

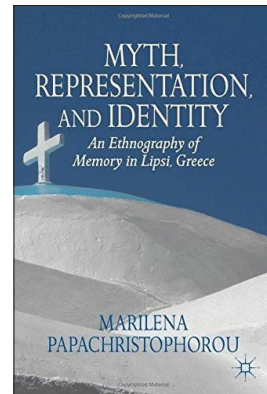
## LIVING ORAL HISTORY TRADITION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY EUROPE

**Marilena Papachristophorou.** *Myth, Representation and Identity: An Ethnography of Memory in Lipsi, Greece.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 198 pp.

This is a beautifully and slightly philosophically written book about community identity building in a society with a strong oral tradition. Marilena Papachristophorou is Assistant Professor of Folklore at the University of Ioannina, Greece, and has published a monograph based on her fieldwork on a small Greek island, Lipsi, where she has conducted fieldwork over a decade. Over this time period the author was able to observe changes in the local community and how these changes reflected in local narratives that constitute the basis for identity building on the island. Lipsi is a small Greek island with one village, with a population of less than seven hundred people. Traditionally, inhabitants of the island have been engaged in fishery, agriculture, and tourism. The first inhabitants of the island were monks and until today the Monastery of Patmos possesses a big part of the island.

The focus of the book is well summed up on page 13: "In the following chapters I shall attempt to explore the oral tradition of the island as I perceived and recorded it over these ten years, often "working" within entire families and "tracking" narratives and worldviews across three or four generations. [...] The presentation of my ethnography and the relevant anthropological interpretation are structures along three areas: (1) the *history* of the island according to collective representations; (2) *religion* experienced, both as narrative and as ritual; and (3) *everyday* narrative occasions." The main thesis is presented on page xi: "Symbols, as verbal representations of physical objects, can obviously survive in narrative and cultural practices much longer than religions themselves and even when the ritual contexts [...] no longer exist." Therefore, not unsurprisingly, the author leans heavily on the structuralist approach, looking at narratives and symbols as the "total fact" of Claude Levi-Strauss.

The tone is set in the first chapter which is dedicated to the Hellenic legend about Odyssey and of how Greek legends about the goddess Calypso and wanderings of Odysseus or Ulysses are related to the island, but also a template of the narrative of the creation of the community. Marilena Papachristophorou shows that the myth of the creation of Lipsi, Christian by its nature, repeats elements and narratives from the *Odyssey*, and that geographically several key events from both narratives take place in the same locations. Throughout the book she refers to Elias or Old-Lios, who is the ancestor of the people from Lipsi, but at the same time also to a Trickster whose biographical facts draw from Ulysses' short stay in Lipsi. Chapter two compares Elias' story with that of Ulysses and shows how the origin of the people is connected with how and when they received their allotments of land from the monastery. The author concludes that the history of the island is not merely facts but a shared worldview of the islanders (p. 45).



A big part of the book is dedicated to how local cosmogony is reflected in landmarks and toponymes. To sum it up, the island of Lipsi is viewed as a polarised world – there is human territory and wilderness. Wilderness is inhabited by devils and the human sphere by saints. Saints in local history are personified and related to particular families. Myths about saints are linked to legends of hidden treasures and events of deceased ancestors. As it appears, the islanders' relationship with the environment is often defined through visions and miracles, which mark certain life events (like birth of children) but simultaneously symbolise a bond with a particular saint. In chapter four the author shows that life in Lipsi is a constant struggle between “impure land” and the human space, the appropriation of wilderness is linked with good and bad supernatural powers and therefore has a transcendent dimension. The author also talks about how different places become meaningful when they are given names that connect them with concrete persons or events. This approach is similar to that discussed by Keith Basso among Western Apache or Alex King among Koryaks. In Lipsi, such personification of the landscape is mainly related to the appropriation of the land from the wilderness or to some key events in the life of an ancestor. In one way or another, such a social bond to the space symbolises land ownership. This is a social construction of landscape but the strength of such a tradition in modern Greece is surprising.

In chapter six Papachristophorou comes back to everyday practices, talks about people, and demonstrates the strength of the community's oral culture. Narratives and myths are transmitted and reproduced through chatting over coffee or at family celebrations. Analysing changes from the past decade, the author shows how communal rituals (dancing, celebrating, visiting the cemetery) are essential in creating a sense of solidarity and unity within the villagers. The author, however, argues that communal rituals are not to be understood as a revitalisation of traditions but as renewing the imagined community. When rituals remain the same, then their meaning and related personal or communal narratives are in a constant flux. Every generation relates different stories to dances and other celebrations and these commonly shared narratives renew the social bond between islanders. Additionally, chapter seven discusses how long traditions help to create continuity and history of the community.

What renders special value to the monograph is the auto-ethnographic approach of the author. She discusses how she and her son became related to the community, what they felt and how they reacted to things. The islanders are depicted in a way the reader feels the atmosphere in the village and the warmth of community rituals. Apart of being an interesting read, the book made me wish to visit Lipsi as a tourist.

As a Siberianist, I found the book interesting and necessary due the fact that similar processes can be observed everywhere. In light of the culture of narratives in Lipsi we should revise the concept of modern traditional culture since it has been related to non-Western culture. As the book shows, we can conceptualise the traditional culture through Christianity and still find enough material to compare it with non-Christian and non-European people. This book is highly recommended not only to folklorists but also to anthropologists and even to a wider range of social scientists, such as political scientists. Understanding various ways of establishing and maintaining local identities is helpful in creating a bigger picture when you study, for example, nation building or social movements.

Aimar Ventsel