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Cultures of Crisis in Southeast Europe
Part 2

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Cultures of Crisis in Southeast Europe

Part 2
Crises Related to
Natural Disasters, to Places and Spaces,
and to Identities

edited by

Klaus Roth and Asker Kartari

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Evacuating people from the village of Rast, district Dolj (on the Danube), Romania, during the flood of April 2006. Photo taken by the State Inspectorate for Emergencies (ISU) (cf. Ștefan Dorondel's article p. 11–32).

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Cultural Actions and Reactions of Localities The Case of the Mountain Villages of Tzoumerka in Greece of Crisis

Konstantina Bada, Ioannina

Abstract

The paper focusses on how the villagers of a mountainous region of Tzoumerka in Greece have dealt with and adapted to the inconsistencies and ruptures of post-civil war migration trends, a transition to capitalism and their integration in a modern market economy. It is indicatively reported that from the dramatic decade of the 1940s onwards, the tendency of rural exodus was a common outcome in most villages and a result of the region's desertification and cultural abandonment, which appeared a more or less accepted fact. It is understood, however, that this did not occur. On the contrary, behind the assimilative logic of capitalism, the mountain people appear not only to ensure the terms of survival, but also to develop, through the use of a continuous "tradition", their mountain culture and the identity of the locality. The vitality of both the region and the family is based on a number of foundational structures such as formal or informal institutions, attitudes and ways of life, shared memories, symbolic representations and meanings, realities, practices of cultural resistance and the area's means of adaptation, all of which form a very diverse social reality.

Introduction

Three years ago, members of the Matsouki Cultural Association, also known as "The Vyliza", along with residents of Matsouki, the small mountain community of the Tzoumerka area, visited the author at the University of Ioannina to express their interest and support concerning the implementation of a survey on the local traditions and cultural heritage of Tzoumerka, as well as the promotion and valorisation of their region. Their words, their arguments and their previous actions revealed that they were the agents of a lively everyday culture as active subjects in a crisis context. They are conscious social subjects taking part in a particular local mountainous culture endowed with a cultural identity and potential. Moreover, they claim recognition and are willing to assume an active role in the transformation of the terms of their present condition, especially in the current context of the severe financial crisis witnessed in Greece. The dynamic and active presence of the locals and mountaineers is testified in the present day

context by the successful restoration of the old Monastery of the Virgin Mary (Panagia) of Vylizas (Kalousios 1992), which took place with the intervention of the local associations, which compensated for the flaws of the official cultural and political instances. Thanks to the actions of the aforementioned members of the “The Vyliza” Cultural Association and other fellow mountaineers who relied on a relative autonomy and self-sufficiency granted by the local associations as well as collective and long-term voluntary work that gathered financial and other resources, the monastery and its surroundings have been restored and accommodation facilities for visitors developed (the monastery stands on a steep slope of the Kritharia mountain¹ and can be reached only on foot). They also secured the conservation of the religious icons and the establishment of a space for the museum inside the village (Merantzias 2012),² the organization of a library, the digitization of rare manuscripts³ made available for research (Kalousios 2009). I considered the inner local potential of this mountainous village (Kalousios 1994) – hitherto unknown to me in the field of research – as a positive omen. In the spring of 2012, along with my postgraduate student, I initiated the fieldwork in the Matsouki village and other closed communities. The main purpose of the research was to investigate and then present on the cultural digital map the cultural data that demonstrate Tzoumerka’s local profile. What became evident during our research project was that over time the inhabitants of the village developed a multidimensional model based on the rational use of natural resources. They had gradually established a dialectic relationship consistent with the mountainous features of the area. These same features imposed a sense of mobility and mutual dependence among the various groups (ethnic/professional) who shared the same area. Our findings also demonstrate the reality of a communal and mutually dependent culture that prevails in this mountainous area, while revealing at the same time its local, ethnic and cultural characteristics. This mountainous society is essentially defined by sheep grazing, agriculture,

¹ The Monastery of the Annunciation of the Virgin in Vyliza at Matsouki, as befits the Albanian-origin place name “Vyliza”, stands on a fortified and elevated position, 973 metres above sea level [39°34’01.42’’N/21°08’42.68’’E] on the slopes of the Kritharia Mountain and at the junction of three rivulets joining the Arachthos River.

² The 58 post-Byzantine icons of the Vyliza Monastery cover the period between the 15th and early 20th centuries and include works by great Cretan School painters or their workshops active in the Ionian Islands and Italy, for example Damaskenos and Emmanuel Tzannes.

³ Theological, ecclesiastical and secular manuscripts from the rich library that is likely to have existed in the Monastery of Vyliza, survive to this day. They include fourteen codices that Spyridon Lambros moved to the National Library of Greece (accession numbers 1902–1925), and a late-14th century theological codex now kept at Matsouki Library. This sample is indicative of a rich manuscript tradition that found its way into the monastery through different routes.

handicraft manufacturing, trade and craftsmanship. Work conditions complied with traditional, pre-capitalist institutions and relations and continued as such until the 19th century.

The field work and the research as a whole were carried out under the rubric of a research project titled “Researching and Disseminating the Local Cultural Aspects of Tzoumerka (15th–20th centuries): Digitizing the Region’s Cultural Reserve”. The above project was co-financed by the European Union (European Regional Development Fund) and Greek national funds through the Operational Program “Thessaly – Mainland Greece and Epirus 2007–2013” of the National Strategic Reference Framework (2007–2013).

The research data have been recorded in a custom-made database and on an interactive, online cultural map that may easily be updated. In fact, both the database and cultural digital map aim to preserve the region’s traditions and cultural heritage, and to directly disseminate the cultural data that we collected for instructive and research purposes, for a broader audience. The online content includes recordings (written, visual, audio), research studies, the digitization and promotion of Tzoumerka’s culture and cultural heritage, and information on the cultural reserve of the area (<http://tzoumerka.project.uoi.gr>). It also includes two well documented cultural routes⁴ designed to promote the region’s cultural heritage through cultural tourism. The cultural routes are depicted on a digital map in order to contribute to the region’s sustainable and local development plan.

The study of the local culture of Tzoumerkon was based on a multidisciplinary approach and was achieved thanks to the collaboration of a diverse group of professionals. The collection and analysis of the material so far is based on lo-

⁴ The first cultural route is centred on the Devotion to the Virgin Mary (Panagia). It focusses on the worship of the Virgin Mary as a figure of reassurance. For locals, the figure performs a variety of roles, which hold different meanings depending on the occasion. This route leads to a substantial number of monasteries and churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary, who is honoured with religious and popular celebrations (e. g. festivals). The monastic architecture, iconography and sculpted sanctuaries are irrefutable evidence of a prosperous and long-standing culture. They reveal the deep religiosity of the people and their worship of the Virgin Mary, albeit mainly as a mother figure. The second route’s central theme focusses on stone structures related to water. It refers to the local population’s perseverance in their struggle for survival. Nonetheless, this struggle developed a balanced, dialectical relation with the mountainous natural environment. Resources are used with respect to nature’s capacity for sustainability. By sharing a common place and blessed with an endless supply of water, skilled craftsmen built stone structures for various uses (e.g. water mills, water basins, fountains) and a means of communication (e.g. stone bridges). These craftsmen used pre-industrial techniques and materials supplied by the environment, and originally hailed from specific settlements of Tzoumerka known for their skilled craftsmen (e.g. Pramanta, Ktistades, Michalitsi, Houliarades etc).

cal ethnographic and archaeological research, individuals' real experiences and memories of the place, written evidence, local literature, folklore collections, photographs and other relevant material found in archives, private and museum collections. It is important to note that we define and understand culture as a whole. In other words, culture as we understand it includes all aspects of human life (i. e., economy, society, cultural establishments). Rather than evolving separately, such aspects are interconnected.

Actions and reactions of localities

Social and anthropological research on the agricultural world was mainly based on approaches concerning the insertion procedure of the peasant and the agricultural community into capitalist economy and society as a whole. In part, it also concerned the study of the way in which rural societies react, manage and influence the assimilation procedures in modernization, and the continuities sections and the ruptures (such as the economic crisis). Thus, the fundamental aim of this article is to study how the local and economic, social and political dimensions co-exist and tend to transform the mountain people's terms and further means of insertion, which conflict with the prevalent way of thinking of the nationally predominant socio-economic system and its wider implications. The approach also concerns the members of the communities as active subjects and not as recipients of an assimilation policy, nor as collateral survivors depending on a broader social system. As such, the view put forward by Mendras in the 1960s concerning the extinction of the villagers and local traditions and the desertification and deculturalization of the villages did not prove to be absolutely true in Greece during the last decades (Mendras 1967). On the contrary, rural sociologists have shown that although the Greek villager has accepted his insertion in society in a broader sense, he attempts to manage the terms of this insertion mainly by using his local culture, his familiar social structures and interpersonal relations which he extends to the urban space through his social activities and cultural experience. Stathis Damianakos in particular holds that the Greek villager – and perhaps Greek agriculture in general – differ perceptibly from the western European model, because of the particularity of national capitalism. It was inside this national capitalism that a mode of organization of production was developed as a socio-economic reality (Damianakos 1996). In his view, the Greek villager is “a particularity within a particularity”, a social subject that has developed a tradition of resistance to the processes of incorporation that centralized power and capitalism attempt to impose. In this view and approach Damianakos refers to the “triumph of the villager”, in contrast to Mendras, who refers to “the end of the villager” (Zakopoulou 2008: 35).

The mountainous culture

The region of Tzoumerka lies in the central southern part of the Pindos mountain range, while its borders are defined by two rivers. The Arachthos River lies to the west and the Acheloos River is situated east of the region. From a geomorphological perspective, it is a mountainous region whose largest section belongs to the Epirus Region, which has been classified as one of the most disadvantaged regions of Greece and the EU. The territory consists of 47 communities that stretch along the Pindos mountain range, at an altitude reaching 1400 metres (Philos 2000, Nitsiakos 1998). From an administrative point of view the above communities are governed by the prefectures of Ioannina,⁵ Arta and Trikala. Despite the region's aforementioned administrative division in the past and present, the feeling and awareness of belonging to an anthropo-geographic and cultural unity is strong and shapes the lives of individuals. The reality of a communal and mutually dependent culture in this mountainous area reveals at once its local, ethnic, professional and cultural characteristics. A case in point are the Vlachs⁶, who live in the villages of Syrako, Kalarytes, Matsouki, Bathipedo and Palaiohori. Until the last two decades of the 19th century, the Vlachs were perhaps the most prominent settlers in the entire region, thriving on livestock and commercial and manufacturing activities. Another group were the livestock- farming nomads, the Sarakatsani⁷ (Campbell 1973) who, after their

⁵ Our research is concentrated on the communities of the Ioannina Prefecture.

⁶ The Vlachs (Greek: Βλάχοι) are an ethno-cultural group found across the Greek territory. In the course of time, this group has developed a distinct cultural identity that is chiefly based on the development of a mountain culture, on mobility, on trans-border communication, and on the usage of what is a fundamentally Romance language. The Vlachs originally inhabited regions with a high altitude, in Pindos, Vermio, Olympos, and mountainous Thrace. Later, a large section of the population moved from the aforementioned areas to Euboea, Mainland Greece, and the Peloponnese. The main production activity of the group was nomadic or semi-nomadic livestock rearing. However, in the given socio-economic circumstances of the 18th-19th centuries, they engaged with manufacturing and trade (long-distance trade in particular). In the context of the process of modernization and the disintegration that the latter brought about for the rural world, the Vlachs of the mountain areas gradually settled in urban centres or migrated abroad; their cultural identity, largely distinct until the postwar era, was assimilated. It is noted that similar ethno-cultural groups also consist of Vlachs from the Balkan Peninsula. Their presence is more intensely felt in the Southern Balkans (Albania, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia [FYROM], Bulgaria, Romania, and elsewhere). From the 19th century onwards, the question of the Vlachs became a question of ethnic and political tensions between the Balkan states, but also within them.

⁷ The Sarakatsani (Greek: Σαρακατσάνοι) are an ethnic Greek group (they speak Greek, and their social institutions, values and customs are Greek) who were traditionally transhu-

compulsory naturalization between 1929 and 1930, opted to become members of other communities. The majority of the villages was held by the inhabitants of other villages whose main occupation was also livestock farming and a small-scale agriculture. Beyond the aforementioned differentiations, over time the inhabitants developed a multidimensional model relying on the rational use of natural resources, that was based on the dialectic relationship consistent with the mountainous features of the area. The terms of production output in the hinterland society of Tzoumerka are primarily defined by sheep grazing (nomadic or semi-nomadic, see Karatzenis 1991) and complementary agriculture. Besides sheep grazing, domestic rearing (the ownership and handling of a small number of animals) provided the required staples. These animals were deemed necessary to ensure the provision of basic food items (e. g. milk, cheese, meat and fat) and were also used for agricultural tasks that covered the nutritional needs of families and the animals themselves. For horticulture, greens were cultivated in a specially designated area near the courtyard or at the periphery of settlements, complementing the existing yield. As stated earlier, to supplement these main activities, the communities of the Vlachs developed the small family enterprise and the commerce of wool fabrics, as in Syrako (Kautantzoglou 1997), and other products like handmade silver products in Kalarytes (Bada 2014: 53–68). In this manner they reached the wider market. During the Ottoman Empire⁸ in particular, these communities were ruled by the system of “privileges”. The village known as “Kalarytes” is the seat of the “privileged” communities of the Malakasis area. As nomads, the Kalarytes benefited from tax exemptions and privileges, as these came into force within the social scheme of the Ottoman Empire, gradually transforming the terms of the development of a sound mechanism of local administrative autonomy.

mant shepherds in continental Greece. In the Post-war period, most Sarakatsani abandoned their transhumant lifestyle and were urbanised, to a significant degree. It is noted that the Sarakatsani also display a significant presence in neighbouring Bulgaria, southern Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Under the emergence of the different Balkan nationalities, the presence of the Sarakatsani in the Balkan Peninsula produced, as with other similar groups, many and varying theories as regards their origins. More analytically, before and after the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), folklorists, historians and others, used their patriotic inventiveness to provide ethnological and historical evidence to advance or validate their various national frontiers, in areas which, under the unity imposed by the Byzantine and Ottoman empires, had become an inextricable patchwork of different ethnic and religious groups.

⁸ Their integration into the Greek state gradually started in 1881 when Arta became part of the Greek state and the Arachthos River became a defining border. This resulted in neighbouring communities such as those of Syrako and Kalarytes being on opposite ends of the border line.

The inhabitants of other villages developed a broad range of technical skills and activities (builders, woodcutters, charcoal burners, painters and mule owners) working inside the Tzoumerka area but also across the Greek territory.

The family as a main unit of production and reproduction

The organization of production and reproduction is mainly managed by the family and based on the family self-owned small enterprise and its exploitation. It must be stressed that the basic agent of production and the economy consists of the small family business (Damianakos 1999: 31–36; Kasimis, Louloudis 1999: 11–31; Damianakos 2002: 11–44). The latter finds its viability in the participation and support of wider family ties and other networks, cultural factors and values. Individual lives are lived interdependently, embedded in a network of shared relationships. For those who live in the same household, the interconnection of the lives of family members is undoubtedly strong. With an individual family member leaving one stage of life and entering another, family members act collectively to make adjustments according to associated changes in individual and family needs. The multi-activity of members of the mountain family also constitutes a practice that contributes to the preservation of the rural household. The economic and social role of the family proves that the economy, as perceived by capitalism, is not the absolute regulatory factor of social relations and transformation. The family and the social groups or the micro-societies, are in fact the bearers of the transformations and management of the crisis, as they rely on a sound familiar cultural background that is based on sustainable experience and memory. As a collectivity they manage to invent ad hoc ways of survival and insertion. An obvious example is the enlarged network of kinship that handles the transformation and the commerce of products derived from cattle breeding (e. g. dairy products). During certain periods, economic, historical and other factors restricted the terms of self-sufficiency. In this case, the main practice was the emigration of the young members of the family for gathering sources of income for the survival of the family and the conservation of its small-sized property.

The processes of incorporation and integration of the mountainous world in the nation and capitalism (Psichogios et al. 1987), and the inclusion of the hinterland and its local communities into a global society, led to a breakdown in the social institutions that once defined the mountainous world of Tzoumerka. The region's gradual abandonment consequently gave way to a marginalised local cultural system. Following the dramatic decade of the 1940s, internal and external trends of migration (Kayser et al. 1976) were almost universally found in most of Tzoumerka's settlements. Until approximately the 1990s, the demo-

graphic and social characteristics of the area were marked by the gradual population flows triggered by emigration and immigration, the deteriorating age structure of the population and lowered living standards. More analytically, the main characteristic of the economy was the low degree of economic density of the territory, the high level of unemployment, high production costs, the low degree of infrastructure, associated with various forms of restricted access to the market.

Nevertheless, our empirical research demonstrates that the endogenous power and culture of the local communities of Tzoumerka tend to show resistance against the established procedure of their assimilation. The tendency is merely due to the actuation of the always present internal dynamic and adaptation skills of the mountainous societies, rather than to a mountain development policy as such, although some promising results are reinforced by the national and, perhaps to a larger extent, the European policy of sustainable development, the valorisation of the local potential (implemented after 1990), as well as through the process of regionalisation⁹ (Bada 2003a: 195–202). Using the family and its member, the familiar practices of multi-activity, mobility, and interpersonal relationships, they succeeded in surviving and in some cases the population even saw an increase. The increase in population in the villages of North Tzoumerkon observed in the latest official census constitutes a clue as to the new tension (Kotzamanis 2012, Duquenne 2012: 2).

The mountain localities and their cultural identities in urban centres

At this point it is relevant to stress that the mountain villagers' strength is also reproduced in the urban centres, given that the established villager has maintained strong ties and relations with their place of birth. Such ties are expressed through rich networks of economic exchanges, as well as existing social and political relationships between the people of the mountainous countryside and those of urban centres. Moreover, in previous years, a new form of "rurality" has come into being, meaning that the agricultural space is also used by other tenders and users as well as by "returnees" to their village of origin.

The sense of co-belonging in a collectivity establishes and builds cohesive relationships through real and symbolic acts. Consequently, in the city's outskirts new "imaginary" communities were established, largely based on a construed past and on the need to protect one's culture. Cultural associations, unions,

⁹ The nation is not the only territorial unit of identification. The Regions and the localities play an important role as well, especially those that look back on traditions that differ from those of the national state.

brotherhoods, and other organizations are established in an attempt to reproduce cohesive relationships among their members, by deploying a wide range of activities in their village. They organize, say, for cultural events, conferences, reunions, creating local museums and acting for the protection of the environment.

The internal power is yet more recognizable in the tendency to strive for rational and qualitative management of the natural and cultural environment, at a different degree and pace for each community. Besides, the socioeconomic reality of some villages or, better, some ethno-occupational groups, still depends on the practice of ecological adaptation. The producing activity of livestock, for instance, continues to be, to a certain extent, the main activity of production. As a complementary activity, the villages seek to invest in sustainable tourism by taking advantage of supportive action offered in this field (Bada 2003b, Kokkosis et al. 2011: 54–71). Specifically, agro-tourist resorts have been developed in certain villages (Syrako, Kalarytes, Pramanta), and certain local products are offered on sale. In general, these activities seek to strike a balance between the present reality and the cultural and natural character of a region. Tourism and the recently established practice of migrants to return to their homeland during the summer create the conditions for satisfactory employment. A considerable number of workers from Albania, specialized in building with stone, are permanently or temporarily employed in the restoration of old buildings or the construction of new ones, and make up the main or auxiliary staff of tourist and other businesses (e. g. cattle breeding and wood-cutting). Some villages, like Matsouki, exhibit a strong cultural activity, which covers the existing cultural gap, as shown by studies in agricultural communities during the 1960s (Mendras 1956: 50). Individuals and cultural unions appear to undertake creative initiatives aiming at the preservation and sustainable management of the local cultural heritage. It may be observed that despite the restricted implementation of any national or regional planning of the local cultural development policy, the locals themselves are a source of innovation, initiative, and action, all of which are in tune with the valorisation of symbolic/cultural resources held by the area and with their insertion in the course of the production cycle for the benefit of the public interest and the sustainable cultural development of the country.

Conclusions

The research therefore identifies a local, yet durable mountainous culture that has been scarred, fractured, and disrupted, but has survived thanks to the harmonious relationship that its people have developed with the environment over the course of time. It also survives thanks to a vivid and ongoing tradition where family, relatives, community networks and wider social relationships

have been built on productive and economic alliances. Such conditions have created a unique means of integration into the wider society and economy. The individual and the group have adapted to these socio-economic conditions and to the familiar reality of mobility. The latter was prescribed primarily by the need to tend to a mobile livestock which was also the region's main productive activity. Over time, it evolved just like the place's social, economic and cultural relations, giving way to a social adaptation and integration process in the wider society and market economy. This is ultimately a culture that relies on complex relationships between the local, national, and global while highlighting the different ways in which such relationships are integral to a context of "traditional" small-scale places.

The data shows that as early as the 18th century, the villagers of Tzoumerka have developed a degree of mobility and adaptability, features that enabled them to correspond to a worldly market economy and society, while retaining their own distinct cultural identities. Their integration is not restricted to the economy: they are also partially integrated in society, engaging with larger groups in a number of ways, while maintaining their own social customs and norms.

Finally, the results of this survey on the mountainous region of Tzoumerka, Epirus, reinforce the view already put forward by rural sociologists and anthropologists, which holds that the Greek villager and the rural community are not merely the recipients of an assimilationist policy or collateral survivors of the system, but are rather active and implicated subjects who react by addressing and displaying resistance to existing problems. They adapt to modernity and change in the sense that they are neither passive subjects of central policies or economic choices nor mere "agents of production". On the contrary, by investing in their social and cultural experience as an individual, family member, or member of a social group, and by inventing unconventional ways of adapting, the countryman endeavours to manage the terms of their insertion in the outside world. It might generally be said that the specific features of rural society, as defined by Redfield (1956), are encountered in these specific communities. The relative autonomy, the financial self-sufficiency, the predominant role played by the family group in the financial and social organization of the community, the mutual acquaintance that characterizes and influences the relationships in the community, the interaction between the community and the surrounding society or between local and central authorities managed by the local political authorities, the cultural associations and other federations, all contribute to these features.

Moreover, this attitude of the villager could explain, to a certain extent, why Greek society is resistant to the severe financial crisis witnessed in the country in the last years.

The survey has also demonstrated the following dichotomies: agricultural/urban space, closed/open community, stability/mobility, local/global society. The last is perhaps the less certain, as the local and rural dimension seem to be very resistant and have the potential to impact on society as a whole. In any case, the relation of the local agricultural community to the surrounding world does not appear as a one-way relationship, but rather as being dialectical and certainly conflicting, following Stathis Damianakos, considering that these established relations are at once relations of insertion and rejection. Even though the author does not entirely share Damianakos' view on the triumph of the villager, I can undoubtedly refer to their resolute and challenging presence.

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