



**RURAL HERITAGE AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY**  
*Building the sustainability of rural communities*

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## Introduction

This paper will try to illustrate the special features of Greek rural customs and rituals, their direct or indirect connection to cultural heritage, cultural identity and the social development of rural communities.

Usually scholars and folklorists divide customs and rites into two main categories: those that take place at a particular date or season of the year (calendar or seasonal customs) and those related to life-cycle (life-cycle customs) or to domestic and social work and life (occupational customs).

The folklore calendar is considered very complex, since it combines several interdependent systems mostly linked with the annual cycle of the fertility and productivity of the nature. Therefore the major rural activities (such as ploughing, harvesting etc) are marked by feasts associated with the church calendar (Christ and saint's feasts days)<sup>1</sup>.

For the purpose of this text customs, rites, festivals and rituals are presented in groups according to their symbolism and particular meaning for the community, its survival and evolution.

The research text consists of three sections:

1. **Part one** provides short historical and cultural background information. It also focuses on analysis of core concepts such as: culture and cultural identity, how the latter is built, which are its main features and expressions and how they reflect aspects of social and community life. In light of this an effort has been made to identify in all events-customs, rituals, celebrations- the common issues as well as their signs and symbols and to interpret them in an endeavour to understand cultural identity and its link with modern life.

Therefore we have selected those customs that are the most eloquent expression of memory but also have continuity in the passage of time, especially from rural communities of Northern Greece, customs that date back to antiquity and reveal a rich heritage and multifaceted and multi-levelled identities: cultural, religious, linguistic and gender with a plurality of mutually interdependent signs and symbols that guide and regulate the social practices of everyday life. The main aim is not to describe and present but mostly to understand and interpret.

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<sup>1</sup> All books on Greek folklore include a section on calendar customs. For a presentation of major Greek customs, see Demetrios S. Loukatos, *Christmas Customs*, Athens 1984, *Easter and Spring Customs*, Athens, 1998; for introductory accounts see George Megalos, *Introduction to Greek Folklore*, Athens 1972, pp. 234-5, *Issues of Greek Folklore*, Athens 1975 and *Greek calendar customs and festivities*, Athens 1979.



2. The **second part** is dedicated to the presentation of the characteristic examples serving the above main aim. Customs and rituals are classified into four groups: apotropaic (warning evil) and protective acts, fertility (rebirth of nature) and harvest customs, ecstatic rituals and rites of passage. Although the classic ethnographic and folklore division of customs related to annual and life cycle is very much appreciated, we opted against using a linear presentation, rather focusing on symbolic expressions that are interrelated.
3. The text concludes (**Part three**) with some general remarks and observations related to sustainable development of rural areas.

Special emphasis has been given not only to the symbols and signs but also on understanding the deepest meaning of the cultural manifestations. For each custom there is a short description of the main elements, its main symbols and signs of expression, its original character and mission that in most cases aimed at securing good **fortune** and **fertility**. Whenever possible additional comments are included explaining the recreational character of a ritual. However the preservation of a custom cannot be accounted for recreational purposes only. There is also the need to preserve tradition and understand the deeper socio-political relations of a community.

Therefore an effort has been made to show the contribution of all rites and customs to the formation not only of the cultural identity but mostly to the preservation of cultural heritage. The past decades have bore witnesses to various efforts for the protection of cultural heritage, while its potential has been exploited as a factor of development. The last years a large number of traditional buildings have been restored, renovated and reused. Local traditions, rural rituals and values have been brought in the forefront, while arts and related activities have been seen as means of empowerment of local people. Thus culture is promoted as a constitutive part of sustainable development.

Rural customs and events keep the collective memory alive and manifest, in the most eloquent way, the strong foundation and the values of a community upon which it's social and cultural evolution has been built.



*A civilization is a continuum, and when it changes it incorporates earlier values that survive through it and remain its essence. Civilizations are not mortal. They live on, despite all the transformations, the disasters.*

Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*

## **PART I**

### **1. Historical and cultural back ground**

Culture plays a leading role in contemporary societies, contributing to the network of relationships between people and the environment, both rural and urban. Modern societies show an increasing interest in preserving their culture and especially their cultural heritage, both movable and non-movable. Protection and promotion of cultural heritage has also been seen necessary in many countries, while its potential has been properly exploited as a factor of development. During the past decades many efforts have been made –on international and European level- to increase social awareness of traditional cultural values in order to prepare people to accept them as a contribution to human evolution and not as a rejection of development. In relation to that cultural heritage and cultural identity has been the subject of continual study and investigation, in an endeavour to understand the different people and their cultures and to build a link with modern life.

Particular emphasis has been laid on expressions of cultural identity, especially of rural customs and festivities, in relation to the contemporary quest for the return to one's roots. It must be noted that traditional culture, and in our case rural culture, is particularly pronounced in period of intense economic and technological development; we may compare contemporary ecological and environmental movements, which aspire, through a return to the wisdom of nature, to provide a vision of quality of life to modern mankind.

Greece has one of the most long standing cultural traditions due to historical and geographical reasons. Greece lies at the South end of the Balkan Peninsula in the crossroads between Europe and the East. Great civilisations and cultures have left their impact through the ages all over its geographic extent. Ancient Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Ottomans had moulded the Greek regions and influenced its peoples. Rural areas, especially those of the North (Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace) were the ones who sensed the various changes. These communities have also largely contributed to the cultural evolution. Change and continuity have been definitely the underlying features of these rural areas, especially in the periods from the late 19th century until the Balkan Wars, when neighbouring areas (Greece, Bulgaria, and to a certain degree Serbia and Romania) experienced competing national movements claimed



brethren in Ottoman areas of Northern Greece, on historical, linguistic, cultural and religious grounds. In the period from 1912 to 1925 various migration phenomena, in certain cases forcibly, led to the settlement in the regions of a number of population groups (from Asia Minor, the Turkish Black Sea coastal area, Eastern Thrace etc.) had subsequently consequences to the social and cultural identity of the rural communities, especially those of Northern Greece. The geopolitical changes of 20<sup>th</sup> century largely affected the areas of Greek Macedonia and Thrace. The latter being characterized by two main elements;

1. the multiplicity of cultures, which have resulted exactly from the rapid and revolutionary geopolitical change of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in its social and economic structures and
2. the constantly seeking ways of its societal groups to secure the harmonious co-existence of their different identities and cultural particularities.

The region eminently multicultural and with customs that date back to antiquity, reveals a rich heritage and multifaceted and multileveled identities: cultural, religious, linguistic and gender.

## 2. Core concepts: Culture, Cultural Identity and Cultural Heritage

There is no agreed definition of the term culture<sup>2</sup>. Most researchers (ethnographers, sociologists and social anthropologists) use the broad ethnographic definition of Edward Tylor according to which "*Culture or Civilization is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*"<sup>3</sup>. Thus not only art and artistic expressions, but every aspect of human life is influenced by culture, which "*provides us with guidelines and rules, which help us to accomplish everyday activities and relate socially to other people*"<sup>4</sup> and formulates the **cultural identity**. Based upon different factors (history, environment and landscape, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age etc) each society creates in a particular time a cultural identity which is considered as ideal for its members. Therefore "people are categorized as belonging to a particular group because they have characteristics that differentiate them from another group"<sup>5</sup>. Thus it happens that certain groups attempt to demonstrate their ethnic identity on the basis of their cultural. This approach often gives rise to particular problems, especially when the historical record is promoted in isolation that may then lead to defective or erroneous considerations, which may even prove to be dangerous.

Cultural identity is composed by different elements most of which are directly linked with the **cultural heritage** (material and immaterial), considered as the most eloquent expression of memory. It embraces not only the most monumental remnants of cultures and civilizations but

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<sup>2</sup> 200 definitions found according to a critical review by Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture: a review of concepts and definitions*, New York (1963, 1953).

<sup>3</sup> Tylor 1958, *Primitive Culture: researches into the development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom*, Gloucester, M.A. and Paul Taylor, *Investigating culture and Identity*, 2000, London, Harpers Collins

<sup>4</sup> Paul Taylor, *ibid*, pp 1-25.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*



also a great range of features and expressions of **traditional culture** such as customs and rites, festivities, events, art forms etc broadly related with life and annual cycle.

Rural cultures are an integral part of traditional cultures which are mainly characterized by the wealth and complexity of their expressions. The researches have proved that traditional cultures in general and European traditional cultures in particular possess<sup>6</sup> features that reflect all aspects of social life –intellectual, ethical, aesthetic. They have their own dynamic, which helps them to endure in time. However, as it is well recognized, cultures are not static, they are undergoing continuous change. The same happens with cultural identity, which is considered as a phenomenon under constant evolution.

Following the above it has to be stressed that the Greek Culture Identity is based not only upon the formations happened with the passage of time, but also on the cultural specificities of the Greek regions influenced by common practices and experiences and reflected as much as in the cultural tradition –local customs and rites – but also in the linguistic expression and the different sorts of entertainment or artistic expression, - popular theatre, dance, music.

Both East and West exercised influences on Greek culture, which is secured by means of specific conditions and requirements. Thus in Greek cultural identity there are elements from the ancient Greek heritage, the roman tradition and the Byzantine ‘ecumenism’. Living in the same geographical area for centuries, speaking a language that has naturally evolved from antiquity, Greeks continue, mostly in the rural communities, the traditional activities. Many of the signs –temples, monuments, and customs- of centuries’ long history have been indelibly impressed on the Greek cultural heritage.

The geographical position and the climate have also largely contributed to the Greek cultural evolution. Almost in the centre of the Mediterranean, Greece used to be and still is a bridge of communication, trade, and cultural exchange among Europe, Asia and Africa. One could mention as representative examples the Greek Islands but also continental Greece (e.g. Thessaloniki is a communication centre with central and northern Europe and an opening of Balkan countries to the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea). Greek territory played a decisive role in the development of traditional life and society.

The work, the habits and prejudices of every day life are strongly related with the nature of the country. The mountainous territory forced people to move to fertile places or to immigrate to urban areas or travel abroad thus contributing to the economic development of the regions and the demographic changes. The geo-economic circumstances also played an important role in the formation of family and social relations. Change and continuity have been definitely the underlying features of the Greek regions, especially the rural ones.

Customs dating back to the antiquity, signs and symbols expressed in different occasions, especially during festive events combining Christian and pre-Christian elements, depict the multifaceted and multilevel cultural identity of the rural areas. A plurality of mutually interdependent signs and symbols guide and regulate the social practices of every day life.

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<sup>6</sup> See also E. Karpodini-Dimitriadi, Greek cultural identity and regional development. The role of traditional culture in regional development, *Annual of the Institute of Regional Development*, Athens 1992 (reprint.) and Dr E. Karpodini-Dimitriadi (ed), *Ethnography of European traditional cultures-Their role and perspectives in a multicultural world*, Athens 1995



Consciously or unconsciously reproduced, they provide a cultural code that manifests itself on various occasions.

At all events – customs, rituals, celebrations- there is a common issue to be identified that of **cooperation** and **mutual understanding**. The ritual practices happening in the occasion of different cultural manifestations are an opportunity for the community or the participating social group to express the **collective memory** and **collective cultural identity**. It is also a way to develop a broader communication not only among the members of the community but also with “outsiders” –observers, spectators, guests.

Rural customs and rituals is a way for the members of a community to show how closely they are bounded together, their high respect for tradition and commitment to common beliefs and cultural symbols. The following pages present some illustrative examples.





## PART II

### I. APOTROPAIC AND PROTECTIVE RITES

#### DISGUISES AND MASQUERADES<sup>7</sup>

The **apotropaic** (warding off and protecting against evil) customs and rites are most probably the earliest in the human culture. Most of the rural customs are held, ever since primeval times, in the time of the year related to crucial periods: winter solstice and the awakening of vegetation in spring<sup>8</sup>. These periods of the year are full of beliefs linked “with the existence of demons that are far abroad on the earth or with the souls of dead, who hold sway over sowing and the harvest and have to be propitiated”<sup>9</sup>. Symbolic processions by groups of people singing songs or performing acts with theatrical elements or mimic actions (*ayermoi-quête-song*) based on sympathetic magic are known almost in the whole of Europe but basically they have a frequency in Balkan region where they have been handed out from ancient Greece “along with Byzantine culture and Christianity”<sup>10</sup>.

Rural rituals, mostly those happening during spring are related with female fertility and the fruitfulness of the earth. Among the variety of events the cycle of masquerades during carnival occupy an important place.

The wearing of Masquerades belongs to the most widely known customs, practiced throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. It is a universal phenomenon exhibiting a great endurance throughout time and fulfilling a variety of functions<sup>11</sup>. The origins of the custom seem to have been in magic, and to be connected with the cult of the dead ancestors.

Disguises have always been in use in Greece, from antiquity to recent times, related according to many scholars, with mimic performances of early Christian times inherited from Greco-Roman antiquity. The view has been advanced that they were a survival of Dionysiac worship, and corresponded to the *Rural Dionysia*, which took place from 15 December to 15 January. Similar masquerades were also held under the Byzantine Empire during the Twelve Days (from Christmas to Epiphany) and depictions of them have been preserved (e.g. Ayia Sophia in Kiev). Although the Orthodox Christian Church exercised a fierce polemic against masquerades, they continued to be held without break, reviving a series of elements of ancient

<sup>7</sup> See also Dr E. Karpodini-Dimitriadi (ed), *Ethnography of European traditional cultures-Their role and perspectives in a multicultural world*, Athens 1995, pp 80-90 where the text has originally be published.

<sup>8</sup> See also W. Puchner, The Popular and traditional theatre in the Balkans, in Dr E. Karpodini-Dimitriadi (ed), *Ethnography of European traditional cultures-Their role and perspectives in a multicultural world*, Athens 1995, pp 135-145, a summary of an extensive study of the author published under title *Popular theatre in Greece and the Balkans (a Comparative study)*, Athens 1989

<sup>9</sup> Walter Puchner, *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> See Dr E. Karpodini-Dimitriadi (ed), *ibid*, p. 80 with relevant references



Greek cult practice, such as the enactment of weddings, miming of the sexual act by disguised people, simulation of ploughing, miming of sowing etc<sup>12</sup>.

Masquerades occur at many times of the year; however the most important ones are those during Carnival and the Twelve Days from Christmas to Epiphany.

## 1. During the Carnival period (*Apokries*)

Masquerades during the period of Carnival (*Apokria*) are found in the whole of Greece. Those with traditional character are attested mainly<sup>13</sup> in Thessaly, Macedonia and Thrace and some islands, we name that of Skyros. Three are the main features in these masquerades:

1. Masks in a variety of forms<sup>14</sup>;
2. Wearing of animal skin and above all
3. Large sheep-and goat- bells hanged around the waist of the disguised.

**Mask** usually is made by of unprocessed animal hide (sheep or goat-skin) or of cloth or cardboard, or by suitable painting of the face. It is worn principally to **protect the face** to conceal wearer's identity. It is generally accepted that masks have an **apotropaic character** driving away the evil spirits, the forces of darkness and winter and “open the way for the spirits of light and the coming of spring”.

Symbolic is also the role of the **bells**<sup>15</sup> that reinforce the apotropaic character of the mask. The resounding bells were used, irrespective of the material and manner of their construction, to **ward off evil** by virtue of the sounds they produced. Bells moved on from their natural use (means by which the flock could be recognized by the shepherd, frightening away wild animals) to the metaphysical one, and were worn to keep away evil and demons. They thereby acquired a magical and religious quality which was extended to other uses in folk religion, invariably of a symbolic nature. This symbolic purpose continues to be present in the masquerades worn at Carnival period, though these generally have the character of light-hearted entertainment. The masqueraders are known by a variety of names (*Karnavalia*, *Koudounati*, *Koukougeri*) and operate in groups, some of which are standard (e.g the bridegroom-bride etc) while others are formed on the inspiration of the moment. To the main figures some others are added following local traditions and proceed to some mimetic actions, the most common of which is the parody of wedding. Customary rituals and popular rites also gave feed to a variety of spectacles, based upon improvised scenes influenced by the motif of marriage and including the abduction of the bride, the dishonoured daughter etc.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> We refer exclusively to masquerades that keep traditional elements and not to those happening in urban towns influenced by contemporary forms expression.

<sup>14</sup> Masks have been used since antiquity for both ceremonial and practical purposes. In some folk ceremonies they are used to express contrasting categories of the ‘good’, the ‘evil’, the ‘ugly’ or the ‘idealised beauty’ see also Yvonne de Sike, *Fêtes et croyances populaires en Europe, au fil des saisons*, France (Bordas) 1994, p 98

<sup>15</sup> See dr. E. KARPODINI-DIMITRIADI, Masquerades during carnival, *idid* pp. 80ff and E.KARPODINI-DIMITRIADI, Les cloches et les masques festives en Grèce, VI Atelier PACT-EURETHNO, *Les marqueurs du temps, la cloche; invention européenne du temps compte*, St Martin de Vésubie, 4-9 Avril 1993.



Broadly speaking masquerades have their local variations, often associated with local historical events.

### **The masquerades in Naoussa**

The masquerades in the district of Naoussa in North-west Macedonia are a characteristic example. The custom, known as the dance of the *Yenitsaros* and *the Boula*, is connected with the fighting of the inhabitants against the Turks during the Turkish occupation. Its origin is to be found in the ancient ceremonies celebrating the coming of the spring. Symbolic movements, dances and other mimic gestures depict the first forms of the custom, to which new elements have been added during its evolution.

As in other regions, an effort is made to maintain and promote local tradition as far as possible, and attract a large number of visitors, with a view to increase tourism in the region.

The Naoussa Carnival dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, (it is first found in 1705), when it began in different neighborhoods, each of which organized its own groups of masqueraders; these groups had many features in common, which are still found at the present day. One of the main features is the dance of the *Boula*, performed by groups of men (*yenitsaroi*) dressed as *armatoloi* (men at arms), and with their faces covered by wax masks and their chests by rows of thousands of coins. Masks are the most impressive element; totally white they have only colors in the place of eyebrows and a stuck false moustache. There are only very small openings for the mouth and eyes. The heads are also covered with a coloured long kerchief. The band is led by a man dressed as a woman, who is called *Boula*<sup>16</sup>. The entire celebration is devoted to the memory of the dead who fell in the struggle against the Turks. The peak of the celebration is on the last Sunday of the Carnival. According to the convention, the group of masqueraders goes to the Town Hall, where it asks permission from the Mayor to begin the dance. After that the groups of masqueraders dance in the streets of the town, following a particular route and making standard movements and poses, to the accompaniment of the music played by specialist musicians. When a *yenitsaros* meets somebody firstly proceeds to shake hands and then makes two or three jumps thus making the abundant silver coins he wears to clank and cause impressive sound aiming at drive away evil spirits.

It may be noted that the main body responsible for the protection and promotion of the custom used to be for many years the local dance society “*Yenitsari and Boules*”, whose efforts were directed towards ensuring the authenticity and continuation of the custom and who participated in various Greek and international festivals. The information pamphlet issued by this organization stated that the “principle of the Society is to preserve the custom of the *Yenitsaros and the Boula*, free from any foreign or modern influence. The costumes, music and dances are authentic and handed down from generation to generation without any outside influence”. All the young men of the area want to become masqueraders since by doing so they demonstrate that they respect and honor the traditions of their region. The main aim is not merely to preserve the custom from outside influence but to keep it confined to the town of Naoussa. Those who make the costumes, shoes and various costume-attachments therefore stay in the city and refuse to transport their art to the regions.

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<sup>16</sup> *Boula* is dressed like a bridegroom, wearing a broad dress with silver jewellerys and other elements of local costumes on the chest, a mask on the face and holding a handkerchief.



Recalling my observations during fieldwork<sup>17</sup> it is also worth emphasizing that:

- the costumes differ mainly in their decorative elements (coins on the chest head decoration, silver icons) and according to the age of the masqueraders. They are quite expensive to make, while support of the musicians, who are called upon especially for the day, is also very costly.
- the entire activity is organized and leaves no room for spontaneity. Although in theory all young men may dress in masquerades, they have to learn the conventions (in what row they stand, what house they call upon, at what points they should adopt their poses etc). This means that at an early point in time they have to become a member of one of the groups that still preserve the custom.

The whole performance provides an opportunity for all –both performers and guests- to take part –collectively or individually to the event and enforce their knowledge of local cultural heritage as an expression of memory and collective identity.

### The masquerades on Skyros

Related with the ancient traditional actions to combat evil spirits and wake up the spirits of vegetation and fertility are some other manifestations happening during the carnival period. Amongst the most impressive carnival masquerades are those held on Skyros, culminating on the last Sunday of the Carnival. The masqueraders form groups of 5-6 people. They wear goat skin masks on their faces, and half their body is covered with a black hairy cape. Round their waist hang large numbers of goat and sheep bells. The main characters in the carnival group are the *yeros* (old man) and the *korela* (young girl). The old man is the leader of the group. He wears a mask, a shaggy woolen cape, a shepherd's over-breeches and the traditional shoes called *trochadia*, worn by Skyrian villagers together with the socks known as *trochadokaltses*. He holds a shepherd's crook in his hand, around the end of which are tied a few plant tendrils. All around his waist are tied a large number of large sheep-bells. The old man is accompanied by the maiden, a man dressed in traditional women's costume. His face is covered with the same kind of mask and he also wears *trochadia* and *rochadokaltses*. He carries a kerchief in his hand which he waves continuously as he dances around the 'old man'. To these two main characters was later added a third, the 'Frank'. He wears a mask of some kind and European trousers and has a large bell hanging from the back of his waist. He holds a large conch in his hand and moves constantly, blowing the conch and teasing the passers-by<sup>18</sup>.

The groups of masquerades move about continuously, and their movement causes the bells to ring, each time with a different sound. The festivity comes to an end on the afternoon of Clean Monday. According to the custom, the groups go up to the monastery of Saint George, the patron saint of the island, venerate the saint's icon and ring the monastery bell in celebration. They then return to their homes, take off their masquerades and sit down at the family table. The masquerades of Skyros are closely connected with ancient Dionysiac rituals

<sup>17</sup> In 1995

<sup>18</sup> See George A. Megas, *Greek Calendar Customs*, Athens 1982, pp.59-75



and seem to have been initiated by villagers. Their aim is to ward off daemons and give magical assistance to the earth to sprout and bear fruit<sup>19</sup>.

The same character has the **Thracian** custom of *Kalogeros* (**monk**) practised to day in the village of St Eleni on Quinquagesima Monday and including symbolic showing and death and resurrection of one member of the group (*Kalogeros*)<sup>20</sup>.

### The masquerades at Sohos

The masquerades at Sohos<sup>21</sup> (a mountain village near Thessaloniki) have their own special character. They begin with the *Triodion* and climax on the last Sunday of Carnival and Clean Monday. They include many festivities. The masqueraders are called *Karnavalia* and differ from those in other regions in two main features: the face mask and the bells.

The mask (today made by a black wooden material –*Sayiaki*–) is decorated with colorful geometric designs and beads. It ends up in a peculiar pointed headdress filled with straw–continuation of the mask– which is colorfully decorated by narrow paper ribbons and with a fox tail at the top; horse hair are used for the moustache. Around the waist of the disguised are tied five heavy bells, especially selected for this purpose. There is a particular process-ritual of dressing of the *Karnavali*<sup>22</sup>, which before leaving the house receives good wishes by those present in the ritual who attach him on the shoulder, while a woman –usually the mother or the grand mother– sprinkles over him a little water and pours away the rest wishing to *karnavali* a free road just as the water flows freely. Holding a long staff or a wooden sword in one hand and a bottle of strong drink in the other *karnavali* meets up with other *karnavalia* and folk musicians and all together go around the streets striking their bells, offering drink from their bottles and exchanging wishes not only with the inhabitants like “many happy returns” or “a good harvest” but also with the many visitors who come from the neighbouring villages and towns to attend the event.

As the Greek scholar George Ekaterinidis analyses in his study<sup>23</sup> “the goat-masquerades of Sohos are not a matter for the individual, but concern the **entire settlement**”. The custom is closely connected with productivity of the fields and flocks; there is a deeply rooted belief that if it is not carried out not only will that year be barren, but other disasters will follow<sup>24</sup>.

The present day form of the custom may briefly be summarized as follows:

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<sup>19</sup> Demetrios Loukatos, *Introduction to Greek Folklore*, Athens 1977, pp262-3

<sup>20</sup> Today, the custom takes place in the Kalabaki village, in Drama, under the auspices of the local cultural club and has a recreational character. The aim is to promote corn, the most important agricultural product of the region. It is also performed at *Meliki* in Imathia.

<sup>21</sup> The text is based on field research conducted by the author in 1995 and 1997. Detailed description of the custom is based upon a broader publication of George Ekaterinidis under title *the Karnavalia of Sohos near Thessaloniki*, Athens 1984 (reprint).

<sup>22</sup> Usually *Karnavali* is assisted by friend or relatives to put on his masquerade. He wears first the shoes (*tsarouhia*) made by the hide of a cow or a pig, the socks are made of thick wool, while the jacket is also made by black goat-skin. The bells are tightening around the waist with a thick piece of rope attached to a red belt crossed over the shoulders.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> The disasters that happened in 1930 to the village –malaria, earthquake, animals’ death etc– were attributed to the abandonment, even momentary of the custom.



1. The custom continues to have a magic-religious character. The young people also continue to have a strong desire-irrespective of age- to dress up as *karnavalia*, generally following the traditional convention. Masquerades take place throughout the whole of *Apokrias* but climax on the three day period surrounding the Sunday of Carnival (*Tyrini*) that is on Saturday, Sunday and Clean Monday.
2. It is seen as a ritual to bind the relations of the community. Many of the villagers of Sohoh who have moved to neighbouring towns or to Thessaloniki return to the village for this 3 day period, to join in the celebrations with their family and friends. During the 3 days of *Apokrias* they also take part in a series of other local customs that bind the members of the community together. The inhabitants of Sohoh continue to engage<sup>25</sup> themselves in those traditional practices which are connected not only with blood relations but mainly with spiritual relations (godfather, best man, etc), which also contain a religious element and inaugurate a new cycle that is brought to completion on Easter Sunday. The Sunday of the Carnival and more commonly Clean Monday, are chosen as days on which to visit the godfather for “forgiveness” which is sought from godfathers at the beginning of Lent. During this visit a set procedure is followed (kissing of the hand at the beginning and end of the visit, proffering of Lenten sweets), and oranges are invariably offered to the godfather. A similar ritual is followed on Easter Sunday<sup>26</sup>. It has to be mentioned that with Clean Monday starts up the period of the Lent that will last 40 days and will end at Easter Sunday.
3. The custom has a festive, recreational character. The inhabitants take part in the communal dance organized in the main square and in general share in the good humored nature of the festival, exchanging good wishes and teasing each other and offering drinks to the *karnavalia*.
4. Several new features have been grafted on to the Sohoh carnival, some of them obviously ‘folkloristic’ in nature. Specifically:
  - It has now become the practice for women too to dress in masquerades, in contrast with the practice in the past, when only young men dressed up.
  - The carnival is increasingly assuming an organized character and the municipality tries to be involved in promoting and advertising it in an effort to attract visitors. To this end, despite the fact that Clean Monday is a fast day, cakes and pies are distributed to visitors, mostly sweet pies whose main ingredient is rice but also a variety of other kinds. According to the custom, these pies are made on Saturday of the week before Lent, in memory of the dead and are distributed along with a piece of halva to “sweeten” the dead. Because the majority of the visitors to Sohoh arrive on Clean Monday however, the distribution of pies has been transferred to this day in order to demonstrate the local custom to everyone, or so the locals claim.

<sup>25</sup> According to the interviewees during field research in 1997

<sup>26</sup> when a basked (called *kaniska* in the local dialect from the ancient Greek word *kaniskion*), is offered containing a large loaf of bread (in earlier days this was baked by the women of the house themselves, especially for the godmother, but now it is bought from the baker's), eggs, a few sweets, and a main dish (piece of meat, first or financial means permitting a whole lamb or goat). The godfathers respond with a gift or usually eggs.





- Although the traditional elements are basically retained in the festivities, and in the other masquerades that are held (the Arab, the Camel, Enactment of a wedding), the carnival ends with a parade of the masqueraders and attempts are made to ensure that it is of an organized character, like the parades in urban carnivals. The goat-figures and other masqueraders parade around the main square of the village in a specific order and there is also a parade of floats with themes satirizing current events, which come from neighboring areas. These floats are sent in reciprocation for the parade of the bell-wearers, who have visited the areas in question some day during the period of the Carnival.

Similar is the character of the carnival ritual taking place according to the tradition on the island of Naxos. At noon on the last Sunday of the carnival, in the village called Apiranthos, the **Koudounati** (people who bear bells) make their appearance. They wear cloaks and hoods and go around the village creating a lot of noise and speaking and behaving in a provocative way. They also carry a piece of wood, called *somba*, similar to the Dionysian phallus. They form a circle holding each other's pieces of woods and rhythmically jump to make a loud coordinated sound. When they do not move, they thwack the soil or the rocks with the pieces of wood ("koutskoudes") to ensure the fertility of Mother Earth.

### Some general remarks

Generally speaking, the original mission of the masquerades was to **drive away evil spirits** and **secure fertility** of the earth. Gradually, the original elements were forgotten and the festivities assumed a purely festive recreational character. However, it has to be noted that the endurance of the kind of masquerade discussed above is due to the long traditions in these areas of rituals illustrating the will of the people to secure good fortune; these have their origins in Dionysiac cults, which first appeared in Thrace and Macedonia and then spread to the rest of Greece. Their confinement to the particular local regions, finally, is closely connected with the **social and economic structures** of the areas in question, which have also determined the character of the rituals. Symbols and signs used - such as goat skins, masks and headdresses, phallic symbols and the enactment of weddings, jokes and the other features- that constitute the main elements of the carnivals described above all point to primitive socio-religious idea that forms the kernel of many rural rituals<sup>27</sup>.

## 2. During The Twelve Days (*Dodekaimero*<sup>28</sup>)

The celebrations and the rituals happening in this time of the year, when days start to lengthen have a dual meaning:

- a) to **drive away the evil spirits**, forces of winter and darkness that according to ancient popular beliefs, are combating the nature and the blossom of the earth;

<sup>27</sup> Ekaterinidis ibid

<sup>28</sup> *Dodekaimero* or *Dodekamero* is called the twelve days period between Christmas and Epiphany (from 25 December to 6 January) also celebrated in many parts of Europe and called with similar names: les Douze Jours, I Dodici Giorni, Zwölfachte.



- b) to **secure happiness and fertility** for the family and the community in the new year. Their origins are found in the pagan and Roman times when similar feasts were celebrated<sup>29</sup> (Kalendes, saturnalia etc.).

They are observed mainly in Macedonia and Thrace and they have some common characteristics:

1. Dressing up with various peculiar costumes.
2. Mimic acts performed by groups of disguisers.

Costumes constitute, as in many other cases, a non verbal sign of expression and communication among the members of a community. The disguisers of the Dodekaimero wear animal skins, they cover their faces with masks and they hold or tie around their waists bells. They walk or dance around the villages in groups and they make performances with symbolic meaning whose main purpose is to drive away the evil spirits that threaten the nature from blossoming and producing new fruits. The masks are thought to depict the souls of the dead ancestors, who are recalled to protect the community; however they may draw their origin to the ancient demons of vegetation.

The groups of disguisers bear different names, *Kallikantzari*, *Lykokantzari*<sup>30</sup>, *Rogatsia* ou *Rogatsaria*<sup>31</sup>. Although they have some similarities<sup>32</sup> in appearance with other customs mainly from central Europe (Germany and Austria) they do not have a morbid character<sup>33</sup>; they are recalled in the winter time, a calendar period, when people in rural communities are uncertain of the favourable conditions of the coming year and the fertility of the land; their appearance and enactments seek to support or even to provoke, the resurrection of the nature and the defeat of darkness. The enactments that constitute part of the celebrations symbolize the victory of life over death.

The most representative customs are those happening in some areas of western Macedonia, but mostly in eastern Macedonia and Thrace (*at-Kali Vrysi* in Drama, *Nikisiani* in Kavala etc).

On the 5th of January annually, teams of costumed youths go through the village, house to house, keeping alive the custom of the "Rogatsaria" or 'Rogatsia' (*winter pixies full of mischief*).

Groups of disguisers as bears, goats or wolves, laden with bells and holding walking sticks, wander around the streets of the villages. They visit the houses and receive presents from the

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<sup>29</sup> In Rome, the Winter Solstice was celebrated many years before the birth of Christ. The Romans called their winter holiday Saturnalia, honouring Saturn, the God of Agriculture. In January, they observed the Kalends of January, which represented the triumph of life over death. This whole season was called *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. The festival season was marked by much merrymaking. It is in ancient Rome that the tradition of the Mummers was born. The Mummers were groups of costumed singers and dancers who travelled from house to house entertaining their neighbours. From this, the Christmas tradition of carolling was born.

<sup>30</sup> Mainly in the Lakonia district of the southern Peloponnese

<sup>31</sup> In eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

<sup>32</sup> Similarities have been observed in the custom called Brezaia in Roumania but also in Switzerland, at Appenzel, called Silversterkläuse

<sup>33</sup> Yvonne de Sike, *ibid*, p.48





householders who appreciate their visit as an auspicious sign. The typical feature of this custom<sup>34</sup> is the armed conflict which breaks out between the groups. If two teams of ‘*rogatsaraii*’ encounter on another in the village streets, there is a fight between them until one of the groups emerges victorious. Those who have been defeated must now pass under two poles held crosswise by the “*kapetanides*” of the victorious team.

Another element is the death and resurrection of one member of the group. The group of three persons - the ‘*rogatsiaris*’, dressed as an old hump-backed man, with a blackened face and laden with bells; the ‘*boula*’, a person dressed as his young and beautiful wife, and a young man wearing the *foustanella* (Greek kilt) who holds a sword in his hand- dance around the streets and they perform an enactment symbolizing through the eventually killing of the young man by the old one, the victory of life over death and the awaken of the earth to produce new corn and fruits<sup>35</sup>.

Another version of this custom is found in areas of Macedonia, Thrace and Thessaly, especially in villages where there are refugees from Pongos and is called *Momogeri*. Disguised with different symbols<sup>36</sup> improvise plays based upon certain given themes accompanied by dancers and a musician. Today, the custom is more of a recreational nature, while in the past, until the middle of the 1950s, it was seen as having a magical character; to bring a prosperous new year. They organise “dramatic” representations in the streets, accompanied by musicians, in some cases they terrify people -by striking them with ashes from the bags they carry or by the sound of their bells. In *Kali Vrysi* the impressive masquerade groups streaming into the streets of the village and making noise with their bells named *Babougeroi* or *Babougera* celebrate every year a three days event (6,7,8 January) which includes a parody of wedding ceremony, kidnapping and liberation of the bride<sup>37</sup>.

The victory of life over death is also the main symbolic meaning of celebrations taking place at *Nikisiani*, Kavala, where groups of men dress up in black sheepskins and black woolen clothes, with masks made of some kind of skin, wearing four heavy bells and holding large wooden swords perform in the streets a dwell which ends up at an eventual death and resurrection of one of them.

Similar is the character of some other disguises of this time of the year taking place at *Monastiraki* (Drama)<sup>38</sup>: men are dressed up as wild animals, wearing five bells tied around their waists, with painted faces and wearing various masks. The groups visit the house and perform special dances. A mimic action of ploughing completes the custom, which ends up with music and dance accompanied by the music of pear-shaped lyra and large tambourines (*dairedes*).

In the celebrations of Twelve Days more men than women participate, unlike to those related to spring customs and ritual practices (eg. Easter celebrations).

<sup>34</sup> As described by George Megaw in *Greek calendar customs*, p.43

<sup>35</sup> See also Kanellou Kanellou, *Hellas festivals and customs*, Vergas publications, Athens 1997

<sup>36</sup> See Walter Puchner, *Popular theatre in Greece and the Balkans (a Comparative study)*, Athens 1989, pp 93 ff

<sup>37</sup> Wedding parody is also taking place in the custom at Volakas in Drama

<sup>38</sup> Disguises take place in many places of the Drama prefecture; in Monastiraki, Volakas, Petroussa, Xeropotamos, Pyrgoi, Kali Vrysi



Disguises are among the most persistent rural customs of the Twelve Days. The same happens with other **Christmas rites**:

- **carol** singing (*kalanda*), performed by groups of young children,
- the **decoration of Christmas tree** (or a **boat/ship**),
- the **preparation of Christmas table**, that must have abundance of food and
- the **lighting of the fire**, which has a sacred and apotropaic character against evil spirits (*Kallikantzari*) which invade the houses and will be driven out in the Epiphany with the holy blessing of the waters.

On Christmas Eve groups of boys and girls holding metal triangles or drums and other musical instruments visit the houses and narrate the miraculous story of Christ birth while they address wishes for good health and happiness to the inhabitants of the house. Housewives reward them in order to ensure good fortune and abundance. Christmas table is an occasion for the family to meet and celebrate together. Christmas bread (*Christopsomo*) richly decorated (*ploumidia*), different kind of pies and candies (*Christokouloura*) are included in the festal meal. The tree with its decoration and greenery that symbolizes life and vegetation or a decorated ship (common in the islands) bring into the houses warmth and joy.

### **Symbolic acts related to gender**

At the last day of carnival and especially on Clean Monday, which initiates the period of lent, many ritual acts are testified, dispersed both in continental and insular Greece: the pepper dance on Evia island, the '*mostra*' - mock trial on Chios island etc. Worthing special mention is the custom of "**day of the midwife**", another symbolic expression of Thracian culture. It is mostly related to societal symbolisms rather than religious ones. It is celebrated on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January and it means 'women's rule' and it also called the custom of Bambo (*Μπάμπως*). The custom was mainly celebrated in order to honour the oldest woman in the village who had the duties of a midwife. Midwives were of great respect until very recently in Greek rural areas.

According to the custom on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January the women of the village – with the exception of childless or unmarried- visited the village's midwife offering her gifts - a towel with soap, and a pair of slippers. In order to show their respect to her important role they washed her hands and she in return blessed them with water and basil. The midwife sited in an armchair, oddly dressed, offers symbolically to each woman a piece from round-shaped bread she had baked in advance, and wishes her for healthy children. At the end of this ritual, the midwife was carried to the village's main water fountain accompanied by an old man (dressed woman) who would protect her. The objective of the ritual is to secure fertility.

Nowadays, the custom is mostly associated with feminism and the continuing attempts of rural women to overcome gender oppression and promote their feministic claims. It is called **Gynaikokratia** and held at *Monokklisia, Serres*, the same day annually, on 8<sup>th</sup> of January, mainly for the benefit of tourism and has another dimension. It is based on the change of roles between the two sexes.



On that day the roles<sup>39</sup> normally played by men are undertaken by women, while the men stay at home and do all the women's jobs (washing, cooking, sweeping up, feeding the children etc). Groups of women accompanied by musical instruments -"*tsambounes*"<sup>40</sup>, (a kind of bagpipe) and drums walk in the streets and inform men that the village is under their rule. With a few exceptions only women are walking or sit in the coffee shops smoking, playing cards and enjoying themselves. The only male who is permitted to go out and about on this day is the village priest, who gives his blessing to the customary act. The whole event ends up with music and dancing.

The interchange of roles is a characteristic of the Twelve Days and Carnival and is closely connected with the events of rural society aiming at satirising events or institutions and even present alternative solutions to a particular issue. Some scholars<sup>41</sup> recognise in all these events and rituals the primary forms of popular theatre.

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<sup>39</sup> See K. Kanellopoulos, *ibid*, p203

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

<sup>41</sup> See W. Puchner *ibid*



## II. ECSTATIC RITUALS

All these customs although they may no longer absolutely correspond with their original content and the conditions that created them, they still provide us with messages linked with the essence of our past and the nature of our world, visible or invisible. They are closely related with ancient traditions and celebrations taking part in ancient Greece in honour of Dionysus, the Thracian god *par excellence*.

From the ancient pre-Christian rituals of the Dionysus worship<sup>42</sup> draws its origin a religious custom that of **Anastenaria**.

The custom, which can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>43</sup>, is linked with the feast day of Sts Constantine and Helen (21<sup>st</sup> may) and has its origins in north-eastern Thrace. Before 1922 and the exchange of populations the custom was held in about 20 villages of North-Eastern Thrace, both by Greek speaking and Bulgarian speaking populations. Among the villages the most important performance took place in the area around the village *Kosti* (near the Black Sea). In Bulgaria the custom almost died after the World War II (nowadays it is common only in the *Strandzha* villages), and in Greece it is only held in parts of east Macedonia, mainly in the villages *Ayia Eleni* (where the former inhabitants of the village *Kosti* settled) and *Langada*, although even there it is threatened with extinction. The fire walking and the immunity to the burns of the *Anastenarides* attract many visitors. Many scientists, mostly psychologists, observed the custom in order to find an explanation of this immunity, which still remains unexplained.

As the Greek Scholar George Megas pointed out in his description of the custom<sup>44</sup> “although it is a Christian religious custom its relation with ancient celebrations and especially with that of ecstatic orgiastic worship is obvious”. The fact that Christianity grafted itself onto earlier pagan worship was no mystery to the Greek Church. Pagan elements were incorporated into the Christian faith in the beginning as an attempt to provide an easy transition to the new religion. It was simply a matter of convincing the populace to slightly redirect their focus to include Jesus. The result, especially in Greece, has been a great number of traditions, which to a large extent carry many pagan elements.

The **Anastenaria**, is a representative example. Barefoot villagers annually walk over hot coals. Among scholars the origins of the *Anastenaria*, as opposed to what the cult has become today, are a matter of considerable dispute. Although there is no evidence in ancient literature of fire-walking rituals associated with the god Dionysus, most scholars connect the *Anastenaria* with the widespread cult of that divinity. The Church authorities also made this association when they condemned the practices of the cult. George A. Megas (1956 & 1975)<sup>45</sup> observes that the cradle of Dionysiac worship was precisely in the Aimos area where the *Anastenaria* are danced today, passed down by the Greeks to the neighbouring Bulgarian

<sup>42</sup> George A. Megas *Greek calendar customs*, ibid, p. 203

<sup>43</sup> According to some researchers there is evidence of its performance in remoter times

<sup>44</sup> ibid

<sup>45</sup> Megas, G.A. 1975. *Issues of Greek folklore*. Athens.



villages<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, the evidence of mid-winter and carnival customs is that much that was associated with the Dionysian cult has survived throughout northern and central Greece.

Megas<sup>47</sup> has also pointed out that the state of frenzy among worshippers, observed among the *Anastenarides*, was characteristic of the cult of Dionysus, whose Maenads, or female worshippers, “rushed in a frenzy over the mountains at night, lighted by torches and goaded on by the wild music of deep-throated flutes and thundering drums.” Certainly some observers have noted in the dance of the *Anastenarides* over the hot ashes, with their trance-like faces and outstretched arms, the modern successors of the infamous ancient Maenads of Dionysus, the God-intoxicated women who might, in their trance-like state, tear apart any animal they came across in their frenzied nocturnal roaming over the mountains. Of crucial importance in this context is the evidence that the modern *Anastenarides* may, in their frenzy, run away with the icons for a period “into the mountains”, and that this is expected as an integral part of the sacred ritual.

Apart from the fire walking three are the main elements of the custom:

- The ecstatic, monotonous and very intensive dance, influenced by the sound of musical instruments (lyra and drum), which play a specific tune;
- The indoors (called *konakia*) and outdoors (called *agiasmata*) places of worship. The “*Konaki*” or “*Megalo Konaki*”, is a private indoors sanctuary which belongs to the leader of the *Anastenarides*, where special objects are kept (such as the knife for slaughtering the sacred animal, the sacred scarves -“*amanetia*” and the musical instruments) and the holy icons- “*chares*”, which *Anastenarides* carry while they perform their ecstatic dance. They strongly believe that thanks to these icons they are able to walk on burning coals..
- The square of the village where the fire walking is taking place.

The ritual starts on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, when the *Anastenarides*, men and women, gather in the house of the leader of the *Anastenarides*<sup>48</sup>. There they try to concentrate and engage themselves to their spiritual preparation. They start then their special songs accompanied by the sounds of musical instruments.

In the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, the *Anastenarides* bring the icons of Sts Constantine and Helen to the church to be blessed. The custom also includes a ritual sacrifice of an animal (bull or lamb) whose age in years is an odd number (3, 5, 7 years old) and it is bought with money raised by the believers. According to the description of the scholars<sup>49</sup> “the victim is led to the place of sacrifice from the *konaki*, to the accompaniment of a lyra and drum and with lighted candles. The leader of the *Anastenarides* performs a special dance and censes the animal, which is sacrificed immediately afterwards. Its blood is allowed to flow into a pit, at the edge of which it is slaughtered and all the unwanted parts (horns, feet etc) are thrown into this. The pit is filled in with earth. The meat and a little of the skin are distributed among the

<sup>46</sup> This latter point is made clear by the fact that the prayers used by the Bulgarian *Anastenarides* are recited in Greek, and that the transmission of the rites from Greeks to Bulgarian settlers in the area is a matter of historical record.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*

<sup>48</sup> See detailed description by George Ekaterinidis, *Anastenaria: legend and reality*, Athens 1993 (reprint)

<sup>49</sup> See George Ekaterinidis and Kannelos Kannelopoulos, *ibid*



houses of the *Anastenarides*". Thereafter scholars recognize in the custom an apotropaic character; to ward off evil and ensure good fortune for the whole community.

The most remarkable part of the custom remains the fire-walking that takes place in the evening. The fire is lit up early in the evening by a member of the group who has inherited this privilege by his forefathers. When the flames have died down and a thick bed of red hot coals has formed, the *Anastenarides* arrive holding the '*amanetia*' and icons of the saints and dancing continuously. They begin a circular dance around it while the music grows louder and louder arousing the dancers into a state of ecstasy. At the same time, sighs (*anastenagmi*) are heard, from which the custom takes its name. The *Anastenarides* start to walk on to the coals and dance on them with bare feet, without appearing to be burnt or to be in pain and without the soles of his feet being harmed in any way. According to descriptions of the scholars<sup>50</sup> walking on the fire is the supreme mark of sanctity of the dancer. It is said that "the icon calls the pure man". He is "seized by the Saint", who speaks through the mouth of the *Anastenaris* or *Anastenarissa*, who will then start to cry "make a vow, make a vow to the Saint", and those present will make vows promising gifts to the church. He will then shout "give back what is wrong, give it back, so the Saint will not harm you". Each person then tries to remember what wrong he has done and amend it. The fire-walking is repeated on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, when the ritual cycle of the *Anastenaria* closes. It is believed to have "an apotropaic character, particularly at the moment when the *Anastenarides* perform a circular dance at the crossroads, the point that is where good and evil spirits enter and leave".

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<sup>50</sup> Megas *ibid*, p.201



### III. SYMBOLISMS OF FERTILITY AND REBIRTH OF NATURE

#### EASTER CELEBRATIONS

Easter is the most significant celebration for the Christian world. Closely associated with spring, Renaissance and Rebirth of nature it incorporates rituals and customs that can be traced back to antiquity.

In Greece and in Cyprus Easter -else known as *Lambri* or *Anastasis*-Resurrection-incorporates not only the religious element of Christ's Resurrection but also is the most significant spring celebration, symbolizing the joy of people for the revival of nature and the beginning of creativity.

The selection of Easter date is based upon complex calculations, aiming on the one hand to be discerned from the Jewish feast (Pessah="passage"<sup>51</sup>) and on the other hand to take into consideration the astronomical circumstances. The eclipses of the sun and moon followed by cosmic turbulences created beliefs with huge symbolism.

Similarly to the rest of the customs of the annual cycle, the majority of the customs have survived, mostly in the countryside, whereas in the cities only those that are closely related to the ecclesiastic customs have been preserved and maintain a strong societal character.

The Easter period is preceded by 40 days of Lent during which the believer gradually prepares for the joyful message of Christ's Resurrection.

The highlight of Easter celebrations is the Holy Week, an extension and intense experience of Lent, bearing all the characteristics of a "gradual procession and support of the faithful to the - multiple times recounted from the Evangelists- suffering of their Teacher". The Holy Week, from an ecclesiastic, ritualistic but also ethnographic view, is full of symbolic actions contributing to the understanding of the Divine Drama. Simultaneously it ensures the participation of the believers in the revival of the Passions, death, mourning and the catharsis that comes from Resurrection with the victory of life over death. For these reasons the character of most rituals is intensely religious.

The Church prepares the believer by showing gradually the suffering of Christ and his martyred procession. The processions follow one another, from the prophetic speeches of Christ, to the betrayal and arrest, to the grand trial by Pilatus, the arrival at the Cross, the Burial and of course the much anticipated Resurrection. The people experienced and shared all the stages in the procession towards Golgotha, mourned with the Holy Mother and cried for the "beautiful young God". With the certainty of the Resurrection preparations run in parallel for the celebration-the painted red eggs, the sheep, the whitening of the houses. The awakening of nature and the arrival of spring are dominant throughout the religious and folklore ritual.

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<sup>51</sup> Easter is also known as Pascha.





In the pages that follow a short presentation of the rituals that comprise the Easter celebration takes place.

Emphasis is given to those that survive to our days and mostly those dominating the Greek speaking Orthodox (Greece and Cyprus) where the relationship between the religious and folklore rituals has survived, from Lazarus Saturday to the Sunday of the Resurrection. Before proceeding to the analysis of the Easter customs and rites, attention should be given to some important **cultural issues** and **values** reflected in the ritualistic practices and their vehicles.

Easter festivities are marked by a great emotional value, which is expressed by the dramatic character of the liturgy and the overall theatrical nature of the festivities, especially in the Mediterranean Orthodox world. Almost similar are the characteristics in the Balkans or those of the Slaves in the East. In the whole of the Orthodox Christian East, all the ritualistic practices are assigned to women and children<sup>52</sup>. Although the ritual of the Orthodox Church is assumed by the priests (men), women are almost exclusively involved in the dressing of the Epitaph (Holy Sepulchre) and in the other preparations in the houses and in the Church. The almost exclusive participation of women in the practices celebrating Easter is explained by the fact that women are linked with fertility and growth, they give life and birth. Therefore all the customs and rites related with the death and resurrection of nature and humanity are dependant on the feminine knowledge and competence<sup>53</sup>.

### **From Lazarus Saturday to Easter Sunday**

#### **Songs (*agermoi*) and customary events (*dromena*)**

Resurrection is preceded by Lazarus Saturday along with Palm Sunday, while the songs (*agermoi*) of Lazarus Sunday, bearing his name (Lazarus *agermoi*), are widely known and popular<sup>54</sup>. That day, compounded by the cheerful Evangelical tale of the resurrection of the dead (John 11, I-44) and the following day with the triumphant entrance of Christ in Jerusalem (John 12, 12-19), brings a positive message and foretells the Resurrection of Jesus.

Lazarus Saturday, also known as First Easter (*Proti Lambri*) is rich in customary events that are geographically spread and vary locally.

All are clustered around the Lazarus rise and include:

- Lazarus's songs (*ayermoi*) sang by boys and girls announcing Lazarus's resurrection while carrying baskets with freshly cut flowers and collect the eggs of Easter<sup>55</sup>.
- The baking of bread-made figures depicting of Lazarus that carry a pre-resurrection symbolism (Aegean Islands), as well as the procession of effigies on flowery funeral

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<sup>52</sup> In the West the main tasks for the organization of Easter manifestation are mostly assigned to men.

<sup>53</sup> See Yvonne de Sike *ibid*

<sup>54</sup> Although spring festivities spread across the Balkan area, they only have religious character in the Greek-speaking parts.

<sup>55</sup> The custom is well known in the continental part of Greece; from Macedonia to Thrace and central Greece to the Peloponnese, - but also in insular Greece (Dodecanese islands) and Cyprus. In Epirus the youth are accompanied by large bells and woods having an apotropaic symbolism





beds of Lazarus (Epitaph) made out in rough shapes and colourfully decorated (Cyclades, Crete, Ionian, Epirus)

The songs dramatically narrate the story of Lazarus, which is also played out as in an open-air theater, with the intention not only to recount the story but achieve a psychological catharsis and experience the “resurrection”<sup>56</sup>.

The making of the effigies takes place the night of the eve of Lazarus Saturday by women and children with coloured ribbons or baked breads (Lazarus bread) in human form, often in the shape of a puffed up baby (with eyes made out of raisins). The origins of this lay in the Byzantine iconography where Lazarus (resembling a small mummy) is portrayed as dead surrounded by mourners who are aware however of his imminent resurrection the next day.

In the insular Greece, Lazarus breads are distributed in the dead man’s soul<sup>57</sup>. Groups mostly of girls but also of boys, holding in their hands the spring idols used to walk around the houses of the village-on occasion even neighbouring villages, sing a narrative lament and offer well-wishes to the owners of the houses for the coming spring. The groups are always welcome, since the wishes and the praises offered in the second part of the songs are connected with harvest. In some areas like Epirus, the songs/carols are accompanied by large bells whose purpose is to drive away the evil.

In some cases only girls participate in the songs of Lazarus (named *Lazarines*) while married women are excluded. The reason for this is that Lazarus had only sisters. In Western Macedonia, Thessaly, Central Greece and Peloponnese the custom had an intense social character since it offered to girls the opportunity of coming into contact with the micro-community of their village, walk around the houses show off their skills and become known as potential brides.

In the old days, the *Lazarines* met a week before, every night at a different house, until they learned the long religious song and the wishes they would offer to the residents. The *Lazarines* hold a basket decorated with flowers in which they place white eggs offered by the housewives. In some cases they place in advance an egg in the basket, inviting thus the residents to give them many eggs, which they will paint bright red and consume on Easter day.

In certain areas (Zagorohoria in Epirus) they used to decorate the baskets to resemble small epitaphs with bells or handkerchiefs surrounding them, a herald of Resurrection. The flowers used for decoration in some areas-mainly in Cyprus- are usually yellow, the color of death and often bear the name “Lazarus”. In the entrance of the houses they set up a “*strange but believable representation of Lazarus rebirth*” while girls cradle Lazarus look-alike idols to which they sang the carols. The songs themselves either long or short, are usually mixed in format especially in the Aegean islands where they contain many praises (leading to the expected tip)<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> Demetrios Loukatos, *Easter and Spring Customs*, Athens 1988

<sup>57</sup> The same custom can be found in Bulgaria

<sup>58</sup> In Cyprus where Saint Lazarus is a popular saint, we encounter an extensive religious song but also a more demonstrative representation of the resurrection-especially in Larnaca. According to tradition, in his second life, unsmiling because he had already faced Hades, Lazarus lived in Cyprus and was in fact the first bishop of Kitio,



There is a variety of ways and forms in which the custom has been presented over the years in Greece. The evangelical tales and iconography played a significant part in this however the custom itself could have began as a religious mystery<sup>59</sup> and then crossed over being recreated by the public who sought through the personifications to experience and enjoy the element of the “Resurrection” that they associated more with the farming, bucolic and general rebirth and productivity of nature.

The custom later on changed to include the procession of Lazarus effigy for well-wishes, or the offering of baked effigies (*lazaroudia*), songs (carols specifically) which focused either on female presence (*Lazarines*) or driving away evil (Bells) or announcing Spring.

Lazarus’ Saturday, before nightfall, is considered the most appropriate time to prepare the **palm leaves** that will decorate the churches the next day, Palm Sunday. The gathering of palms in the old days was undertaken by single women, to ensure childbearing. Usually they wore green and red colours and once they finished collecting the palms they danced in tune to the respective songs and thump each other with a branch to ensure their health and to ensure fertility. The bundles are then transported to each parish. The blessed palms along with the flowers will be distributed to the attendees and be kept at their homes to drive away the evil. In the rural areas they used to knock the bundles in the fields, the trees and the vineyards. In Skyros it is believed that cattle-breeders awaited the palm leaves of the church to reach the paddock, knock each of the sheep with a palm leaf so that they could begin the milking to produce the cheese on time. In the islands they brought in the church along with palm leaves, olive and bay leaves. Those were kept by the housewives in the family altar and used them as incenses to drive away the evil spirits of the “evil eye”.

The customs of Lazarus’ Saturday and Palm Sunday, especially the carols, are interconnected with the customs of the Holy Thursday and Holy Friday and the **lament of the Holy Mother**, a non-ecclesiastical lament song<sup>60</sup> that has been preserved in many versions (more than 256) oral, handwritten in manuscripts (from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and on) and printed (from the 19<sup>th</sup> century). The lament is a piece-in-verse narrating the personal drama of the Holy Mother and describing indirectly the human destiny of Christ from the cradle to the grave.

It is a mourning song with a geographical and timely continuity incorporating ancient Greek traditions (Adonis), medieval poems and theatrical performances (Erotokritos, Abraham’s sacrifice), magical (for the harvest) and social habits that spread across today’s Turkey, Bulgaria and Albania. In some variations a female figure slips into the Holy Mother’s lament song, named Saint Kali-an ancient Greek divinity that was said to express the disapproval of the public opinion<sup>61</sup>.

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what is now known as Larnaca, where he also died. His sarcophagus can be found in a crypt underneath the name-part church in Larnaca. The day of his celebration is connected to various other customs, like abstention from work or washing of the body to avoid the evil. Groups of children, preserving the custom, used to go from house to house singing the religious song according to various local traditions, while carrying palm-trees decorated in flowers. In certain areas they used to re-enact the resurrection at the end of the church service.

<sup>59</sup> Like the *Niptir* ecclesiastical ritual taking place in the island of Patmos.

<sup>60</sup> Bertrand Bouvier, *Le Mirologue de la Vierge I. La chanson populaire du Vendredi Saint*, Genève 1976.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



Related to the rituals of Holy Thursday is the “**ceremony of the basin**” (known as *Niptir*). It is a symbolic representation, testified to being presented in Constantinople, Jerusalem and Cappadocia and today taking place only on the island of Patmos. The main performers are the Father Superior and the monks of the monastery of St John the Theologian. The reenactment follows a particular scenario based on the scripture of the Holy Testament, which has been preserved in two manuscripts known from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ritual starts on the 11pm of Holy Thursday in one of the squares of the island’s capital (Chora); Christ is played by the Father Superior, the 11 Apostles are represented by 11 priests and one laic plays Judas. All the scenes include symbolic actions. The central scene is the symbolic washing of the Apostles feet by the Father superior.

Holy Thursday and Holy Friday are related with **funerary customs**<sup>62</sup>. It is a common practice for women to visit the cemeteries and to decorate the graves with flowers. The most important event of Holy Friday is the evening **procession of the Epitaph**, led by the liturgical flags and the cross and in some places accompanied by local bands playing funeral marches. In most places a women chorus sings special songs contributing to the atmosphere of devotion. On the islands the procession of the Epitaph takes place close to the sea. In the old days there was a custom to bring in the main doors of the houses the costumes of sea-farers lost at sea. The procession of the Epitaph is closely related with the popular customs, the purification of the houses and the lands, and the commemoration of the dead, because according to ecclesiastical tradition Christ visited Hades and met the souls of the dead.

In general the Epitaphs gather all the power of the Holy Week. Therefore sick and weak people used to pass three times under the Holy Sepulcher hoping to receive the blessing to bring them good health.

Among the common Easter customs is the **burning of Judas**. It is happening in the most of Greece<sup>63</sup> and is related with the purifying fires aiming at drive away the evil. The burning takes place in the afternoon of the Easter Sunday, usually in front of the Church or in the central square of the village. The making of Judas effigy is simple and almost similar in all parts of Greece. It is made of straw and rags filled in with gun powder while a gourd is used for the head. In some variations they put in the effigy’s hand a purse symbolising the Judas 30 silver pieces of Christ betrayal. The effigy is placed in the top of a pile of logs or it is hanging from a tree and burned. Many scholars see in this custom some of the most ancient traditional practices related with prolific and fertility figures symbolizing the vegetation<sup>64</sup>.

### **Easter symbols**

It is well known that ritual symbols constitute an integral part of the festivities lending a special interest to each ceremony. With the passage of time, the mobility of the people and the

<sup>62</sup> E. Karpodini-Dimitriadi, Les jours des morts en Grèce: temps et ceremonie, *Pact/Eurethno Actes III* p. 123-126.

<sup>63</sup> The custom is also known in the whole southeastern Europe and also in some parts of western Europe (e.g in Lorraine, France)

<sup>64</sup> See Walter Puchner, *ibid*, p. 74



consequently exercised cultural influences, new symbols are added to those already existing or others are abolished.

A short description of the most common symbols linked with Easter celebrations follows

### *The eggs*

The eggs and mainly the painted red ones are largely known in the whole Orthodox world<sup>65</sup>. Their preference is interpreted by many different ways. Considered as source of life and of perfection, the egg symbolises in the Christian years, as in the past, the rebirth and good fortune. The red, a powerful and apotropaic colour, has been related to ancient Greek and pre-Christian traditions (e.g. Adonis and Attis<sup>66</sup> etc) and is related with Christ's blood that is considered as a mean to drive away the evil. The eggs are dyed red usually in the morning of Holy Thursday, which is also called Red Thursday (*Kokkinopefti*). The dyeing of the eggs follows a specific ritual (e.g. the pot which is used must be preferably new) carried out by women and young girls who sometimes decorate them with different figures (e.g. birds) or signs (flowers, marguerites) called thereafter frilled or embroidered eggs. Women used to keep eggs which remained uneatable because of the Lent and they offered them to the children singing carols on Lazarus Saturday. In the Easter day the eggs were the most simple and plentiful food.

The custom of dying eggs has been subject of research by many scholars, especially by those dealing with comparative mythology. A comprehensive presentation has been carried out by Professor Stilpon Kyriakidis<sup>67</sup> who accepts that the use of eggs during Easter is linked with the ancient deities of vegetation, those of Adonis and Attis in particular; who were adorned at the end of March and an element of their worship was the egg. It is well known that the Christian church tried to abolish many of the pagan rituals, albeit unsuccessfully. Therefore the church adapted many of them by adding a new religious and spiritual meaning. In this category falls also the egg.

The egg is the symbol of Easter par excellence (Easter without eggs is no Easter) and for that reason it became a present with many variations (chocolate eggs, caramel eggs, eggs made by metal, cloth etc). The Easter eggs have according to the tradition great power, which is transmitted to those who are celebrating. Women use to bring with them Easter eggs in the church, so that the service would be read over them (called *evagelismena* eggs). They are considered as having miraculous powers and one of them is kept in the home iconostasis for good fortune and fertility. Sometimes they touched with these eggs the forehead of ill people or used part of the egg shell to incense the house for a better fortune. The magical power of the egg is also transmitted to winners when cracking the Easter eggs. Keeping intact the egg

<sup>65</sup> For the symbolic meaning and usage of the egg see also Marie-Christine Anest-Couffin, *Le temps mythique et l'oeuf dans Le calendrier populaire grec, PACT/EURETHNO: Actes IV*, pp. 124-132

<sup>66</sup> Attis whose faith and ritual originate in Western Asia, especially in Phrygia, appears to have been a god of vegetation, and his death and resurrection were mourned and rejoiced over at a festival in spring. Attis legends and rites are much alike to those of Adonis, a very complex cult figure of ancient classical times. He is an annually –renewed, ever youthful vegetation god, a life-death-rebirth deity, venerated especially by women see Greek Mythology and Sir James George Fraser the Golden Bough, 1922

<sup>67</sup> Stilpon Kyriakidis, Easter Red eggs, VIII Byzantine Studies Congress in Thessaloniki, *Proceedings III*, 1957, pp.5-13.



during ‘egg tapping’ is a sign of good health, while greetings follow a specific ritual; “Christ has risen” and the answer must be “He truly has risen”.

In some rural areas women bring Easter eggs in the cemeteries (e.g in Lakonia, South of Peloponnese) and leave them on the graves of the departed, because according to the tradition the souls mingle freely with the alive between Easter and Pentecost since Christ visited them before its Resurrection.

### *Candles and flowers*

The candles are dominant during the whole of the Holy week. They are distinguished into two main categories: white and yellow. Yellow are used during the funeral ceremonies. They are lit up in the evening of Holy Thursday as well as during the Epitaph procession on Holy Friday. As it happens with other Easter symbols they are considered to have miraculous working powers. Therefore part of the candles of Holy Thursday is kept in the houses as an amulet. In insular Greece (e.g in Paros Island) they keep candles from the Epitaph procession in the house and they throw them into the sea or lit them up to smooth storming weather<sup>68</sup>. Candles (white, red, or richly decorated) are used on Easter Sunday, a day of rejoicing after the mourning of the Holy Week while fire crackers, squibs, fireworks are let off across Greece. They aim at driving away the evil. The same meaning has the **smashing of pots** nosily in the streets on the island of Corfu. On Holy Saturday, around 11.00 am women throw from their windows into the streets ceramic vessels full of water.

Similar meaning has the sign of the cross marked on the lintel of the houses by the Easter candles that the faithful bring with them. It must not be forgotten that Resurrection is celebrated in spring, a period of rebirth of nature. Candles but mostly flowers are considered to have significant power, especially those used on Holy Friday but also during the whole Holy week<sup>69</sup> an indication of the rebirth and renewal of nature and the beginning of a new life.

In some areas (mainly on Northern Greece, town of Serres) women used to place candles mingled with flowers in front of their houses during the Epitaph procession. They also put on a table of flowers, candles and incense around the icon of Christ on the Cross. Close to this they also placed small ceramic pots in which they have previously planted lentils or barley, which blossom very easily. This custom is linked to the ancient **Gardens of Adonis**<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Another interesting element of the Easter celebrations is the procession of the epitaphios at Marpissa which has an interesting particularity; the procession stops 15 times and at each stop a part of the mountain is lit up and there, children re-enact scenes from the Holy week: entry into Jerusalem, the prayer of the Mount of Olives, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

<sup>69</sup> Flower wreaths are offered as vows on Holy Thursday to the Christ on Cross. They are also put them on the graves of the departed on Holy Friday; White or coloured for the young, purple for the elderly.

<sup>70</sup> Adonis according to the myth was so beautiful that Aphrodite fell in love with him. He died at the tusks of a wild boar and Aphrodite asked Persephone to allow him return to life annually for six months. According to some legends as Aphrodite sprinkled nectar on Adonis dead body, each drop of his blood turned into a red flower (rose or anemone). In honor of Adonis were special feasts in ancient Greece (*Adonia*) celebrated by women, who planted in baskets and swallow pots (**Gardens of Adonis**) wheat, barley, lettuces, fennel and other quickly germinating but also quickly dying plants, as it similarly happened with the premature death of Adonis.



Flowers decorating the Epitaph are considered to have significant power and it is a sign of good fortune to be distributed among the believers by the priest after the end of the procession on the evening of Holy Friday or during the service on Holy Saturday.

### ***Easter Bread (Tsoureki)***

Easter Bread (*kouloura*) is also an important element of Easter celebrations aiming at bringing into the house power and better fortune. The baking of Easter bread usually takes place in the morning of Holy Thursday and in most cases is decorated by simple or more sophisticated designs made by the same dough, while read eggs are also used as decorating elements<sup>71</sup>. All these decorating elements have a symbolic and apotropaic character aiming at transmitting to human beings life and power. *Tsoureki*, is also baked, a kind of sweet bread, paste with sugar, eggs and seasoning, also in different shapes and decorations in an advancement of the Easter bread<sup>72</sup>.

### ***The Lamb***

Ecclesiastical symbol the lamb denoting Christ according to the Apocalypse comprises the power of the victory over death. In the whole Mediterranean civilization lamb, and especially the newly born, is the expression of the renewal of nature happening in spring. Its destiny was to be sacrificed in order to secure this renewal. According to Mythology a lamb was sacrificed in spring in the Lerna Lake (Central Peloponnese) in order to assist Dionysus to search his mother Semeli in the Hades. Symbol of the Jewish traditions, lamb has been associated with Christ, (Father God's Lamb) sacrificed to bring the Redemption to people. In the first Christian times the most common representation of Christ was that of the shepherd, which has been changed after an order (Canon 82) of the Synod of Constantinople (Quinisext Council) in 692 according to which a representation of Christ as a lamb was forbidden. Ever since, the representation of Christ on the Cross would be the only one to be used.

However lamb, especially roasted, remains as the main Easter food in the whole orthodox world. The custom of roasting lamb is very popular in the whole of Greece. In some places of Northern Greece (mostly in Thrace) it was a common practice that the priest after the church service in the morning of Holy Saturday visited all the bakeries and blessed the roasted lamb while being offered as a reward, a piece of it. The lamb is also connected with magical predictions. The house lord would interpret the signs on the lamb slope and predict what happen during the year at his house, at his land and more broadly in the world.

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They also would put statues of Adonis made by wax, laid out as corpses and lamented. For detailed and literary version of the story of Adonis see Obidius *Metamorphoses*, X, 525 and 708. For contemporary custom see also George Megas "the garden of Adonis in Serres" *Serraika Chronika*, v. 9, Athens 1979, pp 187-194..

<sup>71</sup> According to their designs they are characterised by different names.

<sup>72</sup> To the same category falls *Flaouna* (deriving from the medieval word *flaon*, *flan*) a kind of sweet bread popular in Cyprus and the *Sfougato*, in Corcyra.





### ***Easter Popular Athletic Games***

Since Easter is not only a religious but also an ancient inherited rural spring feast, it is significantly important to be celebrated in open air and rejoiced with music, dances and athletic games, the latter aiming at showing up the power, the skillfulness and the community spirit. Such athletic games are spread all over the Orthodox Balkan countries and they mostly take place on **St George's feast day** (23<sup>rd</sup> April), marking the starting of summer period. They continue to take place on Easter Sunday in many places of continental and insular Greece presenting similarities with the ancient Olympic Games but also with games that happened in the Byzantine Hippodrome. In these games only men take place. The prize of the winners is usually a lamb while they offer to their beloved women attending the game a kerchief to wear around their neck. The most popular games are the race, the horse race, the high or long jump, and wrestling.

### ***The swinging ritual: the Greek Aiora (Αιώρα)***

One of the most interesting Easter customs is the *Kounia* (swing) mainly taking place in some Aegean islands (e.g Kythnos) but also in Cyprus<sup>73</sup>. On Easter Sunday, a swing is set up on a tender tree (fertility) or in the town's main square in which boys and girls dressed sometimes in traditional costume take a swing followed by traditional songs. The custom has a recreational but also a social character since it represents the engagement of young women in search of a husband. It is an opportunity for young girls to show up their courage, competitive and athletic spirit, characteristics of an ideal bride. The custom derives from the ancient Athenian Festival of Flowers (*Anthesteria*), one of the most popular ancient Athenian festivities celebrating the coming of the spring. Following the mythological tradition it was linked with the myth of the Athenian King Ikarios, who was given the wine by Dionysos. The villagers after drinking it, thought they have been poisoned and killed him. His daughter Erigone hanged herself from the tree under which her father lay. Athens was then struck by plague and they were advised by the Delphic oracle to introduce the annual rite of *Aiora* in order to appease Erigone's spirit. Therefore children (boys and girls) used to swing from trees. The contemporary rural custom of swing has as main aim the joy, fun and good luck<sup>74</sup>.

### **Customs of Easter Week**

The celebration of Easter continues throughout the whole week after Easter, during which time rural communities abstained from work. In old times, this week had a significant social

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<sup>73</sup> The Cypriot ritual is linked with the wine. Until recent years, the Cypriote families which possessed a pointed arch in front of their house use to hang a swing for their girls, and the movement of the Aiora swings was followed by a traditional song.

<sup>74</sup> The same custom is spread across Eastern Europe and Russia.



character, offering the opportunities for social contacts amongst villages, families and especially between professions (financial arrangements), thus fostering economic and social relationships.

In some rural areas celebrations and dances continue to take place during the Easter week. It is worth mentioning the dance of **Trata**, a traditional commemorative<sup>75</sup> dance performed by women every two years in Megara in Attica, on the open space in front of the small church, known as Saint John the Dancer. According to Folklorists it is an ancient mimic dance (hauling of fishing nets) performed to secure success of the fishermen<sup>76</sup>. In South Euboea (Karystos) people used to dance every Thursday for three weeks after Easter in order to moderate the destructive effects for the plantations of the north wind. Similar dance (the dance of Master North Wind) was performed in Sifnos (Cyclades)<sup>77</sup>

The Easter week is also associated with funerary customs. In some places the relatives of the departed used to visit them in the cemetery on the Easter Monday leaving offerings on their graves (red eggs, bagels, or bread and cheese). According to tradition the souls mingle with the living for 50 days from Easter to Pentecost. A series of customs also known as *Russoulia* are known across the Orthodox Balkan countries and in Russia. Scholars link the name of the custom with the *Rosalia* or *Rosaria*, a spring festival of ancient Romans, which was later on developed to a funeral feast during which they put flower wraiths over the graves<sup>78</sup>.

Easter Monday is related to customs aiming at bringing good luck and fortune. Similar is the character of the customary litanies during which a procession of icons takes place, through the streets and crossroads of the villages. Similar processions take place 25 days after Easter in order to secure the growth of vineyards<sup>79</sup>.

Easter customs and rituals hold a particular interest since they combine religious and ancient traditions that survive until today as testimonies of the rich traditional life and culture. They combine symbols and practices, which have a special value for the traditional societies and communities and secure the relationship among people, thus reaching contemporary societies.

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<sup>75</sup> It is believed to commemorate the building of the chapel during the Ottoman rule aiming at preventing Turks to benefit from a spring being on the site, which had a fertile effect on women who drank it. It is told that the dance commemorates their success to build the chapel in one day.

<sup>76</sup> See John L. Tomkinson, *Festive Greece: A Calendar of Tradition*, Athens 2003 pp77-8., and George A. Megas, *Greek Calendar customs*, Athens 1982, p. 111.

<sup>77</sup> George A. Megas, *ibid*, p. 178

<sup>78</sup> The feast was also connected with the tombs of the martyr's of the early Christian years; it became very popular in Bulgaria as evident from the various inscriptions. According to some traditions the souls of the departed come back as evil fairies (russalia/rosliile/rusalki) and chastise people for their wrongdoings; thus they have been associated also with the spirits of the water and the river (Russia). See George A. Megas, *ibid*, p. 208 and Walter Puchner, *Popular theatre in Greece and the Balkans (a Comparative study)*, Athens 1989, pp 54-57

<sup>79</sup> See G.Aikaterinidis, "Spring customs of popular cult from Serres", proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Folklore Symposium of Northern Greece*, Thessaloniki, 1975, pp14-19.





## HARVEST AND SOWING RITES

As the basic survival of many societies depended heavily upon their ability to negotiate the environment and interpret the information contained therein, learning to read signs and symbols was a fundamental part of the rural experience. It provided knowledge of one's history, thereby encouraging the development of one's own cosmology, and ensuring the continuum of culture. Of course, reading the signs and symbols was not enough. One had to interpret them carefully, and act accordingly.

Most rural societies, even today, rely on the agricultural sector to provide their food and, therefore, survival. If the harvest is adequate, most people will survive; otherwise, there will be famine. Whatever power provides the bounty deserves praise. Therefore many customs relate to the harvest of the land. The most important moments in the rural cycle of life for both the modern and the ancient farmer are the period of **sowing** and that of the spring. The farmers, usually, through a type of “sympathetic magic” ‘assist’ nature to survive the winter. Several rituals have been practised for this purpose in which pre-Christian and Christian elements are mingled together and sometimes overlap:

In Greece the principal traditional rural customs were –and in many cases still are- closely related with agricultural activities, activities, which par excellence aimed to guarantee the survival of people: the rituals of sowing, of harvesting, of winnowing, as well as those linked with the cultivation of rice, cotton, tobacco, with sericulture and apiculture etc. All these activities are also associated with feast days and consequently most of the customs are perpetuated in respect to the calendar year. Combining pagan and Christian practices most of them have been preserved across the ages as having a great significance for securing the rendering of the field and in consequence a good year for the family and the community. It is important not to forget that during old times life was very dependent on agriculture. It is also evident to find a rural character in many rituals. It should also be noted that although rituals are generally speaking linked to a feast day, variations appear according to different regions.

Rural people observed carefully the seasonal cycle and the evolution of cultivated seeds and fruits and to adapt accordingly their family and personal lives, to the needs of agriculture production. Trying to secure the productivity of land, they sought to forecast weather, they observed the constellations, they searched for empirical signs, invoked God's help and very often they had a recourse to archaic practices with magic-religious character integrated in the Christian cult. Rural activities are also depended on the sun and the influence of calendar year. Thus a compound of customary, religious and calendar elements are identified in many rural manifestations. Traditionally the calendar year started from 313 AD the 1st September. It is normal then that some rituals happened at that, the common being to sprinkle the fields and the houses with holy water. Cattle raising however largely contributed in the way peasants divided the year, in summer and winter periods. The first started on 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, feast day of St George, when shepherds lead the flock up to the mountains, while the second started on 26<sup>th</sup> of October, feast day of St Demetrius, when they bring back the flocks to the plain in order to stay there for the winter.



For the farmers the way earth is going to receive ploughing and harvesting is considered as very important. For this farmers had recourses to diverse conjurations in order to secure the fertility and the prosperity of the cultivated land. The dramatic representations and the *mimodrames*<sup>80</sup>, with flagrant symbols of fertility, are the most representative examples (especially in northern Greece and Thrace). They took place on St Demetrious feast day (26<sup>th</sup> of October) and during the Twelve Days Feast, the carnival period (see descriptions above), the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. The conjurations for the fertility of the earth are numerous in the course of the year. We name the blessing of grain during the feast day of Holy Cross (14 September). To the same cycle of rituals belongs the use of clay idols taking in most cases the form of burying and lamenting of effigies known under different names; *Zafiris* in Epiros, *Leidinos* in Aegina<sup>81</sup>. The burying and lamenting of an idol is used either to provoke rain or fertility. The ritual of *Leidinos* was taking place on 14<sup>th</sup> September (Holy Cross feast day) and had as a main characteristic the lamenting of an idol. An anthropomorphic effigy made of a piece of cloth stuffed with straw and symbolizing a young person was put into earth by lamenting women. The whole ritual is linked to the archaic motifs of death and resurrection symbolizing the disappearance and the rebirth of nature. It is also associated with the rites of passage (rites de passage) and the religious calendar. A revival of the ritual happened some years ago for the benefit of tourists.

Among the conjurations related with sowing is the Feast of Seeds, known with the ancient name “*panspermia*”, which is celebrated on the feast day of Virgin Mary (Presentation of the Virgin, 21 November), called *Messosporitissa*<sup>82</sup> (“*protector of grain in the middle of sowing period*”). During this day in many rural areas, people use to eat, as a main meal, a combination of boiled cereals and vegetables, and share a small portion with neighbours in order to guarantee the abundance of plants.

Among the symbolic actions linked with the Cycle of cereals and of the corn, is worth noting the sewers habit to tie the last ears of corn in a nice bouquet with different forms (comb, cross etc) which sometimes they hang around the iconostase of the house, the place where they usually keep the icons, or they hang it from the ceiling. In some regions (e.g in the island of Karpathos) they leave in the fields some ears of the corns, while tracing around them by the sickle a magic circle. Finally it is worth mentioning the custom of bringing the first fruits in the church to be blessed the day of Christ Transfiguration (6<sup>th</sup> of August).

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<sup>80</sup> See Walter Puchner, *ibid*, p. 125

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, pp68-71

<sup>82</sup> This adjective means “protector of grain in the middle of sowing period”



## IV RITES OF PASSAGE

All the above references illustrate in an eloquent way that people through their customs and rituals try to make their main statements either through verbal assertion or privilege physical action. Therefore, following Van Gennep<sup>83</sup>, some scholars assume that “*rituals are always in some way regarded as rites of passage and that they survive through agency by default*”<sup>84</sup>.

### Summer solstices’ fires and future predictions

In rites of passage rituals that celebrate birth, initiation, marriage, death, many liturgical occurring in the annual calendar and most of, if not all, those of seasonal changes. To the later belongs a well known Greek custom that of “*Klidonas*”<sup>85</sup> (“Soothsayer”).

It is celebrated on 24<sup>th</sup> of June, Feast day of Saint John the Baptist, marking the summer solstice, an astronomical phenomenon that impressed traditional people and lead to many superstitions. According to some Evangelists (Loukas 1, 26-36) St John, the last of prophets, the precursor of christianism, was 6 months older than Jesus Christ. Since Christ, called also the Sun of Justice, dominates the winter solstice, when the days start to lengthen, St John’s day is naturally providing an opportunity to revive all the customs and practices of summer solstice, when the inverse movement of sun begins, that of decline, which six months later will lead to winter solstice. Therefore it is not strange that in almost the whole of Europe people celebrate sun’s momentary victory by lighting up fires. These **open air summer fires** have their analogues in the winter fires during Christmas.

The **summer solstices’ fires**, into which in many Greek regions throw wreath of flowers (especially that of May), are not only fires for jubilation and purification, but also fires for protection against misfortune, bad luck and illness, which the traditional man fears will happen due to the suns’ gradual decline. People usually jump over the fires to through away bud luck and misfortune. It is also obvious that people in that period of change wish to have a glimpse of the future. They pursue in many practices aiming to reveal their destiny. These happen between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of June. Women clean the houses in order to welcome good fortune which will go away if the inhabitant and his home are not impeccable. Considered as experts they proceed into **divination (prediction)** by means of dreams. Evidently they also try to predict the future of young people and namely of young women. Since they are interested in their future marriages the ritual is a community matter rather than an individual one. The divination by mean of water is immutable through centuries and follows the same ritual since 11<sup>th</sup> century. On the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, a young girl<sup>86</sup>, whose both parents are alive and in good health, goes in the central fountain of the village in order to take water. She carries into a pot and without speaking to any one (‘wordless water’) brings it to the house where the divination will take place. There, persons –mostly young- who wish to

<sup>83</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, 1909 and 1981 (reprint)

<sup>84</sup> Daniel de Coppet (ed), *Understanding rituals*, Routledge, 1992, p. 13

<sup>85</sup> The name *Klidonas* (“Soothsayer”) derives from ancient Greek work meaning announce, repute. The word is also found in Homer, while the today’s custom is known since the Byzantine years.

<sup>86</sup> In some regions a young boy



predict their destiny throw into the water some precious personal objects (a ring, a cross) preferably made of gold or silver. They cover then the pot with a red piece of cloth and secure it by a chain and a lock. They put it outside the house, where it remains the whole night to be seen by the stars. The following day they gather in the house and the same person who secured the '*klidonas*' opens the pot. Then she proceeds by taking out from the pot, one by one the objects and telling oracles inspired. The owner of the object can ask for the interpretation of the oracle, which will be given by older women or men who are experienced in the interpretation. There were some other ways for divination by means of plumb, ash or mirror; however the one by means of water holds the longest endurance in many Greek regions. In Thrace the custom is known as *Kalogiannia* –from the flowers young women selected in the fields attaching to them a valuable object and putting them into a bronze pot. Predictions of future marriage take place by taking out the objects and the custom ends up with traditional dances and music

All these divinations draw their origin from ancient times. By putting them under certain Christian saints rural people found a way to counterbalance the demons of vegetation and the deities of antiquity. It has also to be noted that most of the customs and rituals with a magic-religious character linked with the fertility and prosperity show an absolute attachment mostly in areas that kept during the 20<sup>th</sup> century old or archaic practices of cultivation. Their original significance is lost or forgotten and those who still practice them, they can not give a reasonable explanation other than that “our parents did like that”.

In any case it is also worth noting that all these traditional manifestations, symbolic representations and practices described above are an integral part of Greek cultural identity and –one way or another– “defend” a cultural survival, even though their components serve for the benefit of ‘cultural consumption’. Following this, special mention should be made to celebrations that constitute **milestones of life cycle**, and especially marital rituals and customs.

## Marriage rituals

### *Bridal symbols and signs*

Marriage belongs to the rites of passage that have a special weight for the life cycle of persons in a given society due to the fact that manifest the transformation of relations of people, who put an end and start a new beginning in the path of their lives. The rites of marriage are primarily the affair of the central actors forming alliances and secondarily of the largest community. As a rite, produces effects beyond the moment of union which have a social impact. Thus all the ritual actions reproduced during the marriage have a special meaning and their significance is consciously or unconsciously recognized. Many bridal traditions and rituals, still today observed, draw their origin from past time. Most have evolved from the superstitious beliefs of an era when evil spirits were believed to rule people’s existence being envious of happiness and awaiting every chance to strike people’s joy and good fortune. Therefore the bride and groom should be protected in order to ensure happiness. Music, singing and dancing had an attempt to drive away these spirits by the noise they produce.



As it happens with other rural customs marital ones present a variety in Greece, due to their close link either with local traditions and regional cultural identity or with the special character of the community that created or perpetuates them. However there are some common elements which compose the nucleus of the custom despite the variations.

In every traditional Greek marriage three are the main parts to be distinguished:

1. The preparatory rites
2. the wedding ceremony and
3. the week after the wedding with the ritual extensions.

The **preparatory rites** are conducted simultaneously in the houses of each side (bride and groom), or in the new house of them, which in many cases is provided by the father of the bride. It is part of bride's dowry, a custom preserved for centuries in all rural areas. Dowry is a kind of specialized gifts from the bride's father to the bridegroom. Originally, in archaic societies, it had a symbolic meaning; the setting of relationship between the two partners and the association of the young wife with her origins while integrating a new family, that of her husband's. However in the process of time it took the form of a financial assistance rather than a symbolic gift. Although outlawed still exists in some remote villages. The dowry includes all things to be found in a typical village home: tablecloths and bed covers, cut out linen and doilies, pots, glassware and icons of holy saints. Most brides received, and still do, from their families a piece of land or other financial assets. All the dowry details were written in the Dowry Contract, which included all properties and or money that were to be given to the bridegroom on the day of the wedding. Usually the Dowry Contract had the form of a legal document and it was signed by the bridegroom, the father in law and 2 witnesses in order to secure the dowry conceded to the bride.

Numerous are the marital habits and rituals, highlights of the local cultural heritage and identity. Every rural area has customs and traditions applied throughout various aspects of a wedding and by means of signs and symbols aiming at securing fortune, luck and marital bliss.

The preparatory rites include the invitation to relatives and people from other villages to attend the wedding ceremony. It was announced with several ways mainly by sending young boys as emissaries. They usually held baskets with fruits, nuts or drinks and singing traditional songs inviting people to attend the event<sup>87</sup>. In some of the Greek islands sweets accompany the invitation. On Rhodes it is called "*melekouni*", a kind of candy made by sesame seeds and honey (*pasteli*). On Karpathos and in other areas it is called '*sesamomeli*' and it is served in wooden baskets to those preparing the bridal bed.

Two or three days before the wedding usually in the brides' home the **bridal bed** is made. Relatives from both sides participate and the dowry is in display for everyone to look at it and admire. Young girls, with both parents alive, make the bed by using the best white embroidered lines, part of the bride's dowry and singing traditional songs. When the bed is prepared, they call relatives to throw on to the bed money and or gold coins along with their wishes to the brides for happiness and healthy life. In some places relatives throw on the bed

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<sup>87</sup> To day the invitations are printed.



sugared almonds and rice for fertility. Common is also the rite on the newly made up “marriage bed” to place a young child, preferably a male one, so the weds will be fertile and give birth to many children, hoping the first one to be a boy. This is linked with beliefs of the past, when having children was considered as the most important aspect of a marriage and many of the marriage rituals are representative of wishing fertility on the couple.

Fertility symbol is also the **bridal bread**, which represents fruitfulness and fertility and is said to bring good luck and health to the couple. Young women take part in the preparation of the “marriage bread”, while in Macedonia and Thrace it is kneaded with the assistance of three young girls. In other areas of continental and insular Greece (e.g. villages of the Peleion mountain, Levkada island etc), both boys and girls participate in the preparation. Usually the bread is covered with sugar to secure for the brides auspicious life. In Kythira Island they prepare at the house of the groom a special type of bread, called *plastos*, made only with wheaten flour and kneaded by two young girls. During the kneading, the groom and the relatives who attend it throw silver coins, for good fortune. Later on, in the wedding ceremony, the priest will cut two small pieces from this bread and will offer them to the newly weds.

In some places (mainly in Dodecanese islands) the baked bread has the form of a kind of marriage buttery biscuit shaped in long thin strips. It is broken up and put into small bags together with different peanuts and a few candies, which are offered to all the people who participate in the wedding ceremony and bring either gifts or even just wishes for the future couple’s happiness.

The traditional wedding day is full of **symbolism**. Both parties are dressed in separate homes. Relatives and close friends assist the bridegroom to get shaved and dressed with new cloths, usually traditional ones. Young girls assist the bride to wear the traditional wedding costume embroidered with brightly colours aiming to protect her from evil spirits and demons. The same is the purpose of the bridal veil; it was believed to protect the bride from the evil eye of an ill-wisher. Relatives of opposite families adorn the bride with gifts of gold jewellery. Local musicians play traditional folk music. Generally speaking and depending on the local tradition wedding takes place in the bride’s village. A band escorts the groom to the church and another band retrieves and walks the bride. When the bride is getting ready to leave the house relatives from bridegroom’s side come to receive her from her father and walk her to the church. The man on a horse holding the *flambouro* (wedding banner) is usually in front of the group.

The *Flambouro*, one of the most important wedding symbols in many Greek areas, is a flag made usually by a big square piece of red cloth put on a long wooden staff and decorated with different elements according to the local tradition. In Macedonia they use kerchiefs to adorn it; in some places they put on it a pomegranate, symbol of fertility, or fruits (always there in number). In Sarakatsanis<sup>88</sup> villages the *Flambouro* was made on the Friday before the

<sup>88</sup> Sarakatsani were nomadic shepherds of continental Greece mainly located in Epirus, Thessaly, Macedonia and Thrace. They traditionally spent summer in the mountains and the winter in the valleys. Their seasonal migrations led them to other Balkan countries. Nomads no longer exist. Many 20th century scholars have studied their linguistic, cultural, and racial background of the Sarakatsani, especially the Danish scholar Carsten Hoeg (Hoeg, 1925-1926), the Greek ethnographer Angheliki Chatzimichali (Chatzimichali, 1957), who spent a





wedding either by a young unmarried boy or by the groom's mother. With a cross on it, symbol of faith, it was decorated with many other fertility and prosperity symbols - coins, apples, gold or coloured ribbons or threads, chains, etc. In some Sarakatsani areas they prepared three *Flamboura* with stitched wooden pompons (*kiritsia*) flower shaped and with bells on their center, symbols of fertility and apotropaic. Coloured pompons decorated also the bundle of woods which will be used for the cooking of bread and food of the wedding ceremony. The pompons will be offered later on by the groom's mother to the women taking part in the wedding preparation. She also gifted them with kerchiefs which were used to lead the dances.

The wedding ceremony, with a few exceptions, takes place in the church. In some areas the wedding parties proceed first to the village centre, where they dance mostly three folk reels and then proceed to the church. The rings will be also exchanged three times, during the first part of the ceremony which is referred as the engagement one. The **wedding rings** are usually made of gold, especially for this occasion, although silver models are not unusual. Circular in shape they bear inscriptions on the inside surface<sup>89</sup> –, a tradition dated back to 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, when ancient Greeks used to inscribe dedications inside their rings thus strengthening the symbolism and sentimentality. A wedding ring is usually worn on the fourth finger of the right hand, and apart from being an indication of marital commitment to fidelity it has a broader symbolic and magic significance for the couple's union. Due to its round shape it is considered to have protective properties ensuring to the couple continuity, harmony, fertility, health and prosperity. The bestmen/women (*koumbaroi*), who are witnesses to the marital union exchange three times the rings on the couple's fingers, thus strengthening the couple's union. The number three is repeated several times.

Three times will the headbands/crowns (*stefana*) be exchanged of the bride and groom during the second part of the ceremony, when it takes place not only the crowning but also, the common cup, the dance of Isaiah and the removal of the crowns. The wedding crowns (*stefana*) are two; made of flower are linked together with a white ribbon, which symbolizes physical and spiritual purity. In some areas they used herbs instead of flowers as having more power to drive away evil spirits but also as representations of nature to be favourable for the couple<sup>90</sup>.

Three sips will the bride and the groom drink from a common cup of sweet wine meaning they will share from that moment on all the joys and sorrows of life. Three times the priest will lead the couple by holding their hands around the table that is situated in front of the sanctuary and serves as an altar. This circular dance signifies the first steps of their common journey to married life. Traditionally the newlyweds are showered with sugared almonds, symbols of the first Christian customs when "honey dipped almonds were offered to the newly weds by the priest". Their egg shape is also a symbol of fertility.

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lifetime among them, George Kavvadias and the anthropologist Aris N. Poulianos . Vestiges and testimonies of customs and the material and cultural life of Sarakatsani are exhibited in the **Sarakatsani Floklora Museum** at the town of Serres, Eastern Macedonia.

<sup>89</sup> The name of one's intended spouse and the date of one's intended marriage are the most popular inscriptions.

<sup>90</sup> Eurydice Antzoulidou-Retsila, *The marriage crowns in modern Greece*, Athens 1980 (doctoral thesis in Greek) with extended references



According to the Orthodox tradition number three symbolizes the Holy Spirit. Having a pure geometrical form, three among the numbers is believed to represent that which is solid, real, substantial, complete and entire.

Once the wedding service is completed, the bride and groom greet each of their guests and receive their wishes. In some of the Greek islands honey and walnuts are offered to the bride and groom from silver spoons. Sweets made by sesame and honey (the melakouni in Dodecanese islands) are handed out to the guests. The same kind of sweet was also offered to the bride following the nuptial ceremony, as honey and sesame were symbols of fertility.

After the wedding ceremony, the weds are walked to their house accompanied by friends and relatives. In front of their future house the groom's mother will receive the bride and welcome her by offering honey, sweets or nuts. In some places of continental Greece they also offer a glass of water or bread. In some of the Greek Islands (Hydra, Crete) a pomegranate was given to the bride to throw it on the courtyard in order to secure prosperity. The wedding feast takes place right after the bride's reception with drinking and folk dancing.

Today's brides and grooms often include these customs and traditions, even combining at times for a bi-cultural event.





## PART III

### RURAL COMMUNITIES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

#### Interpreting rituals and cultural traditions

Cultures have long relied on symbolisms and signs for guidance and instruction in various capacities of everyday life, and to document important events, including celestial and other natural phenomena, various rites of passage, the creation stories and history of the society. Regarding their surroundings with the greatest attention to the smallest of details, rural societies have coaxed life out of the often-hostile conditions of the mountains, plains and prairies.

Over time many societal symbols were incorporated into various forms of creative artistic expression, worked into and onto everything from objects of religious, ceremonial and historic significance, to those of more ordinary, domestic value, such as clothing, ceramic wares, baskets, textiles.

Culture as the resulting expression of **collective identity** can be now viewed as the publicly available symbolic forms through, which people experience and express meaning. Culture consists of such symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms and ceremonies as well as cultural practices such as language, stories, and rituals of daily life. These symbolic forms are the means through which social processes of sharing modes of behaviour and outlook within a community take place.

The productive effort needed for farming and related activities has been always depended on collective effort and cooperation among the members of the farming community. Special celebrations and rituals have been devised by these communities, not only to appease the elements of nature, but also to reinforce the ties between the members of the community and create a “collective identity” reflecting common targets, and most of all, the need for survival and well being.

Collective celebrations and rituals have therefore had a central position in the process of identity building in rural communities. Many of these celebrations and rituals are strong even in our days.

With the passage of time, of course, some of the manifestations of traditional culture, especially those related to rural areas, have fallen into disuse; however there are many that are still to be found, such as music, dance, and customary practices. Although the shell of most customary practices has worn thin, the core nevertheless still remains. Many of the expressions of traditional rural culture are revived exclusively for recreational purposes, frequently under the influence of “folklorism”, while others exhibit an ability to endure, though adapted to modern demands, mainly those of tourism. Very few expressions continue to exist without any adaptation, or remain exclusively the affair of a particularly community that does not desire wider communication. At the same time, there are not a few cases of the



revival of customs or other traditional events that had fallen into disuse, or instances in which modern events draw their repertoire from the wider cycle of the tradition.

During the last decades globalization and modernization of life have dramatically affected the conditions of rural areas, especially in terms of the loss of economic and social capital.

Globalisation is something that does not take place with equal intensity in every country or area. Thus, globalisation does not distribute its costs and benefits equally amongst regions, nor does it eliminate the need for the interventionist state.

At the same time that contemporary rural societies are brought into global processes, they also contain local dynamics directed toward solving problems generated inside and outside their boundaries.

Globalisation also accelerates the processes of social exclusion of small producers and the poorest consumers. Particular regions and locales are incorporated into these chains, while others are excluded. Thus, rather than representing a worldwide phenomenon of homogenisation, globalisation contributes to an increase in the differences between societies and also within their own regions. So, how far, globalisation influences rural identity and the maintenance or the abundance of inherited cultural symbols by a society is an important aspect to be further examined.

At the same time, new forms of livelihoods based on the rural resources and knowledge, such as nature-related tourism and services emerged making rural culture an important component for rural development. In most cases rural culture is understood in material terms, such as heritage buildings and traditional landscapes being the most eloquent expression of historical memory, which forces the expression of identity, both collective and individual. Protection of cultural heritage is seen necessary, while its potential has been exploited as a factor of development. The last years a number of traditional buildings have been restored, renovated and used. Local traditions, rural rituals and values brought into front, while arts and related activities are seen as a means of empowerment of local people. Thus, culture is seen as a constitutive part of sustainable development. However it has to be noted that sustainable development can not be achieved if the various values do not remain as the major link between collective identity and the actions of the respective communities<sup>91</sup>.

The role of rural customs for the best practices towards a sustainable feature is an important aspect, yet the question should be how cultural identity, continuity of cultural traditions and symbols, might help sustainability? One way is through the vivid preservation of customs and celebrations, which throughout the year offer a reason to the individual to escape the frantic contemporary life. They provide a source of energy renewal while at the same time offering inspiration, through creativity. Symbols as preserved through customs and traditions boost the need for preservation, create a sense of belonging (people who live in urban areas visit their places of origin to celebrate for example Easter) and strengthen the historical continuity. The symbolic character of gender roles is also important, as in the rapidly advanced world women's status within society has to be constantly re-evaluated and restated.

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<sup>91</sup> See also *Cultural sustainability of rural areas, a multidisciplinary PhD-Programme 2007-2009* (KULKEMA), University of Jyväskylä



In contemporary, multicultural societies, in which there is a strong need to reinforce the intercultural dialogue, the various values of rural communities can strengthen bonds and contribute to cultural and social balance. Traditional cultures are not only able to offer elements that help us to understand ‘the other’, but can also direct people towards social forms that do not isolate them but, on the contrary, help them to function as members of the social entity.

Post-modern societies, in which values are confused and the relations between the individual and the whole are de-constructed, return to traditional social values, which can give heed to a important lesson, that of integration; integration of the individual into the group, of art into everyday life, of death into life, of the body into existence, of nature into culture. It is not strange that in the post modern societies two cultural notions coexist: ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’; once antagonists, but now important for development. It is the main problem of development to transform these contradictions into complementarities and permit people to become more active and act less as mere observers and at the end become more human.



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