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Folk Traditions and the Church: Some Remarks

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Night was falling as we entered the church of the Annunciation in Gerakari, a lowland village a few kilometers outside Larissa, in Central Greece. The church is a late nineteenth-century building, with an old wooden ceiling and a rather simple iconostasis, but also with later additions, modern frescoes, a narthex with rabbeted wood and a brand-new stone-built shed on its south side. The old and the new coexist here, creating a whole that evades the purism of historians. In the Greek world, after all, such churches are considered new and are not treated as historical monuments. Vespers had ended, the priest had left; the church was celebrating, it was brightly lit, a group of young people in stylized Vlach costumes were dancing in the courtyard, obviously participating in the celebration on behalf of some local cultural association. In the cultural landscape of the past decades, the Church of Greece, and most, if not all, Eastern Orthodox Churches, obviously assume a role as protector and supporter of folk traditions and arts, and even of some somewhat vague "traditional values," a notion also recurring in recent years in Russia.[1] Starting from such observations, we attempt here to write down some questions arising from our fieldwork in Greece and Russia. We do not aim, of course, at a thorough study of the topic, we simply seek to provide some food for thought.

Those who have come into contact, even a little, with social anthropology and ethnography have faced questions about what, after all, tradition is. Hobsbawm has written wisely on the invention of traditions,[2] and if we follow Wittgenstein's thought, tradition is ultimately whatever we decide to call tradition. There is nothing concrete under this term, there is no explanation of phenomena; there are only understandings, as in all theoretical disciplines.[3] The Church itself follows a century long tradition of calling "tradition"—and even more "sacred"—all those things it does not want to discuss, or the origins of which it does not wish to reveal : the names of the Magi in Bethlehem, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the icons painted by the evangelist Luke, and hundreds of others. Once this is so, tradition is a blanket that covers unwanted—but often decisive—details. The term "folk" is similarly vague; Bohlman comes to the interesting conclusion that it is impossible to give a general definition of folk music,[4] and by extension of everything accepted as folk art.

Certainly, the flirtation of the Church with folk arts and traditions is a rather new phenomenon; or, at least, it increased significantly since the 1980s. In the past, the Church was wary of the folk element, even explicitly negative, but didn't give it much attention. This attitude was more or less mirrored by

[1] "The basis of the Social Concept" on the website of the Moscow Patriarchate, https://tinyurl.com/oldmospat

[2] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing traditions" in E. Hobsbawm & T. Renger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (University Press, 1983).

[3] Jeff Todd Titon, "Knowing fieldwork", in Gregory Barz & Timothy Cooley (eds), *Shadows in the field: New perspectives for fieldwork in ethnomusicology* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2008).

[4] Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988).

The creation of the woman from Adam's rib. Church of Saint Athanasius, Drakia, Pelion, 2024. The depiction of God the Creator as a transparent triangle with three eyes is of particular interest.

the older generation of folklorists, who seem to have been equally hesitant to touch ecclesiastical matters. As a simple example of the church's dislike of the folk element, we will mention the comment of the monk Zosimas Esphigmenitis about the festival of Agios Lavrentios on Mount Pelion, in the late nineteenth century: "immediately the local and bad-sounding instruments (the drum) come in [. . .] and thus the circular dance begins."[5] At this time, not only was interest in the "folk" element of religious practice absent from the Church, it was almost non-existent within scholarly thought until the eighteenth century, the era of ethnogenesis. It is Herder and Thoms[6] who first showed interest in the creations, habits, beliefs and perceptions of the broader masses, in an era when empires were collapsing and what was gradually coming to be understood as a nation began to demand its sovereignty and self-government. In fact, medieval literature—even the golden ages of the great Fathers of the Church—offer us the theological understandings of learned, highly educated authors, while the extent to which the masses would have come into contact with these written texts and thought remains uncertain; especially in an era when books, hand written, cost astronomical amounts of money. Did everyone believe exactly what the official Church taught? Could everyone hear—and understand—the liturgical texts in times when there were no loudspeakers?

A few years ago, Florentina Geller published a book documenting religious folk beliefs, with materials collected over several decades of field work in the regions of Bessarabia and Crimea.[7] Some of these traditions we had heard with our own ears in the region of Voronezh, Russia—they are truly unbelievable! For example, we had heard the narrative, also found in Geller's book, about chickens who dug with their feet and revealed the tomb of Christ to his enemies—therefore, chicken feet should not be eaten. Other folk beliefs recounted include theological explanations for the existence of hair in

[5] Zosimas Esfigmenitis, "Πανήγυρις εν Αγίω Λαυρεντίω", in *Prometheus*, 131 (1899), 338.

[6] For a short presentation of the approaches of Johann Gottfried von Herder, see Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*, (London & Sterling: Pluto, 2001), 10-11; for William John Thoms, see Duncan Emrich, "'Folk-Lore': William John Thoms", (*California Folklore Quarterly*, 5 (4), (1946): 355-374.

Three-headed (and six-handed) Christ, a depiction of the Holy Trinity. Church of Saint Nicholas, Drakia, Pelion, 2025.

human armpits and for the absence of menstruation in men, stories about the origin of Adam and Eve from mushrooms or from eggs, a tale about how the Virgin Mary hid the nails of the Crucifixion, and how the prophet Elijah will duel with the Devil "and drops of his blood will fall and burn the Earth." These are just a few examples of the many folk sayings that were collected and published in the above volume, fortunately without censure or "restorative" interventions.

Such stories obviously thrive in specific environments; when, for example, the central authority of the Church does not have the power to disseminate and impose its official narrative, or when the popular masses are cut off from the theological intellect, etc. The Soviet Union was a pretty suitable environment for such processes, but it is obvious that these beliefs are much older, reminding us that, in the pre-modern world, traditions demonstrate a much greater diversity than in our era of technologies, which ensure accuracy through mechanical recording and reproduction. In Greece, such testimonies can be found for church music as well, as for example in the early nineteenth century Xeropotamos codex 357, where the anonymous writer describes the creation of chanting traditions as "this is the way my teacher sang it; and someone else said, my teacher did not sing it this way, he sang it that way, and thus the blind led the blind…"[8] and obviously this is the case also in iconography, which preserves, *scripta Manent*, various unusual versions of the Christian narrative. We must confess that we rejoice in such images whenever we encounter them: the archangel Michael as a psychopomp, Herod judging Jesus before the Crucifixion, and the three-headed Jesus, as a depiction of the Holy Trinity,[9] are some of the most striking examples.

In Voronezh, a folklorist friend commented that recordings of folk chanting began in the late 1980s, when party control had begun to relax, but never became much of a priority. Interestingly, the recording of the ecclesiastical repertoire was included in the general recordings made of folk music, ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical, and often the devotional hymns were performed by the same performers who sang the secular songs, as is the case in many parts of the world. However, in the years that followed, the state-supported effort for a religious renaissance proved disastrous for local traditions, as priests often moved from place to place, filling vacant positions and bringing different musical idioms and customs, according either to the official narrative or to their personal perceptions. Our friend said that she has met several elderly people who remembered older

[7] Florentina Badalanova Geller, *Книга сущая в устах. Фольклорная Библия бессарабских и таврических болгар*. (Russian Foundation for Assistance to Education and Science, 2017).

[8] Grigoris Stathis, *Η εξήγησις της παλαιάς βυζαντινής σημειογραφία ς*, (Athens: Foundation for Byzantine Musicology, 1993 [1978]), 45.

[9] See Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, "Not So Unorthodox: A Reevaluation of Tricephalous Images of the Trinity", *Theological Studies 79* (2),(2018): 399-426.

The dog-headed Saint Christopher. Church of the Presentation of Mary, Metaxochori, Aghia, Greece, 2017. Such images may echo older beliefs about mythical beings.

versions of melodies and customs than those encountered now. In any case, "spiritual verses" recorded in various regions have been published, both as texts and as recordings, many of which deviate significantly from the official church narrative.[10] In Greece, some similar recordings were made by Melpo Merlier and in Cyprus by Fivos Anoyanakis; however, the deviations from the official Church narrative are lesser, implying that the Church in the Greek-speaking world had probably managed to cleanse many beliefs that did not coincide with its official teaching. There are also such "traditional" narratives that have been accepted and used by the Church, such as the one about the life of Lazarus after his resurrection.[11] Upon careful observation, however, it becomes clear that some beliefs and traditions, regardless of the theological beliefs to which they refer, exist in an ambivalent tension with the official Church. A well-known such example is the Anastenaria, the fire-walking ceremonies of Thrace. This tradition is clearly associated with the cult of saints, especially of Saints Constantine and Helena, but has never been openly accepted by the official Church.[12] Similarly, inter-religious customs still exist, such as the Muslim "qurban" that is held in many Greek villages on the feast of Saint George.[13] This reference to Saints George and Lazarus reminds us that the lives of the saints are another field where both popular and scholarly piety and imagination find a brilliant field of glory. Saint George is frequently depicted killing a dragon and saving the princess condemned to become its victim. Of course, such an event is not attested in any historical source, and it seems to be an Ottoman era addition.[14] The representation of Saint Demetrius is similar. The lives of the saints, already in late antiquity, were a field of exaggeration and material for catechism, a genre which rarely showed interest in historical accuracy or documentation; such stories aimed to offer pleasure to their reading public or audience, as well as spiritual guidance, and sometimes ended up sinking into a swamp of platitudes.[15]

Certainly the role of the theologian and the role of the ethnographer are not the same; yet, in the field of church life, these roles sometimes collide. The

[10] See for example T. F. Pukhovaya, T. V. Manukovskaya & A. A. Chernobayeva, *Чернобаева, Духовные стихи Воронежского края*, (Voronezh State University, 2011).

[11] Recorded and published by Anoyanakis in two variants, Fivos Anoyanakis (ed.), *Κύπρος: Δημοτική μουσική*, (Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation), 1988 (box with 7 LP's and book)).

[12] See for example Dimitris Xygalatas, "Ethnography, Historiography, and the Making of History in the Tradition of the Anastenaria", *History and Anthropology*, Vol. 22 (1), 2011, 57–74.

[13] Interview (2013) with the church chanter Vassilis Prassas (b. 1947) in Almyros, Greece, for his childhood in the nearby village of Agios Georgios Ferron.

[14] Recorded also as a folk ballad by Samuel Baud-Bovy and his colleagues. Samuel Baud-Bovy, *Μουσική καταγραφή στην Κρήτη, 1953-45*, Melpo Merlier Musical Folklore Archive, 2006 (box with 2 books and 2 CD's).

[15] For the evolution of the lives of saints as a form of literature through the centuries and some critique, see Cyril Mango, *Byzantium, The Empire of New Rome??* (: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), 248-250.

Feast of the Holy Trinity in the Church by the same name in Novaya Usman, Voronezhskay Oblast, Russia, 2006.

theologian is called upon to examine and document what is right as belief and as praxis, his role is regulatory; the ethnographer, on the contrary, must examine and record what is actually happening and the exact beliefs of the observed group. Often enough, not only do the findings of these two approaches fail to coincide, but even reveal beliefs held in diametrical opposition. Sometimes the Church manages to impose "correct belief"; other times, "the wrath of the people is the voice of God," and the popular view manages to gain the approval of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Yet at this point, we must not forget that ethnography—what was previously called folklore—also made attempts to restore "the tradition" in relation to ideologies, national but not only. This approach has now diminished, but has not disappeared. In Greece, lots of ethnographic research aimed at restoring the purity of the nation, and only with the fall of the military Junta, in 1974, did the door of inclusion gradually open for most, yet not all the ethnolinguistic groups. Since the mid-nineteenth century, a strong concern has persisted over possible impurities present in Greek church chant,[16] and in the contemporary language,[17] a concern that has shaped, to a great extent, modern Greek culture.

In Soviet Russia, official ethnography systematically ignored all religious issues, while for a number of years it attempted to create a pro-government "folk" art; later it turned towards the national narrative—years before the collapse of the Soviet Union—although its support from the state apparatus was and still is rather anemic. In any case, one can observe that ethnographers do not limit themselves to

[16] See the brief notes of Manolis K. Hatziyakoumis, *Χειρόγραφα εκκλησιαστικής μουσικής 1453-1820*, (National Bank Of Greece Cultural Foundation (M.I.E.T.), 1980, pp. 18-19.

[17] For a quick acquaintance with the adventures of the modern Greek language we would suggest the Wikipedia article, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katharevousa. As a detailed study, see Christos Karvounis, *Diglossie, Sprachideologie, Wertekonflikte. Zur Geschichte der neugriechischen Standardsprache 1780 bis 1930* (Böhlau-Verlag, 2016).

recording, but tend to create concrete genres with particular features, attributed to specific regions or periods. This process can be seen as a kind of parallel to what happens within the Church; it aims to restore what is seen as correct. The folklorists' interest in the past orients its field of research towards the realms of history and archaeology; however, we should not forget that ethnography deals first and foremost with the present, as the memories of the past never fully coincide with the real events and understandings of these earlier times. Here, Hobsbawm's thought about the invention of traditions is truly relevant.

Feast of the Holy Trinity in the Church by the same name in Novaya Usman, Voronezhskay Oblast, Russia, 2005.

Today, with the development of technology, the invention and imposition of traditions has become easier than ever. Schools of "Byzantine" painting and "Byzantine" music, organized by the Church itself, produce armies of imitators which avoid deviations from what is considered to be the correct ideal as far as they can. In Greece, "Byzantineness" has acquired the character of a dogma, eliminating personal creation, producing identical new churches—both in terms of visual arts and of ritual performance—and in many cases this "restored" church art is exported to other Orthodox countries. In contrast, the deviations that one encounters in popular expressions of iconography, chanting, and even faith itself, continue to offer a breath of liveliness to the ecclesiastical world. It remains to be seen whether they will continue to offer it in times when new technologies will, as it seems, become increasingly effective. ✠

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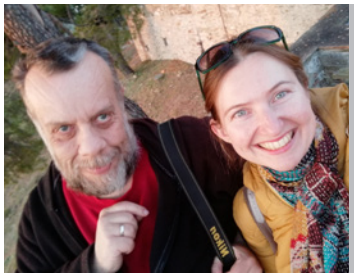

Olya Gluschenko and ***Costis Drygianakis*** met digitally in 2002 and physically in 2003. Photography is one of their common interests, along with cooking, animal nursing and collecting ceramics, while individual interests include music, eco-printing, gardening and anthropology. Since 2013, they have both been involved in the Volos Academy for Theological Studies.