

The Nestinar ritual is popular on the territory lying between Tsarevo (Bulgaria) and Lulebourgaz-Viza-Saray (European Turkey). The villages there can be grouped according to the official language as it follows:

- Greek villages - Kosti, Brodilovo, Agio Stefana, Kalandzha, Axidzhim, Agio Yani, Trouliya, Urgas;
- Bulgarian villages - Urgari (today Bulgari), Marzevo, Derekyoi, Varvara, Rezovo (interior of Strandzha Mountain), Blatsa, Madzhoura, Piroglou, Urumbeglou, Yatros, Peneka, Chenger;
- Mixed population village - Bounarhisar;

St.St.Constantine and Helena's Day is the most important religious holiday for the nestinars. It is usually celebrated on 21st, 22nd and 23rd of May. The whole month is named after it - "St.Constantine's Month" (or "St. Kostadin's Month").

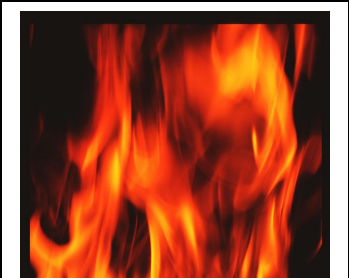
The residents of Bulgari and the neighboring villages still celebrate it according to the old calendar. For the last three decades the celebrations have been held only for two days (3rd and 4th of June), though it is known that they have to continue for three days.

As it was mentioned, the holiday is also called "panagy". It belongs to the spring-summer cycle - and is one of the numerous gatherings in Strandzha Mountain.

#### THE RITUAL :

Nestinarstvo is a unique phenomenon, which still remains unveiled; a mystery posing many unanswered questions. In Strandzha Mountain the celebration begins in the Sunday before St.St. Constantine and Helena's Day.

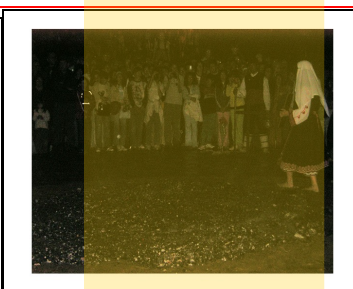
In the past the inhabitants of several villages used to gather at "The Big Ayasma" near the area of Vlahov Dol. The area was also called "Odarchetata" (an "odarche" means a small bed in Old Bulgarian), because of the availability of five plank-beds, one for each of the five villages (Gramatikovo, Slivarovo, Bulgari, Kosti and Kondolovo) that most often practiced the ritual.



Nowadays the ritual also includes visiting the saint patrons' holy springs ("ayasma"), carrying of the icons of the two saints (St.St.Constantine and Helena), animal offering, and serving of ritual breads. The people who attend the ceremony ascend the plank bed, turn to East, cross themselves, light up a candle and stick it into one of the small metal crosses spread over the bed. Many people leave woven kerchiefs and gifts, hung on the parapet of the plank-bed. Sometimes the nestinars "get" their "fits" there.

On the Thursday before the 3rd and 4th of June, they celebrate the so-called "Little Constantine" ("Kourbaneto"). In the early morning of that day the churchwarden ("vikilin", "e'pitrope") goes to the saint patron's chapel, and assisted by two or three other men, slaughters a lamb. The meat is usually boiled in the fireplace of the "konak". When it is cooked, the churchwarden tolls the bell, and all the people of the village gather at the chapel. Then they start their walk to the holy spring, with the purpose to clean it. Candles are lit and the place is swept with beech-tree foliage. After that the "vikilin" opens the lid of St.Constanine's spring, throws a coin for happiness and starts filling the vessels, brought by the people. So that they can drink and wash themselves with the holy water, in order to be healthy in the days to come. Then each of them is served a helping of the boiled mutton.

St.Constantine's Day begins with a new succession of ritual acts. The morning starts with the "dressing" of the nestinar icons (the so-called "tail-end kunizmi/kumizmi"), after they have been taken to the "konak". The "dressing" ritual includes the following steps: first, the "icons' shirts" are censed by the chief priestess, then they are handed to the "vikilin" who puts them on the icons. Once the icons "have been dressed", they are "ready to head for the holy spring" in a solemn procession. There they are "bathed" - their handles are cleaned with the holy water of the "ayasma". "Horo" dances are played, songs are sung and ritual breads are served.



Nestinars often are "obsessed" on the way to the chapel and back to the village and at the spring as well. At noon the stacking of the nestinar fire begins. In line with some old records, nestinars did not start the dance until twelve carts of wood had not been burnt.

Now the quantity of wood used is dramatically less.

At dusk the culmination of the nestinar complex ensues. The nestinars (later the only female nestinar) go to St.St. Constantine and Helena's "konak". There praying in front of the icons of the two saints, they breathe in the smoke of burning incense. When darkness descends upon the earth all the villagers gather, the musicians come and the procession heads for the fire. They walk in the following order: first is the churchwarden, followed by the boys who carry the icons, then, the nestinars, the musicians, and finally the rest. After they arrive at the fire, they form a cordon, encircling the already- spread embers. The

"nestinar obsession" reaches its peak.

With whoops the nestinars get onto the embers. First they always trace a cross. After that they walk at random. The nestinar way of walking on embers is particularly strange. They call it "treading" ("pleshtene"/"tipane"- Old Bulgarian), because the steps are short, even, moderately fast, and on the whole length of feet. When the "fit" is of great strength, the nestinars grab the icons, get onto the embers, make their prophecies, or take a handful from the embers and strew them over their heads.

The dance on embers is usually followed by a common "horo" dance, led by the "vikilin". They play it in the hope of having health and happiness in the future. The nestinar trance gradually subsides, and the nestinars are ready to join the "vikilin" on his way to the "konak". There they are served a holiday dinner, including the already-boiled mutton.

The next day is St.Helena's Day. In the past they used to go with the icons around the whole village, and pay visits to the people's homes (except those of the recently departed, and those of young mothers). The hosts would kiss the icons; and the sleeping infants would be blessed. The practice was abandoned in the 1960s.

We are expecting you!

