

**ETHNOLOGHIA ON-LINE**

**Ετήσιο Επιστημονικό Ηλεκτρονικό Περιοδικό**

**Εκδοτική Επιμέλεια: Ελληνική Εταιρεία Εθνολογίας**

**An Annual Scholarly Electronic Journal**

**Published by the Greek Society for Ethnology**



---

**Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.**

**Συγγραφέας: Μαρία Κοκολάκη - Author: Maria Kokolaki.**

**Πηγή - Source: Ethnologia on-line, Vol.: 8, Ιούλιος 2017 (σσ. 1-33) - July 2017 (pp. 1-33).**

**Εκδοτική Επιμέλεια: Ελληνική Εταιρεία Εθνολογίας - Published by: The Greek Society for Ethnology**

[www.societyforethnology.gr](http://www.societyforethnology.gr).

**Επιτροπή Έκδοσης: Ελευθέριος Αλεξάκης, Μαρία Κουμαριανού, Βασιλική Χρυσανθοπούλου - Editors:**

**Eleftherios Alexakis, Maria Koumarianou, Vassiliki Chryssanthopoulou.**

**Επιμέλεια Ηλεκτρονικής Έκδοσης: Παρασκευή Γ. Κανελλάτου - e-Publication Editor: Paraskevi G. Kanellatou.**

**Επικοινωνία - Contact: [contact@societyforethnology.gr](mailto:contact@societyforethnology.gr).**

**Διαδικτυακή Ανάρτηση - Stable URL: [E.o.L.-2017.07.18-Kokolaki-Fasting\\_purity.pdf](http://E.o.L.-2017.07.18-Kokolaki-Fasting_purity.pdf).**

**Ημερομηνία Έκδοσης: Τρίτη 18 Ιουλίου 2017 - Issued on: Tuesday 18, July 2017.**

---

Τα άρθρα που κατατίθενται στο *Ethnologia on line* αποτελούν πνευματική ιδιοκτησία των συγγραφέων τους. Άρθρα του *Ethnologia on line* που μεταφράζονται ή επανατυπώνονται αλλού οφείλουν να παραπέμπουν στην πρωτότυπη δημοσίευση.

Articles submitted to the journal are the intellectual property of the writer. Translations or reprints of articles from *Ethnologia On Line* should refer to the original publication.

Το ηλεκτρονικό περιοδικό *Ethnologia on line* αποτελεί ετήσια επιστημονική έκδοση της Ελληνικής Εταιρείας Εθνολογίας και εκδίδεται παράλληλα με το έντυπο περιοδικό σύγγραμμα *Εθνολογία*. Στόχος του είναι να προβάλλει το θεωρητικό και επιστημονικό υπόβαθρο μελετών που άπτονται του γνωστικού αντικειμένου της Ανθρωπολογίας και της Εθνολογίας και να δώσει την ευκαιρία σε επιστήμονες εθνολόγους, λαογράφους και ανθρωπολόγους άμεσης παρουσίας της δουλειάς τους.

The electronic journal *Ethnologia On Line* is an annual scholarly publication of the Greek Society for Ethnology, distinct from its annual printed journal *Ethnologia*. Its aim is to stimulate and promote discourse in the disciplines of Anthropology, Ethnology and Laography with an emphasis on issues of theory and methodology, while also giving anthropologists and ethnologists a venue to present their work speedily.

**ISSN: 1792-9628**



### ***Abstract***

This paper examines how people's religious beliefs are incorporated and performed in the local dietary system of a town in Eastern Crete. Focusing on food related religious experience, and in particular fasting, I argue that ambiguity in food related religious practices and the lenience in the collective and individual enactment of fasting rules may be interpreted in part as adaptive strategies of the local people in their effort to respond to the dynamics of cultural change. In this context, I look at the dipole purity vs. impurity and its instantiation within the food realm, especially in relation to the function of the category of Lenten food, which helps individuals deal with change and maintain stability within past discourses. Food related knowledge is coded and manipulated in fasts in order to re-produce a familiar and well established ideational frame for people to process their surroundings and negotiate change.

***Keywords:*** fasting, purity, ambiguity, adaptive strategy.

### ***Περίληψη***

Αυτό το άρθρο εξετάζει πώς οι θρησκευτικές πεποιθήσεις ενσωματώνονται και πραγματώνονται στο τοπικό διαιτητικό σύστημα μιας πόλης στην Ανατολική Κρήτη. Εστιάζοντας στη θρησκευτική εμπειρία τη σχετική με τη διατροφή, και κυρίως τη νηστεία, υποστηρίζω ότι η ασάφεια στις θρησκευτικές πρακτικές που σχετίζονται με την τροφή και η έλλειψη αυστηρότητας στη συλλογική και ατομική εφαρμογή των κανόνων νηστείας μπορούν εν μέρει να ερμηνευθούν ως προσαρμοστικές στρατηγικές των κατοίκων, στην προσπάθειά τους να ανταποκριθούν στη δυναμική της πολιτισμικής αλλαγής. Σε αυτό το πλαίσιο, θα μελετήσω το δίπολο «καθαρότητα/μιαρότητα» και την πραγμάτωσή του εντός του πεδίου της διατροφής, και ιδιαίτερος σε σχέση με τη λειτουργία της κατηγορίας των νηστίσιμων τροφών, η οποία βοηθά τα άτομα να ανταποκρίνονται στην αλλαγή και στη διατήρηση της σταθερότητας μέσα στο διάλογο με το παρελθόν. Η γνώση που σχετίζεται με την τροφή κωδικοποιείται, αλλά και χειραγωγείται μέσα στις νηστείες, προκειμένου να αναπαραγάγει ένα οικείο και καλά εδραιωμένο ιδεολογικό πλαίσιο μέσα στο οποίο οι άνθρωποι καλούνται να επεξεργάζονται το περιβάλλον τους και να διαπραγματεύονται την αλλαγή.



Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

*Λέξεις Κλειδιά:* νηστεία, καθαρότητα, ασάφεια, προσαρμοστική στρατηγική.



Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

## ***Introduction***

This article focuses on fasting, for examining how traditional food knowledge of a local population can be instantiated in religious experience. Based on ethnographic material from the town and the broader area of Neapolis, in the mainland of Eastern Crete, I will approach fasting as powerful knowledge for exploring the dynamics of culture and cultural change.



**Photo 1: The main square of Neapolis, early 20th century.**

People both as individuals and as collective entities employ in their life course various means including symbolic systems, in order to manage and modify their environment. Fischer (2005, 2008) referred to this as adaptive agency, the capacity of cultural agents to influence and augment available options, make viable choices and employ them in a sustainable manner. This is based on “powerful knowledge” which is a conception of local knowledge as enabling and dynamic.

From this point of view, local or traditional food knowledge, as part of the collective or traditional knowledge of a particular locale (Heinrich *et al*, 2005: 6), not only permits observation and description but it also enables the conceptualization and enactment of various cultural contexts, in which it is embedded. This type of knowledge suggests relating natural functions to concepts and ideations about/of culture. It further implies enactment through behaviour as well as embodiment of customs, values and traditions.

In particular, fasting and, its opposite, feasting, are part of the traditional food knowledge in the vicinity of Neapolis, as dietetic implementation and performance of the local religious belief



Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

system which empower and enhance religious experience. In this article, I set to explore how these dietetic enactments of the religious context and, in particular, of the dipole purity vs. impurity can be instantiated in effective/powerful behaviour. Moreover, I will examine the function of ambiguity which is observed in the realization of the fasting rules in local fasting practices and how this ambiguity may be negotiated and utilised in the local context of change.

### *Fasts as temporal Signs constructing social time*

The annual cycle of religious life in the area of Neapolis seems to have been organized on basis of four fasting periods, two major and two minor as far as their duration is concerned. The major and principal fasting periods are the Small Lent before Christmas and the Great Lent before Easter. The Small Lent, which is locally known as *Σαρανταρά* (=having forty days), is fixed and covers the forty days that precede Christmas. During the fast fish eating is allowed. This fasting period it was also called by local people *Κρετσοφαγούσα*<sup>1</sup>, because it was considered very exhausting for people.

Great Lent, which is called *Μεγάλη Σαρακοστή*, is movable and covers a period of forty eight days before Easter Sunday, including the six weeks beginning from Shrove Monday and the Passion Week. The Passion Week is established as austere and obligatory fast, which culminates on Good Friday. People of the town not only participate in the rituals that take place inside the Church and relate to the Christ's passions, but they also perform ritual actions in private and conform to the strict fast with more precision and dedication than they indicate for other holy periods. This is partly explained by the fact that usually many local migrants return to the town in order to feast with their families. At the same time, fasting is believed to purify people's bodies and minds for preparing them to receive the message of the Resurrection. During and through those rituals, people animate and experience the course of Christ to the cross.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pitykakis (1983: 515) observes that, although the literal meaning of the word *Κρετσοφαγούσα* is "consuming meat", in this case it rather means "a fast that wears off people". In the past the physical weakening of people was an outcome of a number of factors that coincided with this fast, such as adverse weather conditions, hard work and sometimes old age or illness.



Moreover, there are two smaller fasts, of Saint Apostles (beginning on Monday that follows the feast of All Saints and ending on June 29<sup>th</sup>) and of the Assumption of Virgin Mary (1/8-15/8). The fasting period of Saint Apostles is partly movable and has fluctuating duration, because its opening depends on the movable Sunday of All Saints which is regulated in respect to Easter, while it ends on 29<sup>th</sup> June (feast of St Apostles, Peter and Paul). The fast of the Assumption, which lasts fifteen days, is particularly important for the local population, because Virgin is considered the protector of the town. The verb *δεκαπεντίζω* (deriving from the word *δεκαπέντε*, fifteen) is used to denote keeping the fast of the first fortnight of August.

Four other days, St John's Beheading (29/8), the Holy Cross (14/9), Christmas Eve (24/9) and Epiphany's Eve (5/1), are established as strict fasts, unless they coincide with Saturday or Sunday. A further two days of the week, Wednesday and Friday, known in the local dialect as *Τετραδοπάρασκα*, are imposed as fasts. However, those days are not fasted during the first and third week of Carnival, on the Easter week, the week after Pentecost and the Twelve days of Christmas (except the Epiphany's Eve).

Moreover, there are also other instances for fasting, such as before receiving the Holy Communion. There is further the case of voluntary fasting, after making a promise to a Saint. This is often supplemented with other ritual actions such as wearing black or covering a distance barefooted or on one's knees. In Neapolis, this promise is given mainly to the Virgin's Assumption, because of the Cathedral, to the Holy Cross, because of the old monastery which is at the top of the homonymous mountain North of Neapolis, or to St George, because of the old church and monastery at the nearby location Selinari dedicated to the Saint.

On the other hand, in between the aforementioned fasts there are five periods of complete freedom in eating (*κατάλλυσις εις πάντα*). Four are movable (Carnival's first and second week<sup>2</sup>, Easter week and the week after Pentecost) because they depend on Easter, while one is fixed (the twelve days of Christmas from 25<sup>th</sup> December to 6<sup>th</sup> January, except from Epiphany's Eve-5<sup>th</sup> January). The last week of Carnival, called *Τυρινή* (of cheese), is an intermediate preparatory period for the great

---

<sup>2</sup> The first week is called '*Συγκόκαλη*' (with the bones) or '*Αμολυτή*' (Liberated) and the second week is called '*Κρεατινή*' (of meat).



Lent called also “white”, since dairy products and eggs are freely and customarily consumed, while meat is forbidden.

Moreover, in between the fasts, there are feasts that include great banquets and have always been times of pleasure and joy. Such feasts for example are the Christmas Day, the Easter Sunday or the Assumption. Nevertheless, although when people refer in Neapolis to feast-days (*γιορτές*) they basically mean religious festivals (*πανηγύρια*), one could extend the term to other festive occasions of social character. All those instances are enjoyable occasions for eating, touching upon the aesthetic, sensory and social aspect of food. So, for example, on the Thursday of the second week of Carnival, called *Τσικνοπέφτη* (Pancake Day), housewives must cook or fry meat in their pans. Houses emit the distinctive smell of cooking meat and smoke.

From the above, becomes evident that fasting periods cover a great amount of the year and, in addition to festive periods, are used as temporal signs upon which ritual, social and economic activity of the area under consideration is based and organized, having food as a primal axis. In the aforementioned framework, dietary customs which are usually combined with perceptions and rituals of both private and social character assume very important role in the local life.

Equally important is the inter-temporal character observed in such ritual practices, where the linking of past to present and future forms the so-called “prospective memory” (Connerton, 1989). Sutton (2001a: 28) talks about “loud ritual occasions” where food and memory come together. The main characteristics of those occasions are repetitiveness and standardisation mainly actualised through food (presence or absence) which, especially in festive occasions, is served in great abundance often reaching the point of extravagance.

Additionally, as far as the character of those customs is concerned, we may find that many of these customs are rural (Megas, 1976), since in the past the main occupation of the local population, especially of those inhabiting the periphery of Neapolis, was land-tenure and stockbreeding. Keeping those customs was linked as much to people’s faith and expectations as to the seasons of the year. During winter, in particular in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, this rural character was manifest in anxious prayers and related rituals concerning people’s welfare and abundant production. Moreover, such customs of rural character were related to Epiphany’s Eve, which is a fasting day, since the following



morning (Epiphany) people go to church and receive the holy water. A particular custom of the area on Epiphany's Eve was the preparation of a dish called *παλικάργια* (lads), which mainly peasant families would share with their oxen. Oxen, the so-called *ζευγάρι* (=pair, yoke-mates) were treated with respect, love and care as they helped the farmers to cultivate the land. So, the practice of offering *παλικάργια* to the oxen was probably related to the recognition of the animals' effort and contribution to the household during the year (Pitykakis, 1983: 809). The meal was a boiled mixture of legumes (such as dried broad beans, chickpeas and beans) and cereals (like wheat, barley and oat). The seeds used had to be from the household production<sup>3</sup>. This mixture was also offered to other domestic animals such as goats and hens<sup>4</sup>. It was even thrown in the roof of the house, in order for the birds of the sky to eat (*«για να φάνε και τα πετεινά του ουρανού»*), and people used to say: *«Φάτε έχνη και πουλιά να σχωρνάτε του ζευγά»* (Eat small animals and birds in order to forgive the peasant).

All over Greece the cycle of production and consumption of food is synchronized with and conforms to the religious calendar (Sutton, 2001a: 29). In this sense, significant days or periods of the religious calendar accomplish the function of ordering time, which furthermore means that people “create time by creating intervals in social life” (Leach, 1979: 115). Leach (1979: 113) notices that people usually divide the annual cycle by means of festivals, while at the same time religious rituals attain a great deal of standardization in their instantiation within this annual cycle of both secular and religious character.

Thus, a holy day, such as the feast of a Saint or a holy anniversary, becomes an important landmark both in time and place for the local communities. A holy day marks with its ceremonial character the social timeline being a kind of symbolic transition from the secular to the sacred space/time. Accordingly, the religious cycle inside the yearly cycle belongs to the sphere of the public and private enactment and embodiment of the religious perceptions and rules expressed by ecclesiastic discourse. According to Dubisch:

*In much of Greece... religion is inextricably entwined with daily life; indeed through its yearly cycle of holy days and its' life-cycle rites, religion has served, and still serves, to structure life in numerous ways...Religion is lived, acted and made*

---

<sup>3</sup>According to Pitykakis (1983:809) the seeds are “from what the couple of cows sow” (*από όσα σπέρνει το ζευγάρι*). ‘*Psarokolliva*’ was another term used in Herakleion for the same custom.

<sup>4</sup> While offering *παλικάργια* to hens, people would say *«φάτε ορνίθια παλικάργια να γενείτε σα λιοντάρια»* (“Hens, eat the *παλικάργια*, in order to become like lions”).





Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

*materially manifest through the many churches scattered around the countryside, in the numerous icons found in churches and homes, and by dozens of common performed rituals, ranging from those as modest as making the sign of the cross to the rich and emotional celebrations of Holy Week (Dubisch, 1995: 58).*

Furthermore, nutriment in Greece has been the main axis in people's religious faith and worship. Until the early 1950's and to a lesser degree until the present day, diet is under religious constraints. Feasts and fasts are equally important for the establishment of culinary habits in Greece (cf. Milingou Markantoni, 2006). At the same time, food is related to the environment, the way of life and the economic and social particularities of an area. So, the abstinence from certain edibles or the imposition of a particular diet by the Orthodox Church is related to geography, local production, commerce, customs and beliefs of the Greeks.

This is particularly experienced in the town of Neapolis, where the presence of the Cathedral and of the Bishopric reinforces deep religiousness and religious solidarity that form essential part of the local identity. Given that religious authority is a force that has been transforming this town's image at least for one and a half century, the ecclesiastic discourse acquires significant power and validity. This image includes also the sector of nutrition-cuisine, as long as it is directly related to religion. In particular, religion functions as a formative factor in the local cuisine, taking also into consideration that what people in Greece categorise as "traditional" diet mainly includes edibles linked to fasts (cf. Matthaïou, 1997) or feasts.

Local people give fasting great importance as it is considered as proof of deep faith and piety. This is related to the issue of purity and to the particular significance with which it is endowed in both religious and secular settings. I will further refer to the culinary practices and customs related to fasts throughout the year in Neapolis and the broader area, following the conceptualization of a Lenten food category, of foods consumed during fasts. Edibles consumed during fasts in the vicinity of Neapolis, are destined mainly for food for meals, which includes the preparation of special types of breads, and in part for desserts such as various sweets. Related is the preparation of consecrated breads that are ever-present in all formal rituals of the church.



### ***Purity and Impurity as semantic Categories instantiated in local fasting Choices***

Keeping fasts is ideally seen as manifesting power and control over bodily needs on the part of the believer: fast is linked to sexual abstinence as well. During fasting periods sexual intercourse is forbidden, as it is stated in the commentary of the 69<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Apostles in *Pidalion* (1841: 53). Related is the local belief in the broader area of Neapolis that children born in the Christmas Eve (or New Year's Day) were in danger of becoming *καρακόντζολοι* (Pitykakis, 1983: 406-407). In the local dialect the word *καρακόντζολος* is used for denoting both sleepwalkers and the cunning spirits of the Twelve days of Christmas. Probably, sleepwalking was attributed to the influence of cunning spirits, as Pitykakis (ibid) further suggests. The local belief is that children were in such a danger, because their parents had intercourse during the Great Lent (especially 25<sup>th</sup> March, feast of the Annunciation). So, in order to prevent this from happening, parents used to help their children on their fifth or sixth birthday count the holes of a sieve (ibid). If we consider pollution as matter out of order (Douglas, 2001), we could see how sexual intercourse occurring at the wrong (improper) time -in this case during fast- is considered as a sin and tabooed.

Fasting offers spiritual and ethical chastity by purifying also the soul, in as much as corporeality is perceived as twofold, as flesh and body/soul-carrier, and thus consummating corruption and immortality, danger and purity. In this sense, the conceptualization of fasting versus not fasting embodies the conception of purity as contrasted to pollution. According to Douglas (2001: 36-37) if dirt is viewed as “a matter out of place,” it must be also viewed as a by-product of a systematic ordering, of a “symbolic system of purity.” This presupposes order and the violation of that order (1997: 198), as “the underlying feeling is that a system of values which is habitually expressed in a given arrangement of things has been violated” (ibid).

Purity is related to order, wholeness, perfection and normality, while pollution is related to disorder, formlessness and matters out of context of place and time. In this sense, as Douglas (1999: vii-viii) further notices those classifications are useful and necessary in social organization since “they do something”. Moreover, boundaries of repulsion are put especially in case of danger: “Ritual purity is a kind of two-way protection, a holy thing is protected from profanation, the profane thing is protected from holiness” (Douglas 1999: 11).



In general, the cultural categories of “pure” and “polluted” as related to Christian dietetic rules may embody various perceptions that relate to the Old Testament (c.f. Douglas 2001, 1999). Accordingly, Koukoules (1952) mentions that in Byzantine times Lenten days were named “days of purity/chastity.” He further talks about three types of fast according to the substance of the related allowed consumption: ‘αγνοφαγία’ (eating pure), ‘ξηροφαγία’ (austere fast) and ‘ιχθυοφαγία’ (eating fish).

‘Eating pure’ was the consumption of Lenten foods strictly, especially shellfish. For the Byzantines the adjective ‘αγνά’, literally meaning ‘pure’, was attributed to all types of shellfish (including those without hard shells, like calamari, octopuses and cuttlefish and those with hard shells, like oysters, limpets and sea urchins) probably because their consumption was specifically connected to Lenten days.

‘Ξηροφαγία’ means the absolute fast kept in monasteries, where only bread and water were consumed. However, nowadays this word denotes also the case of austere fast that includes avoidance of oil (Milingou-Markantoni, 2006) and is mainly imposed during the Holy Week.

‘Ιχθυοφαγία’, up to the present day, is called the prescribed fish consumption. Fish consumption is allowed during the fast of the “Small Lent” before Christmas, except on Wednesdays and Fridays. Moreover, in three other cases austere fast is formally abolished for prescribed fish eating: the Annunciation and Palm Sunday within the Great Lent and the Transfiguration inside the fast of 15<sup>th</sup> August.

Likewise, generally speaking, we may hold that in the area under consideration some of the fasts are considered strict, while some others lenient. The clear-cut prohibition in all types of fast is against meat and products of animal origin. The consumption of edibles like fish and oil varies according to type of fast. An extremely strict fast, which allows the consumption of bread and water only, is usually kept in the monasteries (ξηροφαγία). However, this type of fast is rarely kept in the secular households. Instead, for local people austere fast means the avoidance of meat, dairy products, fish, oil and wine. Lenient fasts include the consumption of oil and wine and may, at specific occasions, include fish-eating. In the area of Neapolis characteristic of this type of fast is for instance



Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

the dish *σοφεγάδα*<sup>5</sup> and various sweets like pinched or raki cookies (*τζιμπητά κουλουράκια*) and barley cookies (*κρίθινα κουλουράκια*) which are mainly prepared for Christmas and the New Year.



Photo 1: Pinched Cookies.

Accordingly, the main axis designating the type of fast is the exact kind of foodstuffs prohibited versus those allowed. This parameter - in combination with the season of the year or the place - determines for the area a special category of foodstuffs called *νηστήσιμα* (Lenten). So, Lenten are foodstuffs allowed in all types of fasts, namely horticultural products in a raw or cooked state, such as wild and cultivated greens, bulbs<sup>6</sup>, olives (but not oil), legumes and fruits, bread and all types of shellfish and snails (*χοχλιοί*) were also customarily eaten during fasts. Broad beans (*κουκιά*) were indispensable in all fasting periods, as they could be served in a variety of ways, fresh or dried. Local people believe that broad beans are blessed<sup>7</sup>. A characteristic way of serving them in the area is the *βρεχτοκούκια* (dried, soaked in salty water). Also, especially on Clean Monday, *παπούδια*, a mixture of boiled legumes, such as chickpeas, peas and broad beans, is prepared and eaten without oil (cf. Pitykakis 1983: 818). Strict fasts also may include sweets such as the spoon sweets or marmalades from fruits or vegetables.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Σοφεγάδα* is a light dish, made of a mixture of garden-stuffs, greens and vegetables, such as blite, fresh beans, potatoes and courgettes, cooked in the casserole (*γιαχνί*) with or without tomato. In the past, it was prepared with the last vegetables from the summer gardens. Today, it is preferred during fasts, mainly during the summer fast of 15<sup>th</sup> August.

<sup>6</sup> Bulbs (*ασκορδουλάκοι*) are usually pickled and eaten as a side dish for legumes.

<sup>7</sup> An old male informant stated: “*Το κουκί έχει ευκή. Σπέρνεις, τρως. Θερίζεις, τρως. Μαγερεύεις, τρως*” (=The broad bean has a blessing. You seed and you eat. You harvest and you eat. You cook and you eat).



Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---



**Photo 2: Barley Cookies.**

At the same time, in Neapolis, very important for specifying the kind of food that should be consumed or avoided in certain holy anniversaries are local beliefs and traditions about the particular occasion or about the powers attributed to the particular Saint being honoured. For example, on Saint John's Decapitation day (29/8), which is an austere fast, there is the widespread avoidance of consuming foodstuffs with red colour for being linked to blood, such as watermelon.

As we said before, fasting days were considered "days of purity". In the Orthodox dietetic practice "pure" equals to the abstention from blood, consummated in the prohibition of animal meat during holy fasts. Douglas (2001: 71) referred to tabooing blood in the Old Testament: "The rule against eating suet is paired with that for blood: the people of Israel are prohibited from eating suet in the same strong terms as they are forbidden to eat blood (Lev 3: 16–17; 7: 22–6)". The Orthodox Church strictly prohibits the consumption of raw blood, as it is stated in both the Old and New Testaments and according to the perception that identifies blood with soul (Koukoules, 1952: 58). The only accepted reference to blood is the symbolism of the Holy Communion, where the wine and consecrated bread stand for the blood and flesh of Christ respectively (ibid). Those dietetic rules by long enforcing abstention from blood led to a broad avoidance of blood in Greek culinary habits and in other Mediterranean cultures as well (Matthaiou, 1994). Accordingly, in Neapolis, old practices for preserving meat, such as smoking or boiling and preserving in fat ensure the complete removal of blood.

Moreover, people in the vicinity of Neapolis use the word *μιαρά* (polluted/dirty) to denote wild animals, especially reptiles, small hunting creatures like foxes and hunting birds like crows



(Pitykakis, 1983: 625). Those animals cannot be consumed. Dogs also are considered dirty and cannot be consumed. People do not eat animals already dead, killed or choked by hunting animals like dogs and vultures, which relates probably to the analogous strict prohibition in the Byzantine Empire by the Orthodox Church (Koukoules, 1952: 59-60). This avoidance is found also in the prohibitions of the Old Testament:

*At that point Leviticus commands the people not to eat blood, not to eat an animal that has died an unconsecrated death, that is, an animal that has died of itself, or an animal torn by beasts, presumably with its blood still in it (Lev 17: 8–16; see also Deut 14: 21). The dietary laws thus support the law against unconsecrated killing” (Douglas 1999: 151).*

Moreover, according to Douglas, “The Leviticus writer's reverential attitude to life, animal and human, explains the animal corpse pollution rules. ‘Thou shalt not stand upon [profit from] another's blood’ (Lev 19: 16). The case of the animal's blood and the case of the human's blood are parallel. Ritual impurity imposes God's order on his creation” (ibid). In this way also, prohibition against touching a dead animal could be viewed in the light of “comprehensive command to respect the dead body of every land animal” (Douglas 1999: 154).

Accordingly, local people believe that the corpse of a man who consumed dog meat does not melt and deforms, as an afterlife punishment, which imposes a deviation from the perceived natural course of returning “dust to dust”. Related is the belief that the corpse of bad people emits bad smell or it does not decay, whilst the one of saints or of good people smells nice (cf. Kokolaki, 2013: 21). As a classification in the afterlife, good and bad smells function as metaphor of purity and sin (denoted, though, by the same word, *μυρίζω*/smell). Moreover, good and bad smell as linked to purity and pollution in the socio-cultural context may denote difference of class, but also good behavior and neatness (ibid).

The dipole of pure vs. impure is further conveyed metaphorically in the case of bread preparation and consumption until the 1980s in the area of Neapolis. Various qualities of bread were categorized in a scale of purity of the flour. So, pure or white (*χάσικο*) bread was made of peeled wheat and was a rare and very expensive type of bread. Wheat (*σίτινο* or *σταρένιο*) bread was made of the local wheat flour and was dark, as the wheat was not peeled. Half pure (*μεσοκάθαρο*) or mixed (*μυγάδι*) bread was made from both barley and wheat. There was also the barley (*κρίθινο*) bread, the



Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

bread for the poor. Thus, the pure vs. impure dipole in bread consumption marked differences between the social classes and reflected a kind of social discrimination in the polarities of rich vs. poor, bourgeoisie vs. peasant, pure vs. polluted (cf. Kokolaki, 2013: 16). However, nowadays, bread is mostly bought in stores and people prefer to consume barley bread or whole wheat bread made rather than white, in an inversion of their traditional food habits.

Moreover, in the religious sphere, as far as the offering breads in the church are concerned, the white offering bread (*πρόσφορο*) had to be of the finest quality of wheat white flour. This flour was carefully kept apart by the lady of the house in a clean white sack or cloth. Each family had a special seal (*τύπωση*) with which the upper surface of the bread was stamped with Christian symbols. The leaven for those breads was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century prepared on Good Friday in church by the priest's wife and distributed to other women. Women of the house prepared those breads in a ritual way, while nowadays they buy them from the bakeries.

Fasts maybe associated with the presence of two types of unleavened breads that characterize the broader area of Neapolis. The one type is called *λειψανάβατο*, which means without fermentation. This bread is usually prepared in the pan, with or without oil, as a quick and easy to prepare substitute of bread, and is either named *πιττοπούλι* or *πιττάρι*. Unleavened bread is also the *λαγάνα*<sup>8</sup> which is a flat bread baked in the oven for the fast of Shrove Monday, customary in the last forty years. The other type is the so-called *φτάζυμο/ftazymo*<sup>9</sup> which is a special type of bread prepared by substituting leaven or yeast with a mixture of ground chickpeas. Local people categorize it as “not religious” and find that it rather falls in the sphere of magic. This bread, in the area, is mostly linked with the fast of the first fortnight of August. Women believe that this bread is sensitive to the influence of the evil eye, so they prepare the yeast in secrecy and hide the moulded breads. They believe that one must be lucky enough to succeed in finally making *ftazymo*. The informants used the phrase “you had to have it in you”. It is also characteristic that, although women may confide the recipe to others, they avoid letting them watch the preparations. This bread is not prepared often nowadays, because its

---

<sup>8</sup> The word derives either from the ancient Greek ‘*λάγανον*’ or the latin ‘*laganum*’

<sup>9</sup> Local people connect the name “ftazymo” with the difficulty in preparation, saying that the bread has to rise seven times. However, the most probable etymology is that the word derives from the word “*autozyimo*”, which means risen by itself, without yeast.



preparation is time-consuming. Although one can buy *ftazyma* rusks from the bakery, this bread is not generally sold.

The presence or absence of leaven in the bread might also be relevant to the consideration that leaven was associated with sin and early tabooed:

*There was an understanding in Late Antiquity that leaven was a metaphor for corruption and evil. Milgrom says, 'Leaven itself comes from corruption and corrupts the dough with which it is mixed, in general fermentation seems to be a kind of putrefaction' (Douglas, 1999: 236).*

Furthermore, as Douglas observes,

*Tracing the idea through the classifications of Leviticus, teeming is fulfilling God's command to multiply, it is fertility exemplified; the rule that teeming things cannot be presented on the altar derives from this fact. Leaven and honey, for example, partake of the qualities of teeming life, and this is enough, according to analogical reasoning, for them to be classified as antithetical to consecrated things. (Douglas, 1999: 163).*

Although in the vicinity of Neapolis the association of leaven and leavened bread to sin/impurity seems not the case and people cannot identify such a connection, in practice local women use various techniques, in order to ensure blessing of the leaven raising. For example, they used to put in the leaven blessed basil from the Holy Cross feast or rose petals from the Epitaph.

Further, the dipole of purity vs. pollution as related to religious beliefs in the area of Neapolis is instantiated in the stereotyping of religious groups. This classification of impurity was primarily used in the past in order to denote people other than Christians: the Turks (as metonym of the Muslims in general) and the Jews, as they do not keep the same avoidances during religious fasts nor the same fasts. People use the verb *μαγαρίζω*<sup>10</sup>, literally meaning both pollute and be polluted, for not keeping religious fasts. So, in those cases, religious fasts are used as symbolic boundaries between religious groups. For this reason, the aforementioned religious groups functioned as negative stereotypes (cf. Matthaïou 1994). Pitykakis (1983: 575) mentions the following remarks for local people that do not keep the fast of the Great Lent and especially of the Holy Week "It is impossible for the Christians

---

<sup>10</sup>Another word with a similar use is the verb *αρταίνω*, meaning to enrich food with oily or greasy materials (prohibited in fast) in order to become tastier, further used as *αρταίνομαι* in order to denote the breaking of the fast with the consumption of prohibited foods.





Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

not to fast during the Holy Week, instead to be polluted like the Turks” or “Only Jews are polluted during Great Lent.”

Since fasting is the means for the purification of the body and soul, the need for purification sometimes is extended to the cleanness of the houses in the area of Neapolis. In this light, on Shrove Monday, a ritual cleaning of kitchens and houses takes place, marking the symbolic entrance to the fasting period of the Great Lent, while the night before, after the end of the feast, women do not clear the table (*«δε σκώνουνε<sup>11</sup> το τραπέζι»*), because they believe that at this particular night the souls of the dead visit the houses and must find something to eat. Shrove Monday is considered a crucial day, the beginning of a period of strict fast after a period of great enjoyment (Carnival). As a consequence, this day is fasted with severity and austerity, while also women perform all the necessary ritual actions to ensure purification. They carefully clean kitchens, wash utensils, plates and casseroles thoroughly and tidy their houses, in order to remove all polluting remaining of the Carnival. An old informant remembers that her grandmother used to clean all the cooking utensils with ash (*αλουσά*) in the backyard of the house.

Furthermore, nowadays, the conversation about purity vs. impurity in the particular local context seems to be linked with the opposition past vs. present, where the past is idolized and conceived as pure, authentic and better. An old female informant made a remark about the eagerness with which people kept the fast in the past, as related to the household production and the quality and purity of the products. She also makes a direct comparison to the present times. She said: *“For the 15<sup>th</sup> August we would prepare one batch of ftazyma to make it through the fifteen days. For this reason we would fast, because we had everything. And there were our own things on the table, our flour that we milled and cleaned ourselves... not all those flours that are now quickly milled and are given to us, even if unclean”*.

Within this local context, fast is related to memory, being a case for nostalgic recollection especially of the old. Holtzman (2006a: 365) characterises it “an important engine for the construction of intense bodily memories”. As nostalgia, food memory “relies on a lay notion of sentimentality for a lost past, viewing food as a vehicle for recollections of childhood and family”

---

<sup>11</sup>‘Σκώνω’ literally means lift up, here figuratively means tidy up



(ibid: 367). Thus, the body becomes a mnemonic locus where, according to Connerton (1989), the past is inscribed through repetitive rituals and embodiments. Fasts and ritual meals are mnemonic performances embodying the past in the form of tradition. In this sense the past is not static. It is rather established and perpetuated or even argued through participation in the multisensory experience of the fast.

### ***The Function of Ambiguity in fasting Practices: A Discussion***

Historically speaking, although fasting in the religious context is customarily regulated by the Church, the issue of fasting has been rather complicate and ambiguous for the local population in Neapolis. This ambiguity mainly relates to the plurality and complexity in the fasting rules and their phrasing by the Church. This phenomenon is also observed in other parts of Greece and is attributed by historians mainly to the transition from paganism to Christianity or the relation between the Jewish tradition and Christianity, and, at the same time, to the great theological disputes these issues have diachronically caused (c.f. Matthaïou, 1994).

For Greek folklorists folk religious behaviour includes attitudes either related to Christian religion or ascribed to an ancient religious system which according to Megas (1976: 14) is “explicit remnants of ancient religion attributed to external demons”. People, in this line of thought, instantiate these beliefs in the “folk” worship by adopting a determined ritual behaviour, in order to please, propitiate, attract or dissuade those demons.

This ambiguity in the local fasting practices might also be related to the way Christian beliefs about holiness “disregard the material circumstances and judge according to the motives and disposition of the agent” (Douglas 2001: 11), where the individual choice is important. Stressed and enhanced are ethical and moral chastity and not the material circumstances: “<sup>10</sup> Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen and understand.<sup>11</sup> What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them<sup>12</sup>’.”

---

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 15:10-11.



In the particular context of the vicinity of Neapolis, this ambiguity may be further caused by the multiple and often distinct interpretations of the food prohibitions by ecclesiastic and secular environments or by the difficulty of both the church and the parish for materialising the ecclesiastic rules as well as the emphasis they both attribute on the individual choice. Church exercises power through two types of governance and correction, precision on one hand and condescension or economy and lenience<sup>13</sup> on the other for considering human weakness and the best interest for the salvation of each individual.

Subsequently, ambiguity is observed in the exemptions of the fasting rules that vary according to the circumstance, which might relate either to the individual or social status (e.g. the ill and the pregnant) or the type of the fast. Therefore, as far as the type of fasts is concerned, there are cases where formally the fast is abolished (*καταλύεται*) either with prescribed fish eating or with oil and wine consumption. So, prescribed fish eating is, as we have already seen, on the Annunciation, on the Palm Sunday and on the Transfiguration. Local people say “For the sake of our Lord we must touch something of fish origin on those days, even if it is only a splinter”. Moreover, an austere fast such as the St John’s Decapitation day can be abolished for olive oil and wine consumption, if it coincides with Saturday or Sunday that are considered festive days.

There is also the option of individual release from fasting, as in case of severe illness or pregnancy. What local people say “*Ασθενής και οδοιπόρος αμαρτίαν ουκ έχει*” (the ill and the traveler do not sin, if they do not fast), which paraphrases the saying “*Ασθενής ή και δηπόρος αμαρτίαν ουκ έχει*” (the ill and the pregnant do not sin, if they do not fast)<sup>14</sup>, is often used, in order to present an excuse for their not fasting. However, this exception to the rule is not always followed by local people, since many pregnant or ill people choose to keep the fast, especially during the Passion Week, ignoring their condition.

Ambiguity is also observed in the kind of edibles prohibited in fasts. While some edibles are prohibited in fasts, others that belong to the same substance category are allowed. Oil is prohibited, while olives are allowed. Wine is prohibited, while grapes and vinegar are acceptable. Moreover,

---

<sup>13</sup> In the 1<sup>st</sup> annotation of the Canon 46 of the Apostles, in *Pidalion* (1841: 30) offers this explanation for the not fixed and contradictory behavior of the Church towards deviations and heresies.

<sup>14</sup> In the interpretation of the Canon 69 of the Apostles, in *Pidalion*, illness and pregnancy/childbed are considered instances where not fasting is excused (1841: 53).



while fish and eggs are prohibited, fish eggs - mainly fish roe (*‘ταραμάς’*) and caviar - are classified as Lenten food. We could classify those edibles in an intermediate category of allowable foods and further, we may distinguish between two subcategories, substances of vegetal origin (such as olives) and those of animal origin (such as fish roe).

What best defines taboos of the aforementioned edibles of vegetal origin is their relation to the natural state (Levi-Strauss, 1997). So, the edible in its raw and unprocessed state (olives and grapes) is allowed as being closer to nature and categorised as pure or purifying, while its processed form is prohibited (oil and wine) as being close to culture, following the oppositions of nature vs. culture and natural vs. culturally transformed (ibid). Vinegar in this sense belongs in the category of rotten which as physical decay is also a natural course of degradation. Furthermore, wine and oil were associated from antiquity with religious offerings to the gods, thus they belonged to the sphere of the sacred and tabooed foodstuffs (c.f. Douglas, 2001). Wine further was related to mystic and ecstatic cults, like that of the god Dionysus, and abnormal behaviour. As it causes euphoria, it is avoided in fasting periods. Vinegar on the contrary is allowed, perhaps because of its sour taste, as symbolising the punishment of bodily passions. This view is enhanced by the local perceptions that link vinegar to the Passions of Christ, as Christ on the cross was given vinegar instead of water. Moreover, about the use of fish eggs during fasts is probably because roe is taken directly from the fish as ovum which is not fertilized, so it cannot be considered as carrying life.

Furthermore, parallel to a generalised avoidance of blood in Greek culinary habits caused by an old and prolonged taboo on blood, as we have seen earlier, the fundamental rule of blood avoidance was not kept equally by all people. Indicative is the case of *ομαθιές*, which is a type of sausage prepared in the rural areas of Neapolis up to now. *Αιματίαι* or *ομαθιές* was a type of sausage made of animal blood, especially pork, which was abolished by the Byzantines and its preparation or consumption was strictly punished (Koukoules, 1952: 57-59). However, there are indications that this sausage was prepared with blood in Crete until the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in Aetolia until the 50's (ibid).

Because of this phenomenal lenience at the individual and social level, fast is continually negotiated and constantly reminded by the priests in the church before their parish in Neapolis. This does not mean that the disapproval by the local Church of certain popular religious practices has resolved the issue. On the opposite, there is often a conflict between the religious prohibitions and



Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

popular/public practice. For example, although the fast of the first fifteen days of August is strict, many people consume meat on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August at the local folk festival of Virgin's Assumption in Neapolis, a practice criticized by the priests.

Likewise, nowadays, although there is a great range of foodstuffs that local people can use in order to substitute in strict fasts for meat, milk and olive oil (e.g. soya products), this is a practice explicitly discouraged by the priests of the local parishes, who preach that the essence of the fasting is lost if people just substitute. In addition, although the priests disapprove the custom of bringing sweet pies to the church in the feast of St Fanourios, local people continue to do so. People believe that St Fanourios reveals (*φανερώνει*) lost things or people's fortune, from false etymological connection of the saint's name (*Φανούριος*) to the verb 'reveal' (*φανερώνω*). Thus, people who have lost any object, ask the Saint's help, in order to find it. In return they promise (*τάζουν*) to make a special pie, the *φανουρόπιτα*. In this feast women bring their pies to the church of St Fanourios, which is situated at the Northern side of Neapolis, they store them outside in the courtyard and offer them at the end of the Mass to the congregation. In contrast, consecrated breads are blessed and formally distributed inside the church. For the priests, this feast is a time for preaching that the search must not in fact be related to lost objects, but to lost souls.



**Photo 3: Feast of St Fanourios – Young Women bringing ‘Φανουρόπιττες’.**

In addition, the issue touches on the social character of fasting. One way of imposing fasts is the control by socio-cultural environments. In the vicinity of Neapolis, not fasting in the past was criticised and punished by social isolation. People who did not fast were labeled as “anti-Christ” or “unfaithful” and were equated, especially during 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, as we have already seen, with Turks or Jews, while during the civil war and dictatorship with atheists or communists.



Talking about the public and social character of fasting in the area under consideration, we must mention that, during fasts, local bakeries and confectioneries usually sell or serve only Lenten sweets and pastry. This practice is a way of conforming to the pressure of the community and to seasonal demands of the local market related to religion. It also helps regulating the fasting behaviour in public and, in a way, helps the community conform to religious rules. It is relevant that those stores are run by local people. Furthermore, although the situation now has changed in Neapolis and the issue of fasting is considered issue of personal choice, the disapproval towards people who do not fast becomes sometimes obvious, though not explicitly expressed. In this sense, the social enforcement of the public opinion, of “what people will say”, is still very strong, as it is constantly reminded within the families and taken into account.

Accordingly, in fasts there is the expectation of recompense (moral and spiritual) along with the fear of being marginalised in this world and the other. So, although fast was originally considered an embodied proof of faith for people in the area of Neapolis, it has always been a process functioning inside a whole system of reciprocal expectations. The fasting person assures forgiveness, salvation or entrance to paradise. The jeopardy is mainly moral, of losing one’s salvation and soul. However, there is also the fear for bodily punishment, which sometimes may be immediate. For instance, in the area, fever and shivering are believed to be the punishment for not fasting in St John’s Decapitation day. Accordingly, this day is called “of St John who brings the chills” (*του Αγίου Ιωάννη του Πιγολόγου*).

In this setting, perceptions for the power of food as embodied practice are related to the ambiguity in religious behaviour of the local population. So, women used to consume vinegar with lentils or snails or bread on Good Friday, in order to “share Christ’s suffering on the cross”<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, the avoidance of certain edibles is linked to the belief that foodstuffs transmit certain characteristics to the one who consumes them: for example the one who eats cocks brain (*μυαλά κοκόρου*) becomes *κοκορόμυαλος* (=lightheaded, silly). However, although people’s behaviour conforms to these perceptions, many locals, especially the literate, largely refer to them as “superstitions”. Those perceptions might be seen in the light of an informal set of rules that regulate

---

<sup>15</sup> According to the local beliefs, lentils stand for the tears of the Virgin Mary and vinegar for the sour wine that the soldiers gave to Christ on the cross.



the indigenous religious experience. Edibles and eating habits, as part of this system, function as the instantiation of those rules.

Food attains great importance where and when there is a link between the material and spiritual. Iossifides (1991) has talked about the distinction between the κοσμικός/secular person and the πνευματικός/spiritual or sacred, while Dubisch (1995: 61) has argued against the presence of this dualistic view in Greek Orthodoxy. In fact, although there is a distinction between the natural/material world/body and the mystic/spiritual world/body, it is believed that “the material world can make manifest the holy” and may become a means towards spiritual fulfillment and purification: “material manifestations” at the same time function as the “manifestation of the holy” (ibid).

Additionally, it is relevant that older people in Neapolis conform to religious rules, while the young are more reluctant to do so. In this context, mothers insist on family members keeping fasts, mainly teaching self-restraint and self-control to their children. For instance, although most people usually respect the fast of Shrove Monday, the young have difficulty in keeping the fast, so they are criticized by the old. However, an old informant mentioned that, although she respects fasts and also insists that her children and grandchildren should keep fasts, when she was young she tended also to avoid fasting on Shrove Monday “We didn’t sleep at night, we continued eating from Sunday and so we didn’t have to fast.” Another old informant mentioned that they used to eat the leftovers from Cheese Sunday. This reveals not only that the implementation of fasting rules functions within a frame of intergenerational relations and transfer of knowledge, but also the change of people’s perceptions and attitude towards fasting rules over the years as their role in the household and in society changes.

People in Neapolis, recognise the value of fasts not only for purifying and empowering the soul but also in the context of the sustainable use of local resources. This could be also seen in an economic and social perspective, as fasts in the area are based on foodstuffs accessible to all that mainly relate to agricultural production or gathered goods found in the wild as wild plants and snails. As the cycle of production and consumption is synchronized with the religious calendar (Sutton, 2001a: 29), there is a greater dependence on seasonal products which may lead to efficient use of natural resources. Moreover, fasts impose a uniform type of diet to both the rich and the poor,



although the rich have a greater range of choices in Lenten foodstuffs. Finally, in these culinary habits we discern the dependence on seasonal products which led in the past to an efficient use of seasonal natural resources.

Moreover, the ambivalence we observe in Neapolis, which results to a divergence of local fasting practices from ecclesiastic rules, reflects a proposed dichotomy between the 'official' religion and worship and the 'folk'/popular ones that are treated as parallel systems: the first is endowed with power and authority, while the second is the local variation depending on people outside hierarchy (cf. Dubisch, 1995: 57-58). Dubisch proposes that:

*the notion of folk or popular religion implicitly prioritizes, and the view of Greek women as principally responsible for the activities of 'folk' religion carries the danger of placing women once more inside, constrained by a male structure... we should examine how analysis of gender and religion leads to 'deconstruction' of the very notion of religion itself, to a focus on practice and experience, and to a critical reanalysis of a folk/official dichotomy (1991: 43-44).*

In this sense, women perform or are responsible for activities in the sphere of folk ritual and religion. This type of folk worship employs women as main agents, although the relation of women to the sacred sphere is ambiguous: women are often viewed as polluted, weak, inclined to sin and antithetical to the sacred or as mediating between sin/danger and purity, seen both as Eve and *Panayia* (Virgin Mary), who seem to represent the two antithetical poles of female existence (cf. Du Boulay, 1986, 1991).

A female presence is necessary for all religious practices in the area of Neapolis; not only in the form of often church attending as a member of the congregation, but as a performer of ritual tasks in the religious sphere in and out of the church, at homes or in the public village space. Women participate in church life by enacting various rituals such as ornamenting the *Επιτάφιος*/Epitaph on Maundy Thursday night after the liturgy. They also enact rituals in private for ensuring the welfare of the household and connecting to significant feasts throughout the year. Furthermore, they undertake the ritual purification, protection and consecration of the house which is often synchronised with the empowerment of the soul through fasting.

Female performances constitute a significant part of the religious system, both as participants in formal religious rituals and especially in the sphere of the folk tradition, which in part is sanctified





by the church. However, the informal female role in the activities of folk religion may suggest the reproduction of a stereotypical dichotomy between a male dominated church hierarchy endowed with the enactment of formal religious rituals and a negotiation of the female position in the religious sphere as agents of folk religion and worship (cf. Dubisch 1983, 1991).

What Dubisch names a “feminine cast to religion” (1991: 42) covers the responsibility for the “non-sacred aspects of rituals” upon which the welfare and prosperity of the household is based. Religious duties performed by women are “a kind of equivalent of kin work” (ibid: 43), perceived as feminine and domestic and, in consequence, as functioning within a male-centred system. Moreover, although women-as-agents replicate religious perceptions and behaviours related to their stereotypical and ambivalent position, the female enactment of folk religious rituals functions as a counter-discourse of the female world as female actors are struggling to defend their position in the male dominated secular and sacred world.

The aforementioned ambiguity in the possible enactment of the dietetic ecclesiastic rules can be most clearly identified in the contrast between on one hand the life of the secular households in the vicinity of Neapolis, which is partly regulated by the church dietetic rules, and the ascetic way of life in the monasteries on the other, where strict dietetic rules apply not only during fasts but also in their everyday diet. At the local level, diet in fasts is dictated by the Church and regulated within the households, while the everyday diet is dictated and controlled mainly within the households and partly by the Church (as in the case from Wednesdays and Fridays or in feasts). What is mainly imposed by the Church is mainly the time and type of fast. However, this is further related to the parallel function of “folk religion” which is enhanced and generalised through sociocultural reinforcement. Up to now this is the case not only for the rural populations but also for the bourgeoisie (Matthaiou, 1994). Accordingly, the ecclesiastic rules on imposing dates and content for fasts would ideally harmonize with individual choice and social reinforcement over fasting on specific days.

Furthermore, looking at the dynamics of fasting experience, it would be interesting to envisage, as Fischer (2008: 1) suggests, “how a symbolic system ‘drives’ the material organization of human groups” or how “mental sophistication” materializes, hypothesising that there is “an interdependent relationship between the limits of our experience (what things can do) at any one time and the range of possible operations that can be impacted by symbolic transcription” (ibid: 9).



Despite changes in food availability over time that may drive local food choices in the broader area of Neapolis, some underlying principles remain fairly stable due to their reinforcement within religious symbolism. In relation to the above, it is worth noticing that, although tourism, the mass media and the development of transports have a great impact in people's lives and visibly influence customs and everyday practices, in Neapolis people conform to religious rules which they identify as important part of their local identity. Traditional foodstuffs are often related to fasts and form a shield that "protects" local people from the invasion, especially nowadays, of other ways of life. Moreover, the traditional is vested with nostalgia, especially by older people, who are considered carriers of the past and feel rather justified by the new trend towards the benefits of traditional diet (cf. Holtzman, 2006a).

Modernisation is often considered an obstacle to the preservation of the perception of the sense of distinction and of the collective self. At the same time, it may be considered as the reason for the existence of a subconscious symbolic boundary system. In the same way that people search for their individual identity, groups look for their collective identity. Its creation and existence is a kind of protection, or rather of defence, against decay, which especially threatens remote communities undergoing population movement to urban areas. Bell and Valentine remark: "Food often gets used to articulate defensive uses of community, as resistance to globalising (or modernising or otherwise threatening) forces, in fact. Thus, the inhabitants of New Jersey Pine Barrens delineate an 'us' and a 'them' through their views about food, which becomes a 'badge of identity' and a powerful boundary marker" (1997: 204).

Although ambiguity maybe perceived as the blurring or trespassing of boundaries, which are used for ordering individual and social experience, and, thus, it may be seen as a marginal state which threatens conformity and weakens the system (Douglas, 1979), it seems that, in the particular context under consideration, ambiguity can be turned into a mechanism of negotiation between various actors through which the system is sustained and perpetuated. Undoubtedly, ambiguity concerning fasting is related to the renegotiation of local identity under the impact of modernisation and innovation in the vicinity of Neapolis. This renegotiation is further imposed by various factors both internal and external, such as local social institutions and cultural traditions or political and religious authority.



Likewise, Papataxiarchis (1993) talked about the “multiplicity” of ideations present in a context of time which are related to strategies initiated by the church, the state and social classes.

In relation to the above, Douglas observes that “any culture that allows its guiding concepts to be continually under review is immune from cosmological pollutions” (1979: 201). She also observes that “As in language, there are different degrees of tolerance of ambiguity... Cultural intolerance of ambiguity is expressed by avoidance, by discrimination and by pressure to conform” (1979: 199).

Within the broader issue of the renegotiation of local identity, the ideation and instantiation of religious fasting is related to the conceptualization of a category of Lenten food as part of the collective traditional knowledge in the area of Neapolis. Fasting and its opposite, feasting, are part of that knowledge as culinary enactments of a local religious belief system. This system is mainly maintained through ambiguity. Although the religious frame of fasts in its core (represented by the official religious rules) has not changed, change takes place in the individual enactment and embodiment of religious prohibitions, which is negotiated in church by the priests and renegotiated in public mostly by the older or in households mainly by women/mothers. Women are major actors in the realisation of the religious constraints that are imposed through fasting, not only through the embodiment of fasts but also through the regulation of the family’s behavior. In this way, a familiar ideational frame for people is reproduced and enhanced, being part of a cultural mechanism that provides people with the ability of making choices.

According to Fischer (2008: 9) cultural symbolic models do not just reflect reality. People may use symbolic knowledge in a dynamic manner, in order to meet new needs and support adaptation within a system of cultural mechanisms relating to transformation. Culture offers people the ability to mediate change, adapt and develop, being a kind of “ideational technology” of capabilities and resources used in order to respond to various situations critical to defining and building the surrounding world (ibid). In this sense these systems not only help people to adjust and maintain their status in their environment, but they also enable human invention leading to development and change (adaptive agency).



### *Final Suggestions*

According to the material we have reviewed, there are proposed three general axes of the religious rules related to fasts: context (time), content (type) and choice for fasting. Time is fixed and stable, there are set exact days of the week and periods during which there is an obligation for fasting. As far as the type of the fast is concerned, even though absolute abstinence from food is prescribed in monastic life, it is rarely followed as such by the congregation. It rather means abstinence from specific types of edibles and even drinks and the consequent function of a Lenten food category. This dipole of food prohibited vs. food allowed makes up a familiar ideational framework for the local population.

Tabooing blood consumption is absolute in the Greek Orthodox diet. In this respect, fast means the categorical prohibition against meat. However, as we see in the specific case of Neapolis, the prohibition of the other food categories is rather ambiguous and circumstantial. Moreover, the issue of individual choice and collective enactment of fasting rules may vary. Very often, there is a need for priests to remind their parish of this or even reprimand them for a possible abolition of the rules. Although fasting rules are imposed by the Church and phrased in the discourse of the priests, they are regulated and negotiated in public and in private inside the household mainly by women. Female performances constitute a significant part of religious practices, both as participants in formal religious rituals and as principal actors in the sphere of the folk tradition. Female members of the family, especially the older, become mediators between the religious, the collective and the individual sphere. Women participate as main actors in the performance and actualising of the religious constraints that are imposed through fasting, not only through the embodiment of fasts but also through the regulation of the family's behaviour.

Furthermore, the conversation about purity/impurity in the local thought of Neapolis seems to be linked with the opposition past/present. In relation to modernization, despite changes in the local context which include food availability and food choices, the religious official frame of fasts has not changed. Change has taken place in the individual and collective enactment of religious prohibitions and relates to the availability of options and the corresponding choices which are negotiated in the church with the priests and in the households with women.



Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

Ambiguity in religious practices relating to food in the area of Neapolis, especially the ambivalence between the discourse of the Church and the individual enactment, may be interpreted in part -within the framework of adaptive agency- as adaptive strategies of the local people in their effort to respond to the dynamics of cultural change. This ambiguity must be seen not only in cause-effect logic, but rather in the sense of cultural poetics, as the cultural mechanisms, capabilities and resources people employ dynamically in order to process and sustain their broader socio-cultural environment, to re-produce a familiar and well established ideational frame or adapt to the new circumstances that emerge, drive change and innovation. In this context, this cultural poetics is shown not in the actual rules or goals that local people set and employ, but rather in the strategies that they use and in the outcomes of their actions.



## References

- Agaprios Ieromonahos and Nikodimos Monahos. (1841). *Pidalion* (Rudder). Athens: K. Garpola Edition
- Bell, D. And Valentine, G. (1997). *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat*. London: Routledge.
- Caplan, P. (1994). *Feasts, Fasts, Famine: Food for thought*. Oxford: Berg.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cowan, J. (1991). Going Out for Coffee? Contesting the Grounds of gendered Pleasures in Everyday Sociability. In P. Loizos & E. Papataxiarchis (Eds.) *Contested Identities: Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece*, (pp. 180-202). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Danforth, L. (1983). Power through Submission in the Anastenaria. *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 1, pp. 203-223.
- Douglas, M. (1979). Pollution. In W. Lessa & E. Vogt (Eds.) *Reader in Comparative Religion*, (pp. 196-202). New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Douglas, M. (1996). *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology*. London: Routledge.
- Douglas, M. (1999). *Leviticus as Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Douglas, M. (2001). *Purity and Danger. An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Dubisch, J. (1983). Greek Women: Sacred or Profane. *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 1, pp. 185-202.
- Dubisch, J. (1991). Gender, Kinship and Religion: 'Reconstructing' the Anthropology of Greece. In P. Loizos & E. Papataxiarchis, (Eds) *Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece*, (pp. 29-46), Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dubisch, J. (1995). *In a Different Place. Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dubisch, J. (2004). *Se Dhiaforetiko Topo: O Anthropologhos os Proskynitis* (In a Different Place: The Anthropologist as Pilgrim). In *Opsis tis Anthropologhikis Skepsis kai Erevnas stin Ellada*, (pp. 221-244). Athens: EL.ET.E.
- Du Boulay, J. (1984). The Blood: Symbolic Relationships between Descent, Marriage, Incest Prohibitions and Spiritual Kinship in Greece. *Man*, N.S., 19 (4), pp. 533-556.



- Du Boulay, J. (1986). Women-Images of their Nature and Destiny in Rural Greece. In J. Dubisch (ed), *Gender and Power in Rural Greece* (pp. 139-168). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Du Boulay, J. (1991). Cosmos and Gender in Village Greece. In P. Loizos & E. Papataxiarchis, (Eds.) *Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece*, (pp. 47-78). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Falassi, A. (1987). Festival: Definition and Morphology. In A. Falassi (Ed.) *Time out of time: Essays on the Festival*, (pp.1-10). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Fischer, M. D. (2004). Integrating Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Culture: the 'Hard' and the 'Soft'. *Cybernetics and Systems*, 35(2), pp. 147-162.
- Fischer, M. D. (2005). Culture and Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Emergent Order and the Internal Regulation of Shared Symbolic Systems. *Cybernetics and Systems*, 36, pp. 735-752.
- Fischer, M.D. (2006). The ideation and instantiation of arranging marriage within an urban community in Pakistan, 1982-2000. *Contemporary South Asia*, 15(3), pp. 325-339.
- Fischer, M.D. (2008). Cultural Dynamics: formal descriptions of cultural processes. *Structure and Dynamics: e Journal of Anthropological and Related Sciences*, 3, 2, Article 6. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/imbs/socdyn/sdeas/vol3/iss2/art6>
- Fischler, C. (1980). Food habits, Social Change and the Nature/Culture Dilemma. *Social Science Information*, 19(6), pp. 937-953.
- Fischler, C. (1988). Food, Self and Identity. *Social Science Information*, 27(2), pp. 275-292.
- Heinrich, M. et al. (2005). 'Local Food – Nutraceuticals': an Example of a Multidisciplinary Research Project on Local Knowledge. *Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology*, 56, Suppl. 1, pp. 5-22.
- Holzman, J. D. (2006). Food and Memory. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35, pp. 361–78.
- Koukoules, F. (1952). *Vyzandinon Vios ke Politismos* (Life and Culture of the Byzantines), Vol. E. Athens: Collection de l' Institut Français d' Athènes.
- Leach, E. (1979). Two Essays Concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time. In W. Lessa & E. Vogt (Eds.) *Reader in Comparative Religion*, (pp. 108-116). New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Leach, E. (1976). *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1968). *The Origin of Table Manners. Introduction to a Science of Mythology: 3*, transl. by J. & D. Weightman. New York: Harper and Row.



- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1997). The Culinary Triangle. In C. Counihan and P. Van Esterik (Eds) *Food and culture: A reader* (pp. 28-35) .
- Matthaiou, A. (1993). *I Hrisi ton Proiondon tis Elias sti Diatrofi, mesa apo ta keimena tis Tourkokratias* (The use of olive products in nutrition, through the texts of Tutkish occupation). In *Elia ke Ladi, D' Tiimero Ergasias*, (Olive and Oil, 4<sup>th</sup> Conference Proceedings), (pp 423-431). Athens: *PolitistikoTechnologiko Idryma ETVA-ELAIS*.
- Matthaiou, A. (1994). *Diaititikes Apagorefsis stin Tourkokratia* (Dietary Prohibitions during Turkish Occupation). *Historica*, i. 21, pp. 259-287.
- Matthaiou, A. (1997). *Apotelei i Diatrofi Aksia sto Neoelliniko Politismo?* (Does Nutrition Constitute a Value in Modern Greek Culture?). *Praktika A' Simposiou: Topiki paradosi ke politismikos tourismos*, (Proceeding of the 1<sup>st</sup> Symposium of Local Tradition and Cultural Tourism), (pp. 128-136). Lefkada: *Pnevmatiko Kendro Dimou Lefkadas*.
- Megas, G. (1976). *Ellinikai Eortai ke Ethima tis Laikis Latreias* (Greek Feasts and Customs of Folk Worship). Athens.
- Milingou-Markantoni, M. (2006). *Dendra, Fyta, Anthi ston Laiko Politismo ton Neoteron Ellinon*, (Trees, plants, flowers in the folk culture of Mordern Greeks). Athens: *Stihiagra*.
- Papataxiarchis, E. (1993). *Eisagogi: To parelthon sto paron. Anthropologia ke i meleti tis neoellinikis koinonias* (Introduction: The past in the present. Anthropology and the study of Modern Greek society). In E. Papataxiarchis & Th. Paradellis (Eds.), *Anthropologia ke Parelthon: Symvoles stin koinoniki istoria tis Neoteris Elladas* (Anthropology and the Past: Contributions in social history of Modern Greece), (pp. 13-74). Athens: *Alexandria*.
- Pitykakis, M.I. (1983). *To Glossiko Idioma tis Anatolikis Kritis* (The Linguistic Idiom of Eastern Crete), vol. A (A-N) & B (M-Ω). Neapolis-Crete: *P.L.E.A.M.*
- Seremetakis, C. N. (1991). *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sutton, D. (1996). Explosive Debates: Dynamite, Tradition, and the State. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 69, 2, pp. 66-78.
- Sutton, D. (2001a). *Remembrance of Repasts: an Anthropology of Food and Memory*. Oxford: Berg.
- Sutton, D. (2001b). Whole Foods: Revitalization through Everyday Synesthetic Experience. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 25(2), pp. 120-130.





Maria Kokolaki, 07b/2017

Fasting and Purity: Choice, Ambiguity and the Negotiation of the Past in a Cretan Town.

---

### ***Biography***

Maria Kokolaki holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology and an M.A. in Social Anthropology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (U.K.C.). She has a background in Medieval and Modern Greek Literature and Greek Folk Studies (School of Philosophy at the University of Athens). She is an External Associate at the Centre of Social Anthropology and Computing (CSAC), Human Area Resource Files (HRAF) Advanced Research Centres, Yale University. She was an Honorary Research Associate at the School of Anthropology and Conservation of the University of Kent.

### ***Βιογραφικό***

Η κ. Μαρία Κοκολάκη είναι Διδάκτωρ Κοινωνικής Ανθρωπολογίας του Πανεπιστημίου του Κεντ (University of Kent at Canterbury) της Μεγάλης Βρετανίας. Είναι κάτοχος Μεταπτυχιακού Διπλώματος στην Κοινωνική Ανθρωπολογία από το ίδιο Πανεπιστήμιο. Έχει πτυχίο Φιλολογίας με εξειδίκευση στη Μεσαιωνική και Νεοελληνική Φιλολογία από τη Φιλοσοφική σχολή του Πανεπιστημίου Αθηνών. Μετά την ολοκλήρωση του διδακτορικού της διετέλεσε επίτιμη επιστημονική συνεργάτιδα (Honorary Research Associate) στη Σχολή Ανθρωπολογίας (School of Anthropology and Conservation) του Πανεπιστημίου του Κεντ. Είναι εξωτερική επιστημονική συνεργάτιδα του Κέντρου Κοινωνικής Ανθρωπολογίας και Υπολογιστών (CSAC) των ερευνητικών κέντρων HRAF Advanced Research Centres (EU), Human Relations Area Files (Yale University).