Who Owns Carnival? Festive Tradition and Social Stratification in a Contemporary Greek Community

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I attempt to shed light on the complex relationship between class stratification and carnival performances in Agiasos, a mountainous village located on the Greek island of Lesbos. Rooted in fertility rites, early twentieth-century carnival there featured a collision of worldviews and attitudes between the “haves” of the village—landowners with strong links to the Church of Holy Mary, that is, one of the most important pilgrimage sites of the Aegean Sea—and the “have-nots,” the working class of the village. Following a turbulent period marked by World War II (1939–45), the Greek Civil War (1943–49), and military rule (1969–74), the return to democracy was marked by the emergence of a new white-collar class, consisting of people with academic titles who set about to create and manage popular culture. As a result, the carnival community became informally divided between manual laborers and “the creative class,” the latter of whom appointed themselves the “guardians” of carnival tradition, dictating the terms under which the ritual should be performed. Based on fieldwork carried out in the village of Agiasos, this essay highlights the way the economic elite of Agiasos has been using carnival performances to exclude undesirable, unruly individuals from the village.

1. See Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Rural Settlement of Refugees 1922–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).
2. Stratis Kolaxizelis, *Legends and History of Agiasos of the Island of Lesbos* [in Greek], photomechanical reprint of 1947 edition (Athens: Agiasos Association, 1997), 186.
3. Anthony Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society," in *Reflexive Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, ed. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).
4. See James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1990 [1890]); and Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1959).
5. In Don Handelman's taxonomy, carnival is described as "an event of re-presentation," meaning a festival which, unlike "events of presentation," involves flexible forms of organization, encourages participation, remains unstable and unpredictable, and can thus turn into an "arena of confrontation." Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
6. Alessandro Testa, "Rethinking the Festival: Power and Politics," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 26 (2014): 66.
7. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 122.

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Introduction

This essay focuses on the carnival festivities organized in Agiasos, a village located on the North Aegean island of Lesbos, Greece. Located twenty kilometers away from the sea, it is relatively isolated from other rural communities on the island. Owing to its mountainous terrain (it sits at the foot of Mount Olympos), and to land distribution reforms dating from the 1920s,¹ the village's population consists mainly of small farmers engaged in olive cultivation or stockbreeding who supplement their income with other, nonrural activities.

Carnival has been celebrated in Agiasos since the eighteenth century, though performances took their current form in the 1930s.² Its central feature is the *satira*, satirical poems using iambic fifteen-syllable verse (*dekapentasyllavos*), that is, the meter of most Greek traditional oral poetry. These compositions usually reference social relations inside the community and political events at the national and international scale. *Satira* express beliefs and views long established in the collective conscience and are characterized by both radicalism in their general worldview and conservative attitudes towards everyday-life questions, such as gender and intergenerational relationships.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the way social stratification has been reflected in carnival from the pre–World War I period to today, and how it has affected both the content of satirical verses and the organization of carnival performances. Adopting a Bakhtinian perspective on carnival and culture, it tries to explore how literacy and school education in particular have complexified the relation between social class and cultural integration. It also relies on Anthony Giddens's concept of "guardians of tradition" to show that tradition may be utilized to correct and exclude.³

On Carnival and Social Class

In Europe, carnivalesque events (which date back to the tenth century BCE⁴) have played a major role in the construction of communities. Given the relative freedom of expression they grant performers, they have often been used to "re-present" social relations and even class or racial conflict.⁵ Alessandro Testa notes that "festivals are obviously charged with tensions embedded in social expectations, political claims, religious passions," tensions that can either support or destabilize "the hegemonic order and its functional imaginaries."⁶

In the Middle Ages carnival was a time for temporary reversal, when the popular worldview—about human relations, about the nature of power and of the divine—prevailed over that of the political, economic, and religious elites. As Mikhail Bakhtin explained in his magnum opus, "the historically determined culture of folk humor ... was not opposed to all seriousness in general. It was opposed to the intolerant, dogmatic seriousness of the Church, which also presented a historically determined form."⁷ Carnival's joy and liberty preceded and contrasted with the austerity of Lent and with the Christian perception of the human body.

8. Ibid., 394.

9. Tony Bennett, "Popular Culture and the Turn to Gramsci," *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 94.

10. Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 109.

11. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1981).

12. Abner Cohen, *Masquerade Politics: Explorations in the Structure of Urban Cultural Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3.

13. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 34.

14. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 3, italics mine.

Bakhtin described medieval and early Renaissance carnival as the unhindered, liberating, and catalytic expression of the oppressed and highlighted its inversive, rebellious, nonhierarchical, and subversive nature. The basic element of medieval carnival culture, according to him, was folk laughter, that is, a festive, universal, ambiguous, and derisive form of laughter based in the language of the "lower body," a grotesque version of the ideas and symbols of the dominant culture.⁸

Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci described popular culture as a privileged field of conflict between hegemonic and popular beliefs and worldviews, "a force field of relations shaped precisely by these by contradictory pressures and tendencies."⁹ Gramsci's theories largely contributed to the emergence of cultural studies as an academic field following the end of World War II, refocusing the study of culture on its contentious political dimension.

Other scholars have stressed that rites of reversal, while an obvious manifestation of protest against the established order, serve as a form of safety valve through which subordinated groups can let off steam and then, relieved, return to their everyday life of inequality and injustice. The anthropologist Max Gluckman thus analyzed carnival rites as "intended to preserve and strengthen the established order,"¹⁰ an interpretation backed by Terry Eagleton: "Carnival, after all, is ... a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively intellectual as a revolutionary work of art."¹¹ In his introduction to *Masquerade Politics*, Abner Cohen similarly stated that "every major carnival is precariously poised between the affirmation of the established order and its rejection."¹²

Adopting a sociological approach, Pierre Bourdieu pointed out the connection between popular culture and social class. He distinguished between high-bourgeois and low-popular culture in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, contrasting bourgeois courtesy, "a distancing, inherent in the calculated coldness of all formal exploration, a refusal to communicate concealed at the heart of the communication itself ... whose impeccable formalism is a permanent warning against the temptation of familiarity," with the "expressiveness of popular language" resulting in the assumption that different forms of popular art please working-class audiences as "they satisfy the taste and sense of revelry, the plain speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties."¹³ However, it was E. P. Thompson who really provided a cultural dimension to the concept of social class in his monumental work *The Making of the English Working Class*, from which the definition below is extracted:

Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. *Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms.* If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.¹⁴

The expression of class claims through popular culture was an issue that troubled the Soviet Communist Party in the postrevolutionary Soviet Union, as its predominantly rural population

15. Felix J. Oinas, "Folklore Activities in Russia," *The Journal of American Folklore* 74, no. 294 (1961): 362.

16. Maxim Gorky, Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, Andrey Zhdanov et al., *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977).

17. Yiannis Zaimakis, "'Forbidden Fruits' and the Communist Paradise: Marxist Thinking on Greekness and Class in Rebetika," *Music and Politics* 4, no. 1 (2010): 1–25.

18. James H. Satterwhite, *Varieties of Marxist Humanism: Philosophical Revision in Postwar Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 171.

19. "Tradition involves 'formulaic truth,' to which only certain persons have full access.... Tradition is unthinkable without guardians, because the guardians have privileged access to truth; truth cannot be demonstrated save in so far as it is manifest in the interpretations and practices of the guardians." Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society," 64, 79.

20. Ibid., 104.

21. Cohen, *Masquerade Politics*, 8.

22. See Kathryn E. Holland Braund, "Guardians of Tradition and Handmaidens to Change: Women's Roles in Creek Economic and Social Life during the Eighteenth Century," *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1990):

had a rich legacy of folk forms, notably tales and music.¹⁵ At first, Communist intellectuals treated popular culture with some reservations, as they considered it connected to the old regime that had to "die." This posture radically changed in 1934 when Maxim Gorki stressed during the Soviet Writers' Congress that "the unwritten artistic compositions of the working people represented the sole organizer of their experience, the embodiment of ideas in imagery and the spur to the working energy of the collective body."¹⁶ The traditions of ordinary people and the social content of folk culture were now perceived by Marxist intellectuals as a sort of "secondary" resistance in the battle against ruling-class domination.¹⁷ The identity of the "new worker" would be based on popular, traditional culture, which would be molded according to socialist ideals.

Communist Parties asked people like Gorky to formulate and disseminate the principles of class struggle among the masses. Writing about the role of these "edifiers of the masses" in ex-Communist regimes, Czechoslovakian intellectual and academic Karel Kosík would later lament that "'edification' became here 'mystification,'"¹⁸ meaning the creation of a false consciousness. In a way, edifiers were the prototypes of the "guardians of tradition," a term introduced by Giddens to discuss the normative power some people have over what should or should not be thought and done.¹⁹ The party's edifiers were thought to have access to "formulaic truth" and were charged with monitoring any deviation from it and deliver it intact to the generations to come. They provided for the accurate observance of some practices that took the form of rites.

This detour via the Soviet Union makes clear that tradition and its cultural forms are connected to power. Tradition "incorporates power relations and tends to naturalize them," Giddens writes.²⁰ Thus it is deeply political, in the same way that "the political is constantly expressed, articulated and objectified in terms of cultural forms and performances."²¹ The guardians of tradition determine the framework into which collective consciousness is constructed and they are entitled not only to have an opinion on "traditionality" but also to criticize, judge, and punish "transgressors." Though the term "guardians of tradition" has been employed in a variety of contexts,²² it has mostly been used by scholars writing about modernity. Esther Peeren has thus examined the role of the Carnival and Arts Committee in Notting Hill Carnival in "propagating a 'need for some formality' in the planning and execution of the Carnival."²³ In this sense the committee acted as the guardian of Afro-Caribbean carnival tradition in London, although the term was not used by Peeren.

In this essay I examine how political subjects may turn into guardians of tradition and thus exert an ideological "hegemony" based on their own, established conceptions of tradition and popular culture. The period under examination goes from 1936 to 2008. It was marked by both international events such as World War II, which changed historical parameters globally, and local events such as the Greek Civil War (1946–49), the "Regime of the Colonels" (1967–74), and the return to democracy in 1974, which shaped modern Greek society. It was also marked by an increase in literacy. An education reform in 1976 made school attendance compulsory from the age of six and made education more accessible to a wider part of the population by replacing *katharevousa*, an artificial language based on ancient Greek, with *demotiki*, a popular language spoken by the majority of people.²⁴ As Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron argue, the efficacy of all pedagogic work depends on "the distance between the habitus it tends to inculcate" and "the habitus inculcated by all previous forms of pedagogic work and, ultimately, by the family."²⁵ Much

239–58; Judi Aubel, Ibrahima Touré, and Mamadou Diagne, “Senegalese Grandmothers Promote Improved Maternal and Child Nutrition Practices: The Guardians of Tradition Are not Averse to Change,” *Social Science & Medicine* 59, no. 5 (2004): 945–59; Amit Bein, *Ottoman Ulema, Turkish Republic: Agents of Change and Guardians of Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

23. Esther Peeren, “Carnival Politics and the Territory of the Street,” *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race* 14 (2007): 76.

24. On the long-lasting conflict between the supporters of *katharevousa* and the proponents of *demotiki*, which overlapped with an ideological struggle between conservatives and progressives, see Christos Katsikas and Kostas Therianos, *History of the Greek Education System: From the Establishment of the Greek State to 2004* [in Greek] (Athens: Savvalas, 2007).

25. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 72.

26. *Ibid.*, 115.

27. Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978), 266.

28. Unlike other carnival practices, *satira* was an exclusively male affair until almost the twenty-first century. Men are therefore the ones most able to narrate and explain their stances and choices. Furthermore, most of the young women who participate in carnival

like the French students evoked by Passeron and Bourdieu, Greek public school students had to learn “university Greek,” a “timeless amalgam of former states of the history of the[ir] language” which was quite removed from their mother tongue.²⁶ Literacy changed the class structure of many rural communities. Rather than “qualify manual and mental labor in different ways,” it came to “disqualify manual labor (to subjugate it) by only qualifying mental labor,” to use Nicos Poulantzas’s words.²⁷ This essay will consider the impact that this reinforcement of the manual/intellectual labor division had on carnival *satira*.

My research strategy and theoretical model are based on Bourdieu’s symbolic anthropology and theory of practice, combined with analytical tools used in cultural studies. I first studied the Carnival of Agiasos synchronically in 2007–8, then diachronically from the 1930s through the twenty-first century. My observations are based on the archives of Agiasos Anagnostirion (the village’s cultural center), on local newspapers, on the study of carnival *satiras*, and on participant observation, which took place mainly during the preparation and performance of carnival. Additionally, this paper uses material from open-ended interviews with seven male members of the carnival community²⁸ in order to explore the following research questions: (1) To what degree does literacy affect carnival performance, and particularly *satira* verses? (2) Why do the more highly educated members of the carnival community become “guardians of tradition” and get to decide the terms under which tradition is experienced? (3) Does not modern carnival promote exclusion, correctness, and punishment rather than *communitas*?

Agiasos and Its Carnival

Agiasos was first founded as a monastic community in the ninth century and its religious identity remains strong due to the omnipotent presence of the Church of Our Lady, the most important pilgrimage site of the North Aegean. The church lies in the central square of the village, the so-called marketplace (the designation, not common in Greek villages, evokes Bakhtin’s analysis about the birth of medieval carnival). It became a secular community in 1701 when it obtained a *firman*, an edict issued by Ottoman Sultan Mustafa II that exempted it from paying taxes. Due to that exemption, many newcomers settled on the steep slopes of the mountain, as the monastery monopolized the only plain in the area. The monastery’s commissioners demarcated the residential zone for newcomers, defining the limits between pious and savage, sacred and profane.

By the end of nineteenth century, industrialization had reached the island’s port towns. The circulation of products and commodities gradually connected local economies to regional and global networks.²⁹ Agiasos, as the second biggest settlement in Lesbos, experienced rapid economic growth due mostly to the development of a market for olive oil. As the village became larger and prosperous, newcomers who had settled on the outskirts of the monastery started to articulate their own discourse against the *kozambasides* (local notables) who negotiated with the Ottoman authorities. During carnival, the two different communities confronted each other, “constructing the same space at the same time into rival worlds.”³⁰ The dwellers of the mountainous part of the village descended to the monastery plain and celebrated by “forming bacchanalian parades and singing songs that praised male and female genitals.”³¹ Based on oral testimonies, local folklorist Stratis Kolaxizelis has proposed the following description of carnival celebrations in the village towards the end of nineteenth century: men and women dressing up,

festivities today are the offspring of old carnivalists, meaning that their views tend to coincide with those of their fathers. The place that women have occupied in Agiasos Carnival throughout its history has been thoroughly studied in Regina Zervou, "Women and Carnival Space: Gender and Carnival in a North Aegean Island Community," *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 25, no. 2 (2016): 73–93. The men interviewed for this article include: Yiannis, an aged carpenter who built and decorated the first carnival floats; Panis, a middle-aged carnival *satira* writer; Vasilis, a middle-aged wagger and the most popular living *satira* reciter and member of the Satyros Carnival Club; Antonis, an elderly, very popular *satira* writer; Giorgos, a carpenter who has twice written carnival *satira*; Dimitris, a middle-aged civil servant who writes and recites *satira*; and Raphael, an adolescent who participated in carnival once, in 2007.

29. Christos Bakalis, "Tobacco Networks in the Aegean Islands," *Advances in Historical Studies* 5 (2016): 63–79.

30. Peeren, "Carnival Politics and the Territory of the Street." Though referring to the racially divided United Kingdom, Peeren's remark perfectly applies to the class-divided society in the Christian villages under Ottoman rule.

31. Stratis Kolaxizelis, *Legends and History of Agiasos of the Island of Lesbos*, 186.

32. On nineteenth-century ritual performances and popular theater in the Balkans see Walter Puchner, *Popular Theater in*

gathering in houses, eating special food, singing *tripsimata* (typical, derisive carnival songs), and performing skits parodying birth, weddings, and funerals (as in many other parts of island and mainland Greece during that period).³² Carnival participants with the best voices would lead a small parade—*patinada*—that passed through the alleys of the village, heading toward the *kafeneions* (fig. 1).³³

Figure 1. A *patinada* winds its way up the streets of Agiasos, 2001. Courtesy of Agiasos Anagnostirion's digital archives.

Figure 2. Carnival battles, 2001. Courtesy of Agiasos Anagnostirion's digital archives.

Greece and in the Balkans [in Greek] (Athens: Patakis, 1989).

33. *Kafeneion*, the Greek “coffee shop,” has become an international term in ethnology, mostly due to the particular role it has played (and continues to play) in the construction of male identity in the Mediterranean societies.

In Agiasos it was also called *kouitouki*.

34. For a more detailed description of these modern institutions that emerged in traditional communities, see Stathis Damianakos, Ersi Zakopoulou, Charalambos Kasimis, and Vasilis Nitsiakos, *Authority, Work and Memory in Three Villages of Epirus. The Local Power of Survival* [in Greek] (Athens: Plethron/EKKE, 1997), 20–21.

35. *Agiasos*, the longest-lived among them, was published from April 19, 1931, to April 8, 1933, and published essays dealing with various social concerns. Its January 15, 1933, issue, for instance, featured an article titled “Hod for Proletarian Intellectuals.”

36. *Meraki* is one of those idiomatic words that are extremely hard to translate into other languages and cultural systems. It can mean love, passion, or longing, and is used in informal contexts.

37. Stratis Anastasellis, *My Friend Theofilos* [in Greek] (Athens: Keimena, 1981), 12–13.

Some years before the annexation of Lesbos by Greece in 1912, the lead singers started to wear helmets and people called them “Megalexandros” (Alexander the Great). In the early twentieth century jokers started to improvise verses mingled with the ones they read in magazines published by the Greek community in Istanbul, and they invented what came to be called *satira*, rhymed satirical verses. Mounted on donkeys and assisted by their respective *satira* writers, the best jokers gathered on the village marketplace and launched into “carnival battles.” They exchanged derisive verse, teasing each other, until one could no longer improvise rhymed jokes and the other was pronounced the winner. Following these changes in performance patterns, Agiasos Carnival started to attract a broader audience from rural Lesbos.

In 1894 a major event took place in the village: the establishment of Anagnostirion. Many cultural centers were concomitantly established in Lesbian villages and in other parts of Greece as well, a fact that has led Stathis Damianakos to challenge the notion that agricultural communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were as backward and committed to tradition as generally assumed.³⁴ The activities of these institutions resulted in a business, artistic, and literary boom in their respective communities. From a space in an ironmonger’s workshop where craftsmen gathered to read and talk about books and magazines, Anagnostirion soon turned into a meeting point for scholars who had traveled in Europe for business or studies, as well as people from lower classes, who participated in theatrical performances, music and choir classes, and literature workshops. In 1914, shortly after the island was annexed by Greece, it was recognized as a cultural association by the First Instance Court in Mytilene. During the interwar period all the progressive forces of the village community, that is, those who questioned the social status quo and promoted arguments for equality and justice, were members. Radical ideas seemed to flourish in this remote community of ten thousand inhabitants, a hypothesis supported by the considerable number of newspapers that dealt with topics related to the social situation of peasants, refugees, and soldiers of the Greco-Turkish War (1919–22).³⁵

In 1938, Agiasos Anagnostirion received a donation from an expatriate in the United States. As many of the organization’s members were carnival artists or participated in the theatrical plays performed at the center, the board decided to allocate the funds to the organization of an annual carnival competition named after the donor, Valians. The best *satira* writer and his carnival group would be rewarded and remunerated. The goal of Anagnostirion scholars was to strengthen carnival tradition, which they deemed to be a vital part of popular culture. The scholars who frequented the institution had visited Europe and were deeply influenced by progressive and Communist ideas that dominated both workers’ struggles and intellectual life. In his short treatise about the folk painter Theofilos, Stratis Anastasellis, a taxi driver who is also a *satira* writer, a member of the Communist Party, and a “popular scholar,” waxes lyrical about how popular culture expresses the lower social stratum’s worldview:

People’s passion (*meraki*³⁶) and love for beauty is the leaven that ekes art and mitigates life’s tartness.

People ... transmute their pain and aspirations into art, they can tell good from bad and impose the sustainable.

Popular music, our folk poetry, popular handicraft, all these join hands with everyday reality and mark our level of culture.... Popular art gifts people with the key to paradise.³⁷

The Anagnostirion board urged carnivalists to submit their satirical verses in writing. Crossing the barrier between orality and literacy embarrassed many *satira* writers, who were practically

38. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*, (London: Routledge, 1992).

39. When translating *satira* verses into English, I have tried to reflect the informal, vernacular nature of the originals.

40. *Lysistrata* is an ancient Greek comedy written by Aristophanes in 411 BC. The protagonist, Lysistrata, persuaded other women to abstain from sex in order to convince their husbands to stop the Peloponnesian War. She has often been seen as a feminist archetype.

illiterate. That obstacle was overcome when the board members allowed them to use the local idiom and to forgo established grammar, syntax, and spelling. In prewar *satiras* and those of the 1950s and 1960s, verses do not follow any of the rules of written language. This may be called a case of “literate orality,” a form of folk literature created orally by practically illiterate people, thus transcending Ruth Finnegan’s bipolar discussion of popular literature as either oral or written.³⁸ However, for the village community, *satira* remained a form of oral popular poetry, to be heard and not read.

Today, studying the *satiras* that can be found in the Agiasos Anagnostirion archives—the oldest of which dates from 1937—gives us insight into an oral tradition transcribed by those who created it. It also sheds light on the social conflicts and political tensions that pervaded the carnival celebrations. Through carnival verses, the “lower” stratum articulated their discourse and projected their worldview and values against those of the “upper” class, that is, the Greek Orthodox Church and its temporal representatives. The social groups that used carnival *satira* to make political claims did not remain the same over the twentieth century, however. They changed, much like the Greek countryside changed after World War II.

From a Carnival of the Poor to Petty-Bourgeois Carnival

Prewar carnival in Agiasos was the cardinal time and place for the lower stratum to take to the streets and direct satirical attacks at the community’s leaders, the *kotzabasides* that were also in charge of the monastery. In other words, it pitted the marketplace against the church. This contentious relation is depicted in some verses of the *satiras* that participated in the first Valian competition in 1937:

He who was born on the Sabbath
Lives a higher life in the village,
He who came out from noble crotch.
There are some kin
Who have free access to the church’s purse
When the nobles are on the lead
Everything is so different.

They’ve learned the tricks from their grandpas
How to rule the poor
And how to deal
With Holy Mary’s stuff.³⁹

In the 1940s a man disguised as a modern Lysistrata⁴⁰ took the carnival stage to defend women’s rights, while at the same time promoting a newly founded cooperative olive mill that would shake off the church’s feudal domination of the local economy:

Long live the cooperative
That makes wonders.
Up to now it has pressed
Six thousand *stamata* (local unit of measurement).

41. Quoted in Regina Zervou, "Agricultural Cooperatives as Expressed in Folk Culture," in *Agricultural Cooperatives in South and Central Europe, 19th–20th Century: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Helen Gardikas-Katsiadakis and Katerina Bregianni (Athens: Academy of Athens, 2013), 267–96.

42. Patras is the third-largest city in Greece. Situated on the west coast, it is strongly influenced by Italian culture and developed an important urban carnival in the nineteenth century, with big parades and floats. See Nikos Politis, *Patras Carnival* [in Greek] (Patras: Achaian Editions, 1987).

43. Even though Greece experimented with parliamentary democracy in the years that followed the Civil War, Communists were still persecuted and censorship of public discourse was common.

44. Giannis Hatzivasileiou, interview with Vasilis Vayanas, *Agiastos 10* (1982): 4.

45. Interview with Panis, Agiasos, February 20, 2007.

46. Interview with Vasilis, Agiasos, February 23, 2007.

47. Interview with Antonis, Mytilene, February 15, 2007.

If you want your accounts
To be all right,
Take your olives
To the cooperative.⁴¹

The competition ran for three consecutive years (1938–40) and then stopped until 1955. The Greek-Italian War of 1940–41, followed by the Nazi occupation of Greece (1941–44) and a devastating civil war (1945–49) stripped the village of its progressive citizens, as most Anagnostirion members—and many of the lower-class carnivalists—faced persecution as members of the Communist Party or fellow travelers. "Masks were forbidden in those days [during the Civil War]. Poverty. Even with the Germans we were poor, but we felt much freer. Then it was terror, torture, exile.... Those who made carnival were fugitives or in prison," Yiannis remembers.

The island's administrative authorities suspended all Anagnostirion activities in 1946. The center reopened in 1952 without its former, leftist members on the board. In 1955 the Valian contest was organized again on an annual basis and Agiasos Carnival became the biggest public event in Lesbos during the politically unstable decades of the 1960s and 1970s. After the war performances took place in Agiasos's central bus station. As carnivalists started to build large floats following western standards and emulating Patras Carnival,⁴² they needed a space bigger than the marketplace. Hundreds of people flocked to Agiasos to attend the festivities and hear the famous, caustic *satira* verses. At a time when radio receivers and newspapers were not yet commonplace in the Greek countryside, the inhabitants of other villages expected carnival participants to inform them of what had happened in Greece and in the rest of the world over the year. Moreover, they anticipated the comments by *satira* writers, who masterfully used allegory to transmit their hidden messages to their audience (figs. 3–7).⁴³

The sociological profile of carnivalists in the abovementioned period was fairly similar: they were toilers who patronized the *kafeneions* in the upper part of the village. They lived on land granted in 1701 to the newcomers who did not belong to the church community. They were what people today would call "simple people," based on their place in the economic and social hierarchy of the community and on their nonattendance at educational institutions. One of the iconic figures of Agiasos's pre- and postwar carnival, Vasilis Vayanas, explained in one interview: "My school knowledge was practically nonexistent. I didn't like school. I practically never went to school. I hardly finished elementary school. And then I was a herdsman for my father's cattle. At sixteen I carried stuff with my father's mule."⁴⁴

Even nowadays, members of the village carnival community and modern *satira* writers insist on the originality of elder carnivalists: "All these simple people were the protagonists of our popular culture. This does not refer only to carnival but to popular culture in general. They were practically illiterate but talented," Panis explained.⁴⁵ "Even now *satira* writers are ordinary people, illiterate toilers as Vasilis Vayanas was in his day. Antonis, our great *satira* writer, is a tailor. P. K. is a philologist, OK, but this is an exception," Vasilis confirmed.⁴⁶ Antonis, the living legend of Agiasos *satira*, summed up the argument as follows: "To write *satira*, you have to be human, you know, you have to be non-educated" (emphasis mine).⁴⁷

Figure 3. "The Explorers of the Jungle" carnival group, 1954. Courtesy of Agiasos Anagnostirion's digital archives.

Figure 4. "The Rocket" carnival group, 1958. Courtesy of Agiasos Anagnostirion's digital archives.

Figure 5. "The Delphic Oracle" carnival group, 1967. Courtesy of Agiasos Anagnostirion's digital archives.

Figure 6. Carnivalist Kostas Voulvoulis, dressed as an Indian fortune teller, parodies speeches by dictator Georgios Papadopoulos, 1971. Courtesy of Agiasos Anagnostirion's digital archives.

Figure 7. "Fasoula's Funeral," 1977. Courtesy of Agiasos Anagnostirion's digital archives.

This fact changed drastically after the return to democracy in 1974. In those times of political stability many village youths moved to different cities in Greece to enroll in college. The academic degrees and institutionalized knowledge they brought back home helped them join a different social class, the new "petty bourgeoisie" of civil servants. University degrees were "not intended to guarantee this or that specialist knowledge but rather to locate them in the camp of mental labor and its specific hierarchy," recalls Nicos Poulantzas.⁴⁸

Upon their return to their hometown, some of them—often the offspring of carnival families—started to get involved in the organization and performance of carnival rites. Even though they had mastered the written, scholarly language far better than their parents, they cherished and respected the "old carnival guard," deemed to embody authenticity. Their nonetheless different approach to traditional rituals led them to found a new carnival organization in 1984.

Satyros Carnival Club versus Anagnostirion: Manual versus Intellectual Labor?

On Ash Monday 1981, for the first time in fifteen years, carnival was not celebrated in Agiasos. According to Panis, a civil servant and carnival organizer who gave an extended lecture about the history of the festivities in 2004, "various organizational weaknesses ... impeded the custom."⁴⁹ That no carnival group submitted *satira* in order to claim the prize came as a shock to a community that considered carnival, along with the August 15th pilgrimage to the Church of Holy Mary, as its "brand." In the subsequent issue of the newly founded magazine *Agiasos*, which was published by villagers who had recently immigrated to Athens, columnist Stratis Vlastaris offered a solution to the crisis: carnival should be "weaned off" Anagnostirion in order to finally "come of age."⁵⁰ This would be achieved through the establishment of a club that would gather all members of the carnival community and take the lead in organizing festive performances.

48. Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, 268.

49. Panagiotis Koutskoudis, "The History of Agiasos Carnival," unedited text that was presented during the carnival festivities in the theater of Anagnostirion on February 21, 2004.

50. Stratis Vlastaris, "The Carnival today—The Crisis and Its Causes," *Agiasos* 7 (1981): 7–9.

51. Panagiotis Koutskoudis, "1989 Agiasos Carnival: Proposal for a Quality Upgrade," *Agiasos* 51 (1989): 9–11.

52. Ibid.

The argument for a carnival club testified to a shift in the local perception of popular culture. As a new petty-bourgeois class embarked on the task of modernizing Greek society, they set out to transform carnival into an impressive spectacle that would attract visitors. Popular culture became something to be consumed. In "1989 Agiasos Carnival: Proposal for a Quality Upgrade," a text published in a 1989 issue of *Agiasos*, Panagiotis Koutskoudis used terms like "symbolism" and "theatrical hero," a sure sign that an academic perspective now prevailed on what was used to be oral popular culture. His text ended this way: "*Satira* ... entertains and teaches or makes us think.... To achieve this goal, it must be fully understood by the public. This could be achieved by using a more common language, free of local idioms and foreign impurities."⁵¹ The reference to language use, which mirrored the instructions issued by high school teachers of the time, widened the gap between those who had access to higher education and could handle scholarly language and the manual laborers who could only express their worldview through the local idiom.

The Satyros Carnival Club was founded in 1984 as a private entity "responsible for the organization of Carnival performances, to the exclusion of other kind of activities.... Every city, every village in Greece had clubs with similar goals.... Founding a Carnival Cultural Club was an urgent necessity," the founders explained.⁵² At the club's first meetings a fruitful debate took place over the future of carnival and many decisions were made through democratic procedures. Indeed, in the first ten years following the establishment of the club, meetings of the board were very frequent, convening one to three times a month, and even more frequently before and during the carnival period (fig. 8). Civil servants cooperated with manual workers, although the former tended to monopolize administrative responsibilities and positions.

Over the years, however, the club's dynamism seemed to wane, until no carnival performances took place in the village at all in 1996. This led to a split within the club. Many of its members resigned from the board and started to collaborate with Anagnostirion instead. They initially co-organized a series of tributes to carnival history and later initiated a new festive event on the last Saturday of carnival. Held indoors, in the Anagnostirion hall, it took the form of a theatrical act, complete with *satira*. The older and more well-known carnivalists, who embodied the festival's history, soon followed them. As a result the Satyros Club was "left" in the hands of the wage-earners, who did not have access to institutional knowledge and had no experience in managing a club or in performing any of the following tasks: contacting other local agents and the state administration in Mytilene, the capital of the island; using the appropriate terminology when applying for European Union grants and subsidies; contracting with suppliers; purchasing the materials necessary to the construction of floats; compensating people for the labor offered. The thorny problem of financial compensation for the club members and outside workers involved in the construction of carnival floats caused a rift in the carnival community and was extensively mentioned in the interviews I conducted in 2007 and 2008.

In the prewar era, the "age of innocence" for popular culture, participation in carnival performances did not entail any kind of reward, let alone financial compensation. Prize money in the Valian competition was generally shared between two or three groups in an attempt to keep everyone satisfied. The prize was meant to reward the best *satira*, not to compensate for the work done. Even during the period that followed the Civil War, when the construction of

Figure 8. The headquarters of Satyros Carnival Club, located one story below those of the Greek Communist Party, 2000. Photograph courtesy of Tasos Kostopoulos.

53. Dora Konsola, *Cultural Development and Politics* [in Greek] (Athens: Papazisi, 2006), 108.

54. Interview with Giorgos, Agiasos, March 2, 2008.

large carnival floats required more capital and more working hours, nobody claimed financial compensation. Following the regime change in 1974, many residents of the Greek countryside started reviving their old traditional rites in a folklorist context, and the Ministry of Culture financed cultural activities from the country's periphery as part of a decentralization program meant to reduce inequalities between regions and to favor the balanced development of all territorial units.⁵³ Local government and prefectures also managed a portion of the subsidies for culture.

When interviewed in 2006–7, all members of the Satyros Club seemed to believe that the municipality of Agiasos, along with other public institutions, should finance carnival. In fact, the municipality had been co-organizing the festivities with the Satyros Club since 2001, disbursing funds directly to the suppliers of materials and construction work. The municipality, however, did not remunerate anyone for the work involved in the construction and decoration of the floats. Only the board of the Satyros Club, which received funds from the Ministry of the Aegean Sea and from the Northern Aegean Administration, could decide to remunerate anyone for the work done during carnival. This caused a lot of misunderstandings and resentment among the members of the club, most of whom were wage-earners. Some, like Giorgos, accused the board of favoritism:

The president calls me out of the blue and asks me to design big masks. How come? Do you want to make a carnival? Come and tell me, "Well, what do you want, make me the carnival, how much do you want to make it?" This guy painted a ball with a hairbrush and took three thousand. And he was a member of the club. I don't want to give out any names. Obviously, I don't want to get involved any longer.⁵⁴

The issue of financial remuneration that troubled club members points to the ongoing

55. "State bureaucracy was... the medium of reproduction of petty bourgeois society, playing a central role in the process of building and consolidating unproductive strata." Andreas Moschonas, "Social Complexity and Modern Greek Reality: An Interpretive Approach," in *Modern Greek Society: Historic and Critical Approaches* [in Greek], ed. Theodoros Sakelaropoulos (Athens: Kritiki, 1993), 201.
 56. Interview with Vasilis, Agiasos, February 23, 2007.
 57. The conception of inherited cultural continuity is commonplace in Mediterranean societies. On this subject one may refer to the anthropological research done by Maria Papapavlou and Vasiliki Lalioti in Spain and Greece, respectively. Vasiliki Lalioti and Maria Papapavlou, "Because It Runs Through Our Veins." *From Ancient Drama to Flamenco, Anthropology Returns to the Field of Experience* [in Greek] (Athens: Kritiki, 2010).
 58. Interview with Panis, Agiasos, February 25, 2007.
 59. The year 1973 was marked by dozens of protests against the military dictatorship at various Greek universities. On November 14, 1973, hundreds of students occupied the Polytechnic school in downtown Athens. They were soon joined by thousands of people from all over Athens and the Attica region. On the night of November 17, military tanks were sent by the government and crashed through the building. The military and the police forces killed twenty-four people, while many students and workers were commercialization of carnival as a formal cultural expression of the community. The event had been turned into a community "brand" that addressed tourists. It also revealed the gap between the worlds of manual and knowledge labor. Petty-bourgeois carnivalists in Agiasos were predominantly civil servants, which meant that they held permanent jobs with a secure income, they benefited from a relatively flexible working schedule, and their salary was not indexed to productivity.⁵⁵ They differed from other carnivalists not only in their access to institutionalized knowledge but also in their living standards. Quite simply, they belonged to a different social class. On the subject of carnival, they shared very different opinions on issues of remuneration and time spent on preparations. This was, of course, a direct result of the former discrepancy. Civil servants, being paid a fixed amount as a salary, could afford meeting every day during the carnival season to discuss the upcoming festivities. If needed, they could easily get a leave of absence without any financial consequences. This puts them at odds with manual workers, for whom meeting every day generated a lot of stress and who felt that time dedicated to carnival was, at the end of the day, "stolen" from their work day. "Closing down my workshop for a month? Who would pay for the expense? Social security reimbursement doesn't stop. The last three days I didn't work at all, I'm all day around. Why am I doing this? To help the club make it until Monday. They won't say 'thank you.' It is for Agiasos, not for me," Giorgos acidly commented. Things were even more complicated for farm workers, since carnival coincided with the peak of olive gathering.
- Like Yorgos, many wagers started to reconsider the terms of their participation. "Today it is all about money. You cannot do anything without money. In the old days people would work for nothing, not even a cup of coffee.... I am a passerby, tomorrow I won't be here. But I will not stop loving the club. If we had plenty of money, that would be hunky dory. It was not like that before, carnival ran through their veins. Now it's not like that," Vasilis V. confirmed.⁵⁶ With the phrase "carnival ran through their veins," my informant summarized the shift in the way popular culture was perceived and performed: while it used to be seen as an organic part of everyday life, now carnival was considered as a ritual obligation requiring participants to sacrifice their time.⁵⁷ Since carnival was now experienced as a community "brand," a commodity to be consumed by tourists, laborers felt that they should also reap the benefits of their investment. In other words, laborers viewed their participation mostly in terms of extra work that had to be remunerated. Panis, a civil servant, naturally lamented this evolution: "Some people say, 'I won't come if I don't get paid, because I'll lose my wage.' Some are gathering olives, others work in construction. Now the club remunerates them."⁵⁸ Like him, Satyros board members acknowledged that manual workers were the heart and soul of carnival. However, coexisting with them under the same "roof" became impossible. The literate civil servants gradually withdrew from the club and switched their affiliation to Anagnostirion. Agiasos Carnival at the beginning of the twenty-first century thus became divided into two poles that respectively embodied manual and intellectual labor.

Cultural Gatekeeping as the Petty Bourgeoisie's Ideology

Other than the divide between manual and knowledge labor, what distinguished the educated civil servants from the wage-earners was their ideological proclivity: most of them belonged to "the Polytechnion generation," a term used in Greece to single out the people whose youth coincided with the student rebellion that sealed the end of military dictatorship in 1973.⁵⁹ Their

arrested. The Polytechnic rebellion had a major impact on the young generation, and the people who participated in it or in the protests that led to the end of the dictatorship came to be called the "Polytechnic generation."

60. Dimitris Fyssas, *The Polytechnic Generation, 1973-1981. Members of the Students Movement and Other Students: A Biographical Dictionary* [in Greek] (Athens: Delfini, 1993).

61. Zaimakis, "Forbidden Fruits' and the Communist Paradise."

62. The carnival season in Greece traditionally begins ten weeks before Greek Orthodox Easter, and ends on the first day of Lent, also called "Clean Monday."

63. Interview with Dimitris, Agiasos, February 22, 2007.

64. In the first years after the return to democracy political activity was very intense, as evidenced by the number of strikes, student demonstrations, and political concerts and festivals that took place during the 1970s. The ideological dominance of the Left was obvious in unions, in university lecture halls, and in demonstrations.

Award-winning European director Nikos Koundouros captured the atmosphere of the period in his documentary film *Songs of Fire*, which premiered in Greece on February 10, 1975 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-8kiKAXBIF4&list=RDg8kiKAXBIF4&start_radio=1&t=2808). For the first strikes in the 1970s see also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DY700sZ_xNc.

65. Extract from a *satira* titled

leftist stance and political involvement determined the dominant narrative in Greek public discourse during the last decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ In Agiasos the Polytechnic generation were the ones who joined forces to keep carnival alive after the return to democracy in 1974, when its political and subversive character started to fade. While other rural communities underscored their traditions through folkloristic revivals of old rituals, Agiasos Carnival stressed its heavily politicized discourse. Tradition in a community with a strong Communist and partisan history was determined by the new leftist local intellectual leadership that adopted a model of popular culture that has been constructed since the 1930s: popular art expresses the desires and needs of the people and at the same time contributes to its social and political formation.⁶¹ Here is how one of my informants, Dimitris, remembered the carnival that immediately followed the return to democracy: "It was strict political *satira* at that time. We were talking about the tanks in the Polytechnic School. It was a pioneering act. It was in March. People did not speak, especially in the villages. We had to say what we had to say at any cost." He continued by describing his opinion about how carnival should be performed:

I have my views on carnival. Carnival meant protest, a banner, a loudspeaker, even during the Ottoman domination. I know how to write *satira* for the carnival. Partisan *satira*.... To make people's minds think, work. Since everything stultifies us, let us have something that we can use to make people think, put their head to work.

We have to keep our particularity, which is characterized by certain things. This particularity consists in the political references you may find in our *satira*. On "Clean Monday,"⁶² we comment on the news from our political perspective, because this is what we are talking about. This is a characteristic that we had better not let go. That is, you cannot abstain from commenting [on] current political issues.⁶³

Coming of age during a period characterized by turbulent political activity determined the frame into which Agiasos Carnival was set by the Polytechnic generation in the years that followed the return to democracy.⁶⁴ Current affairs, viewed through a purely ideological prism, largely pervaded the "Clean Monday" festivities, which in Greece are considered to be the apex of carnival:

Capitalist employers
With the fat bellies,
Give us back what you've stolen
And stop fuzzing around.⁶⁵

US foreign policy was another frequent topic, as it had been demonized in the last decades by the Greek Left. However, not all social events found their way into Agiasos satirical verses. During the 2009 carnival celebrations, for instance, there was hardly any mention of the youth riots that had shaken Greece just two months earlier, although they had been largely covered in the local (and international) media.⁶⁶ This was a clear reflection of the Communist Party's stance on the riots. According to Michalis Psimitis, "orthodox Communists found it hard to come to grips with the phenomenon of common action across heterogeneous social groups, with different incomes, class and cultural features. And, of course, they chose the easy way out by denouncing and stigmatizing a great part of the mobilizations."⁶⁷ Another event that was barely mentioned was the attempted murder of Bulgarian immigrant worker and unionist Constantina Kuneva, whose 2008 "accident" had brought precarious employment to light and turned her into a symbol of

"The First Topic," performed in 2008 during the Clean Monday festivities.

66. On these riots, see especially John Karamichas, "The December 2008 Riots in Greece: Profile," *Social Movement Studies* 8, no. 3 (2009): 289–93; and Spyros Sakellaropoulos, "On the Causes and Significance of the December 2008 Social Explosion in Greece," *Science & Society* 76, no. 3 (2012): 340–64.

67. Michalis Psimitis, "Collective Identities versus Social Exclusion: The December 2008 Greek Youth Movement," *Επιθεώρηση Κοινωνικών Ερευνών*, 136 (2011): 111–33.

68. Konstantina Kuneva was a Bulgarian citizen who had migrated to Greece with her son after the collapse of the Communist regime. She had been trained as a historian but ended up working as a janitor for a company that provided cleaning services to public and private clients. As the working conditions were very bad and the cleaners had to sign fake contracts, Kuneva decided to start a union with two of her co-workers, an initiative that was met with anger by their employers and fear by other employees.

Kuneva received numerous threats and on December 26, 2008, an unidentified person attacked her on her way back home, forcing her to swallow sulfuric acid. The news of the incident spread rapidly among the people involved in the 2008 Greek riots and there were many demonstrations and acts of solidarity.

After spending many months in the hospital, Kuneva was elected to the European Parliament as a

unionism and workers' struggles.⁶⁸

To sum up, the representatives of the Polytechnion Generation in Agiasos, who had joined various leftists groups or the Communist Party in the 1970s, turned into "guardians of carnival tradition" when they got older. Either as members of the Satyros Club or, later, on the board of Anagnostirion or in municipal offices, they got to define the meaning of Agiasos Carnival and how it would be performed.

A New Generation of Carnivalists

In the first years of the twenty-first century, the youth of the village started to demonstrate increasing interest in carnival, refuting older carnivalists' claims that young people only cared about having a good time and did not care about tradition. They took part in high school carnival performances on Fat Friday and in Anagnostirion's satirical plays on Fat Saturday. Some of them even participated in the "small carnival" that is performed on the village marketplace on the Sunday before Ash Monday. In 2007 an older *satira* writer wrote verses that served as an "initiation ceremony" to young carnivalists who wished to enter the carnival community.

Concomitantly, a middle-aged cafeteria patron named Giorgos—whom I previously referred to as one of my informants—wrote verses for "Birthing," an archetypical carnival rite that parodies childbirth.⁶⁹ A group of pupils then performed the parody in a cafeteria in 2004. In 2005 the same youths performed the "Occupation of the Cafeteria," referencing recent protests organized by high school students in many Greek cities to denounce the disastrous state of the Greek educational system. In 2007 Giorgos wrote a lengthy carnival sketch parodying the international television game show *Super Deal*. Performed exclusively by young people, it became part of the 2007 Ash Monday festivities. "*Super Deal* in Agiasos" was a pleasant surprise for those attending carnival in Agiasos that year. The scenario was as follows: a young man from Agiasos participates in *Super Deal*, escorted by his wife and mother-in-law, and the quarrels between them disorientate the performer, a well-known Greek comedian. Even though it was written by an adult, its topic and the way the performance was prepared—on the margins of established organizational structures—inspired the majority of high school pupils who participated either as reciters or extras. The performance had elements of spontaneity that the audience really enjoyed, and they participated by laughing and chatting with the carnivalists. Supervision of casting and rehearsals was led by two intermediaries—younger people who were on good terms with the "guardians" and, due to their age, had easier access to adolescents than the middle-aged guardians. They chose the ones capable of reciting in front of the large audience for Clean Monday festivities.

Although "*Super Deal*" was warmly received by the audience, it did not please the guardians, who soon zeroed in on how it deviated from tradition. "It was a parody, they were spoofing a TV show, okay. But that shouldn't affect our carnival. You start spoofing and then it is the topic that prevails on you. '*Super Deal* in Agiasos' didn't have the features of *satira*. And these features are part of tradition. It had its verses, intense dialogue parts, a plot that faithfully followed the show's form, but the verses didn't have wit," Panis complained. The reasons why the *satira* in question didn't "pass the test" were numerous and contradictory: it copied the TV show's structure, it was not faithful to the traditional deployment of text, it used prose excessively, it was not original as it repeated scenes from older *satiras*, and, more importantly, it did not incorporate social concerns:

candidate of the left-wing SYRIZA Party in 2014. See also Nelli Kambouri and Alexandra Zavos, "On the Frontiers of Citizenship: Considering the Case of Konstantina Kuneva and the Intersections between Gender, Migration and Labor in Greece," *Feminist Review* 94, no. 1 (2010): 148–55.

69. The carnival rite of birthing is described in Puchner, *Popular Theater*, 52, 78.

70. Interview with Panis, Agiasos, February 26, 2008.

71. That year scientists had discovered that juice from olive trees might cure various types of cancer. Media coverage of this alleged discovery was extensive. As Agiasos is an olive-cultivating area, news about the "miracle juice" was largely mocked in that year's *satiras*.

72. Interview with Panagiotis, Agiasos, March 5, 2007.

73. Ibid.

Super Deal was the most popular TV show that year, with the highest ratings. But one should not just copy. They copied the show and parodied it but something was missing: clever ideas, even a good scenic appearance. The part where the mother-in-law goes on a trip to an island inhabited by cannibals was presented years ago and it was copied. There is no harm in repeating, but I would like to see something new. This one was just copying. It is wrong to repeat a TV show in carnival. Should we be watching *Super Deal* again on Clean Monday? One may watch it on TV. If you take it as a topic you should at least include witty verses and convey messages to the audience.⁷⁰

This was not, of course, the first time that TV topics had inspired carnival *satira* in Agiasos. Television had, after all, become a vital part of the village's everyday life since the 1970s. However, the guardians of tradition believed that they were entitled to control the extent to which television could inform carnivalesque performance:

As you noted, and I fully agree, tradition is not something constant and unvarying, it changes all the time. It is affected contextually, by the social conditions and the subjects, its protagonists. Now it seems that a new era will start in our carnival. I believe that the youths will draw on the old, traditional forms. But they shouldn't... You know what I mean. Yesterday's *satira* was a copy. They just replicated a TV show. Of course, as you said and this is very correct, it is their own life experience. They have been brought up with television, they may have seen the show dozens of times. They have lived with it and they parodied it in their way, but this is not enough. They have to move forward. The satirical element was missing. They opened so many boxes and in all of them there were only sexual hints: a condom, a banana. They could have taken something else out of the box, an olive leaf for instance; this way, they would have referred to the news about olive leaves supposedly curing cancer.⁷¹ They didn't take full advantage of the circumstances. Of course one has to have experience to know how to write *satira*.⁷²

The guardians, a limited group of people who controlled experience and knowledge, got to decide who had or did not have enough charisma. "Those youths [those who participated in "*Super Deal*" *satira*] weren't born in families with carnival culture, as T. or K. were. The latter are the offspring of carnivalists and that is very important," Panagiotis explained.⁷³ The youths who were relatives of the guardians had accepted the terms set by their fathers. As a result, they were seen as the promising young members of the carnival community, those who would guarantee its prosperous future. This often proved true, as carnival tradition within a family tended to strengthen children's talent, gave them opportunities to perform, and helped them gain symbolic capital within the community. However, there are always exceptions to the rule, as the next section will show.

Outcasts of Tradition: The Case of Young Raphael

What happened in this case was that a gifted young carnivalist appeared out of the blue and his performance was as inspiring as that of the legendary reciters of the 1960s and 1970s. In "*Super Deal* in Agiasos" there were two main reciters, whose talent and improvising abilities gripped the audience, "rocked" the *satira*, and made people laugh heartily. One was the son of carnivalists who were very close to the guardians. His brother was one of the mediators mentioned above. The other one was a boy with no family ties to carnival. He was, however, a "natural" performer. I was expecting to see him in the following year's performances and when I did not, I went looking for him. I found him working in a cafeteria, in the upper part of the village. The answers he gave to my questions were, as often happens with adolescents, short and fragmentary. My interview with

74. This is an old warehouse at the entrance of the village that used to be a slaughterhouse and now serves as a place for the preparation of floats and as a dressing room for carnivalists.

75. Interview with Raphael, Agiasos, March 12, 2008.

him did, however, shed light on the nonhegemonic side of Agiasos Carnival. Here's an extract from our conversation:

Raphael: I began doing carnival when I was in school.... I left high school, I went to a vocational school in Mitilini, I knocked someone down, they threw me out and I came back here ... I've been doing carnival and theater since ninth grade. I performed in carnival last year ... in "*Deal*"...

... We had finished with the rehearsals, then Clean Monday came and we went to the abattoir.⁷⁴ They put makeup on us, we did one last dress rehearsal ... It was fun, we drank ouzo ... At the beginning I was very nervous. So I drank a lot of ouzo. The float's planks were half broken ... So we climbed on the stage and the van started to drive to the square, the speaker recited the names: who played, who did the scenery, etc., and then we started to recite ... and then I stopped feeling nervous ... Inside I was all in flames ... as if something was clutching me. I was stressed. People were looking at me and I blushed ... but I had makeup on, so no one could see.

They thought I was an experienced carnivalist, not a young boy. They had me in mind as if I had been in several carnivals before ... I recited really well, I moved so well that nobody believed it was my first carnival performance ... Nobody made me any comments. Only T. told me that it was good, that people liked it.

Me: Did they invite you to participate this year?

Raphael: No.

Me: Did T. ask you to play?

Raphael: No, he didn't. I wanted to, but he didn't ask me. He asked other boys he likes, but not me ... Now I don't care about carnival.... This year it was lousy, people didn't like it, they didn't laugh ... My friends came and asked me, "Why didn't you go to carnival?" ... I'm mad, angry ... maybe I'll go next year, if they ask me ... If they plead, I'll go.

Me: Were any of your relatives a carnivalist?

Raphael: No, my father and mother had nothing to do with carnival. My grandpas weren't born here, anyway.⁷⁵

Family qualifications were not a prerequisite for participating in carnival in the past. Carnival lineage did not exist as a concept in older generations, when learning was an organic function of the community and there was no need to construct an input-output system for data and humans. My fieldwork suggests that the "superiority" of the "inheritors," the differential value of family tradition, is a narrative that was constructed during the last decades of the twentieth century. As popular culture and its modes were declining, some believed that new ways needed to be found to revive rituals. The guardians of tradition, the ones who molded the framework of carnival performances, tried to safeguard their inclusion into the carnival community by giving priority to their own "blood," their family members and friends' family members, under the pretext that carnival inclination "runs through the veins." In that narrative, carnival descent could refer to the offspring of old, talented reciters but also to the children of painters, float-builders, and even to those of sponsors—that is, of anyone who played a role in carnival. There were cases in which carnivalists' children proved to be so talented as to guarantee them a brilliant "career" on the village's carnival scene. More than talent, however, what the guardians transmitted to their offspring was an unquestionable acceptance of the given rules as to what carnival should be about and look like. When interviewed in 2008 about the *Super Deal* parody they had performed the previous year, the "inheritors"—like the majority of their high school classmates—said that the *satira* was insufficient and bad, using the same arguments as their parents.

What happens then when natural talents with no family qualifications participate in carnival productions that are not sanctioned by the guardians? Transgressors are punished. Raphael's successful performance was not praised by anyone and was subsequently forgotten. He was not

76. Michel Agier, *Anthropologie du carnaval: la ville, la fête et l'Afrique à Bahia* (Marseille: Parenthèses, 2000), 29. See also Stavros Stavridis, *Suspended Spaces of Otherness* [in Greek] (Athens: Alexandria, 2010).

77. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 145.

encouraged, nor was he invited to participate in carnival the following year. He feels embittered and marginalized. Raphael belongs to the lower stratum in the village, as do many of the youths I met with and interviewed during field research. The village's carnival tradition seems today to concern only a part of its population, consigning many youths to the ranks of the wage-earners. As a result, many a talented performer will decline to express themselves through this traditional cultural ritual.

Conclusion

In many European countries, carnival continues to be a time when the experiences and worldviews of most communities, especially the isolated ones, "get down to the streets." As Michel Agier wrote in 2000, "Carnival is a ritual space where everyday ideas, solidarities, and identities spring up and grow."⁷⁶ However, carnival performances, as an institutionalized festive time for the community, also result in hierarchical relations and practices of inclusion and exclusion. When, during field research, I asked myself the question, Who in the carnival community decides what Agiasos Carnival should look like?, I soon realized that this overlapped with another question: Which social group defines popular culture and tradition in Agiasos?

During the interwar period the residents of Agiasos manifested their aspirations for social justice and equality by joining the Communist Party, and Communist ideals therefore pervaded *satiras* until the Civil War. In the 1950s and 1960s, a time of great social and political turmoil in Greece, carnivalists used allegory to convey their messages so as to escape governmental censorship. Most carnivalists during that period were working-class people, called "wage-earners" because they received daily wages rather than a monthly salary. They could not, and would not, dictate what was right or wrong in terms of tradition, as carnival formed an organic part of their lives. The intellectuals of the village, mostly gathered on the board of Anagostirion, refrained from intervening in the carnival community, restricting themselves to awarding the prize for the best *satira*.

Following the return to democracy, young people who returned back home with a university degree took positions in the public sector and took over the organization of carnival. Their educational level, their clearly leftist political orientation, and their status as civil servants distinguished them from the world of manual labor, from the wagers who were still involved in carnival. Together, they made up a "new petty bourgeoisie," according to Poulantzas's terminology, and started to act as modern "guardians of tradition." Their academic status allowed them to impose their views and rules on the content and the form of *satira*.

While carnival usually "unhinges all transcendental signifiers and submits them to ridicule and relativism,"⁷⁷ the "guardians of tradition" in Agiasos Carnival opted for a more "politicized" version of the rite that would advance a leftist narrative (anti-Americanism, attacks on the government, reclamation of peasants' and workers' rights). They confined carnival laughter to the schemes that derived from tradition, that is, *dekapentasyllavos* verses and the use of the local idiom. However, these schemes could be overruled by them when considered appropriate. As we saw earlier, the "guardians" believed that local idiom should not be used extensively, as it might make Agiasos Carnival less attractive to tourists, and that theatrical performances given in Anagnostirion's hall should have more prose and fewer *dekapentasyllavos* verses than

“permitted” during the Clean Monday festivities. When a *satira* exceeded the limitations and outplaced political references with the element of play and pure laughter, as was the case with “*Super Deal* in Agiasos,” the guardians considered it out of the traditional frame due to its lack of “political references.” The youths had to choose between reciting the verses the guardians had written or corrected for them or leave the carnival world of transgression and return to a dull reality. Thus, carnival worked not as a universe of equality and inclusion but as one of correctness and ostracism.

Rural communities with a long carnival tradition rooted in the past, such as Agiasos in this case study, have responded to the challenges of modernity in various, unique ways. Most of the time, they have preserved strong elements of their past, while enriching the rituals with new elements derived from their rapidly changing reality. The group of individuals who take the initiative to organize the festivities, the protagonists of popular culture, has radically changed in the last decades of the twentieth century. As a consequence, it requires a deep and thorough study to reveal the context behind the appearances.

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