The Commodification of the Anastenária:
The Effects of Tourism in Lagadhás

Jane Sansom

Langadhás is an unremarkable village for 362 days of the year. It is what happens there on the other three which is making it increasingly a tourist attraction...(Crossland and Constance 1982:144)

Preamble

The Anastenária is a firewalking ritual performed in towns and villages in and around Thessaloníki in the north of Greece. The ritual was originally performed by Greek Orthodox Christians in villages in what was then the north-eastern part of Turkish Thrace. At that time this area was inhabited by Bulgarians and Greeks. This area now falls within Bulgaria. During the Balkan wars, 1912-14, the Anastenárides were forced to flee south on two occasions. In 1922, with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne (which witnessed the exchange of Turkish, Greek and Bulgarian populations), they finally settled in and around the city of Thessaloníki. The Anastenárides performed their ritual in private for over twenty years, in fear of persecution from the Church and the local population. But in 1947, the Anastenária was performed publicly for the first time and since that day has become known across the world.

The Anastenárides view themselves as Orthodox Christians, following the Orthodox Calendar and venerating Orthodox Saints. It is Saints Constantine and His mother, Helen, to whom the Anastenárides address most of their worship. It is on 21 May, when these two Saints are celebrated in the Orthodox Church, that the Anastenárides perform their most well known firewalk. The Anastenária has attracted a great deal of attention over the years, particularly due to its problematic relationship with the Greek Orthodox Church. The Church continues to view the ritual as pagan and opposed to the Church’s doctrine. The ritual has also become a popular tourist attraction, drawing hundreds and even thousands of people to its performance every year. It is this phenomenon that I am addressing in this paper.

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1 All quotations are cited in original form in this paper. Consequently there are inconsistencies in transliteration, spelling and the use of accents.
The *Anastenária* revivised?

In Greece, as in many parts of Europe, public celebrations have been increasing since the 1970s (Manning, 1973, 1979, 1983; Boissevain, 1992). This revitalisation, it has been argued (Boissevain, 1992) was in response to a number of factors: modernisation, the growth of leisure and consumption in contemporary societies, general democratisation, the decreasing power and influence of the Church, a rise in the standard of living, increased secularisation, return migration, an explosion in media and mass tourism. This revitalisation has been said to take several forms: invention, re-animation, restoration, revival, resurrection, by re-traditionalizing or folkloring, and in many cases is consciously done in a manipulation of tradition for political or financial ends (Cowan, 1986, 1988). Boissevain argues against the claim that tourism as a phenomenon on its own has caused the increase in the performance of rural rituals and in contrast to Hobsbawn and Ranger (1983), claims the resurgence in public rituals occurred largely because of the decline in migration to the cities. What occurred instead, particularly during the 1970s, was a return migration or at least an increase in return travel to people's homelands. These return trips often coincided, deliberately or otherwise, with major community celebrations (Boissevain, 1984: 8). Boissevain also argues that increased secularisation and industrialisation, as well as the increase in the standard of living in much of Europe, resulted in the isolation of people. This led, he argues, to the increase in the need for public events such as feast days. He argues that migration also made populations aware of their own identity, creating a desire to mark off their communities from others. These boundaries, he suggests, were often marked off through rituals, which provided a sense of belonging and acted as a celebration of "them" against "us" (Boissevain, 1992). There was also a rise in the dependency on the state, both economically and socially, a general democratisation, a media explosion and the arrival of mass tourism, all of which Boissevain sees as relevant, but none independently responsible for the increase in public ritual.

Somewhat differently, Crick (1989: 197), focusing on the impact of mass tourism, looks at the disappearance as well as the possible increase in public rituals. He suggests that some rituals have died as a result of tourism, while others have survived because of it. Christodoulou (1978) in her study of the *Anastenária* argues that the ritual has been able to maintain itself because of tourism:

> tourism: the economic capital that it brings into the local and wider economy encouraged the Government (state and local) to patronise the ritual and consciously preserve it. I disagree with the consequent assumption of this argument, that the ritual would not have survived without tourism and the interest of the Government. I do acknowledge, however, the obvious effects these phenomena have on the ritual and its participants. How much the changes in the actual ritual performance are linked directly to the focusing gaze of tourism (Volkmann 1990: 92), however, is arguable.

The *Anastenária*, as situated within the wider frame of Greek social life, has unarguably been affected by the increase in tourism and the consequent involvement of the Government. Social, economic and political changes had, and will continue to have, an impact on the performance of and sustenance in the ritual. They have without doubt been involved in it if not responsible for, the "production" and "manufacturing" of the ritual. I maintain, however, that these phenomena are not solely responsible for the *Anastenária*’s continued existence. One can only speculate whether or not the ritual would have died without tourism and the transformation of the ritual into a tourist product. This type of conclusion, I would argue, assumes that there is little other meaning or value in the ritual besides the economic, which is a naive and superficial conclusion. What can be concluded, however, is that the ritual has become a cultural product and consequently its performance, at present anyway, has been dominated by local Government and mass tourism. Different from many of the public rituals which Boissevain and others refer to, the *Anastenária* is not performed by all members of the local community. The ritual is not something that everyone can be a part of. Without the *Anastenárides*, relatively small communities within each respective town and village, there would therefore be no ritual performances. The Government’s interest, inspired by the economic rewards of tourism, has eased the pressure of the Orthodox Church against the performance of the *Anastenária*, however. The Church remains vehemently opposed to the ritual’s use of the Icons and the display of firewalking in honour of Orthodox Saints, but is relatively powerless to act against them without the official support of the Government.

Tourism receipts are one of the main elements of strength in the Greek economy and constitute nearly 5% of the GNP (Gross National Production) (OECD 1987: 5)...Greece receives over 6.5 million

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2 See also Margaret Kenna (1993) and her discussion of return migrants and tourism development in the Cycladic islands.

3 Boissevain (1984, 1992), specifically in his work on the revitalisation of public rituals in Malta, also acknowledges the increase in pageantry but argues that this is not a ploy to lure tourists nor is it a reflection of a lapse in the meaning of these rituals to the performers.

4 See also Brown (1984), McKeen (1989) and Swain (1989) who argue that tourism maintains the performance of public rituals and protects them from being outlawed by perhaps the Church and Government.
tourists annually (ibid.) [and] of these, nearly three quarters arrive between May and September... (Kenna 1993: 77).

In 1991 it was recorded that a total of 8.03 million tourists visited Greece, with receipts totalling US$2.566 million. The Acropolis and other great archaeological sites, the Monasteries, coast lines and particularly, the islands, have long been the main attractions of Greece for tourists. In more recent years, trekking in Greece's mountains and more "rural" holidays geared towards the younger market have been popular, as have been trips that include "authentic" displays of Greek culture. The Anastonária is one of these. "By the 1970's the Anastonória: had become a major tourist attraction in Ayía Eléni and Langadkhás" (Danforth, 1989: 201). The ritual features in the Blue Guide to Greece (Rossiter, 1977: 557), in travel guides and books on Greece, in calendars that list cultural events and in tourist pamphlets found in hotels, information offices, train stations and so forth. Books and articles have been written by foreign anthropologists (for example, Christodoulou, 1978, Danforth, 1989) and folklorists (for example, Romaios, 1944-45, Mihail-Dede, 1972-73), documentaries have been made, and every year the Greek newspapers and television stations feature articles and presentations on the ritual. Internet sites on Greek tourism, culture and history refer to the ritual. In particular, several tourist companies advertise trips to Langadkhás for interested tourists. In May 1995, a popular current affairs/talk show on one of the major Greek television stations presented a special feature on the ritual. Interviewed, were an academic theologian from the University, a representative from the Orthodox Church and several Anastonária. The discussion centred on the reluctance of the Church to accept the performance of the ritual, with the talk show suggesting that it was time the Church ceased its disapproving position. The show appeared at prime time and was repeated again the following afternoon.

8 I am not suggesting that all Greeks thought of their national identity, (if at all) in this way.
9 The Folklore Society of Ayía Eléni was set up in the spring of 1971 and its primary concern was to regain possession of the Anastonária icons which had been confiscated by the Church (see Danforth 1989: 137-145).
11 See also Greenwood (1989: 179) who refers to "cultural brokers", the tourism industry and those involved in the manufacturing of "ethnic tourism".
13 Christodoulou (1978) states that the National Lottery and the Ministry of
was performed publicly and tickets were sold, the Folklore Society received the money that was collected and after paying the expenses of the performance, deposited the excess in a bank account. This money was often used to help individuals, families and the entire community in Lagadhás (Christodoulou, 1978). In 1994-95 as tickets were not sold for my group’s performance, this income was not available. Funding was more officially distributed to the Thracian Folklore Society from the local Government who allow for “cultural expenses” in their budget when applying for federal funds. The influx of finance obtained from Government funds, the selling of tickets and money offered to the icons in the Konáki, all of which came with the establishment of the Folklore Society, led to disagreements amongst the Anasténaries and divisions occurred.

Decisions that had to be made regarding the spending and distribution of the money resulted in conflict. One Anasténarí told me that one of the musicians had left the group to play for another group as he felt that he was not being paid enough for his services. In 1995 the Mayor of Lagadhás offered the Anasténaries from the group with whom I was involved a generous sum of money to perform the fire walk outside in the main square, with seating for the spectators and with professional lighting. This was how the ritual had been performed in previous years, but since the completion of the new Konáki and the division in the group, this year the Mayor was aware that some coaxing might be needed. This money was to cover all of the expenses of the performance with some left over for the Thracian Society and therefore also the Anasténaries. The Mayor argued that performing the ritual outside allowed for a more organisation and better control of the crowd, and was more comfortable for the spectators. The offer, however, was refused. This came as no surprise to me as I had heard the Anasténaries on several occasions discussing the performance of the ritual for that year. The pros and cons of both possibilities had been discussed and it seemed quite apparent that those with the most influence in the group had pretty much decided that the firewalk would be held next to the Konáki. During the year prior to my arrival in Lagadhás, there had been a disagreement in the Anasténarde community. A dispute had erupted between a senior Anasténarí and the head of the Folklore Society (over politics according to one informant) and also between several individuals over matters concerning the performance of the ritual and over seniority. I was also told that personal disagreements had evolved, all resulting in the group eventually dividing. What emerged was the existence of two practising Anasténarde groups in the town. One group, the one with whom I was involved, built and remained at the new Konáki and had the support of the Folklore Society. The other based themselves at the home of their new Pappús. As my friends had refused the Mayor’s offer, he promptly took it to the other Anasténarde group. They accepted. This was a significant moment as the Mayor had up until then been closely aligned and supportive of the first group, and his offering of money to the other group was taken as an insult. None of the Anasténaries actually voiced their disapproval to me, but it became quite obvious in conversation and through the comments made by others, that they were most unhappy. As the Anasténarde group whom I was with did not sell tickets in the two years that I was present in Lagadhás (1994-95), income generated from the ritual was minimal. In a sense, however, they won in another way. The advertising and “selling” of the ritual and the involvement of mass tourism and economics had been severely criticised from the start. Criticised, that is, mainly by academics, in particular folklorists, but also by journalists, theologians and other “purists” who argued that the ritual (1989) noted that money collected at the festivals was sometimes used to send the Anasténaries to Kostí for a holiday and to celebrate Saints Constantine and Helen’s day there as it falls on another date as the Anasténaries in Kostí follow the old Orthodox calendar. Danforth (1989) claimed that money was also used to put up Anasténaries visiting from other parts of Greece during the festivals.

In particular, the individual who owned most of the Icons, had made it quite clear that he disliked having the firewalk in the main square. He argued that it was too much of a show, too commercial and it was right to have it next to the Konáki. His position is particularly important, as being a journalist and folklorist he was very aware and involved in the discourse of tradition and authenticity.

The Pappús is the head of the group; always a man and usually the oldest member of the community. The division separated family members.
was losing its meaning along with its authenticity. Many blamed this
"destruction" of the ritual on the Folklore Societies, which were largely run by
wealthy businessmen. An extract from a Greek newspaper article written in
1984 revealed how many people felt about the changes occurring to the ritual and
clearly pointed the blame at the Folklore Societies.

The Folklore Society of Aya Eleni in Serres...has literally castrated
the Anastenária as it is celebrated there. There are many villages in
northern Greece where the Anastenaría comes alive each May 21, but
the way this happens is not everywhere the same. On the one hand,
the Anastenaría can be performed as a tourist attraction... On the other,
it can be performed traditionally and purely. Many people have
not even noticed this transformation of a traditional ritual into a
tourist spectacle; some people have actually sought it out. The
Folklore Society of Aya Eleni is responsible for such a
transformation... [positioning] the Anastenária as a manipulated
and persecuted group, helpless against the Folklore Society officers
who now control the ritual.

Miliádis claimed that the spectator is now forcibly separated from
the performance and the ritual itself has died, making way for a show.21 This
position beautifully exemplifies the struggle between authenticity and popular
performance; i.e. the fields of mass production and restricted production
(Bourdieu, 1993). Those sharing the concern of Miliádis, (folklorists,
journalists, etc.) are endowed with cultural capital, through the prestige granted
to them through being legitimated to speak on such matters, and are at pains to
maintain the ritual as a closed cultural event. For them, the mass production of
the ritual, the advertising and the tourist interest are all detrimental to the ritual's
worth. This is opposed to the local (and also the state and federal) Government,
who stand to gain economic capital (and also symbolic capital from involvement
with the ritual) from the production of the ritual. Amongst these confrontations
are the Anastenáriaides, who are also caught between the problematical relationship
of having their ritual widely known whilst also maintaining the respect of the
ritual as an authentic performance. Public attention and appreciation of the ritual
are a pleasant change from the persecution of the Church, but through the
"selling" of their ritual to tourism, they run the risk of being denied the prestige
of authenticity.22 In May 1995, an article in Thessaloniki, a major newspaper in

Phoney folk culture

It has been argued (Forster 1964: 226) that tourism is often responsible for
the creation of a "phoney folk culture", in which "authentic" rituals are packaged
and sold for tourists. This discourse accompanies the field of large scale
production. It is the criticism by those representing "high art", those endowed
with the cultural and symbolic capital that legitimates them to measure
the "authenticity" of an object or event. Tourism is involved in this field
of struggles as it is the tourists who are positioned within the field of large scale
production. This lies in opposition to the restricted field of production, where
intellectuals and academics, who, like Forster, deal in "prestige", are opposed to
"popular culture". In this way, Turner and Ash (1976) go so far as to accuse
tourism of being the enemy of authenticity and cultural identity. MacCannell

point, I found that many of the Anastenáriaides in Lagadhas were not overly
cager to talk publicly about the ritual, nor be made a fuss of. One Anastenáriaissa
said to me, "This is for the Saint, not for Antenna 1 (a television station in
Thessalonik)".

See also Eade (1991) on his discussion of the pilgrimage site of Lourdes. He
acknowledges the transformations undergone at Lourdes, noting that, "what
actually emerges is a continually shifting mix between the older, popular
beliefs and behaviours and the newer, more official ones, between what is now
classed as 'superstition' and what the authorities deem to be religion 'proper'
(Eade 1991: 65). Interestingly, many of the Anastenáriaides played the
actual firewalking, aware of the negative associations with "magic" which it
encouraged. At the same time, however, the tourism industry plays upon the
firewalking. It is spoken of and advertised in opposing ways.

21 Taken from a Greek newspaper article written by D. Miliádis in May 1984, as

22 Danforth (1989) claims that many of the Anastenáriaides, particularly women,
are empowered by, and therefore enjoy, the prestige and public attention that
they receive from their involvement in the ritual. Whilst this may be true to a

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photographs and videos being allowed. The discourse of authenticity has become the way by which people discuss and judge the ritual. No longer the language of folklorists, the tourist industry has helped to spread and legitimate notions of authenticity, as if it was a readable, tangible thing.

Conclusion

The Anastenária has been transformed from a small rural religious festival, into a major tourist spectacle. With this transformation has developed an entirely new discourse, one that is articulated by the media, folklorists and other academics keen on documenting the ritual. Now cited as an example of Greek cultural history, the ritual is either criticised or acclaimed for being more “authentic” or “too touristic”. Icons are no longer the sacred representations of the Saints, but are also powerful commodities in their own right, used to symbolise “authenticity” and to attract the respect of the spectators. Contradictions are made natural; having the larger crowd is important, but so is having the more “traditional” performance. As the fields of restricted production and large scale production precariously co-exist, so too will the contradictions.

A great number of the residents of Lagadhs come to the festival after already celebrating in the Church, to pay their respects to the Icons and to watch the Anastenáriodes walk on the coals. Students of anthropology, history, folklore, music, psychology, science and medicine come to watch and talk to the Anastenáriodes. Television and newspaper reporters are there. Foreign tourists incorporate the festival into their holiday, as they would a corroboree in Australia, or the Carnevale in Italy. They come in bus loads, organised by hotels and tour companies, moving from one Anastenário group to another, looking for the one with the largest crowd, for the best display of “authentic” Greek rural life. They too, engage in the contradiction.

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See also Greenwood (1998). His study of the Alarde, a public ritual in Fuenterrabía in the Basque country, discusses the politisation of public rituals. Arguing that the ritual has been packaged and sold to tourists, and in the process has also lost much of its original meaning to the participants, Greenwood also acknowledges that this process of commodifying the Alarde consequently invited it into the regional political debate.

Manning (1979) also discusses tourism as a form of imperialism. Crick (1985) reflects on the position of the anthropologist as tourist and reflects on Said’s Orientalist debate, arguing that tourists (and perhaps anthropologists) are perhaps guilty of similar crimes. The post-modernist arguments on writing ethnography resonate with this also. See also Graburn (1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1993) for the anthropological study of tourism and also for interesting discussions on the impact of tourism.

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