

NARRATIVES, GENEALOGIES AND MATRIMONIAL STRATEGIES ON THE ISLAND OF PSARA, GREECE AN EMIC/ETIC APPROACH

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This study is based on fieldwork conducted on the island of Psara (Greece), at intervals, from June 2007 to August 2008. Its aim is to show through an emic and etic approach how narrations on genealogies focus mainly on the historical event of the destruction of Psara, which they try to link with family histories and matrimonial strategies.

Key words: Geneograms, narrativity, marriage strategies, descent, origin, Greece, Psara.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between narrativity and genealogical memory, and the influence that discourse on origin and descent exerts on marriage strategies. Psara, a small island in the middle of the Aegean Sea, was selected as the research space.

For the needs of this study, I have relied on Veyne's statement that, 'interpretation is no more than the way in which a description is organized in a comprehensible plot'¹, and on Ricoeur's definition of narrativity as a way of understanding an event². Narration is the praxis that gives form to a scheme of relations, that is, it is an overall assessment of things. So, narration is the discourse by which one aspect of the past is offered for understanding, either by linking causes and effects, or by seeking cohesion in a sequence of events, or by justifying certain choices. The term narrativity refers also to the practice and to the dynamic totality of free narration, that is narrations without stereotyped morphological characteristics, which flow out easily from the framework of a social interaction.

As method of narration, we have chosen the geneograms, that is, the reconstitution of the family trees, through the narration and the commentary, which in parallel yield information on the position of the family in the wider social entity and on the personal choices of the individual.

These narrations do not merely 'carry' events, but offer explanations. That is, they become signifiers behind which is hidden the signified, that is, the deeper meaning, the representation. The issue of representation leads us inevitably to the

¹ P. Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire suivi de Foucault révolutionne l'histoire*, Paris 1978, 23.

² P. Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, Paris 1983, vol. 1 L'intrigue et le récit historique, 171–310. Also M. Pachristophorou, 2008, 'Narrativity, space, symbols: conversing with an island landscape', in E. Alexakis, M. Vrachionidou, A. Oikonomou (eds), *Anthropology and Symbolism in Greece*, Greek Society for Ethnology, Athens 2008, 285 (283–307).

relationship between the narration and its context. Only a detailed examination of the form and the content, in relation to the framework of expression, transforms the narration into a process of producing symbols, bearers of meanings³.

Noted is the polyphony of the narrations⁴, since these are constituted in fields of conflict between concepts and status.

As Mishler (1993:64) points out, ‘meanings in discourse are neither singular nor fixed, as they are in a closed set of mathematical axioms. Rather terms take on specific and contextually grounded meanings within and through the discourse as it develops and is shared by speakers’⁵.

The narrations will be interpreted on two levels: the structural, which concerns the meaning and the interpretation of the discourse, and the referential, which concerns the preconditions of existence of the discourse, that is, the social frame of reference for understanding it⁶.



Psara, Prefecture of Chios, Greece



Psara form a satellite

The space and its history

Psara is a small island in the middle of the Aegean Sea. It lies about 9 km. off the northwest coast of Chios and belongs to the Chian district of Volissos. It is approximately 40 sq. km. in area, which increases to 67 sq. km. with the neighbouring islets of Antipsara, Daskalio, Ai-Nikolaki, and its highest peak is Agios Ilias (546 m. a.s.l.).

³ H.White, “The Context in the Text: Method and Ideology in Intellectual History”, in *The Content and the Form: Narrative Discourse in Historical Representation*, Baltimore 1987, 202 and 211–213.

⁴ M.M., Bachtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, M. Holquist (ed.), Austin 1981.

⁵ G.Elliot Mishler, *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1993, 64.

⁶ C.L. Watson, M.B. Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An anthropological inquiry*, Rutgers University Press 1985, 26.

Psara was known in antiquity as Psyrie, by which name it is mentioned in the *Odyssey*. The harbour of its homonymous city could accommodate up to 20 ships. In Byzantine times it was counted among the Sporades and belonged administratively to the XVII theme and the 29th province of the Byzantine State.

After the Fall of Constantinople, around 1472, the Mahons (the Genoese merchant shipping company which exploited the mastic of Chios) came to an agreement with Sultan Mohamed the Conqueror, by which they would pay tax in order to keep their privileges. They also urged the inhabitants of Psara to migrate to Chios, because of the growing menace of piracy. From that time the island was gradually deserted.

The period before the War of Independence

According to accounts by foreign travelers, between 1562 and 1571 the repopulating of the island began, at first with mainly Muslim families, in the framework of a relocation policy of the Ottoman administration, with provision of land and exemption from taxes, in order to protect the space. Subsequently, Greek incomers arrived, from Thessalian Magnesia, Euboea and western Epirus, who because of bad weather conditions encountered *en route* to the Asia Minor coast interrupted their voyage and dropped anchor at Psara. The cohabitation of the two religious groups apparently led to the assimilation of the Muslims by the Greeks, or to the Muslims' abandonment of the island to the new inhabitants and the sale of their properties to them⁷. Not long after, the Psarians who had sought refuge on Chios also returned to their native isle.

At first, the inhabitants were involved with agriculture and stock raising, in very adverse conditions. Later, under the threat of piratical raids, a walled settlement was created in the southwest part of the island, at the site of Palaiokastro, where the church of Saint Nicholas stands today. As the years passed and the population increased, the need for foodstuffs became more acute. The inhabitants turned cautiously towards the sea, initially to obtain necessary supplies from the neighbouring islands, and subsequently to engage in maritime trade.

Administratively, the inhabitants elected annually a representative body of 40 men, which in its turn elected the four-member council of elders (*demogerontia*), called the 'Boule of Psara', which was the executive authority.

After the victory of the Russians in the naval battle of Çesme (1770), the Psarians launched a flotilla of cruisers against the Turks. Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris (1783), the Psarians were awarded commercial advantages that allowed them to engage in sea trade, very often breaching the blockade of France during the Napoleonic Wars. In this way they accumulated wealth, acquired a

⁷ Nikodimos preserves in his Memorandum an important contract relating to the sale of a farm by an Ottoman woman to a Greek man settled on Psara. C. Nikodimos, *Memorandum on the Island of Psara*, vol. I, 629–630.

mercantile fleet of 45 ships and established Psara as the third largest maritime power in Greece, after Hydra and Spetses.

The Psarians were among the first to be initiated into the *Philike Hetaireia* (Friendly Society) and in Easter 1821 they unfurled the flag of the Revolution. The fleet of Psara, under the command of admirals Apostolis, Papanikolis, Kanaris, Pipinos, Vourekas, Vratsanos, Maniatis, and others, participated in all the naval battles of 1821, 1822 and 1823.

On 20 June 1824, an Ottoman fleet under Admiral Hosref, with 140 ships and 14,000 soldiers, attacked Psara. The Psarians, under the pressure of 1,200 Thessalians and some 20,000 refugees from the Asia Minor littoral, had decided, at their last assembly, to defend the island only from on land. The Turks broke the defence line of the Psarians, who in a last desperate effort were blown up at two points on the island, Ftelio and Palaiokastro. The Turks captured Psara, massacred its defenders and left, seizing most of the Psarian ships and taking captives.

The years after the War of Independence

After the Liberation of mainland Greece (1830), the Psarians realized that they could not return to their island, which was still in Ottoman hands, and asked the Greek government to appoint a place of temporary domicile for the survivors of the massacre. At first Monemvasia was chosen, and after the Liberation the government installed them in a settlement at ancient Eretria, which was named Nea Psara. On 31 January 1844, the First National Assembly passed a decree granting the privileged election of two parliamentary deputies, from Palaia and Nea Psara, as a gesture of gratitude. Psara was liberated on 22 October 1912.

Today there is only one village on Psara, with a population of about 400. The island is far away from the major urban centres of Greece, excepting the town of Chios, with which there is a regular ferry connection, except in bad weather. The community is a dynamic one, particularly the young women, who have created the 'Constantinos Kanaris' Cultural Association, which organizes local events and other activities.

The main source of income on the island is remittances from the men employed in the shipping industry. In addition, there is considerable activity in tourism, especially in summertime, and there are incomes from properties and building trades. The inhabitants are involved with agriculture, stock raising and fishing, to a lesser degree and primarily to cover domestic needs.

The narrative method

This study is part of a more extensive research conducted on Psara, at intervals, between June 2007 and August 2008. In addition to the ethno-historical method, that is, the combination of fieldwork and historical textual sources, geneograms constitute the main bulk of the narrations.

The geneogram is the combination of the family tree with the narration. This is a synthesis that lends itself to an interdisciplinary approach, which is used in many cases, depending on the level of analysis, and in which the application of semeiological analysis can be demonstrated to be the best method of interpretation. In anthropological research, the geneogram can be used not only as a tool for collecting information relating to kinship, but also as a means of reconstructing the past. Essentially, it is a pre-made structure, upon which a network of information concerning the same individual personally, and which comprises what we call personal myth, is intertwined⁸. As McGoldric and Gerson observe⁹, ‘the geneogram is a family tree which records information on the members of one family and their relations for at least three generations’.

Of central importance in my approach is the analytical model proposed by Greimas, which is based on the restoration of a threatened order of values, starting from the principle that both the pragmatic and the mythopoeic narration share common axes, human action and human passions¹⁰. The understanding of the events is predicated on the understanding of the language, the action and the cultural tradition from which the typology of the narrative plot comes.

Narration and genealogies

Oral testimonies are a different category of documents from written sources. This does not mean that the oral narration is of minor importance. Since it does not hush its subjectivity, it can be more reliable than the written document, which supposedly represents ‘objective’ informing. The oral testimony is always useful, especially when it concerns certain silences of history. In this case, the oral testimony does not simply offer the subjective lived experience of things, it substitutes for the non-existent written documents¹¹.

‘My family is one of the oldest on the island. My ancestors originated from Thessalian Magnesia, Epirus and Roumeli. My great-grandfather, Constantinos, was a sixteen-year-old lad at the time of the destruction of Psara. After the massacre, he and his father’s brother, Giorgis, went to Syros. There, their ship was

⁸ M.Stylianoudi, M.-G., ‘Geneogram and semeiology: A new language in therapy’, in *The Life of Signs*, Third Panhellenic Conference of Semeiotics (Ioannina, 26–29 October 1989), Eratosthenis Kapsomenos, Grigoris Paschalidis (eds), Paratiritis, Thessaloniki 1996, 146–155.

⁹ Monica McGoldric, Rudy Gerson, “Geneograms”, in *Family Assessment*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York 1985, 1.

¹⁰ This is the action model or performance model, which follows Chomsky and Levy-Strauss. It speaks of surface structures and deep structures, and is based on some global characteristics of human action, in A.J. Greimas, *Semiotique et Sciences Sociales*, Seuil, Paris 1976.

¹¹ Baron, Odette, ‘Oral History: the constitution and the processing of an archive’, in *Narrativity, History and Anthropology*, University of the Aegean, Department of Social Anthropology, Mytilene 1994, 66–89.

requisitioned by the government. They gave everything they had to the Struggle. Just think, in 1864 his wife asked for a pension because of indigence.'

The distinctive element of each narration is the linking, in whatever way, of the narrator's origin with a forebear who came to the island in the years before the War of Independence and who, in the best case, either belongs to or is connected with a family of ship-owners, or took part in the War of Independence, or in the defence of Psara before its destruction.

'We are among the pre-revolutionary families. I don't know the ins and outs well enough to tell you. You should go to Dimitris A., who deals with the historical details. I know that our family is a very old one. We also had victims in the massacre of Psara. See! Go and look at the names on the memorial. And my wife's family too is one of the old ones, of the 'first families' [prota sogia], as we say. She's a good woman, astute and a thrifty housewife. It was a brokered marriage, my mother arranged it. We're also related, second cousins, I think. I didn't know her, I was away at sea for many years, but when I came home from one voyage, my mother said to me: "Marry her"! A good woman! And so I married off my children well, and they too married into first families, not that I believe these things, but see! You know, here is a small place and everything is counted! ...' (Giannis, aged 70).

The concept of origin functions as an organizing scheme of the community, and at an ideological level it refers to a genealogical line of origin – in most cases true and in very few cases modified – which is a source of pride for the family. Genealogies of this kind are of families who are linked with one another either by common origin or by a system of intermarriages that validates and reinforces the origin. This scheme plays a vital role in the life of the community; it secures a position of status in the social tissue, it organizes the strategies of intermarriages and it functions as a means of preserving the social capital of each family.

Genealogy and origin

'Look now! You're asking me why Dimitris doesn't want Soula as a daughter-in-law. The main reason is that Soula's parents are foreigners [i.e. not Psarians]. She's a good girl, and her mother is very hardworking and polite. But what can we do about it! They don't match. He's from an old family, she and her family are foreigners. ... I don't pay much attention to such things, but those who remain on the island, they stick to them still' (Lakis, aged 60).

The Psarian system of origin is quite complicated, with many parameters that are mutable or are open to negotiation, depending on the social circumstances.

All informants agree on the existence of three classes, which in the years before the War of Independence were distinguished on the basis of origin and occupation. The families (called *sogia*) were distinguished on the basis of class (economic and social) criteria. To the first *sogia* belonged families originating from

ship-owners, aldermen (*demogerontes*) and captains; to the second *sogia* belonged families of crewmen; the third class was made up of servants, foreigners¹².

This specific class distinction was reflected spatially and also determined the routes the island's inhabitants followed. It should be noted too that the various classes had different neighbourhoods, coffee shops and pews in the church. For example, the church of Saint Nicholas is built on a hill and is accessed via two marble staircases, one on the northeast side of the churchyard and a second one on the southeast side. According to the sources, the aldermen, captains, wardens and in general members of the island's ruling class, as well as official visitors, used the first staircase, which was revetted with marble. In the years after the War of Independence, only those inhabitants who were members of Psarian pre-Revolutionary families were allowed to use it (Archontos 2007: 225–226). The second staircase was intended for the crews, while a third stairway, cut in the rock, was used exclusively by those inhabitants who were not Psarians in origin or who belonged to the lowest social classes (Archontos 2007: 229).

The significance that this pronounced class consciousness had until recently is apparent from the interview with E.K., aged 66. *'On the beach there was a jetty and people had to wait there by soi [i.e. class] for the ship that was coming for supplies or for news, otherwise there was danger of a fray. My grandfather, who was the first pilot, was very angry that someone of low class [aposogo] had stood in front of him. He wanted to hit him, but the others held him in check. He couldn't understand how someone of the third soi dared to go in front of him. There's no need for me to tell you that there were also two coffee shops, one for the genuine Psarians and one for men from foreign parts and the third sogia'.*

In more recent times, mainly after the Greek Catastrophe in Asia Minor, the situation changed. The old ruling class of the island had returned, financially ruined but still retaining its old glory, while new social groups had been created with the arrival of the Asia Minor refugees, who now played the role of the third class and were called by the locals *'sogiougloodes'*. Although Psara received several hundred refugees, who fled there temporarily, the permanent settlement of some triggered a mechanism that re-created the already dormant class differentiations and identified the newcomers with the third class. The new differentiation was now related to the time of settlement of the family on Psara, which fact brought the following distinction: a) pre-Revolutionary families which came back in the years just after the destruction or even later, b) families which settled until the early twentieth century, c) families of refugees from Asia Minor, who settled after 1922.

At present, even though it is not referred to explicitly and is indeed denied by informants, the same distinction exists, based both on descent and origin and on the purity of the blood. So, purity of blood is also a criterion of social classification, as a consequence of which the incorporation of foreigners [non-Psarians] is difficult

¹² Interview with Dimitris Andrianas, July 12th 2008.

and they are almost never the first choice for marriage, except among the third *sogia* or other foreigners.

The social dimension of descent is linked also with the psychological, particularly when descent does not have the same meaning for the others as it does for the subject. And this because the ego himself gives the symbolic dimension he desires to his roots. For example, Nikos spoke to me in glowing terms about his wife's family (*soi*). '*She's an M. I couldn't have made a better choice, because she's from a first family, as am I*'. Nikos intentionally omitted to tell me that his wife is not in reality of M. family blood, but was a *psychokori* [quasi-daughter] who was adopted, as other informants' sped to tell me. '*Don't listen to him. He's a bragger. I'm not saying, his wife is very nice, but she's not an M. She was a psychokori, whom they adopted. He wants to present things as if she were a true daughter*'. Descent and subjectivity are closely linked: the lineage ceases to be a social institution, but a personal fancy.

Bremond¹³ conceives of narration as an intellectual function that is structured in articulation with a programme of human action. According to this view, in everyday practice each individual draws up a plan, mentally investigates the possible developments of a situation, thinks about the course of an action undertaken, recalls to his memory the phases of past events.

Bremond argues that 'the production of narrative types is simultaneously also the structuring of human behaviours'¹⁴. The narrator draws up through these the model and the material of an organized process, which is essential to him in the course of his life. Of course, in these narrations there is one single plot, that which the narrator himself has adopted as framework for interpreting the specific event, that is, for inscribing a narration of his own in the narration he is analysing.

In the case of Nikos, as in so many other cases, this is an emic approach, in which each informant, in order to elevate the position of his family, distinguishes the classes in the way that is in his best interest. According to the analytical model proposed by Bremond, the basic functional units of a narration are constituted on different basic sequences with various formations and ways of connection, on the basis of the procedure of *improving* and *downgrading*¹⁵.

Although descent is the principal axis around which the value of the family revolves, the informants nevertheless have difficulty in recalling persons beyond the third generation. When memory has lapsed, the names of the persons missing are recalled either on the basis of the names of the children or the cousins, or with the aid of other and older fellow villagers. These gaps concern mainly forebears without children or who were unmarried, or children who died in infancy. Cause of the faulty memory is perhaps the conviction that man only fulfils his purpose when he creates a family and when he contributes in this way to perpetuating the

¹³ Claude Bremond, *La Logique du Recit*, Seuil, Paris 1973.

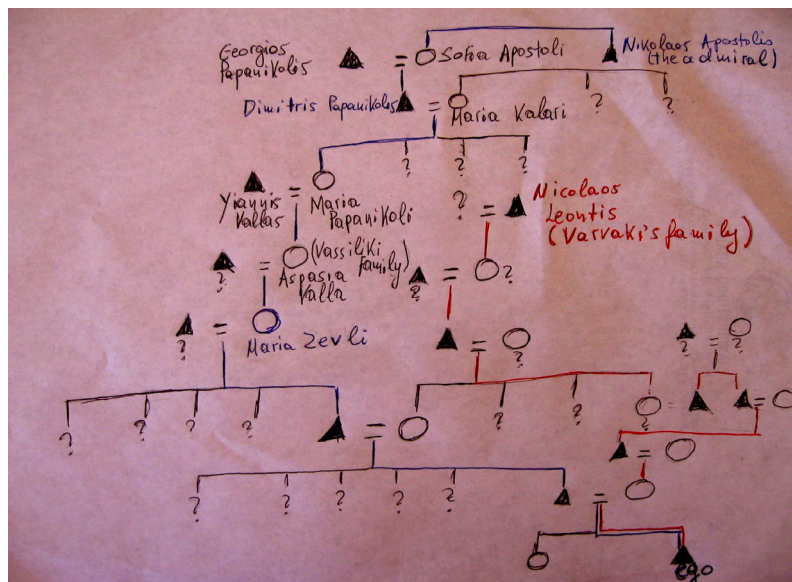
¹⁴ Op. cit., 157.

¹⁵ Op. cit., 146–157.

community. Also, these are relatives who, in the opinion of the informants, contributed nothing to the glory of the family or the lineage. In these cases, instances of structural amnesia appear¹⁶.

I give as an example the following genealogy, as it was presented to me at the first meeting with the informant, and as it was presented at the second.

I.A. is well-known and respected on the island, not only because of his vocation but also because of his descent. In our first interview, he said to me with regard to his family: *'I come from a very old family that is related to great sogia. My mother's family is from the Leontides, of the Varvakis family, while my father descends from Maria Zevli, who was of the family of Papanikolis, the famous admiral'*. When I asked him to draw his family tree on paper, I got the following sketch:



This particular informant carried out research on the genealogies and is author of the history of the island. Further to this, at my insistence, he filled in – not very willingly – the parts of his genealogy that were incomplete, trying to understand the reason why I was interested in the rest of the kin. This was not, of course, the sole testimony in which the informants adapted what they said, by emphasizing the existence of important ancestors, or, many times, by creating them or even erasing those they considered insignificant.

'I'm not from Psara. I'm from Ikaria. However, in my family there's the myth that we are descended from Karavogiannos and Trikouvertis, who, after the

¹⁶ Alan Barnard, Anthony Good, *Research Practices in the Study of Kinship*, Academic Press, London 1984.

destruction of Psara, went to Ikaria and settled in Alani. I always wanted to come to Psara. I was reading a lot of history. And see, I've settled here. As if I've come home' (Stelios, aged 79).

At this point, I think Barnes's distinction between 'genealogy' and 'pedigree' is obvious¹⁷. Although the genealogy is mainly a scientific and an anthropological way of compiling a family tree, since its plausibility can be checked at any time, the 'claim of pedigree' is based on information which the informants themselves wish to give, so as to emphasize certain points of their descent. In other words, these are etic and emic approaches respectively. Specifically, the term pedigree refers to testimonies which, orally or schematically, project the ego as descendant of an ancestor who, in his opinion, is important.

The basic element in the geneograms is the value of each deposition, which, apart from the elements of uniqueness, represents also the wider circle of persons in which the speaker participates. It should be mentioned too that what the informant narrates is always intermediated, either by the informant's relation with his past, or by the function of the interview. What is narrated is never the 'reality', it is its reconstruction by the informant at the specific moment¹⁸ and is related to how he experiences himself in time¹⁹.

Geneological narration and marriage strategies

For the inhabitants of Psara, marriage is the central point and purpose of their life. As we shall demonstrate, it is in essence a model of practices and strategies, a kind of habitus whose aim is to secure the preservation or the ascent of the family in the social and economic hierarchy, as well as its biological continuity. Strategies or practices of this kind direct the choices, but without ever, at least today, being explained clearly and systematically²⁰.

In brief, what I want to demonstrate is that marriage is not the outcome of submission to an ideal canon, but the result of a strategy that applies the deep-rooted principles of a tradition and reproduces it. Through the oral tradition of each family, and the geneograms, can be seen all the necessary adjustments that justify its approaching or distancing from the Xs or the Ys, with the aim of maintaining or even increasing the family's symbolic capital.

¹⁷ J.A. Barnes, 'Genealogies', in *The Craft of Social Anthropology* (ed. A.L. Epstein), Tavistock Publications, London, New York 1967, 101–128.

¹⁸ Paul Thomson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, Oxford University Press, 1988, 62.

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur 1990: 74.

²⁰ At this point we should stress the difference between the informant and the researcher. The researcher, ignoring these norms, tries to comprehend them through the practice or the discourse, whereas the informant, although he does not consider them as a system of objective relations but as accommodations that are referred to only when the need calls for it.

In 2006, when I began fieldwork on the island, there were about 25 unmarried girls aged between 23 and 35 years. The reasons are various and concealed behind some are other causes. First of all, there was that which they call ‘*chasogambria*’ [loss of grooms]. This term has a double meaning. Firstly it means that in some years fewer boys are born than girls, and secondly that the potential grooms are lower down in the social scale than the prospective brides, which fact makes any attempt at marriage difficult. Mrs K has two children, a son aged 28 and a daughter aged 26. To my question as to when her children would marry, she replied that this is a matter of luck, even though she is anxious about her daughter. However, the other informants explained to me that although many men had asked for her daughter’s hand, the mother considered they were of ‘second-class families’ [*deftera sogia*] and did not give her consent. As far as her son was concerned, ‘*We know he had an affection for G, M’s daughter. She’s a very good girl but she doesn’t have a house, and Mrs K. is against this attachment*’. One possible solution would be for the daughter to marry outside the island and live elsewhere, but the whole family is against this option, since, as they say, ‘there is a considerable real-estate property’ and marriage with a man not from Psara would be considered as marrying down (hypogamy).

In other words, through the narrations can be seen how the marital strategies aim, at least for the most privileged families, at increasing the symbolic capital. I am not speaking about the material capital, because in most cases these are families of seamen, which have secured financially their children’s future. However, in each case the marriage is a form of transaction in which the value of the symbolic and the material capital becomes the object of negotiation and characterizes the interest of the contracting parties, depending on their sex and the family’s position in the social hierarchy. This does not mean that that a large fortune is sufficient for someone to rise socially: the leading families rarely, or better never, want to become kin of families whose social advancement is due only to their wealth, or to wealth deriving from hard work, or sometimes to lack of scruples, and who do not know how to express virtues such as dignity, honour, generosity and hospitality.

‘*Look, for Eleni to marry well, it’s rather difficult. Her mother, I don’t say, she’s from a good family, poor of course, she married a foreigner. Of course, he’s an honest man, hardworking, he’s acquired property, but ... a foreigner. Whatever you say, the children no longer belong to the first families [prota sogia]*’. The concept of the good family can survive economic decline. The distance separating the ‘*aposoga*’ from the ‘*proto sogia*’ is based only on material and symbolic capital, but also, primarily, on the value of the whole lineage, from both parents and for many generations, on the life style and the social recognition the family enjoys, so that some marriages become impossible or are considered hypogamy.

That is why economic or age criteria are very often put as an excuse for excluding marriages between families that are not on a par, particularly when it is the marriage of an only daughter. In this case, since the children that will be born

will take the father's surname and the names of the paternal grandfather, the groom must be of equal, if not superior, rank in the social hierarchy to the only daughter, which is proven by the surname and if this is inscribed on the memorial to the heroes killed in the blowing up of Palaiokastro, as well as in the book of Nikodimos, which is a kind of *libro d'oro* of Psara. I cite a highly characteristic narration: *'Do you know how many girls have asked for my son? And we're talking about very good matchmakings. But he doesn't want it. Father, he says to me, I want to choose the girl myself. And we make the same excuses over and over again. Look, he's young, look ... he's got to get his captain's certificate, look ... he's got a sister to marry off. And you know, some of the brides were from first families. Of course, there were others too, whom I wouldn't agree to. That is, I wouldn't have refused him, but I would have done whatever I could to make him change his mind'* (Giannis, aged 53).

Although the marriages, from the point of view of strategy, prove to be right, nonetheless even to this day, nothing functions without tensions and dramas. Over the past seventy-five years (the archives pre-1932 were destroyed by the Germans), there have been only two divorces on the island, out of 255 marriages. Even so, the system functions as a mechanism and ignores the oppositions between duty and sentiments. Even today, the discourse of the parents is by no means trivial and matchmakings in the form of 'free', but in reality imposed, choice prohibit marriages with inferiors and impose, notwithstanding the feelings, the best possible unions, in order to preserve the family's place in the social hierarchy.

Contrary to anthropological tactic, which confronts each marriage as an autonomous act within a totality of material and symbolic nuptial exchanges, here each marital act has a special place in the marital history of the family.

So, these chance and free unions are the product of a habitus, of a series of mute canons and agreements which arrange marital strategies and which pass from generation to generation as an aura of unspoken norms, to determine the fortunes of the generations to come.

The data I collected start from 1932 and show that the preferred form of marriage (at least until 2000) was between fellow villagers, 'so that the families know one another'. Marriages with individuals whose families were not known to the community or for which they could not gather information were avoided, as a result of which the island is endogamous at settlement level (homochthony).

'For many years I had an affair with a boy. Don't imagine anything untoward. It was a flirtation from schooldays. But how could I tell my mother about it, for he was poor and from a third-class family [trito soi]! She would have killed me! So, he waited to go to sea, to earn some money and to come and ask for my hand. However, in the meantime, P. asked to marry me. It had never ever entered my mind. He was a lad from the neighbourhood, older than me, and I looked upon him as a brother. When my mother came and told me the news, I nearly died. She didn't want to hear anything about the other one. She considered that this was a great

honour for the family and such good fortunes should not be lost. And it would be a long time before the other one came back, whereas P. was sending me letters telling me of his feelings. In time, I got used to the idea and I married him. I haven't regretted it, from the point of view that he's a good man and my children carry his name. Over the years I came to love him. How could I disobey?'

Thus, we understand how superficial is a question about the relationship between structures and sentiments: the individuals refer to clearly objective criteria, such as the virtue (the girl should not have been “talked about”), the health and the beauty of the girls, the dignity, the industriousness and the altruism of the men. Family education tries to secure correlation between the basic criteria underpinning the system, and the subjective criteria mentioned by the actors: the ‘good family’ should, more than the others, embody the virtues which, in their opinion, should typify such as man. In this case, a ‘happy’ marriage is a socially-acceptable marriage and is based on a social destiny that unites two socially-predetermined contracting parties. The name of the family and the purity of the lineage are so important that marriages between kin of the fifth, sixth and seventh degree are preferred, even though those involved silence this fact.

Conclusions

Starting from the fact that the narration is the discourse with which one aspect of the past is offered for understanding, linking causes and effects, I have tried to show the way in which the discourse on pedigree is linked with the marital strategies, by justifying certain choices.

Through the geneograms and the oral life histories, I have come to the conclusion that the emic approach classes the families in three categories, according to the purity of its blood, its historical dimension and the time of its settlement on Psara. The families are interlinked by intermarriages, which are the result of practices and strategies aimed at consolidating and reinforcing the social, economic and, primarily, symbolic capital of their name.

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