

Myth, Representation, and Identity

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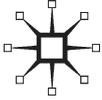
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*Myth, Representation,
and Identity*

*An Ethnography of
Memory in Lipsi, Greece*

Marilena Papachristophorou

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MYTH, REPRESENTATION, AND IDENTITY

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Preface

When I first visited Lipsi, it was in the summer of 2000, by pure coincidence: I was looking through a travel guide for an unknown destination in order to spend a short peaceful vacation at the peak of the tourist season in August, following a painful experience that affected my perception in subtle ways I could not see at the time. That summer the island had a direct connection to the port of Piraeus, so we reached it rather easily on July 29, arriving very early on a Saturday morning. A sense of utter peace as we were waiting for the people to wake up and start looking for a room, plus two observations, made me return many times since; the very first scene I perceived before landing was that of a middle-aged woman who got her first glimpse of the island with tears in the eyes, behind the gradually opening ramp as the ship was mooring. The second one, once we had landed, was a road sign with many place names among which “*Panaghía¹ tou Chárou*” (“Holy Virgin of Charon”); the name triggered my curiosity, while the icon itself filled me with questions as soon as I faced it—Virgin Mary, her gaze full of maternal sweetness, was holding in her arms crucified Jesus, baby-sized and in place of the Holy Infant.

Without realizing it I was embarking on a long-term ethnographic fieldwork that was to take ten years, from 2000 to 2010, and inevitably mesh—in a parallel and (eventually) complementary way—with key life incidents, mainly in the context of my biological cycle and my academic career, that also caused delays. I would say that the project found its pace after 2005, while my visits to the island became more frequent.

The initial working hypothesis was about depicting and exploring some symbolic system where *Panaghía tou Chárou* would dominate: why Holy Virgin would be associated to Charon, the representation of death in the Ancient and Modern Greek imaginary? The working hypothesis was gradually modified as I discovered on the one hand a rich oral tradition on the island, and on the other the conditions for focused fieldwork within a self-contained community, with broader theoretical considerations and of a more general interest. The more I became acquainted with a local discourse relating to everyday activities, narratives, and ritual practices, the more I delved into a local oral tradition amazingly rich in narratives, which complemented and

interacted with vernacular cult practices and collective identities. In this coherent system of representations I perceived a key structural opposition between fertility and death; the investigation of this symbolic opposition forms the pivot of my approach.

Fieldwork research was based on participant observation along with in-depth or semi-structured interviews, field notes, and a field journal. Participant observation, however, could only be established slowly and gradually, since on my early visits I was “excluded” from any participation. The first data were recorded exclusively through direct observation and by asking informal questions. I have talked or spent time with over one hundred individuals, aged between 5 and 90 and of various levels of formal education (with age usually being inversely related to schooling). Archival research, which would complement the field data, was very limited. On the one hand, the island’s municipal register was burnt as the Italians were leaving and was only restituted in 1955, which is too recent; on the other, research in the Archive of Patmos Monastery, whose manuscripts go back to the 5th c. AD, produced very little. On the contrary, the documentary and archival research in Italian institutions, carried out by the island’s friends Sergio and Giovanna Giuli (Giuli & Giuli 2005), was exceptionally useful.

The large gap in history was evident from the outset of the fieldwork, when the community tried to lead me to historical research with the information and stories they unfolded for me. Since historical research was not my objective, I chose to avoid that axis and focus on what I perceived as a specific system of representations and a largely local oral tradition, in order to investigate narratives as a “phenomenon” in itself.

The cost of my visits (travel and accommodation expenses) and the equipment I employed during 2003–2007 was covered by the Academy of Athens, as part of my research work for the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre (2002–2009), while repeat visits outside the framework of formal fieldwork missions were funded by myself. The final stages of fieldwork after my move to the University of Ioannina (2009 to date), were covered by the university’s regular budget for research and instruction purposes. My stays on the island lasted from nine days to five weeks every one or two years; they took place at different times of the year between March and December, and were usually combined with the recording of major events within the ritual year. In these visits I was either alone or accompanied by my family. In my quest for historical data and in order to acquaint myself with the community’s broader cultural context, I visited, apart from Lipsi,

Patmos and Leros in 2004, the islands of Arkioi, Agathonissi, and Marathi in 2006. I have spent in all about five months in Lipsi, spread over a period of ten years. Since my bonds with people on the island sometimes grew into friendships, I remained in regular contact during my absences as well, mainly over the telephone, as I continue to do since the completion of my research.

The period of ten years that ensued proved to be long, as the research frameworks inevitably change, not only by circumstance but also because both the researcher and the research participants move on, at least in terms of age, and this affects personal traits as well as collective behaviors. Along this course, the researcher is able to discern changes in the community's views as they are passed on—or not—to subsequent generations. As regards my personal involvement in fieldwork research, I can now say that the shift of interest from collecting archive material to fieldwork research that interacts with academic teaching and theory substantially altered the internal framework of my approach as well: freed from the professional task of recording folklore material, I was able eventually to immerse myself into participant observation. I have deliberately left this differentiation to color the style of my ethnographic account, since it forms part of this specific research and influenced both my observations and the recording of data for a considerable length of time.

However, the fine task of collecting various forms of folklore material for preservation had already taught me to perceive and experience “folk” culture and “tradition” as a consistent system of symbols, where the dominant fields of expression are language and ritual. Language introduces verbal material into ritual, which is then reproduced and conveyed as (sacred) narrative; whereas ritual practices (or is it narrative practices?) leave their traces on rites and beliefs. Symbols, as verbal representations of physical objects, can obviously survive in narrative and cultural practices much longer than religions themselves and even when the ritual contexts—in which they function inversely, as material representations of abstract concepts²—no longer exist. Symbolic exchanges between language and ritual, via narratives, is one of the points that will arise on several occasions in this book.

As oral tradition thus I perceive, especially in the context of this research, a system of oral communication with the emphasis on “popular” religion and the construction of a consistent collective identity—with many local traits in this specific case. Oral tradition, as a communication system, underlies, conserves, and conveys a worldview; since orality and tradition both constitute, in a minimal

sense, “communication events”³ that permanently conserve, supply, and redefine, through repetition, interactions between society and institutions (cf. Leach 1976; Boyer 1990). The idea that “the totality of a people’s customs always forms an ordered whole, a system” was introduced into anthropological studies by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his works *Tristes tropiques* and *La Pensée sauvage* (1955 and 1962): “Human societies, like individual human beings, never create out of whole cloth but merely choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas anteriorly available to them. Stock themes are endlessly arranged and rearranged into different patterns: variant expressions of an underlying ideational structure which it should be possible, given enough ingenuity, to reconstitute” (Geertz 1973: 351).

This case study reached a final point with the start and the escalation of a financial crisis in Greece—a crisis that is also political, social, and humanitarian. I believe this will inevitably impact the cohesive community of Lipsi, as one of the traits of this crisis is a moral panic that often leads, in terms of behaviors, to instances of alternating social introversion and aggression. However, the contradiction—and perhaps the clash—between mainstream ideology and local worldview relates to other fields of social research and cannot be examined here.

It should be made clear at this point that I “worked” mainly with people of the land rather than the sea. By this distinction I mean individuals whose activities center on farming, services such as construction or tourism, but also on religious practices, which can take up a lot of the leisure time—and this is why I treat them as an activity: “everything [we do is] for Christ.” These people constitute the dominant “class” in Lipsi as regards the orientation of the economy and the dominant worldview. On the other hand, the social presence of sea people is confined on the “limit” between land and sea—the harbor. I spent little time with them, mainly due to my gender and the social norms a woman ethnographer in the field must observe.

Acknowledgments

The people from Lipsi I wish to thank are many, and first of all every single one of my interlocutors in the field, without whom no ethnographic fieldwork is possible. When I refer to their words I use pseudonyms for obvious reasons, even when certain family names or nicknames have a great symbolic impact in the community's history (handling with this difficulty concerned me for a long time). In my mind all these speakers have a name, as I remember them one by one and I remain grateful to them.

On the other hand, I feel the need to thank by name the families of Lipsi who offered their friendship and hospitality to me and my family during this long period: Stamatia Vavoula and her many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren; Theologia Petranti and the family of Angeliki and Kostantis Paradissis; the family of Irene and Yorgos Laountos; and Chariklia Grylli.

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As a lover of (oral) communication, I consider that scholarship is also formed and inspired by spontaneous conversations. I am therefore indebted to all those with whom on various occasions we exchanged thoughts on issues pertaining to the ideas examined in this book: Eleni Psychogiou, Antonis Paparizos, Vassilis Nitsiakos—and a further “thank you” to the three for reading through a final version of my manuscript in Greek—Eleftherios Alexakis, Eleni Kotjabopoulou (also for editing my earlier English papers), Ulrich Marzolph, and Cristina Bacchilega; however, all assumptions remain mine. I am also thankful to my colleagues from the Hellenic Folklore Research Center, both research and administrative staff, for sharing their registers and fieldwork experience, and for their technical support: Georgios Ekaterinidis, Panagiotis Kamilakis, Miranda Terzopoulou, Maria Androulaki, Eustathios Makris, Evangelos Karamanes, Andromachi Ekonomou, Vassiliki Chryssanthopoulou, Zoe Anagnostopoulou, Cleopatra Fatourou, Aphroditi Samara, and Anthoula Bakoli.

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Several concerns and assumptions in this book have been presented previously in international meetings, proceedings, and/or journals.¹ I would like to thank the editors of the collective works and the anonymous readers for a number of valuable comments.

This book was first written as a monograph in Greek,² and it was barely finished before its English translation began. Its present form in English owes much to the decisive contribution of Tony Moser, who provided me with a firm basis of translation on which to rebuild my text without having to rewrite it from anew. His lively translation also preserved the charm of my interlocutors’ idiomatic speech, without distorting it. The photographs and sketches that accompany the text reached their present resolution thanks to the technical support generously provided by Yannis Athanassiou and Exentric Web Design. I’m thankful to both of them. I thank Maria Nikolaou for her kind assistance in adapting the works cited. My warm thanks go also to my editor, Robyn Curtis, for the reception of my project and her continuous support, as well as to the editorial team of Palgrave Macmillan who assisted me thoroughly throughout all stages toward an impeccable publication.

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* * *

In the meantime many young children grew up on the island and others were born. To this new generation of Lipsi, I dedicate this work.