documented mention of its history and origin. Researchers, such as Katerina Kakouri, claim that a similar celebration used to take place in ancient Greece, as a celebration of spring, to honour the god Dionysus or other pre-Christian deities. Pausanias, in his *Arcadika* mentions a large spring feast, without, however, describing precisely the celebration process. The custom, in its present-day format, is transmitted from one generation to the next through participation. Furthermore, it is worth noting that a re-enactment of the custom also takes place in Chicago, where a large number of first-, second-, and third- generation *Tsipianites* live. The re-enactment takes place during the annual ball of their society, where they wear the traditional costumes and sing the songs of *Ai-Giori*.

7. The significance of the element today

a. What is the element's significance to the community / its bearers?

The custom of *Ai-Giori* is a point of reference for the identity and collective memory of Nestaniotes, both men and women. By observing the custom, all of us Nestaniotes, living in the village or elsewhere, have the opportunity to participate in festivities of a local character, to strengthen our ties, remember our ancestors and deepen our feeling of common origins, something of particular importance for those of us living abroad. As mentioned previously, preparations take place year-round for the day of the feast. The custom thus becomes an excuse for continuous contact and tightening of relations of all Nestaniotes, wherever they are located. The custom of *Ai-Giorgi* is also a topic of discussion, providing an opportunity for bringing closer together all those originating from Nestani.

Furthermore, the custom presents visitors with the opportunity to become acquainted with our village, the surrounding nature and mainly the people, offering a taste of their way of life and habits.

b. What is the significance of the element for contemporary Greek society?

The feast of *Ai-Giori* of Nestani, is an important cultural legacy, not just for participants but for all Greeks, too. As with all events, it encompasses the characteristics of contemporary society, at the same time keeping alive the relationship and connection of young people to history and tradition.

The custom is a legacy of all Greeks, being a great example of how the general public can come into contact with Greek history and popular tradition. Anyhow, like every cultural expression deeply rooted in the past, it is affected by the customs, way of life and, generally speaking, historical experience of a number of different eras. After all, it is no coincidence that great researchers have devoted time to studying the custom, both in terms of its historical value and as part of the expression and evolution of society over time. Thus, it is important to safeguard and promote the custom, as it can become a source of information on local history and a means to study contemporary society, the formation of local and broader social relations and cultural identities.

c. Did the community participate in the preparations for the inscription of the element in the National Registry of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and how?

At a meeting held in Nestani the community of Nestani, as well as Nestaniotes elsewhere, were notified of the Convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the opportunities this offers for safeguarding and promoting local traditions. It was organized by the Directorate of Modern Cultural and Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture and Sports in collaboration with local entities. Then, in a village general assembly, a working group was set up for the inscription of the custom in the National Registry of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Greece.

8. Safeguarding/ promotion of the element

a. How is the element passed down to younger generations today?

The custom is transmitted through oral tradition and through actual participation. The more experienced participants initiate the younger ones, especially in anything related to teaching the songs; they also instill respect in all that has to do with the order and character of the custom.

b. Measures taken in the past or being implemented at present for the safeguarding/

promotion of the element (on a local, regional or broader scale).

No measures have been planned or taken to date for the safeguarding and promotion of the custom, since experiential mechanisms are still in operation for the transmission of knowledge and custom practice.

c. Proposed measures for safeguarding /promotion for future implementation (on a local, regional or broader scale)

The inscription of the custom in the National Registry of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Greece, offered the community an opportunity to consider ways of safeguarding and promoting the custom for younger generations, as well as the general public. Proposals were submitted, that include the collection of material related to the custom (publications, photographs, videos, etc.) and the compilation of a relevant historical archive in the form of a public and open database, so that anyone interested might have the opportunity to access information and documentation.

All of us participating in the event are interested in highlighting various forms of representation of the custom, within the framework of traditional dance festivals and other such events, as long as these representations respect, as far as possible, the custom's character and structure. To this effect, a proposal was also made to form a group that will present the custom in public

Furthermore, within the framework of the public discussion regarding safeguarding and promoting the custom, it was proposed to make audio recordings of the songs, to systematically produce visual records (video-recordings), in addition to promoting the custom in the media and social media, in the form of digital material and live broadcasts.

Finally, an important action for the preservation of the custom, would be to find or create fabrics for making new costumes. It would also be helpful if the path leading to the top of Goulas were signposted, to assist the climb and descent of participants on the feast day.

9. Basic bibliography

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10. Additional documentation

- a. Texts (sources, archival materials, etc.)

b. Maps

c. Visual and audio items (designs, photographs, audio files, videos, etc.)

d. Internet sources (hyperlinks)

- <https://www.kalimera-arkadia.gr/arcadia/item/8931-o-entyposiakos-goulas-pano-apo-ti-nestani-eikones.html>
- https://www.exploring-greece.gr/el/show/24403/:ttd/GULAS#tpo_details_tab
- <http://www.arcadiaportal.gr/news/anakalypste-ta-mystika-tis-omorfis-nestanis-pics>
- <http://www.psnestanis.gr>
- <http://arcadia.ceid.upatras.gr/arkadia/places/nesta.htm>
- http://www.traveltripolis.gr/300/conducted_tour/monasteries_churches_el/%CE%B9%CE%B5%CF%81%CE%AC-%CE%BC%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%AE-%CE%B3%CE%BF%CF%81%CE%B3%CE%BF%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B7%CE%BA%CF%8C%CE%BF%CF%85/
- <http://www.gtp.gr/TDirectoryDetails.asp?ID=17621&lng=1>
- <http://agiorisnestanis.blogspot.gr>

11. Particulars of the Bulletin's Author

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