

**WITH THE DRUMS AND THE ORGIES OF THE MOTHER  
FEMALE FOLK CULT AS A POLITICAL METAPHOR  
IN A CONFLICTIVE ENVIRONMENT**

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This text, part and preliminary presentation of a working hypothesis,<sup>1</sup> investigates how “different”, that is “non-canonical”, groups which have experienced marginalization and minoritization, preserve, adopt and develop peculiar, also “non-canonical”, religious cults. At the epicentre of such cults, women – a minority within each minority yet also fiduciaries of the cultural structures as well as eternal manipulators of the imaginary, that is of myths and rituals – are perpetually inventing new manners and forms of cult, depending each time on the community’s needs for legitimization and continuity, by transcribing into the everlasting, allegorical, ritual dialect the experience of innate or political conflicts, at the hub of which are also the women themselves.

**1. A JOURNEY OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE IN MANY EPISODES**

In this essay I shall draw on the experiences of a protracted journey of knowledge in northern Greece, presenting thoughts and proposing hypotheses and interpretations. A long and tardy journey in space and time, which led me for a while to difficult places of a geographical and ideological national periphery, among groups of different provenance and history, language and religion, with different oral traditions and conceptions, cultic habits and rituals, with different – frequently mutually conflicting – vested interests and ambitions. The comprehension of the asymmetries as well as the cohesion of the data of this privileged research – and not only – experience, are based on the proximity that different cultural traditions incorporated in a wide, but peripherally affined, geographical and historical space acquire.

I began each time from a different starting point, I always approached something else: the people or the spaces, the groups or the individuals, the religious feasts (*panigyria*) or the secular parties (*glendia*), the songs or the singers, the myths and the life narratives, intimate female conversations, prophecies, machinations and gossip, identifying elements that predominated in a certain group or those that transcended the boundaries and were diffused with the most unexpected appearances

I began by seeking answers to issues revolving around one of my basic questions: Where does the Female stand in today’s version of Greek Orthodox Christian reality?

In this pot-pourri of primordial traditions and modernization, of ecclesiastical teaching and rationalism? In this milieu of misogyny, of fixed-guided sexuality, of muzzled conflicts and of unintelligible rivalries, which through twisting and turning paths of oral and of literary discourse are put forward as a riddle for the reader of the map of Greece's cultural and political hinterland?

This interest of mine, which was focused on the way in which antinomy between the physical, mental and social hypostasis of individuals is expressed, was formulated by asking more specific questions: How does the community manage the engendered individuality of its members and what are the canons of legitimization or rejection of their "delinquent" demands, that is the collectivization of individuality? How are the expressional languages of individual and of collective experience and memory formed? How can I read the resistance of memory, "history" as a shield and as a wound, tradition as a filter and a catalyst of the hazards of history?

In each case my impression that the cultic rituals constituted the ideal framework of performance, the safest field of individual and collective expression of these lived and experienced antinomies, was reinforced. I was able to distinguish in the context of the two official, dominant religions in Greece,<sup>2</sup> smaller and larger sub-groups with a particular religious physiognomy, with particular cult practices, which are linked with specific places and mainly with specific sacred persons, suitably selected for their specific qualities. What was difficult was to understand which and why.

Slowly but surely, I saw forming behind the life of the everyday routine and beyond the memory of the "actual" history of each village and of each group, in two-way and encoded articulation with these, the scenario of a "drama", of an epic myth as extensive as the space I had covered. The local oral traditions, the personal narratives, the conspiratorially transmitted secret meaning of the ritual performances (*dromena*), the eternally vital and multiply significant verses of the songs became "fragments" of the text. The peculiar circumstances and the canons of folk worship created the setting within which the play and its protagonists, real and imaginary, were re-baptized in the sanctity – and the militancy – of collectivity.

In this scenario I found the constant and diachronic repetition of dramaturgical motifs and episodes, roles and potent names linked with major mythological or mythicized historical systems: births, marriages and murders, abductions, incestuous relations, infanticides, migrations and supernatural feats; Constantine and John, George, Ali or Elijah, Helen, Mary or Anne, Marina, Kali or Despo, the Old Woman, the Midwife,

the Mother, the Daughter. I encountered them sometimes as saints, more often as folk heroes and heroines, of olden times or contemporary and recognizable, in songs and narrations, playing leading roles, on account of their deeds or their anomalies, their family dramas or their tragic untimely death, in ritualistic myths, models for emulation or threats for chastisement. And sometimes as renamed persistent appearances of gods and deities, as demons or reflections of celestial bodies, haunting places and waters, sown fields and mountain peaks, the imagination and the faith of men, those haunted firstly by the inevitability of harsh historical experience and by the riddles of psychological/mental identifications written boustrophedon. I suspected that the cultural dynamic of history in the specific, violently conflictive space of northern Greece was what led to this exceptional multiplicity of manners in which memory is expressed, primarily by women, through the engendered allegorical language of ritual.

The facets of the scenario on which I focused my attention from the outset and which had stimulated hypotheses were those referring to and depicting on the one hand the autonomous and by extension “delinquent” female figure, and on the other maternity; maternity as desire and as realization, as quality of the worshipped figures and as demand of the suppliant devotees, as a concept which unites the below with the above, the outside with the inside, earthly women with their transcendental models, as well as with their own body, their desires and repulsions, the demands, the submissions and the transcendences. In wanting to approach that side of the female that concerned my personal myths, I tried to understand the way in which the maternal figure is constructed in folk mythologies of my time.

Firstly, I was seeking, reasonably, whatever concerned the contradictory *per se* Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, who, although incorporated and dominant in the official religion as a patriarchal representation of femininity and maternity, preserves properties which gather around her person small, local, liminal female cults which, overtly, or allusively and silently, deviate from ecclesiastical ceremonial (*typikon*) and official doctrine. Gradually, however, I saw emerging a series of female sacred figures which are characterized by their quality as “mothers” or “daughters” but are differentiated from the dominant role-model of the Virgin Mother of Christian religion. This differentiation concerns essential traits of their “delinquent” personality, their qualities, their maternal relationship, as well as the peculiar cult practices addressed to them, which transcend the definitions and the bounds of the Church, and

which, as I began to understand, reveal obscured to prohibited, therefore also “delinquent” – at a social and not just a symbolic level – aspects of the female hypostasis.

## 2. THE VIRGIN MARY AND HER MOTHER

In seeking everywhere the threads of folk conceptions and practices relating to maternity as a conflictive life experience for women, I re-read the folk songs as significant discourse which *par excellence* condenses and expresses folk mythical thinking and ideology, with focused interest and in excitingly fertile dialogue and antilogy with my friend and colleague, in so many ways, Eleni Psychoyou, who systematically seeks her own Fair Helen in the mountains of the Peloponnese. One of the relevant thematic motifs which recurs persistently in the songs is the conflict between mother and daughter. Among the other cases, there is a transcendental one as well: between the Virgin Mary and her mother St Anne, as presented in the “Virgin’s Lament”, which is known all over Greece.

The “Virgin’s Lament”, a Medieval, prolix versification, of male monastic erudite provenance but of very wide popular appeal, based on the apocryphal gospels and ecclesiastical hymnography, is an anthropocentric narrative lamentation for Christ’s path of martyrdom towards the death on the Cross, as seen through the emotive eye of his tragic mother. Sung in vigil inside the church and around the bier of Christ on the night of Maundy Thursday, exclusively by women, who express their empathy and identity with the human, maternal side of the Virgin, in the ethos and style of their familiar secular lamentations, it is a climactic expression of female collective piety; an expression of marginal and private character vis à vis official worship, but multifaceted and revelatory, with the diachronic power of such a practice vis à vis the deeper meaning it embodies.

With this popular song, women, narrating the myth of the *mater dolorosa* of the sacrificed son, annually crystallize and externalize the exemplary persona of the *All Holy Virgin*, the *Panaghia*. The characteristics of this exemplary woman-mother (self-sacrifice, irrevocable devotion to her son, imperturbable emotions of love, pain, fortitude, strength and endurance) are dictated through the song by Christ-her son himself, and concentrate the ideal qualities for women, in correspondence to the holy figure they worship. I would be so bold as to say that the women stage and enact

female collectivity with sanctified roles corresponding to the role or roles of the Virgin.

Above all, my interest is focused on a scene of psychoanalytical interest in the Lament, otherwise inexplicable, but which reveals perhaps hidden facets of the fate of female deities. This is the scene with St Kali, a dark sacred figure who clashes verbally with the Virgin and for this receives her curse, which condemns her to anonymity and exiles her to the Nowhere of Christian geography.

The scene is as follows: The Virgin, unable to suffer the spectacle of her scourged and reviled son and the prospect of the imminent climax of his torment, upon the Cross, previously seeks to kill herself. Christ dissuades her from such an act and exhorts her to be courageous, crediting her with the duty of being a paradigm of endurance for mankind. Indeed, he advises her to return to her home and to dine, and to await the day of his Resurrection. The Virgin obeys. Whilst she is dining, St Kali appears as if an unknown passerby, truly the least-known figure of Christian mythology, and the following scene takes place – according to the poem:

Αγια-Καλή ηπέρασε κι αυτό το λόγο λέγει:  
Ποιος είδε γιον εις το σταυρόν και μάνα στο τραπέζι;  
«Άντε κι εσύ, Αγια-Καλή, και δόξα να μην έχεις,  
άντε που να σε χτίσουνε ανάμεσα πελάους,  
παπάς να μη σε λειτουργά, διάκος να μη σε ψέλνει  
ούτε κερι και λιβανο να μην καεί εμπροστά σου,  
μόνο το κύμα στου γιαλού την άκρη να σε δέρνει.

(St Kali did pass this way and these words did she say:  
Who saw a son upon the cross and a mother at the table?  
“Get you gone, O St Kali, and never have you glory.  
Be gone where they will build you in, in the midst of the seas.  
No priest will hold a service for you, no deacon will ever hymn you  
Nor candle, nor incense shall ever burn before you,  
Only the wave at the edge of the beach shall whip you.”)

Bouvier (1976: 266-288), who studied and published the basic and excellent philological study of the Lament, underlining the mysterious nature of this scene, recognizes in the enigmatic person of St Kali a female figure alien to Christianity but closely associated with primeval folk beliefs, who leads us to remote Antiquity.

Making a retrospection to the fantastical creatures of folk mythology, Bouvier suggests the possibility of linking the Neohellenic queen of the fairies Kali with the nymph Kallisto or with Artemis Kalliste, pointing out that the eponym “Kali” – in the sense of “lovely” rather than “good” – which has been ascribed to the diachronic figure of the “Great Mother”, was diachronic too and that in the personality of St Kali is revealed – in the fullest possible manner, on account also of the name – the survival of an Aegean deity that was always “rogue”. A deity who, although being pushed away continually to the margins and to anonymity, resists, assuming different names depending on the period, the region and the tradition of her devotees, I would add. Bouvier argues that the episode has a dual function, aetiological and apologetic: it condemns a pagan deity who lives on in the folk imagination and belief, while at the same time it muzzles those who want to condemn the folk habit of mortuary meals.

I consider important here an observation that Bouvier did not make: that St Kali, commenting on the Virgin’s supper as lack of sensitivity, expresses something more than peevish malice of personal opposition. She declares deep down a different attitude towards death and especially to the loss of a child, the attitude that led another archetypal mythical mother, Demeter, into abject mourning and contagious withering due to refusal to eat. And that through the rhetorical juxtaposition of the two different mourning – that is cultural – traditions, the episode reveals perhaps a deeper level of female discourse, which has a political dimension – as do all songs and especially laments – and lends itself to proclaiming difference and protest.

Of particular interest for me in this episode was that in certain versions of the song, and indeed the earliest ones, instead of St Kali, St Helen or St Anne appears in opposition to the Virgin. Bouvier maintains that these two names are simple substitutes for the name of St Kali, considering first and foremost that it impossible for the Virgin to clash with her canonically accepted mother.

I, on the contrary, considered that the specific names alternatively ascribed to the accursed saint are not fortuitous: both the name of Kali with its multiple meanings and of Helen – which despite the intermediation of the sanctified Byzantine empress was never rid of the ancient identifications with the uncontrollable power of allure-enchantment – and of Anne too, as saint with the characteristics of the Great Mother Goddess (Anna = *mana*, i.e. mother), omnipotent and autonomous, and indeed mother of a daughter and not of a son; and that their clash, through Anne-Mother with the primarily Daughter and secondarily abjurer of male-dominated Christianity Mary, is

inscribed in the *longe durée* of a story which not only has not ended but, on the contrary, as ethnography and psychoanalysis never cease to demonstrate, is being enriched continuously in meaning by the political claims, each time, of their devotees, through labyrinthine courses of choices and undetected interpretations and identifications.

I considered, furthermore, that the Virgin's curse was not fortuitous either: place of exile for a deity of Land and the life that comes from this is not the sea – how threatening could the Aegean seem for creatures staying temporarily in another land? – but the allegorical no-Land (Nowhere). I then made the bold assumption of what was for me a glimmering logic: that women possess unconsciously the knowledge that the source of every cause of conflict is the deviation from the life-giving, regenerative law of the mother and that the, in my opinion, archetypal conflictive relationship between the Virgin and other sacred female figures – with whatever name they appear –, and first and foremost her mother, is connected with this deviation. And further, that this unconscious (?) knowledge of women creates the ritual context in which, in correspondence to the symbolic conflict, every other conflict can “be enacted”, every silenced demand can be expressed, sometimes as injury and acceptance of submission, sometimes as protest and insurrection.

Consequently, I did not consider it fortuitous that the most “delinquent”, therefore oppressed, marginalized, minoritized groups select from the “non-canonical” models of worship of this kind the most extreme. And of course women, doubly marginalized socially and always manipulators of the imaginary, that is of myths and rituals, are at the epicentre of such cult practices, which seem to reflect the innate contradictions and conflicts which they themselves live and experience. Conflicts which they live and experience on the one hand personally, as constant recipients of harsh patriarchal demands, and on the other hand collectively, as the cohesive nucleus of specific groups, charged with preserving cohesion and continuity by remodelling in perpetuity the symbolic image which the stigmatized community needs for its legitimization and its inclusion. Here I would agree with Clément – Kristeva (Clément – Kristeva 2001:224) that the “maternal” element, which the paganism of these folk groups sanctifies, becomes precisely the sacred element which creates ties there where incompatibilities exist.

The examples that follow, as arguments in support of my working hypotheses, are two selected cases with many common elements. Versions – probably the fullest – of a

kind of Christianized, and in the one case possibly at one time Islamized, “shamanism” in Greece of the southern Balkans, for me milestones in a quest always with the same premiss: the deviant sacred and profane female and maternal figures and, by extension, the worlds they represent, the psychological/mental processes they mobilize, the conflictive situations they liberate – and cure. In any case, this whole journey began from a consubstantial personal life experience of my own.

### *3. A woman is guilty of as many murders*

*as the number of children to which she could have given birth.*

Césaire, Bishop of Arles, *Orations*

In the mid-1970s, on returning to Greece after the fall of the Junta and a rather traumatic period in European countries, where I had been exposed for the first time to anthropology, psychoanalysis, feminist thinking, which until then I knew of only from books, I found myself for the first time at the *Anastenaria* (Fire-walking ritual). For years afterwards I tried to understand what it was that drew me, a person – at that time at least – absolutely atheist and of no religion, so intensely, which touched me so deeply and overwhelmed me. Was it perhaps that which in general convulses everyone who happens to attend this particular ritual: the heady music, the sacrifice and the blood, the pull of the fire and its accompanying myths? Or was the pull hidden in that which I felt for the first time: the contradiction between the imposing sacred couple of mother and son – which I saw in the icons that were danced in the hands of the participants – and the catastrophic, infanticidal mothers of the unstructured songs that accompanied these dances? And beyond, in this mixed feeling of sanctity and savagery, of veneration and insurrection, of consciousness and transcendentalism, of collectivity and solitude, of humility and violence which the participants – mainly the women – inspired in me, with the abrupt transitions from controlled normality to a dynamic communication with “something” through the state of “ecstasy”.

Contradictions which fitted in well with my modernist consciousness as well as concepts which were in dialogue with my own questions, linked with issues of subjectivity which energized my guilt feelings towards – as I then saw it – the heap of my personal delinquencies in relation to my gender, body, roles, political entity, my fantasies. They energized them but also, in a strange way, relieved them, making me feel for the first time a sense of religiosity, rather something more and entirely

metaphysical: that at some time I had been baptized corporeally in this religion. I could not understand, I was frightened. For years I kept a safe distance. Whatever I read in the rich bibliography was of no help, since the only interesting dimension and the only outcome of the belief in the *Anastenaria*, which the authors distinguished, was the **non-burning** and the only meaning was the ancient Greek Dionysiac roots of the ritual.

The death of a beloved person who was linked with all these things led me again, after a long time, to the *Anastenaria*. I faced the return with resignation, feignedly indifferent. Then the dreams began. I discussed them with friends who participated, were searching and searched from the innermost. For the *anastenarides* (initiates in fire-walking) dreams are an infallible sign of **"road"**. My friends suggested to me that I interpret them in this way too. I acknowledged my subjective participation as a desirable prism and criterion of reading. I went to the feast (*panigyri*) again. With great tumult, excessive. The return was redemptive. The *panigyri* – or I – had changed a lot, the old women were no longer there, the power had been lost or hidden. I was able to live my memories and disturbances, to think about everything more calmly. Danforth's studies (1979, 1992, 1995), first and valuable scholarly anthropological approach to the *Anastenari*, which had been published in the meantime, were of great help in consolidating my own thoughts, leaving me of course with many lacunae. I knew that this was not just a matter of difference of culture but also of gender.

Like that primal, vague question which the first existential and ethnographic experience posed of me, that stimulus which at the specific personal moment for me, replete with contradiction and rebellion, made me see, hear, pay attention differently and which continues to possess me. It concerned the nature of this cult, the cultic form and the interaction with its celebrants. I tried to clarify the content of the question and to formulate it: If the good Christian identifies with his all-merciful God, if Christian women identify with their forbearing Virgin, with whom do the angry, violent, ecstatic, dancing *anastenarisses* identify? If I do not rest on what they themselves say, that "they are tortured by the saint", if I legitimize myself for a moment to translate this into the language of my own feelings and accept that the calling comes from within them, from the cancelled or unconfessed piece of themselves, then the question becomes: What are they trying to say and how do they know that here, only here and only thus, they can say it? Which sacred judge knows how to hear it?

Visual, audio and other data, the details of the ritual, the content of the songs and the correlations with information of mythology and theology on the one hand, and the talk and the “explanations” of the initiates on the other, as well as their history, made me see some initial contradictions in the outward projection of this cult schema. I sensed instinctively for instance that the central person of a cult such as this could not be the piously promoted St Constantine, but some silenced person. Perhaps the female figure – of vague relationship with him – who in some points was covered beneath the name of his known mother, St Helen? I found myself in a maze of mythological, archaeological, linguistic, philological indications, as well as of historical, anthropological, psychoanalytical suggestions that were in amicable or subversive dialogue with the ethnographic data gathered from concentrated as well as extensive research-peregrination. I tried to evaluate the evidence, to rank and to utilize those data which – albeit indirectly – concerned and answered my question: What is the *Anastenari*, what are its bearers and what is between them? Research of this kind, following the slow tempos of participatory presence and the “oblique” paths of ethnographic insight, is always a difficult endeavour: combinatory and multi-level, it is predicated on knowledge, or rather the ongoing learning, of the continuously changing codes of the socio-religious idiom. At the level of the study of the symbols, the ritual and the relations that develop within and from this, and concurrently at the level of self-analysis and self-knowledge, it demanded from me that I function continually in the open circuit of mythology-psychoanalysis-anthropology.

Analysis of the multiple levels of the symbolic language began to reveal to me the underlying logics of the specific culture overall, in which the religious feast (*panigyri*) takes on the characteristics of a “full social event”, in accordance with the classic expression of M. Mauss. That is, it gives the community the opportunity not only to confirm its collective identity through ritual actions but also to redefine the framework which each time limits and separates the concept and the space of “us” from the space and concept “the others”.

I was aware that the multiple otherness of the *anastenarides*, in regard to the dominant ethnic and religious models – refugees, mystics, pagans, oneiromancers, fire-worshippers in enduring conflict with the Orthodox Church and society, which for many decades pushed them to essential marginalization – this is one of the main factors which must be taken into account in order to understand the partial elements of their cultural physiognomy, the songs and their peculiar cult practices.

The icons and the ritually danced songs, principal characteristics of *anastenari* worship, extensions and transformations of an age-old oral tradition, allude better to the mythological-symbolic substrate of the *Anastenari*, and indeed in a particularly impressive way, since both are from the later elements of the Christianized and Hellenized rite, which came to be combined with the earliest and virtually fixed component elements of every cult of this kind: the sacrifice and the communal meal, the endless dance, the monotonous music with percussion instruments predominant, the wrestling, the purificatory relationship with fire and water, the relationship with disguises and other **fertility** cult actions. Icons and songs fitted in remarkably with the nuclear myth and were given meaning anew within the specific cult context, depicting its latest version – some centuries old – and expressing an otherwise hidden, perhaps now forgotten, psychological/mental dimension and the religious as well as social demand of the participants in the *panigyri*.

Those who have studied the *Anastenari* have noted that in the sanctified historical figures of Emperor Constantine, worshipped as Sun, and his imperial mother Helen, which in any case meet the specifications of the archetypal cult couple of mother and son, we have a Christianized version of the symbols of rustic religion: the regenerative “Great Goddess”, the lunar goddess to whom, under all the forms she assumed over the millennia, countless rituals were addressed, which demand the somatic participation of the devotees. And that most of these aforementioned ritual elements of the *panigyri* – on the famous Dionysiac character of which all researches insist so strongly – bear the features of a dual sun-worshipping–moon-worshipping religion. I would say rather they have the character of the rituals in honour of a series of female deities of the type of Cybele or Artemis, to which Helen belongs too. Metonyms of a maternal figure, but with qualities of virginity and autonomy, with vague maternal-erotic-conjugal relationship, whose future everlasting companion dies violently in his youth; of a figure who alternatively gives birth, loves and destroys, and which was always considered protectress of fecundity and of childbirth, as well as of marriage.<sup>3</sup> I believe that the characteristics of these mythical sacred persons, which underlie the saints venerated today, have set their seal on and therefore interpret many aspects of the *Anastenari*, making the attributed meaning and therefore also the criteria of choice of the ritual songs comprehensible.

In the *anastenari* songs, the adventures of the hero *Mikrokonstantinos* (Little Constantine), of a hero whose biological cycle is condensed in the limits of an eternal

youth, always concern his relationship with his mother, a relationship which is reduced to the archetypal stereotype of the sacred murderous couple of mother and son.<sup>4</sup> In one of the most loquacious identifications of myth and ritual we have in Neohellenic tradition, the songs referring to this demonized relationship are developed upon the motif of the evil mother – bipolar aspect of the self-governing woman – promoting female models whose delinquent acts lead to the cancelling or transcendence of the concept of marriage.

In my opinion, the child-worship elements referring to the sufferings of the young god-sanctified hero, to his regenerative premature death and dismemberment, to the magical “delinquent” and psychoanalytically significant behaviours of the autonomous mother, reveal not only the fertility character of the custom but also, primarily, the initiatory interaction between the hymned-worshipped figure and the resorting female celebrants, with their representations and ambivalences concerning maternity or, rather, with the torturous demand for their socially compulsory destination/determination, which they seek to express – and to annul – symbolically: verbally through the songs and bodily through the ecstatic dance and fire-walking.

If, as Clément – Kristeva (Clément – Kristeva 2001:28) maintains, ecstasy is a different revolution, then we understand the obsessive attitude of the Virgin in the “Lament” in condemning, by her curse, St Helen and her fellow-believers to the hyper-limits of the society of Christians, calculating that women no longer reside there.

#### 4. THIS IS ANOTHER PLAN OF FAITH ...

*... Look, this, how can I say, how can I describe it? ... Was it a religion, a custom? No, it wasn't a custom. It isn't a custom. This is another plan of faith, it's a Turkish pilgrim-shrine. And our women, because they were slaves to the Turks for four hundred years, had taken it from there. The old women did it every Friday. They said that “on Friday - we call it Ababas – we'll go to Ababas”. She must take a candle and go the yayas. Or so each one, someone was suffering at home and said “I'll feed those women who do Ababas, I'll give a meal at home for Ababas, so I'll get better”. Now, whether she got better, I don't know. And they all gathered in houses, drank, ate, afterwards this work these women know began. They put a glass thing, wide so, like a basin, they filled it with water to there, like holy water (hagiasmos), afterwards each one spoke with her hand inside, they mumbled their own things, you can't know what*

*they were saying. Afterwards they gave the patient some of that water. Above all the little ones, the babies that is, who had smallpox, who were whiny, one thing and another. They made there some sweetmeats with dough and then they brought the old women, who knew songs. They put the water there too, they put the little one in front of them, they sang, they did things, they fondled the baby, and they put a little water, they smeared it a little, “now look”, it became better ... That’s what they believed then. There weren’t any doctors; they went to the babo, this midwife, after having delivered the women she also was the doctor. E, now they got well out of faith, how do I know, that’s how it was ... They had their songs, as we have, shall we say, like the troparia in the church, they had this song, the Turkish amane, all Turkish, they danced, they started to tremble and their faces changed, how can I say, like when you’re drunk and don’t know what you’re doing exactly. They said “Ababas has got her” and they had the jurutia, like spits, to get out the evil. But at the same time, I couldn’t understand. That is, they called on Ababas, let’s suppose, to make them well, at the same time also St Anne, the Virgin. Which was a completely opposite religion, it doesn’t combine at all with the Christian religion, the one contrary to the other – and they weren’t anastenarides either ...*

(V.F-G.N., male villagers)<sup>5</sup>

A few years after my first contact with the ecstatic cult of the *Anastenaria*, supposedly unique to Greece, as part of an extensive research on the Rom of Greece, I was told of the existence of an analogous ritual – as far as I knew then –in a northern Greek Rom group, by members of that group settled in Athens.

Those first allusive, covert references to the “custom” and to the mysterious, vague, spirit which was worshipped, *Ababas*, were confirmed by some scant descriptions made by schoolteachers who had served in the area and which were included in unpublished manuscript collections of folklore material in the Academy of Athens Research Centre for Greek Folklore, where I was working. The correspondences and the similarities with *anastenari* cult, given the diametric differences of the two groups – as I then saw them – were impressive. There was correspondence too in the way in which both groups referred to the subject.

Although I had no information from the field, I nevertheless formed a preliminary picture and made the correlations:

- *Ababas* is a female ecstatic-healing ritual which was performed by a group of “initiates” with special qualities, the *Yayes* (“grannies”) as they were called, who gathered on set days “for good luck” or to make someone well when the need arose. These were old women, wise, strong, that is *superior even to the priest*, who had an opinion and influence on everything. The community acknowledged them out of respect or out of superstitious fear. The *Anastenari* in the villages of Macedonia was not exclusively female – at least in the times when it was seen and described from outside by various visitors, myself among them. Nonetheless, the female element remained dominant within the rite-performing group and the narratives about the past show the central role of elderly women with their ecstatic, therapeutic and prophetic abilities as well as their leadership power within the community. The *anastenari* group from the Crimea, as we encountered it many years later, hegemonic and still composed entirely of women, was destined to confirm for us retrospectively the affinity.<sup>6</sup>

- *Ababas* was linked, like all rituals of this type, and first and foremost the *Anastenari*, with music and dance. In both cases the sound, that is the tunes and the words of the songs, the instruments, the manner of playing them, as well as the incited movement, that is the dance, derive from the musical bequest of the community and the recognizability functions on multiple levels for the actors and for the spectators-devotees. A stimulus of a few seconds from a rhythmical sound of the membranophone percussion instrument is sufficient to excite the women and induce in them a state of trance: *When they put tsiftetelia like that in Turkish style, heavy tsiftetelia as they say, they [the women] seemingly were struck and danced in their own way ... these yayes danced, they didn't dance like ours, in the fast tsifteteli they did their hands this way and they had their eyes closed ... there was one old woman, how can I say, she also played the tambourine, when the songs started, Turkish ones, amanedes, she was carried away – when she made them, when she sang them, you shuddered ...; when the drums passed that way, as soon as she heard them, that was it ... she wanted to dance ...*

- *Ababas* as healing at a level of faith, and also because of the elderly devotees’ (“*Abajikes*”) experience as midwives, seemed to be related to child-bearing and maternity as well as to the protection of children’s health.<sup>7</sup> The *Anastenari* indirectly and directly revealed a more intense relationship with both. Experience proved that this was the basic relationship.

The years went by and when I came to Lavaró,<sup>8</sup> the village for which I had those first snippets of information, seeking in the whole of the much-suffering region of Northern Greece, through happy events and religious feasts, the appearances and the resistances of the sacred maternal figure who insists on hearing the most anomic petitions from her daughters, I was assured that as long as the basic human needs and adventures do not change radically, they will resort to the quest for analogous manners of symbolic expression – and not only in their dreams.

## 5. THE VILLAGE AND THE INVENTION OF HISTORY

*... Every village that was pressurized by the governments, which is why it became democratic ... Because this race, we, however long it has been living here, the old ones and to this day, we were oppressed greatly by Nigrita. That is, they had us as if we weren't human beings, you understand? And from this here, after the governments too, they paid us no attention, as if they took us for different people, you see, racial discriminations, and they paid us no attention. And if we asked for something, they didn't give it to us. They gave us fields, they took them back and they gave them to Nigrita. And we were left with twenty small fields. The foreigners who came took fifty each, when Venizelos brought the refugees he gave them each fifty small fields. We who were locals took twenty each. First they gave us forty each, afterwards Nigrita, how did it do it, took them from us and they took them from us and left us half the fields. From these pressures, from these here shall we say, people a whole life, understood something, that we must be other men we ...*

Lavaró is an old “*dopio*” village in the district of Visaltia, in the northwest part of the prefecture of Serres. The inhabitants show great embarrassment with regard to defining their provenance and their ethnic identity. They define themselves first and foremost as “*dopioi*”<sup>9</sup> and only when they have got to know you do they mention the words *Roma*, *Romides*, *gyftoi* (Rom, gypsies). They try to hide these charged terms by insistently describing themselves as “fishermen”, projecting their old occupation rather disorientatingly in relation to the troubling side of their ethnic identity, given that in Greece this occupation is not normally linked with the various known Rom groups. Sensitive point is the paternal language, which they cannot cast off and which they accept only as a vestige of a vague past, as

part of the whole effort to differentiate themselves from the rest of the Rom. In their desire to emphasize the long duration of their settlement in the area, they stress that they lived – they almost identify their existence with Lake Achinos, drained since the 1930s – not only as fishermen but also as basket-makers, exploiting the rich raw material of the marshes, and as farmers.

The relationship with the land was the point of conflict with the neighbouring populations. They recount that however much arable land they managed to create in the swamps, this was seized from them forcibly by the inhabitants of neighbouring Nigrita, who were Greek-speaking within a Babel of other tongues and therefore powerful.<sup>10</sup> After the draining of the lake and the allocation of the lands thus gained, things worsened and crystallized to the Lavariots' detriment. The village remained without sufficient fields. The economic difficulties and the feeling of injustice, arising from the discriminations against the inhabitants, forged in them a strong political and class consciousness. Many organized themselves in the resistance movements, EAM (National Liberation Front), ELAS (Greek Popular Liberation Army) and the Greek Communist Party (KKE), with the well-known consequences. Emigration to Germany and to Athens followed. Cultural associations were formed.

The Lavariots of the diaspora tried within a few decades to distance themselves from the old, downgraded and stigmatized identity. The young people studied and are employed in modern professions that do not allude to the past. Nevertheless, the ties with the village remained strong. Upgraded socially and economically, they can look towards this with the nostalgic reverie characteristic of all emigrants. The Lavariots' cultural associations, with their football teams, their folklore dance groups and their other cultural activities, in parallel with the interest of folklorists and journalists, lead to the re-evaluation of tradition, to the enhancement of the customs on new terms. The Lavariots' left-wing sympathies and role in the resistance also had a positive role in the process of their national incorporation, since "resistance behaviour" as an expression of patriotic loyalty now functions as an indication of a national allegiance in the broad sense. According to the new reading of the past, which demands the erasing of sore points wherever these exist and the inventing of identities wherever these do not exist, the racial ties are transformed into localist ones. At the same time, these are symbolized by founding a blood-donor group as principal action of the members

of the cultural association in Athens. The music of Turkish provenance, with the *zournas* (shawm) and the *daouli* (drum) was rid of incrimination by the issuing of a special CD in America.

This phase of the processing of Lavariot pride, by utilizing and promoting the village folklore and adapting it to cultural models of panhellenic appeal, has for the younger urbanized Lavariots another side too. It demands distancing themselves from that piece of their tradition which is the hallmark, the identity, the cohesive force of the community, namely *Ababas* and whatever is connected with it. So, with a psychologically interesting pendulum-swing behaviour, when *Ababas* appears as the central subject in discussions with foreigners – as it always does – it is increasingly pushed away into the dim, dark area of the Ottoman-Turkish past, of ignorance and superstition. For men of all ages, this stance seems to be something simple and painless. Not so for the women, and not for all the same.

Here at the watershed, in the unstable phase of a stable transition, when things are in danger of losing their meaning without having acquired a new one, the heavy heritage of responsibility for the cohesion and the continuity of the community appears to weigh upon them as an imperative pending. The *yayes*, *babes*, *abajikes*, closed in their silence, follow and control everything. The younger women sometimes in open conflict with the old women, that is with the past, sometimes in anxious embrace with modernity, are trying to find and to apply the alternative scheme which will ensure without losses the legitimacy of the group as credential for their children. The lake that once secured the survival of the village, with its fish and its reeds, once again gave the solution.

## **6. THE MOTHER OF THE VIRGIN**

*This icon didn't come out in this village. Then, two hundred years ago, as we've learnt from our grandfathers, our village was not here. He lived in Turkish times in a place that had a lake and beside it they had made their houses. With wattle, huts, there were some twenty, thirty houses, so many then. And they lived there. They had to be near the water because they were fishermen, the beys had them there and they caught fish... There was a woman there, Sophia she was called, she saw in her dream something like nightmares, as if something was pressing her: "You must go, you must dig, you will find*

*this icon in such and such a place". Every day, every day, she saw it alive before her, as if digging, as if doing, that's what they said. After once, twice, I don't know, she was furious. She dared, she went to that place, she lay down, as if put to sleep over there, she went to sleep. Afterwards she woke up, she asked them to give her a pick, they gave her one, she dug a little, and she brought out the icon. She brought it out of the earth, that is. She got it out and afterwards she had it, with her husband, they had it in their house until they make a place to put it, of course they didn't have a church too in those days. And they made that little church, with wattle again, afterward I don't know what happened there among the Turks, they got up and came here. And how the village became afterwards, on account of St Anne! They heard that the St Anne they brought out of the earth, that is without buying it, is miraculous. The families got up, came here, I don't know how many families. And since then we have it ... and we have it like God, and what God, we have St Anne above God ...*

Today Lavarò is theatre of a ritual which is developed in four acts, distributed in the annual cycle in a logically symptomatic manner: the last Sunday of Carnival and Shrove Monday (moveable feast, usually in March), the birthday of the patron saint St John (24 June), the nativity of the Virgin (8 September) and the official feast-day of St Anne, anniversary of her conception (9 December). From another perspective, these dates correspond roughly to the four points of the cosmic year, the solstices and the equinoxes, which in their turn correspond to the beginnings of the four seasons of the year.

In and amongst them are added and articulated (at a religious, symbolic and social level):

- The vernal rite of passage-initiation-worship of the dead-bridal parade of nubile girls, developed also in acts (feast of Lazarus, eve of St George's day), now non-existent due to lack of girls.
- The feast of St George, as fertility-grain cult ceremonial of married-reproductive women.
- The feast of Sts Constantine and Helen, which is now celebrated as a "feast in the country" as well as a feast of "memory", since the chapel dedicated to them is supposed to mark the old site of the village.

- The feast of the Dormition of the Virgin on 15 August (paramount in the Mariological cycle, to which in any case the veneration of St Anne also belongs, both logically and officially), which is mainly an occasion for gathering of Lavariots of the diaspora in their village – as is the case throughout Greece.
- The mortuary cult “Soul Saturdays”, with climactic and most characteristic the autumnal one, the Friday before the feast of St Demetrios.

Here too, as in the *Anastenari*, the pagan religiosity of the past is cloaked in the mantle of official Orthodox Christianity. But if there the character and the spirit of the cult has virtually disappeared through the continuous transformations and the full incorporation of the groups, in the case of Lavaros the women, members of yet another suspect group in terms of ethnicity, gender and religion, demonstrate an impressive inventiveness in finding ways to publicize the village’s Christian zeal, without betraying the spirit of their own worldview. Identified as gender with the secret, mystical, “delinquent” cultic tradition of *Ababas*, the women choose an alternative cult which functions disarmingly, since it is subject to the official religion and does not deviate overtly from the accepted cult actions. Whatever suits them is constructed with an apparently unconscious choice of symbols and practices and the emergent system permits the two-way movement from the permitted to the prohibited, from the official and sanctified to the covert and marginal. In essence, by claiming the right to continue and to justify their metaphysical inquiries and their conviction in their supernatural powers (therapeutic, magic), through which they maintain and impose their dynamic role as cohesive element of the group, the women adopt a system of rituals which allows them to exercise their proscribed practices, faithful to the same conceptions which are threatened only by evolution, modernization and repatriation. Principal figure for the community today is St Anne – *Ayanna* in local pronunciation – and her church becomes the new locus of women’s activity, the hearth of enhancing the new Lavariot identity.

*Ayanna* appears in people’s dreams always tattered, tired, perspiring, *because she runs and walks everywhere, in the marshes and the fields, wherever there are our people, to stand by them and to help them. That is why for us St Anne is above God.*

Everything is intended for her. Their faith, hopes and prayers, the votive offerings, the money collected from making rounds of the houses at carnival celebrations and on the feast of St John (“*idilia*”), from the *kurbans* (the animals offered and sacrificed), from

the *Lazarines* in the old days. St Anne has overshadowed not only the patron saint St John on his own feast day, but also the ubiquitously prominent Virgin, at all levels, since the great feast of St Anne is held on 8 September, anniversary of the nativity of the Virgin, which has been turned into a feast of the child-bearer. It is believed, in accordance with prevailing conceptions on miraculous icons, that the venerated icon of St Anne the child-bearer was not made by human hand but emerged *acheiropoiete* from the earth. Its find-spot is pointed out. The woman who found it is said to have made a chapel and then died, because *if you bring out such a heavy thing ...*, exactly as in the *anastenari* narratives.

At an iconographic level, in the portable and the despotic icons, the concept of birth/nativity triumphs: of Mary, of Christ, of St John the Baptist. At the feast on 8 September (Nativity of the Virgin), even the *Jamala* gives birth.

*Jamala* is a rural (agricultural) custom celebrated by both Christians and Muslims in the southern Balkans. Central theatrical prop of the performance is the *Jamala* or *Gamila*,<sup>11</sup> a zoomorphic construction consisting of a wooden frame covered with thick cloths (which conceals the men inside who lift it) and an animal head with articulated jaws: an effigy paraded with symbolic, usually comic antics. *Jamala* is a moveable custom, which takes place in spring or autumn, closely associated with the vegetation cycle.

Some differences in *Jamala* at Lavarro make this a particularly interesting case: the “effigy” instead of an animal head has a face of a beautiful – which is what the word *jamala* literally means – magnificent female, bedecked with kerchiefs-veils and a red dot on the forehead, a face that could be said to be of an Indian goddess – something which acquires special significance in regard to the specific group. What the Lavariots address as *Babo-Jamala* is an old woman, like *Ayanna*. In earlier times, 8 September was the celebration of *Jamala*, today it is of St Anne. Considering that the new, Christianized version of the Lavariot cult replaces the symbols yet keeps the deeper nucleus unchanged, the fact is almost self-evident. Nonetheless, even today most Lavariots when referring to the feast say “at *Jamala*” (*στην Τζαμάλα*). Of old, the custom included a great procession-litany of the *Jamala*, which had to encircle the whole village, for its good, until it reached the church of St Anne. Today the priest – himself of Rom origin – vacillating between his two statuses, between rationality and superstition, between respect for tradition and the tendency to increase the prestige of his role – which he “plays” only in Church contexts –, has imposed a great procession

of the icon and limited the parade of the *Jamala*. Because there is no provision for such a procession in ecclesiastical ceremonial, the priest has applied the familiar practice of the “*Epitaphios*” (funeral bier of the Lamentation of Christ), which, as on Maundy Thursday, the women decorate with flowers and carry round. However, for *Ayanna*, instead of the liturgical veil of the lifeless Christ, an icon of a nativity is placed on the bier!

The whole ritual performance, which we are observing today at its birth, displays great interest in terms of the gathering of elements from multiple sources and the improvising inventiveness apparent in all its aspects. In a few years it will be ordered and ready to be recorded by folklorists. Now the pieces in the puzzle are still being tried and fitted together: little boys dressed as priests – the priest’s wife and her lady friends dress them in the narthex, shortly before the procession – and carrying flabella, as in the litanies of the Orthodox Church; little girls dressed as angels, as in the litanies of the Roman Catholic Church; myrrh-bearing women as in the procession on Good Friday, who seek the appropriate hymns for the case. On 8 September 2001 canticles for Good Friday (Life in the tomb, etc.), the *troparion* of the Dormition of the Virgin chanted on 15 August, Christmas hymns, songs from Sunday school – the most appropriate – were heard. Everyone spoke of a radiant, white, pure, virgin mother, who shines like the moon and the sun – how could I not dare to think, as I was recording, the forgotten, latent memory of the women?

On that day the procession, having made a great round through the pitch-black village, passed in front of the church of St Anne, where it made a brief halt in honour, welcomed by the bells, ringing as at the Resurrection. In front of the church door, lying down nonchalantly, huge, impressive, polychrome, the *Jamala* awaited its turn. It was more than obvious to whom St Anne and her infant daughter were addressing honour and welcome. Truly, as soon as the ecclesiastical litany has covered the last remaining metres before the church of St Anne, even before the icon is carried back into the church, the *zournades* and the *daoulia* are heard and the procession accompanying the *Jamala* appears. The people are in a frenzy. The *Jamala* turns round swiftly, beating right and left with its green tail of enormous leafy branches. The women push their young children under it and pull them out again suddenly, shouting: “*Babo-Jamala* has given birth, *Babo-Jamala* has given birth”. Relieving. Even though they have pushed poor old “*Babo-Anne*” inside the flower-bedecked

funerary baldachin, *Babo-Jamala* has remained to do the job, to remember and to remind.

In my long journey over many years and covering much ground, I am able to say that Lavarò is the village with the fullest and most replete in meanings customary cult cycle. Recognizable beneath its Christianized and Hellenized form is a fascinating, all-embracing scenario of oriental provenance, epicentre of which is the archetypal sacred female figure and many of her names, appearances and properties: *Metera* (Anna = *mana*, i.e. mother), Old Woman (*Babo Jamala*, old St Anne, but also the *Yayes*, the old female *Abajikes*), Kali, i.e. Beautiful (the icon of St Anne: *you can't see it, it shines*, the *Jamala* = literally beautiful). Child-bearer (in the iconographic cycle and in the theatrical ritual performance of *Jamala*), Midwife, protector of child-bearing and of childbirth (according to the testimonies, those who want to become pregnant and have children resort to *Ababas* and to St Anne), Revealed (the *acheiropoiete* icon that emerged from the earth) and many others.

St Anne, literally and metaphorically the Mother, with her icons and myths, the depictions and representation of her holy miraculous confinement, all conserve and glorify one of the rare appearances of the Goddess: the old woman. St Anne is an old woman, *Babo-Jamala* an old woman, the *babougeroi* – the carnivalists –, the *mitragyrtes* of *Babo*. And the sacred healing *Abajikes*, also old women.

If in Antiquity the priests of the Mother – whatever she was called – deposited to her their testicles in token of devotion, the present devotees possessed by the saint, consciously deposit everything: the musicians their profits, the carnivalists their tips and bells for safekeeping, the *Lazarines* the treats, the mothers their children's clothes, the women their jewellery and handiwork, the alms-collectors all manner of acquisitions, money or gifts or offerings from ritual begging.

St Anne, under the prism of their own interpretation, is added to the series of numerous appearances of the Mother: they honour her for her success in child-bearing in old age, success which is attributed to her strong desire and faith – an exemplar to be imitated by those who resort to her. They honour her, however, also for her matrilineal kinship relationship with Christ: “We have all the family here”, the priest boasts.

I remember the curse of the Virgin, which, through St Kali, is extended also to St Anne, her mother:

Αγια Καλή αλειτρούητη κι αναθεματισμένη

.....  
παπάς να μη βρεθεί ποτέ να μπει μες στ' άγιο βήμα  
μηδέ λιβάνι και κερί να σε δοξολογούνε

(St Kali unredeemed and anathematized

A priest never be found to go into the holy bema  
Nor incense and candle to praise you)

And it is as if the priest of Lavaró confirmed it: “We don’t celebrate mass in the church of St Anne, very rarely, they had it purely as a side-chapel (*parekklesi*). We take the icon covered, every Sunday, and we take it to the church of St John and I celebrate mass there”.

The mother of the Virgin, marginal as in the Good Friday “Lamentation”, in Freudian conflict with her virgin daughter, the mother who herself tasted physical delights, here emerges triumphant victrix. Mother of a daughter and not of a son, like her, she keeps her enigmatic position and role, liminal in her Christianity, omnipotent and independent in her archetypal state, with the relationship with her female congregation undisturbed, dark-skinned and oriental, to follow from a certain distance her sanctified renowned daughter, circumvallated in her male-dominated Garden and controlled everywhere by her male priesthood. She with her neighbour, St Helen, still keep in good shape and control, uncontrolled, the reproduction of women and their ambivalent feelings. Eternally feminine beings, just like their cult devotees, who give birth and kill until their anger and their protest is heard.

## 6. EPILOGUE

Variations of the classic drama that could be entitled “The Tragedy of Sterility” or the “Tragedy of Maternity”, the customary rituals to which I have referred contain at their core everything that is related to the fertility as well as the sexuality of women, as basically conflictive situations. The female protagonists, in cult and ritual, are involved directly with this apocryphal chapter of life as well as with the mechanisms of expressing psychological and social demands through particular cult practices.

In both cases, “ecstasy”, as a climactic and supposedly uncontrolled somatic expression, disturbs and is rejected by the modernizing, legitimizing demand, which will transform the socio-religious minority into an equal, that is undifferentiated,

member of present-day Greek reality. Even so, although it is being adapted more and more, we can say that it continues to hold out politically through a camouflaged, milder religious resistance. The groups as ethnic (Rom) or religious (*Anastenarides*) minorities, the women as gender, the ecstatic rituals as betraying the pagan and therefore dangerous folk origin, all aim to hide, to reject, to forget or to rename and to transmute what until recently was a stigma – despite the few benefits gained from the folklore interest of intellectuals, which in any case only affects up to a point the anxious self-criticism of every deficient group. I only really understood the difference, that is the violence contained in the obligation for one to declare or to conceal where he belongs, when I too decided to expose myself corporeally, to come out of the group of onlookers, to dance and to undergo the ordeal of public fire-walking. For the old ones the test concerned my not burning or my courage in the face of the fire, for the younger ones bravado in the face of an uncomfortable corporeality, incompatible with the status of the bourgeois intellectual. What is important however is that it was public.

Both the *anastenari* cult and the *Ababas/Ayanna* cult at Lavarò, both female and “ecstatic”, reveal aspects of femininity that are prohibited and therefore “delinquent” in the context of official worship, and for that reason are blacked out. These aspects are linked with the dimension of an autonomous, independent femininity, which is not subject to male-paternal law, but tends to be reproduced psychologically and socially from this, through the mother-daughter relationship, as well as through the diverse and different manifestations of the female hypostasis: Daughter (virgin)-Mother (unmarried – not subject to a man) – *Babo* (old woman, wise, proficient in many ways, midwife) – *Jamala* (perhaps the animal female dimension). In this model the man is in the service of the woman (*mitragyrtes Babougeroi, Kalogeroi, Carnivalists, musicians, butchers*) – a phenomenon that is linked with a matrilineal social organization – which however is linked harmoniously also with the organization of the cult schema (matrilineal kinship of Anne with Christ, embryonic relationship of Christ with St John the Baptist through the wombs of their mothers, the exclusive relationship of Constantine with his mother Helen).

The women, the most downgraded subjects, on all levels except the magical-religious, of a patriarchal, marginalized and “delinquent” community, such as that of the Rom of Lavarò as well as of the idolatrous, fire-worshipping Bulgarian-refugee *Anastenarides*, “undertake” the role of enhancing these aspects through their

identification with the corresponding different facets of the “delinquent” female figure of cult, facets which have the tendency to emerge incessantly. These identifications are “delinquent” because they do not follow the course of the institutionalized identifications of the women with the mother and therefore also of subjection to the man and of impregnation (child-bearing) in his name through marriage. On the contrary, they enhance the matrilineal identificatory procedure in which the mother harks back to the virgin-daughter, that is to the independent women, and both of them to *Babo*, the wise, very old women who unites together all aspects of autonomous femininity – including even the animal.

Of particular interest in the case of Lavaró is the way in which the younger women are attempting to incorporate this “delinquent” identificatory procedure into official worship and social constants: firstly through St Anne (*Ayanna*), who is accepted by the Church, a process which is reinforced by the apparently more secure collaboration – essentially disguising in the male figure of alliteratively similar name, St John (*Ayannis*) – who is in any case also “delinquent”; in continuation, by paralleling their actions with the priest, through primarily the ambivalent priest’s wife, by encouraging religious tourism for the miracle-working icon, the enhancement of the folklore dimension of the magical ritual performances, etc. By managing and enhancing the marginalized and prohibited elements of the female hypostasis in this way, they replace socially the official worship, since they complement and compete with it in exactly those co-ordinates of it from which it had been severed and of which it had been deprived.

Better light could be shed on this process by including it in the framework of psychoanalytical theory. In this theory which describes and analyses the subject’s innermost constitution, according to which all the unprincipled and therefore also peculiarly individual traits of what Freud defines as “polymorph perverted sexuality” are reduced to the primal process, that is to the relationship with the mother, and should be blacked out, that is forgotten, cast off. In this relationship intervenes, as he should intervene, the father with his law, in order to socialize her. But since these elements are never forgotten finally and irrevocably, they tend continually to emerge through the dreams, the rituals or the pathologies of the individuals, so as to reconnect them with their ignored facets.

## 7. FINAL STOP BEFORE THE EXIT

Here stops the never-ending chronicle of a journey. My acquaintance with Tania Vosniadou at some advanced point of the course of the journey, our dream-like journey together to the banks of the lakes in the borders, her supportive analyses through our discussions and primarily through her writings, gestated, confirmed, illuminated, consolidated my thoughts and hypotheses. They helped me to dare to walk along psychoanalytical paths, they led me to friendship – and to authorship. By making me see beforehand that for me too the public space above the fire is no more than my unpaid somatic debt to my political self. I reply to her that she was right, the quenching of the fire can also be the cease-fire.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Condensing the research data to the minimum, in order to fit into the limits and the aims of an article in a collective volume with specific title was extremely difficult. The analytical presentation of this enormous research product from the two cases referred to here, as well as from many important kindred ones, as well as its conclusions (?) are the subject of a long study which, I hope, will be completed in the near future.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to both the Christian and the Muslim, which alternate regularly in the regions in which I am working, by considering them rather as religious systems which must respond to and cover the needs of faith and worship of the most heteroclitic social groups.

<sup>3</sup> Artemis, virgin goddess, not as untouched by erotic experience but as unmarried, not subject to a man, and independent – a status not compatible with the social values of historical times – linked with the biological cycle of women (menstruation, pregnancy and death in childbirth), and also as Mistress of Animals (*Potnia Theron*), as goddess of the ‘outside’, of the space not included in the framework of culture, alone, was the protectress of fertility and of child-bearing but not of marriage. In the cult of Hera we observed the changes in marital institutions. From representative of virgins, of the girls entering the stage of sexual maturity (nubile) – which is expressed symbolically by specific, collective initiation rites –, was transmuted to protectress of marriage and of married women (matrons).

<sup>4</sup> Constantine, as companion of the female figure, Helen, is introduced through the narrative of the songs, which does not concern his holiness but his adventurous life, which follows the course of all wonderful heroes: supernatural childhood, son of a mother without father, premature death, etc. A life that will end in his violent death-murder-dismemberment and thence in his not only mythological but also ritual consumption-devourment (bull-*kurban* (sacrifice)) – and in the birth of the rite. What is the course from the mythical child *Mikrokonstantinos* (Little Constantine) of the songs, with the life-giving-murderess mother, to St Constantine? What is the relationship between folk oral literature (songs-traditions) and cult? Why is the name of Constantine so frequent in the songs and narratives but

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not that of his mother? Perhaps the phrase of the most elderly *anastenarissa* replies, by referring directly to the mysterious origin of the cult figure and the ritual: *That name we should not say.*

<sup>5</sup> The excerpts from the oral testimonies are either from interviews made mostly in the framework of the research programme ‘Eastern Macedonia’, of The Friends of Music Association, and belong to its archive, or from my personal research.

<sup>6</sup> We learnt of the existence of the hitherto unknown, isolated, Greek-speaking *anastenari* community in the village of Cernopolie, in the Crimea, Ukraine, totally unexpectedly in 1997, in the framework of a collective interdisciplinary research project on the music of Thrace, which was conducted with funding from The Friends of Music Association. The initial ancestral group had emigrated to the Crimea before the mid-19th century and originated also from Eastern Rumelia, then part of the Ottoman Empire. For unknown reasons, they had taken a course in the opposite direction to the rest, moving eastwards, but some eighty years earlier, and continued along a different historical course. The consequences of this minor difference were decisive for them as well as for us, who were lucky enough in repeated meetings with them and as visitors to the village, to have lived experience of *anastenari* values (e.g. the female character of all the sacred actions) now lost to a great degree in the communities in Greece. These shed light on the obscure world of the symbols and the cult practices, exposing us to another way of manifesting religious faith, with dynamic processes which reveal that the religious contains and saturates the social, and vice-versa: that the historical and the social affect and are inscribed in the religious. I can say that the road to Cernopolie was for me the royal road to understanding a deeper truth relating to the *Anastenari* – and not only that.

<sup>7</sup> The midwife was always the one who had secret knowledge of the female body and who was manager of women’s reproduction as well as sexuality. According to the physician Soranos of Ephesos (*Gyn.* 1.1,3), the midwife knew all branches of medicine: pharmacology, dietetics, cheiropractice (treatment using the hands), surgery (treatment using instruments), it was she who performed embryotomy, the dismemberment of a *foetus in utero*, when it could not be removed intact. Midwives accompanied, assisted and frequently directed as secret-counsellors women in unique and solitary experiences, such as pregnancy, parturition, breast-feeding or the various age-related rites of passage, they were often their accomplices, undertaking magical therapies for barrenness or for invoking male fertility, abortions, contraception for undesired pregnancies. A central role in societies in which women had no right of choice regarding child-bearing and in which deviation from this duty was equal not simply to sin but to crime, considered as subversive removal of children from the husband. Interesting is the multiplicity of ways in which the concept appears in a magical-religious context throughout Northern Greece, with the use of the word ‘*babo*’, which means both old woman and midwife.

<sup>8</sup> For obvious reasons I have chosen not to use the actual name of the village, even though many references betray its identity, especially for those involved with issues pertaining to this region.

<sup>9</sup> The concept ‘*dopios*’ in Northern Greece is extremely vague in meaning and, to the degree that the word has been identified with the Greek and the Greek with the Greek-speaking Christian, it has also acquired appositions. Macedonians who speak or spoke ‘*dopika*’, that is Macedonian or Bulgarian in all its variants, characterize themselves as ‘*dopioi*’, but ‘even more *dopioi*’ are the Greek-speaking

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Macedonians. ‘*Dopioi*’ are those belonging to the various groups which have been living for many generations in the wider region (Muslim Pomaks, Muslim or Christian Rom, Vlachs, Sarakatsans, Gagauz, etc.), but ‘*dopioi*’ too are the incomers from Southern Greece (mainly Cretans and Peloponnesians) from the time of the Macedonia Struggle and mainly after 1912, a period of ‘Hellenization’ and of incorporation of the recently-liberated northern territories into the Greek State; ‘even more *dopioi* are those descended from the Asia Minor and Pontic Greek refugees who were settled there after 1922, even though derided as of ‘Turkish seed’ (*Turkosporoi*), they considered and consider that they Hellenized and protected the region. The groups that fall short of the ‘ideal’ measure of language and religion are a point of friction and opposition even between two already ‘delinquent’ groups, in their conflict over land, authority, prestige, legitimacy and so on.

<sup>10</sup> From the testimony of an informant: *Here then they were on their own authority, we had lakes here, This now, you know what ... the Strymon which flows, which comes from the heart of Bulgaria, we call the Strymon Karasos. So, this Strymon was coming from there and entered inside here and made lakes. It spread its waters everywhere ... So here we had a lake, it was Babo Bara. Fish, plenty of fish. Over there, where it came out, it made lakes, that is all this place was lakes. And there, where there was a place like islets, our people, then they used to plough with oxen, they went and made a few fields, we could say, and they sowed them with maize. ... One year our people went and sowed the fields, they had about three, four hectares ... And the others came from Nigrita and they distributed them now, our fields, provisional allocation ... Sown, cultivated ... Well, our people began to shout, to scream, then they grabbed hold of the zepkinia – with which they beat the fish, they called them zepkinia, a Turkish word – and they rushed upon them. Nigrita was shocked, didn’t know what to do, and they began to leave. And they left. But a court-case was held and they took the fields once again, sown, and they reaped them and they ate the harvest ... The many were victorious once more. The court was theirs, everything was theirs ...*

<sup>11</sup> Euphemistically, since *jamil* in Arabic means beautiful.

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