



PUBLICATIONS OF THE HELLENIC FOLKLORE RESEARCH CENTRE – 31

NARRATIVES ACROSS SPACE AND TIME: TRANSMISSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 15TH CONGRESS
OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR FOLK NARRATIVE RESEARCH
(June 21-27, 2009 Athens)

VOLUME III

ATHENS 2014

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Paraskevas Potiropoulos

“Narrating” Local Identity in a Greek Border Community

Local identity in a post-modern world

The flow of globalization and the condition of modernity have redistributed in a new context cultures and identities, pushing them to an unstable form (Bauman 2000; Appadurai 1996; 2002)¹. The deconstruction of the concept of community based on people sharing the same space, place and culture has questioned primarily the connection of identity with fixity (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Rather than establishing identity and culture on the spatial, economic, social or kin relations, the new conditions introduce fluid and hybrid identities. This seems to surpass the anthropological approach to local identity in a broader context, including regional, national and supranational entities. Moreover, it questions the very core of anthropological definitions of identity as the process of distinction and differentiation, as the “construction” of spatial, cultural and symbolic borders. Instead the revealing of so many different definitions of identity unbound them of the constraint of stable formations and boundaries, as community, nation and state impose, provide much more flexible approaches of identity and connect it with the concept of movement (Rapport and Dawson 1998)².

As “traditional” conceptualizations of identity undergo dramatic change, studying the local identity of a Greek border community seems paradoxical. But although in many cases *home* (in the sense of homeland) “*is a hybrid, is here and there, an amalgam, a performance*” (Bammer 1992, p. ix), on the contrary *home*, as a place, physical and symbolical,

1. For the term “flow” and its employment in anthropological discussions of globalization, see Rockefeller 2011. See also Hannerz 1986; Castells 1989.

2. Home is conceived here as “plurilocal” (Rouse 1991), a term related to “multi-local” ethnographic approach (Marcus 1995) or the connection of identity with multiple locales (Bhabha 1994).

still exists, defining people's identities, incorporated of course in wider spatial and symbolical entities. In the era of globalization, national, political and cultural borders have been questioned, transcended, crossed and they are subject of negotiation (Nitsiakos 2010), but still keep being constructed, at least symbolically, defining identities either by excluding the others or by including entities.

Despite the changing "nature" of entities, based on "deterritorialized" identities as have been introduced by Appadurai (1991)³, the significance of place in the definition of identity remains either as symbolic *home* (Rapport and Dawson 1998, pp. 7-9) or the spatial location of it. Placed identities transcend the traditional notion of localities referring to solitary, homogenous and coherent communities.

Defining placed identities and localities, not only in the contemporary post-modern world, is a dynamic process as they are constructed historically. Place is the locus where space and time were structured. As no place is completely in itself and separate (Massey 1992), the ways the members of each community define the territory and manage their identities are directly related to specific processes of social, economic and cultural constitution, formed within the dialogue between localities and the national, supranational or transnational world.

Such definitions may be useful to define the ways that communities construct symbolically the links to the nations. But in such a post-modern era, after weakening the strict role of boundaries and the degradation of the periphery, such as mountain communities in our case, it is important to find the means that not only historically but even now the local people construct or narrate their identity. Instead of defining identity strictly in the process of distinction and differentiation, trying to find the boundaries between a collective entity and the "other", it may be worth exploring the internal identification in community, the construction of collective self related to unity and continuity in place and time, in modernity and post modernity, but even more the means for the construction of collectivity.

The negotiation of local identity in the post-modern condition needs new analytical constructs, new concepts, takes into consideration notions as movement, representations, memory etc. It also supports the critical use of classic ethnographic approaches providing a new interpretative context.

Narratives could be a "medium" for exploring collective identity

3. Appadurai draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze, in his use of the term "deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guatarri 1980).

construction, as a social practice that both creates and sustains community (Hinchman and Hinchman 2001). Collective narratives, as a continuum among past and present, attempt to define the cultural landscape, the social and symbolic constitution of the community, may be defined at the same time by the regularities of history. Narratives converse with history in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the past, creating the particular sense of communality (Tonkin 1992, pp. 111-112). Moreover, sometimes, narratives of community either serve as a response, a traditional one, to a changing world or constitute *small*, local narratives against the totalitarianism of grand *narratives*⁴.

A Greek border community

Plikati is a village facing the Greek-Albanian border. Until the beginning of 20th century the majority of the inhabitants were orthodox Christians, and a few Muslim families. After its incorporation into Greek State in 1913, the pressure upon the Muslim population pushed them gradually to move to Albania.

Plikati is being part of a cluster of villages widely known as «Μαστοροχώρια» (Mastorochoria = Stone-Masons villages) due to technical specialization of their male inhabitants in late-Ottoman times, being part of a specific cultural division of labour.

Except those villages, in late Ottoman time, they had relations with Vlachs cattle-breeders in the neighbouring villages of Aetomilitsa and Grammousta (the latter now obsolete), as well as nomad cattle-breeders in the summer pasturages of Grammos Mountain. The socio-cultural environment of Plikati is supplemented by its close relations with the villages of Kolonjë region (today a district of Albania), which is found on the other slope of the mountain.

Main economic employment was agriculture while the livestock farming was limited in domestic needs. During that period a few Muslim families, and only one Christian, had possession of the land which they rented to the Christian inhabitants collecting the corresponding taxes, and also they rented the pastures in the nomads cattle-breeders. The geographic limitations in connection with the demographic increase and the economic and political dependence on *beys*, the Muslim owners, despite the technical specialization of their male inhabitants, led a lot of Christian families to relocate in North and Central Greece.

4. The term “small narratives” has been introduced by J. F. Lyotard (1984).

The narration of the past in Plikati set the distinction between the “other” and “us” in religious, economic (as the Ottomans are the land owners and the Christian the *rayas*), cultural differences, also in labour specialization and language. Consequently they determine their identity as religious, cultural and social divisions rather than as national categories.

For Plikati, in specific, its incorporation in the Greek state, in 1913, marks several important socio-cultural changes, some of which were well under way, while others were triggered by the coming of the nation state. This is decisive for the form of relations between the two groups of village, Christians and Muslims. The presence of the Greek state put pressure upon the Muslim population, who gradually moved from the village to Albania. That was followed simultaneously by the transfer of land ownership. Christians bought off the houses and fields from the Muslims. By 1940s only one Muslim family had remained in the village.

During the formative decades of 1920s and '30s the inhabitants of Plikati were subjected to the homogenization projects of the Greek state. The largely bilingual population was forced, mainly through education, to become monolingual, while personal and place names were Hellenized.

Despite this, communication with the neighbouring villages on the other side of the border was retained, marital relations continued, and Erseka (the closest Albanian town) remained the main market place for the village.

On the contrary, the presence of nation–state becomes more perceptible in the economic and political field. The changes that happened in the local society are characterized as positive in the narrations of this period. The decades of 1920s and 1930s was a period during which the Christian residents of village acquired the houses that lived and the fields that cultivated, and were finally exempted from the dependence of the economically powerful Muslims (and one Christian) *beys*. As shown by the conflicts with neighbouring communities for the village borders, by the trials of the nomad cattle-breeders for the possession of the pastures and of the state about the forest propriety titles, the land has a significant role in the symbolic construction of community. In this sense, incorporating the nation to the village assumes a local meaning quite detached from the rhetoric of national self-determination, and has particular importance for the shaping of local identity.

The 1940s mark – not only for Plikati – in the most violent way the transition of the specific locale and its extended region towards modernity (Mendras 1961; Sivignon 1968; McNeill 1992). The effects of this transition became apparent in the Greek Civil war that followed German occupation (1944-49). The village and the surrounding areas became the

theatre of the last battles of the civil war that followed the second war, and as it happened in the largest part of rural Greece, the inhabitants were divided in political lines. During that time the social structure of the village was almost destroyed. A large portion of the population left the village and wandered around almost all the Eastern-Bloc countries. A lot of them managed to return to the village in 1953; others had to wait even until the 1980s.

Besides internal political division, the war made national and political divisions between Greece and Albania equally explicit. The border was like a curtain, hiding the “other” from any kind of direct social interaction.

It is obvious that the border position imposes an ambiguous character upon the village⁵. The inhabitants in Plikati were, and most of them still are, bilingual, fluent both in Greek and Albanian, mirroring older, pre-nation state, socio-cultural affinities of the village with the neighbouring communities of the district of Kolonjë, today part of the Albanian state.

Furthermore, the borders cut a region that during the Ottoman time was defined to a large extent by a complex cultural web with economic, social and religious complexities⁶.

In this frame the inhabitants in Plikati, as in all the borderline places, are called to manage, on a local level, anymore the cultural elements that constitute the national “we”, and determine their identity concerning the national “other”, Albanian, on the other side of the borders.

Moreover they have to negotiate their cultural identity in the present, including the concept of both nation and pre-nation elements, and re-organise the past, either as lived or as imagined experience.

The fact that community is the frontier but also the meeting point between two worlds undermines the dividing importance of the border. The re-establishment of relations between Albania and Greece, after the collapse of the communist regime in Albania (1991), marks for the Plikati a form of continuity with the past and has a profound effect on the practical and symbolic management of the borders. As the state ideological

5. About the culture of border zone communities and the structure and function of the borders, the relation between local and national identities see Wilson and Donnan 1998.

6. “*Borders are also meaning-making and meaning-carrying entities, parts of cultural landscapes which often transcend the physical limits of the state and defy the power of state institutions*” (Wilson and Donnan 1999, p. 4). This web could be considered as a “cultural continuum” (Drummond 1980).

control has been relaxed, and the national affiliation of Plikatiots cannot seriously be challenged, a sense of common landscape is being constructed by the cultural proximity of the past and the hierarchical divisions of today, as the once *rayas* have become today's employers. Only the borders still refer to national, social and economic differences rather than cultural similarities, economic exchanges and marital relations.

Mapping identity

Undoubtedly the representation of the "other" in Plikati nowadays is linked to its border position. The Plikatiots determine their identity in national, religious and social – to some extent – differences from Albanian neighbours. These distinctive features, reified by the national borders and its ideology, based on present perception or reading of the past, as do other features, less easy to deal with, like language, social and economic exchange of the past, the common religion for many Albanian neighbours and the relatives on the other side, are now surpassed.

At the same time the representation of "us" in Plikati is framed by cultural differences and similarities. The Vlach cattle breeders of Aetomilitsa and few nomads in Grammos mountain are the distinctive other while the common technical specialization in late Ottoman times signifies cultural similarities with the other *Mastorochoria* (Stone Masson villages) in the region.

As has already been mentioned, religion is a critical factor in the construction of the collective identity in Plikati⁷.

The dichotomy between Christians and Muslims that lied in the heart of the social and cultural structure of the Ottoman Empire became the raw material for the fragmentation of the Balkan cultural complexity into distinctive national "selves" and "others". Thus, the Christian *millet* was divided into national churches, the creation of which became a priority for the new states (Todorova 1997, pp. 161-183).

7. The importance of religion in the creation of the local identity in Plikati was the subject of the announcement by Nitsiakos, Mantzos and Potiropoulos, 'The Turk, the Christian, the Albanian and the Greek: Managing religious difference in a Greek border community', 7th European Association of Social Anthropologists (E.A.S.A.) conference: *Suspect Neighbours, Intimate Enemies: Christian views of Islam in actors in South East Europe*, Copenhagen, 14-17 August 2002. I owe many thanks to Kostas Mantzos as some of my thoughts of the existing paper were born during our collaboration and discussions for the preparation of that announcement.

In Greece, Orthodox Christianity provided the common denominator that unified the divergent cultural localities, especially during the period when the state expanded its borders, integrating populations that could hardly comply with any of the other criteria of national membership (Kitromilides 1989)⁸.

The narration of the past begins usually with the late Ottoman times, where a distinction is set among an “us” (the Plikatiots) and the Muslims or Turks. It is important to note here that the use of any of the two categories distinguish between behaviours and not people. “Muslim” refers primarily to a sense of cultural division that stems from religious difference, while “Turk” denotes class-like hierarchical relations among the “Muslim” land owners and the Christian *rayas*. Interestingly enough, the only Christian family that owned land at the time is usually conflated with the Turks.

In addition, national categories remain absent until the imposition of the border, in 1913. As one of our informants put it, “*In the old times the village was Turkish. When the Greek state came we bought the houses from the Albanians*”.

The native Muslims in Plikati are for the Plikatiots the “narrative objects”, and are assigned a significant role in the village past. In the 20th century this role takes up the Albanian others.

While religious affiliations of the self is usually projected as a “primordial” characteristic of identity⁹, representations of us and others, and the construction of local identity can be and are obviously utilized in a much more flexible vein.

A characteristic element of the religious symbolism in the local identity was the crisscrossing of the settlement with churches, an action that establishes and consecrates at the same time the symbolic and real space of community. The older churches of Saint Athanassios, Saint Trinity, Saint Constantine and Prophet Elias, and the most recent of Panagiopoula, Saint Christoforos and Saint Demetrius surround and protect the village from the exterior – natural and human – dangers¹⁰. Actually, they

8. Most of the ethnographies of western anthropologists focus on the importance of religion in the social life and culture in Greece (Campbell, 1964, du Boulay 1974; 2009; Hirschon 1989; 2009; Just 1988; Stewart 1991, etc). This is obvious in Greek Folklore as the Orthodox liturgical calendar is identified with the traditional calendar. About the relation between church and state in Greece, see Frazee 1977.

9. It could be considered as one of Geertz “primordial attachments” (Geertz 1973, p. 259).

10. Some of them have been rebuilt or they have substituted iconostases that “marked” the space, as in the case of Saint Christoforos.

specify the space of social entity, the place of collective identity, against the challenge to his territorial and symbolic substance.

The territorial basis of the village collective identity relates directly with the concept of “place-making”. A common component that came out from the narration of the past was the management practices of natural environment in history, with which the local society attempts to determine its particular identity. Use, perception and representations of the environment construct the community place and landscape. Since the place does not constitute a neutral geometrical space, but, on the contrary, its meaning results from the local society’s experience, organization and significance, it is determined by but also determines the identity of community. In this frame, the land and the narration about the land, such as myths about the ownerships, the order of the land, control relations, stories about distinct identities, the inner and intercommunal relations have a significant role in the symbolic and historical constitution of community, even today that there is no productive activity any more.

“Narrating” identity

In the process of place-making, the “founding myth” of the village established the special relationship between the place and the people; moreover it provided the justification and the authentication of locality.

In a variant of a well-known story (spreading beyond the particular place) about the holy icon of Virgin Mary of Plikati (*Panaghia Pliki-tiotissa*), as a form of occupancy in the pre-existing space, the icon is connected with the construction of the central church of the settlement.

The grammar of narration and its symbolic coding, the particular characteristics in the content of the myth and in the syntactic line of ritual practices, all offer the explanatory frame for the particular forms of constitution, cohesion and reproduction of the local society

“This icon has a long story. A shepherd found it in a place called Fetokos [or Theotokos = the Greek word for the Mother of God], where he was pasturing our sheep, in a tzini, in a bush, a wild bearberry. There the icon shone on its own, with her vigil candle, with everything”¹¹.

“The shepherd comes in the village, it says, I found an icon. All the other told him: bring it right here. But where we would put it? In the place there is now the church in the pit, at that time there was absolutely nothing. Someone proposed: Let’s place the icon in the church

11. Narrator: Z. A, 7/8/98, Plikati.

of Saint Athanassios, and we carried it to Saint Athanassios. The night, the doors were closed. The holy icon was raised late at night and went and set in the bush. In the morning the people saw the icon there and the vigil candle lighted. Everybody begun to wonder: what the blazes, what's going on here, what now? The elders, the notables of the village, were grouped round the priest, took counsel together and decided to place the holy icon in the church of Saint Athanassios again. Late at night the icon left the church again and went to the bush. In the same place where later we built up the church. Then the notables said, in order to get up and leave the church, probably the icon did not like the place over there. They said, 'Virgin Mary we are going to change your place'. And then take the icon and put it in Panagiopoula”.

In that place a church was later built, and called Panagiopoula (or Little Virgin Mary). In the particular point of narration, there is a time inconsequence, a time *transcendence*. The church of Panagiopoula is newer than that of Virgin Mary. In that place there exists a Stone with the mark of cross, where the icon stood according to another variant of this myth. An iconostasis was made there as temporary roof of the icon till the completion of the new church.

“As soon as we went there in the morning, the icon was behind the door again. The priest told the icon these words, as nowadays the priest says during the litany of the icon: ‘My Virgin Mary, stay here as long as the snow leaves, as soon as the snow thaws (melts)’, because it was 16 February, this day we celebrate the Holy Virgin here, ‘and we are going to construct a church for you there and we will put you in your place, that is what you want’. The iron bars still exist over there in Panagiopoula, where we put the icon on, as long as it takes to build the church. In these irons we encase the icon every year in 16th February in its procession litany.

Well as soon as the sun thawed the snow and the ice, all the inhabitants began the construction of the new church. They dug out and riddled red soil, mixed up with straw to make mud. They built up the church with mud and stone, hewn stone, like old time did. They fleeced the coats, gathered the wool mixed up with egg and be plastered the walls. That church compelled the admiration, respectful icons, all around courtyard, two belfries and lodge, also had a guest house, the dorter, it was an accomplished church, a systematic one”¹².

12. Narrator: A. Th., 29/7/98, Plikati. See also Tattis 1953, pp. 26-27; Tattis 1981; Tatsis 1978.

The story of holy icon in the Plikati, even if it isn't identified completely with the model of the founding legend of the village, it carries out, however, precisely this role. Taking into consideration the oral testimonies, the life stories, the genealogical trees of village residents and the historical testimonies, the constitution of settlement appears to emanate from the conjunction of scattered familial installations in the wider region, as it is proved by the place toponyms, the settlement in the area of many families from Southern Albania and elsewhere, a result of socio-economic realignments in the second half of the 18th century (Ars 1994).

The story of holy icon gives substance to the village as collective entity. As a mark of divine providence, it assigns and consecrates the space and confirms, legalizes, even "blesses" the co-habitation.

In this narration a sequence of episodes and characteristic elements are symbolic representations of the process of community constitution, contributing simultaneously to its territorial determination. The icon is brought outside the perimeter of Community territory, in an ambiguous site, in the location *Pristiliapi*, in the borders of the settlement Fetokos (Virgin Mary) and Aetomilitsa (Denisco), a village of Vlach cattle-breeders. The holy icon was discovered by an ambiguous person. In the collective memory the shepherd that spotted it, while herding the community flock, is a person with a special relation to the community, albeit not a member of entity.

All the inhabitants of the village participate in the icon carriage. At first, the icon is placed in the oldest church of Saint Athanassios, at the end of the village, in a location where many people believe that there was a monastery before the settlement was founded.

Then the icon is carried out in *Panagiopoula*, on the other edge of the village, relatively near to the location of Paljofsat - Paliochori (Old Village), one of the early settlement placements. The final site of the icon, the new church, is located in the conceivable centre of the residential place, in the form of a constituted community. The new church belongs to the community, contrary to the other churches that are placed provisionally as each of them is connected and maintained by a concrete family or kin. The participation of all the inhabitants in the construction of the new church symbolizes the new wider collectiveness that exceeds the kindred families (*soya*), including, of course, their own.

In this interpretation, the history of the holy icon, not only expresses the common identity but constitutes the fundamental community myth. Furthermore it's not by chance that it recommends the farthest limit, the origin in the community narration time. In contradiction to the personal life stories and the familial origins, and the myths related to particular places and incidents, most narrations for the Plikati as a collective entity

date “later” than the story of Holy icon. Before that there is no reference to Plikati as a concrete community, there are only references to scattered hamlets, familial settlements. Finally the inhabitants of the village built up on their own the new church that in fact proves their technical skills, signifies the cultural similarities with the other Stone Masson villages in the region, known as Mastorochoria.

The feast of Virgin Mary of Plikati is taken place each year on 16 February. Nowadays, a central place in the ceremony is given to the procession of the icon from the central church to the church of Panagiopoula, in the location that had been placed temporarily, according to the myth. The custom procession does not complete the encirclement of residential space, as another custom, so-called *ganiasma* (γκάνιασμα), *the ritual ploughing* for founding of a new village, takes place. However, the connection of the two holy places during the procession expresses the continuity and cohesion of community. The route the procession follows, from the central to the familial church, from the current village to the location of one of the early settlement placements, and its return to the central church, represents symbolically the process of settlement constitution and the creation of collective identity. The placement of the icon in its place in the central church renews ritually the consecration of the territory and confirms the mental cohesion of the community. The participation of all the inhabitants expresses the social cohesion and is confirmed ritually through the auction of the icon through the respective participation of all families.

Another significant point is the particular time of this performance in the annual festive circle, as it is connected with the circular time of community life. It is the period that the men of the village, builders in their majority, take a rest, to prepare for their new seasonal immigration.

Quite interesting is the story about the divine punishment of a Muslim that showed disrespect to the power of the icon of Holy Mary. This is considered a “practical proof” of the triumph of the Christian faith on the infidels, enforced simultaneously the communal identity. It is also important to note here that the last Muslim family that remained in the village until 1940s, as long as they lost their position as land owners, they also lost their distinctive religious identity: “*Sefkis* [the head of the Muslim family] *was almost Christian – he came frequently to the church and every year he slaughtered a lamp for the icon*”.

Conclusion

The story of Holy icon and its procession has played, in a different historical dimension, a fundamental role in the shelf identification, the identity of local people. The consecration of the space and the divine ratification of collective entity were, in the past years, decisive for the territorial and symbolic substance of the Christian population of community against the Muslim that controlled the village. First of all, in Plikati, those years the danger concerned the contestation of their space, their Community and their cultural entity.

Even now, under the pressure of modernity that led to the depopulation of the village and degradation of the traditional way of life, people still attempt to identify themselves with their home village. In fact, locality, as “*a means of claiming a distinct identity*”, constitutes a coherent frame of social, cultural reference and identification, as a response to social and cultural changes (Potiropoulos 2012, p. 204).

Deductively, in a world of movement, this oral narration, the ritual action and the symbolic practices form finally the content of the representations of “us”, determining substantially the local identity. Through memory and myth, the inhabitants of Plikati attempt to overcome the discontinuities in space and time, even in the post-modern era. Narrating their relationship with the place, in order to shape the contemporary social and cultural landscape of the community, they try to re-define their own distinguishable identity.

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