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**Environmental tourist Utopias and the Quest for highland Halkidiki.**

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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.

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## *Environmental tourist Utopias and the Quest for highland Halkidiki.*

### **Abstract**

Two types of travelling and tourism presuppose the quest of utopias. This paper is an attempt to anthropologically conceptualize the representation of Halkidiki as an environmental utopia with reference to its tourist industry. I focus on the developments of the last two decades. Ethnographically I direct my attention to the highland tourist resorts of Halkidiki located close to the town of Arnea and the village of Taxiarchis. I argue that Halkidiki can be divided in four different zones based on different tourist utopian promises. I also argue that the focus on the natural beauties of Halkidiki becomes dominant, together with a focus on traditional cultures, in the case of highland tourist resorts. The most interesting in the case of Halkidiki is that the relationship between locals and tourists has been determined on the basis of 'who was first' involved in imagining the tourist utopias. The development of tourism in Kassandra and Sithonia was the result of demands coming from the urbanites of Thessaloniki in the 1970s and the 1980s. The development of tourism in the highlands of Halkidiki followed the other way around. Tourism in the highlands has been the outcome of an offer addressed to the urbanites of Thessaloniki and Athens. This offer came from the side of local (native businessmen) and non-local actors (EU funding and developmental agencies) in the last two decades. They are those who actually created Holomontas based on assumptions regarding the utopian desires of middle-class residents of Thessaloniki and Athens.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, Tourism, Greece, Halkidiki.

### **Περίληψη**

Η τουριστική ανάπτυξη της Χαλκιδικής ξεκίνησε στις χερσονήσους της Κασσάνδρας και της Σιθωνίας στη δεκαετία του 1960. Η τουριστική αναπαράσταση της Χαλκιδικής βασίζεται στο φυσικό της κάλος, στην υπόσχεση δηλαδή μιας περιβαλλοντικής ουτοπίας σε απόσταση λίγων ωρών οδήγησης από τη Θεσσαλονίκη. Στις δεκαετίες που ακολούθησαν διαμορφώθηκαν τέσσερις τουριστικές ζώνες με διακριτά χαρακτηριστικά: η «κοσμοπολίτικη Κασσάνδρα» όπου το φυσικό



περιβάλλον υπάρχει ως σκηνικό μιας βαριάς βιομηχανίας μαζικού τουρισμού, η Σιθωνία που κατασκευάζεται ως επιτομή ενός «περιβαλλοντικού παραδείσου», το Άγιο Όρος με την ιδιαιτερότητα του θρησκευτικού τουρισμού και η ορεινή Χαλκιδική. Η παρούσα μελέτη εξετάζει την αναπαράσταση της Χαλκιδικής ως περιβαλλοντικής ουτοπίας εστιάζοντας στην ορεινή Χαλκιδική. Η εθνογραφική έρευνα (2014-2015) βασίστηκε στις απόψεις και τις πρακτικές των ντόπιων που εργάζονται στα τουριστικά καταλύματα ορεινού τουρισμού της Αρναίας και του Ταξιάρχη. Υποστηρίζεται ότι η ανάπτυξη του τουρισμού στη ζώνη της ορεινής Χαλκιδικής προέκυψε τις τελευταίες δύο δεκαετίες από τη σχεδιασμένη προσφορά κατασκευής μιας περιβαλλοντικής ουτοπίας για τους αστούς της Θεσσαλονίκης και της Αθήνας. Η ανάπτυξη αυτή προέκυψε μέσα από τις μεταπολεμικές ανακατατάξεις στην τοπική οικονομία και κοινωνία. Το συγκεκριμένο μοντέλο τουρισμού συγκροτεί απτές εμπειρίες της σχέσης παράδοσης και τουρισμού και προϋποθέτει ένα συγκεκριμένο αυθεντικότητας έναντι των «ξενόφερτου» μοντέλου της τουριστικής βιομηχανίας στην Κασσάνδρα και στη Σιθωνία. Η όλη διαδικασία εμπλέκει συγκεκριμένες απόψεις για τη διάκριση φύσης – πολιτισμού, παράδοσης και νεωτερικότητας, αγροτικού και αστικού χώρου.

*Λέξεις Κλειδιά:* Ανθρωπολογία, Τουρισμός, Ελλάδα, Χαλκιδική.



## ***Introduction***

The first group of French journalists officially invited by the Halkidiki Tourism Organization in the summer of 2015 did not have any difficulties in describing the area. Writing for *Le Figaro* magazine, *Le pPoint*, *Lui* magazine and *Le Bottin gourmand*, the journalist talked about ‘Le petit paradis, Halkidiki!’<sup>1</sup> This is not a surprise. Most tourist guides published since the late 1960s in English, French and German have offered a similar presentation of Halkidiki.<sup>2</sup> Tourist guides impose specific perceptions over places not only for the tourists but for the various categories of natives as well as the businessmen engaged in the tourist sector (Bourdieu 1990). Thus, they establish expectations of experiences leading to specific investments projects.<sup>3</sup> Presenting Halkidiki as a ‘paradise’ is closely related to the natural environment of the region. Tourists resorts all over the world are famous for a number of things religious sites, sex industry, ancient heritage, entertainment clusters, natural beauties, cultural industry, etc.<sup>4</sup> With the exemption of the case of Mount Athos, the tourist gaze over Halkidiki focuses on its natural beauties.

All types of travelling and tourism presuppose the quest of utopias. The Middle Age Christian travelers who walked for weeks the path to Santiago de Compostelawere looking for their salvation. The upper bourgeois youth of the 19<sup>th</sup> century attempting ‘Le Grand Tour’ in the Mediterranean were eager to visit the sites of classical antiquity but also to experience the utopian pleasures of the Orient. The travelers heading towards the western Indian province of Goa in the 1980s gradually created their own hippy-style utopian communities. The tourists spending one month every summer in isolated resorts in the Rocky Mountains argue that they discover an unspoiled natural utopia. All these utopias refer to some kind of promise (Holden 2009: 373–389). What is actually promised varies according to the aspirations of the tourists, the travelers, the visitors.<sup>5</sup> However, in order to cover the needs of the many, the utopias promised have to be as ambiguous and vague as possible. As Tower and Kolakowski argue, ambiguity is typical of all

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://respentza.blogspot.gr>, accessed June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Mike2014, Let's Go2009, Lonely Planet2012, McLoughlin 1995.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that most studies related to the development of the tourist sector in Halkidiki follow the ‘sell the beauty of its nature’ scenario. See, for example, Laloumis2014 and Marits 2013.

<sup>4</sup> A critical analysis of the various ‘forms’ of tourism developing worldwide since the 1980s is available at. Urry1990.

<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this analysis I am not engaged in discussing the important differences between tourists, visitors, travelers etc.



utopian contexts since the very first use of the term by Thomas More in 1515 (Tower 2010: 139-142, Kolakowski 1983: 229-230).

This paper is an attempt to anthropologically conceptualize the representation of Halkidiki as an environmental utopia with reference to its tourist industry. I will focus on the developments of the last two decades. Ethnographically I will direct my attention to the highland tourist resorts of Halkidiki located close to the town of Arnea and the villages of Taxiarchis and Palaiokastro. Fieldwork was conducted in 2014 and early 2015.<sup>6</sup> The area was not unknown to me. My maternal grandparents originate from a village about 20 kms to the south-west of this area and I have spent most of my summer months in Halkidiki. My familiarity with the place allowed me easier access to the local businessmen and others working in the tourist sector. The analysis is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants and fieldwork observations. In selecting informants the aim was to capture the variety and diversity of types of tourist activities, rather than to claim representativeness. For a number of reasons explained below, my intention lies on the side of the locals rather than of the tourists. I argue that Halkidiki can be divided in four different zones based on different tourist utopian promises. I also argue that the focus on the natural beauties of Halkidiki becomes dominant, together with a focus on traditional cultures, in the case of highland tourist resorts. I will explain why this is happening by addressing the relationship between environmental and cultural utopias, authenticity and the expectations of urbanities of Thessaloniki.

### *A Typology of Tourism in Halkidiki*

Halkidiki can be divided in four distinctive tourist zones. This typology is based on the different promises addressed to the tourists who visit the area.

- The peninsula of Kassandra, the town of Moudania and all the resorts on the road from Moudania to the capital city of Polygyros follow a model of mass tourism development

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<sup>6</sup> The research for this article was funded by a grant from the Aristeia II programme of the Greek General Secretariate for Research and Technology in support of the project “Mines, Olives and Monasteries: Towards an Environmental Macrohistory of Halkidiki” of the International Hellenic University in Thessaloniki. I am grateful to E. Deltsoy and G. Antoniou for travelling around the tourist resorts of Halkidiki and for the inspiring discussions we had regarding tourism in the region. Vassilis Katsikis helped me a lot in securing the trust of local businessmen engaged in the tourist sector of highland Halkidiki. Dimitris Drenos provided me with a useful understanding of utopian theories.



where the focus lies on the tourist infrastructure. The natural environment is used as a theatre stage where cosmopolitan hotels, bars, cafes, restaurants, clubs and sports facilities are situated. According to Deltsou, ‘tourism took off in Kassandra roughly in the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, when road improvements facilitated the arrival of tourists, as well as the construction of several big tourist complexes along the coast line’.<sup>7</sup> This is the area preferred by middle-class Thessaloniki urbanites who wish to have a summer flat or house next to the seaside. During the summer months the area is noisy and crowded with tourists mainly coming from overseas. The hotels of Kassandra attract tourists from all over Europe and the Middle East. The largest hotels are also involved in organizing conferences and business meetings of up to 1,200 participants. Some of these hotels have been recently bought by businessmen coming from Russia and other countries of the former USSR.

- The peninsula of Sithonia together with the island of Ammouliani<sup>8</sup> present a different model of tourist development. The area is less crowded and with fewer hotels compared to Kassandra. It offers the possibility for family tourism but also for various kinds of alternative activities such as camping and extreme sports. Tourists prefer Sithonia because of its ‘untouched and unspoiled’ physical environment. In the case of Sithonia, the promise offered to the tourists clearly refers to the experience of nature. This explains why the hotels in Sithonia are smaller to the ones in Kassandra. The only exemption is the Porto-Carras tourist complex at the southern end of Sithonia.<sup>9</sup> However, with the exemption of the village of Nikiti, this stress on nature is not accompanied with a stress on local cultures.<sup>10</sup>
- The peninsula of Mount Athos has never been a popular tourist destination. The Orthodox Christian monasteries can be visited only by men provided that they hold special permission. Men coming from all over the world visit these monasteries for centuries. The

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<sup>7</sup> See Deltsou, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Salamone conducted an ethnographic study of Ammouliani at the very period when the tourist infrastructure was about to start developing in the island (Salamone 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Porto-Carras hotel is a unique case in the context of Halkidiki. It is part of a tourist resort gradually constructed since the late 1960s on monastic property of 1,763 hectares bought by Giannis Carras. The resort includes a marina, a golf-course, the famous villa of the first owner of the hotel, vineyards and a wine factory. The hotel aimed in attracting the upper-bourgeoisie, the aristocracy and the richest of Europe and the Americas. It was visited by Queen Juliana of Holland, Salvador Dali, the son of Aga Han, Stavros Niarhos, Rudolf Nureyev, Francois Mitterrand, Konstantinos Karamanlis, Margot Fonteyn, the Rockfellers, Prince Albert of Monaco, President Puttin, Valery Giscard d’ Estaing. The initial plans pay particular attention in the preservation of the physical environment. It is questionable whether later expansions of the resort followed the perception of nature and the environmental visions held by the first owner.

<sup>10</sup> See Αντωνίου 2015 for a detailed analysis of environmental utopias in the Sithonia region.



experience of travelling to Mount Athos resembles to the religious pilgrim trips in Sina and Tibet. There are very few roads in Athos and limited public transportation. Travelers have to walk from one monastery to another. Mount Athos is in itself a religious utopia on earth.

- Highland Halkidiki presents a different kind of tourism development. There are no large hotels but few mountainous resorts and taverns situated inside the forest. All of these sites have been built in the last 20 years and attract upper-class urbanites from Thessaloniki and Athens. Similarly to Sithonia but to a much larger extent, the highland resorts of Halkidiki offer the promise of a real experience of nature and culture. However, as explained bellow, there are important differences to the peninsula of Sithonia tourist industry.

The above typology does not include the coastal settlements between the village of Olympiada and the village of Stavros. This is because this area composes a tourist cluster together with other villages and towns of the Strymonic Gulf (Stavros, Asprovalta, Vrasna) situated in the Municipality of Thessaloniki. This cluster does not belong to the entrepreneurial tourist context of Halkidiki. Contrary to Halkidiki, this area was characterized since the 1970s by the dominant presence of lower-middle class Greek tourist and tourists coming from former Yugoslavia.

### ***Highland Halkidiki***

Tourism in Halkidiki actually started at the outskirts of its highland zone in the 1930s. During the interwar bourgeois families from Thessaloniki use to spend a few weeks every summer at the highland village of Vavdos. Vavdos is surrounded by forests at an altitude of 780 – 1020 meters. The village is situated just 45 km from Thessaloniki and accessed from the Thessaloniki-Polygyros provincial road. It was considered a healthy place to escape the summer heat of Thessaloniki and all summer diseases existing during the interwar. The lack of roads and the living memory of bandits active further deep in the highland forest prevented the development of other tourist resorts. The events of WWI and of the Greek Civil War ceased the possibility of safe travelling in the region.

The villages of highland Halkidiki suffered massive population exodus due to immigration in the 1950s – early 1980s. The depopulation of the area had significant effects in the natural



environment. A great number of those who remained in the villages preferred to work in the mines of Stratoni, Yerakini and Vavdos instead of engaging in agriculture, pastoralism and forestry.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the forest actually expanded covering uncultivated fields and unused grazing lands. Old paths and sheepfolds inside the forest were abandoned and gradually taken over by nature. In just three decades the forest looked like an area never used or even explored by humans.<sup>12</sup> Villages which managed to keep part of their population started developing from the early 1980s. In the 1980s and the 1990s villagers expanded their agricultural activities. They started cultivating new types of olive trees and avocados. They introduced the cultivation of specific kind of spruce fir trees aiming to the Christmas market of Thessaloniki. Gradually they returned to some of the pre-WWII activities and expanded pastoralism (goats, sheep and wild pigs) and forestry. The necessary capital for such activities was introduced in the local economy. Return migrants from Germany and Australia contributed a lot in this process. In addition, loans coming from EU funding resources were distributed in the region although not always according to real needs and valid investment plans. The youth of the highland areas use to engage in seasonal work in the tourist resorts of Kassandra and Sithonia. Thus, they gradually acquired a significant know-how of the tourist sector. New roads were constructed which allowed travelling from Thessaloniki to the town of Arnea in 80 – 90 minutes.

The know-how coming from the seaside tourist resorts of Halkidiki had significant effects in the region since the 1990s. A number of local taverns changed their style presenting a more ‘authentic traditional highland’ menu in order to attract upper-middle class costumers from Thessaloniki. This was the time when ‘traditional’ village architecture and the ‘quality of traditional rural life styles’ started attracting the attention of tourist developers. The mass tourism model of seaside resorts was not any more considered as the exclusive scenario for the tourist industry of Halkidiki. Rurality and traditionality were turned into commodities. According to Deltsou,<sup>13</sup> this process was initiated in the highland village of Parthenonas at the far end of the Sithonia peninsula. It is worth noted that by the mid 1980s the highland villages of Palaiokastro and Parthenonas, the

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<sup>11</sup> Numerous papers published at the journal *Chronika tis Halkidikis* (Γα Χρονικά της Χαλκιδικής) offer an account of this process.

<sup>12</sup> Nitsiakos provides us with an interesting detailed ethnographic study of the same process taking place at a village close to the town of Konitsa in Epirus. According to Nitsiakos, the villagers negatively evaluate the expansion of the forest and the development of ‘wild nature’ (Νιτσιάκος 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Deltsou op. cit.



highland town of Arnea and the coastal village of Nikiti in Sithoniawere officially given the status of ‘traditional settlements’<sup>14</sup> and/or historic sites.<sup>15</sup>

The focus on traditionality was further encouraged by EU instructions, regulations and provisions. Most important it was supported by EU funds available at the local level.<sup>16</sup> Developmental agencies in Thessaloniki and Halkidiki turned their attention to this funding and provided the necessary know-how and opportunities to local entrepreneurs. The idea was to create a sector of ‘alternative tourism’ operating throughout the year based on ecotourism and agrotourism.<sup>17</sup> Similar trends existed since the early 1990s in other highland areas of Greece such as Metsovo and Zagorochoria in Epirus, Pilion in Thessaly and Parnitha in Attica. The owner of one of the first resort established in the area described the process as such:

*The taverns in Ayios Prodromos survived despite the construction of the new road from Thessaloniki to Polygyros. Two taverns in Palaiokastro were rather successful in the 1980s. The taverns on the top of Holomontas were operating despite the change of the bus route to Arnea. I was persuaded that our mountain was ideal for winter resorts. When I visited the architect’s office in Thessaloniki he did not agree with my project. But I had been around in many highland resorts in Greece, Bulgaria and Austria. My father argued with me thinking that we were to lose our property. All that is history know... We succeeded and others followed.*

### ***The Highland Resorts***

In just two decades a number of mountain resorts have been established in the area between the villages of Palaiokastro and Taxiarchis and the town of Arnea. Palaiokastro is located at an altitude of 560 meters, Taxiarchis is at an altitude of 670 meters and Arnea with a population of 2,600 people is at an altitude of 600 meters. All seven of these resorts operate 12 months per year and they are located at an altitude of between 900 – 1120 meters. The top of mountain Holomontas is reaching an altitude of 1,165 meters. The peak season of the resorts is around Christmas when the area is covered by snow. Resorts are more or less similar. They are surrounded by large trees and it is difficult to find them even if in cases where they are located close to the main road. Guests live in

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<sup>14</sup> See Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change (<http://estia.minenv.gr/EXEC>).

<sup>15</sup> Deltsou offers a critical account of this process (Deltsou 2010: 241-266).

<sup>16</sup> This process is described in detailed at *Towards quality rural tourism: Integrated Quality Management (IQM) for rural destinations*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> The development of agrotourism in Greece is described by Deltsou and Galani-Moutafi (Deltsou 2000, Galani-Moutafi 2002).



small houses with their own kitchen and fireplace. Fireplaces are large and used simultaneously with the central heating. Each house is composed by at least two rooms. Some resorts offer sauna and jacuzzi facilities. The architectural style is dominated by the need to present a ‘traditional - rural’ image. Building is based on three materials which function as indicators of traditionality: stone, wood and red tiles. None of these resorts is using the term ‘hotel’. They use other terms such as guest house (*xenonas*), green village (*prassinochorio*), farm (*farma*). As one resort owner told me ‘*we do not like hotels in our places*’.

The similarities of these resorts are striking. This is due to a number of factors. The first two resorts built proved to be rather successful so the rest followed the same style. In addition, the regulations imposed by the EU in order to receive funding forced the architects to follow similar patterns both in the structure of the buildings and in organizing the surrounding space (gardens and the wood). Resorts have their own café and restaurant, sports facilities and children play areas. Some resorts, the larger ones, provide their guests with the possibility of horse riding and mountain bike tours. Two resorts have tennis courts. Depending on the seasons of the year, another five to seven restaurants and bars operate in the nearby area. They are usually open in weekends, public holidays and during the summer months. All these businesses are owned by locals who live nearby or locals living half of the year in Thessaloniki and half of the year in the region. It is worth noted that the most luxurious of the resorts belongs to a local who has been operating the most popular tavern in highland Halkidiki since the 1980s. The personnel working in the resorts, the bars and the restaurants is composed by locals or Albanian migrants who live in the villages since the early 1990s. Migrants do the heavy jobs but as in all over Greece. In addition to the full-time personnel many locals work part-time at the resorts, the taverns and the bars. The income gained is a significant contribution to many families of nearby villages and the town of Arnea. The resorts coexist without problems with other economic activities in the area such as pastoralism, forestry and coal production. Actually, the existence of these activities is intentionally brought into attention by those working in the resorts. As one restaurant owner explained to me ‘*tourists have to know that we are a rural area with a traditional highland economy*’. The only sector of the local



economy threatening the tourist resorts is the gold mining in the area. However, this threat is gradually declining.<sup>18</sup>

The resorts, the taverns and the bars have actually created a small tourism cluster.<sup>19</sup> The more they became, the more visitors they attracted. Generally speaking visitors belong to three categories: weekenders, summer-time residents and daily visitors. The later are always coming from Thessaloniki and usually spend a few hours in a resort or tavern. They walk around the forest, play games and enjoy a meal. Weekenders dominate the winter tourist period (October – March). They arrive in the resorts on Friday evening to find the fireplaces of their rooms full of burning wood and leave on Sunday afternoon. The majority of weekenders are couples and/or groups of young urbanites. They come mainly from Thessaloniki but also from Athens. Summer time residents are coming both from Greece and abroad. Families with young children and retirees spend a week in the resorts walking many hours per day in the forest. Given the limited number of rooms and houses available in every resort,<sup>20</sup> those spending their summer holidays in the area get to know very well all those working and living there. The statements bellow present the categories of guests as perceived by the personnel of three different resorts:

*'I know all my summer guest by their first name. Some of them have first visited us on a winter weekend and later returned in the summer'*

*'Different kinds of guests come in the summer and in the winter... Summer guests are more conscious [siniditopiimēni] of the place. Weekenders coming in the winter are looking for an adventure in the snow and the woods. Summer visitors are looking for something more than that...'*

*'Last summer one of the resorts was used as a hostel by the riot police units guarding the nearby gold mines. It was the most bizarre situation. This was the first time, since the opening of the first guest house, that we had visitors not interested to chat with us'.*

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<sup>18</sup>The introduction of new gold mining technology by Eldorado – Gold Ltd in northern Halkidiki caused reactions on the local, the national and the international level. Local society has been divided among those in support of the mines and those arguing that the mining technologies recently introduced will create permanent damage to the environment. Numerous violent clashes took place in the nearby to the mines hills. The interference of riot police forces arriving from Thessaloniki increased the degree of violence. It is beyond the intentions of this paper to discuss this context. In my view, the dispute is gradually leading to an end. Those against the newly introduced mining techniques secured political hegemony on the local level. Similarly, the government is rather critical of the new gold mining technologies.

<sup>19</sup>I am using the term tourism cluster following Partalidou and Koutsou (2012).

<sup>20</sup>The maximum number of residents in the larger of the resorts is 110 persons.



It is beyond any doubt that the crisis in Greek society and economy has had negative effects for the local tourist businesses. However, these negative effects are more evident in the coastal tourist industry than in the highland tourist resorts.<sup>21</sup> The tourism cluster of highland Halkidiki gradually involved the production of local ‘traditional’ products such as jams and various sweets made out of forest fruits (for example, chestnuts), teabags made with herbs of the forest and meat products based on wild pigs. These products are consumed and sold in the local restaurants and guest houses. The village of Taxiarchis eventually came to be the centre of this cluster.<sup>22</sup> Some resorts actually advertise the ‘local traditional products’ in their internet sites.<sup>23</sup>

The clustering process involves not only local products but also attitudes towards the tourists. During fieldwork I found that men and women working and serving, personnel and owners, followed very similar performing strategies towards the tourists. These resorts attract tourists not on the basis of the ‘sea, sand, clubbing and tzatziki’ complex available for the coastal tourist industry of Halkidiki. On the contrary, they capitalize upon whatever is presented as the heritage of nature, culture and local identity: the wild forest, the wild pigs, culinary practices (‘the annual feast of the chestnuts’, ‘the annual feast of forest mushrooms’), the close spiritual relationships with Mount Athos. Staying at the resorts is presented as a pilgrimage to the utopia of highland forests. Serving a coffee or a meal is perceived by the locals as something more than ‘work’. It is performed as a meeting between individuals belonging to two different worlds. It is meant to be a socializing to the world of the woods process. It is worth taking into account some statements of resort owners and personnel:

*‘When someone is calling my attention loudly, I wave to him. He has to understand that in the woods we always have to be silent. I intentionally walk in a silent way. I do this even when there is only one group of visitors in the resort...’<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> See the various reports published by the Halkidiki Hotel Association (<http://www.halkidiki-hotels.gr>) and the Federation of Holiday Rooms and Apartments in Halkidiki (<http://www.halkidiki-holidays.gr/en/>).

<sup>22</sup> The official internet site of the village (<http://taxiarchis.net/>) gives emphasis on promoting the guests houses, the taverns and the bars.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, <http://www.jimmyshotel.gr>. The most ‘traditional’ local products include herbs, herbal teas, soap and sweets made out of forest fruits (see <http://www.holomon.gr/products.html>).

<sup>24</sup> Stressing the need for silence is even advertised in the internet sites of the resorts (op.cit.). Silence is also described as a key experience of those who visit the resorts (read, for example, the account available at <http://www.terrapapers.com/?p=34370>).



*'My boss told me that I should not hurry to serve the clients. I should give time to them to enjoy looking the forest. Then I always take a chair and seat next to them. Actually, I am not taking an order, I am discussing for a few minutes the menu with them and then I let me decide.'*

*'We always provide customers with a glass of local red wine and sugared chestnuts – even without asking them. Of course we do not charge for this. We ask them to taste them...'*

*'In case some group of visitors is making noise I always interfere. One couple once told me "...but there are no other visitors staying at the resort". I replied pointing out the existence of birds, squirrels and other animals around. They looked astonished. Since then, they come every year from Athens.'*

*'The first thing I explain to them is that kids are safe to go everywhere inside the resort. Leaving the resort without an adult is not the best thing to do... Kids can play and sing loudly, the forest likes the sounds of kids.'*

*'Yes... we have parties and wedding banquets lasting until the morning. But these are organized similarly to the local festivals taking place in our villages. We do not play disco music here!'*

*'On Saturdays I always inform the visitors of the time of the Sunday liturgy. I explain to them that we live in the villages, I point out our geographic proximity with Mount Athos.'*

*'I advise and even demand the guests to walk around the forest. There is a small back door in the fence of the resort. I take them there and indicate the path they should follow. I always say to them "I am not going to serve your breakfast unless you walk around for 10 minutes in the woods" They like it...'*

The owner of the most successful, in financial terms, resort is famous for his physical appearance and body politics. He is an outspoken man in his sixties with a large oriental style moustache. Everyone calls him with his first name. I have visited him for a number of times. He is famous for performing a kind of 'striptease' in the weddings organized in his resort. The ritual is always the same: he stands up at the peak of the dance, he climbs on two tables, he unbuttons his shirt while dancing, he takes it out, he drops his shoes and his socks on the floor and he opens the belt of his trousers. At that stage he is touching and exhibiting his large moustache in a very macho way. Then he stops and returns in serving the guests. This performance of shepherd-style pre-modern masculinity does not last more than 5 minutes. But the message is clear to everyone: Holomontas is another place, Holomontas has another culture. It is worth noting that the same businessman decided to build a small chapel inside the premises of his resort. When I asked him the reasons for building the chapel he pointed out the proximity to Mount Athos ([i *apostasi mas apo to*



Oros)]. However, when I pointed out the existence of a church located just 1,5 km away from his resort he turned my attention to the wedding ceremonies organized in his resort:

*'We should offer them everything inside the premises of the resort. Guests should be able to experience our mountain all together in one place.'*

The otherness of the highland resorts needs to be stressed not only with reference to Thessaloniki and Athens but also with reference to the coastal hotels of Halkidiki. All of the owners of the highland resorts expressed their criticism for the massive tourism model of the coastland with special reference to the case of Kassandra. Their statements are revealing and, in some cases, insulting. The youngest owner of these resorts explained to me:

*'I have been to many places around the Mediterranean... From Majorca to gated tourist resorts in Turkey. They are all the same. The sad thing that Kassandra and Moudania follow this model. What is the difference between a hotel in Kassandra and one in southern Turkey? What tourists learn about this place by staying all day and night inside these hotels?'*

A restaurant owner who lives in the town of Arnea but originates from the village of Taxiarchis told me:

*'You know Yiorgos, when I was a child I use to work as a shepherd... This is how I feel when I see all these tens of thousands of tourists in the coast. They look like a flock to me...'*

*'Why are you asking something you already know? You have been here for a number of times with your family. Ask your daughters: is this place similar to the 'nothings' [tipota] of the hotels in Kryopigi?'*<sup>25</sup>

*'Yes, we learned a lot by working for the refugees<sup>26</sup> in the south. We understood what the tourists are looking for... But it is because of this experience that everybody up here decided to take another, a different path.'*

A young woman engaged in local politics attempted to summarize the difference between the highland resorts and the coastal hotels:

*'Just think of the names used by the guest houses of our village and the names of Hotels in Kassandra... We use names such as farm [farma], forest-garden [Dasokipos], the fallen stone*

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<sup>25</sup> Kryopigi is one of the most touristic villages in the peninsula of Kassandra. It is full of bars, shops and restaurants.

<sup>26</sup> The population of Taxiarchis and Arnea originates from the local Greek speaking Orthodox Christians living for centuries in the region. On the contrary, most of the villages and towns in the coastal area of Halkidiki have been created by refugees coming in 1922 in Greece following the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey.



*[Apolymeni Petra], the spruce-fir forest [Elatodasos] indicating our relationship with the woods. Tell me how hotels are called in Cassandra...'<sup>27</sup>*

It is however interesting that when I asked my informants to clarify the otherness of highland resorts irrespectively of the coastal tourist model and the urban centers, they failed to go beyond the stereotypical explanations. The utopia of the highland resorts is obviously different from the one of the peninsula of Cassandra but equally ambiguous and vague.

### ***Environmental and cultural Utopias, Authenticity and Tourism***

Most of the tourists arriving at the highland resorts of Halkidiki are ignorant of the context explained above. They walk around in a forest which looks like a jungle to them. But this is simply the result of human intervention caused by the abandonment of old paths and sheepfolds following WWII. They eat wild pork, they drink local wine and enjoy local herbal teas without knowing that these products emerged simply because of tourism. They visit the traditional village of Taxiarchis and the traditional town of Arnea ignoring that EU funding not only reinforced but actually produced the traditionality of these settlements. They participate in the 'chestnuts festivities' without taking into account that this event was initiated just 15 years ago.

All the above are not relevant to them. Tourism is always underlined by a quest for authenticity. Authenticity relies upon nostalgia.<sup>28</sup> Tourists of the highland resorts are looking for their own versions of 'paradise' in Halkidiki. This is obviously a different version of the one promised to those visiting the most touristic area of Halkidiki, the non-place of the peninsula of Cassandra. Spending their holidays at the highland resorts is perceived as a more genuine and authentic experience closely related to the natural environment of the local cultures. These tourists do not consider themselves as consuming the place, they actually experience the place.<sup>29</sup> By imposing rules, regulations and stereotypes, the personnel of the highland resorts makes everything

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<sup>27</sup> Most hotels in Cassandra are named in such a way to confirm the stereotypic touristic perception of Greece. Hotels names make references to Greek gods (for example: Ammon Zeus, Aphrodite), heroes and philosophers of classical antiquity (for example: Alexander the Great, Aristotle) or ancient Greece in general (for example: Macedonian Sun) etc.

<sup>28</sup>See MacCannell and Selwin on the relationship between authenticity and tourism (MacCannell 1999, Selwin 1996). Wang has particularly focused on the importance of memory in creating authenticity (Wang1999).

<sup>29</sup>Burns and Stronza explain the different ways according to which tourists consume places and transform spaces into places (Burns2004, Stronza2001).



possible to provide an experience which will transform the tourists. Confirming authenticity is a process which involves both producers (i.e. the personnel) and the consumers (i.e. the tourists). Producers have to follow specific practices and processes in order to secure the necessary quality of the authentic experience.<sup>30</sup> These practices and processes, such as the ‘striptease’ ritual described above, are considered to be unique in time and space. The tourists have to discover the authentic place by being able to distinguish the quality of the ‘original tradition’ of Holomontas and by discovering the shortest and more reliable link allowing access to the ‘world of the woods’. The locals, especially those engaged in the tourist sector, rush to engage in the negotiation of authenticity<sup>31</sup> as the gatekeepers of authenticity, as those who can lead the tourists in discovering the shortest reliable way to their promised utopias.

This context is obviously part of the wider milieu of tourist industry existing worldwide in late modernity.<sup>32</sup> This model on the one hand produces the distinction between nature and culture and on the other commodifies both of them. The most interesting in the case of Halkidiki is that the relationship between locals and tourists has been determined on the basis of ‘who was first’ involved in imagining the tourist utopias. The development of tourism in Kassandra and Sithonia was the result of demands coming from the urbanites of Thessaloniki in the 1970s and the 1980s. The development of tourism in the highlands of Halkidiki followed the other way around. Tourism in the highlands has been the outcome of an offer addressed to the urbanites of Thessaloniki and Athens. This offer came from the side of local (native businessmen) and non-local actors (EU funding, developmental agencies) in the last two decades. They are those who actually created Holomontas based on assumptions regarding the utopian desires of middle-class residents of Thessaloniki and Athens. Ironically, the authenticity of environmental and cultural utopias of the highland resorts of Halkidiki depends on the expectations of urbanities. ‘*Le petit paradis, Halkidiki*’ exists as an offer to the readers of *Le Figaro magazine* and the urbanites of Thessaloniki and Athens.

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<sup>30</sup>Spooner refers to quality issues as ‘the objective attributes of authenticity’ (Spooner 1986).

<sup>31</sup>Op. cit.: 220.

<sup>32</sup>In his seminal work on ‘the beach’ Taussig traces the origins of this mentality in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Taussig 2000).



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