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Anastenaria*

Dimitris Xygalatas

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The Burning Saints
Cognition and Culture in the
Fire-walking Rituals of the Anastenaria

Dimitris Xygalatas

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For Adriana

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1

Introduction

Fire-walking around the world

Fire-walking is the ritual act of walking over fire or burning embers, ashes or stones with bare feet. Such rituals are performed in many parts of the world, in all continents. Accounts of fire-walking can be found in historical records, from Strabo's descriptions of such ceremonies held in Italy and Cappadocia (*Geography* 5.2.9; 12.2.7) over two millennia ago, to Landa's reports of sixteenth-century Maya fire-walks (1566/1864). Anthropologists and other scholars have also documented various contemporary fire-walking rituals the world over. Kingsley Roth (1936) described a ceremony performed in the Fiji islands, where participants walked on burning stones. Max Freedom Long narrated his experience with Hawaiian Kahunas who walked over hot lava (1948). R. U. Sayce (1933), who conducted fieldwork in Natal, South Africa, studied the fire-walking ceremonies performed on hot ashes by Indian populations. Marie L. Ahearn (1987) described the fire-walking rituals of Paraguay, while Gananath Obeyesekere (1978) provided an account of fire-walking rituals performed in Sri Lanka. Carl Belle (2004) has written his dissertation on the rituals of the Tamil people, who regularly perform fire-walking in India, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, the Seychelles and elsewhere. Fire-walking is also performed in Tahiti (Langley and Lang 1901), Japan (McClenon 1994), Brazil (Leacock and Leacock 1975), Haiti (Kiev 1968), Australia, Papua New Guinea and elsewhere. During the last decades, it has also been performed extensively in the contexts of several New Age movements, particularly in the USA (Danforth 1989; Burkan 2001).

In Europe, fire-walking rituals are held at the village of San Pedro Manrique, in Spain (Konvalinka et al. 2011; Xygalatas et al. 2011), as part of the festival of San Juan. A few thousand people gather there on midnight of 23 June, on the summer solstice, to watch the participants follow a procession up the

hill and then walk across a carpet of glowing-red coals, carrying a beloved person on their backs. In addition, fire-walking rituals are held at a few small villages along the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria (Kakouri 1999) and five villages in Northern Greece (see e.g. Danforth 1979, 1984, 1989; Christodoulou 1978). Although the rituals of San Pedro Manrique have no connection to the fire-walking traditions of Greece and Bulgaria, the latter two are historically related and together form the tradition of the Anastenaria, which will be the focus of this book.

Fire-walking among the Anastenaria

The rituals of the Anastenaria are of interest for this volume not only because of their particular historical development and certain specific ethnographic and historiographical problems involved in their study; this tradition also constitutes a good example of a physically and emotionally arousing ritual, and such rituals raise a very important question regarding their participants' motivation: why do people engage in extreme, costly ritual activities, that offer no obvious advantage but entail evident risks?

This volume is a cognitive ethnography of the Anastenaria. Its goal is twofold. As an ethnographic project, it intends to document and describe this tradition within its specific historical and social context. At the same time, as a cognitive study, it aims to identify some of the implicit psychological factors that contribute to the persistence and the transmission of the Anastenaria and other emotionally arousing rituals. These two directions of research, the cognitive and the ethnographic, will be interrelated and interacting: on the one hand, various cognitive theories and methods will serve as tools for the interpretation of my ethnography. On the other hand, my ethnographic data will be used to examine some of those theories by either supporting or challenging their claims.

So far, the study of the Anastenaria has not addressed the role of mental processes in shaping and constraining human behaviour. In this book I will consider some of these properties and their role in the performance and transmission of highly arousing ritual activities. The Anastenaria provide a very promising opportunity for such an endeavour, allowing me to examine, in a real-life setting, two very different sets of ritual dynamics within the same community: the frequently performed, low-arousal rituals of the Orthodox Christian setting, and the less frequent but much more emotionally arousing fire-walking rituals. For the interpretation of my ethnographic data, I will draw on evidence from the cognitive sciences as well as some of the most recent developments in the study of ritual in order to discuss the role of

underlying psychological processes involved in the performance of high-arousal rituals.

The story behind this volume

This work is based on three years of research, which was designed and eventually submitted at Queen's University Belfast in the form of a doctoral dissertation, and executed in Northern Greece and Southeast Bulgaria, where I carried out my ethnographic fieldwork. The first time I visited Belfast was during the summer of 2003. I knew that anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse was at the time professor at Queen's University, and I decided to visit him and discuss the possibility of entering a doctoral programme under his supervision. We were both interested in high-arousal rituals and cognition, and the possibilities for fieldwork that we discussed at the time included exotic and distant places like New Guinea, Mauritius and Amazonia. During two subsequent meetings, the subject of fire-walking did not come up at all.

Like most Greeks, I knew about the rituals of the Anastenaria through the reports of the press every May. However, it was only after a conversation I had at a conference in the beautiful Spanish town of Santander with my good friend and former professor from Greece, Panayotis Pachis, that I began to realize that this tradition would make an excellent subject for my study. Fire-walking is arguably the only ritual activity that involves such high levels of emotional and physiological arousal anywhere in Greece. Furthermore, it is not practised by some exotic cult, but by a group of pious Orthodox Christians. It was exactly this interplay between two contrasting dynamics, the conventional practices of the mainstream Greek Orthodox religion and the electrifying rituals of the Anastenaria, that made this tradition so interesting. When I finally moved to Belfast, in September 2004, and presented the idea at a meeting with my supervisors, they instantly agreed on the potential of such an undertaking.

Admittedly, I was somewhat hesitant about doing fieldwork in my home country, as I was aware that this might involve certain drawbacks. An insider's perspective can often prevent the researcher from recognizing or paying attention to familiar patterns that to an outsider might seem obvious or noteworthy. Would I be able to discern themes of potential ethnographic importance, which are normally taken for granted or considered as ordinary in my own culture? Would I be able to avoid biased descriptions and judgements (see R. Burgess 2000: ch. 1)? True, maintaining the necessary distance from the culture I grew up in was a challenge, but less so than I had originally feared. On the one hand, having lived abroad for the previous few years made

it somewhat easier to adopt an outsider perspective. On the other hand, the rural setting of Agia Eleni, a small village of four hundred inhabitants, often looked alien compared to the large, busy urban centre of more than a million people in which I grew up (Narayan 1993).

When I first read Loring Danforth's ethnography of the Anastenaria (1989), I could not help feeling that the author was "exoticizing" his subject of study, representing the people of Agia Eleni as too traditional and excessively different from the Western society that I knew Greece to be. "This is not the Greece I know!", I thought. His descriptions seemed to me closer to the good-old black-and-white Greek films of the 1960s that depicted a culture which to my generation looked familiar but at the same time distant, romantic and almost comical. But when I finally arrived at Agia Eleni, I soon realized that Danforth had not been exaggerating in his ethnographic descriptions. This was a very different culture than the one I had grown up in. One implication of this was that, despite being in my home country, I remained in a sense an outsider to the community I intended to study. I would therefore have to face one of the main challenges that every ethnographer has to face, that of earning the trust and acceptance of the locals, who, as we shall see, already had their reasons to be weary of anthropologists.

Of course, doing fieldwork "at home" can also offer certain important advantages. First of all, being a native speaker can greatly reduce the risk of misinterpreting the informers' accounts, providing a better understanding of the nuances of expression and behaviour. Familiarity with the local norms often enabled me to avoid inappropriate behaviour that could result in embarrassing others (or myself) and also allowed me to appreciate more fully certain behaviours, attitudes and expressions within their specific cultural context. Finally, it was easier for my participants to talk to someone who had grown up in Greece, as it allowed them to narrate their stories using freely the same expressions, jokes, historical and political references that they used in their everyday conversations.

After spending the first year preparing for my fieldwork and training in research methods, in May 2005 I left for Greece, where I would remain for a period of sixteen months, until September 2006. As I have mentioned, fire-walking was performed in five different places in Greece. I chose to focus on the village of Agia Eleni, because it offered specific advantages: unlike Lagkadas, which was an ever-expanding town, Agia Eleni was a small community of negotiable size and each of its inhabitants knew every other person in the village. Unlike Mavrolefki, where the performance of the ritual had ceased for several years due to the opposition of the Church, the Anastenaria had been performed continuously in Agia Eleni (despite similar polemic from the clergy), with the sole exception of one year. Unlike Kerkini, where the

fire-walkers did not welcome researchers or journalists and refused to speak to them, the people of Agia Eleni had never prevented investigators from attending their rituals, despite the trouble that the latter had often caused (see chapter 2). Finally, Meliki had not always had as a stable number of participants as Agia Eleni, as many of the locals went to other places to fire-walk.

My base was Thessaloniki, the biggest urban centre in Northern Greece, conveniently situated in the middle of the area where most of the fire-walkers resided, at an hour's drive from Agia Eleni, Meliki, Kerkini and Mavrolefki, and only 20 km from Lagkadas. Furthermore, Thessaloniki is an hour's drive from the Bulgarian border, and has a railway connection to Bulgaria's capital city of Sofia. Finally, Thessaloniki also had the additional advantage of having a large number of fire-walkers who resided there during the year and visited one of the villages for the festival, something which allowed me to conduct several of my interviews there.

I visited Agia Eleni weekly by car or by bus, often staying there for a few days, and for longer periods of time during the festivals or other events of the ritual cycle of the Anastenaria. I also made several trips to the other villages of the Anastenaria in Greece, as well as the villages of Kosti, Brodilovo, Bulgari and Vassiliko in Bulgaria. Finally, I regularly visited and interviewed fire-walkers that resided in Thessaloniki and other places in Northern Greece. Overall, I conducted extensive interviews and discussions with over sixty fire-walkers, as well as many locals, officials and observers. In addition, more structured interviews and questionnaires were administered to the fire-walkers of Agia Eleni, in the village and elsewhere, according to each informer's place of residence.

My first contact with the people of Agia Eleni was made through a personal friend who happened to know the leader of the community (the *archianastenaris*), a psychiatrist who lived in Thessaloniki. I visited him at his office, which was filled with books about Thrace, historical maps and pictures, and musical instruments, and announced my intention to conduct fieldwork in Agia Eleni. Tasos was a tall middle-aged man, polite but somewhat formal, and it was clear from our conversation that he was a well-educated person, with an excellent knowledge of the literature on the Anastenaria. He gave me several references, but refused to allow me access to some hard-to-get bibliographic resources that he had in his library.

I arrived at Agia Eleni for the first time a few days before the festival, in May 2005. There was no hotel or pension in the area, so I rented a room at a private house, the owners of which also owned one of the village taverns. My first conversations with my hosts were discouraging. "They won't talk to you", Mr Nikos said. "They don't like it when people stick their noses into their private affairs." My first attempts to get information confirmed Mr Nikos's

prediction. The people were very friendly and hospitable, and would invite me into their homes and offer me some Greek coffee and a snack. Nevertheless, whenever I asked them about their rituals, they would become laconic and evasive, refusing to talk about the subject, or claiming to have no knowledge of it. “We don’t know about those things”, the youngsters would say. “You’d better ask the elders.” And then the elders would respond: “What do I know? I just do what I have to do. Nobody knows the will of the saints.”

I spent several weeks desperately trying to find someone who would be willing to answer my questions about the ritual. I was hoping that as the festival approached it would be easier to discuss the subject with the Anastenaria. I was wrong. Indeed, as we moved towards the festival people would become even more cryptic or avoid the subject altogether. When the festival began, everybody looked very focused and busy, and it was now impossible to establish any kind of contact with them. I often felt as if I were invisible or transparent, as if people looked right past me, and their eyes never crossed with mine.

On the day of Saints Constantine and Helen, while I was following the procession on the way to get the sacrificial animal, I joined a group of Anastenaria on a platform that was pulled by a tractor. When we arrived at the sheep-pen, I saw Vassilis, an eighty-three-year-old man, trying to get off the platform, and I offered to help him. He refused in amusement, and jumped off swiftly. Sometime during the next day, Vassilis approached me and smiled at me. “Wasn’t it you that offered to help me get off the platform yesterday?” he asked me. “Yes”, I replied. “You are a fine young man”, he said. We started chatting and soon I asked him if I could record our conversation. He didn’t mind. Vassilis had been fire-walking for more than fifty years, without ever missing a festival. He told me all about his experience as a fire-walker, about the first time he performed the ritual, and about the dreams and visions he was having prior to his call from Saint Constantine. This was the first and most interesting interview that I ever got from an Anastenaris. Up to this day, I consider this to be the single most important moment in the course of my fieldwork. Not only because Vassilis was the first Anastenaris who actually agreed to an interview with me, and not even because he had such fascinating things to say, but mostly because the fact that the oldest fire-walker had taken a liking to me meant that I was accepted, that I was allowed to be there. Later that day, when the *archianastenaris* saw us together, he approached us and asked Vassilis, “So, what do you think of Dimitris, is he ok?” “Yes”, the old man replied, “he is a good lad”, granting me approval.

During the remaining days of the festival, not much changed in the attitude of the Anastenaria. But when the festival was over, people were more relaxed and easy to chat with. And within the next few months they would gradually

open up; they would invite me into their homes and talk with me for hours. As they explained to me, they didn't like those visitors who only appeared in May, took some pictures, asked a few questions and then disappeared. Besides, the inaccurate descriptions and biased interpretations that had been published by various ethnographers for their own purposes and agendas, as we will see in the next chapter, had caused much trouble for the Anastenaria in the past. My frequent presence was for them proof of my genuine interest in the ritual and my willingness to get the facts straight. By the end of my stay, I would watch some "newcomers", whether journalists and researchers, struggling to get a word out of the Anastenaria without much success, while I was recording long hours of conversation over lunch with them.

Outline of the volume

This volume consists of two major parts. The first part is ethnographic-descriptive, providing a historical, sociological and ethnographic outline of the tradition of the Anastenaria. Chapter 2 will present the historical setting into which the Greek fire-walking rituals have come to be performed in their current form and location. It will follow the trail of the Anastenaria from the area of Strandja, at the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria, to their establishment at the villages of Greek Macedonia. It will also describe the conflict between the Anastenaria and the Greek Church and some of the reasons behind it. In doing so, it will come across a specific problem in Greek historiography and the ethnography on the Anastenaria, namely the theory of the Dionysian origin of this tradition. Greek scholars have in their majority linked the Anastenaria to the ancient orgiastic cults of Dionysus (Hourmouziadis 1873; Kourtidis 1938–39; Diamantoglou 1952, 1953; Kakouri 1999). However, as we shall see in some detail, this theory was consciously designed and uncritically reproduced to serve a specific political agenda, and despite its claims there is no substantial evidence for the dating or the origin of the Anastenaria. In general, ethnographic writings on the Anastenaria have mostly been directed towards phenomenological descriptions, leaving out crucial social and psychological factors. In addition, despite the fundamental reliance of phenomenology on subjective experience, most of these assessments are based not on direct engagement with participants but on secondary sources and armchair anthropology. This is not to dismiss this bibliography as a whole. On the contrary, it provides detailed ethnographic and historical information, valuable for understanding the development of the Anastenaria and their socio-historical context, and has proved particularly helpful for the purposes of this book. However, only a few studies have considered the sociopolitical dynamics of

the performance of the Anastenaria, and even fewer have addressed questions related to individual behaviour (two notable exceptions can be found in the work of Loring M. Danforth [1989] and Jane A. Sansom [1999]). In addition, the latter have remained within the symbolic-interpretive level, viewing their subject matter as a symbolic system that arises primarily from the participants' interpretations of the world. While there is of course nothing wrong with these kinds of approaches, this volume will follow a different course. Without dismissing the importance of directly observable behaviour and personal confession – far from it – it will attempt to examine them in view of some of the underlying implicit workings and properties of the mind that allow and constrain such behaviours in the first place.

Chapter 3 will outline the ethnographic context into which the Anastenaria are performed in their current location, primarily focusing on Agia Eleni, a small agricultural village of no more than four hundred inhabitants in continental Northern Greece. The people of rural Greece are generally deeply religious (Stewart 2008a) and often turn to various saints for help with their problems. Religious healing is a common concept in Greece, and people often try to treat or prevent illnesses by using prayers, benedictions, visiting monasteries and allegedly miraculous icons, or by making vows and promises to various saints (Xygalatas forthcoming b). The Anastenaria are no exception. They are pious Orthodox Christians, they go to Church and honour all Christian saints; but they have a special place in their worship for Saints Constantine and Helen, who are the main figures of their tradition.

The relationship of the Anastenaria with these two saints is strong and emotional. They see their presence and intervention in everyday life, talk to them and see them in dreams or visions. In turn, the saints are thought to often interact with them, guiding and protecting the faithful and punishing the impious. Their icons are worshipped by the Anastenaria. These icons were brought by their ancestors when they migrated to Greek Macedonia, and they are considered necessary for the performance of fire-walking. They are regarded as very ancient and having a will of their own. They are thought to be miraculous and capable of communicating with people. The Anastenaria feel that they can heal them from illnesses, but also bring misfortune if not handled properly.

Chapter 4 will describe the ritual cycle of the Anastenaria. As the participants emphasize, the Anastenaria are more than fire-walking; they are a much broader tradition, with several ritual events around the year, all of which are based on important days of the Orthodox calendar. Preparations for the festivals start as early as 26 October every year and the cycle culminates with the festival of Saints Constantine and Helen in May. The festival includes elaborate ritual actions: various processions around the village, purification

rites with incense and water, an animal sacrifice, music and dancing for many hours throughout its duration. The most dramatic moment of this ritual cycle is the fire-walking ritual itself, where the participants, carrying the icons of Saints Constantine and Helen, dance over glowing-red coals. The description of the ritual activities in this chapter has intentionally been stripped of any personal comments and subjective judgements so as to allow the reader to get as much of an objective view of the rituals as possible – although still through my own eyes – as the basis upon which to understand and evaluate the explanatory claims that follow in the second part of the book.

Chapter 5 will consider the religious knowledge that is contained in and generated by the Anastenaria. The Anastenaria have no sacred texts or any form of written tradition, so this knowledge is orally transmitted, and stems from two main sources: the first is through personal experience and its individual or collective interpretation: extraordinary events are often deemed as “signs” or “miracles” and are attributed to the saints’ will. Similarly, dreams and visions are seen as divine manifestations following and contributing to the pattern of the saints’ workings. The second source of religious knowledge in the Anastenaria lies in the various oral narratives that get passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Such narratives include the myths and legends of the Anastenaria that talk about the origins of fire-walking, the lost homelands and the glorious past, when the saints interacted directly with their believers and the latter were wise and pious. Those stories do not form a consistent mythological corpus but are largely fragmentary and often contradictory as well as historically inaccurate. Other narratives recount the life and workings of not-so-distant Anastenaria, within living memory of many. Their acts and behaviour are often idealized and romanticized, and these earlier fire-walkers are considered insuperable by the present-day Anastenaria. Since this knowledge is not explicitly taught, it grows with old age, and elders are seen as wise and knowledgeable, mystic-like authority figures, even if this knowledge is never displayed or challenged.

The second part of this volume is theoretical and analytical; based on the data from the study of the Anastenaria presented in chapters 1 to 4, it calls upon theories and methods from a variety of disciplines in order to account for the appeal, the transmission and survival of such emotionally and physiologically stimulating rituals.

Chapter 6 will identify certain problems in the way religion in general and ritual in particular has been studied in the past, and will then go on to concur with the emerging field of cognition and culture, which calls for an interdisciplinary approach to religious behaviour. Such an approach combines the methods of the natural sciences with those of the humanities, offering a methodological pluralism, employing multiple levels of analysis

and explanation in order to reach a fuller understanding of the ways in which human beings think and behave.

Chapter 7 will pose the question of motivation for ritual behaviour. Simply put, why do people perform rituals? It has been suggested that humans have an innate tendency towards ritual behaviour (e.g. Boyer 2002; Boyer and Liénard 2006). However plausible this case may be, something more needs to be said about the many “extreme” or costly rituals found the world over. In other words, why are some rituals unexceptional, repetitive, even tedious, while others can be exciting, stressful, difficult to perform or even dangerous? What motivates people to participate in such costly activities? Costly Signalling Theory (Irons 1996; Sosis 2000, 2003, 2006; Bulbulia 2004) argues that costly rituals function as proof of commitment to the group. According to this theory, certain violent rituals such as initiations can become means of warranting commitment by challenging potential members to pay a costly price in advance before joining the group. This, however, can hardly apply to the Anastenaria; as I will argue, the cost of participation is much higher than the potential benefits in terms of social status. What is it, then, that makes these activities so appealing to people, despite their high costs?

Chapter 8 will discuss the role of arousal in motivating participation in rituals like the Anastenaria. Ritual theorists (Whitehouse 1992, 2000, 2004; McCauley and Lawson 2002) have noted that high arousal can be a very effective mechanism for the production of ritual meaning and in consequence for the transmission of ritual traditions. This view is supported by empirical evidence showing that people intuitively attribute meaning and importance to highly arousing events, and that engaging in such events can retrospectively influence their attitudes regarding these activities and the other practitioners. These theorists have particularly emphasized the role of memory in the transmission of religious knowledge, and the bimodal distribution of ritual forms: certain ritual traditions seem to favour repetitive and unexciting rituals, while others systematically employ infrequently performed, highly arousing rituals. The rituals of the Anastenaria are themselves performed within a context that includes two diametrically different modes of religious transmission: on the one hand, religious knowledge in Greek Orthodox Christianity is transmitted via frequent repetition and training, propaganda and safeguarding through official review and policing. Yet on the other hand, the tradition of the Anastenaria lacks such mechanisms for the transmission of religious knowledge, for which it rather depends on high arousal, sensory pageantry and personal exegesis instead. I will argue that the highly arousing nature of the Anastenaria indeed plays a fundamental role in the transmission and survival of the tradition, as it is a major provider of meaning and motivation.

Chapter 9 will focus on some of the somatic aspects of the performance of physically and emotionally demanding rituals such as those of the Anastenaria. Why is it that participants in such rituals feel that a special role has been assigned to them? How do these rituals create a sense of “revelation”? Is it possible that the performance of a ritual can have actual therapeutic results for the participant? These are some of the questions that this chapter will address by looking into the consequences of participation at the physiological level. Extreme somatosensory arousal can effectively alter consciousness and modulate perceptions and attitudes. Among its potential effects are hallucinations, conversion experiences and a sense of divine revelation. It is even possible that such rituals may sometimes have actual therapeutic effects, whether by functioning as placebos or by triggering endogenous mechanisms.

As should be evident by now, this account of the Anastenaria is based on multiple levels of analysis. The final chapter of this book will argue that such an approach can contribute to broadening our understanding of cultural phenomena by acknowledging that human beings are not immaterial, mindless vessels that are determined by whichever culture is imposed on them, nor are they automatic, pre-programmed robots that are determined by their genes. Rather, they are cultural and historical agents, just as much as they are psychological and biological agents, and to negate any one aspect of their existence inevitably impoverishes our understanding of culture itself.

Since the Anastenaria are the protagonists of the narrative on which we are about to embark, their own words will be very often quoted. In order to protect their privacy, original names have been changed or often omitted altogether and replaced by other traits (e.g. “an old woman”, “a priest”) although those who are familiar with the village and/or the Anastenaria will inevitably be able to identify certain persons and situations. However, original names are used for some of the Anastenaria of the past that are now historical figures of the tradition, as well as for the *archianastenaris* of Agia Eleni, Tasos, who is somewhat of a public figure, having been named several times in ethnographic work as well as in the press, and as such immediately recognizable.

In my ethnographic descriptions, I will often use the present tense as a narrative construction of time which preserves the reality of the ethnographic encounter (Marcus and Fischer 1986). I hope that it will be obvious to the reader that this narrative device is not intended to portray the Anastenaria as a timeless entity (Stocking 1983: 107) or to make any pretence regarding the objectivity of my representations (Fabian 1983). It refers to a historically located “ethnographic present” of a constantly changing society as I perceived it during the course of my fieldwork (namely in the years 2005–2010), which, as any ethnographic description, is already in the past at the time of writing.¹

For a better sense of how Greek words are pronounced, the UN/ELOT (International Standard ISO 843) system of transcription is used.

2

Tradition in the making

The Anastenaria¹ are communities of Orthodox Christian devotees known for their exiting rituals, namely the fire-walking ceremonies that they perform in honour of Saints Constantine and Helen. Notwithstanding the explicitly Christian character of these groups, Greek ethnographers and historiographers have traditionally considered the Anastenaria's practices as pagan, originating from the ancient orgiastic cults of Dionysus. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it will become apparent that this view lacks any evidential support and is based on ideological grounds alone. In this chapter, I will delineate the history of the Anastenaria as it is known from the available evidence, and subsequently I will discuss the claims on the Dionysian origins of this tradition, the explicit and implicit motivations behind those claims, and their implications not only for the ethnographic representation of this tradition, but also for the tradition itself.

From Eastern Rumelia to Northern Greece

The tradition of the Anastenaria was brought to Greece by refugees from the area of Strandja, at the Black Sea coast, which used to be part of the Ottoman Empire and today is divided between Turkey and Bulgaria. This area was inhabited by Bulgarians, Greeks and Turks. Fire-walking rituals had long been performed there, in several villages with a Christian (Greek, Bulgarian or mixed) population (Arnaudov 1935; Romaios 1944–45). In most of those villages fire-walking was held in honour of Saint Constantine, while in others the celebration was dedicated to Saint Panteleimon or Saint Ilias. In addition, fire-walking was also performed on other important dates of the Orthodox calendar, such as 8 September (the birth of the Virgin Mary), 18 January (Saint Athanasius's day), and 24 June (Saint John's day) (Hourmouziadis 1873: §6).

Each village had a sacred well (*agiasma*), from which holy water was drawn, and a chapel, where the sacred icons were kept. The biggest and most prosperous village in the area and home to the most important fire-walking festival was Kosti, with a population of 180 families (§5) in the mid-nineteenth century and a few thousand people at the beginning of the twentieth century (Danforth 1989: 133).

The festival in Kosti was held every May in honour of Saints Constantine and Helen. It lasted eight days, and every night included fire-walking and dancing to the melodies of the Thracian lyres, drums and bagpipes. On 21 May a sacrificial bull was slaughtered, while several people would also bring sacrificial lambs and sheep as personal offerings. The animals were blessed by a priest before being slaughtered and the meat was distributed among the villagers. In the evening, a big fire was lit. After dancing for several hours, the Anastenaria started crossing over the fire, led by the *archianastenaris* and carrying the icons of Constantine, Helen and other Christian saints. Following the ceremony, the various communities of the Anastenaria exchanged visits carrying their icons, so that the depicted saints could visit their “brother saints” (Hourmouziadis 1873: §18).

The leader of each community, the *archianastenaris*, was elected by a council of elders called “The Twelve.” Each *archianastenaris* kept the icons in a special room in his house called the *konaki*. The icons were often called “Grandfathers” (*pappoudes*), like Saint Constantine, who was also often referred to as “the Grandfather” among the Anastenaria. Since Kosti was the most important village, its icons were seen as more powerful and its *archianastenaris* was the most respectable and influential of all.

The Anastenaria were considered to possess special religious knowledge, and their icons were believed to be miracle-working. People often visited them and asked them to interpret their dreams, offer them advice or help them overcome an illness. The Anastenaria listened to people’s confessions, foretold the future and exposed thieves and other transgressors. They used their icons to produce rain and protect the crops and livestock from diseases, to prevent some natural disaster or to diagnose and cure the sick (Hourmouziadis 1873; Petropoulos 1938–39). In the absence of professional doctors, they often acted as the village doctors. When someone got sick, the Anastenaria would be called to the rescue. Using their icons, they would try to cure the illness or suggest some alternative treatment.

When somebody asked for help, they would call four or five Anastenaria. They would go and see the patient, and give instructions: “the icon of the Virgin is not well-placed; you will take it and put it over there; you’ll give it to a painter to wash it and re-paint

it; you also have a ram; you'll slaughter it, make it a *kourbani* [sacrificial animal], and bring it to the *konaki* of the Anastenaria". The family of the patient would take the ram to the *konaki*, and the Anastenaria would eat it all, and speak about the healing of the patient. If it was due to an illness caused by the icons, and if the icons bestowed their grace, the patient would recover. (Anastenaris from Kosti, in Petropoulos 1938–39: 141)

There is no certainty about when or how Kosti was founded. Some say that it was founded in the eighteenth century by a man named Kostis. During the Russo–Turkish war, many of the surrounding villages were burnt down when the Turks were fighting the Tartars, and many of their inhabitants gathered in this place, which was called Ortan Bugaz. The village was divided into separate quarters, which made it particularly vulnerable to frequent raids by the Tartars, because its people were fragmented. When Kostis united the various quarters and successfully fended off the raiders, the new village was named Kosti in his honour, and its people Kostilides.

According to a legend to which the Anastenaria often refer, the sacred icons lay buried in the ruins of the abandoned villages. Sometimes people would dream of those icons and they would then become ill and suffer. Kostis took these people to the places where their old villages used to be, and they dug up the icons. They built a church of Saints Constantine and Helen in Kosti to host the icons, which were only removed for the duration of the festival. At first, the priests took part in the ritual by performing sanctification rites, but later the Patriarchate of Constantinople, head of the Orthodox Church, forbade them to do so. After that development, the Anastenaria took their icons from the church and kept them in their shrine (*konaki*) throughout the year.

The area of Strandja was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1885. After the Russo–Turkish War of 1877–78 and the Treaty of Berlin (1878), the northern part of Thrace had become an autonomous province (*vilayet*) under the political and military command of the Empire, and was named Eastern Rumelia. However, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, and as unrest against Turkish occupation spread throughout the Balkan peninsula, the area became particularly unstable, with constant conflicts and territorial repartitions. In 1885, Eastern Rumelia was annexed without bloodshed by the Principality of Bulgaria, a vassal state of the Empire, which had also been created by the Treaty of Berlin.

During the first years of the twentieth century, tension remained in the area, resulting in frequent armed conflicts between Turks and Bulgarians. In August 1903, Russian ships took control of the port of Igneada, while

Bulgarian militia ignited an uprising in Thrace. The rebels soon gained control of Kosti and most of the surrounding villages, and the Turkish families that lived there were forced to flee. The Greeks of the area were sympathetic to the rebels and were thus safe for the moment. However, sensing that the troubles were only beginning, the Anastenaria were concerned for the safety of their icons. They decided to remove them from the *konaki* and keep them in the homes of the people who had found them.

In 1908, Bulgaria proclaimed its independence, but the conflicts continued and eventually escalated into what became known as the Balkan Wars. During the First Balkan War (1912–13), the nations of Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia formed an alliance that was named the “Balkan League” and successfully fought off the Ottomans, conquering Albania, Macedonia and most of Thrace. Immediately after, however, the victors disagreed over the division of the conquered territories and engaged in the Second Balkan War.



Figure 2.1 The villages of the Anastenaria. 1. Kosti (today in Bulgaria). 2. Agia Eleni. 3. Lagkadas. 4. Kerkini. 5. Mavrolefki. 6. Meliki.

This war was terminated with the treaties of Bucharest and Constantinople (1913), which officially ceded Eastern Rumelia to Bulgaria. Shortly after, the Greek population of the area was forced to leave their homes and were moved to refugee camps in the southern part of Macedonia, which had now become Greek territory. A few years later, after the end of the First World War, when Greece regained Eastern Thrace from Turkey with the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), they were moved there with the promise that they would soon be able to return to their homes, which were now over the Bulgarian border. However, after the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which handed control of Eastern Thrace back to Turkey and imposed an exchange of Greek, Bulgarian and Turkish populations (see P. M. Brown 1924), the hopes of returning to the homeland were effectively shattered and the Anastenaria were forced to flee once again. By 1924, the majority of them had settled in several villages and towns of Greek Macedonia.

The opposition of the Greek Church to the Anastenaria

The Patriarchate of Constantinople never approved of the Anastenaria. It opposed their practice, deeming them pagan rites, primitive relics and acts of ignorance that were not “in line with the practices of the Mother Church” (Hourmouziadis 1873: §1). At the time of their performance in Strandja, the clergy persecuted the Anastenaria, often violently, beating the fire-walkers and burning their icons (§29). Because of this persecution, when the Anastenaria arrived in Greece, they celebrated their rites in secret for fear of an adverse reaction from the Greek Church and the local population. Fire-walking was performed indoors, inside the *konaki*. The fire was lit in the hearth and the coals were spread on the floor, which had been covered with soil and manure. The Anastenaria then danced over the burning coals until they were put out.

Nobody knew about the Anastenaria in Lagkadas; not even our neighbours. On the day of Saint Constantine, people would hear the lyre and the drums playing and ask my father what all the fuss was about. “We’re celebrating my brother Kostas’s name-day”, he would answer. “But your brother is dead!”, they would say. “So what?”, my father would reply. “Shouldn’t one honour the dead? Shouldn’t one celebrate for them?” (personal interview with the son of a former *archianastenaris*)

About twenty years later, the Anastenaria performed their festivals publicly again. An Athenian doctor and president of the Greek Society of Psychic

Research, Angelos Tanagras, who had an ethnographic interest in the fire-walking rituals, went to Bulgaria searching for the Anastenaria and found that they had moved to Northern Greece. Several years later, he finally managed to trace the Anastenaria of Mavrolefki, and in the 1940s he persuaded them to perform the ceremony in public again (see Christodoulou 1978: 148).

As the Anastenaria feared, the Orthodox Church indeed opposed the practice of their rituals. In 1947, the Bishop of Serres wrote a letter to the Holy Synod of the Greek Church asking what his position should be towards the Anastenaria of Agia Eleni. The Synod replied that “this pagan custom, originating from the orgiastic feasts of Dionysus,² should be abolished, with the use of any means the Church has at Her disposition” (Holy Synod 1531/778-26/6/1947). A similar encyclical was distributed to various churches in 1952 by the Bishop of Thessaloniki, while the Faculty of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki added support by publishing a letter condemning the practice of fire-walking. This initiated a public debate between the clergy and theologians on the one hand and various ethnologists on the other. Members of the former group condemned the Anastenaria as idolatrous, while others considered them as Satanic or anti-Christian (see Christodoulou 1978: 143–9). They argued that fire-walking was presented as a miracle, and that miracles can occur only by divine authority (Evangelou 1994: 53–5). Since the Church, which they considered to be the exclusive interpreter of divine will, was opposed to fire-walking, then it had to be the work of the Devil. Church officials were also concerned about the financial aspects of the issue. They pointed to the material and monetary offerings of devotees to the icons of the Anastenaria and insisted that only the Church had the right to make a profit from religious relics, based on a Greek public law enacted in 1940 which stated that “any private icon producing income must be confiscated and taken to the nearest church” (Ephemeris ton Nomon 1940: 516). Opposed to these arguments were many ethnologists, who claimed that the Anastenaria now constituted a Christianized ritual performed by pious Christians, one of the many pagan elements that the Christian Church had incorporated into its worship (Roiados 1954; Loukatos 1981), while others stressed the importance of the Anastenaria as evidence for the continuity of Greek civilization.

Despite the protests, the Bishop of Serres confiscated the icons of the Anastenaria in Agia Eleni in 1954, delivering a severe blow to the fire-walkers by removing their most sacred relics. A villager of Agia Eleni narrated to me the following anecdote:

Back then, the priests didn't really have any problem with the Anastenaria. Even the bishop would often visit us. One day he

attended the feast at the *archianastenaris's* house. The bishop was a very canny man. He saw the people bringing money to the icon, and asked the *archianastenaris*, “Are these private, or villager icons?” The old man didn’t really realize the difference between the two, and he naively answered that they were villager icons. The bishop then replied, “Villager are the icons, villager is the church, you should therefore take the icons to the church.” (personal interview with the son of a deceased *archianastenaris*)

Eventually, the Anastenaria reached an agreement with the bishop, who allowed them to perform their rituals as long as the icons were given to them only on the day of Saints Constantine and Helen for the fire-walk; for the rest of the year, they would have to remain in the local church. Furthermore, all the money collected during the festival would have to be given to the Church. The bishop broke this agreement in May 1970 and informed the Anastenaria one week before the festival that they would not be allowed to have the icons. The Anastenaria agreed to perform the ceremony without the icons, as long as these at least remained in the village church. However, on the day of the two saints, 21 May, the icons disappeared “mysteriously”. An old woman from the village remembered that day:

The icons had been taken away a lot earlier, but nobody realized it. The church was being refurbished and the priest moved all the valuables and the icons into the sanctuary, where he would keep them locked until the work was done. When the restoration was completed, he called us, the young girls, to clean up. I didn’t go, but my younger sister did. When they were done cleaning, she told the priest, “Father Alexis, bring us the icons now, and we will hang them up.” Father Alexis simply smiled awkwardly. When my sister came home she said, “Dad, they have taken the icons! We asked for them and he wouldn’t bring them out.” (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

The bishop denied any involvement. After that, the festival didn’t take place that year. The fire-walkers took legal action, and the dispute was finally settled in court. In May 1971, the case was heard at the Lower Court of Serres. The Church argued that the icons were not originally private; they belonged to the church of Kosti in Bulgaria and were only lent to the fire-walkers for the performance of the ritual. Therefore, they should now be considered the property of the Greek Church. To support his argument, the Church’s attorney cited the dimensions of the icons (30 × 40 cm) and claimed that they were

too big to be private icons. Both witnesses on the side of the Church were priests, who testified that they had never heard that the icons belonged to the fire-walkers. The *archianastenaris*, on the other hand, argued that the icons were private. One of them had recently been made after his own request (and on his own expense) by an iconographer, and the other one belonged to the family of another fire-walker and had been passed on from one generation to the next. It had been brought to Agia Eleni by the man's grandfather when he fled from Kosti, and then passed on to his father, from whom he inherited it. Two witnesses, one of whom was a member of the board of trustees of the local church, confirmed his testimony. The decisive evidence was a record of the church committee, dating back to 1950, where the church's property was listed. The two icons were listed under the names of their owners, and the book was signed and sealed by the bishop himself. Thus, the Court ruled that the icons were private property of the two families; they were returned to them, and the Church was ordered to pay for the court expenses (Christodoulou 1978: 149–52).

Similar opposition has also been demonstrated against other communities of the Anastenaria. In 1954, local priests and teachers protested against the practice of fire-walking in Lagkadas. As a result, the Anastenaria decided to hold the festival indoors that year, without processions and music. The local bishop refused church services to the fire-walkers and their children. The Anastenaria were denied Holy Communion and were not allowed to get married, become sponsors in weddings or have their children baptized, unless they signed a statement that they would never fire-walk in the future. One woman signed this statement, but the next year she became ill, and one of her cows died. She attributed those events to her absence from the festival, and started fire-walking again (Christodoulou 1978: 153).

In 1973, the prosecutor of the criminal court of Thessaloniki ordered the police to conduct an investigation on the Anastenaria, after the bishop's request (Megas 1974a: 3). Throughout the duration of the festival, the bells of the cathedral were tolling mournfully. Furthermore, the bishop claimed that the Anastenaria had been excommunicated by the Holy Synod. In 1977, one of the Anastenaria was refused a wedding permit from the bishop, because he wouldn't sign the affidavit. The man wrote a letter to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople complaining about the bishop's behaviour. The Patriarchate then informed the Holy Synod of the Greek Church, which ordered the bishop to issue the wedding permit, as the fire-walkers "have never been excommunicated or detached from the Church" (Holy Synod 5144/77/1849 NK-18/4/1978).

In Mavrolefki, the bishop confiscated the icon and placed it in a chapel. A few years later, the chapel caught fire and the icon was damaged. Then the

bishop returned it to the Anastenaria, who had it restored. The job had to be done by a specialist and the cost was steep. All the communities of the Anastenaria helped raise the money. When the icon was restored in 1969, the bishop had the police confiscate it again, and thus the performance of the ritual ceased in Mavrolefki. Those who wanted to fire-walk went to another community that held the festival. In 1976, the Anastenaria instituted legal proceedings against the bishop. They asked for the help of the other communities to raise the money for the attorney's fee and finally managed to recover the icon. The bishop threatened to excommunicate the Anastenaria (Christodoulou 1978: 159) and on the days of the festival he ordered the village church and the chapel of Constantine and Helen to be shut down (Megas 1974a: 3).

At the turn of the millennium, the Orthodox Church still opposed fire-walking and various clerics often spoke and wrote against their performance, although they no longer had any power to prevent it. The Anastenaria were celebrated in Agia Eleni, Lagkadas, Mavrolefki, Kerkiniand Meliki. The rest of the Kostilides that lived scattered in other places went to one of those festivals to fire-walk. For some years, the Anastenaria had also been celebrated in Meteora, a suburb of Thessaloniki (Christodoulou 1978). Finally, a handful of Bulgarians, mostly of Greek origin, were at the time of writing still performing the Anastenaria in their original location in Strandja; however, their number had diminished greatly and the custom seemed to be dying out.

Fallmerayer, Hourmouziadis and the theory of Dionysian origins

This, in broad lines, is what we can tell with any certainty about the recent history of the Anastenaria, based on the available ethnographic and historical evidence. On the other hand, we know very little – in fact, close to nothing – regarding the origins or the dating of this tradition. Despite this lack of information, the majority of Greek scholars who have treated the subject have argued that the Anastenaria originate from the ancient orgiastic cults of Dionysus (Hourmouziadis 1873; Kourtidis 1938–39; Diamantoglou 1952, 1953; Kakouri 1999). As we will see, this claim is entirely unfounded, and was calculatedly constructed in order to serve specific political agendas.

The construction of this theory relates to a more general trend in Greek scholarship to find links with the ancient past, which started shortly after the first independent Greek State was established following the War of Independence from Ottoman Turkey (1821–32). Around that time, during the 1830s, the Austrian historian Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer proclaimed in his publications that the contemporary inhabitants of Greece had no racial

relation to the ancient Greeks (Fallmerayer 1830, 1835, 1836). According to Fallmerayer, until the sixth century CE, the Greeks had been a “pure” race, without any foreign elements; the decline of the Greek civilization started with emperor Justinian and the Byzantine rule. Once Greece was weakened, Slavic tribes invaded it and wiped out its population. The problem for Fallmerayer was that modern Greeks continued to speak the Greek language. He dealt with this problem by claiming that the “real” Greek language was the one spoken until the sixth century, with its Dorian and Ionian variants. The modern Greek language was a “barbaric” form of Greek and was brought back to Greece in the ninth century, when the Byzantines conquered the mainland and wiped out the Slavic element. Finally, Fallmerayer claimed that at the beginning of the nineteenth century Greece’s inhabitants were mostly of Albanian origin.

Fallmerayer’s work was deeply ideological, driven by political motives and aspirations. Following the *realpolitik* of his time, he was interested in the maintenance of the post-napoleonian status quo, which he felt was threatened by Slavo-Russian expansionism (Romanos 1984; Herzfeld 1986b). He considered Russia to be the biggest menace against the Germanic nations and thus wanted a strong Ottoman Empire, capable of preventing the Russians from gaining access to the Mediterranean Sea. To this purpose, he made an appeal to the European forces to abandon their philhellenism and suppress the Greek revolution against the Turks. His main argument was that modern Greeks, having been “corrupted” by Slavic blood, were not worthy of Europe’s aid or sympathy (unlike other Western European countries that had intermingled with the Germans, “adding fresh Northern blood and vigour to the inhabitants of Italy, Spain and France” [Fallmerayer 1984: 35]). He concluded that “God has chosen the Greek race as the par excellence object of His wrath, and has imposed every punishment on it” (60).

Fallmerayer’s ideas caused a ferocious reaction from Greek and philhellene scholars and triggered a search for the continuity of Greek civilization from ancient to modern Greece (Danforth 1984). The profound effect of his ideas on nineteenth-century Greek scholarship is aptly captured by the title of a book authored by Giorgos Veloudis, *Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer and the Birth of the Greek Historicism* (1982). Indeed, Greek historiography emerged largely as a reaction to Fallmerayer’s theory, in order to make a case for the continuity of Greek civilization (Paparrigopoulos 1843; Stewart 1994).³ The link between modern and ancient Greeks had already been emphasized by the Greek Enlightenment scholars, who nonetheless considered the intermediate Byzantine rule as a dark age, a theocratic and obscurantist regime that separated the two periods of Hellenism (Demaras 1994). On the other hand, certain historians (Zambelios 1852; Paparrigopoulos 1853) argued that the

Byzantine era was not a period of decadence, but one of revival of ancient Greek culture combined with Christianity. According to this perspective, the Byzantium was seen as the link between ancient and modern Greece and the precursor of modern Greek civilization, which is now described as “Greek-Christian” (Zambelios 1852; Koulouri 1988).

Those Greek scholars were heavily influenced by German Romanticism, a movement that opposed the rationalism of the Enlightenment and stressed the priority of emotion over logic, particularities over universalities, and the past over the future. Thus, focus was placed on the nation, its origins and its unique attributes, and nationalism became one of the central themes of Romanticism as well as the key concept of German scholarly discourse (Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1978: 17–33; Zambeta 2005). For the German Romanticists, each nation had a special, unchangeable essence, which was described as the “folk spirit” (*Volksgeist*), and was not subject to external sociopolitical influences. This spirit could be traced in traditional folklore expressions, and especially those found in rural areas, which were seen as pure and uncontaminated from the polluting influences of industrialism. Romantic ethnography was placed in the service of the ethnic state, which was based on the concept of racial consciousness, that was considered not as a cultural but as a biological category. The purpose of German ethnography was to strengthen – or create in the first place – national consciousness and self-awareness, as well as to manipulate it according to the needs of the state (Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1997: 32).

This need for national unity and self-awareness was more than urgent in the newly founded Greek state, and Greek scholars saw in the German model an opportunity to show that the modern inhabitants of Greece were the direct descendants of ancient Greeks and beneficiaries of their cultural heritage. The goal was twofold: internally, to establish a national consciousness; and externally, to evoke the sympathy of the European powers, taking advantage of the movement of Philhellenism that was developing in Western Europe, whose proponents were dreaming of a revival of ancient Greek civilization. Many of those Europeans had an idealized image of Greece, based on its glorious past that was seen as the foundation of Western civilization. However, the population of modern Greece mostly consisted of uneducated peasants, whose life and customs were considered “barbaric” and “Oriental” by Greek intellectuals, who often saw this as a hindrance to their attempts to gain international support for the Greek plans of expansion.

To solve this problem, Nikos Politis, the father of Greek “folklore studies” (λαογραφία), proposed a modified version of Edward Tylor’s theory of “survivals” (Tylor 1871), focusing exclusively on those elements of Greek culture that appeared to have some relationship to antiquity. For Politis, the

customs of Greek peasants were not irrational or barbaric, but descended from the higher levels of ancient Greek civilization; they were, as he called them, “living monuments of Greek antiquity” (1914). Thus, he – somewhat clumsily – combined Tylor’s comparative method with Romantic historicism. While he searched for parallels of the customs that he studied in other cultures the world over, he denied the possibility that those customs could have spontaneously arisen in contemporary Greece, as they did elsewhere, as Greek peasants, despite being “vulgar and ignorant”, were still too civilized to have made up such infantile representations (Politis 1894). Those latter were to be found in earlier stages of Greek cultural evolution. In this way, the Greek ethnographic synthesis appropriated rationalist ideas within an overly Romantic setting, just like Greek Enlightenment had promoted reason, science and secularization, while at the same time endorsing a Romantic view of history (Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1997: 32).

It was within this context that the first account of the Anastenaria in the Greek language was written by Anastasios Hourmouziadis in 1873. At the time, Hourmouziadis was a professor of Theology at the Great School of the [Greek] Race in Constantinople, and was commissioned by the Orthodox Patriarch to run an investigation and write a report on the Anastenaria, due to certain suspicions raised by the local priests over the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of their members. The explicitly stated purpose of his report was twofold. On the one hand, it was polemical, describing and opposing “those rituals that spring from darkness and ignorance” and “diverge from the customs of the Mother Church”. On the other hand, it was also apologetic, aiming “to disprove those Western European scholars who have falsely contradicted our descent from the ancient Greeks” (1873: §1).

Based on such premises, Hourmouziadis cursorily goes on to derive his grandiose conclusions from trivial anecdotal evidence. His essay starts in a literary tone, describing the geographical setting of the Anastenaria: “Nature there smiles happily and cheerfully during spring.... In winter, however, her glory is manifested mightily. Snowy mountains...sit around like thoughtful old men, the wind roars wildly...and the ferocious and noisy sea madly crushes her tall waves onto the rocks.” It is this astounding nature, Hourmouziadis reassures the reader, that startles the inhabitants’ imagination, makes them ecstatic and causes them to “hear and see non-existent things, disturbs their nervous system, and turns them into fire-walkers” (1873: §3).

Hourmouziadis never actually saw the Anastenaria, nor did he visit the villages in which they were performed, and by his own admission his reports were based on information that he received from two priests who had served at those villages (1873: §27). They criticized the Anastenaria for failing to attend church regularly and because they didn’t give tips to the clergy. Based

on their reports, Hourmouziadis described the Anastenaria as crude, mentally ill people (§23) and accused them of superstition, drunkenness, orgies and sacrifices to Aphrodite (§16–20, 26). He even stated that if any stranger dared to mock the Anastenaria, he would immediately be killed, just as Pentheus was killed by the Bacchae for making fun of Dionysus (§20). For these reasons, as he admitted, the clergy had persecuted the Anastenaria “with the axe, the fire and the whip”, and the bishops had very often threatened and beaten the Anastenaria and thrown their icons into fire (§29).

In his description of the practices of the Anastenaria, Hourmouziadis is determined to attribute a Dionysian origin to anything one can think of. The sacrifice of an ox is connected to Dionysus’s descent from a bull. The *oreivasia* (frenzied barefoot mountain-climbing) practised by the ecstatic worshippers of Dionysus is compared to the formal visit paid by the Anastenaria to the neighbouring villages, that happened to lie on the mountainside. The *omofagia* (devouring of the raw flesh of live animals) practised by the ancient Bacchae (Euripides, *Bacchae* 138) is equated to the distribution of raw meat among the Anastenaria after the sacrifice (1873: §30). What Hourmouziadis does not mention, however, is that the Anastenaria of course cook this meat before eating it (in this respect, it is no different than purchasing raw meat from the butcher). Hourmouziadis concludes triumphantly that he has “proven with a great mass of evidence” that “we are the worthy children of our immortal forefathers” (§43). He closes his report by thanking “His Highness, our respected lord, Sultan Abdul Aziz Han” for his gratitude and protection. “Long live our blessed Sultan, Long live! Long live!” (§43).⁴

Thus, despite his criticism of the Anastenaria, Hourmouziadis also saw some utility in their study as an opportunity to support the case for the continuity of Greek civilization, which he, as other Greek scholars of his time, saw as a matter of national importance. And although he strongly opposed this tradition, deeming it a heathen and primitive relic, he also stressed its importance for demonstrating the continuity of Greek culture. To resolve this conflict, he concluded that although they had descended from idolatrous practices, the customs of the Anastenaria had been Christianized and associated with the worship of Saints Constantine and Helen. He maintained, however, that the fire-walkers should be educated by the Church in order to become “enlightened” and cease the performance of their rituals.

Hourmouziadis’s work established a theory on the origin of the Anastenaria based on constructed evidence and far-fetched assumptions. And despite all its obvious problems and biases, this theory remained largely unquestioned, as we will see, for more than a century. Hourmouziadis’s ideas had profound effects on the study as well as the performance of the Anastenaria. On the one hand, his views have been widely influential for Greek ethnology and served

specific nationalistic agendas. On the other hand, the theory of the orgiastic origin of the ritual provided the Greek Church with a *casus belli* and triggered a persecution that is still ongoing.

Early ethnography on the Anastenaria

After the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), Greece found itself in a transitional period, plagued by prolonged turbulence and political uncertainty. The threat of further territory loss was still in the air, and yet the ideas of a “Greater Greece” had not been forgotten. For the following three decades, governments would change every few months or even weeks and the political system would constantly swing between republic, monarchy and militarist coups. Amidst this climate of political uncertainty, Greek ethnography and historiography were mainly dedicated to shaping Greek cultural identity and defending the unity and continuity of Greek culture. This tendency was particularly evident in newly added Northern Greece, where the Greek element was still the minority and the need for a coherent national identity was greater.

In Thrace, two ethnological journals were founded during that period, *Thrakika* (Θρακικά) in 1928, and the *Archives of the Thracian Ethnographic and Linguistic Treasure* (Αρξείο Θρακικο Λαογραφικού και Γλωσσικού Θησαυρού) in 1934. They were both directed by Polydoros Papachristodoulou, a schoolteacher. There were no academics among their founders and their boards consisted of medical doctors, politicians, businessmen and other well-respected Thracians (*Archives of the Thracian Ethnographic and Linguistic Treasure* 1934–35, δ). The two journals had the same goals (*Thrakika* 1928, γ): “to proclaim for the ten thousandth time that Thrace has always been the cradle of Hellenism...and call the Thracian brothers to unite, get organized, and prepare for glorious patriotic action.”

Soon, the first articles on the Anastenaria of Kosti appeared in the *Archives of the Thracian Ethnographic and Linguistic Treasure*. Meanwhile, as we have seen, the Anastenaria had moved to Greece, but they practised their ceremonies secretly by fear of persecution. Without first-hand knowledge of the Anastenaria, the authors of those articles relied exclusively on the accounts of Hourmouziadis and followed his example, referring to their practices as Dionysian rites (Deligiannis 1938–39; Kourtidis 1938–39; Petropoulos 1938–39). What is more, even when it became known that the Anastenaria were now holding their ceremonies in Greece, these authors did not bother to visit them but continued to write about them based exclusively on Hourmouziadis’s report on the Anastenaria of Eastern Rumelia from the nineteenth century. Papachristodoulou himself started writing about the

Anastenaria (1950, 1952, 1953a, 1953b, 1954, 1955) when, in his own words, he realized that

It would be a pity not to take advantage of [the Anastenaria] – at least from a nationalist viewpoint – since their existence confirms the presence of Hellenism in Thrace for the last three thousand years. The Bulgarians, to their credit, take advantage of such important phenomena. (1950: 309)

Before long, more authors adopted the idea of the Dionysian origins of the Anastenaria (e.g. Diamantoglou 1952, 1953). The best-known proponent of this theory, who took it to the extreme, is teatrologist Katerina Kakouri. For her, the entire history of Christianity seems to be based on Dionysian elements. In her work she uses almost exclusively Christian sources, and the search for “historical facts” leads to the Old Testament, which, she argues, provides evidence for the Christianization of the ancient Greek ecstatic cults (1999: 60). Any reference to high-arousal rituals is considered as a clear case of Dionysian survival. Thus, the Anastenaria are remnants of the ancient worship of Dionysus, and the fire-walkers are referred to as “Bacchants” or “Bacchant-Christians.” For the purpose of demonstrating the connection between the Anastenaria and Dionysian rites, Kakouri stresses minor, mostly arbitrary similarities, ignoring significant differences. She relies on Hourmouziadis’s text, which is given authoritative status in her work. She even claims that Hourmouziadis went to Thrace and studied the Anastenaria (1999: 2–3, 11), while he himself stated plainly that he had never done so (Hourmouziadis 1873: §27). An example of the degree of uncritical reproduction of Hourmouziadis’s arguments by Kakouri is her mention of the *oreivasia* (mountain-climbing) practised by the ecstatic worshippers of Dionysus, as another parallel between the two cults. Having read Kakouri’s account while preparing for my fieldwork, when I arrived for the first time at Agia Eleni (where Kakouri had conducted her own research), I expected to see a mountain settlement, and was surprised to discover that the village rather sat in a valley, at a distance of 20 km from the nearest mountain. Naturally, when I asked the Anastenaria if they climbed the mountain during the festival, they were puzzled and amused at my enquiry.

Kakouri’s claim for the undisturbed historical continuity of Dionysian elements from prehistory until modernity (1999: x) and her efforts to bridge a 2000-year gap between the Bacchic cult and the modern fire-walkers are, to say the least, unconvincing. Attempting to find the missing links, she mentions various medieval “heretic” groups. The similarities between those groups and the Anastenaria are “their enthusiastic and popular character, the formation of independent religious groups, their fundamental belief in the existence of

Good and Evil...and the sanctity of fire and water” (68). Her reference to medieval texts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries mentioning groups of possessed people called “Sthenaria”, or “Psycharia” (80–81; Romaios 1955) does not seem to have any relevance other than rhyming with “Anastenaria” (-ari is a very common ending for neuter nouns), as these texts include no reference to fire-walking whatsoever.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that the worshippers of Dionysus performed any kind of fire-walking in the first place, something that Kakouri acknowledges (1999: 72–3). To support her case, she refers to Strabo’s descriptions of two ancient cases of fire-walking, one in Cappadocia⁵ and one in Italy.⁶ She concludes that “it would seem impossible that the ritual of fire-walking was transmitted to the Thracian Dionysians [sic] by the Romans, who had only temporarily conquered them. It is more likely that fire-walking spread from the temple of Castabala to Thrace.” And thus she goes on to speculate that Christian heretics who left that area must have brought the custom of fire-walking to Thrace after the eighth century (73), something that contradicts rather than confirms her main argument, which is that of the continuity of this tradition in Thrace.

The work of Maria Michael-Dede, who has written various articles based on her fieldwork in Lagkadas during the 1970s (Michael-Dede 1972–73, 1978, 1979, 1983, 1988–90), is also driven by similar nationalistic agendas. Although she criticizes the idea of the Dionysian origin of the Anastenaria as unsupported, she follows a similar path herself, claiming the ancient origin of the ritual. She cites passages from Homer and Xenophon that praise the heroic nature of the Greeks and the bravery of the ancient Thracian warriors (1972–73: 30–31). This ideal of “the hero-warrior...friend of the arts”, was later transubstantiated into Saint Constantine, the “Saint-Warrior” (32) and is today represented by the Greek fire-walkers. She speaks of the “truth of the actions of the Anastenaria” (23–24), the “purest expression of the Greek soul, which blends the Cross with the sword” (27). Furthermore, she claims that one cannot study the Anastenaria without being familiar with the values expressed in the slogan “fatherland, religion, family” (26), the nationalist motto of the militarist dictatorship that was in power in Greece at the time. Therefore, the privilege of studying and interpreting Greek culture belongs exclusively to Greeks and more specifically those who share the nationalist ideology of the junta.

Even more characteristic of the biases that govern Greek scholarship on the Anastenaria is the work of the renowned ethnographer Georgios Megas, which clearly demonstrates an opportunistic and ideological treatment of the subject. Megas began writing about Greek “Dionysian practices” in Eastern Rumelia before the performance of the Anastenaria in Greek Macedonia

(1911, 1942–43). Later, when the festivals of the Anastenaria were held publicly in Greece, he described this tradition, following the consensus, as yet another Dionysian survival (1960). Surprisingly, Megas spoke of the Anastenaria exclusively by describing their practice in Kosti, based on textual accounts. He did not witness their festivals, although by that time they had been held publicly in Greece for many years, and the lack of familiarity with his contemporary Anastenaria is obvious in his work. A picture in one of his articles shows the *archianastenaris* of Agia Eleni fire-walking, holding the icon of the two saints, but the caption under the picture reads: “The *archianastenaris* holding the holy Gospel, dancing on burning coals” (1960: fig. 15). Ignoring the contemporary performance of the Anastenaria, Megas went on to make a case for their Dionysian origin, uncritically reproducing Hourmouziadis’s arguments. Much of his article is dedicated to refuting the views of those Bulgarians and Greeks who doubt the Dionysian origin of this tradition, thus questioning the Greek racial origin of the Anastenaria (1960: 516). The lack of evidence to support this claim, which he acknowledges, does not deter him, as “there is only a small distance between ecstatic dancing and fire-walking”. It is therefore possible that “in times of intense religious frenzy, entirely spontaneously...fire-walking appeared, as another evidence of divine synergy, as a clear proof of the mystical union between man and God” (524).

Surprisingly, a few years later Megas completely reverses his position (1974a). His purpose this time is to defend the Anastenaria from the Church’s persecution, which he discusses in the beginning of his article. Alarmed by this fact, he sets out to “examine scientifically whether [this tradition] is indeed pagan and derives from the orgiastic cults of Dionysus” (4). One by one, the same arguments by Hourmouziadis that were praised in his previous paper are now debunked, and the author concludes that the only similarity between the ancient cult of Dionysus and the Anastenaria is the participants’ ecstatic enthusiasm, but in any case the differences are great. This time, the significant similarity of the Anastenaria is that to medieval Christian mystic movements, such as Hesychasm. Therefore, the Anastenaria must have a Christian origin. Megas mentions that he finally visited the Anastenaria “to get a first-hand knowledge of things”. However, his single visit took place twelve years earlier and only lasted for a few hours, while he did not even attend the fire-walk, “as it was getting late and we had to go back” (1962: 557). Just as the previous one, this article is exclusively based on reports on the performance of the festival in Kosti, and it seems that the only purpose of mentioning this visit is to add plausibility to his claims. The work of Megas constitutes a typical case of armchair anthropology and yet another case of an approach to the Anastenaria that is not based on any evidence, but on personal and collective agendas and motivations.⁷

This long formative period of scholarship on the Anastenaria spawned a plethora of similar works on the subject. This literature is dominated by comparative approaches in which the Anastenaria are associated not only with Dionysian rites (Kourtidis 1938–39; Kakouri 1999), but also with various ancient cults, sun worship, Druid rituals (Margioris 1980), fakir practices and so on, and are assumed to originate in early antiquity, in the Old Testament (Cassoli 1958; Michael-Dede 1979) and so on.

Nationalism has not been the only agenda behind the study of the Anastenaria. Almost all of those who have written on the subject have demonstrated a strong interest in either the preservation or the abolishment of this tradition. Those supporting it, in addition to stressing its importance for the national cause, often point to the ability of the Anastenaria to walk on hot coals unharmed as a sign of supernatural power or divine miracle (Konstantinidis 1953). Psychiatrist Angelos Tanagras (1940, 1959) claims that the secret of fire-walking lies in “psychic energy”, a peculiar substance located in the neural system and composed of “hypophotons”, particles smaller than those of matter, which are not governed by the laws of nature. When the Anastenaria fall into trance, these particles leave their bodies and form a radioactive shield that protects them from fire. This radioactive energy is the same substance that forms the halo around the heads of saints. Michael-Dede (1972–73: 99) informs us that this energy “accumulates through sexual abstinence... [and] is released through ecstasy”, creating a protective “aura” which “is pure energy and with its properties produces incombustibility”. Nikolaos Margioris (1980) speaks of an “ectoplasmic essence”; and Vittoria Manganas (1983) of a bio-energetic protective shield; Iason Evangelou (1994: 137) attributes the powers of the Anastenaria to electromagnetic energy; and others speak of a Holy Breath or Holy Sparkle (Vlastos 1953), of ethereal essences and stellar influences (Papageorgakis 1959).

On the other hand, those who oppose the Anastenaria reject them as a primitive or pagan tradition, the product of ignorance and psychopathological anomalies, or as evil and anti-Christian, and claim that “modern psychiatry has concluded that the Bacchic cult of the Anastenaria persists today due to primitiveness and ignorance”, and that

they will soon be history.... Their extinction is due shortly, and this is proven by the fact that there isn't a single person below the age of forty among the Anastenaria, which means that there have been no new Anastenaria after the return to the homeland, in the new, civilized conditions. (Kranidiotis 1956: 277)⁸

Despite its poor quality and many biases, the extant Greek literature of this period may prove very useful for the ethnographer, as it can inform a historical overview of the social, cultural and economic context of this tradition. Due to the small size of these communities, ethnographic research on the Anastenaria is often the only available source of information on the social life of the area. In this respect, the rigour of the description of the sources eventually proves an advantage, as there are very detailed reports that reveal various aspects of the life of the Anastenaria.

History revisited

It was only during the last quarter of the twentieth century that more substantial studies of the Anastenaria began to appear on the basis of empirically grounded research, in the form of long-term participant observation conducted by doctoral students of anthropology (see Christodoulou 1978; Sansom 1999). The turning point towards a more critical treatment of the subject was provided by the work of Loring M. Danforth (1978, 1979, 1984, 1989), who conducted fieldwork in Agia Eleni during the 1970s. Danforth offered the first rigorous ethnographic account of the Anastenaria, including a devastating critique of the theory of the Dionysian origins of the Anastenaria and more generally the discourse on Greek rural culture and its ideological context (1984).

Danforth suggested that the question of the continuity of Greek culture should be understood as an ideological issue involving two groups of people. On the one hand, he argued, there was an intellectual elite interested in the question of continuity; and on the other hand, there were the people of rural Greece, who were seen as superstitious and uneducated, representatives of a primitive and static culture. The members of the first group were the ones who had an interest in presenting themselves as heirs of an idealized past, and the members of the second group were only useful to the extent to which they could affirm this connection. Thus, this elite promoted a narcissist, essentialist version of Greek history, which reinterpreted and censored the past according to what was appropriate in the present.

Despite Danforth's compelling critique, however, the theory of Dionysian origins of the Anastenaria remained mainstream in Greek scholarly and folk discourse. During the course of my fieldwork, I very frequently discussed the origins of the Anastenaria with my informants as well as with many visitors and outsiders to the tradition. Interestingly, I discerned two different patterns in their answers. As it often happens to anthropologists when they inquire about the origins of some old tradition, the usual answer among my informants was "We don't know how old it is. We've always done it, like our

parents, and our grandparents, and their own grandparents have. But no one knew how old it was for as long as anyone could remember.” In fact, the local Anastenaria invariably supported this view. Some of them speculated that this custom probably originated in Christian times and mentioned the various aetiological myths that linked it to Saint Constantine.

On the other hand, many of the outsider observers of the ritual mentioned the theory of Dionysian origins. This theory was also a very popular subject of discussion among visitors during the festival, and one could often hear journalists, university students or amateur ethnographers attest to its validity, referring to the work of Megas or Kakouri and pointing to this or that “orgiastic” aspect of the ritual. Similarly, this theory was mentioned to me by some of the younger fire-walkers who were not locals but had been drawn into the Anastenaria and had read some of these ethnographies.

In conclusion, the early ethnography of the Anastenaria has left its mark not only on the study of this tradition, but on the community itself. The hasty descriptions and interpretations of those armchair anthropologists, motivated by personal and collective agendas, contributed to the ongoing tension between the Anastenaria and the Greek Orthodox Church, resulting in a persecution that has lasted for over a century and has often brought hindrances and changes to the performance of the fire-walking rituals. This, in turn, had an impact on the practitioners’ view of and attitude towards ethnographers, ranging from suspicion and reservation to outward hostility (see introduction to this volume), which further contributed to the problem of ethnographic representation as very few scholars have actually conducted long-term fieldwork on the subject. Finally, this early ethnography on the Anastenaria created a skewed view of this tradition, which, due to its popular appeal, has come to be endorsed by the majority of the Greek public and even by some of the Anastenaria themselves, despite the availability of more serious ethnographic work. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, a group of New Age pagans in Athens, fascinated by the story of the Dionysian origins, began to perform fire-walking rituals, using the music and several of the symbols of the Anastenaria but replacing the saints with ancient Greek gods. One can easily imagine how this could only lead to a resurgence of the Church’s opposition to the Anastenaria.

Chapter 2 has chronicled the history of the Anastenaria over roughly the last two centuries, following the migration of the fire-walkers and their tradition from the Black Sea coast of present-day Bulgaria to five locations in Greek Macedonia. Furthermore, it has argued that the theory of the Dionysian origin of the Anastenaria is entirely unfounded by evidence and was the product of intentional construction with the aim of serving specific political purposes. For a long time, Greek ethnographers – more or less unanimously

– uncritically adopted and reproduced this theory, which has had wide implications for the study as well as the performance of the Anastenaria, triggering the opposition of the Greek Orthodox Church to this tradition and various attempts to suppress it. More robust studies of the Anastenaria have been produced during the last few decades by a handful of ethnographers.

Chapter 3 will provide the ethnographic setting of the performance of the Anastenaria in rural Greece and the particular relationship of the Anastenaria to Saints Constantine and Helen.⁹

3

The ethnographic setting

As we have seen, the fire-walking rituals of the Anastenaria were brought to Greece by refugees who were displaced from their homeland in Eastern Rumelia and relocated in Northern Greece after the division of the former dominions of the Ottoman Empire among the Balkan states. Almost a century later, these rituals were still performed in the same five villages in Greek Macedonia, defying radical transformations that have come about in virtually every sector of life. In order to situate the reader into the overall setting of the performance of the Anastenaria, I will attempt in this chapter to provide a brief overview of certain aspects of life in rural Greek Macedonia, and in particular in the village of Agia Eleni, where my ethnography was conducted. This overview will necessarily be compendious and selective, as it is not my goal here to provide a broad account of Greek culture, but instead to point to certain of its features that may be relevant to the general context in which the Anastenaria operate.

Cultural crossroads

Greece lies at the furthestmost Southeastern corner of Europe, at the tip of the Balkan Peninsula, neighbouring with Asia to the East and Africa to the South. It is surrounded by the Aegean Sea to the East, the Libyan Sea to the South and the Ionian Sea to the West, and it borders by land with Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria to the North and with Turkey to the East. To most foreigners, mention of Greece evokes mental images of ancient ruins, sandy beaches and picturesque islands. However, in addition to its plentiful and stretchy coastlines, it is also one of the most mountainous regions in Europe, with approximately eighty per cent of its total landmass consisting of mountains or hills.

Owing to its strategic geographical position, Greece has always been a crossroad of civilizations, for better or for worse, as it has always been both a major trading route and a sought-after military target. Having been partly or wholly invaded, occupied or ruled, among others, by Romans, Turks, Venetians, Flemish, Bulgarians, Serbs, Germans, Italians, English and French, Greece became an independent country less than two centuries ago, while its current borders were established only in 1947 (Paris Peace Treaty). Due to these diverse influences, Greek culture is simultaneously modern and traditional, partly Western and partly Oriental, often defying standard cultural classifications (Kourvetaris and Dobratz 1987).

Northern Greece, in particular, has been a cultural melting pot for many centuries (Karakasidou 1997: 5). Among its inhabitants are people who draw their descent from various ethnic groups, such as Sarakatsan and Vlach shepherds, Arvanites, Slavs, Turks, Pomaks, Roma (gypsies), refugees from Pontus (Pontioi), Asia Minor (Mikrasiates), and Eastern and Northern Thrace (Thrakiotes), like the ancestors of the Anastenaria, as well as settlers from other parts of Greece. Despite such diversity, after the population exchange of the 1920s and until recently Greece has been considered an ethnically homogeneous society (Kiprianos et al. 2003: 155), something which has changed again in recent decades with a massive influx of immigrants from various countries.

Personal and collective identity

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Greek national identity has largely been the product of the need to address issues of ethnic homogeneity and sovereignty. As a consequence, it has traditionally revolved around a notion of cultural continuity, based on common language, religion and racial descent. Nationality and ethnicity are usually seen as coterminous, and the idea that the “essence” of being Greek is transmitted from one generation to the next through an uninterrupted bloodline is widespread. This belief is reinforced by the Greek public education system, the Church, as well as a plethora of self-proclaimed guardians of the “Greco-Orthodox civilization”, who vary from priests and politicians to academics, journalists and local publishers. School textbooks strongly emphasize the continuity of Greek culture and the legacy of Greek civilization to humanity (Asemomytis et al., 1998; Zambeta 2000). Greek kiosks are full of cheap publications that glorify the achievements of the ancient Greeks, while local TV stations feature daily programmes that proclaim the superiority of the Greek race (Pachis 2004). Due to the great public appeal

of those ideas, Greek scholars and politicians of all parties rarely challenge this discourse in fear of losing public favour.¹

National symbols and celebrations stress religious affiliation, the heroic nature of the Greek psyche, and the links between past and present. The two national holidays that mark the uprising against Ottoman Turkey in 1821 and the Axis powers in 1940 are celebrated with enormous pageantry, public speeches, expensive military parades and the national flag hanging from every balcony. The national anthem eulogizes those who fought in the War of Independence. Streets, plazas and public buildings are named after ancient philosophers and war heroes, and numerous statues are built to honour them. Artistic motifs of antiquity and Orthodox Christianity abound.

Individuals in Greece derive their primary identity from their family (Georges 2004). The notion of origins is a recurrent theme in Greek culture, and people usually identify themselves according to their parents' or grandparents' place of birth (usually based on patrilineal descent), or sometimes even further back in past generations. Thus, many people self-identify as Pontioi (from the Black Sea coast of Turkey), Mikrasiates (from Asia Minor), Arvanites (descendants of Albanian settlers from the Middle Age), Thrakiotes (Thracians) and so forth, which usually refers to a relationship of several generations.

Family and social relationships

Compared to most other Western countries, Greece is in certain respects a somewhat more traditional society. And as is usually the case, this emphasis on tradition tends to be more evident in rural areas, where social roles are more clearly defined. Family bonds are particularly strong. The family-based household unit is the most important kinship group, while extended kin networks are thoroughly maintained. Children rarely leave their parents' home to live on their own before marriage, while many youths work in and eventually take over the family business. Neolocal residence is increasingly the norm, but it is still very common, especially in rural areas, for couples to live in an apartment in the same building or a house on the same lot as their parents or in-laws. Parents invest heavily in their children's education and professional development (Patrinos 1997), support them financially throughout their lives and are actively involved in the upbringing of their grandchildren. In return, elderly parents often join the household of one of their adult children.

Kin relationships carry over into the professional and public sphere, and nepotism is taken for granted, pervading politics and public administration. In general, connections are considered of crucial importance, and every Greek

knows that it is often not easy to get things moving unless “you have some acquaintance” (Lambiri-Dinaki 1983). Such “acquaintances” can be acquired through bribing, political affiliation, as well as through spiritual kinship bonds in the form of godparents and wedding sponsors, which are thus often strategically planned.

Perhaps related to the patriarchal, family-based model is the importance of seniority in Greek culture. Seniors, especially men, dominate the social hierarchy in the public and private sphere, while younger individuals and women are often treated patronizingly and are not allowed much initiative or decision-making. Thus, the key players in business, education, politics and public administration are typically middle-aged men.

Economy

Lacking heavy industry, Greek economy is largely based on the service sector, which accounts for almost three quarters of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), followed by industry and agriculture, while tourism is also a major source of income. Shipping has traditionally been one of the country’s key economic activities, while other principal economic activities include banking, manufacturing, construction and telecommunications. Greece has been a member of the European Union (EU) since 1981.

The country has a population of around eleven million, the majority of which is highly concentrated in urban areas, mainly along the coastline. The intense industrial development and modernization that followed the Second World War produced a wave of internal migration towards large urban centres, and today more than a third of the total population lives in or around the capital city of Athens. In addition, the population is ageing very rapidly, as Greece has one of the lowest fertility rates and one of the highest proportions of elderly people in Europe (Eurostat 2007). As a result, many rural areas have shrunk or been abandoned during the last decades. The decline of the countryside has become a self-reinforcing phenomenon, where decrease in population means fewer opportunities and resources, which leads more young people to migrate, and so on. As a result, rural communities often do not have access to high quality education, medical care and other basic public services.

Those rural areas that are on the coastline, and particularly the ones that are situated on some of the most visited islands or near metropolitan areas, have managed to increase life standards substantially by investing in the tourism industry, while fishing is often still an important source of income. On the other hand, the villages that are farther away from the coastline – and by Greek standards this means a few dozen kilometres – usually rely heavily on farming

and herding for their survival. Nonetheless, due to its rocky, mountainous terrain and its long, hot and dry summers and cold winters, Greece is not a very fertile place. The thick forests that used to cover the country in ancient times have to a great extent been depleted, and the subsequent erosion has left almost four fifths of the land barren. Among the few arable areas (along with Thessaly and Thrace) is Central Macedonia, where the Anastenaria settled after their migration.

Even in those areas, however, life is not easy for Greek farmers. Those who do not own land find it increasingly difficult to get a job, partly because the new techniques and technologies that have been introduced have reduced the number of working hands needed. Moreover, land owners prefer hiring immigrant workers, because they can pay them less than the minimum salary and avoid making social security contributions (Kasimis et al. 2003). In general, the Greek agricultural sector is particularly unproductive, plagued by a variety of problems. Farming in Greece is still predominantly a family business, with small and fragmented holdings, lack of organization and low level of education and training. Furthermore, Greek farmers have traditionally resisted the cooperative movement and refused to work together.² This has prevented them from effectively branding and promoting their goods, allowed exploitation from big corporations that buy their stock at very low prices and made Greek agricultural products less competitive in the European market. Adding to all those problems is the slow, inefficient and corrupt Greek public administration system (Kasimis et al. 2003).

Finally, during the last decades, and particularly since the 1990s, life has become more and more difficult for Greek farmers, as governments have adopted free-market economic models, which, however, have led to oligopolies and price-fixing by a handful of corporate lobbies. As a result, producers are selling their crops at ever lower prices, while the final product becomes more and more expensive, leaving all the profit to the corporations and the farmers dependent upon bank loans and EU aid to survive. Actually, EU subsidies make up a staggering fifty per cent of the total sector's income, making agriculture the most heavily subsidized sector of the economy (Kasimis et al. 2003). The introduction of the common European currency (the Euro) in 2002 rocketed the cost of living without increasing prices for producers, further worsening the situation for farmers.

The village of Agia Eleni

Agia Eleni is a fairly typical Greek inland rural village. It belongs to the municipality of Skoutari in the prefecture of Serres, one of the seven prefectures of the

periphery of Central Macedonia. It is situated 5 km east of Skoutari, capital of the municipality with two-and-a-half thousand people, and 13 km south of the city of Serres, which is the capital and largest city of the prefecture of Serres with almost sixty thousand inhabitants. Thessaloniki, the largest metropolitan area in Northern Greece with over one million inhabitants, is 80 km to the West. Agia Eleni lies at an equal distance of 50 km between the Bulgarian border and the Aegean Sea, and has a continental climate, with dry and hot summers and harsh winters. The Strymonas River, which passes nearby Agia Eleni, provides water for the irrigation of the Serres Basin.

The modern history of Agia Eleni is inextricably tied to the wider geopolitical developments of the Balkan peninsula over the last century. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Greek Macedonia was home to a remarkable variety of people with different ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Kontogiorgi 2006: 19), and when the area was officially ceded to Greece in 1913, Greeks were only twenty-one per cent of the population. Following the Balkan Wars and culminating with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey implemented a series of population exchanges, forcing two million people to become refugees in their mutual attempts to perform ethnic cleansing (Hirschon 1998).

When the Greek refugees arrived at Macedonia, there was a large number of slavophone Macedonians in the area who constituted the majority of the population in many rural areas, especially in the Northern territories of Greek Macedonia. The Greek government followed an intensive programme of Hellenization, strategically placing the refugees to reinforce the Greek element. A committee, chaired by folklorist Nikos Politis, was formed with the task of changing all “barbaric” names of places to Hellenized ones (Politis 1920: 4), and later those who used the old Slavic or Turkish names of their towns or villages were persecuted by law (Houliarakis 1975: 344–5). Soon, under the fascist dictatorship of Metaxas (1936–40), the teaching and speaking of the Macedonian language was banned altogether. During the Civil War between communists and nationalists that followed the Second World War, many Slavic Macedonians sided with the communists, who had promised equal rights for minorities. When the communist forces were defeated, most of those Slavic Macedonians were forced to flee to Eastern Europe or became immigrants to Western countries (see Karakasidou 2002; Danforth 1993, 1995b; Roudometof 2002). Among those who remained in Greece, most have been assimilated into the Greek population, and nowadays those who self-identify as ethnic Macedonians are no more than a few thousand. However, the Greek government has always denied both the existence of a Macedonian nation and that of a Macedonian minority in Greece, and has officially referred to them as “Slavophone Greeks”.

Before the Kostilides arrived at Agia Eleni in 1922, the village's name was Kakaraska and it had a population of almost 200 people of Slavic origin (Palaiologos 1885: 165). The refugees doubled the population of the village and in 1927 its name was changed to Agia Eleni (ΦΕΚ 7Α-14/01/1927), in honour of one of the two patron saints of Kosti, homeland of the majority of those refugees. The number of inhabitants increased in the next decades and reached almost one thousand in the 1960s, but has been steadily declining since the 1970s, as younger generations started seeking jobs in urban centres or became immigrants to Western countries, most commonly Germany.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, around four hundred people lived in Agia Eleni. Almost half of the inhabitants were of Thracian descent, and an equally large group consisted of the “locals” (*ntopioi*). The Thracians still referred to themselves as “refugees” (*prosfyges*), a term that reflects the status of the Kostilides when they arrived at Agia Eleni. It was at that time that the term “locals” was widely used to describe the Slavophone, or “Macedonian”, majority that lived in the area. The Macedonian language was no longer spoken by younger generations, although some of the elders still used it among them. The rest of the population consisted of refugees from Asia Minor, Roma (gypsies), as well as some people from other parts of Greece.

The village has two main squares. The village church is situated between the two squares and dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helen, and near the northern entrance of the village was the *konaki*. At the time of writing, around the first square was a small convenience store and a butcher's shop. Around the second were three taverns, an elementary school and a municipal building. In addition, the village had two cafeterias and a small kiosk. The village had its own priest, but no doctor. The closest general practitioner could be found at Skoutari, while to see a specialist one had to go to the city of Serres. The elementary school had only twenty students and two teachers for all six grades. Due to the continuing decline in the number of students, the government was planning to shut it down, adding it to the several abandoned buildings that reminded visitors that the village had seen better days.

A significant number of the houses in Agia Eleni were occupied by one elderly couple or a single elderly person. Overall, the village consisted of around 150 households whose livelihood predominantly came from farming, and most of its inhabitants either owned a small patch of land or worked for someone else, cultivating sugar beets, cotton, clover, wheat, corn, watermelons or tomatoes. Some of the younger people were working in nearby villages, while many of those who found work in the city would settle there and not return to live in the village.

Religiosity

Religion plays an important role in Greece, which has one of the highest rates of religiosity in the Western world (Karanasi 2005).³ The great majority of Greeks belong to the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is the official state religion. Orthodoxy remains a cornerstone of ethnic identity, while most Greeks consider that Orthodoxy and Greekness are inseparable (Stewart 1998: 8; Kourvetaris and Dobratz 1987: 161). The Church has traditionally been a very potent institution and, despite having lost much of its power in recent decades, still has considerable influence and is often directly involved in political decisions. However, as it so often happens, folk religiosity tends to deviate from the official doctrines of the Church (Slone 2004) and is blended with various supernatural belief systems such as magic, astrology and so forth. Lay people often customize their own versions of Christianity, which may include notions rejected by the Orthodox Church, such as belief in reincarnation (Stewart 2008a), or ritual practices condemned by the clergy, such as fire-walking. The Church officially strongly disapproves of such deviations from the official dogma, however in practice it often willy-nilly tolerates them and has indeed over the centuries consistently incorporated folk religious culture into its formal structure (Kokosalakis 1987; Seremetakis 1991: 159–69, 189–95; Xygalatas forthcoming b). This antagonism between church officials and lay religiosity may partially explain the seeming paradox of the combination of ardent faith and widespread anti-clericalism: it is common in Greece to find people who proclaim that they have a strong belief in God but resent priests, who are seen as members of a corrupt, money-grubbing and authoritarian establishment (Dubisch 1990, 1995; Herzfeld 1990).

Despite Christianity's emphasis on the Triune God, Greek Orthodox Christians only rarely appeal directly to any of the three persons of the Trinity. Instead, they most commonly address the Virgin Mary (Panagia) and the saints. Saints are the intercessors between God and humans. Thus, they have a more direct relationship with their devotees and most ritual practices are directed towards them. Several of these saints (always male), like Saint Demetrios or Saint Constantine, are portrayed as great heroes and warriors who intervene in crucial historical moments to defend the Greek nation (Seraïdari 2010), and their heroic achievements are recounted in elaborate mythologies. Saints are also thought to intervene in people's everyday life, often manifesting themselves in dreams, providing advice and solutions to problems or punishing wrongdoings.

The worship of saints plays a fundamental role in Greek Orthodox religiosity, both popular and official (Xygalatas forthcoming b). People's relationship with the saints is based on the *do ut des* principle of reciprocal

exchange between humans and supernatural agents, which in many ways reflects the more general clientelistic politics that pervades Greek society (Kokosalakis 1987). Devotees will turn to the various saints according to their needs, offering or promising them gifts (*tamata*) and expecting their reciprocation. These donations can vary from candles to expensive golden or silver ornaments, offered to an icon, a church or a monastery, either as a return for good fortune or in advance, as down payment for some requested favour. Similarly, many people go on pilgrimages to monasteries, especially those that purportedly possess miracle-working icons, to beg the depicted saint to influence the outcome of some important affair, either for themselves or for their loved ones. The most typical promise that people make to a saint is that in the case their petition is granted, they will offer a candle the same height as that of the beneficiary of the favour. Thus, for example, many mothers at the end of the school year make such an offering in order to ensure a successful result in the exams for their children.

The Greek Orthodox Church recognizes hundreds, perhaps even thousands of saints, and its calendar is packed with several of their names for every day of the year. Each of them have their domain of speciality and protection. For example, Saint Barbara is the patron of the Greek artillery; Archangel Michael patron of the air force; Saint Nikolas of the Navy. Each profession also has its protector saint. Saint Porfyrios is the patron of actors; Saint Maximos patron of translators; and Saint Christoforos of drivers. Moreover, every city, town and village has its patron saint. Saint Dimitrios is the patron of Thessaloniki, Saint Andreas of Ioannina, and Saints Constantine and Helen are the patrons of Agia Eleni. Areas of speciality can include anything: Saint Filothei protects from magic; Saint Antonios from temptation; while Saint Xenii is the protector of alcoholics. Several saints are associated with healing, and they too have their areas of expertise: Saint Drosis protects from sexually transmitted diseases; Saint Antypas is the protector of teeth; Saint John the Apostle protects from tongue and heart diseases; and Saint Magdalene from hair loss. Many saints have more than one domain of speciality. For example, Saint Artemios is the patron of the police and also protector of...testicles. Conversely, several domains are overseen by various saints. However, irrespectively of their specific domain, people turn to one or the other depending on local or even individual preferences.

The saints are thought to be represented on Earth by their icons, which have special significance in Greek Orthodox religiosity. They are considered to carry some of the power of the saint they depict, and many of them are believed to be miraculous. People will often travel long distances to visit these icons, with the hope of being cured of some serious illness or otherwise being helped. A renowned example is the island of Tenos, where it is claimed that

the icon of Virgin Mary (Panagia) works miracles. Every 15th of August, Day of the Assumption, one can see thousands of pilgrims arriving at the port, most of them on their way to worship the icon crawling on hands and knees or even rolling on the ground. The church is 1 km uphill, and at this time of the year temperatures can be very high. Many elderly people faint during this painful ordeal, but nevertheless continue their journey as soon as they regain their senses (see Dubisch 1995).

Perhaps the area in which supernatural intervention is invoked most frequently is that of health. Healing powers are often attributed to Christian saints, priests, rituals or relics, as well as to other supernatural agents and practices outside mainstream religion. Thus, despite the dramatic improvement of medical treatment in rural Greece over the last decades, traditional forms of healing have not entirely been abandoned and depending on the symptoms alternative remedies are still fairly popular. When the symptoms have clear somatic manifestations (e.g. injuries, infections etc.), conventional medicine is more likely to be used; however, when doctors fail to offer a cure, or when the symptoms are more vague, people often resort to alternative practices (Danforth 1989: 75–83; Stewart 1997: 880).

For example, headaches, malaises and various adversities have traditionally been attributed to the evil eye (*kako matilvaskania*) (Hardie 1923; Georges 2004).⁴ This belief is very widespread in Greece, even among those who self-identify as non-religious.⁵ The evil eye is considered as “the most probable cause of a sudden and unjustifiable, personal and mainly physical, disturbance” (Veikou 2008: 95; also see Herzfeld 1981, 1984, 1986a, 1999: 45–6; Stewart 1991, 2008a). In addition, the evil eye can inflict one’s loved ones, livestock or material possessions. It can be cast, willingly or unwillingly, through an intense gaze by someone who feels envy, or even benign admiration, of another person’s possessions, beauty or success. Certain categories of individuals, like gypsies or blue-eyed people, are believed to be particularly likely to inflict someone with the evil eye. To protect themselves against the evil eye, many people keep cloves of garlic or amulets in the form of a blue eye in their houses and cars or in the form of pendants. In addition, it is very common to take apotropaic measures against inflicting the evil eye when expressing one’s admiration, such as spitting or making ritual utterances.

When people believe that they have been hit by the evil eye, they will usually ask for the help of an elder woman who knows how to make a diagnosis by means of a divinatory ritual. Although there are many variations of this ritual (see Veikou 2008; Stewart 2008b), a typical version involves pouring a few drops of olive oil into a bowl of water while making the sign of the cross and then observing the patterns formed by the oil on the surface of the water. These patterns reveal the answer. If the evil eye is indeed diagnosed to be the

cause of the problem, then the woman will perform a different ritual to cure the patient, usually involving sprinkling some of the oil and water on the person, making the sign of the cross, thinking of a secret prayer and spitting three times in the air. This ritual resembles the official un-bewitching ritual performed by the Orthodox Church, which involves sprinkling of holy water (*agiasmos*) and the baptism ceremony (Stewart 2008b: 91–2). The Greek Church officially accepts the notion of the evil eye and attributes it to the work of the Devil and envy. However, it rejects the rituals performed against it by lay people and instead offers an exorcism with a special prayer, which must be read by a priest (Vaporis 1986). Most elder women in Greece today still claim to be able to diagnose and cure the evil eye, so the most common person to appeal to is one's mother. When she is too far away, people will even ask for a diagnosis and treatment over the phone. When the danger is great, and particularly when the evil eye is attributed to a rejected lover, some people might consult professional mediums and sorcerers as well (Danforth 1989: 79). Other times, particularly in cases of more severe illness, people often turn to the official religion for healing. They might call priests to give them their blessings, buy amulets, drink holy water or make material offerings to the saints.

The Anastenaria

Ever since my first discussions with the Anastenaria, it was very obvious to me that they were pious Christians. They participated in the liturgical life of the Church and their dogmatic beliefs were no different from those of the majority of Orthodox Greeks. In fact, they were all particularly religious, and when their Christianity was questioned they often became upset and answered with simple but impassioned arguments, which came as a response to the antagonism, hostility or outright aggression of the Church against them.

We are as good Christians as anyone. In fact, maybe more than the others, because we do all the things the rest of Christians do, but we also have this extra one, the Anastenaria. The priests say we are pagans. But we only worship the icons, the same icons that they have in the churches. And if they call us pagans, then why did they take our icons into their church? (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris)

For the priests, it was all about the money. We offered them half of the earnings, but they wanted to get everything. For this reason, they say that the

Anastenaria are evil. How can they be evil, if we use candles, incense, icons, everything the Church uses? These are all Christian things. (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris)

Most of the Anastenaria of Agia Eleni were either descended from Eastern Rumelia or married to someone who was. Thus, they identified as Thracians (Thrakiotes), and most of them as Kotsianoï or Kostilides, drawing their ancestry from the village of Kosti. Descent from Kosti was considered more prestigious than descent from other villages. Thrace was often referred to as the “homeland” or “fatherland” (*patrida*), although none of the existing Anastenaria was born in Kosti, and most of them had never even been to Eastern Rumelia. Furthermore, there was often a hypothetical relationship to the “homeland” even among people who were not in any way descended from Eastern Rumelia. A fire-walker who was not related to the village or any of the Thracian families once told me,

I think that I am probably descended from Kosti. I know I must be. I believe that all those who come here and dance are related to St Constantine by blood. Even if they don't know it, they all bear some distant relation to him. It is not a coincidence. I believe that this relation is a kind of memory, an unconscious thing, not an immaterial memory but a material one, through blood. (personal interview with a young Anastenarissa)

Originally, only Thracians could become Anastenaria. Nonetheless, this boundary was crossed soon after the migration to Greece, allowing membership to spouses, while more recently anyone could in principle become an Anastenari. In order for this to happen, however, one would need to be accepted by the community and given permission to join the dance by the *archianastenaris*, after demonstrating sincere faith and interest in the tradition as well as signs of receiving a personal call from the saints to fire-walk. This development had important implications, protecting the tradition from extinction and also changing the composition of the group, which gradually became open to people of various educational and geographical backgrounds. At the time of my fieldwork, among the Anastenaria of Agia Eleni were farmers, workers and employees, as well as university students, a doctor, an architect, an artist, an accountant and so on. Most of them lived in Macedonia and were descendants of Thracian families, but there were also several who were drawn into this tradition without having any blood relation to other Anastenaria. The youngest Anastenari in the community was twenty years old and the oldest was eighty-five.

More recently, another boundary was crossed. Since the 1980s, and until the time of writing this book, the *archianastenaris* of Agia Eleni, Tasos, was not actually a fire-walker. However, he was descendant from Kosti and grew up in a family of fire-walkers. His mother and grandmother were Anastenarisses and his grandfather was responsible for the financial affairs of the Anastenaria back in the homeland, while his family were heirs to the icon of Saint Panteleimon. Tasos had been involved in the organization of the ritual since he was a child. He was the founder and first president of the Folklore Society of Agia Eleni. He played the lyre and sang, and was widely read on Greek ethnography on the Anastenaria. He became the leader of the group upon the suggestion of Giorgos Giavasis, a retired *archianastenaris*, who claimed that Saint Constantine appeared to him in a dream and indicated Tasos as the most suitable for this task. At the time, many Anastenaria reacted with surprise or resentment. Some of them wondered how one can be an *archianastenaris* without fire-walking. Most people, however, realized that Tasos was well respected within and without the community. His position as a doctor (a healer, like Saint Constantine) gave him prestige and his education allowed him to deal with the authorities and defend the tradition when necessary, as he did back in 1971, when he founded the Folklore Society with the aim of helping the Anastenaria to regain possession of their icons, a goal that was finally accomplished during the same year. He had also acted successfully as a mediator in the past when conflicts had arisen among the Anastenaria. People in the village had profound respect for Tasos, partly because he was able effectively to combine two different identities. Although he was the child of a wealthy village family and his uncle had been the President of the community, he was never “spoiled”. As a young man, he was helping out in the field while studying medicine in Thessaloniki. Although he had been living in the city ever since, he had never forgotten his origins and visited the village at every opportunity. “The doctor”, as everyone in the village called him, was also the *archianastenaris* during the festival; humbly kissing the hands of the elders, but firmly assuming the role of the leader when necessary, Tasos had been able to maintain order and harmony within the group.

Constantine and Helen

The Anastenaria honour all Christian saints but some of them occupy a more central place within their tradition (e.g. Saint Athanasius and Saint Panteleimon, as they were patrons of some of the villages of their forefathers in Eastern Rumelia). The most prominent figures are Saints Constantine and Helen, and the most important festival, which takes place each May,

is dedicated to them. The two saints have always been celebrated together in Christian tradition, as they were son and mother. However, Constantine has a more important role in Christianity, as he does in the tradition of the Anastenaria, while Helen is a secondary figure. Saint Constantine was the Roman Emperor Flavius Valerius Constantinus and is commonly referred to among Christians as Constantine the Great. He is best known for establishing Christianity as a legitimate religion of the Roman State, although he himself was a polytheist throughout most of his life. Constantine rebuilt the ancient city of Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople after himself, which was often referred to as the New Rome.

At an early age, children in Greece learn about the two saints in school. Extensive references are made in both history and theology textbooks, with little difference between them. Students are taught about the legend according to which Constantine, before advancing to Rome to fight his rival Maxentius in 312 CE, had a dream (Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 44.5), or according to another version a vision (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.28–9). He saw a bright light in the sky, in the form of a cross (or the monogram of Christ), and the message *hoc vinces*, which in Latin means “with this you shall win”. Constantine was heavily outnumbered, and the odds were against him. However, encouraged by this apparition, he ordered his soldiers to carry the sign of the cross on their shields and flags, advanced to the battle and triumphed over his enemy (Barnes 1981; Lane Fox 1986).

After this victory, his attitude towards Christians became more tolerant, and one year later he issued in Milan an edict of tolerance stating that everyone, including Christians, were free to worship any deity. Constantine created a syncretistic religion combining elements from Christianity and the old religion, for example keeping the old pagan statues but placing crosses in their hands. He was also worshipped as a god himself. Constantine confirmed the privileges of the priests of the ancient gods. At the same time, he was granting the Church more and more advantages and providing it with abundant funding (Lane Fox 1986: 667–8). On its part, the Church tolerated the cult of the emperor. Christians could speak of the divinity of the emperor without being deemed as idolaters, and the clergy often referred to him as the Angel of God or the Son of God. Constantine also took a direct interest in matters of doctrine, setting a precedent for future emperors, and called the first Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church at Nicaea. During the last days of his life, he was baptized a Christian (Alföldi 1948).

In Greek tradition, Constantine the Great is a Christian hero, the warrior who defeated his enemies and legitimated Christianity in the Roman State. He is also the guide and inspiration for the Anastenaria. He is believed to heal the ill and punish the unfaithful. He is also claimed to often appear to

his believers in their dreams, advising or rebuking them, revealing solutions to their problems, urging them to become fire-walkers and protecting them from getting burnt.

Saint Helen was Constantine's mother, Flavia Julia Helena. She was of humble parentage and for this reason Constantine's father, Constantius, upon becoming co-regent of the West, forsook her and married Theodora, the daughter of his patron, Emperor Maximianus Herculus. When his father died, Constantine brought his mother back to the imperial court and gave her the title of Augusta. After his victory against Maxentius, Helen converted to Christianity according to her son's will (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 3.47.2). As stated by a legend, she was sent by her son on a mission to gather Christian relics. She went to Jerusalem, and after a revelation discovered Jesus' tomb and the True Cross (Bowersock et al. 1999: 390), the most sacred and powerful of all Christian relics. She is also traditionally credited with discovering the remains of the Three Wise Men.

Helen's name is always linked to that of her son, Constantine, and while the latter is very often evoked or mentioned separately among the Anastenaria, Helen is almost always referred to in connection with him. Thus, people will often mention "the saints", but most frequently they simply refer to "the Saint", always meaning Constantine. In some of the legends and myths of the Anastenaria, Helen is referred to not as Constantine's mother, but as his wife.

The icons of the saints

The icons of the Anastenaria are called "Grandfathers" (*pappoudes*),⁶ or "graces" (*chares*) and are passed from one generation to the next. They are painted on wooden surfaces of portable dimensions, about 40 cm tall and 30 cm wide. The icons are placed in their "clothes", which are special cases made of cloth, each one adorned with small bells and crosses hanging from thin silver chains, which are called *stolidia* (ornaments). The icons are also accompanied by the *amanetia*, red and white kerchiefs, and the *simadia*, offerings made to the icon by various believers as a token of gratitude for some past favour or in hope of a favour to come. These offerings are small gold or silver plates, depicting hands, eyes, hearts and other organs of the body that need to be healed (or have been healed). This is indeed a very ancient custom in Greece, where similar offerings (*anathimata*) were made at least as early as classical times, most notably to Asclepius, god of medicine and healing (Ogden 2007: 169; see figs 3.1 and 3.2).

Not all icons are suitable for fire-walking. Those that are suitable are called "dancing" icons; they depict Saints Constantine and Helen in a standing



Figure 3.1A *simadi* depicting a heart.



Figure 3.2 *Simadia* on one of the dancing icons of the Anastenaria.

posture, holding a cross between them, and have a special wooden handle by which the Anastenaria can hold them while they dance. Of the eight icons that were brought from the “homeland”, five depict the two saints. The oldest one is kept in Mavrolefki and is called Gerokotsianos (“Old Kotsianos”), because it is believed to come from Kosti. It bears a metal plate inscribed with the date 20 April 1833. However, the Anastenaria believe that it is a lot older, and that the plate is a later addition. Kastaniotis (from Kastania), one of the two icons that are kept in Lagkadas, bears the same date (fig. 3.3). The other icon of Lagkadas is Triporinos (from Tripori). In Kerkini, there is Neos Kotsianos (Young Kotsianos). In Agia Eleni there is an icon called Vulgareli, because it was found outside the village Vulgari (Bulgari). Finally, there are three icons that depict other figures: the Dormition of the Virgin Mary (Koimisi tis Theotokou), which was kept in Serres but has been stolen, the Transfiguration of the Saviour (Metamorfofi tou Sotiros) in Strymoniko, and Saint Panteleimon, which is from Brodilovo, while all the others come from Kosti. There is a second “dancing” icon called Vulgareli in Agia Eleni. However, it is younger and does not come from the homeland. It was made by an iconographer at the request of Giorgos Giavasis, who was then the *archianastenaris*. Before using the icon, Giavasis adorned it with *simadia* that he had brought from the icons of Lagkadas and then left it at the church for a year to be sanctified.

According to the Anastenaria, the original icons were specially made in Constantinople and kept at a church for forty days before being used. When they are worn, these icons are restored by specialist iconographers, who scrape their outer surface and repaint them exactly as they were before. The clothes and offerings that are attached to them are carefully removed and then placed back on the restored icons. Thus, it is believed that the interior part of each one of the Grandfathers is ancient and carries part of the depicted saint’s essence, which endows it with miraculous properties.

Across a range of contexts, the Anastenaria mentioned that the icons have a will of their own. They will often “torture” their owners when they are not satisfied with their location inside the house or are worn out and need to be restored. In this case, the owners will call the elder Anastenaria to their home to examine the icons. They will check whether their position is adequate, whether they are placed at an eminent spot, or whether they have enough light. The icons are also said to complain when they are not in the hands of the Anastenaria. They appear in people’s dreams and urge them to take action in order to find them, as it happened when they were buried in Strandja, or to liberate them when they are “imprisoned”. This term is used for the icons that were taken away by the Church.

The icon called Triporinos, after its owners died, was inherited by their daughter. However, when she got married, her husband didn't want the icon and gave it to some relatives in Agia Eleni. But the icon didn't want to stay home. It was moving from one heir to another.

— How did they know that it didn't want to stay?

— They had problems, misfortunes. The icon wanted to leave, to go back to its place, so it was causing trouble. In the end, one of its hosts threw it into the river and said that it had been stolen. The next morning, a shepherd saw his cow that went to the river to drink water stand up on her back legs, frightened. He thought she must have seen a snake. But when he went closer, he saw the icon in the water, spinning like crazy, vertically. He ran and called the Anastenaria, who went there, blessed it with incense, and took it out of the water. (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris)



Figure 3.3 The icon of Kastaniotis, in Lagkadas. The inscription bears the date 20 April 1833.

“Entering the dance”

The relationship of the Anastenaria with their saints is highly emotional and involves devotion and rewards as well as tensions and sanctions. The saints and their icons are not only thought to offer help and protection to their followers, but also to punish transgressions and impiety. As many fire-walkers claim, the Anastenaria must lead an ethical life and be good Christians. Especially before the festival, one has to be “clean”, avoiding impure thoughts and offensive or unfair behaviour towards others. Sexual abstinence is indispensable. “When you go into the fire, you must be clean. You have to abstain from sex for one week before the festival” (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris). Transgressions are thought to be punished by the saints. One common form of punishment for the Anastenaria is related to fire-walking. Individual transgressors may burn their feet or not find the courage to fire-walk. If the group commits some error in the performance, then perhaps the logs will not catch fire or the fire-walkers might not be able to dance. Therefore, when something goes wrong during the performance of the ritual, the Anastenaria should try to find what transgression has been committed.

I was in Aktopol, before dancing at the festival. One of my friends convinced me to have some alcohol. “Don’t worry”, she told me, “nothing bad is going to happen if you just have one sip.” I just had a tiny bit, half a shot. Later that night, when I tried to dance, I was going around the fire but I couldn’t get my feet to cool down; I couldn’t get in the right state of mind; I couldn’t dance. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa from Bulgaria)

One of the most severe misdemeanours is to stop performing fire-walking. The Anastenaria believe that by taking part in the fire-walk they undertake a responsibility to perform the ritual for life – or at least for as long as they are physically capable of doing so. If a person becomes a fire-walker and then for some reason stops participating, some terrible misfortune might come upon them.

For as long as I am alive, I will keep coming here and dancing for the Saint. I even came and fire-walked after having suffered a stroke. I left the hospital and came here. The doctor forbade me to come. I told him, “What do you know? You don’t have a clue. You say I might die if I go. But do you know what will happen to me if I don’t go?” (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris)

Saint Constantine is thought to not only punish the Anastenaria, but also those who stand in their way or mock them. Disrespect is punished severely, and those who commit it may fall ill, go mad or even die. Legends about such punishments abound. One such legend tells of a priest in Kosti who took the icons and hid them inside the church. When the Anastenaria asked him about the icons, he said he didn't know who had taken them. Shortly, he and his wife went crazy. They were wandering around the village naked, cackling like chickens. His wife took her baby, and instead of holding it to her breast to suckle, she held it up her bottom. When they finally returned the icons and cried for forgiveness, they became well. Another common legend recounts how when the Bishop of Drama took the icon of the Anastenaria his mouth bent and he was not able to speak. Along the same lines, I was repeatedly told that the woman who revealed the location of the Anastenaria to Angelos Tanagras (the ethnographer who found the Anastenaria again after their migration) later went crazy.

Sometimes, the Saint's punishment may bring a person to a life-changing realization of his or her hubris and lead to a conversion experience. Kostas, an Anastenaris from Agia Eleni, told me how he was punished for his disrespectful behaviour:

— One year, the festival was taking place and the Anastenaria were coming to take the icon. I made fun of them, and said, "Hey, those nutcases are coming with their lyres and drums to take the icon!" That night, I felt sick and went home early. I saw a man telling me, "You will find me in Lagkadas."

— In your sleep?

— No, I was awake. It was like a dream, but I wasn't asleep. Later that night I couldn't sleep, and I was afraid to be left alone.

His wife remembers,

When I came home the next day, he was very upset. He told me, "Woman, don't ever make fun of the Anastenaria again." "Me?" I told him, "I never made fun of them; I've seen the festival many times. You are the one who was making fun of them." He kept on repeating, "Don't ever make fun of the Anastenaria, you shouldn't joke about them", and he started crying. I realized what was going on and called my mother to come over. She came, but we couldn't stop him from crying. He began to pull his hair and pound his head against the wall. I also went out and gathered some other old Anastenarisses, as well as the *archianastenaris*. By the time I brought

them home, I could hear him cry from the street. The *archianastenaris* gave him some incense and a *simadi* and told him to incense the family icons. Soon, he felt better.

After that, every time that the festival approached, he would feel upset. We took him to the doctor, who said it was due to stress, but I knew it was from “those things”. Then he started urinating in bed during the night. He had this problem for a year, but we hadn’t told anyone. We went to various doctors, in Serres and in Thessaloniki, but there was no result. On New Year’s Day, I took some incense and visited my godmother [another Anastenarissa]; I told her all about Kostas’s problem. She gave me a scarf and told me that he should wrap it around his waist. “If it is from those things, it will show”, she said, “and if the problem is his own, then he will just have it.” He got well, but in January, on Saint Athanasius’s day, the same thing happened.

Kostas finally became an Anastenaris and was cured from his condition. A few years later, however, he committed another transgression.

When he came from Germany [where he was working as an immigrant], he danced here [in Agia Eleni] on the first night of the festival. On the second day, he went to Thessaloniki to visit his father. I don’t know what happened there and what my mother-in-law told him, but they went to Lagkadas and he fire-walked there. That was a mistake. He shouldn’t have done that. He didn’t know. I was young and didn’t know much either; besides, I was busy taking care of the kids. When he came back to Agia Eleni, he fell asleep and in the morning he wouldn’t wake up. He seemed to be in another world. I called my mother and some Anastenarisses to see him. They talked to him and he got up; I don’t know what they told him. That night, after the festival, we went to a restaurant instead of staying at the *konaki*. I was young, and I hadn’t seen him in months. All the time he was in Germany, I was staying home taking care of the kids, and now that he was here, I wanted to have some fun. But soon we realized it was a big mistake. He started feeling ill, and we went home early. The next morning he was sick again. I thought he had fainted, and I couldn’t wake him up. When he finally woke up, he was shaking and didn’t want to eat anything all day. He recovered soon, and we learnt our lesson: “Your job is here; you shouldn’t leave your village to dance at another festival.”

This notion of divine punishment often leads many Anastenaria to the belief that personal misfortune is the result of sin, misdemeanour or hubris. The most common form of punishment is madness, however the range of possible manifestations of the Saint's wrath is infinite. An illness, an accident, professional or financial problems, or failure to achieve a personal goal can all be interpreted as caused by one's misconduct in the recent or distant past. Thus, when someone is thought to behave in a manner that is seen as inappropriate in any way by the community, it is only a matter of time until something that can be considered as punishment for this behaviour takes place. And this reasoning also works inversely. One's illness or misfortune may indicate a previous violation. And since the range of possible violations is also very broad, the problem is readily attributed to this or that past transgression. Furthermore, there are no particular set rules of ethical conduct in the Anastenaria, nor a central authority that would decide on matters of morality, so the idea of what constitutes a transgression differs from person to person (for example, although sexual abstinence before participation in the ritual is a commonly accepted moral prerequisite, its duration is not specified, and varies from a few days to several weeks according to each participant's personal interpretation – and patience!). Thus, the Anastenaria very often attribute cases of misfortune or disease to what they perceive as disrespectful behaviour or incorrect performance of the ritual, even when the transgression has taken place many years before the event that is seen as punishment. Papachristodoulou (1950: 271) refers to a story about a churchwarden in Kosti who wanted to stop the Anastenaria from fire-walking. Many years later, after the Anastenaria had moved to Greece, when they heard that the man's children had died of illness one after the other, they said that this was because of the sin he had committed in attempting to repress their rituals.

As we have seen, many people become fire-walkers after receiving the Saint's call and going through spiritual preparation and guidance from the elders. In other cases, however, the Saint's plan is fulfilled without the awareness of the subject, who is acting as his instrument. Therefore, many participants start fire-walking for no obvious reason, and indeed, as we shall see later, report that they do not know why they “entered the fire”.

I went to Agia Eleni for the first time for the January festival, with a friend who was an Anastenaris, just to see it. At that time, I had no idea how this was going to affect my life. I went back again in May, and then it happened. Something happened to me, some force possessed me. I wouldn't have dared to join the dance, but the *archianastenaris* came and took me by the hand. I have no idea why I did it. Afterwards, I decided I would never go back. But I

did. And the second time, I said I would never go back again. But I always come back. (personal interview with a young Anastenaris)

Regardless of how they started, once they fire-walk for the first time the Anastenaria usually report an uncontrollable urge to keep performing the ritual. Kostas, an old and experienced Anastenaris, told me how in 1971 he came all the way from Germany to take part in the festival. He was working at a factory as a guest-worker (*Gastarbeiter*), one of many Greek immigrants who went to Germany in search of better working conditions at the time. His wife joined him at first but later went back to Greece to take care of their children, who had been left to the care of their grandparents. Kostas remained in Germany and sent money home every month. As the time of the festival approached, he was feeling depressed and anxious. He had to find a way to go to Agia Eleni and serve the Saint.

It was my first year at the factory, and I didn't even know the language. The time for the festival was approaching, and I desperately wanted to come to the village. But I was new at work, and I was not entitled to any leave. One day, during the lunch break, I was so sad that I started crying. Some of my colleagues saw me and asked me what the matter was. Then the saint revealed the solution in my mind. I told them: "I have received a letter from Greece. My wife is in the hospital. She was on her way to the field on the carriage, and the horses toppled and run her over." They went and informed the supervisor, who called me to his office. I told him that story, and he asked to see the letter. When I went home that evening, I took the stamped envelope from a recent letter that my wife had sent me. I went to a friend from Mavrolefki that was also a worker there and asked her to write a letter for me in her own handwriting. This woman was also an Anastenarissa, so she understood. I put the letter in the envelope and the next morning I took it to my supervisor. He called an interpreter to read it and then sent me to the director. The director gave me one month's unpaid leave. He also asked me if I needed money. Since I had only been working for a few months at the factory, I didn't have any savings, so they also gave me two hundred marks as an advance. They even told me that if I needed more time in Greece I should call them and get an extension. When I went back to Germany, I told everyone that my wife had just left the hospital and was beginning to feel better.

Carrying out the Saint's will is not a pleasant experience. It involves suffering and struggling, or what the Anastenaria often describe as "strain" [*zori*]. When they dance, they are said to be "seized" by the Saint, caught in a frenzied state in which they have no control of their actions. All this makes participation very stressful. The Anastenaria describe a feeling of profound discomfort or anxiety [*stenochoria*] gripping them, and an escalating tension. The Saint, or the icon on his behalf, is "torturing" them as they dance. When they carry the icon, they often seem to be fighting with it as if it was resisting them and they had to force it to stay still. Their emotions are expressed with utmost intensity. They moan and shout, they sweat, tremble, and cry; they become dizzy and have difficulty breathing; sometimes (especially women) they pound their chests, pull their hair, or collapse on the floor.

The icon was tormenting me. I beat my legs with my fists so hard that afterwards they were black and blue. Everyone was watching me because I was suffering more than anyone else. I was like Christ. I was suffering even while I danced. Afterwards I was exhausted. (interview with an Anastenarissa in Danforth 1989: 27)

At the beginning I didn't want to go back because it was destroying me. It was making me collapse; and this is still going on. It is wrecking me. But now I know I cannot stop going. I have to go. (personal interview with a young Anastenaris)

But the struggle of the Anastenaria does not last only for the duration of the festival. It is an obligation for life.

It is something that lasts throughout the year. About thirty or forty days before the festival, it hits me. It is like sadness, but not quite. There's nothing to be sad about. It's a sweet melancholy. It is a form of energy. It doesn't affect me in a bad way, for example in my work. To the contrary, it gives me energy. And then, after the festival, I think about it throughout the year. And there, I find many things that I can apply to my everyday life. It is a form of knowledge that can – and must – be used throughout the year. It is not something that you do for three days and then forget about. (personal interview with a young Anastenaris)

And however painful or stressful participation may be, when one becomes an Anastenari there is no stepping down. As a popular Greek saying goes, "Once you enter the dance, you have to dance."

Religious healing in the Anastenaria

We have seen that the saints and their icons are believed to have the ability to cure from illness, and healing is a common theme in the Anastenaria. Loring Danforth (1978, 1979, 1989) has examined the Anastenaria as a system of religious healing. Applying “an interpretative approach to medical anthropology” (1989: 50–63), Danforth views fire-walking as a “ritual system of psychotherapy” (1979: 141) and argues that illnesses and their symptoms constitute somatic symbols that express people’s social and psychological problems. “Spirit possession is a particularly powerful religious idiom or language that enables people to articulate and often resolve these problems by redefining their relationship with the possessing spirit so that they acquire the supernatural power they need in order to be healed” (1989: 5). In this process, religious symbols become instrumental in helping people overcome their problems within a sacred context. Ritual therapy constitutes a metaphorical transformation from a state of illness to one of health.

Healing is indeed a very important aspect of the performance of the Anastenaria. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to attribute certain forms of illness to the will of Saint Constantine. One common category of illnesses that are often considered to be caused by the Saint includes various psychological conditions such as stress, depression or madness. Such mental disorders often carry significant social stigma in rural Greece, and thus those who suffer from these conditions are usually reluctant to visit a therapist either for themselves or their family, while hospitalization in a psychiatric clinic, commonly called “the madhouse” (*trelladiko*), is seen as shameful. The attribution of those conditions to divine intervention is therefore preferable to other diagnoses, because it does not carry that social stigma (Danforth 1989: 80).

Among the Anastenaria, a person who has similar symptoms will often be diagnosed with suffering “from those things”. This means that the Saint is causing the problem, either as punishment for something that was done or omitted, or simply in order to make the patient act according to his will. In either case, the sufferer will usually be led to fire-walk in order to find a cure.

I wasn’t feeling well. I was stressed and upset. I had a sort of anxiety for no specific reason. I went to my grandfather, who is an Anastenaris. He told me that the Saint was making me suffer. For six months, I visited him [the grandfather] every Sunday, and he prepared me to become an Anastenaris. When I fire-walked, I got well. (personal interview with a young Anastenaris)

However, it must be said that not all participants see the Anastenaria as a healing ritual. In fact, there is no official justification for the performance of the ritual, and as we will see in more detail in chapter 8, people's reasons for their participation vary significantly.⁷ Generally, people perform fire-walking to honour and serve the saints and to invoke their support, which can refer to any and every aspect of human life, and not just illness (Stewart 1992). Furthermore, those who are suffering from "those things", meaning from the Saint's will, are not necessarily considered ill (Christodoulou 1978). To the contrary, this diagnosis can often be welcome as an indication that they have been chosen by the Saint for a very important task, and thus are not ill in the medical sense. Finally, by considering fire-walking a healing ritual, it may be difficult to explain why the Anastenaria generally join the group for life, even after having been cured from the original symptoms.

These clarifications notwithstanding, it should be stressed that healing is undoubtedly an important aspect of the Anastenaria and should not be overlooked in trying to gain an understanding of this culture. Indeed, several of my informers have told me of cases where the Saint intervened to heal themselves or others, and even those among them who had not had a similar experience strongly believed in the ability of the saints and their icons to heal. However, it would not be entirely accurate to describe fire-walking only in the context of the Anastenaria as a healing ritual. We will return to this subject in chapter 8, where we will discuss people's motivation for performing the fire-walking ritual more extensively.

Chapter 3 has provided aspects of the ethnographic context of the performance of the Anastenaria. Fire-walking is performed within a rural setting, although many city-dwellers also participate today. The Anastenaria are particularly religious and believe in the healing power of Saints Constantine and Helen and their miraculous icons. These icons, called the "Grandfathers", are thought to have a will of their own and the power to influence people's everyday lives. The saints and their icons call people to become fire-walkers, heal them from severe illnesses, and often punish them when they misbehave. Humans have no choice but to follow their will or they will have to suffer the consequences. But becoming a fire-walker is not an easy task, for it requires commitment and devotion for life.

Chapter 4 will provide a detailed portrayal of the ritual cycle of the Anastenaria, and particularly the big festival of Saints Constantine and Helen.

4

Fire-walking in Agia Eleni

The presence of the tradition of the Anastenaria is readily felt in Agia Eleni. The village church is dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helen, while the village itself is named after Saint Helen. The specially designated area where the festival is celebrated, near the northern entrance to the village, unmistakably reveals its sacred importance. Fire-walking takes place in a circular field of about 30 m in diameter, fenced with low metal bars (see fig. 4.1). Spectators stand behind the fence and the perennial scorch marks in the centre of the circle show where the fire is lit. On the one side of the circle lies a cement deck, covered by a wooden roof, where chairs are placed for distinguished guests. On the other side and across the street is the *konaki*, the room where all the preparations and dancing take place. The *konaki* is a rectangular building, about 12m long and 6 m wide, and each of its long sides has one door and two windows. It has a pitched roof and wooden floor.

Attached to the side of the *konaki* is a small kitchen, and behind it are the headquarters of the Cultural Society of Agia Eleni, where visitors can find a photographic archive of the Anastenaria. On the other side, there are two more buildings. One of them is the chapel (*parekklisi*), and the other is the *agiasma* (fig. 4.2), the sacred well of the Anastenaria. According to tradition, some time after the Second World War some of the women had a dream in which Saint Constantine revealed to them the location of the well. They got up in the middle of the night and started digging, and soon they found water. Since then, this place has been considered a sacred well, and a structure has been built over it, with a staircase leading to the water.

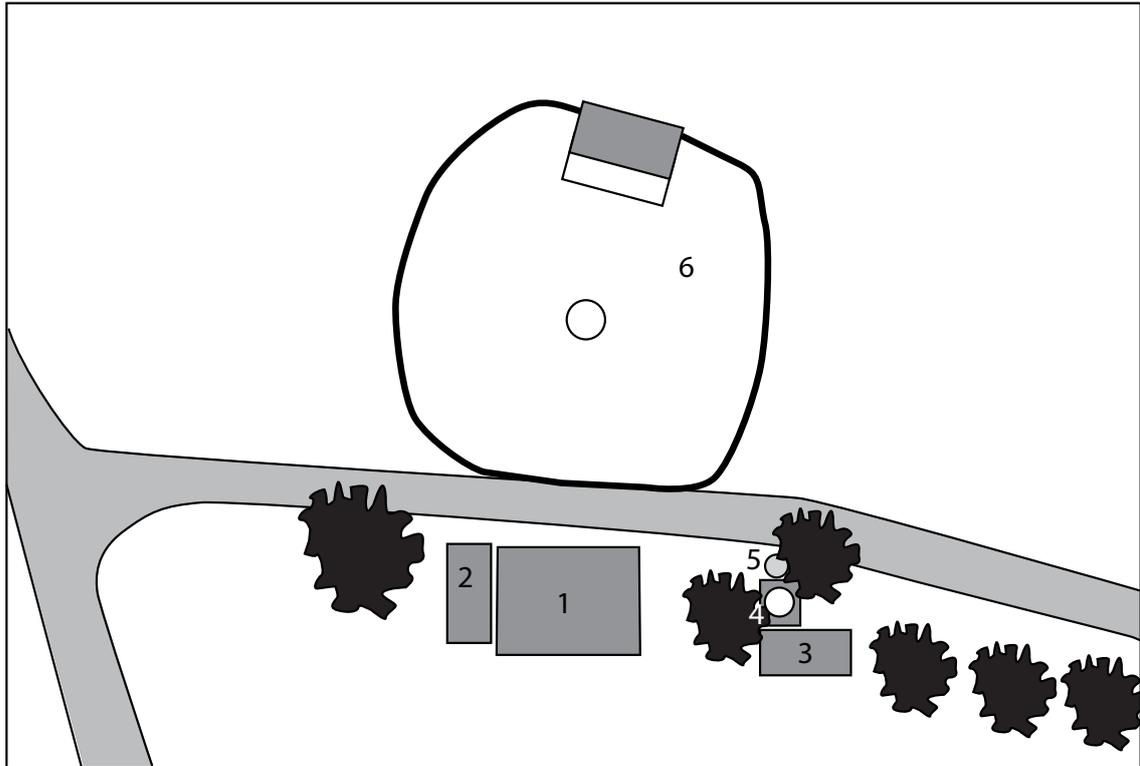


Figure 4.1 Map of the sacred space of the Anastenaria in Agia Eleni. 1. The *konaki*. 2. The building of the Folk Society of Agia Eleni. 3. The chapel of Constantine and Helen. 4. The *agiasma*. 5. The spot where the sacrifice of the *kourbani* takes place. 6. The venue of the fire-walk.

The ritual cycle of Agia Eleni

The ritual cycle of the Anastenaria begins on 26 October 26, the day of Saint Demetrius. The Anastenaria meet in the *konaki*, where they talk about the festival and the necessary preparations. Then, over the following two Sundays, a committee of three or four people goes around the village collecting money for the *kourbani* (the sacrificial animal) from every household. Almost everybody contributes, although sometimes there are a few who do not wish to participate. In older times, most people would offer wheat, corn, flour, oil and other products, as only the well-off were able to offer money. Those products would then be sold to the local merchant and the money would be used for the purchase of a lamb. Previously, a bull was used instead, while people often claim that back in Kosti they used to sacrifice wild deer and buffaloes. A woman recounted to me the following legend regarding those animals:

Those buffaloes were very wild; if you accidentally crossed paths with them in the forest any other day, you'd better climb a tree

or else they would run you over. But on the day of the Saint, those same animals would come by their own will to the place of the sacrifice and kneel outside the church, waiting to have their throats slit. But then one day a deer came and the Anastenaria slaughtered it right away, while it was still sweaty. They didn't let it rest; they didn't respect it. After that, the animals never came again on their own, and that's when they started sacrificing oxen. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

Each New Year's Eve, the Anastenaria gather at the *konaki* to play music and sing. At midnight, at the change of the year, they bring out a cake called *vasilopita* (Saint Basil's cake). This cake is traditionally served in Greece at the arrival of the New Year, which in the Orthodox calendar is also Saint Basil's day. A coin is inserted into the cake from underneath, so that the point of insertion is not visible from above. The cake is then spun three times and cut into slices, one for each attendant. The person who finds the coin in his or her slice is said to be blessed with good fortune for the rest of the year.

In January, after the day of the Epiphany (6 January), the women gather and clean up the *konaki* and the *agiasma*, preparing for the festival of Saint Athanasius, which takes place 17–19 January. This is the second most important festival of the year for the Anastenaria and is very similar to the one in May; the main difference is that fire-walking is performed indoors. On the 17th, the day of Saint Antonios, the *agiasma* is blessed by the *archianastenaris* and then the Anastenaria dance inside the *konaki*. A fire burns in the fireplace and at night the coals are taken out and spread on a small rectangle on the floor (approximately 1 × 1.5 m), covered with clay. The fire-walkers take off their shoes and dance barefoot over the glowing red coals until they put them out completely. Over the next two days, a procession visits every house in the village, and fire-walking is repeated. Finally, at the end of the third day, all those that are present are offered a meal containing boiled cabbage, olives, feta cheese and bread.

On the first Sunday after the festival, a committee takes up the task of finding an appropriate animal to become the *kourbani*, which will be sacrificed in May. It must be a black, suckling male of an odd number of years and must not have been mated, castrated or yoked (those rules have been in place since the time that bulls and buffaloes were sacrificed – nowadays, in practice, the animal must be a black, suckling one-year-old male lamb). The committee will first try to find a stock breeder from the village. If one of the local breeders has an appropriate animal, they will buy it from him. If not, they will search in other nearby villages. When such an animal is found, the breeder is notified that the following Sunday he will receive an advance on the purchase. The

archianastenaris visits him and offers him a bottle of *ouzo* and some raisins and chickpeas. Once the purchase has been agreed, the young animal will remain at the breeder's farm, where it will continue to suckle until the day of Saints Constantine and Helen. This means that its mother cannot be milked during that period. Furthermore, the breeder is not allowed to cut and sell the animal's wool. Also, he will not make any profit from its skin, which will be sold by the Anastenaria after the ritual. All this results in increased costs for its maintenance and raises the price of the animal substantially. Nonetheless, the Anastenaria never negotiate with the breeder; they pay whatever he asks for. In fact, they do not even ask about the price. Instead, they give a down-payment and then in May, when they pick up the animal, the breeder asks for whatever he considers a fair price. In 2006, the Anastenaria of Agia Eleni paid three hundred euros for the sacrificial lamb.

On the first day of Lent, young Greeks traditionally went to the elders, kissed their hands and asked their forgiveness for anything disrespectful they might have done during the year. However, in recent decades this tradition has become all but obsolete and can only be found in a few rural areas. On this day, the Anastenaria used to gather in the *konaki* to carry out this practice, but since the village ran out of youngsters, the Anastenaria started observing this custom at their homes.

On 2 May, the day of the deposition of the relics of Saint Athanasius, the women gather to clean up the *konaki* and the *agiasma*, and a week later they wash the "clothes of the Grandfathers", meaning the *amanetia* and the cloths of the icons. The big festival takes place 21–23 of May, and on the 24th the women gather to clean the *konaki* and the *agiasma*.

On 6 August, the day of the Transfiguration of the Saviour, the women gather in the *konaki* to wash the grandfather's clothes once again. Later on, the Anastenaria meet at a private house, where there is a *simadi* from the icon of the Transfiguration of the Saviour, which is kept in Strymoniko. The last meeting of the Anastenaria is on 15 August, when they gather in Serres for the festival of the Dormition of the Mother of God and visit the heirs of the icon of the Virgin Mary. This icon has been stolen, but the Anastenaria still visit its heirs and pay tribute to the *simadia* that remain at their home. Finally, the ritual cycle closes with a common meal.

The festival of Saints Constantine and Helen

The festival of Saints Constantine and Helen takes place 21–23 May. It is the biggest and most important event in the religious and cultural life of Agia Eleni, not only for the Anastenaria but for the entire village. The two saints are

the patrons of the village, and people from all the surrounding villages gather there during those three days to take part in the festivities. Celebrations start with an evening service on the 21st and a procession of the icon of Constantine and Helen. This icon belongs to the Church and is not one of the icons of the Anastenaria. After the procession, the Anastenaria start their own festivities, and those who do not wish to celebrate with them, either due to the recommendations of the Church or for any other reason, can spend the night at the central square, where there is traditional music and dancing until late.

Having attended all but one of the festivals of the Anastenaria in Agia Eleni over a period of six years, I can attest to the rigidity of the ritual procedures and observances. Here, I will describe the events that I witnessed in May 2006, although this is meant as a paradigmatic description of the festival in general. The descriptions are based on my personal observations as well as on video recordings that I and others obtained during the festival.

On the eve of the festival, 20 May, the village was already attuned to the rhythm of the Anastenaria. The village church had just been repainted and so had the pavements on the main street. Public spaces had been cleaned thoroughly and the old flags at the municipal building had been replaced with new ones. The programme of the festivities was hung on the windows of the local shops. Some gypsy and Chinese vendors were nearby the *konaki*, setting up tents and stalls where fast-food, toys and various other goods would be sold during the festival, as well as a small amusement park. Anastenaria from other areas were arriving at Agia Eleni. Most of them had relatives in the village, but even those who did not were treated as “guests of honour”. People repeatedly told me with pride that they would never refuse hospitality to another Anastenari who had come for the festival, on a pilgrimage and tribute to Saint Constantine.

Anastenaria visit me very often. Whenever they come here, they sleep at my place; and if I go to their villages, they will put me up; and they will do it willingly, too, because I also do it willingly, with a smile. Once, sixteen people stayed at my place, and my family had seven members. So, twenty-three people slept here, in a two-bedroom house! (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

The village has no hotel and available beds are rare, so visitors sleep wherever they can. Sometimes, visiting Anastenaria have even slept on the floor of the *konaki*, while outside visitors often sleep in tents, caravans or cars.

In the morning, I saw the *archianastenaris* with another man, at an old red-brick two-storey house, holding an incensory. This house used to belong

to an old *archianastenaris*, Giorgos Giavasis, who also owned one of the two “dancing” icons of the village, and the *konaki* used to be in this house. The man who was with the *archianastenaris* was Giorgos’s son, now owner of the house and heir to the icon. The *archianastenaris* was blessing the icon with his censer.

At the same time, preparations had already started in the *konaki*. Two of the musicians were cleaning their instruments and one of the drummers was stretching the skin on the drums. Some women were making preparations in the kitchen, while two men were carrying the logs for the fire. As the Anastenaria often say, their group is “like a military unit”. It has a leader and soldiers, and everyone has a specific task to do. Some of them fire-walk, while others prepare the fire or play music; the women take care of the kitchen; yet others are responsible for providing the candles, bringing supplies, taking care of shopping and financial issues, butchering the sacrificial animal or maintaining order in the festival. Everybody pitches in.

The *konaki* was spartanly decorated, as usual, and there was no extra pageantry for the festival except for the icons that were going to be brought later. In one of the corners there was a wooden shelf (the *eikonostasi*) where the icons are placed during the festival. During the rest of the year, only some *simadia* are left there. Next to the icon stand, there was a big fireplace. Along each side there were benches for people to sit on, and on the walls hung photographs of the festival and the fire-walkers. Close to the fireplace, there was a big wooden trunk with a candlestick on it. On the top side of the trunk was a slot where people could throw some money in order to buy a candle. An old Anastenarissa entered, dropped some money into the box and got one of the candles. She lit it and placed it in the candlestick. Then she turned to the *eikonostasi*, stood upright and crossed herself three times. The icons were not there yet, but nevertheless she approached the stand, took each one of the *simadia* that were on it, kissed it, and then carefully put it back in its place.

According to the programme, the evening service was going to take place at 8.00 p.m. in the village church, which was dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helen. The icon of the two saints was decorated with flowers and placed at a prominent location in the church right in front of the entrance, and people were free to enter the temple and worship it. In the afternoon, it was announced through the community loudspeakers on the roof of the municipal building that the service would after all take place one hour earlier, because the Bishop of Serres himself was going to officiate. Some of the Anastenaria frowned when they heard that. Apparently, this change found many of the people unprepared, and thus the church looked half-empty when the service started. Nevertheless, the number of attendants kept increasing during the service, until there were about one hundred fifty people inside

the church, while others kept moving in and out, as there was not enough space for everyone inside. In total, around two hundred people attended the service, three-quarters of whom were women. About eighty per cent of all attendants were middle-aged or older. There were fewer than ten teenagers in the church, while a few more stayed outside at the parvis without entering the church. The municipality school band was also there, preparing to escort the procession of the icon. However, due to the rain, the bishop decided to postpone the procession for the next day. This decision was received with ironic comments among most of the villagers. “Is he afraid of getting his gown wet?”, a man wondered. In addition, some of the locals were upset because of certain comments the bishop had made during the sermon, prompting his flock to “abstain from idolatrous customs during those holy days”, clearly insinuating the rituals of the Anastenaria.

After the service, the *archianastenaris* went to the venue of the festival, where several people were waiting. He entered the chapel, which was already open. It was an unexceptional chapel, with a wooden screen with four large icons, a candlestick and an alms box with candles on top of it and a slot for the offerings. A few more icons and various vigil lights were hung on the walls, and in the centre of the room there was a wooden stall, covered with a red cloth that reached to the ground. On the stall, and over a smaller white cloth, lied an icon of Constantine and Helen holding a cross, decorated with freshly cut flowers. Tasos observed the chapel and rebuked an old man who had changed the position of the icons. He then entered and observed the *agiasma*.

The *agiasmahad* had an underground hallway. To the left entering was an icon of Saint Christophoros. In front of it, hanging from the wall was a vigil light, and on the floor a candlestick. To the right there was a table on which lied a container with holy water and a bucket for carrying it from the sacred well. Ten stone steps led down to a circular spot, approximately 1.5 m in diameter, in the centre of which lied a round well, covered with a lid. Around it were three more icons, placed in special slots in the wall with a vigil light hanging in front of each one of them. To the front and behind the well was the icon of Saints Constantine and Helen, to the left that of Saint George of Ioannina, and to the right the Metamorphosis of the Saviour.

It was half past nine when Tasos headed towards the *konaki*, and about thirty people had already gathered there. When he entered, there was silence and everybody stood up. He lit a candle and then went to the icon stand and reviewed it. He took a small incensory and lit it. He lifted it in the air and made the sign of the cross in front of the icon stand, and then made three circles, leaving plenty of smoke around. Next, he walked towards the hearth and stood there repeating the same movements. Finally, he started to



Figure 4.2 The *agiasma*.

walk slowly around the room with the incensory, bringing it in front of the attendants. As he passed in front of them, people crossed themselves and made a movement with their hands, dragging the smoke towards them and inhaling it profoundly. He started from the musicians' corner, crossed the room, stood at the doorstep and repeated the movements once more. Then he continued the circle until he reached the back door. He went out of the *konaki* and into the kitchen, which he sanctified with incense as well. The women who were in the kitchen also crossed themselves, caught the smoke with their hands and brought it to their face. Finally, Tasos entered back into the *konaki*, completed the circle and went to the icon stand, where he repeated the movements once more and left the incensory. He turned around and said to the attendants, "Good evening; may you live long and may we have a good festival." He took his seat next to the icon stand and then everybody else sat down too.

The eldest of the *Anastenaria* were seated next to the leader, close to the corner where the icons were placed. Kostas, the former *archianastenaris*, was seated on Tasos's side. Next to him was Litsa, the eldest woman, and Vassilis, the eldest man among the fire-walkers, and then other veteran *Anastenaria*, both active and retired. The rest of the community were divided into two groups: men, seated on the right side of the icons, and women, seated on the left side. Visitors were standing at the back of the room. More people were starting to arrive, dropping some money into the box, lighting a candle and

crossing themselves. Before sitting down, they greeted the senior Anastenaria and kissed their hands. There were now about sixty people in the *konaki*, most of them women, and it was beginning to get very hot inside.

Tasos stood up again and the lyre started playing at a very slow, plaintive rhythm. As the music started, people's faces became more serious and grim. Litsa, the eldest Anastenarissa, got up and went to the icon stand. She kissed the *simadia* one by one, crossing herself after every kiss. When she finished, she turned to the attendants and wished them a good evening in a respectful tone. Tasos stood up again, blessed the icons with the censer and nodded to Kostas, who got up, stood in front of the icon stand and crossed himself three times. The *archianastenaris* gave him the incensory and they kissed each other's hands. Kostas carried the censer around the room, going through the same movements that Tasos himself had gone through a while earlier, sanctifying the room and the attendants and returning it to Tasos. Then he crossed himself three times in front of the icon stand and kissed the spot where the icons would be placed. Tasos left the incensory on the trunk and added some incense. He then called another elder man, who repeated the same process all over again. The music began to play a little faster and the two drums joined in. The atmosphere was very tense now. A young man named Angelos seemed to be in distress. He was sweating and breathing very heavily, with his eyes fixed on the spot where the icons would be placed as he was swinging slowly in the rhythm of the music. Angelos was living in Thessaloniki and had attended the festival for the first time the previous January, when he visited Agia Eleni with a friend who was an Anastenaris. Now he had returned and it appeared that he was "receiving a call" from the Saint.

An old woman started breathing heavily and crying "ah, ah ah!" Litsa started moving her hands above her head, looking very upset. The rhythm of the music kept increasing. After a few moments of intense movements, she calmed down and crossed herself. But this did not last; very soon she started crying again, this time even louder: "ah, ah, ah!" Then she started dancing with small, slow steps, throwing her hands in the air and shouting. Still dancing, she approached the icons and took the incensory from Tasos. She blessed the icons, the fireplace and everybody in the *konaki*, making the same circle, in and out of the doors, into the kitchen and then back into the *konaki*. Finally, always dancing, she reached the icons, blessed them with the incensory, kissed them as well as the *simadia*, and passed the incensory to Tasos, who kissed her hand. The woman then started shouting, "No! No, Tasos, no! No, no!" But Tasos hadn't said or done anything. She was throwing her right hand in the air and then holding her head with it, as if something horrible had happened. Tasos was firmly holding her left hand, trying to calm her down. Indeed, she crossed herself and sat down, but soon she started

again, sitting down this time, and shouting, “No, no no!”, with a ferocious look in her eyes, while moving and clapping her hands in the air. Angelos was now holding his head and crying, attracting the visitors’ curious looks. Tasos called another man, who kissed the *simadia*, took the incensory and walked around the room once more. Soon, the music slowed down and people’s faces became calmer.

Tasos went to the corner and took four big white candles, each one about 1.5 m tall, and lit them. Two old women, retired Anastenarisses, came towards him. Tasos gave a candle to each one of them. He kissed their hands and they kissed his. After that, he nodded to a young man to come forward and gave him another candle and an incensory, and again they kissed each other’s hands. The man stood in line next to the two women, who were standing close to the door. He then signalled four more men, who were given a rose each and took their place in the line. Finally, he called another man and gave him the fourth candle.

The two women holding the candles stood outside the door, one on each side. The musicians and Tasos were the first ones to go out; next was the line of men he had chosen, followed by the crowd. The women with the candles stayed at the *konaki*. The procession made a circle around the village. The pace was fast and people were quiet and solemn. The houses that lay along the way had their porch lights switched on and some of the landladies were standing at their doorsteps holding candles in their hands. As the procession passed in front of them, they would greet us saying, “May you live long; may we have a good festival”, and cross themselves. No one is allowed to get in front of or cross the procession, thus “cutting the way” of the Anastenaria. This is considered very disrespectful and a possible source of bad fortune.

The procession made its first stop outside Giavasis’s house, which had all its lights switched on, and the owner, Giavasis’s son, opened the door. Tasos and the candle bearers climbed the external staircase and entered the house, and many people followed them. The music stopped and the musicians stayed outside. The front door revealed a spacious hallway-reception room in the centre of the house, which allowed access to all of the other rooms, two on either side. One of them had its door wide open; this was the room where the dancing icon was kept. It was rectangular, with roughly 3 m on each side. It had two windows with white curtains, and was spartanly decorated; a single light bulb was hanging from the ceiling and the only pieces of furniture were a round table covered by a plastic tablecloth and a wooden trunk covered by a white sheet. On the table was a candlestick full of burning candles, an incensory and some incense, a box of matches, and oil for the two vigil lights that were hanging from the ceiling. In the corner behind them was the icon stand (*eikonostasi*) made of two wooden plates mounted on the two walls. It

was covered with a white cloth embroidered with red crosses, and on top of it were the icons. The biggest one was the “dancing” icon of Saints Constantine and Helen, dressed in a dark red cloth. There were also two somewhat smaller icons, as well as a pocket-sized one. The icons were not touching the wall but were laying on white cloths nailed on it. There were also other items on the *eikonostasi*, some laying on the wood and some pinned on the cloths: kerchiefs, some laurel leaves, red ribbons and gold and silver offerings.

Tasos sanctified the hallway, which was crammed with people, and then entered the room. No one else but he and the candle bearers was allowed to be there. He circled the room with the incensory, made the sign of the cross with it three times in front of the icons and then left it on the table. Then he kissed each one of the icons and crossed himself. He took the icon’s “ornaments” (*stolidia*), small golden bells, ribbons and various offerings, and placed them on its cloth. Then he took the incensory again and made the sign of the cross three times in front of every icon. He went out the door and into the hallway, where he made a circle spreading the smoke. People caught the smoke with their hands again and inhaled it. The hallway was so crowded that everyone had to move so that he could pass. Finally, he returned to the room. He gave a kerchief to each of the men that were inside. Then he took the icon of the two saints and called Fotis, a middle-aged man who was an experienced fire-walker. He held it up and Fotis kissed each one of the saints and Tasos’s hand and crossed himself. The *archianastenaris* also kissed Fotis’s hand and gave him the icon. Once again, he took the incensory and made the sign of the cross three times in front of each of the remaining icons, as well as the place where the icon had been before. He went out of the room, circled the hallway again and then returned inside. Now they were ready to go. Tasos went first, followed by the icon-bearer and the men with the candles and the kerchiefs. The musicians resumed playing and the procession took off again.

The next stop was at another house, where the second icon was kept. This time, only Tasos and a young man were allowed to enter. The heirs of this icon did not want the crowd entering their home; they were afraid the icon might be in danger, like the icon in Serres that got stolen. A few minutes later, Tasos appeared with the young man, who was now carrying the icon. The music resumed and the procession started again, heading back to the *konaki*. This time it stopped right outside the *konaki*, at the *agiasma*, where only the *archianastenaris* and those who were holding icons, candles or *simadia* could enter.¹ The cameraman of a local TV station tried to enter after them, but was immediately pushed back by the men at the door.

Tasos took a small tin bucket and drew some water from the well. He left the bucket on the edge of the well, crossed himself three times and approached Fotis, who was holding one of the icons. They kissed each other’s hands as well

as the icon, as Tasos took it and made the sign of the cross with it over the bucket. Then he gave it back to Fotis, repeating the same hand-kissing ritual. The same process was repeated altogether with the second icon, and then Tasos threw the water back into the well and refilled the bucket. Finally, he emerged from the *agiasma* with the bucket. He crossed himself and threw the water high in the air in front of him, so that it would fall on people's heads. He repeated this process two more times, filling the bucket and throwing the water once to his right and then to his left. The attendants received the water gratefully, and some children ran at every throw to position themselves so that they would receive the holy water repeatedly. The only ones who seemed to be bothered were the photographers, who were running to protect their cameras from the shower, to the amusement of the locals. Finally, Tasos descended for a fourth time and returned again with the bucket, but this time people gathered around him and he poured the water on their hands. They drank it and washed their faces with it. Litsa was the first one to drink. Tasos went into the *agiasma* again and this time offered the holy water to the men with the candles and the icons. When they left the *agiasma*, the music resumed and the procession returned to the *konaki*. However, they did not walk straight there but instead headed towards the big circle where the fire-walk takes place. They entered from the right side, made a big counter-clockwise circle along the field, exited from the other gate and went into the *konaki*.

Tasos took his usual place next to the icon stand. One of the men with the icons came along and gave him the icon, and they both kissed each of the depicted saints and each other's hands as Tasos took it and carefully placed it on the *eikonostasi*. The same happened with the second icon, as well as with the four candles. Then the music stopped. There was silence. Tasos kissed the icons, crossed himself and said, "Good evening; may we have a good festival." At this point there was a break, and people went out to get some fresh air.

When Tasos came back inside, the music immediately resumed. He took his seat. After performing the same ritual procedures, he approached the icons, blessed them with the incensory and called an old Anastenarissa. He held one of the icons and she "undressed" it. He then placed it back on the stand, blessing it once again. Subsequently he called another elderly woman and the same thing was done with the second icon. Litsa stood up. She kissed Tasos's hand, took the incensory and approached the icons. After blessing them, she started to move slowly. The lyre began to play faster and soon the drum joined the rhythm as Litsa started to dance, blessing the hearth, then the musicians, then everyone in the *konaki* room. After completing a full circle of the room, she ended up in front of the icons again. She began to move faster and shout "Ah, ah, ah!", moving her hands above her head as if slapping the air, with her look fixed on the icons. She finally reached towards one of

the icons, put her hands on its side and kissed it. She did the same with the other icon. She gave the incensory to Tasos, took a couple of steps back and then forward again; she seemed to be trying to lift the icon, but soon released it as if it were too heavy for her to move. She took a few steps back, dancing, moaning and crying “Ah, ah, ah!”

Kostas then went to Tasos, kissed his hand, got the incensory and walked around the *konaki* with it. Meanwhile, Litsa was still dancing. After Kostas finished his circle, Tasos gave him one of the icons and he started dancing with it. Although he was almost seventy years old, he was moving vigorously, lifting it high in the air and then bringing it down again with sharp movements. His eyes were constantly fixed at the ceiling. The music was now faster and louder, and Kostas started crying. Some of the women started getting anxious and letting out cries: “Ah, ah, ah!” Two young men, Angelos and Dinos, were crying and shaking.

When the music slowed down, the four candles were passed around once more and the procession started. The route was the same, except that this time the crowd was not going to pick up the icons but return them to their owners' homes. In earlier times, the icons would remain at the *konaki* during the night and some of the women would stay up all night to watch them, but nowadays they are returned to their owners at the end of each day. When the procession returned to the *konaki*, it was already midnight. Kostas said, “Tomorrow, everybody here at 10.00”, and Tasos added, “Go on now, get some rest, so that you have energy tomorrow.” He urged everybody to be punctual. A woman brought a bucket of water and some towels and everyone washed and dried their hands before leaving.

Most of the streets at the village were now empty. Some of the people who had not attended the celebrations were still eating at one of the restaurants and at the stalls outside the *konaki*. Among them was a priest, seated discretely at a table in a dark corner with some friends. As everyone left the *konaki*, he approached one of the photographers. He told him that he had seen him taking his picture earlier, and asked him to destroy it, because he was afraid that if it got published he might be in trouble with his bishop.

Finally, the big day had arrived. Even early in the morning, it was obvious that something important was about to take place in the village. There was some unusual traffic in the streets and people were coming and going. The tavernas were already open and making preparations for the big night, while the first visitors that had arrived were seated there, looking for some shade.

The *konaki* was open early in the morning. A few people were chatting outside. Some women were making preparations in the kitchen and two men were taking care of practical arrangements. Some people brought two lambs with red ribbons around their neck and flowers attached to their ropes and



Figure 4.3 The dancing icons of Agia Eleni, dressed in their festive clothes.



Figure 4.4 The procession of the icons around the village during the festival.

tied them to a tree next to the *agiasma*. This struck me as strange, because I knew that only one lamb was bought for the sacrifice. People explained to me that these were not actually the *kourbani* purchased in January; they were offerings to the saint made by devotees. “Perhaps somebody brought one to thank the saint for some recovery, or maybe to ask for his help”, they said.

Inside the *konaki*, people had started to gather while the musicians were tuning their instruments. Tasos sat with them, took the lyre and played with them for a while. At ten o'clock, he stood up and lit up the incensory. After the usual blessing of the *eikonostasi* with it, he gave it to an elderly man who was sitting close to him. This man was not a fire-walker, but he was from the village. The man refused, saying that he was not worthy of such an honour and that Kostas should get it because he was a former *archianastenaris*. Tasos insisted. The man still refused, but Tasos stood his ground. He gave him an austere but reassuring look and told him repeatedly in a steady, calm and firm manner, "Come on." In the end, the man obeyed. It was obvious that he was very touched by this honour. With trembling hands he blessed the icons and then carried the incensory around the room. Tears started flowing from his eyes. After he finished, he was still crying; during the rest of the night he cried again several times and did not speak to anyone. I thought he was going to join the fire-walk that night, but he didn't.

After a while, Tasos lit and distributed the four big candles once more. He attached a carnation to the drum and the procession started. When they came back with the icons, there were about forty people in the *konaki*. In the exact same way as the day before, the icons were placed on the *eikonostasi*. This time, however, the procession was ready to take off right away. The four white candles were distributed again and some men got in line and received the *simadia* from Tasos. One of them was Vassilis, who started dancing. He was dancing with his hands open, whirling around in small steps and crying, "Oh, oh, oh!" Shortly after, he took his place in the line again. Another man joined in and Tasos gave him an axe wrapped in a kerchief. The two elderly women stood by the door and the procession left the *konaki* once more.

Outside the *konaki* was now a tractor with a platform attached to it. There were benches on the platform, where people could sit. I asked someone what this was all about, and she said, "We're going to get the animal." I followed the crowd and got onto the platform. About thirty people squeezed on it, and off we went. It was eleven o'clock. The atmosphere was cheerful and people were laughing and making jokes. The musicians were also on board; every once in a while they played a sad tune and then everyone would stop talking and become thoughtful. More people were following us in three private cars, because the platform was too small for everyone. The tractor was going very slowly but none of the three cars ever overtook us. Some other drivers that happened to be in our way obviously knew what was going on; they patiently waited until we passed before crossing so as not to interrupt the procession. We drove in a big circle outside and around the village and came to a stop close to the river. The ride lasted about thirty minutes and when we got off, the procession continued on foot. Under the bridge there was a sheep-pen

with a wooden fence, and that was where the *kourbani* was kept. The farmer presented the animal to the *archianastenaris*. Tasos passed the incensory over the animal's head and then he did the same with a *simadi*. The lamb was then adorned with a red ribbon and tied with a rope around its neck. Tasos took some money that was wrapped inside the *simadi* and paid the farmer. The lamb was then led in front of the procession towards the platform, accompanied by music. A young man was holding the rope in one hand and a *simadi* in the other. We headed back to the *konaki*, this time taking a shorter route.

The animal was taken to the place where it would be sacrificed, next to the *agiasma*, where there were now two more lambs, four in all. This place was a rectangular opening in the cement which revealed the ground, covered with a metal slate during the rest of the year, approximately 3 m long and 1 m wide. Tasos passed the incensory three times over it and Vassilis started dancing over the sacred space. Then, a man took a shovel and dug a big hole in the ground. This was the man that had been given the axe earlier. He was a butcher, and his task in the festival was the slaughtering and skinning of the animals. The first animal to be sacrificed was the *kourbani*. It was wrestled to the ground and the butcher held its head over the edge of the hole while another man was holding its back legs. He took a knife and slit its throat, allowing the blood to flow into the hole. Then he did the same with the other four animals. Even after having its throat cut, each animal would usually keep fighting

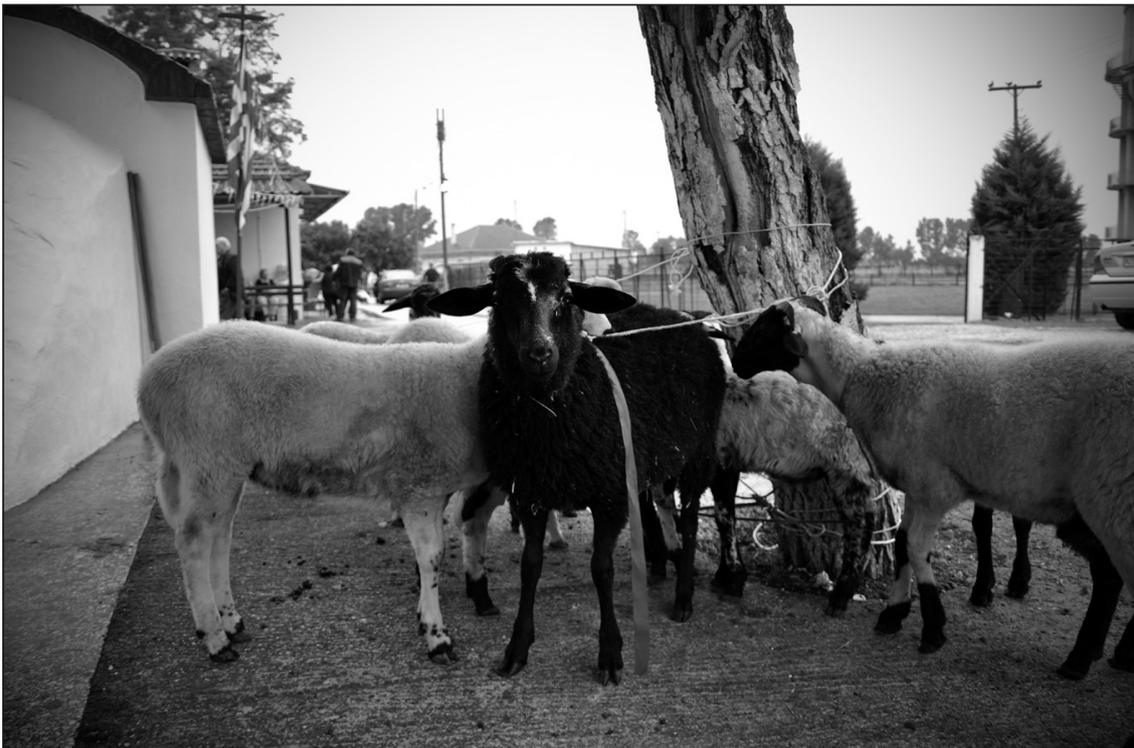


Figure 4.5 The *kourbani* (black), and the other sacrificial lambs.



Figure 4.6 The butcher slaughters the *kourbani* as the *archianastenaris* blesses the sacrifice with incense.

for a few minutes, and they had to keep it pinned to the ground to allow all the blood to drain inside the hole. The sight of the blood and the animal's agony made many visitors uncomfortable, and some young women among them were upset or crying. The Anastenaria, on the other hand, looked sad and thoughtful but at the same time calm and determined. They seemed to mourn the death of the animals, but also to recognize the necessity of this violent act (fig. 4.6).

After the sacrifice, there was a break and most people went home for lunch. It was now one o'clock and the sun was burning, and those who remained at the *konaki* stayed in the shade under the porch. Some of the visitors were putting their heads under the faucet, while others went to the riverbank and lay down under the trees where it was a little cooler.

Meanwhile, the butcher was beginning to skin the animals. Using the axe he was given earlier, he cut off the horns and the feet; then he hung the carcasses from a series of metal hooks that were mounted against a wooden log in the porch, skinned them, and cut the meat into large pieces. After he was finished, the women took over the meat. A portion of it would be given to each household of the village, while the rest would be cooked in the kitchen of the *konaki* (figs 4.7–9).

THE BURNING SAINTS





Figures 4.7–9 Preparing the *kourbani*.

At six o'clock everyone was back in the *konaki*. There were now a lot more visitors, as well as many photographers and members of the Press. It was already getting difficult to find a place to stand and the room was very hot and stuffy. Tasos stood up, lit the incensory and carried it around the room. The musicians started playing and Vassilis danced. An old woman "undressed" the first icon. Tasos took it carefully, kissed it and placed it back on the *eikonostasi*. The same thing was repeated for the second icon. The drums stopped and the lyre began playing a different, more plaintive tone; soon, some of the Anastenaria started to sing. Their songs were sad and talked about losses of family members, about the lost homelands, about Saint Constantine and his sufferings, and about a young girl abducted by a Turk. The Anastenaria appeared to be deeply moved by these songs. They all looked sorrowful and thoughtful, and several of the women were crying. Some of them seemed to be struggling to remain seated, as if they were fighting some invisible force that was pulling them from their seats. They were screaming and lamenting. One of them was pulling her hair while another was pounding her chest. These women were of Thracian descent, and although they had never seen the "lost homelands", they had grown up listening to narratives about these places.

When they finished singing, the drum joined the lyre and the rhythm became faster and more intense. Vassilis got up and started clapping his hands and moaning. Tasos gave him a *simadi* and Vassilis started dancing, occasionally letting out loud cries. Then, three more men and one woman went up to Tasos, took a *simadi* from him and joined the dance. Angelos was trembling again. His eyes were fixed on the icons and he was breathing with great difficulty. He was rocking with the rhythm of the music without lifting his feet off the ground. It was clear that he wanted to dance, but he didn't dare to. Tasos went to him and gave him his hand. He took it and followed him ecstatically, always moving to the rhythm of the music. Tasos gave him one of the *simadia* and advised him not to fear. Everything was going to go well. A woman was standing in the way, and Tasos shouted at her, "Get out of the way, get away!" The woman became offended and left the room.

Tasos took the first steps in the dance with Angelos. And so Angelos danced for the first time. Tasos was whispering in his ear, guiding him. All eyes were focused on him. He was soaked in sweat, and tears were running from his eyes. A photographer took a close-up picture of him using a flash. He was immediately ordered by some of the locals not to do that again, but I noticed that Angelos did not even blink. He clearly seemed to be in a state of trance by now. His gaze was constantly fixed somewhere on the ceiling and he didn't respond to any external stimuli. When he finished dancing, he kissed the hands of all the elders, who were offering him words of encouragement.

When the music started to slow down, the dancers slowed down as well, as if waking up from their ecstatic state, and finally went up to Tasos one by one and returned the signs. They turned around to the crowd and wished them a long life and a good festival. Angelos looked completely worn out. Tasos praised and comforted him.

There was a short break and people went out, as it was getting hard to breathe inside the *konaki*. However, it was only slightly better outside, as it was still sunny and hot. Twenty minutes later, everybody came back and the music started again. At half past eight, the Anastenaria gathered in a circle around Tasos. He spoke to them in a low, peaceful voice. He told them, "Have faith, and have no fear. We have to do our work, and everything will go well. Just remember to follow His signs, like He followed the sign that he saw in the sky. Let's have a good festival."

The lyre began to play, and people started singing again. Kostas took the incensory and circled the *konaki*. Tasos gave him one of the icons and Kostas started dancing. One by one, the other Anastenaria went to Tasos, kissed his hand, got a *simadi* and joined the dance. Each one had their own style. Some were swirling or swaying while others were jumping, although all were tuned to the rhythm and followed the same path, anti-clockwise around the *konaki*. They let out loud sighs, occasionally clapping their hands. They seemed very stressed and uneasy. One of the women who were sitting down started crying and those sitting next to her were trying to calm her down. Dinos was beginning to shake and sweat. He seemed to float rather than stand, swinging along with the music as if hypnotized. It was now Litsa's turn to circle the room with the incensory, dancing. As she did this, she would often stop in front of certain people and hold their hand tight, peering at their eyes as if testing them or offering approval, as if to say, "You are a good, faithful person." When she touched Dinos, he entered the dance with tears in his eyes. As Litsa was dancing, her eye caught a young girl in her mid-twenties who was jumping up and down to the rhythm of the music. She wasn't from the village and hadn't been there before. She was wearing fashionable juvenile clothes and seemed to be enjoying herself. I thought, however, that she seemed to be "out of context", in the sense that she looked as if she were at a party rather than a religious event. Apparently, this is exactly what the old Anastenarissa thought, and she turned on her severely, saying, "What are you moving around for? What's bothering you? What a nerve!" The girl stopped moving at once.

When the music began to slow down, one by one the dancers went to Tasos, kissed the icons, crossed themselves and gave him the signs. They seemed very calm now, except for Dinos. At times he still seemed to be dancing, although his feet were stuck to the ground, moving his hands and head around. Finally, he burst into tears and loud cries, holding his face. Tasos called him and gave

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Figures 4.10 The Anastenaria thoughtfully listening to the mournful songs.



Figure 4.11 Preparing the fire.

him the incensory and the young man circled the room, still crying. Tasos then offered Dinos a seat next to him and whispered something to his ear. There was another break.

Tasos took two big white candles and gave them to two men. He also gave them the incensory and the *simadia*, and they went out. It was now around nine o'clock, and the fenced field was already full of people, while hundreds more were outside, unable to secure a place inside the enclosure. The men entered the field and blessed the pile of logs with the incensory. Then, using the candles, they set fire to it. The fire grew quickly and within a few minutes it reached a height of 5 or 6 m.

Meanwhile in the *konaki*, the Anastenaria were singing again and the atmosphere was very tense. People were sad and thoughtful. Litsa took off her shoes and socks. She took the incensory from Tasos, blessed the icons and started to dance. The music became faster. After a while, Litsa gave the incensory to Tasos, kissed his hand and then the icons. She appeared to be talking to them. She then took a few steps back, always dancing, staring at one of the icons, and raised her hands toward it as if she was calling it to come to her. Tasos then went to the icon, kissed it, crossed himself, raised the icon and gave it to Litsa, who took it and started dancing with it. When she was done, she gave it back and took the incensory again. Carrying it, she circled the *konaki*, now looking very weak and exhausted. Tasos escorted her around the room, holding her hand. Between their hands they were holding a red kerchief. Every once in a while Litsa shouted, "Ah, ah, ah!" In the crowd, the young girl was jumping up and down again, following the rhythm. Litsa gave her another strict look and shouted at her, "What are you doing? What did I tell you?" The girl stopped dancing immediately and did not attempt it again.

After another short break, the Anastenaria gathered around Tasos again. For several minutes, nobody said anything. They all looked pensive and worried. Then Tasos spoke: "How are you feeling today? Are you tired? Are we going to do our job today? You must have your mind on the Grandfathers. Your body and heart should be with them, because the Grandfathers know." Then he stood up holding the incense and everybody followed. The lyre played and the song started. A woman started crying. Tasos went to her, helped her stand up and gave her the incensory. Two men started to dance. The drum joined in. One by one the dancers took off their shoes, went to Tasos, took the *simadia*, and started dancing. Dinos danced rapidly with his eyes closed. He appeared to be in frenzy.

In the meantime, the men who were in charge of the fire were preparing the coals. The pile of big logs had now collapsed into smaller pieces, which they laid out carefully using long sticks to form a flaming circle of about 3 m in diameter. The place was now flooded with people. There were more than

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FIRE-WALKING IN AGIA ELENI



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FIRE-WALKING IN AGIA ELENI



Figures 4.12-19 The emotional dance of the Anastenaria.

two thousand people in and around the enclosure. There was also a large number of men in suits and ties, who were going around shaking hands with people, especially those who were holding cameras. As I was holding one myself, several of them approached me, introduced themselves and gave me a card or a brochure. They were politicians, party candidates for the upcoming national elections, who had shown up for publicity reasons. One of them asked me to take a picture of him, while another one told me that I was welcome to visit him at his office any time, obviously thinking that I was a member of the press. The locals didn't like them at all and most of them refused to take their brochures. "They are predators", a local man explained to me. "They only show up before the elections to ask for our vote, once every four years, and then we never see them again." "Do you see this man?", he asked me, pointing at one of the men in suits. "He is a local MP, and he has not visited the village in four years. This is the first time we see him. Now we'll have to wait for another four years to see him again!"

At eleven o'clock, around fifteen people were dancing barefoot inside the *konaki*. Some of the fittest young men formed a protective wall with their bodies so that the dancers could exit undisturbed by the crowd. Tasos was holding Angelos by the hand, guiding him and encouraging him. The musicians left the *konaki* and the dancers followed them.

The coals were now bright red. I was standing at a distance of about 10 m from the fire but could nonetheless still feel the heat intensely, while my eyes were stinging.² The procession entered the field anti-clockwise and circled around the fire a few times, walking (fig. 4.20). Then, the Anastenaria started dancing. Litsa was the first one to enter the fire and Vassilis was second. Everyone else followed them, crossing one by one over the glowing coals, sometimes coming from two different directions, but always circling anti-clockwise. Tasos took Angelos by the hand, walking a full circle around the fire, and then led him to cross. He crossed the fire many times, and so did everyone else. Some of them joined hands and crossed the fire in pairs. Others stayed on the coals longer, going back and forth many times before leaving the burning circle. The fire-walk finished when the coals were completely put out, which took roughly twenty minutes. Afterwards, the Anastenaria joined hands and danced in a big circle thrice around the fire, and then left the field and went back to the *konaki*. Various people were now approaching the hearth to check if the coals were still hot. Some of them were saying that they were now cool enough and that they could easily walk on them barefoot, but no one attempted to, even though they had been put out by the fire-walkers.

The dancers were still barefoot inside the *konaki*, and their feet showed no sign of burns whatsoever. Two men took the icons and circled them around the room. The attendants crossed themselves, kissed each one of the figures



Figure 4.20 The procession circling the fire before the commencement of the fire-walk.

of the saints and then the holder's hands. The atmosphere was now very different. People's faces were no longer tense and sad; they were calm and relieved, smiling and joking. Angelos now seemed like a different person, more relaxed, and for the first time since he arrived, I saw him talking to people. A woman brought a bucket of water and a towel and the Anastenaria washed and dried their feet. Then they started preparing for the dinner. A big carpet was laid on the floor and some women brought plates, forks and a huge cauldron with the night's meal.

It was midnight when all conversation suddenly stopped, and there was silence. All eyes turned to the *archianastenaris*, who was preparing to speak. He said,

Tonight the festival was big, but the people were few. Right? We've said it before, that these works don't require much trouble; all they need is the Saint's footsteps. The Grandfathers don't ask for anything; they only want to see you gathered together. And everything the Grandfathers get, it comes back to you – to all of us. You should keep that in mind.

A spartan meal was offered to all those present, locals and strangers alike. It consisted of boiled meat from the lambs that were sacrificed, a few olives, goat's

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cheese and bread. A single bottle of Ouzo was passed around, and everybody took one sip from it.

At one o'clock, the procession was formed once again, and started from the *konaki* to deliver the icons at their owners' houses for the night. By the time they came back, there were no strangers in the *konaki*. All the visitors had left and only the Anastenaria remained. Tasos said, "Tomorrow we shall gather at two o'clock in the afternoon. If there is no village, there is no circle. You should know that." This is how the night ended, and everybody went home.



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Figures 4.21–4 The Anastenaria dancing through the fire.

The next day, people started gathering at the *konaki* according to schedule, at around two in the afternoon. The same rituals were performed and the procession started, only this time after taking the first icon from Giavasis's house, it followed a different route. The householders of each home stood at their doorstep when they heard the music approaching, and Fotis, who was holding the icon, and the men with the candles entered their homes. They exchanged greetings, and each landlady offered bowls of treats containing dry fruits, sweets, chocolate and fruit. Everybody passed with a plastic bag, took a handful of treats and offered their wishes to the landlady. In one of the houses the procession stopped for a longer period, and everybody was invited inside for some coffee. The landlords are the heirs to the icon of the Transfiguration of the Saviour, which is in Strymoniko, and a *simadi* from this icon is kept in this house. Afterwards, everybody went upstairs, where they worshipped the *simadi* and danced. The procession visited every house in the village within two days; the "Thracians" on the first day, and the "locals" on the second. The only houses that were left out were the ones in mourning, and when the procession passed by such a house where some recent misfortune had occurred, the music stopped playing.

The procession reached the *konaki* at seven o'clock, and there was singing and dancing for several hours. A meal was served around midnight. It was lamb with rice, spring onions and peppermint. Afterwards, the icons were returned to their homes, and people went to sleep at one o'clock.

Finally, the third and last day of the festival started with visiting the rest of the houses, continued with some more dancing and culminated with a second fire-walk. The atmosphere was festive. Some Anastenaria from another community came to join the dance. In their own village there was no fire-walking on the third day of the festival, so they came to Agia Eleni. They fire-walked with confidence and enthusiasm. An old Anastenaris who hadn't danced for years due to health problems crossed the fire. A young woman, Popi, took part for the first time. She was descended from Kosti, and her mother and grandmother were Anastenarisses. Therefore, she didn't have to ask for permission or to prepare. She took off her shoes and danced on the fire with rigour. "I always knew I was going to do it", she told me. "It was just a matter of when."

After the fire-walk, a table was brought into the *konaki*. The money that was collected during the festival was laid on it, and five young men began the task of counting it while three women were sitting among them holding candles (fig. 4.25). The amount gathered was announced by Tasos: 839 euros. He asked the attendants, "What should we do with it?" Every villager had the right to say his or her opinion. "Does anybody know someone who is in real need of the money?", he said. Someone suggested that the Folk Society

of the village was in need of funding. “Any other suggestion?”, Tasos asked. “Speak up”, he said, turning to the elders. Another man said the *konaki* needed to have heating for the winter. Tasos laughed at this and said that it wasn’t important. “Anybody else?”, he asked. A couple of people seconded the proposal of a donation to the Folk Society. “Whatever you say. It is decided, then”, Tasos concluded. Afterwards, he called the musicians. He gave them some money, according to their age and the time they had been playing for. The lyre player received 50 Euros. The young drummer boy got 30. A man who was playing the drum got 50. He said it was too much, and that they should use the money otherwise. Tasos told him, “Just take it, and then do as you think is wise with it.” The man later gave 30 Euros back to the common pool as a donation.

The treats that had been gathered were brought into the *konaki* in four big buckets and placed on the table in the middle of the room. Tasos took the incensory and blessed the treats, and some young men and women started offering them to everyone. The preparations for the meal started. Cutlery, bread, feta cheese and olives were laid on a white sheet on the floor. The dish was lamb with peas.



Figure 4.25 Counting the money on the last night of the festival.

Somebody pounded a pot to call attention. Everybody stood up, and the *archianastenaris* spoke:

The festival is over; however, our work is not over. With the help of the Grandfathers – may they take care of us so that we can serve them – we will do everything right. The Grandfathers don't ask for much. They only want our footsteps, and our love. Everything else is for us. They don't want our money; they don't want us to light many candles; they just want us to keep the lamp which lies at the doorstep of our heart lit, and that the door of our heart be open for the Grandfathers. Just as their embrace is always open for us. This work, we don't do it for us, we do it for everybody. And for this reason, whatever worries we have, we leave them behind and we come to the festival. Our work is difficult, but it's also easy. May the Grandfathers help us, so that we can always love them. And may we only have one thing: the will to be with them. Welcome to our table. May the Grandfathers bless you, your families and your jobs, and may they bring peace to all the world.

As he spoke, he blessed the food, making the sign of the cross three times with the incensory, and everybody crossed themselves and started eating. And this concluded the festival.



Figure 4.26 Preparing for the common meal after the fire-walk.

Chapter 4 has described the ritual cycle of the Anastenaria, which begins on 26 October and ends on 15 August every year. The central figures of this tradition are Saints Constantine and Helen, but all the significant events in this cycle coincide with important days in the Greek Orthodox calendar and are related to various Christian saints. The most important events of all are two big festivals, one in January and particularly one in May, dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helen. Each of these festivals lasts for three days and involves various processions, music and dancing, an animal sacrifice, and ecstatic ritual dance. And each culminates with the fire-walking ritual, where the participants, carrying the icons of Saints Constantine and Helen, dance inside the *konaki* for hours before entering the fire and walking over the glowing-red coals. Ritual activities take place in and around specially constructed buildings, and processions follow specific paths and stop in particular places. Everything must be done in a prescribed manner.

Chapter 5 will discuss the various forms of religious knowledge in the tradition of the Anastenaria and the ways in which such knowledge is revealed and transmitted.

5

Knowledge and revelation among the Anastenaria

Very often I hear my husband talking in his sleep. Sometimes I ask him what he is talking about, and he just says, “Turn around and sleep; those are my own things.” I understand. He is talking to the Saint. (personal interview with the wife of a senior Anastenaris)

The tradition of the Anastenaria is believed to contain a special form of knowledge. Although the content of this knowledge is not specified, seniors are believed to possess larger portions of it, while the younger Anastenaria usually consider themselves ignorant of the Saint’s will. For this reason, the elders are seen as authoritative and are often consulted on matters concerning the tradition, important decisions, human relations, personal problems and everyday matters in general. I have very often heard the elders tell the youths – insiders and outsiders – including me, “You may have read many books and gone to university, but I know things about which you have no idea.” This wisdom is considered to be hard to acquire, and there is no official or direct process for its transmission. Ritual procedures are learnt through participation and observation, but there is no formal teaching of religious ideas and principles. In fact, even when explicitly asked by younger members of the community about this religious knowledge, the elders are usually cryptic and evasive.

So where does this knowledge come from? The Anastenaria have no sacred texts or written tradition. Of course, as Orthodox Christians, they believe in the teachings of the Bible and the doctrines of the Greek Church, but there is no textually transmitted form of collective knowledge specific to the framework of the Anastenaria. Thus, religious knowledge in the Anastenaria stems from two main sources: the first one is through privately experienced or publicly observed events that are interpreted as the saints’ attempts to communicate with their followers; and the second through oral myths,

legends and other narratives that get passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth.

The Saint's call

Many Anastenaria reported to me having experienced a revelatory manifestation of Saint Constantine, usually in the form of “signs” (*simadia*) such as dreams or visions, which eventually resulted in their involvement in the Anastenaria. These apparitions, which typically follow a period of intense physical or psychological stress, are considered to be the Saint’s “calling” to the person to become a fire-walker and are welcome, as evidence that their problem is only transitory; however, this is not exclusively good news. Such a call is usually associated with some form of suffering, an ordeal imposed on the person by the Saint, only to be followed by a cathartic process of redemption. Indeed, very often the Anastenaria resist the Saint’s orders, even if they eventually succumb to his will. When they start dancing, fire-walkers typically show discomfort, moving around as if they were fighting or trying to get away from something, moaning and sometimes crying or shouting, “no, no!” Whether this “resistance” is the product of a hallucinatory encounter with the Saint, a case of emotional contagion or simply an instance of mimicking other participants’ behaviour in a state of collective trance, the Anastenaria appear to be genuinely experiencing an internal struggle when they dance. This struggle, which is described by the Anastenaria as “strain” (*zori*), is part and parcel of the relationship between Saint Constantine and his followers and can sometimes be a long and enduring process, taking the form of a personal journey of self-discovery.

For example, one of my informants, then in his eighties, described to me very vividly how some decades earlier he all of a sudden started crying for no apparent reason:

— I didn’t have any particular problems or anything. I would just burst into tears and cry out loud, with real tears – for good, with real sorrow. I would go to an isolated place to cry alone. My wife was worried. She was asking me why I cried, but I didn’t have an answer. This lasted for two weeks. Then I started having those dreams. They were dreams, but they were real, you know? I could really feel them, they were factual, I don’t know how to explain it...

— What were the dreams about?

— There was an old man with a beard, unknown to me, who asked me to light a fire and dance on it. He was a very ugly man,

he seemed to be sick. I told him, "Leave me alone." Then he gave me a hard slap on the face!

I ask my wife, "Why did you hit me?" And she says, "Are you nuts? I didn't hit you!" Every time I refused, he would hit me hard. Finally, I said that I would do it. In the morning, when I woke up, he said, "Are you ready? You will go to Lagkadas." I answered, "All right, but I don't have the money to get there." He told me not to worry. I set off for Lagkadas. I only had one coat, old and patched. I was very poor. I had nothing but one drachma with me. I went to the bus stop, and when the bus arrived I got in and went to the back, so that the driver wouldn't see me and ask me for the money. He didn't see me. I got off at Derveni, and I needed to change to the bus to Lagkadas but I didn't know where the stop was. I had never been to Derveni before. I thought, "Where am I to go, how will I get there?" Then a man came to me and he told me, "Look East."

— Who was that man?

— I don't know! I went East, and I saw a bus. I got on. I didn't pay there either. I thought, "How nice, I have saved my drachma, I can take it back to the village." I got off at the town [Lagkadas] and I thought, "Where should I go now?" Then a man comes and tells me, "North."

— Who was that?

— I don't know! He grabbed me from the waist, turned me around, and said, "North." He pointed me towards the right direction and said, "When you reach the square, you will hear the music." I started walking and I finally got there and heard the sound of the lyre and the drum. When I went there, somebody asked me, "Why are you late?" I said, "I am not late", and I started crying. Crying! Somebody told me to take off my shoes, but I refused. He then said "Let him be, he will take them off by his own will." We went to the fire, and I didn't even realize when I took off my shoes and ran into the fire. After the ritual we went to bed and my head was about to explode. I was hearing voices: "Why are you late, why this, why that..." Anyway, I was finally able to relax and get some sleep. In the morning, I was looking for a way to return home, and somebody told me, "Don't worry, this man will give you a ride free of charge." The man indeed drove me home, and since then he told me to perform the fire-walk here [in Agia Eleni]. He said, "You shall not come here again; you will go over there, because it's closer to your home."

— Who was it that told you to come here?

- The Saint. We talk to each other, I don't know how to explain it to you, we talk just like you and I are talking right now. After this happened, I was scared. When I came back home, I went to the field and told people what had happened. They didn't believe me.
- And did you stop crying after this happened?
- Yes. (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris)

Compare this interview, gathered in 2006, with a personal account from 1947, of a man explaining how he became an Anastenaris:

As I was herding my sheep, everything got dark; I felt a strong slap on the face and I heard a voice say, "The time has come and you shall confess. You are my own root and branch.... Confess my signs..." For three hours I stood still, silent, just crying.... When I came to my senses I went home. My wife, worried, came out. I managed – crying – to tell her, "give me my clothes". "Where are you going?", she asked. "I don't know, wherever my way takes me", I replied. Without realizing it, I went to the house of Vlaskaina [the *archianastenaris*], to the icons. There, I felt better. I lit a candle, some incense, and I prayed. The next day, around the same time, I was dizzy again, and something, some force, led me to the church. This kept on for three years. I couldn't take care of my business. Very often I would just jump off the cart, go home and lie in bed...

One day as I went to bed, I felt dizzy and heard a voice say, "The time has come. Light the candle and let all my signs be revealed. Don't worry; there are people who will help. We shall not perish." At once, I lit a candle, a vigil light, and the earth shook, it lit up; and there was chaos, beautiful! My neighbours didn't realize what was going on. At one time, the power told me to get a shovel and a pickaxe and go to find Vlaskaina. She led me to a place I had never seen before. I didn't know whether I was a thousand metres above the sky or a thousand metres under the earth. She told me to dig. I dug and found an *agiasma* [sacred well]. At once, I came to my senses and realized I was at the edge of the village. Ever since, I gradually started working and taking care of my family again. Except for Wednesdays and Fridays [fasting days in Orthodox Christianity], that sometimes the Saint seizes me. (Papachristodoulou 1950: 327–8)

These two narratives are characteristic of a more general pattern, where the Saint orders his chosen followers to become Anastenaria. But the path to

membership must pass through suffering and illness. The symptoms in the two descriptions are similar: they involve crying without any apparent reason, psychological problems, and the Saint tormenting the patient by hitting him on the face. It is only by accepting the Saint's will and carrying out his orders that redemption comes and the suffering is alleviated.

Signs and miracles

At other times, the saints make their will known to the Anastenaria by more indirect means. As their followers say, they do this by sending them "signs" (*simadia*), just like the sign that Saint Constantine allegedly saw in the sky. The range of these signs appears to be infinite, and it is up to the Anastenaria to discern and interpret them accordingly. To outsiders, they often seem random coincidences or ordinary events, but to the Anastenaria they are meaningful manifestations of the Saint's will. Typically, they either provide some subtle demonstration of the Saint's active interest in the life of the person or the community or act as clues that lead to the fulfilment of a goal or an important discovery.

When my husband left for Agia Eleni, he told me to lock the door of the *konaki*. During the night I heard footsteps in the living room. I thought to myself, "The kids must have unlocked the door and someone has entered the house." I got up, but there was nobody there. Then my children told me that they had also heard the footsteps the previous night. It was the Saint, who was watching over the icons while my husband was away. (personal interview with the wife of a senior Anastenaris)

Last week, I was thinking about the festival that was approaching and how I didn't have the money to take a taxi to Agia Eleni. "What am I going to do?" I asked myself, "How am I going to get there?" Just as I was thinking about that while crossing the bridge, I found a twenty-euro note on the bridge. I thought to myself, "This will cover the cost of the taxi. And once I'm there, then I'll find somebody to take me back. Thank you, my Saint, for providing for me once more." (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris)

When my father-in-law [a former *archianastenaris*] died and the priest was in our house blessing him, just when they lifted the coffin for the procession, I heard drums play from far away. At first

I didn't pay attention, but later more people told me that they had heard the drums. It was the Saint, who was saying goodbye to him. (personal interview with the wife of a senior Anastenaris)

Some years ago, we went to Bulgaria to visit the homeland. During the communist rule religious activities were prohibited, so the locals held the ritual secretly inside their homes. We started asking around to find the place where it was performed before. An old woman told us that it was where the old school used to be. When we reached the school, the grass was very tall and we could find no traces of the old fire. We started looking around. As we entered the yard of the old school, we saw a red thread flying in the air above my husband's head. He was walking and the thread was following him. As we were looking for a trace of the fire, the thread got caught on a tree. Then my husband said, "It's here!" We looked between the grass and we saw it. There were some old ashes. We cleared all the grass, made a fire and danced on it. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

Signs are themselves considered to be a form of miracle (*thavma*). However, the term "sign" usually denotes an unexceptional event that is interpreted as having a special significance, usually by one person alone. On the other hand, people speak of a miracle where there is a powerful public manifestation of the Saint's workings; in other words, when several people witness an extraordinary event that is considered to constitute clear evidence of divine interference. Fire-walking itself is seen as a miracle. It is only by the Saint's intervention that the Anastenaria do not get burnt when dancing on the fire. However, miracles can also be unrelated to the festival. The majority of accounts of miracles that I heard during the course of my fieldwork referred to events that the participant had not experienced directly, but had heard from other Anastenaria.

In some cases, however, people have claimed to me that they had directly witnessed a miracle or had even performed one themselves, acting as instruments of the saints. Such stories were only told by some of the most experienced Anastenaria, and usually involved instances of miraculous healing.

Our neighbour's son once came to our place and stayed over for the night. When I asked him where he wanted to sleep, he said that he wanted to spend the night in the room where the icon was, under the *eikonostasi*. In the morning, I asked him how he had slept. He told me that he was under the icon when a light wind blew, lifted him and laid him on the sofa, where he slept. Since then, he has

told me that every time he has some problem and he prays, he sees that moment repeated in front of his eyes. (personal interview with the wife of a senior Anastenaris)

There was once a mute boy who was watching the ritual. I pushed him into the fire – I don't know how, I didn't mean to – and he shouted "Mommy!" From that moment on, he started speaking! (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa from Bulgaria)

Dreams and visions

The most common form of signs that Saint Constantine sends to his followers is dreams and visions. Such apparitions manifest the Saint's will to his followers and often lead them to join the practice of fire-walking, just like his own dream/vision manifested God's will to him and eventually caused him to embrace Christianity.

Dreams in rural Greece are very often considered to have metaphysical significance, especially in times of anxiety or illness, and particularly among women (Stewart 1997). In such situations, dreams can be prophetic or symbolic of forthcoming events, and people will frequently appeal to the elders for their interpretation.

...When my husband became the *archianastenaris*, I dreamt of a farmer from Serres that I knew. He came with his threshing machine and circled the field three times. I told him, "You will be the *archianastenaris* for three years; that's how long your term will last"; as it happened. (personal interview with the wife of a former *archianastenaris*)

Very often a dream may seem unimportant, but a later event might be considered as relevant and interpreted in terms of that dream. A woman once narrated to me various dreams that she had had and attributed a meaning related to the saint to each one of them. Finally, she described another dream and told me,

This dream I had twenty years ago, and I still haven't been able to find a meaning for it. But I am sure that one day something will happen to me in such a way that the dream will make sense. (personal interview with the wife of a senior Anastenaris)

The belief that the dead intentionally appear in people's dreams is particularly common in rural Greece (Danforth 1982). The dead may appear to the living to make a request or a complaint, reveal a secret, or provide the solution to a problem. This notion particularly applies to special categories of ancestors, such as the saints. In the rural Greek setting, having such dreams can sometimes be seen as a sign of grace or illumination, especially among women, and it has been suggested that women are therefore impelled to have more dreams in order to benefit in terms of social status (Dubisch 1995; Stewart 1997).

Dreams are always interpreted in terms of the personal lives of the dreamers, and indissolubly related to their physical and cultural environment (Bulkeley 2003: xii). For this reason, in any given social group the different unique narratives of dreams tend to converge into recurrent schemas and motifs. In this way, a personal dream becomes filtered through the specific social framework of interpretation into a recognizably standard narrative (Stewart 1997). One very common theme in dream narratives in rural Greece is the manifestation of various saints, who often appear to people while they sleep to advise them, reproach them or urge them to do their will.

Among the Anastenaria, Constantine is the saint who appears more often, offering his wisdom to his followers, talking to them and guiding them through the problems of everyday life. However, any saint could appear to a person, depending on the nature of their problems or idiosyncratic preferences.

When my son was taking his exams to enter the university, I was praying for his success. That night, I was watching television and I fell asleep on the couch. I dreamt that I was at our home in my village and had a big bunch of keys but couldn't unlock the door to get in. And then an unknown man came to me and picked one of the keys and unlocked the door. I opened it and went inside. And when I was about to close the door behind me, the man asked me, "Are you going to leave me outside?" I said, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am Nikolaos." I told my husband about the dream, and he said, "That was Saint Nikolaos. Our son will enter the university, because you let the saint in." I asked him where the nearest church of Saint Nikolaos was, and he told me it was in Lagyna. I said that I would go and light a candle for him. But I neglected it, and after a few days had passed I had another dream. An unknown man again came to me and asked me how my son was doing. I said he was fine and asked him who he was. He replied, "His friend Nikolaos, from Lagyna." (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

I dreamt that I was dining when I heard someone knock at the door. I opened up and saw a tall young woman with black hair dressed in black. I asked her who she was and she said, “That’s why I have come here, so that we can know each other.” She then asked me whether I had ever been to Heraclion and I said that I go there very often. “Then why have you never visited my home?”, she asked. I answered that I didn’t know who she was. Besides, I was a single man. What would people say if I went to a young woman’s house?” She then asked me, “If I tell you who I am, will you come to my house?” I said I would. “Do you promise?”, she asked. “Yes, of course”, I answered. And then she disappeared, and the chapel of the Virgin Mary of Heraclion appeared in front of me, full of people, during the service. When I went to visit that chapel, it was exactly as it had appeared in my dream, and the exact same persons were in it! (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris)

Finally, another common manifestation of the saints’ will is through visions. Visions are largely similar to dreams, with the difference that the subject is – or claims to have been – awake at the time of the experience. Often, though not always, the subject is in a state of trance while experiencing the vision, during the dance or the fire-walk. As with dreams, visions consist either in direct contact with the saints or in extraordinary events that are considered symbolic and are attributed special importance and meaning.

As I was dancing, I raised my eyes, and the ceiling was gone. There was nothing! I saw the sky, clear and blue. I saw the angels in white clothes, dancing and singing the Great Doxology [*doxa en hypsistois*]. I kept dancing, shouting “The skies have opened up, and the angels have come down! They are singing!” (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

We were in Lagkadas for the festival. We were all there waiting for [my son] Giannis, who was late. People were dancing, and I was with my other sons in the *konaki*. I was staring at the door, waiting for Giannis. Then, I saw a rainbow starting from the icon and stretching towards the door. When it reached it, my son appeared on the doorstep and the rainbow stopped on his head. I knew that this meant he was going to dance that day. He entered, lit a candle, said a prayer and started dancing. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

One day, about twenty years ago, I was at the festival in Brodilovo when I suddenly begun to feel sick. They called the doctor but he couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me. My skin was very cold and soon I was unable to speak, although I could hear the doctor and the people around me. The doctor suggested that they move me away from the people, somewhere where

I could breathe better, so they took me close to the *agiasma*. I had some water to drink from the *agiasma*. Then, I saw an old lady walking up to me and telling me that I would walk on the fire. I said I wouldn't. She insisted. I asked her, "Why should I walk on the fire?" and she just said, "When you are cold, you will go into the fire." Later, I asked the people who that woman was, but they told me there had been no one around. Maybe it was a hallucination. In a while, I started feeling better and I went back to the festival. The others were done dancing but the music was still playing. I felt cold and I thought about what the woman had said. I ran through the fire rapidly. I didn't get burnt. Then I ran again. The third time, I felt a bit warm, so I rushed to get out but I got burnt. I thought I would never do it again. However, the next year the mayor asked me to dance again at the festival. I didn't want to. But when I heard the music, that's when I felt the urge to do it again. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa from Bulgaria)

Myths and legends

Over time, the experiences of the fire-walkers become crystallized in various myths and legends and form the oral tradition of the Anastenaria. As these experiences are subjective, this body of stories that derive from them is not particularly coherent. Like all folk mythologies, it includes various – often contradictory – narratives of unknown origin, and usually there are various versions of each narrative. However, these accounts are usually not treated as myths but rather as meaningful stories which describe real historical events that took place at some indefinite time in the past.¹

Many of those narratives refer to the origins of the Anastenaria. According to the bestknown among them, some time in the past, the Church of Saints Constantine and Helen in Kosti caught fire. As the church burnt, the villagers heard the icons crying for help. The bravest rushed into the burning church to save them and neither they nor the icons were harmed by the fire. To commemorate this miracle, the citizens of Kosti organized an annual fire-walking ritual. In a different version of this myth, those who entered the fire to save the icons were Constantine's soldiers, while in another one Constantine is said to have built the church himself. Nonetheless, there are other myths that tell a different story about the origins of the Anastenaria:

Once upon a time, God wanted to have a representative on Earth, and He decided to organize a contest. He made a big fire, and the first young man to cross it would become His chosen one. The man who was able to cross the fire was called Constantine. Then, God

wanted to find a match for Constantine, and He put all the young women through the same trial. The girl who made it was called Helen, and she became Constantine's wife. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa from Bulgaria)

Not only are many of the myths incompatible or contradictory, but some of them also contain historical inaccuracies and anachronisms. One of the most common anachronisms is the presentation of Constantine fighting against the Turks.

There was once war between the Byzantines and the Turks. Saint Constantine was the Emperor, but he wasn't Christian. His mother, Helen, was. The Byzantine army was losing badly. Then, Constantine had a dream. He saw a red flag with a cross flying high on the sky, with the words "With this thou shall win" [en toutō nika] inscribed on it. He ordered a flag just like that to be made, and went to war. His army soon began gaining on the enemy. Then the Turks set fire to the fields, so that he wouldn't be able to reach them. But his army went through the fire and won the war. That was when people started practising fire-walking inside their homes, to commemorate this event. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

Helen and her son Constantine found the True Cross in Jerusalem and brought it back to Constantinople. They had it in the palace when the Turks were laying siege to the city. The Turks lit a huge fire all around the walls. Constantine climbed up onto the walls and saw the flames; then he returned to the palace and brought out the True Cross. Holding the True Cross in his hands he stepped into the fire. Wherever he walked, he put the fire out, so he left behind a path where there weren't any flames. That way all the Christians left the city, and no one was burnt. (Danforth 1989: 86)

Saint Constantine was a general; originally he was an unbeliever, but his mother Saint Helen was a very religious woman. One day, Constantine was fighting his enemies, the infidels, in Thrace near Kosti. He defeated them, and they fled. To block his pursuit, his enemies lit a huge fire and burnt down the forest. This was the fire that destroyed all the old villages around Kosti. Constantine stopped in front of the fire. What could he do? But then in the sky he saw the words "In this sign conquer!" That meant he could pass

through the fire unharmed. It happened on May 21st. (Danforth 1989: 86–7)

In these narratives, a well-known legend, first mentioned in the fourth century (Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*; Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*), is adapted into the context of the Anastenaria. Constantine's expansionist war against Maxentius of Rome becomes a defensive war against the Turks, who arrived in the area more than a thousand years later, and fire is introduced in the story to provide a justification for the origin of the tradition. In addition, Helen is often presented as having been a Christian before Constantine, while according to Eusebius's account it was the emperor who "made her god-fearing" (3.47.2).

A significant recurring element in these narratives is the saints' manifestation and/or intervention in the lives of the Anastenaria. Such interaction between the saints and their followers is believed to have been more frequent and more direct in mythical times, although it still occurs today.

There was once a young girl from Kosti. She came from a family of Anastenaria and was famous for her beauty. A Turkish sultan came to the village with forty armed men and abducted her to take her to his harem. On their way, when the sun set, they had to make camp. The sultan took the girl in his tent and the soldiers formed a circle around it. The sultan fell asleep on her lap. Then she begged Saint Constantine for help. "Please, my Saint", she said, "I don't want to become a Turk. I want to go back to my family." The saint then appeared to her and told her to escape. "But how will I do that?" she replied. "The Turk is sleeping on my lap. He will wake up if I move. And his men are outside guarding us." "Don't be afraid", the saint said, "everything will be all right." The girl moved the sultan's head and got up. He didn't wake up. She went outside and saw that everybody was sleeping. She passed through them and left. As she reached the river that now separates Turkey from Bulgaria, she complained to the saint that she would never be able to cross it. Constantine spoke to her again. "Take your scarf and lay it on the water. Then step on it and cross over." The girl did as she was told, and the scarf became a boat for her to cross the river and be saved, with the grace of Saint Constantine. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

Another large number of narratives recount the workings of the ancestors, who consist of three categories: (1) The mythical – typically anonymous – distant ancestors who started the tradition in some indefinite time in history.

Saint Constantine himself is often included among them and considered to be the original progenitor of all modern Anastenaria. (2) The ancestors of many present-day fire-walkers who lived in Kosti over one hundred years ago. Most of the senior Thracians of Agia Eleni still remember their grandparents or great grandparents who left the homeland and became refugees in Greek Macedonia. (3) Finally, the few previous generations of fire-walkers after the migration, and especially the *archianastenarides*. At the time of writing, there had been only two deceased *archianastenarides* in Agia Eleni since the migration, Dragoulis (known as Gerodragoulis, which simply means old-Dragoulis), and Giavasis, both of whom had acquired legendary status and were always referred to with reverence.

In the narratives about the past, the ancestors of the Anastenaria are said to offer valuable services to the villagers by healing them and their livestock, invoking rain, foretelling the future, and revealing the perpetrators of mysterious crimes (Petropoulos 1938–39: 141). And above all, they give solutions to problems and provide answers to questions related to the saints, based on their specialist knowledge.

My great-grandfather in Kosti dreamt of an icon hidden next to a chestnut tree. He got up in the morning, called the Anastenaria and narrated his dream to them. They decided to go and dig it out. He guided them and found the tree, and when they dug, they found the icon in an upright posture under the ground. They censed it and then someone tried to take it. But it wasn't the man who had seen the dream. And thus the icon disappeared into the earth. The Anastenaria burnt incense, played music and danced, but the icon would not show itself. That same night, the icon appeared in his dream again and told him, "You shall not see me again. But in the chestnut tree that you saw, you will find a suitable branch, and from that you shall make a new icon." The next day, he called the Anastenaria again, and they all went to the tree. This time he cut the branch himself, took it to Constantinople and had it made into an icon.... When he brought it to the festival, nobody could take it and dance. Every other icon was dancing, but this one was unapproachable. Then, an old Anastenarissa said, "The lad is good and worthy, but the roosters peck him." This meant that the icon was good, but it was not yet ready to dance. Our forefathers were uneducated, illiterate, but they knew many things. They asked her what she meant by that and she replied, "It is not ready because the iconographer forgot to paint the sign of the cross on the back of the icon. Without it, the icon is not complete." They turned the

icon around and saw that the sign was indeed missing! They took it back to the iconographer, and he completed his work. After that, this icon was dancing more than any other. (personal interview with a senior Anastenaris)

In Kosti, there was a snake guarding the sacred well. Once, an Anastenarissa sent her little boy to bring water from the well. The boy saw the snake and came back frightened. His mother told him, “Don’t be afraid; this snake is Saint Sotira. She is guarding the well from the Turks, so that they won’t defile it with their infidel hands. It won’t harm you. Go.” And the boy went and brought the water. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

With the exception of Saint Constantine and the other saints, the ancestors are not worshipped or in any sense considered divine. They are, however, venerated and respected. They are seen as honourable historical figures and are always considered to be more knowledgeable than the present generation. Just as seniors are seen as wiser than youngsters, older generations are considered morally and spiritually superior to the younger ones. In general, the past is idealized in the myths of the Anastenaria. Life in the homeland is represented nostalgically as an ideal “golden era” and the ancestors are portrayed as examples of moral and pious behaviour, unsurpassed in their piety and wisdom. Thus, in a way these myths are exemplary in that they prescribe certain behaviours according to the values of the tradition.

The wisdom of old age

The above constitute the different recognized forms of religious knowledge in the tradition of the Anastenaria. Elders are thought to possess more of this expert knowledge, and novice participants less of it. In addition, the accounts and versions of the elders are seen as more authoritative and valuable than those of youngsters. On the other hand, inexperienced fire-walkers are more eager to share these narratives, when they have learned them, and experiences, when they have felt them. Progressively, as the Anastenaria gain in knowledge and experience, they become less likely to talk about it publicly or even privately, and certainly not to outsiders. Researchers and journalists who visit Agia Eleni often find it impossible to get an interview from one of the elders, while they have better chances with the youngsters. My own position was similar. When I first arrived at the village, it took me some months to be able to get any kind of information regarding personal experience from the elders, while I

had better luck with the novices. And of course, there were some elders that never agreed to talk to me “about these things” at all. But even for the fire-walkers themselves, it is not easy to get access to this information. Indeed, the younger Anastenaria would often complain about this, saying, “If they never speak about those things, they will be forgotten. How are we supposed to continue the tradition if they don’t tell us anything?” For this reason, when a senior Anastenaris agrees to tell a story, it is a sacred moment for the others, and especially the youngest, who gather eagerly and listen piously. So rare and important are these moments for them, that when I once recorded a several-hour-long interview with one of the oldest fire-walkers, some other Anastenaria, including the man’s son, asked me to burn it into CD’s for them so that they would be able to listen to those stories.

Chapter 5 has looked into the various forms of religious knowledge in the Anastenaria. Such knowledge comes from oral tradition, personal experience and interpretation of divine will. Recounting myths and legends about the past, about life in the homeland and the insuperable Anastenaria of that era, and about the origins of fire-walking; telling stories about awe-inspiring miracles, meaningful dreams and visions and breathtaking personal encounters with the saints; and showing ability to decipher their signs, constitute the higher form of knowledge within the tradition. As the Anastenaria become more experienced, they are considered to possess more of this knowledge. At the same time, they tend to become more evasive and cryptic about it, regarding “those things” as some kind of taboo issues that are not supposed to be talked about but rather felt and experienced through participation.

Chapter 6 will outline the major questions posed by this investigation and detail the directions and methods that shall be employed in attempting to answer them.

6

Ritual and cognition

Anthropologists are concerned with the study of recurrent patterns of human behaviour in its natural context. Such recurrent patterns depend both on historical and local circumstances and on the pan-human regularities of the human mind, as cognition and culture are interconnected and inseparable: on the one hand, human cognition always takes place within specific cultural frameworks that structure thought and behaviour in a host of ways (Samuel 1990); on the other hand, no culture could exist without interacting individual minds (Sperber 2006a, 2006b). Therefore, in order to study adequately any cultural expression, we need to understand its particular socio-historical context as well as to examine the underlying psychological mechanisms that lead to similar patterns of behaviour. Thus, with respect to our case in hand, if we wish to understand the particular cultural mindset of the *Anastenaria*, we must pay attention not only to the social, historical, political and other contextual factors that have contributed to its development, but also to those features of human psychology that drive similar ritual behaviours the world over.

This unity of the human condition might at first glance sound like a truism. After all, we all know that we are biological, psychological and socio-cultural beings at the same time, and that these levels of our existence are inseparable. However, it is not at all uncommon among those who study human behaviour to attribute ontological priority to one of these levels, underestimating or neglecting the rest. In fact, this attitude has been the rule rather than the exception both in anthropology and in the study of religion.

The discourse on *sui generis* religion

Traditionally, many scholars of religion have considered their subject matter *sui generis*, a unique phenomenon which is independent of and irreducible to any

other domain of human conduct (Otto 1923; Eliade 1991; Pettazzoni 1954; Smith 1964, 1979; Smart 1983; Pals 1987; Sharma 2001). As a consequence, these scholars argued that the study of religion requires special and distinct methods that cannot be found in any other discipline, effectively denying the authority and the right of scientific theoretical thought to examine religious phenomena and rejecting the usefulness of science for the explanation and interpretation of religious action and behaviour (McCutcheon 1997; Lawson 2000a). The proponents of this view often claim that explaining religion would necessarily mean explaining it away (Pyysiäinen 2004a: 4–5) and missing its “essence” (whatever that may be), and that therefore scholars of religion should try to understand and describe rather than explain the object of their study. Privileging hermeneutic approaches over explanatory ones, this rhetoric considers the study of religion the exclusive prerogative of believers and theologians, or at best a pursuit strictly limited within the humanities, depending on the particular variants of this position.

Contrary to this view, several other scholars have been bringing insights from neighbouring disciplines into the study of religion. To name but a few, Sigmund Freud (1927) claimed that religion persists because it is rooted in deep human needs, subconscious phobias and desires, and neurotic obsessions beyond reason, thus being a universal neurosis of our species. Émile Durkheim (1912) claimed that religion plays a functional role in maintaining social order as a symbolic expression of the devotion of individuals to the whole. Karl Marx (1843) arrived at a similar conclusion from an economic standpoint, arguing that religion survives despite its fallacy because it is useful to a tyrannical social hierarchy, reinforcing its suppressive mechanisms and acting as the opium of the people.

However, over most of the twentieth century, the study of religion generally remained reluctant to leave the confines of the humanities, and either embraced the hermeneutic/interpretative stance or mainly focused on the social functions of religion, not willing to discuss the role of psychological processes in religious behaviour. On the other hand, the few psychologists who became interested in religion mostly focused their attention on specific forms of religious experiences, such as mysticism or ecstasy (James 1902), as if they were paradigmatic of all forms of religiosity (Lawson 2000a; for some of the most notable exceptions, see Paloutzian et al. 1978; Paloutzian and Ellison 1979; Ellison and Paloutzian 1982).

This view of religion as an autonomous domain paralleled a more general discourse regarding the autonomy of culture (Saler 2004), which was widespread within the social sciences and particularly prominent in anthropology during much of the twentieth century and to a significant extent persists today. Some of the main representatives of American anthropology

vociferously declared that “culture is a thing *sui generis* which can be explained only in terms of itself” (Lowie 1917: 66) – a view also shared by Durkheim, who argued that social phenomena can only be explained by other social phenomena (1895). This tendency was in part a political reaction against the racial explanations of behavioural differences endorsed by early anthropologists (Tylor 1871; Morgan 1877; see Just 2005: 60) and based on a deterministic model of a unilinear, progressivist and teleological cultural evolution. Cultural evolutionism caused an irreparable trauma to the discipline of anthropology, which has ever since been characterized by an “ancestral sin complex”, a perpetual urge to apologize for the racist views of its founders and to renounce its past. The founder of American anthropology, Franz Boas, who offered the first and at the time much needed systematic critique of cultural evolutionism, vehemently rejected the ethnocentric classificatory schemes of Victorian anthropologists and argued that despite the vast cultural variability, the fundamental operations of thought are the same for all humans (Boas 1927:1; Gardner 1985: 254). Boas acknowledged the role of biology and psychology in human nature, but argued that culture operates on its own level and does not depend on any independent variables. Thus, biological and psychological theories have nothing to offer to cultural analysis (1911). However, the biology that Boas was opposed to was not the Darwinian notion of natural selection, but rather a set of ideas often referred to as Social Darwinism (a very unfortunate term, as this idea preceded Darwin, while its principles actually contradicted Darwinian theory). Similarly, the psychology that Boas was so critical of was largely based on the unfounded generalizations of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theory.

Some of Boas’s heirs took this position to the extreme, often demonizing science and biological theory and denying the role of the individual and thus the relevance of psychology for the study of culture. According to Alfred Kroeber, “the only antecedents of historical phenomena are historical phenomena” (1915: 287), while “civilization, as such, begins only where the individual ends” (1917: 193). For Lowie, “the principles of psychology are as incapable of accounting for the phenomena of culture as is gravitation to account for architectural styles” (1917: 25–26); and for Murdock, culture is “independent of the laws of biology and psychology” (1932: 200). Thus, the response to biological determinism often came in the form of an equally unrealistic cultural determinism and a dualistic and fragmented view of human nature, which considered humans as consisting of two distinct and entirely unrelated elements, the one biological/psychological and the other cultural (White 1947: 686; 1949). “Culturologists”, as some of the proponents of this view defined themselves, essentially negated the mind and relegated

individual behaviour to a mere automatic response to external conditioning (White 1947: 697).

Ever since its formulation, this view did not go unchallenged, and many other Boasians applied a psychological perspective to the study of culture (Sapir 1917; Goldenweiser 1917; Mead 1928; Benedict 1932; Radin 1933). Boas himself saw culture as the product of a dialectical relationship between individuals and society (Boas 1940: 285; B. Morris 1991:162–71), supported the notion of the “psychic unity of mankind” (Köpping 1983) and placed emphasis on unconscious mental processes. However, the treatment of culture as a *sui generis* domain remained very widespread in anthropology and input from other domains of knowledge has often been dismissed on the charge of reductionism (Tooby and Cosmides 1992). The role of the anthropologist was arbitrarily limited to that of the literary critic, while the role of causality and explanation was vigorously opposed (C. Geertz 1973, 1983; Leach 1982), promoting an isolationist and anti-scientific stance for cultural anthropology.

The cognitive paradigm

Nonetheless, an alternative approach to cultural phenomena is already in an advanced state of development and is gradually but steadily introducing a new paradigm in the study of religion and ritual in particular. The proponents of this paradigm argue that the study of human cognition can help us expand our understanding of several aspects of human behaviour by borrowing some of the tools, methods and findings of the cognitive sciences, which expand across such disciplines as psychology, neuroscience, computer science, linguistics, anthropology, biology and philosophy.

Due to this interdisciplinary character of cognitive science, it is very difficult to trace down a single history of the field, as each contributing discipline has its own history of research (A. Geertz 2004: 350). For example, from the perspective of philosophy, the first theories on the workings of the mind could be traced at least as far back as to the thought of Plato and Aristotle (Thagard 2005: 5). However, the first scientific attempts to study the mind did not appear until the second half of the nineteenth century, with the work of German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1874), who introduced laboratory methods for the systematic study of mental operations and founded the first laboratory of psychology in Leipzig. Wundt established the field of experimental psychology as well as the structuralist school in this discipline (see Titchener 1901, 1905; Ebbinghaus 1885). The principle method used by structuralists was introspection, the subjects’ observation of their own mental processes under controlled experimental conditions. Structuralists believed

that consciousness could be broken down to its constituent elements, much like water could be broken down to hydrogen and oxygen without destroying any of the properties of the whole. Just as hydrogen and oxygen were structures of a chemical compound, so sensations and thoughts were the structures of the mind (Titchener 1916: 15). Others, like John Dewey (1884) and William James (1890), disagreed with this reductionist perspective and described consciousness as a continuously changing stream which cannot be reduced to its constituent elements. This school of thought, which became known as functionalism, retained an emphasis on conscious experience but rejected introspection as a valid scientific method. Introducing evolutionary ideas into psychology, functionalists were interested in studying not the particular elements of mental processes and behaviours but their functional value in contributing to the adaptation of an organism to its environment (Colman 1999: 164–5).

However, in the first half of the twentieth century, consciousness and the mind in general was largely neglected by psychologists as behaviourism became the dominant paradigm in the field. Behaviourists like John B. Watson (1913), Clark L. Hull (1935, 1943) and Burrhus F. Skinner (1938) argued that psychology can and must be based exclusively on observable behaviour, without any reference to internal physiological procedures or mental states. According to this view, all behaviour can be explained as a result of learning, and learning is nothing but the formation of conditioned reflexes (Colman 1999: 166). This approach essentially denied the very existence of the mind, considering it to be nothing more than a hypothetical construct of no real value for the study of behaviour. Behaviourism was particularly prevalent in the United States, where it heavily influenced the views of several Boasian anthropologists on the deterministic role of culture (LeVine 1963), while mentalistic models remained within the Gestalt movement in Germany (Wertheimer 1912; Koffka 1922, 1935; Köhler 1929).

After the Second World War, the problems with this denial of mental states and internal experience were becoming increasingly apparent, and a new paradigm soon emerged in the study of mental processing. The “cognitive revolution”¹ began with computer scientists such as Alan Turing, often called the father of the computer, who first posed the question of whether artificial intelligence is possible (1950). This question was soon addressed by such pioneers as John McCarthy (McCarthy et al. 1962, 1969), Marvin Minsky (1954), Allen Newell and Herbert Simon (Newell et al. 1958; Newell and Simon 1972; Simon 1969).

Around the same time, psychologist George Miller published his seminal article, “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two” (1956), suggesting that the way information is processed in our memory is constrained by the

existence of underlying pan-human mechanisms, while Jerome Bruner, Jacqueline Goodnow and George Austin (1956) investigated the cognitive strategies involved in concept attainment and categorization. Two years later, Donald Broadbent, in his work on short-term memory and attention (1958), was among the first to use computer analogies in the analysis of the way the human mind works. A new powerful information-processing model emerged for psychologists who were studying human cognition. According to this model, mental activity could be understood by analogy to the computer, which seemed to process information and manipulate symbols in comparable ways. Computers use specific inputs (stimuli) to produce specific outputs (behaviours) by means of internal processes which run under the control of a program and are not directly visible to the external observer, but can nonetheless be studied precisely (Ashcraft 2003). Similarly, the brain processes information, while the mind is a set of integrated computational programs. Thus, mental processes are bits of information, which are encoded as configurations of symbols that have a physical substance in the brain's neurons (Pinker 1997: 24–5). This computational theory of the mind became known as cognitive psychology, a term coined by Ulric Neisser in the title of his influential work on memory (1967).

In the study of language, the cognitive revolution came with a bang when linguist Noam Chomsky published his book *Syntactic Structures* (1957), one of the most influential works of the twentieth century. Chomsky argued that language, a markedly cultural form, can be subject to formal analysis, and called for a shift of focus “from behaviour and its products to the system of knowledge that enters into behaviour” (1986: 28). In his review of Skinner's book, *Verbal Behavior* (1957), Chomsky (1959) posed a devastating challenge to the behaviourist approach, which saw the acquisition of language as a result of conditioning. He argued that this approach could not account for the generativity of language, the fact that all humans have the capacity to generate an infinite number of sentences that have never been uttered before and will still be understandable to all other speakers of this language. Therefore, he argued for the existence of an innate human linguistic capacity, a “universal grammar” that underlies every language's particular grammar. He went on to show that important aspects of language acquisition are the product of universal capacities of the human brain and proposed his prominent theory of transformational-generative grammar to model the innate knowledge that underlies the human ability to speak and understand language. For Chomsky, then, linguistics is ultimately a psychological pursuit, aiming to specify the biologically rooted principles of the mind that constrain the form of all natural languages. Soon thereafter, growing attention began to be directed to studies that focused on underlying commonalities rather than on the surface

variability of human traits and searched for a “universal grammar” underlying the particular semantics of cultural phenomena.

Meanwhile, Claude Lévi-Strauss was reclaiming the mind for anthropology and advocating “the reintegration of culture in nature and finally of life within the whole of its physico-chemical conditions” (1966: 247). Although he criticized sociobiological theories (see Wilson 1975, 1979) as simplistic, he acknowledged the role of the natural sciences for the study of culture (Lévi-Strauss 1985: 25–36) and argued that the final aim of anthropology is “to contribute to a better knowledge of objectified thought and its mechanisms” (1969: 13). Although his own ethnography was often seen as fuzzy and decontextualized and his hallmark structural analysis of myths was to a great extent unconvincing, he nonetheless insightfully anticipated later developments in anthropology. By applying linguistic analysis and information processing models in anthropology, by directing interest in how the human mind acquires, classifies and interprets information, and by stressing the need for uncovering the rules that govern human cognition, Lévi-Strauss foreshadowed the field of cognitive anthropology (Gardner 1985; Sperber 2008) which sought to study the relationship between culture and mind.

This new anthropological school, the first instantiation of which became known as “New Ethnography” or “ethnoscience”, drew its inspiration from advances in computer science, linguistic theory (Jakobson 1963) and semiotics (C. Morris 1971) in an attempt to make sense of indigenous knowledge systems. Ethnoscience sought to understand how the members of a given culture perceive and categorize their social and natural world from an emic perspective;² that is based on concepts and categories that are relevant for and meaningful to that culture (Morey and Luthans 1984). Componential analysis, a process borrowed from linguistics, became the hallmark method of ethnoscience (Goodenough 1956; Frake 1962). This was a method of formal analysis of ethnographic description, aimed to describe folk taxonomies through the study of the basic building blocks (components) of meaning in particular systems of classification. The ethnographer used a matrix of binary features (e.g. male/female, young/adult etc.) in order to construct a cognitive map of a cultural-specific classificatory system. Although this ambitious project initially generated great interest, its several and severe flaws soon became apparent. Ethnoscience failed to address wider issues in anthropology, as its methods could only be applied in a very limited number of often trivial domains, such as kinship terms (Goodenough 1951; Lounsbury 1956), colour categories (Conklin 1955) and plant and animal classifications (Berlin et al. 1974; Boster 1988), while its aims were descriptive and had little explanatory power (Applebaum 1987). Furthermore, the ethnoscience

approach seemed to imply an extreme cultural relativism, which impaired the possibility of cross-cultural comparison.

These criticisms were coming not only from without but also from within the ranks of ethnoscience, and this contributed to a constructive theoretical and methodological readjustment. The focus of ethnoscientific work shifted from describing indigenous taxonomies to analysing categories in terms of mental processes (McGee and Warms 2008: 360–63). Cognitive anthropology, as the new approach was termed, sought to study the universal properties of the mind as they are shaped by the innate structure of the human brain and how these properties constrain symbols and ideas. Along these lines, anthropologist Brent Berlin and linguist Paul Kay (Berlin and Kay 1969) argued that, contrary to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, which claimed that language drives thought and perception (Whorf 1956), it is rather the opposite: based on cross-cultural ethnographic data, they showed that there are cross-linguistic universal patterns in colour terms (also see Rosch 1973; Mervis et al. 1975). Subsequent research showed that there are universal constraints on other folk-biological systems of classification (e.g. Berlin et al. 1974; Hays 1983; C. Brown 1984; Atran 1990; Berlin 1992).

Thus, cognitive anthropologists continued to rely on ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation and to be inspired by linguistic theory, but also broadened their scope beyond explicit linguistic knowledge, trying to make sense of the organizing principles that underlie and motivate human behaviour. They emphasized the study of cultural models, drawing on schema theory and connectionism (Casson 1983; Holland and Quinn 1987), as well as linguistic work on conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). They asked how culture is internalized during socialization (Shore 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997), how it is embodied and how it becomes shared and distributed (Swartz 1991; Hutchins 1995; Sperber 1996; Moore et al. 2000), and they considered various aspects of cognition, such as reasoning, memory, emotion and motivation (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992). Finally, they explored the potential of evolutionary and developmental research in the understanding of culture (Sperber 1996; Boyer 1999; Boyer and Liénard 2006; Bloch 2008).

Currently, cognitive anthropologists employ a variety of methodological and theoretical perspectives, a diversity which helps mediate some of the radical views of their predecessors and multiplies the explanatory power of the discipline. In coming of age, cognitive anthropology has managed to see through the looking glass and reflect on the role of culture and the limits of universalist claims and to move beyond the simplistic dilemmas of the past (nurture vs nature, brain vs environment, cognitive unity vs cultural variability) towards a contextualized study of human cognition and of the interaction between mind and culture (P. Brown 2006).

Religion and cognition

The influence of cognitive science reached to a larger or smaller degree throughout all academic disciplines, and the study of religion was no exception. However, the cognitive turn here was not so much a revolution as it was an evolution (Xygalatas and McCorkle forthcoming), as the foundations had begun to be laid a long time ago. Already in the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon (1620) noted the existence of innate biases in our perception and cognition, while Benedict de Spinoza (1670) and David Hume (1757, 1779) discussed how such cognitive biases are involved in religious belief. Emphasis on the role of unconscious mental processes in religion was also placed by such scholars as Edward Tylor, Sigmund Freud, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Robin Horton (see Guthrie forthcoming). Thus, the first seeds of cognitive theory in the field of religion found fertile ground.

The tone was set by the work of cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber (1975), who criticized the semiotic approaches to symbolism and the dominant structuralist anthropological approach of his time and proposed that symbolism is best understood not as a system of abstract signs and their meanings with its own rules, but rather as part of our normal mental processes of reasoning about the world. In 1996, he stressed the role of the cognitive constraints that bias the distribution of cultural representations, and shortly thereafter drew an analogy between the spreading of ideas and the spreading of viruses in populations. Endorsing Richard Dawkins's suggestion that natural selection may apply not only to biological organisms but to any sort of replicators (Sperber 1996: 102), he nonetheless criticized his theory of transmission of cultural representations as memes (Dawkins 1976). Sperber maintained that representations get transmitted not through precise replication but through a process of constant transformation and re-representation, and proposed an "epidemiological approach" to cultural phenomena, which provides a framework to explore how certain ideas become selected and transmitted over others. The aim of the study of culture is for Sperber to explain which psychological dispositions underlie the formation and distribution of representations and under which circumstances a relative stabilization of form or content occurs in the process of their generation. Representations move, as they are continuously transformed, towards attractors around which transformation tends to be limited and relative stability occurs. These attractors can be cross-cultural and pan-human or culture-specific and short lived. The selective stabilization brought about by these attractors is the main force driving cultural evolution.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Thomas E. Lawson and Fritz Staal, inspired by Chomskian linguistics and the theory of transformational-generative

grammar, wondered whether a “universal grammar” of ritual action might be uncovered. Lawson proposed that “a specific ritual is to be understood as a language unit similar to a sentence” (1976: 130). Therefore, just like a sentence is a particular instance of a language system, a ritual is a particular instance of a ritual system. A few years later, Frits Staal presented a computational model of ritual structure (1979a, 1979b, 1989; also see Seaquist 2004). Staal argued that rituals have a formal structure, much like that of natural language at the level of the sentence. It should therefore be possible to uncover a syntax of human ritual action. Based on material from his fieldwork in India and the Vedic ritual tradition, Staal, like Lawson, adapted Chomsky’s theory of natural language on ritual action and was also among the first to advocate an interdisciplinary study of ritual based on methods borrowed from the natural sciences.

The first comprehensive cognitive theory of religion was outlined by anthropologist Stewart Guthrie in a 1980 article, and was expounded in more detail in his 1993 book, *Faces in the Clouds* (see Saler 2009). Drawing on the intellectualist tradition from Edward Tylor (1878) to Robin Horton (1993), Guthrie reformulated and substantiated the theory of the animistic origins of religion. He argued that humans have an evolved predisposition to attribute agency and intentionality to ambiguous inanimate objects and events in their surroundings, and that this tendency reflects a fundamental cognitive bias which is due to the evolutionary history of our species and would have offered specific adaptive advantages to our ancestors. In an environment where most living things were potential predators or pray, the speedy detection of animacy would have been of vital importance. An animistic view of the world would thus have been a very useful perceptual strategy for survival, based on the principle expressed by Pascal’s Wager: it is better to be safe than sorry. If you saw a movement in the bushes while walking through the woods, it could be just the wind, but it would be much more useful to interpret it as a potential predator. If it turns out to be the wind, you have little to lose; but if it turns out to be a bear, you have everything to win. According to Guthrie, those same mental systems that helped our ancestors detect predators and prey (such as pattern recognition, analogy, metaphor and various other forms of abstraction) also bias our perception of our world and frequently cause us to see design in nature and supernatural agents behind natural phenomena (2006). Since the most important agents in our environment are other humans, a particularly active form of animism is anthropomorphism, the tendency to interpret non-human phenomena in terms of human characteristics. Anthropomorphism is pervasive throughout all religions, not only because all deities are perceived to possess some humanlike features, but most importantly because religion makes the world humanlike by seeing gods in

it. For Guthrie, religion effectively is anthropomorphism (1993: 178); it is a means of explaining the world, although it operates for the most part at an unconscious level.

Subsequent experimental studies conducted by Justin Barrett and Frank Keil (Barrett and Keil 1996; Barrett 2000) have shown that this tendency to attribute anthropomorphic properties to supernatural entities is so strong that it overrides prescribed theological descriptions. People maintain anthropomorphic concepts of God in the face of official theological doctrines, as our intuitive physics and psychology “encourage the processing of any entity as part of the natural ontological category which most closely matches the entity’s perceived properties” (Barrett and Keil 1996: 242; also see Slone 2004). Theologically correct religious knowledge is very hard to transmit accurately, even with powerful and effective mechanisms of indoctrination in place; and even when people learn the official doctrine through laborious training, they still intuitively use anthropomorphic versions of supernatural agents.

Some of the most ambitious cognitive theories of religion have focused specifically on ritual. In their foundational book, *Rethinking Religion*, Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (1990) called for the study of universal features of ritual action. Drawing on research in cognitive science and inspired by advances in generative linguistics, they proposed a model for the formal analysis of religious thought and argued for “an axiomatic connection between culture (the domain of relatively non-structured religious commitments) and cognition (the domain of structured representations of action)” (Engler and Gardiner 2009: 22). Lawson and McCauley introduced the “theory of ritual competence”, which predicts that people will normally have certain intuitions about the structure and the efficacy of a given ritual even in the absence of explicit instruction, as witnessed by their readiness to learn and participate in ritual actions (1990: 2–3; see also Barrett and Lawson 2001). They stressed that the cognitive apparatus deployed for the representation of religious ritual forms consists of the same general “action representation system” involved in the ordinary representation of agents and actions in general (Lawson and McCauley 1990: 87–95). What makes certain agents and actions religious is their presumed relation to some supernatural agent(s),³ and the role of those agents in participants’ representations of ritual form can account for a number of those ritual’s properties (McCauley and Lawson 2002: 8).

In subsequent work, McCauley and Lawson (2002) argued that all rituals will tend to migrate towards one of two “attractor positions”: one characterized by high-frequency and low-sensory pageantry, and the other by low-frequency and high-sensory pageantry. A similar claim regarding two divergent “modes of religiosity”, one marked by emotional arousal and the other by frequency

of performance, had been made earlier by another major cognitive theory of ritual put forth by British anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse (1992, 1995, 2000, 2004). Although the two theories differ in some of their basic assumptions, they are both concerned with the ways in which rituals that pertain to each attractor position are recalled and transmitted. Some of the nuances of those two theories will be discussed in more detail in chapter 8.

Other leading figures in the field directed their efforts towards understanding why theological doctrines are so difficult to acquire while folk religious versions of these doctrines seem so much more intuitive and persistent. As we saw, Dan Sperber (1996) argued that not all kinds of ideas have the same potential for successful transmission. Another French anthropologist, Pascal Boyer (1994, 2002), explored this claim with regards to religious concepts. Boyer argued that folk religious ideas seem plausible to us because they appeal to certain mental systems that operate in ordinary, non-religious domains (1994) and help us make sense of our world. Humans have innate expectations about the world they inhabit, and these expectations constrain which religious ideas are selected and which are lost (2001). Boyer showed that despite the vast diversity of religious ideas around the world, there is only a limited catalogue of supernatural concepts (2002). Such concepts, he claimed, generally conform to our ordinary mental templates, but at the same time they violate some of the default assumptions of our intuitive ontologies – they are minimally counter-intuitive (e.g. spirits and ghosts may think and act like humans but have no corporeal substance; witches are like normal people but have some special powers etc.). Thus, religious beliefs are attention-grabbing because they rely on “domain-specific competencies that they both exploit and challenge” (Sperber and Hirschfeld 2001: cxxi). In this sense, folk religion is “natural”; it is a by-product of our natural cognitive capacities, based on our spontaneous, intuitive, implicit expectations, which are common to our species and therefore culture-independent, while theological concepts are non-natural, in the sense that they are learnt, explicit and culturally transmitted (Wiebe 1991; Boyer 1994; McCauley 2000a; Pyysiäinen 2001, 2004a).

In parallel with these developments within anthropology and the study of religion, input from other neighbouring disciplines has contributed to the shaping of the field. Among the best-known theorists who have addressed religion from a cognitive perspective are archaeologists David Lewis-Williams (1981) and Steven Mithen (1996), cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald (1991, 2001) and biological anthropologist Terrence Deacon (1997), who have considered the evolution of the human mind, symbolic representations and the origins of religion.

On the basis of the pioneering work of those scholars, a plethora of studies appeared at the dawn of the new millennium, treating a variety of topics ranging from theological correctness (Slone 2004) and creationist thinking (Evans 2001; Kelemen 2004) to teleological reasoning and afterlife beliefs (Bering 2006); from magic (Sørensen 2006) to spirit possession (Cohen 2007); and from Christian Evangelical beliefs (Malley 2004; Luhrmann 2004) to Buddhist burial practices (McCorkle 2010).⁴ This versatile research is explicitly interdisciplinary (Lawson 2004) and employs a variety of methods, from long-term ethnographic fieldwork (Cohen 2007) to laboratory studies (Schjødt et al. 2011) and naturalistic experiments (Sosis and Ruffle 2004; Konvalinka et al. 2011; Xygalatas et al. 2011); and from computer modelling (Bainbridge 2006) to textual (Gragg 2004), historical (Martin and Sørensen 2010), iconological (Sinha 2010) and archaeological methods (Mithen 2004; Lewis-Williams 2002, 2010).

Given this disciplinary pluralism, there are ongoing and constructive tensions and debates over methodological and theoretical priorities. However, the cognitive science of religion, as the field has come to be known (Barrett 2000), now forms a coherent line of academic inquiry. Its proponents share the basic assumption that despite contextual differences, the seemingly boundless variability of symbolic-cultural forms and expressions is subject to certain biological constraints. These constraints are due to the particularities of the cognitive processing of information bequeathed by the common evolutionary history of the human brain and are therefore universal to our species. Religion and ritual are no exceptions; religious behaviour is shaped by the same universal mental capacities of the human brain, while the representation of religious actions draws on the same pan-human cognitive mechanisms used for the representation of any kind of action. Based on this assumption, cognitive scientists of religion share the common goal of providing causal explanations for “the recurrence of religious beliefs and practices and the role they play in social and political arrangements by appealing to the underlying mental structures and dynamics that make people generally receptive to certain ideas and actions” (Barrett forthcoming). Thus, the main focus of the cognitive science of religion is primarily on unconscious thought. This cognitive unconscious “is not the psychoanalytic one, with its hydraulic drives and anthropomorphic homunculi of id, ego and superego, but a more complex one” (Guthrie forthcoming), which encompasses subliminal perception, emotions, motivations and goals, and extends from self-regulation, metacognition and theory of mind to the nonconscious influences of complex social behaviour (Bargh 2005; Uleman 2005).

A naturalistic study of the Anastenaria

In light of these approaches, this book advocates a naturalistic study of the Anastenaria, aimed not only at describing the distinguishing features of this ritual and the social dynamics of its cultural context but also at identifying certain ordinary aspects of human cognition that can result in specifiable features of the religious behaviour observed. Such a study will necessarily be multidisciplinary, involving the use of a variety of methods and tools. This project is by no means antagonistic to more humanistic projects – to the contrary, most of the proponents of the cognitive study of religion, including me, come from the humanistic tradition – but a necessary complementary component of a more balanced approach. Indeed, the first part of this volume has offered a detailed historical and ethnographic account of the tradition of the Anastenaria. In the remaining chapters I will turn to the examination of some of the underlying physiological and psychological processes that might facilitate the persistence and transmission of the Anastenaria, not only as a special case per se, but as an example of an emotionally arousing ritual, one of the many performed the world over. In order to do so, it will call on various disciplines throughout the spectrum of the cognitive sciences, aiming to shed light on some of the mental mechanisms that drive ritual behaviour. In addressing these issues, and in accordance with the paradigm that has been outlined above, there are certain basic assumptions that will inform my approach.

First and foremost, religious behaviour has no autonomous status compared to any other domain of human behaviour, and therefore can and should be studied as any other cultural expression (Sperber 1975; McCutcheon 1997). If we are to study religion scientifically, we must necessarily adopt a position of methodological naturalism, “seeking strictly natural mechanisms for the phenomena under consideration, foregoing alleged supernatural causes” (Barrett forthcoming). Religious explanations of religious phenomena are obviously of great interest for the study of religion, but cannot be taken to have any explanatory value in themselves.

Cultural phenomena, and by extension religious phenomena, are materially constrained. The structure of the human brain, the interaction between individuals and that between groups as manifested in historical forms and developments (e.g. political changes, wars etc.), as well as the physical world in which we live and its particular geographies (e.g. available sources of food, geographic isolation), actively shape and constrain human expression and behaviour (Whitehouse 2004). On the other hand, cognition is deeply influenced by culture and society (Hutchins 1995). Social interaction and culturally embedded practices and technologies can alter people’s mental states,

means of conceptualization and social identities, and shape the development of brain structure and function (Siegel 1999, 2001; Malafouris 2010).

Human cognition has been shaped by natural selection through Darwinian processes of adaptation, just as the structure and various functions of our brain have. And since as humans we have a common evolutionary trajectory in history, our mental properties and behavioural traits are subject to the same constraints for all members of the species *Homo sapiens*, past and present (Tooby and Cosmides 1992). Due to this evolutionary endowment, the human mind is not an unbounded ‘blank slate’, equally open to any kind of cultural content (Sperber and Hirschfeld 2004), but has inbuilt biases and competencies that help us to cope with the particular challenges that we have faced during the development of our species.

Like all cultural products, religious ideas and practices also go through a process of selection, filtered and refined by the universal constraints of our cognitive architecture, which are mediated by brain activity (Sperber 1996; Boyer 2002; also see Boyd and Richerson 2000). Concepts and customs compete for attention, acquisition and transmission, and from the vast multitude of all cultural forms that are incessantly born and enacted, only a small fraction survive for any significant amount of time, and still fewer manage to spread, thus ensuring their long-term endurance (Whitehouse 2004).

Finally, individuals do not live in isolation but always belong to populations of other individuals. This is fundamental in two different senses. As members of the same species, all humans have a common genome and share most phenotypic traits. Equally importantly, as members of social groups, human beings share particular cultures, and cultural practices can modify environmental conditions (Odling-Smee et al. 2003; Laland and Brown 2006) and even transform the selection pressures exerted on humans, thus influencing genetic evolution (Laland et al. 2010). Thus, “sociality and culture are made possible by cognitive capacities, contribute to the ontogenetic and phylogenetic development of these capacities, and provide specific inputs to cognitive processes” (Sperber and Hirschfeld 2001: cxi).

Proponents of the cognitive paradigm in the study of religion generally agree on these points, but depending on their point of departure their particular interests vary from more cognitivist (i.e. how does cognition constrain culture?) to more culturalist approaches (i.e. how does culture shape cognition?). It is important to understand that this variation is one of degree rather than of quality, and it can be seen as a set of related positions on the continuum of cognition and culture, rather than a binary dichotomy of cognition versus culture (Xygalatas and McCorkle forthcoming). To be sure, “much of what has been going on in the human sciences that are concerned with cognition

is the on-going identification of the relations between cognition and culture” (A. Geertz 2004: 354). Indeed, a binary distinction between cognition and culture is meaningless, as nature and nurture are two sides of the same coin (Ridley 2003; Christakis and Fowler 2009; Keller 2010). Thus, if we try to interpret cultural distributions in terms of cultural properties alone, we run the risk of reifying our object of study and confusing the explanans with the explanandum (Whitehouse 2004; Sperber 1996). That said, starting from the assertion that all normal human minds function on the same principles, we cannot account for cultural variability without paying attention to ecological and socio-historical factors.

On the one hand, under these premises, explicit ideas (what we consciously know) and implicit ideas (what we know without knowing) are both crucial for the understanding of religious behaviour. This has rarely been accepted in the humanities or in the cognitive sciences, for very different reasons. Cognitive scientists have largely placed an exclusive emphasis on implicit processes, discarding the importance of explicit ideas and attitudes. However, our behaviour is not an automatic response to external stimuli, but is also driven by explicitly held beliefs and attitudes (Fazio 1990), something which is particularly evident in religious behaviour (Whitehouse 2004).

On the other hand, traditional scholars of religion very often relied exclusively on the accounts of the believers themselves to reconstruct their thoughts and beliefs. However, this is highly problematic, as the notions and procedures related to religiosity are much more complex than what subjects report, or even think, about their own beliefs and feelings (Boyer 2002). People do not always have full access to the inner workings of their own mind or body.⁵ Similarly, there is a mountain of evidence coming from the field of psychology that shows that our explicit reasoning is conditioned by tacit assumptions over which we have no voluntary control or even awareness (see Pyysiäinen 2004b). Consequently, as important as it may be, it is not enough to describe what people do and what they say; it is also important to detail the extent to which these explicit representations are informed by implicit physiological and mental processes.

In this book I try to avoid both of these pitfalls by doing justice to explicit beliefs and behaviours as well as implicit thought and processes. Indeed, the first part of the book has described in some detail the framework of intentional acts and beliefs that are available to conscious thought within the tradition of the Anastenaria. The second part will now mainly focus on underlying processes that take place without conscious awareness, which nonetheless may motivate the participants’ behaviour.

Chapter 6 has advocated a naturalistic approach of the Anastenaria within the framework of the cognitive science of religion. This approach examines

religion not as a *sui generis* domain but as a human phenomenon, and seeks to understand how religious ideas and practices are acquired, generated and transmitted by means of our ordinary cognitive capacities. Such an undertaking necessitates interdisciplinary methods and multiple levels of analysis. Thus, in this study of the *Anastenaria* I will try to benefit from methods and findings of the natural sciences in addition to the traditional methods of the humanities, in an attempt to shed light on certain aspects of participation in the Greek fire-walking rituals as well as other related phenomena.

Chapter 7 will present some of the main theories regarding the emergence and the survival of costly rituals, and will discuss their relevance as well as their limitations in their application to the study of the *Anastenaria*.

7

Costly rituals

Rituals such as the *Anastenaria*, which involve activities that often appear to be stressful, unpleasant or even dangerous, pose an important question regarding the motivation of their participants. In many rituals, such as various initiation rites, participation is coerced or encouraged by social norms and peer pressure, and failure to undergo the ordeal might have dire consequences, such as corporal punishment, social ostracism or even death. Janice Boddy (1989) described how a girl who grew up among the *Zār* of northern Sudan could not get married or have children, and as a result could not have a respectable place within her society, unless she underwent a painful ritual of genital mutilation before her wedding. Ted Strehlow (1971) wrote about the initiation rituals of the Aranda Aboriginals, where boys suffered brutal beating, burning, biting, scarring and tearing of the fingernails without resisting, under penalty of death. Yet, there are many other rituals, such as the *Anastenaria*, which people perform voluntarily, without any – or even against – social pressure. The question, therefore, is why are many individuals willing to participate in ritual activities that would normally intimidate or seem appalling to most people? In this chapter, I will discuss some of the theories that have been proposed to explain this perplexing behaviour. But before discussing why people perform a certain category of rituals, we should begin with a more basic question: Why do people perform rituals in the first place?

Why rituals?

Rituals, whether religious or not, are puzzling for the observer. They require an apparently unnecessary expenditure of resources, they resist change and they seem to rely on powerful self-deception about their utilities. Some anthropologists have argued that ritual behaviour is rational from the point of view

of the actor (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 1956). According to this relativist view, slaughtering an animal to get rain is as rational as turning a switch to get light, as both are supported by explanatory theories relating particular actions to effects without any strong causal theory. However, in a ritual the prescribed set of actions is arbitrary and has no causal connection to the targeted outcome. And this being the case, the persistence of such non-rational – or at least ineffective – behaviour begs explanation (Mort and Slone 2006). Freud famously associated rituals with neurotic obsessions (1907), but – in his usual way – did not provide much support for his claims. More recently, however, a more substantiated case has been made that there might indeed exist a relation between ritualistic behaviour and certain psychopathological conditions, such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (Dulaney and Fiske 1994; Boyer 2002; Boyer and Liénard 2006; Liénard and Boyer 2006).¹

OCD is characterized by the presence of obsessions, compulsions or both (American Psychiatric Association 2000). Obsessions are intrusive, recurrent, and persistent thoughts that are associated with specific fears, typically related among other things to contamination and contagion (e.g. fear of catching or transmitting diseases), injury or other harm to oneself or others (e.g. by handling knives), or uncontrollable anti-social behaviour (e.g. thoughts about shouting obscenities). Compulsions are characterized by a powerful urge to perform certain stereotyped repetitive physical or mental acts, either as a response to these obsessions or in order to prevent some dreaded event or situation. However, these acts are either unrelated to the targeted outcome, or clearly excessive – in other words, they consist in ritualistic behaviour. Typical compulsions include actions such as using gloves or towels to touch everyday objects (wine glasses, doorknobs etc.) or disinfecting after doing so, repeatedly checking to see if the door is locked or if the cooker is switched off, or turning lights on and off a set number of times before leaving the room. OCD patients usually recognize that their urges are irrational, but they report feeling compelled to behave in a specific way in order to avoid some vague but serious danger, without being able to justify their behaviour. It has been suggested that OCD is simply an exaggerated form of specific adaptive traits aimed at generating risk scenarios and avoiding danger of various kinds (Abed and de Paw 1999; Brüne 2006; Wisner et al. 1999). For example, in an ancestral environment checking for predators could never be done too frequently, while germs and other contaminants could pose much greater threats against early humans than they do today. Of course, this does not mean that OCD itself would be adaptive. The range of symptoms that are diagnosed as OCD lies at the extreme end of a continuum of behaviour and usually causes the patient to become dysfunctional – thus becoming maladaptive (Brüne 2006; Evans

et al. 2002). However, when not exaggerated, the presence of such behaviours (e.g. precautionary action, agency detection etc.) may be beneficial.

Studies from the field of developmental psychology have shown that young children cross-culturally typically engage in ritualistic behaviour, performing repetitive, rule-based sequences of actions as part of their normal development (Leonard et al. 1990). Through the use of rituals, the child tries to impose order, stability and predictability on objects and significant others. At a later age, when the child has acquired more familiarity with the rules that govern his or her environment, the need for repetitive behaviour decreases (Zohar and Felz 2001). Specifically, ritualistic behaviour is normative in children between two and four years of age, and then declines over time until puberty (Zohar and Rotem 1997). Compulsive-like behaviour in children usually involves acts and attitudes such as excessive concern with cleanliness, strong preference for particular kinds of food, attachment to favourite objects, persistent habits and so forth, as well as various phobias, for example fear of the dark, of strangers, of animals, of fictional characters (ghosts, monsters) or of possible harm or injury.

Furthermore, studies have shown that there are developmental differences in the themes of compulsive-like behaviour. For example, children younger than four years of age engage in ritualistic behaviour mainly related to strangers and separation anxiety, while at a later stage similar behaviour is related to more specific, context-dependent fears, such as fear of contamination, death, assault and other social hazards (Evans et al. 1999). It seems that certain recurrent behaviours that might be advantageous for younger children may no longer be appropriate for dealing with the environmental challenges faced by older children (Zohar and Felz 2001). Indeed, during the first several months of their lives infants are entirely dependent on their parents for food, shelter and transportation. A few months later, they gradually begin to spend more time away from the mother. As they begin to crawl, they develop a fear of heights that infants younger than about seven months do not have (Gibson and Walk 1960). Later, as they start walking, thus being able to move away from their parents, they begin to show fear of strangers, fear of separation, of darkness and of being alone. And at a later stage, when they actually start spending some time away from their parents, they develop more social fears (Gullone 2000). The adaptive value of these phobias is obvious. Similarly, infants will learn to eat anything their parents give them, but later develop rigid food preferences and refuse to try foods to which they are not accustomed, only to start having a more varied diet after adolescence (Birch 1999). Again, in an ancestral environment parents would provide all the food during the early years of a child's life, but soon the child would start to forage for food. At this stage, before having the necessary experience to distinguish

healthy from poisonous foods, it is a good strategy to stick to what they already know is edible and start trying new foods only when they are more experienced.

Pregnancy and childbirth are also known to be associated with obsessive-compulsive behaviour in women (Neziroglu et al. 1992; Williams and Koran 1997; Maina et al. 1999). However, non-clinical intrusive thoughts are also fairly common in many healthy adults, especially during pregnancy and parenthood (Boyer and Liénard 2006). Women with OCD symptoms during childbirth demonstrate a particularly consistent pattern of themes. During pregnancy, they tend to report a fear of contamination and to engage in washing or cleansing rituals. On the other hand, symptoms in postpartum OCD more often involve intrusive thoughts of harming (e.g. dropping or burning) the infant, as well as an obsessive avoidance of fear cues. Postpartum OCD is not exclusive to females, but also occurs in male parents of newborns (Abramowitz et al. 2001). Other symptoms normally present in OCD, such as obsessions with symmetry or ordering, are not frequently reported in cases of childbirth-related OCD. In this case again, obsessive-compulsive behaviour can have an adaptive value. Obsessional thoughts are experienced as “senseless, unwanted and inconsistent with the person’s typical personality or behaviour (*ego-dystonic*)” (Abramowitz et al. 2003; emphasis in original). Thus, rather than increasing the risk of harming the child, such obsessions urge the parents to avoid potentially harmful behaviour, as postpartum OCD patients engage in excessive prevention in order to avoid committing the terrible objects of their obsessional thoughts, and have intrusive fears not only of engaging in harmful behaviour, but also of even thinking about it. It is thus possible that OCD consists in a dysfunctional hyperactivity of normally adaptive motivational systems that are functionally aimed at the avoidance of potential dangers. When these systems fail to supply a negative feedback to the evaluation of these possible threats, they result in an endless loop of doubt about the proper performance and repetition of the precautions (Boyer and Liénard 2006). One such system, according to Boyer (2002), deals with contamination avoidance. This system triggers powerful emotions of fear and disgust against possible contaminants, thus motivating the individual to avoid dangerous substances. In addition, the system assumes that the source of danger is not necessarily visible and what is more, it leads people to imitate the precautions taken by others against potential danger, even if they have no available explanation of how the precautions work (Boyer 2002: 275).

Collectively performed rituals fit well into the script of this behaviour; they often involve a great deal of preoccupation with cleansing and they target potential dangers that must be avoided, though these dangers do not have to be specified. People who perform religious rituals will often admit a

sense of urgency, an intuition that if these rituals are not performed exactly as prescribed something terrible might happen. Specific rules are to be followed in a precise way, although there is no connection between those rules and the targeted danger.² Such elements are highly salient cognitive triggers for the contagion-avoidance system. Data from experimental research suggest that there may indeed exist a psychological mechanism that operates normally in rituals, which can lead to OCD when it becomes hyperactivated (Fiske and Haslam 1997). This connection might explain the compulsion of performance, the obsession with accuracy and the anxiety produced by an incorrect or missed performance involved in religious rituals.

Of course, this compulsive tendency towards ritualistic behaviour is only part of the story. Even if we accept that there is indeed a pan-human tendency to engage in ritualized behaviour, this by itself does not account for all the variability. After all, one could point out, people perform rituals for particular purposes, such as to evoke rain, to make the crops grow, or to soothe the wrath of an angry spirit (although, as we shall see, in many cases people's explicit reasons for the performance of a ritual may be constructed through their participation in it). It also does not account for the extreme rituals found the world over. Humans might be inclined towards performing rituals in general, but why do some rituals simply consist in the repetitive performance of humdrum actions, such as the ones involved in a Catholic Mass, while others go much further, involving dangerous or costly activities, such as for example piercing and scarring of the skin, self-flagellation or, for that matter, walking on burning coals? And more specifically, what is the motivation for the Anastenaria to perform such a stressful ritual as fire-walking, rather than stick to the less costly rituals of the Church, like the majority of Greek Orthodox Christians?

Why costly rituals?

The tradition of the Anastenaria is a very costly ritual system. The cost of participation is significant on various levels. Fire-walking is a frightening and potentially harmful activity, while the entire period of the festival is an extremely stressful process. As we have seen in chapter 4, during the three days of the duration of the festival the Anastenaria are incessantly busy. They have to perform hundreds of ritualized actions, dance frantically for many hours a day and finally walk on burning coals. Stress and exhaustion are visible during those activities. As they dance, the Anastenaria sweat, cry, moan, often fall into trance and sometimes even faint, but only to resume dancing when they recover their senses. Temperatures in late May can be very high in that part of Greece, and

even more so inside the *konaki*, where as many as three hundred people are crammed in a smoke-filled room no larger than 40 sq. m. The sessions end late at night, and people do not get much sleep before starting again the next day.

Attendance also implies financial costs, and for many of the Anastenaria these costs are difficult to bear, as they have to be away from their work for three days, and those living in distant areas will need to miss an extra couple of days going back and forth. Apart from losing payment for these days, those who are employees often risk losing their jobs, as they have to take this leave twice a year, and especially since most fire-walkers prefer not to state the real reason for their absence at work, out of fear of being seen as “weird”, or “superstitious”. Furthermore, participants have to cover their expenses for the duration of the festival. Although those who have relatives in the village are usually offered hospitality, others still have to pay for accommodation in Serres, and transportation adds a substantial cost for all. Many people, especially those who live in or nearby the village, also invest a lot of time and money throughout the year on organizing the festival and maintaining the *konaki*. Finally, participants give monetary contributions during the festival, and some of them make other – often expensive – offerings as well, such as golden or silver amulets or sacrificial animals.

Of course, the financial burden is harder to bear for some people than for others. However, for those who have prestigious jobs, whether in Agia Eleni or elsewhere, participation carries a different risk, that of losing credibility and status in their field by signalling themselves as Anastenaria. Furthermore, as we have seen, the Greek Church has persecuted the Anastenaria and is still very hostile towards them today. This opposition creates additional problems for the fire-walkers, as they are seen by many as pagan, heretics or superstitious, and often face people’s contempt, even within their own villages. Due to those difficulties, Greek ethnographers have constantly been predicting during the last century that the Anastenaria were about to become extinct within their following generation (e.g. Kranidiotis 1956). In spite of all that, the ritual continues to be performed by elders and youngsters alike. Why then, despite all odds, do people insist on performing such costly rituals?

It has been suggested that the collective performance of rituals may have a functional role in evoking intra-group cooperation and thereby resulting in greater group cohesion, a point already made by Durkheim (1912, 1893), and the Costly Signalling Theory argues that more costly rituals can do this more effectively (Bulbulia 2004; Irons 1996; Sosis 2000, 2003, 2006). This idea stems from work in ethology. During the 1970s, Amotz Zahavi proposed the Handicap Principle (1975, 1977)³ which was largely overlooked for almost two decades until it gained wide acceptance when empirical data and game-theoretic mathematical models began to show its explanatory power in the

study of communication between competing organisms (see Grafen 1990a, 1990b). Zahavi was puzzled by the “peacock’s tail question”: peacocks carry extravagantly large and ornate tails, to such an extent that they become an obvious handicap to the bird. They are so heavy that they make their carriers significantly slower, heavier, less manoeuvrable and more conspicuous to predators. The question, therefore, is why such a trait should be selected in evolution despite its obvious drawbacks and its apparent lack of utility. In fact, this question has often been used as ammunition against evolution in pseudo-scientific creationist literature (see S. Burgess 2001). Darwin himself was puzzled by the peacock’s tail, and very insightfully introduced the theory of sexual selection, which claimed that such extravagant traits give the male an advantage in the mating game. Thus, the handicap imposed by the long, colourful tail is more than compensated for by the increased reproductive advantage it confers (1871). However, Darwin failed to explain why such a costly trait would be favoured by females in the first place. Alfred Russel Wallace recognized that healthy males can develop exaggerated traits as harmless outgrowths of excessive energy (1891), but denied the role of female mate choice in evolution. Later, Ronald Aylmer Fisher (1930) proposed that certain sexual traits could initially be attractive to females because they are useful, and then, because they attract the females, become exaggerated to the point that they are useless or even detrimental.

The Handicap Principle proposes a somehow modified view. According to Zahavi, such traits have evolved precisely because they are handicaps. The rationale is simple. A costly trait signals that the animal is fit enough to afford having it, that it has the ability to thrive despite having to bear this cost. A peacock’s long tail shows that it is healthy and strong enough to survive in the face of having to drag this burden around. Thus, by wasting valuable resources, the animal proves that it has a surplus. The Handicap Principle applies not only to sexual behaviour but to communication in general. One of the classical examples is that of the gazelle. When it spots a wolf in the distance, the gazelle engages in a very peculiar behaviour: it starts to jump up and down as high as possible. At first glance, this behaviour seems suicidal: the threatened animal reveals itself to the predator from a great distance, while it could have gone unnoticed by laying low in the high grass. However, the wolves that watch this display usually turn away from the gazelles uninterested.

Some earlier theories tried to explain this behaviour in terms of group selection, arguing that the gazelles are engaging in a collective behaviour pattern in order to distract the wolves. Hence, according to this view, such behaviours evolved because they were beneficial to the group as a whole. Zahavi showed that this approach was flawed. A careful study revealed that gazelles display this behaviour in the presence of a wolf even when they are

away from the group. What actually happens is an honest advertisement of fitness on the part of the gazelle, which is effectively saying to the wolf, “Don’t waste your time, you can never catch me”, since a healthy gazelle that can jump so high can easily outrun a wolf. The wolf, in turn, knows that it could only catch a sick or injured gazelle, and does not waste valuable energy pursuing an evidently healthy animal. Thus, this communication of signals is beneficial for both prey and predator.⁴

The Handicap Principle, which is better known as costly signalling theory, has also found fruitful applications in the study of human behaviour (see Cronk 2005). With regards to ritual in particular, it had long been noted that many rituals involve an excessive waste of valuable resources (Boas 1897), something which certainly seems problematic. William Irons (1996) first suggested that such acts can function as hard-to-fake signals of commitment, and more recently others have picked up on this idea (Sosis 2000, 2003, 2006; Atran 2002; Atran and Norenzayan 2004; Bulbulia 2004). Humans can obtain great benefits through intra-group cooperation by reducing costs and maximizing benefits. However, cooperation also poses certain problems of implementation. The collective effort is usually enough not only to cover the needs of the whole, but also to produce a surplus. Therefore, some individuals might manage to become “free riders”, harvesting the benefits of group membership without contributing to the common efforts, thus parasitizing upon the group. Richard Sosis provides an appropriate example (2000: 71):

If custom dictates that hunters equally share whatever they individually catch at the end of the day, each hunter must trust that the other hunters will spend their day attempting to catch game. If men are hunting alone and there is high variance in returns from hunting, it will be difficult to determine on a given day whether someone was simply unlucky or attempting to free ride on the efforts of others. Without mechanisms limiting the gains that free riders achieve, or exogenous benefits that reward only cooperative hunters, trust is essential for this hunting/food-sharing system to be stable.

This situation resembles a prisoner’s dilemma.⁵ If everyone cooperates, then everyone gains moderately; if some members free ride while most members cooperate, then the free riders maximize their gains; and if too many members free ride, they do not obtain any substantial benefits, while those members who have chosen to cooperate lose their investment of time and energy. Consequently, it might be costly to participate in a coalition when others defect or free ride, and achieving large-scale cooperation can often be very difficult without the existence of appropriate social mechanisms that would discourage such potential free riders.

Therefore, the problem is essentially one of trust and commitment among members of the same group. A potential defector is a threat to the cohesion, the effectiveness and possibly even the survival of the group, and simply declaring one's own cooperativeness is simply not good enough. Faking a signal has no cost for the individual and can potentially offer great advantages if one becomes a free rider; thus, a signal which is easy to fake cannot be taken at face value unless trust between members already exists (Sosis 2000). The only way out of this problem is to establish signals of commitment that cannot easily be faked. And one way to do so, according to the costly signalling theory, is by means of costly rituals (Irons 1996; Sosis 2000, 2003, 2006; Bulbulia 2004).

Religious behaviour can operate as a hard-to-fake signal of commitment for group members by imposing a set of obligations that imply a considerable energetic or material expenditure. Such hard-to-fake religious behaviour may for example include theological knowledge, which requires laborious long-term study, symbolic markers, whether permanent (e.g. tattoos) or non-permanent (e.g. dressing in a burka, wearing crosses or shaving one's head), or participation in costly rituals (whether their cost is related to time, money, physical pain, health risks and so on). By accepting religiosity as a trustworthy signal of commitment, the group minimizes costly policing and punishment systems that would be necessary to discourage free riders. According to Irons (1996), the benefits that such a mechanism offered could have selected for an evolved tendency towards religious belief and ritual. Thus, the costlier the religion, the stronger and more reliable the signal is (Iannaccone 1994).

Irons refers to religious rituals (see 1996). However, Sosis ponders the possibility that commitment can equally be signalled by costly non-religious ritual actions (see 2000). Indeed, the commitment-signalling mechanism here is not religion itself but ritual, and a secular costly ritual could serve the same function. Examples of such secular rituals are the various hazing ordeals found in fraternity or gang initiations and army ordeals such as the US navy seals' Hell Week. Such violent rituals can function as a means of warranting commitment by challenging potential members to pay a costly price in advance, before joining the group. People's willingness to go through costly ordeals in order to join a particular group is an indication of how serious they are about their participation. In addition, the beneficiaries of costly signals can be not only individuals, but also groups of people and even entire states.⁶ One example is military parades, which function as an expensive – and thus honest – display of the armed forces of a State, aimed at signalling at hostile states that they would better think twice before initiating an attack.

Cost and social status

Signalling theory provides a plausible hypothesis for the emergence and the survival of costly rituals, which could also be relevant in the case of the Anastenaria. Fire-walking could indeed be seen as a way of signalling commitment to the community and as a consequence, for example, gaining social acceptance and status in exchange. Indeed, the notion that rituals can confer social status to the members of a religious community is more than reasonable, and this can undoubtedly be observed among the Anastenaria as well. Loring Danforth has described in detail the various ways in which participation in the performance of the Anastenaria can result in increased prestige and respect within the community. Through the performance of fire-walking, lower-class Anastenaria may find an opportunity to enjoy a higher social status that they are not usually accorded (1989: 101–2); people who suffer from a disease and the accompanying social stigma can see their status elevated as their condition becomes associated with the Saint's will (1979: 150); those who have married into local families, normally occupying a marginal position as outsiders who depend on their "host" families, can be seen as equals through their involvement in the Anastenaria (1989); and women have the opportunity to escape their marginal status through their participation by acting as men during the festival and thus gaining an increased sense of power and control over their lives (1983; 1989).⁷

Jane Sansom (1999, 2001), on the basis of her fieldwork in Lagkadas, argued that involvement in the Anastenaria can confer a certain prestige to the participant, which can function as a form of "social capital". Her analysis is based on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), who expanded the concept of capital to categories such as physical, social, cultural and symbolic capital. According to his theory, individuals occupy a specific place in a multidimensional social space based on the amounts of each kind of capital they possess. Within different social fields, each form of capital has a different specific weight, and various forms of capital can be "exchanged" for other forms of capital or even transferred from one generation to another.

Sansom then goes on to explore how different forms of capital (cultural, intellectual, symbolic and economic) are generated, manipulated, converted and transferred in other fields. The accumulation of one particular type of capital provides its possessors with social status and renders them powerful in other areas, as this power is interchangeable between fields, and an individual's success in one field can be converted into other forms of capital and status. Within the religious field, for example, fire-walking generates symbolic capital, which can bring recognition and prestige among the community (social capital), or can be converted to other forms outside the community, for

example intellectual capital, such as when some Anastenaria act as authorities in ethnographic texts. Conversely, the symbolic capital that the mayor possesses in the political sphere enables him to enter the field of cultural production by patronizing the festival, which in turn will increase his status in the field of power by assuring him more votes.

This analysis seems compelling, however there are certain limitations to the extent of its relevance for the contemporary communities of the Anastenaria. Undoubtedly, in a culture that attributes high importance to a particular set of religious beliefs, those who invest more resources on supporting and acting out these beliefs will be held in high esteem among the members of the group. Thus, a substantial investment of energy and resources in a costly ritual may bring some substantial benefits at the social level. And this might very well have been true about the Anastenaria until recently. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the composition of the group has radically changed during the past few decades due to specific socio-economic developments in the area. While for many generations fire-walking was performed exclusively by a closed group of people who were all related by familial ties and lived in the same small-scale society, the contemporary Anastenaria include people from diverse places from all over Greece, who meet in Agia Eleni only to take part in the festival. As much as they may benefit from the elevated prestige that fire-walking may bestow, this only lasts for the three days of the festival, while for the rest of the year their identity as Anastenaria operates, if anything, as an impediment to their social position. On that account, it would appear that for the majority of the participants those short-term payoffs at the social level are not enough to justify the disproportionately high demands of group membership.

As we have seen, the Anastenaria do not perform their rituals due to peer pressure or coercion, but in spite of social pressure; nor do they participate because of the associated social benefits, but in spite of significant costs in many levels, including the social level. Even if such social benefits used to be very high, the Anastenaria continue to draw new participants in their absence, even when the original conditions of their performance have been greatly altered. The question then remains, What is it that makes these activities so appealing to people, despite their high costs? The remaining chapters will examine this question more closely.

Chapter 7 has posed the question of motivation. The first question we need to posit in our naturalistic study of the Anastenaria is why people perform rituals. It has been suggested that the human propensity towards ritual behaviour is related to innate cognitive mechanisms, and in its extreme form can be associated with conditions such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Given the universal presence of rituals in every known human society, past or present, this seems plausible. But why would so many people

choose to participate in stressful, costly or dangerous rituals rather than simply engage in less costly repetitive behaviour? Signalling theory proposes that such costly rituals secure commitment in a group, functioning as signals of trustworthiness. Others argue that participation in costly rituals can significantly enhance social status. All this is very tenable, and the Anastenaria seem to involve very high costs without providing equally high pay-offs, suggesting that there is more to be said regarding the various mechanisms that motivate the participation in and transmission of this tradition.

Chapter 8 will examine two distinct ritual dynamics within the communities of the Anastenaria and discuss the role of arousal and memory in the transmission of religious rituals.

8

Arousal, emotion and motivation

Various ritual theorists (Whitehouse 1992, 2000, 2004; McCauley and Lawson 2002) have argued that the structure of certain costly rituals may be pivotal for their appeal and eventually for their successful transmission and survival. Specifically, physiological and emotional arousal may play a crucial role in modulating the performative experience of participation in collective rituals, thus having profound implications for the way those ritual actions are incorporated in people's autobiographical narrative schemas and for their capacity to motivate their subsequent transmission (Xygalatas 2008). In order to understand the role of arousal in the transmission of religious knowledge in the Anastenaria, it is also useful to examine the way such knowledge is passed on within the wider context of Greek Orthodox religion. Such an examination will reveal two thoroughly distinct forms of transmission: one dominated by conceptual control through extensive indoctrination, pervasive reiteration and official review and policing; and the other based on praxis, emotional and physiological arousal and personal exegesis.

Religious transmission in the Greek Orthodox context

Greek Orthodox rituals are certainly not characterized by high degrees of arousal. Most Christian rituals – at least in Europe – are not very arousing, but Greek Orthodox rituals seem to be particularly and invariably repetitious and unexciting. The role of the participant is minimal. For example, in a Greek Church service there is never any sort of singing or dancing from the congregation, and no movement except for rising and sitting down in specific intervals. There is also no instrumental music whatsoever, while hymns are sung only by the priest and appointed chanters. Even the words of the service and hymns are alien to most of the attendants as they are read in Ancient

Greek. In short, a Greek Orthodox service looks like a minimalist version of a Catholic mass. Participation in these rituals means almost exclusively observation – the congregation barely ever does anything in an Orthodox ritual. For devoted participants, observing the same ritual actions can take place hundreds or even thousands of times in the course of a lifetime. It is of course true that the devout may sometimes report feelings of great satisfaction or even ineffable bliss during mass attendance. However, such feelings are not due to the structure of the ritual but rather the product of the believer's own prior expectations and thoughts. Yet, Orthodox rituals have proved to be very successful in surviving. Certainly, this is not due to the attention-grabbing character of church practices. So what can account for this success?

The Greek Church and state employ systematic, repetitive and intense religious training and policing. In Greece there is no separation between state and church, and the latter often influences the decisions of the government and the law. The line between church and state jurisdiction is often blurred: Orthodox priests are paid by the government budget and the Greek Church is amply funded by the state (e.g. for the building of places of worship). In 2004, the government passed tax legislation that abolished tax on revenues for Greek Orthodox churches and institutions (law 3220/2004: §15). Non-Orthodox citizens often face career limits within certain domains of the public sector. For example, only members of the Orthodox faith can de facto become officers in the military (US Department of State 2005),¹ while atheists and members of other religions or denominations can be excluded from being employed in public education (Administrative Court of Appeal of Athens 299/1988). Such discrimination on religious grounds was facilitated by the police by the mandatory inscription of religious affiliation on Greek identity cards until the year 2000. Morning prayer is mandatory in the army, and the icon of Jesus is hung over the blackboard in every school classroom and courtroom. Elected Members of Parliament must take an oath to the Gospel before assuming duty. Religious oath is also used by default in court as proof of honesty, as well as in many public ceremonies such as university graduation.

This non-secular character of the state is evident in the Greek Constitution, which begins with the words “in the name of the Holy, Consubstantial and Indivisible Trinity” (subtitle), and establishes the Eastern Orthodox Church as the “dominant religion” (3.1), which is the only religion in Greece that constitutes a legal person of public law. The Constitution also states that other religions “are free and their rites of worship are performed unhindered”, however this privilege is reserved only for “known religions” (13.2), while in practice the vast majority of religions are not recognized as such by Greek law. For example, in 1997 Greece was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights for denying the Roman Catholic Church legal personality

and therefore the right to appeal to court (143/1996/762/963). The same article of the Constitution notes that practices of worship can be forbidden when they offend “good morals”, while it prohibits other religions from “proselytizing” (13.2), without defining either term. Greek courts usually consider that “improper proselytism is proselytizing against adherents of the dominant religion” (Areopagus 1304/82). Based on this regulation, foreign missionaries as well as Greek citizens of other convictions are often detained (US Department of State 2005). Among the best-known cases are that of Minos Kokkinakis, who had been arrested several times and spent six years in prison as a conscientious objector (European Court of Human Rights decision 3/1992/348/421), and that of a mother who was imprisoned in 1992 for taking her children who had been baptized as Orthodox Christians to a church of a different denomination (Areopagus decision no. 480/92).²

With the help of state laws and authorities, the Greek Church often manages to control and suppress the conduct of other religions. In order to open a place of worship, members of all other religions must obtain permission from the local Orthodox bishop (law 1369/1938; also see Tsatsis 2005). As a result, at the time of writing Muslims are still denied the right to construct a mosque in Athens due to the objections of the Orthodox Church. In 1996 and 1997, Greece was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights for the imprisonment of two men (59/1995/565/651; 59/1996/678/868) “for running an unauthorized place of worship for Jehovah’s Witnesses.” In 1999, Gabriel Tsavachidis appealed for being placed under secret surveillance by the National Intelligence Service because of his religious affiliation (Application no. 28802/95).³ In 1993, it was revealed that the Greek Secret Services kept a “list of heresies” that were considered “dangerous for national security”. This list is now published regularly by the Church and includes almost 500 doctrines and philosophies, as well as the names of their leaders or representatives. Based on this list, Greek justice has on some occasions prosecuted some of their members, the most famous case being that of Takis Alexiou, an academic and founder of the Greek Rumi Committee, an association dedicated to the study of the works of the prominent Arab poet and philosopher of the thirteenth century, Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi.⁴ Alexiou was tried in Rhodes for heresy and sentenced to 25 months of imprisonment by the Court of First Instance (*protodikeio*). The charges were brought against him by a resident of Simi, and the court called as witness an Orthodox monk, member of the Greek Ecclesiastical Commission against Heresies, which considers the Greek Rumi Committee a sect and claims that the “heresies” which it propagates “threaten to corrupt [Greece’s] religious and national identity”.⁵

The Greek Church also effectively monopolizes religious education. The ministry that is in charge of educational matters in Greece is named “Ministry

of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs”, and educational law states that one of the goals of Greek education is to “encourage the student’s loyalty to the country and faithfulness to the authentic elements of the Orthodox Christian tradition” (1/1A/1566/85; also see Constitution of Greece 16.2). The subject of religious education, consisting exclusively in Orthodox Christian catechism,⁶ is one of the most heavily taught subjects at Greek public schools, being compulsory for ten years (ages 8 to 18) in primary and secondary education. The stated objectives of the religious curriculum (Presidential Decree 583/1982) are “to establish the children’s *right faith* in God...to cultivate a stable inclination to a life ‘in Christ’, to *regulate children’s behaviour according to His divine will*, and to contribute to the realization of Christian values, as those *must* be applied in life” (Presidential Decree 583/1982, emphasis mine). Children of non-Orthodox parents can get exempt from this requirement only if both parents file a written petition, but schools offer no alternative supervision during the period of religious instruction (US Department of State 2005). Morning prayer and regular church attendance is also mandatory for students of all ages at public schools.

In addition, there are dozens of publicly funded ecclesiastical schools at all levels. In higher education, there are no dedicated academic departments for the study of religion in Greece, and all such study takes place within the existing departments of theology. In addition to that, in 2006 the Greek government gave the Church the right to establish four university departments, run by the Church but funded fully by the state. Admission is reserved exclusively for Orthodox Christian males, and candidates are required to submit a letter of recommendation written by a Church official and attend a personal interview (as opposed to the national-level exams for admission in any other academic department). Professors of these schools are not required to have doctoral degrees, but can be priests.

The heavy influence of the Church on the educational system extends far beyond the subject matter of religion, permeating school knowledge in general. The discourse of the Orthodox Church is adopted throughout the school curriculum, where religion and ethnicity are heavily conflated and Orthodox Christianity is presented as an intrinsic element of Greek national identity (Zambeta 2000). School textbooks, which are under central government control and distributed free of charge to all students, invariably comply to these standards. This is most prominent in history textbooks, where excerpts from the Bible and the patristic literature are often used as primary sources, while various Christian myths, legends and tales of miracles are authoritatively presented as historical facts (Asemomytis et al. 1997). In 2007, the Church, supported by nationalist political cycles, demanded that the new sixth-grade history textbook be withdrawn, asking among other things that

historians acknowledge the Church's contribution to the "rescuing of Greek self-consciousness during the Turkish occupation, and the fact that modern Greeks are descendants of the ancient Greeks". The campaign was successful and the government eventually replaced the book during the school year (Mastoras 2007).

Even outside formal education the Church manages to dominate religious discourse. The presence of the clergy in the media is prominent. Public TV channels have a live transmission of the Mass every Sunday and on religious holidays, and all private stations regularly feature priests on live programmes, while there are ecclesiastical television and radio stations as well as newspapers. Furthermore, the Greek Church has the exclusive right to interpret the scriptures, as the Greek Constitution prohibits translation of the Bible into any language, including modern Greek, without the authorization of the Church (3.3). To this day, books that are considered blasphemous are sometimes confiscated in Greece. The Constitution prohibits confiscation of printed material, but allows an exception for those works that offend the Christian religion (14.3). In 2003, the DA of Athens ordered the confiscation of Gerhard Haderer's comic book *The Life of Jesus* (2002) for "insulting religion". The author was sentenced to six months in prison. A few years earlier, in 2000, the Court of First Instance had prohibited the circulation of the novel *M to the Power of N* (1999), published by author and politician Mimis Androulakis, because it portrayed Jesus Christ as having sexual desires. Prior to the decision, fundamentalists attacked the attendants of the book's presentation, broke into the bookshop and attempted to lynch the author. Member of Parliament Panayotis Psomiadis, along with other extremist politicians and priests, appeared on television burning copies of the book at a central square in Thessaloniki.

More often, fundamentalist Orthodox groups demonstrate outside theatres, demanding that some play be banned, or barge into conference halls to condemn liberal versions of science or history. The Holy Synod often expresses its strong disapproval of artistic expressions it considers blasphemous, demanding their prohibition and calling the public to avoid them. The most infamous example was the reaction against Nikos Kazantzakis's book *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1960), for which he received a Nobel Prize nomination. The Holy Synod requested that the government ban all of his books as blasphemous, communist and anti-nationalist (Gionis 2007). In 1975, the Holy Synod managed to have a Greek movie based on the book banned from airing on public television, and in 1988 it did the same with Martin Scorsese's version, which is still officially banned from all cinemas in Greece and has never been broadcast on television (Venardou 2007).⁷ Similarly, in 2009, Academy Award-winning filmmaker Costa-Gavras saw his film which was

displayed at the new Acropolis Museum censored because it made implicit mention of the fact that Byzantine Christians destroyed pagan artwork in the Acropolis (Maltezou 2009).

In this way Orthodox doctrines are maintained through an elaborate mechanism of transmission and conceptual control based on intensive preaching and repetition, review and safeguarding by the Church, and – officially and unofficially – by the state. Such a system ensures learning through intense indoctrination despite its complicated doctrines and tedious rituals, and achieves compliance through the efficient detection, censorship and often penalization of religious innovation or divergence. Religious knowledge is amply provided by the authorities, while personal reflection on religious meanings is discouraged, as is captured in one of the most commonly uttered phrases by Greek religious representatives, the imperative “believe and do not question” (*pisteve kai mi erevna*).

Religious transmission in the context of the Anastenaria

It is within this context that the rituals of the Anastenaria are practised. However, as we have seen, religious transmission in the Anastenaria is very unlike that of the Greek Orthodox Church. The social system of the Anastenaria relies on diametrically different mechanisms for the dissemination of its religious knowledge. Contrary to the wide-scale framework of the Greek Orthodox religion, the tradition of the Anastenaria is limited to a small group of people and cannot support professional religious experts. Moreover, as we have seen in chapter 5, there are no official dogmas, sacred texts or other established doctrines, and no official process for the transmission of religious knowledge. Such knowledge is acquired only through personal experience and participation in the ritual life of the community. And given that the majority of the Anastenaria no longer live within the same society, the only major occasion for group-specific social learning is practice-based, through the performance of collective rituals.

The rituals of the Anastenaria are also very different in form compared to those of the Orthodox Church: Church rituals are abundant, frequently performed (often even daily) but without active participation by the congregation and relatively low in fanfare. The rituals of the Anastenaria, however, are few and far between, participatory and dramatic. In a sense, there are no regular ritual activities except for the twice-yearly festival; every other event in the context of this tradition is considered preparation for these two big events. Thus, the majority of participants only join in during these two pivotal occasions.

Just like Church rites, most of the individual ritual actions in the Anastenaria are very repetitive – and often monotonous – themselves. The festival indeed includes an overwhelming amount of extremely repetitive action sequences. For example, during one single festival, there were ten ritual processions around the village, followed by candles and music, always playing to the same rhythm; the icons were blessed with an incensory eighty-one times; and procedures such as kissing the icons or the elders' hands, standing up and crossing oneself were repeated hundreds of times. All these actions are also part of normal liturgical Church life and are therefore repeated additionally by the participants throughout the year in church. But all this is in sharp contrast to the practice of fire-walking. The Anastenaria often point out that their tradition involves a lot more than dancing over burning coals. It is an entire religious system. "Fire-walking is just the icing on the cake", they often say. However, I will argue that due to its exiting nature, fire-walking plays a crucial role for the very survival of this religious tradition.

In summary, religious transmission in the Anastenaria is fundamentally different compared to that of the Greek Orthodox Church, the latter relying on explicit indoctrination, repetition and policing, and the former being based on ritual practice and arousal. These two divergent but often coexisting modes of religious transmission appear to be very widespread among the world's cultures and oftentimes delineate the contrast between official religion and popular religiosity. This pattern is consistently found in historical and ethnographic records across the world and across time, for example in the difference between the traditional religious system and the various mystery cults of the Greco-Roman world (see Martin 1987; Pachis 2003), or that between the official religion of the Catholic Church and various cults of African origin in Brazil such as the Umbanda (see Cohen 2007).

The bimodal distribution of ritual forms

Such bipolarity in the structure of religious systems has long been recognized and described in terms of various binary distinctions: universal versus national religion (Kuenen 1882); central versus peripheral (Lewis 1971); regional versus local (Werbner 1977); "charismatic" versus "routinized" (Weber 1930); "Apollonian" versus "Dionysian" (Benedict 1935); "church" versus "sect" (Niebuhr 1929; Troeltsch 1931); "great" versus "little" traditions (Redfield 1956); dominant rather than marginal; state versus individual religion; public versus private; oral versus textual religious traditions (Gellner 1969; Goody 1977, 1987; Ong 1982); religion of the elites versus religion of the masses (Sharot 2001); preached versus lived religion; systematized versus

non-systematized and so on (Segal 1982; also see Vrijhof and Waardenburg 1979; Bell 1989).

Such theoretical approaches to dichotomous forms of religiosity have yielded some very forceful treatises; however, those approaches have for the most part operated at the descriptive level, without attempting to explain why these contrasting forms of religiosity emerge. Two of the most prominent cognitive theories of ritual, Whitehouse's theory of modes of religiosity (1992, 1995, 2004) and McCauley and Lawson's ritual form hypothesis (2002), attempt to do this by focusing on psychological processes underlying ritual practice. Both of these theories place central focus on the distinction between high arousal and high frequency as contrasting means of ritual transmission and emphasize the relationship between arousal, memory and motivation. In particular, both agree on the observation that the structure of rituals the world over tends to gravitate towards one of two divergent configurations or "attractors", and claim that each of these two configurations deploys diametrically different cognitive and particularly mnemonic mechanisms for the transmission of religious representations. Rituals of one type are marked by scarcity of performance and intense emotional arousal, and as such they are attention-grabbing and are printed in episodic memory. Rituals of the other type are humdrum and have little emotional and mnemonic force, and instead rely on high frequency of performance to become schematically encoded as semantic knowledge.

Although the two theories arrive at similar conclusions regarding these configurations, they start from different premises with respect to the causal factors responsible for the relationships they describe. McCauley and Lawson argue that as religious rituals evolve, they will tend to gravitate towards one of two attractor positions. The first configuration involves rituals that are frequently performed and exhibit low amounts of sensory pageantry and emotional arousal, while the second configuration involves rituals that are not repeatable and incorporate comparatively higher levels of sensory and emotional stimulation. They maintain that the independent causal variable that explains these features of religious rituals is ritual form. As was mentioned in chapter 5, their theory of "ritual competence" predicts that participants in ritual systems will be able to make intuitive judgements regarding those rituals' form and efficacy (Lawson and McCauley 1990; also see Barrett and Lawson 2001). It is ritual form or, more precisely, "participants' tacit knowledge about differences in ritual form [and the roles that supernatural agents play therein] that determines which religious rituals migrate to one or the other of the two attractor positions" (McCauley and Lawson 2002: 113–14, emphasis in original).

Rituals that settle around the first attractor (high-frequency–low-sensory pageantry) are the ones in which a supernatural agent’s most direct connection is that with the ritual’s “patient” (the object of the action), called special-patient rituals or with the action itself, called special-instrument rituals. According to McCauley and Lawson, these rituals tend to lack the exciting character of rituals with high-sensory pageantry, and instead rely on repetition to become encoded as discursive knowledge in semantic memory. As people have frequent experiences of the ritual event, they tend to remember it as a type of event, although they might not be able to recall the details of any particular instance of that type (McCauley and Lawson 2002: 86).

However, those rituals that settle around the second attractor (high-sensory pageantry) are the ones in which the supernatural agent’s most direct connection is that with the ritual’s agent (special-agent rituals). These rituals are performed very rarely (normally only once in the lifetime of each participant); they generate “super-permanent” effects, which require another special-agent ritual in order to be undone. Through the use of sensory pageantry and the accompanying enhanced emotional arousal, special-agent rituals acquire a distinct religious significance for the participants, increasing their attention and resulting in “flashbulb” memories which enhance the chances of their successful recollection and transmission. At the same time, their infrequent performance and their direct connection to the supernatural agents create a sense of uniqueness for the participants’ experience, fortifying their religious motivation.

Flashbulb memories are memories for the circumstances in which one first learnt of an emotionally arousing and consequential event (Brown and Kulik 1977: 73). McCauley and Lawson offer an excellent review of the literature on flashbulb memories (2002: ch. 2) and then go on to articulate their own version in the form of the “cognitive alarm hypothesis”, which argues that

when current circumstances are the cause of our emotional arousal, we will increase the attention and cognitive resources we devote to them, which, in turn, will increase the probability of their subsequent recollection. But that sort of memory consolidation may only arise if that initial, heightened alertness receives ongoing vindication in subsequent experience concerning our sense of the event’s significance. (2002: 77–85)

In other words, emotional stimulation marks certain events as salient and worth remembering, but this memory may only remain for a limited period of time, unless these events are attributed with cultural significance or personal importance, in which case they may crystallize in episodic memory forever.

The mnemonic effects of ritual performance have been discussed at length by Harvey Whitehouse, who proposed a general theory of religious transmission (1992, 1995, 2000, 2002a, and especially 2004), making wide-reaching claims regarding the relationships between such variables as frequency, memory and transmission in what are described as two divergent modes of organization of religious knowledge. Whitehouse notes that learning generally depends on either of two different strategies: rehearsal and emotional arousal (2005: 211). Constrained by these two strategies, ritual systems tend to congregate around two major attractor poles. Repetitive mainstream rituals are encoded as schemas, whereas infrequently performed, highly arousing rituals are encoded as special events. His theory describes two sets of transmissive dynamics, or “modes of religiosity”, the doctrinal and the imagistic.⁸

At the heart of Whitehouse’s theory is the distinction between episodic and semantic memory systems. Episodic memory is the explicit memory of specific events, related to a particular time and place (Tulving 1972, 1983). Your recollection of your first kiss, your wedding, a traumatic accident or the time your favourite team won the League, are all examples of episodic memories. Since such episodic memories have a self-representative function through their fundamental role in the construction and maintenance of a coherent self-identity and the sense of a unique life history, they often have an autobiographical character. In fact, the boundaries between episodic and what is called autobiographical memory are obscure and there is to date no consensus on a clear distinction (Hoerl 2007). Some experts use the two notions interchangeably (Tulving 2002), some consider autobiographical memories as a subcategory of episodic memory (Nelson, 1993), while others actually describe the latter as one of many instances of the former (Conway 2005).

Semantic memory, however, refers to a conscious but abstract factual or conceptual knowledge about the world, which is not consciously connected to any particular learning experience (Tulving 1972). We might not know where, when or how we acquired this knowledge, but we can express it nonetheless. You can remember the meanings of thousands of words, the fact that dolphins are mammals, that Ireland is an island, or that Jack Nicholson is an actor, but it is doubtful that you can recall when or how you acquired this knowledge. In other words, episodic memory provides a mechanism for remembering unique instances of events, while semantic memory is shaped and modified by multiple occurrences of similar events, which generate schemas, general knowledge patterns about the categories to which those events relate.

Semantic and episodic memory are two categories of explicit memory, which refers to knowledge that can be consciously and intentionally retrieved and reflected on; it is about things we are aware of knowing and that we are

able to verbalize, to declare, thus also called declarative memory. On the other hand, nondeclarative memory (also called procedural or implicit) is formed by experiences that aid the learning of skills or behaviours without conscious recollection of those particular experiences or verbal retrieval of the behaviour. For example, you may know how to drive a car or tie your shoelaces without remembering the first time you did it or being able to express this knowledge verbally. In short, declarative memory contains knowledge that we know we have and consciously recall (knowing “that”), while nondeclarative memory holds knowledge we are unaware of having or using (knowing “how”; for more see Schacter, 1987; Thomson 2000; Ashcraft 2003: ch. 6; Garrett 2009: ch. 12).

What Whitehouse terms the “doctrinal mode” refers to religious knowledge transmitted through frequently repeated rituals and teachings. The elaborate doctrines that are usually associated with this mode are verbally transmitted and encoded in semantic memory by means of frequent repetition. However, repetition can lead to saturation, or what Whitehouse has described as the “tedium effect”: over-rehearsed doctrines and practices simply become boring. To overcome this problem, doctrinal systems use rhetorical techniques (e.g. sermons) and supernatural incentives and deterrents (e.g. heaven and hell). These techniques require and encourage the development of specialized religious experts who prescribe normative orthodoxy and ensure that it is preserved unchanged. Regular policing is crucial. Any divergence from this orthodoxy, whether intentional or not, must be detected and prevented or suppressed. This need to safeguard the orthodoxy of the tradition promotes the formation of a (usually professional) centralized religious authority. The presence of such religious specialists and authorities means that a few people can transmit religious knowledge to many others, and therefore doctrinal traditions tend to be widespread. The rituals of these traditions are performed frequently and repeatedly and may eventually be encoded in procedural memory not as distinct events but rather as schemas, prescribed sequences of actions. Thus, people often participate in the rituals “on autopilot”, simply going through the movements of the rituals, which reduces the chances that they will formulate personal reflections on the meaning of those rituals or simply leads them unquestionably to accept the meanings given by the authorities. This results in a set of uniform, commonly held explicit beliefs and teachings that have been encoded in the semantic memory system.

In contrast, the “imagistic mode of religiosity” involves infrequently performed, personally consequential, particularly intense and often traumatic ritual events which create flashbulb (episodic) memories for the participants. The violation of existing semantic knowledge, that is the lack of an existing schema or doctrine into which the ritual could be assimilated, the extreme

emotional stimulation, as well as the consequentiality of the ritual for the participants within their cultural context, cause them to produce their own spontaneous interpretations of those events based on principles of analogical reasoning. Whitehouse calls this process spontaneous exegetical reflection (Whitehouse 2004: 113–17). Through the repeated participation in and/or subsequent recollections of those ritual events, analogical reflections on exegetical topics are shaped into a body of quite idiosyncratic knowledge. Thus, in contrast to doctrinal rituals, imagistic rituals result in a plurality of interpretations for the participants. As these idiosyncratic interpretations stem from personally felt apocalyptic experiences and are more convincing than any external teachings or doctrines, the formation of dynamic religious leadership is discouraged. Thus, there is no doctrinal orthodoxy, and therefore no central authority to safeguard it. Although exegetical knowledge formed in this way may be largely unique to each participant, the memories of the ritual procedures themselves – including the identities of co-participants – are relatively precise and therefore common to all members of the group. Coupled with emotional arousal, episodic memories can have cohesive effects, as each member remembers who underwent the same rituals and common emotional experiences can foster bonding among participants. Such practices are found in and give rise to small-scale, localized, stable and exclusive communities or groups. The practical limitations posed by those rituals, as well as the lack of central leadership and policing, discourage a wider spread of the tradition, which will either have to remain localized or be spread by other dynamics.

For Whitehouse, the relation between implicit and explicit memory is a two-way street (2004: 89). To elucidate this, he refers to the work of developmental psychologist Annette Karmiloff-Smith, who proposed a synthesis of Fodor's nativism and Piaget's constructivism (1992, 1994). Karmiloff-Smith describes a process that she calls representational redescription, whereby implicit information gradually turns into explicit knowledge. Her model is a developmental one; however, she claims that it describes a pattern that is common to several spheres of adult cognition. In this model, domain-specific predispositions provide a kick-start for learning by focusing attention on environmental inputs. Knowledge is then acquired through an intricate dynamic interaction with these inputs, which in return critically effects brain development. Once this implicit knowledge is consolidated in a cognitive system, it gradually becomes explicit to that system. In this process, therefore, the human mind redescribes its existing representations, internally utilizing the information that it has already stored and consciously constructing and exploring analogies and theories.

Thus, development and learning evolve in two complementary directions (Whitehouse's two-way street): a progressive modularization, in which

cognitive domains become increasingly autonomous, leading to faster, more automatic and less reflective behaviour and more implicit learning; and a progressive explication of this implicit knowledge, whereby domains become increasingly interrelated and available to consciousness. In this process, a sensory input triggers an original representation which in time gets re-represented over and over to produce different representational formats, resulting in the formulation of explicit representations. Thus, through the redescription of existing implicit representations, knowledge “becomes usable beyond the special purpose goals for which it is normally used” (Karmiloff-Smith 1992: 191) and representational links can be established across different domains (also see Carey and Spelke 1994; Mithen 1996: 58).

Earlier, David Rumelhart and Donald Norman (1978) had proposed that there are three qualitatively different phases in the process of learning: accretion, restructuring and tuning. Accretion, which is the most common form of learning, is simply the addition of new information to existing memory, thus accumulating more information onto the already existing knowledge structures. Restructuring, which occurs much less frequently and requires considerable effort, involves the formation of new conceptual structures or schemas to interpret the material that is to be acquired. Finally, tuning is the continual adjustment and modification of knowledge to a specific task, usually through practice. This stage of learning does not increase the formal content of one’s knowledge, but makes the use of existing knowledge more efficient. It is the slowest form of learning and the one that accounts for expert performance. Tuning often represents automatic behaviour not available to reflection. In this tripartite process, the mind generates a new schema by modelling it on an existing schema and then modifying it based upon further experiences (Rumelhart and Norman 1981). Norman provides the example of learning the Morse code (1982). The initial learning of each letter code requires the process of accretion. Subsequently, learning to recognize sequences or full words involves the restructuring of this knowledge, while the gradual increase in translation or transmission speed indicates the process of tuning. This gradual development of learning indeed seems to constitute a necessary prerequisite for mastering certain complex domains (Elman 1993; Elman et al. 1996). In the process of learning, humans construct mental models, which they then evaluate and revise as needed to achieve expertise (Gobet and Buckley 2000).

The same processes, according to Whitehouse, underlie the development of religious knowledge. “Doctrinal” traditions base the transmission of this knowledge on routinization, which results in scripted memories of sequences of actions and the beliefs that accompany them. Through frequent repetition, participants soon learn to go through the movements of the rituals. This

knowledge is specific to these rituals, automatic and informationally encapsulated from other domains of action or other rituals. Gradually, a quasi-theoretical procedural knowledge is produced, which may eventually become available to verbal expression. However, this knowledge is concerned with how the ritual is performed and not why. Doctrinal traditions tend to have elaborate dogmas and theologies, and therefore extensive exegesis for the practice of the ritual is provided by the religious authorities and/or experts.

Participation in “imagistic” rituals, on the other hand, will tend to produce explicit procedural knowledge encoded in the form of episodic memories, which are conscious and available to verbal expression. Although parts of a ritual may still be encoded as schemas and performed automatically, its most dramatic features will be represented in memory as distinct episodes and participants will remember this particular instance for a long time. Due to their emotionality, these rituals trigger a search for meaning, and since no standard exegetical framework is provided, each participant will form his or her own idiosyncratic interpretations based on principles of analogical reasoning. In time, this exegetical knowledge may become re-represented in semantic memory. Because imagistic rituals are performed infrequently, this process of representational redescription will develop over the course of a lifetime, and will therefore only be available to the most experienced members of the tradition.

These two “modes” of religiosity constitute attractor positions around which ritual practices tend to convene, and novelties that move away from these positions will either lead to the transformation of a tradition and its eventual displacement to the other pole, or die out. Whitehouse cautions that these two poles are not meant to represent fixed categories one of which each religion should comply to, but rather two ideal types of religiosity towards which ritual traditions tend to sway (2004: 75–6; Boyer 2005: 9). In fact, it is not uncommon for both the imagistic and the doctrinal mode to be present in a single tradition. However, Whitehouse argues, this does not mean that the two modes are simply fused (2002a: 309). To the contrary, “the key features of doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity stand in stark contrast to one other” (2004: 74).

Those key features that Whitehouse describes for each mode operate on two levels, a psychological and a cultural one. The first level involves the different cognitive mechanisms underpinning religious thought and behaviour, and the second level involves contrasts in the sociopolitical arrangements pertaining to each mode. The modes theory aims to explain those distributed sociopolitical effects in terms of a set of underlying psychological processes. Whitehouse is reluctant to single out any one psychological factor as more fundamental; instead, he argues that the entire bundle of cognitive features (transmissive

frequency, arousal, mnemonic codification, ritual meaning and revelatory techniques) provides the causal framework for the population-level effects that he identifies as the sociopolitical characteristics of each mode of religiosity (social cohesion, type of leadership, inclusivity/exclusivity, spread, scale, degree of uniformity and centralization; 2004: 74–5).

Exegesis in the Anastenaria

Consideration of these theories on the bimodal distribution of ritual forms may be useful in the examination of the Anastenaria as a tradition which is practised by a small group of people who are at the same time operating within the context of the Greek Orthodox religion. Based on Whitehouse's distinction, the Anastenaria seem to constitute a prototypical imagistic tradition, which heavily relies on high arousal and personal reflection for the production and transmission of its religious knowledge, but is at the same time embedded within the overarching framework of the Greek Orthodox religion, a typical doctrinal tradition that relies on frequent repetition and thorough indoctrination for the maintenance of its dogmas.

Fire-walking is an exceptionally intense experience for the Anastenaria, both physically and emotionally. All the fire-walkers I interviewed, without exception, explicitly claimed that it was by far the most stimulating and emotional religious experience of their lives. Even when I subsequently insisted on contrasting the performance of fire-walking to attending the wedding of one's child, which in Greece typically has extremely strong affective associations, the unanimous answer was that fire-walking was without any doubt more emotional. This emotionality is more than obvious to the observer during the performance, when participants consistently show extreme concentration and affective outbursts, for example through crying, sighing, moaning or fainting. In addition, these events are considered to be highly consequential for the participants. My informants often claimed that fire-walking for the first time is a life-changing experience and reported recalling the event in detail even when many decades had past.

During the course of my fieldwork, I decided to devote part of my efforts to exploring some of Whitehouse's claims, and in particular his notion of "spontaneous exegetical reflection". If Whitehouse's insights were grounded, we should be able to make the following predictions regarding the Anastenaria. First, that participants' idiosyncratic reflections on the meaning of the repetitive, low-arousal ritual elements of the tradition would be greatly reduced compared to those related to fire-walking. And second, that the exegetical reflection invoked by fire-walking would develop and mature over

time. Therefore, novice fire-walkers would not have full access to the motivational potential of the revelatory knowledge generated by their participation (Whitehouse 2004). In other words, participants would not have a clear explanation for the meaning and purpose of the ritual actions, including their own, but such knowledge would arise later.

For this component of my research, I conducted structured interviews with sixteen fire-walkers of Agia Eleni of various ages and degrees of experience (9 males and 7 females, mean age = 57, mean experience = 23.8 years). The questions involved people's reflections on seven basic ritual actions that are performed during the festival and involve varying levels of frequency and arousal. These actions were: (1) using the icons; (2) using the incensory; (3) using candles; (4) playing music; (5) performing the animal sacrifice; (6) taking part in the common meal; and (7) fire-walking. In the first round of questions I asked participants whether they considered that each one of those items was necessary for the performance of the festival. Without exception they answered that the role of all of those actions was indeed essential. Very often, within and without the confines of this particular sample, the Anastenaria justified the necessity of their various ritual actions and items by referring to some analogy. The most typically used analogy, in accordance to Saint Constantine's status as a war hero, was that of the military ("A soldier wouldn't go to war without his weapon; how could we perform the festival without our icons?"), while other themes involved familiar domains of everyday life ("If you go to the field to reap, can you do it without the scythe?").

In the second round of questions I pushed this matter further, inviting participants to consider whether it would be possible to perform the festival if one of the above elements were missing. Out of a total of 112 questions (7 items by 16 participants), only two answers conceded to the possibility of holding the festival without one of the items. Specifically, two participants said that it would be possible to perform the festival without the icons, as long as they had the "signs" (which are seen to stand as substitutes for the icons and to carry some of their essence).

The third round of questions involved the purpose and meaning of those items. Participants were asked why each particular action was performed and what it meant. Despite having accorded central importance to all of those actions, most participants were unable to justify the necessity of most of them. No one provided any justifications for the use of music, the candles and the icons, while two people provided such a justification for the use of incense and the common meal and three shared their ideas about the performance of the animal sacrifice. These explanations were usually symbolic. Only one person gave an instrumental explanation for one of these elements, which related to the official exegesis of the Orthodox Church ("we use the incense to

drive away the Devil”). One fire-walker argued that the common meal is the symbol of the Holy Communion. Someone argued that the animal sacrifice symbolizes the fire that was beaten by Constantine and is now put out by the Anastenaria, while another argued that it symbolizes Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. However, all participants stressed their strong conviction that there must be a purpose and a meaning to these actions; they just didn’t know what it was. Some told me that the Anastenaria of the past would have probably known, and that the Saint definitely knows.

This almost complete lack of justifications for the first six elements was contrasted by people’s ideas about fire-walking: thirteen out of sixteen participants had some idea about the purpose of the ritual. Furthermore, the explanations given were at various levels, and often more than one explanation was offered by a single person. Nine participants gave concrete explanations with an instrumental/causal character, in other words a purposive justification for the practice of fire-walking (e.g. that it is performed to offer cure from illnesses, or for the crops to grow, or to ask the saints for a favour or thank them for some favour that has been granted). Those explanations were diverse and idiosyncratic – not surprisingly, as we have seen that there is no official or commonly held doctrine about the meaning of fire-walking. In fact, some of the fire-walkers stressed to me that their version was the right one, and that I shouldn’t bother to listen to other versions.

In addition to these instrumental explanations, six of those nine participants offered an additional, non-instrumental justification in the form of some aetiological myth, which, interestingly, was not always the same (e.g. “Our ancestors saved the icons from the burning church, thus we fire-walk to commemorate that event”; or “Saint Constantine once held a contest to see who could fire-walk and one of our ancestors won, thus we fire-walk to commemorate that event”; or “Constantine once crossed a burning field to defeat the Turks, thus we fire-walk to commemorate that event” etc.).

Nine participants also offered what I will call, for lack of a better term, a “vague” explanation. This consisted typically in the answer “We do it for the saint(s).” The reason this answer was deemed “vague” was that the interviewees that had provided such an answer were unable to explain what they meant by it, and when probed further they admitted that they didn’t really know what this meant. Note how this is a different kind of answer compared to those who said that people fire-walk in order to ask the saint for a favour or thank him for a favour that has already been granted, thus placing fire-walking within a very concrete framework of reciprocal exchange. Finally, nine interviewees provided what I term a “tautological” explanation, namely that fire-walking is performed “because it is tradition”, or “because it’s always been done like this”; in other words, people do it because people do it.

Looking into the distribution of these responses, there did not seem to be any marked differences between genders or between local and non-local participants. A pronounced difference, however, was obvious between experienced and non-experienced members. I divided the sample into two groups, according to the level of experience in fire-walking. The first group consisted of ten participants, those who had been performing fire-walking for more than ten years (4 males and 6 females, mean age = 69, mean experience = 37 years), and the second one of six inexperienced ones, those who had been participating for no more than three years (5 males and 1 female, mean age = 37, mean experience = 2 years). This distinction came naturally: as chance would have it, there were no participants in the range between three and ten years of experience in the group at the time. The results here were polarized. Only one out of six inexperienced participants was able to provide a concrete explanation for the performance of fire-walking. In addition, two “vague” and two tautological explanations were given, while three of them failed to provide any sort of explanation (the five different explanations came from three people only). In contrast, experienced participants offered abundant explanatory reflections. They all provided some sort of explanation. In sum, they offered eight concrete, seven vague, five mythical, and eight tautological explanations. As the above would seem to indicate, there were both quantitative and qualitative differences between the two groups. All experienced fire-walkers were able to provide some reflection on the nature of the fire-walk, offering a total of twenty-eight different insights (a mean of 2.8), compared to a mere five insights (a mean of 0.8) for the inexperienced participants, half of whom did not have any insight.

One point that is worth noting is that only experienced participants resorted to mythical themes for the justification of fire-walking – in fact, half of them mentioned an aetiological myth. Each of those participants narrated

Table. Why is fire-walking performed?

<i>Participants</i>	<i>10 experienced (≥ 10 years)</i>	<i>6 inexperienced (≤ 3 years)</i>
Concrete (instrumental) explanations	8	1
Vague explanations	7	2
Mythical explanations	5	0
Tautological explanations	8	2
Total explanations offered	28	5
Offered at least one explanation	10	3
No explanation (“I don’t know”)	0	3

a different myth to justify the performance of fire-walking. And although those myths were known among the communities of the Anastenaria (i.e. were not made up by any of my individual participants), their association to the meaning and purpose of the ritual was idiosyncratic. Crucially, those inexperienced participants that had been unable to provide a justification for fire-walking later admitted knowing those same myths that had been offered as justifications by the more experienced fire-walkers. However, they did not resort to those myths when they were asked to offer an explanation for the performance of fire-walking. Instead, the most common answer I received when talking to inexperienced participants was, “We don’t know about these things. You’d better ask the elders.”

Finally, this same pattern, although slightly modified, was also generally preserved in the answers to the last question, which involved the fire-walkers’ own reasons for their first participation (“Why did you become a fire-walker?”). Fire-walkers often claim that once you become an Anastenaris, there is no turning back; “Once you enter the dance you will dance”, they frequently say. Therefore, most participants justify their participation in terms of their first performance. However, five out of six inexperienced participants stated that they did not know why they started fire-walking. They attributed their participation to destiny or divine will, or said that they just “felt an urge to do it” and later couldn’t stop performing it. One woman described to me how she was led to fire-walk for the first time without making any conscious decision.

As soon as the music started playing I began to feel very nervous, to sweat, and I started swinging to the tune. But I had no intention of dancing. At some point, as I was not paying attention to my surroundings, somebody accidentally pushed me towards the centre of the *konaki*. I found myself among the dancers, and, as they say, once you join the dance, you have to dance... (personal interview with a young Anastenarissa)

In contrast, seven out of ten experienced fire-walkers gave a specific, purposive reason for their first performance. And again, the reason varied from person to person. Out of eight total answers (seven experienced and one inexperienced), three participants said that they performed fire-walking for the first time to be healed of some illness; three said that they were carrying out the orders of the Saint after receiving a personal call; one said that he performed the ritual to save the other participants from getting burnt, as he knew he had special powers; while another said that she did it to bring fertility to the crops and animals.

In summary, there was a significant disparity between the degree of reflection on the meaning and purpose of fire-walking and that of the low-arousal ritual elements. Participants appear not to reflect on the meaning of the latter; they simply take for granted that “there must be some meaning”. It is noteworthy that none of the ritual actions that constitute part of Orthodox liturgical life, and are thus more familiar, produced any idiosyncratic exegetical idea regarding their nature: the only explicit justifications about these actions simply repeated the official exegesis of the Church (“incense is used to drive off the Devil”), or made analogical connections between elements of the Anastenaria and church rituals (“the common meal is like the Holy Communion”). The only element that informed two individual justifications was the performance of the animal sacrifice, which carries higher emotionality than most other actions and is not part of Orthodox liturgical life. In contrast, fire-walking triggered several idiosyncratic insights, and most people seemed to have some personal theory regarding its meaning and/or purpose. However, it seems that these interpretations are not there from the offset but are formed gradually as experience accumulates and existing representations are reinforced through subsequent participation and narration of the event.

To be sure, this study is not presented as a controlled experiment rather as an observational field study (for this reason, no *p* values or other detailed statistics are reported). The sample was inevitably small due to the limited size of the group, and it is subject to all sorts of restrictions that the naturalistic context imposes. In other words, it is simply meant to provide some quantitative data in support of an overall qualitative ethnographic argument, as these greatly polarized patterns were consistent across the full range of the Anastenaria I spoke with but were not included in this sample (either because they were members of another community of Anastenaria, or because they did not wish to participate in detailed surveys).

One conceivable explanation directed against my reading of these responses is that participants may often construct any interpretations “on the hoof” to satisfy the interviewer, a possibility of which ethnographers are well aware (Hinde 2005). But in this case, why would novice participants not be able to come up with their own easy answers? Why is it that only experienced participants can provide “on the hoof” exegesis for their practices? Moreover, the exegesis provided by the elders is consistent – once they have it, they stick to it. I never got two different interpretations for fire-walking from the same participant, even after repeated interviews (while I frequently did get different or contradictory exegeses from the same observers of the ritual). If those fire-walkers were spontaneously making up their interpretations just to satisfy my curiosity, there is no reason why they should remember them several months later.

In addition, a thorough study of the ethnographic record seemed to confirm my interpretation. Greek ethnographers often used their subjects' original names in their writings; but even when they didn't, in most cases I was able to identify individuals with great certainty, thanks to the presentation of their life-stories or family trees and due to the limited size of each community. I was therefore able to compare the answers to my questionnaires to what they had told other ethnographers years earlier. The findings of this analysis were most fascinating. That the more experienced participants consistently showed a higher degree of explicit reflection on the meaning and purpose of fire-walking is hardly remarkable. What was indeed remarkable was that some of the same people who had in those reports claimed ignorance on exegetical matters had often provided me with confident explanations for such matters several years later, including their own reasons for performing the ritual for the first time. In other words, some of the same people who told me that they performed their first fire-walk because they were seeking healing or wanted to help their crops and livestock and so forth had told some ethnographer decades earlier that they joined the ritual because they "felt an inexplicable urge" or that they simply did not know why they had done it. Thus, the explicitly stated reasons for participation often seem to constitute post hoc justifications of this participation.

Another possible explanation for this pattern could be that exegesis is not necessarily constructed by the individual but is culturally acquired, that it is learnt from other Anastenaria. Neophytes may not know much about the meaning of the rituals, but they can gradually acquire information about this meaning in the course of their lifetime, be it through intentional instruction or plain conversation with the elders or their parents. After all, although the time of the first fire-walk varies widely, experience does generally correlate with age. Undoubtedly it is inevitable that some such learning does occur. However, there is substantial evidence that its role in the exegesis of the Anastenaria for their rituals is limited.

To begin with, these explanations are too varied to be the product of any systematic or extensive cultural transmission, in which case we would expect them to be more convergent. Furthermore, as we have seen in chapter 5, there is no form of official verbal transmission of religious knowledge in the Anastenaria—indeed, such transmission is often explicitly denied or discouraged. The Anastenaria have very often told me that they normally never talk about the meaning of their rituals to anyone, including each other. Indeed, during the course of my fieldwork I never heard people discussing the meaning of their rituals, and the only mention of these practices among them was limited to practical issues, having to do with the preparation and performance of the festival (the how, and not the why). The example of the

people who asked me for a CD with the interview of the old Anastenaris because they had never had the chance to hear him speak “about those things”, among them being his son (chapter 5), provides an apt illustration of this.

Finally, we have seen that most of the Anastenaria today live in distant places and only see the other fire-walkers once or twice a year. In their place of residence, they are usually very careful to hide their fire-walker status and are reluctant to speak about this matter. In fact, some of them have told me that even their spouses did not know about their involvement in fire-walking, at least during the first years of their performance. All the above indicates that exegetical insight on the meaning and purpose of the ritual is mostly a process of individual reflection and not so much the product of cultural transmission.

Arousal and memory

This evidence seems consistent with Whitehouse’s concept of “spontaneous exegetical reflection.” In fact, this process of “highly creative elaboration of ritual meanings” over time (2004: 9) that results from participation in high-arousal rituals might extend even beyond the degree that the modes theory acknowledges. According to Whitehouse (2004: 70),

Rarely performed and highly arousing rituals invariably trigger vivid and enduring episodic memories among the people who participate in them. It appears to be a combination of episodic distinctiveness, emotionality, and consequentiality that together result in lasting autobiographical memories. These memories can be so vivid and detailed that they can take the form of (what some psychologists call) flashbulb memories. It is almost as if a camera has gone off in one’s head, illuminating the scene, and preserving it forever in memory.

The Anastenaria indeed report such vivid memories of their participation, even many decades after the event. Needless to say, it is not possible to judge precisely the accuracy of those memories, although their details are expressed with tremendous confidence. Sometimes I recorded interviews of Anastenaria narrating these extraordinary experiences and then asked them to retell the same story several months later, and in some instances for a third time as well. Nearly always, the episodic details of those narratives were undifferentiated from the first ones. Again, though, this does not constitute proof that they were accurate descriptions of what happened many years earlier. The narrative might have crystallized into a coherent form through a period of recursive retelling – a

process that has been termed narrative consolidation (McCauley and Lawson 2002). Whitehouse (2004: 9) acknowledges that spontaneous exegetical reflection can occur independently of the accuracy of the person's memories. Indeed, it has been extensively documented that flashbulb memories following intensely emotional and even highly salient, life-altering events are prone to distortion, despite the usual strong confidence in their accuracy (Neisser and Harsch 1992; Talarico and Rubin 2003; Wolters and Goudsmit 2005; Conway et al. 2009; Hirst et al. 2009).

On the other hand, exceptionally emotional events do not necessarily produce such vivid flashbulb memories as the ones described by the Anastenaria, while in some cases extreme arousal might even lead to memory inhibition, producing no memories at all (Loftus and Kaufman 1992). However, there is some evidence that the process of spontaneous exegetical reflection can operate even in the absence of an original rich mnemonic imprinting.

In a study that my colleagues and I conducted in the Spanish village of San Pedro Manrique (Xygalatas et al. forthcoming), we investigated episodic memories for a highly arousing ritual. In this village, a fire-walking ceremony is performed every June as part of the festival of San Juan. Participants attribute extreme personal and cultural importance to this ritual, which they see as a cornerstone of their individual and collective identity. Using heart-rate monitors during the performance of the ritual, we confirmed that this ritual indeed caused tremendous physiological arousal, with individual heart rates during the fire-walk reaching maximum values between 154 and 193 bpm. Based on the participants' reports and on ratings of facial expressions, this event also seemed to produce extraordinary emotional arousal. In addition, we used five high-definition cameras to record the ceremony from every angle. After the event, we investigated participants' episodic memories for their performance at two time intervals, within two days of their performance as well as two months later, and used the video recordings to check for the accuracy of the reports. Our results showed that initial recall for the event was surprisingly low – indeed, most participants reported complete lack of memories of the event, and even when prompted they could recall very few details. Interestingly, after a two-month interval recall increased, and so did confidence in those memories. However, errors also increased, revealing a negative correlation between confidence and accuracy.

The possibility of such disruptions of memory in response to extreme emotional arousal has been well-documented (Bowman 1996; Brown et al. 1998; Joseph 1999; Bourget and Whitehurst 2007; Kikuchi et al. 2010). The empirical relationship between arousal and memory might be aptly described by the Yerkes–Dodson law, according to which performance and arousal are

related by an inverted U-shaped curve (Yerkes and Dodson 1908). According to this law, memory will increase with physiological or mental arousal up to a certain critical point, but when levels of arousal cross that threshold, recall will decrease. This can presumably be attributed to an adaptive memory-repression response system, aimed to cope with traumatic memories by keeping them out of awareness (Freyd 1994).

Admittedly this reduced memory effect we observed in Spain is not the standard pattern in imagistic rituals; vivid memories like the ones described by the *Anastenaria* seem to be a much more common result of participation in such rituals. However, it seems plausible that what Whitehouse calls spontaneous exegetical reflection is a process that might develop for highly arousing and personally consequential rituals independently of the presence or absence of episodic memories.

Cost and exegesis

For a plausible account of this pattern, we might once more turn to psychological theory. Social psychologists know that feelings, beliefs and attitudes motivate behaviour, but that the opposite can often also be true. Already at the end of the nineteenth century, William James proposed that emotions can be a result rather than the cause of emotional behaviour (1890), an idea which has been subsequently developed in various formulations (see Ryle 1949). Leon Festinger (1957; see also Festinger et al. 1956) argued that, contrary to our common intuitions, when behaviour is in discrepancy with explicitly held beliefs and values, people will often modify their beliefs so that they better fit their behaviour. He termed the occurrence of such discrepancies cognitive dissonance, a state which he argued causes psychological tension for the individual, who is thus motivated to try to reduce this tension by changing his or her beliefs. For example, smokers know that tobacco causes cancer, but they also wish to be healthy and live long. Thus, they experience cognitive dissonance between their desire to live a healthy life and their act of smoking, which will most likely shorten their lives. In order to resolve this problem, they could simply quit smoking. Instead, many smokers try to rationalize their behaviour, for example by downplaying the dangers of smoking, by saying that they do not want to live forever or by arguing that if smoking does not kill them something else will (Halpern 1994).

In a classic experiment, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) asked two groups of people to perform a series of particularly tedious tasks and then to try to convince someone that they were actually interesting and engaging. The first group received \$20 for their participation, while the second received only \$1.

In addition, a control group performed the tasks without having to engage in persuasion. Finally, participants were asked to rate the boring tasks, and those in the \$1 group rated them as significantly more interesting compared to the other two groups. According to the experimenters' interpretation, participants experienced cognitive dissonance between two conflicting cognitions (finding the task boring and telling someone that it was interesting). Those who received \$20 had a good reason for lying and were ready to admit that the task was indeed boring. In contrast, those who only received \$1 had no justification for sitting through the tedious tasks and tried to rationalize their behaviour by changing their attitudes towards these tasks.

In this light, the accounts of the fire-walkers could be interpreted as an act of self-justification. Fire-walking is a costly, physically demanding and potentially dangerous action. Surely, all people think that such actions should only be performed for good reason. To admit that one has done it without really knowing why would create dissonance, which will produce a motivational drive to either change one's actions or one's beliefs. But what is done cannot be undone; the ritual has already been performed and this cannot ever change, unlike the attitudes towards the event, which can be modified. Therefore, the person is convinced that there must have been an important reason for performing these actions.

Some reformulations of Festinger's theory have pointed out that the cause of cognitive dissonance may lie not in conflict between cognitions, but possibly in conflict between one's actions and one's positive self-concept (Aronson 1969) or public self-image (Tedeschi et al. 1971). Others have argued that dissonance stems not from inconsistency but from aversive consequences (Cooper and Fazio 1984) or the need for self-affirmation (Steele 1988). One disputable issue with the theory of cognitive dissonance is the idea that the documented attitudinal change is seen as a response to a hypothesized unpleasant tension, which might be viewed as a superfluous and speculative construct reminiscent of Freudian psychology. Notwithstanding, experimental research has shown that dissonance can have measurable psychological and physiological properties (Zanna and Cooper 1974; Cooper and Fazio 1984).

Nonetheless, a more parsimonious alternative version of this view has been offered by attribution theory, which proposes an explanation for such phenomena without the need to posit any internal negative drive state. According to this theory, people intuitively seek reasons for observable events in their environment in order to make sense of their world, and this extends not only to natural phenomena but also to behaviours. Thus, we are inclined to make causal assumptions about why people behave as they do (Heider 1958; Jones et al. 1972; Weiner 1974, 1980, 1986). Since we cannot observe psychological states, we observe behaviours and infer personal traits which

may be the cause of those behaviours. In this process, attitudes can be seen as a function of behaviour and the environmental pressures that give rise to that behaviour (Cooper 1996).

One type of attribution theory, self-perception theory (Bem 1967, 1972), stresses that we often (unconsciously) infer our own attitudes from our behaviour, just like we do when observing other people's behaviour (Kelley 1967; Nisbett and Valins 1972). Thus, those who are asked to make a speech supporting a specific political party or attend a rally to support this party will then be more likely to express pro-party opinions. Indeed, numerous experimental studies have confirmed this prediction. For example, participants who were asked to move their heads up and down (as in nodding yes) while listening to music that contained a persuasive message were more likely to agree with the message than those who were asked to move their heads in a horizontal manner (as if nodding no; Wells and Petty 1980). Similar effects have been demonstrated for a wide variety of feelings and behaviours (Bem 1965, 1966; Cioffi and Garner 1966; Freedman and Fraser 1966; Laird and Bresler 1992; Zimbardo et al. 1969; Niedenthal et al. 2005).

Although the nuances of those related theories and the exact mechanisms at play have not yet been settled, it has been thoroughly established that behaviours can influence attitudes and beliefs, and this has very important implications for the study of ritual. People are motivated to justify costly expenditures of effort by attributing salience and purpose to their actions, a process known as effort justification. This can provide a psychological explanation for the ubiquity of initiation rituals. When we bear a substantial cost in order to join a group, we consider this group to be more important, whether this is because it relieves the negative feeling of having gone through the ordeal for nothing or simply because we unconsciously infer the importance of the group based on the high costs we sustained. Thus, the higher the cost of participation, the more we will value membership.

In a classic experiment conducted by Aronson and Mills (1959), college women went through an "embarrassment test" in order to join a sexual discussion club and then listened to a recording of one of the group's sessions. Those girls who underwent a severe initiation (high embarrassment) subsequently evaluated the group as more attractive than did those who went through a mild initiation (low embarrassment) and the control group (no initiation). A few years later, Gerard and Mathewson (1966) ran a more elaborate version of this experiment. They recruited college women and gave them electric shocks as part of a "test of emotionality". Participants in one group were told that this was a "screening process" to enter a discussion group (initiation), while those in the other group were told that it was a psychological experiment (non-initiation). Furthermore, half of the participants in

each condition were given strong shocks, while the other half received barely perceivable shocks. After the administration of the shocks, subjects listened to and evaluated a tedious group discussion. Results showed that those who anticipated joining the group (initiation) evaluated both the discussion and the participants more highly compared to those who had no such expectation (no initiation). Furthermore, subjects in the non-initiation condition reported liking the group less when they received severe shocks. In contrast, those in the initiation condition liked the group more when they received severe shocks compared to the mild shocks.

As these findings suggest, participation in a costly ritual may produce a sense of importance for this activity and appreciation for the group. Obviously, this does not mean that by taking part in a ritual one automatically becomes an avid follower of the tradition. Prospective participants are typically already members of the same intricate cultural network, which is laden with specific meanings, symbols and cosmological explanations based on which they have specific expectations, presuppositions and insights about the way the world operates. Those individuals who are drawn to the Anastenaria, for example, are bound to have certain culturally imposed assumptions, that is that there is an all-powerful God and various saints who often act as intermediaries between him and human beings, that the icons of the saints have certain powers, that the performance of rituals may influence the state of the world and so on. Belief in the significance, necessity and/or efficacy of a ritual action can provide sufficient motivation for its performance. In addition, however, participation itself may have a significant effect on these attitudes, resulting in the reinforcement of this behavioural pattern (Sosis 2003).

Arousal as a provider of meaning

Based on the above considerations, it seems plausible that, contrary to the Greek Orthodox doctrines and rituals, which are transmitted through repetition and by professional religious experts and are policed by religious and political authorities, in the tradition of the Anastenaria arousal plays an important role in the evocation and transmission of religious knowledge.

Ritual behaviour is a special kind of behaviour; it does not originate from the intentional states of the performers and is irreducible to any set of technical motivations, as there is no causal connection between a ritual action and its presumed outcome (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; McCauley 2005). Thus, ritual actions are by definition non-utilitarian, and their associated meanings and purposes are obscure, very often even to the participants, who nonetheless willingly perform them. The following anecdote from my

fieldwork may provide an illustration of this point. Once in every festival, one of the numerous processions of the Anastenaria makes a stop at a specific house and its members enter the building and are treated with a cup of coffee or some sweet. Then, the musicians start playing and everybody climbs an external staircase that leads to the second floor, where there is a special room (*eikonostasi*) for the household's icons. People enter the room and dance in front of the icons. The first time I attended this event, something unusual caught my attention. The Anastenaria had worked themselves into a frenzied dance and some of them were crying out loud, seemingly ready to collapse. When the dance came to an end, they formed a queue and one by one they fell on their knees and started worshipping something that was laid on the floor. The house was very crowded and it was hard for me to see what it was – at first I assumed it was an icon. People were crossing themselves in front of the item, bowing profoundly and kissing it with enthusiasm. As they left their turn to the next worshipper, they seemed very emotionally charged and some of them were crying. When the crowd started to break, I was able to see that there was no icon on the floor, but only a piece of cloth. Later that evening, I asked a woman who had been worshipping the cloth in tears, looking so emotional, to tell me what was so special about this spot on the floor. To my astonishment, she answered, “I don't know!” I then asked one of the men that appeared most emotional during this homage to the cloth, and he also replied that he didn't know. A third participant told me that a mark had appeared on that spot, which was a miraculous sign of Christ himself. Later, talking to the owners of the house, I found out that this was not accurate. The reason the specific piece of cloth was laid on the floor was that this household owned a miraculous icon, that of Saint Sotira, which was kept at another village (Strymoniko). This was simply the icon's “cloth”, placed on the floor as a substitute for the actual icon.

Similar observations are very common among anthropologists (e.g. see Van Gennep 1911; Lévi-Strauss 1971; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Boyer 2002), whose questions on the goals of people's rituals are often met with puzzled looks and vague references to the elders and ancestors. As Frits Staal emphatically stated (1989), religious rituals are often considered deeply meaningful but in fact ritual has no intrinsic meaning in itself; whatever meaning people find in ritual actions typically “consists in interpretations of these actions rather than content transmitted by these actions” (Boyer 2005: 14; also see Sperber 1975; Rappaport 1999; Paul 2002). In “doctrinal” systems, religious meaning is provided by the authorities, and therefore is readily endorsed by the participants. But in “imagistic” traditions there is usually no such mechanism to attribute an explicit meaning to ritual actions, and such meaning is internally generated by the participants. The physiological and emotional arousal

involved in the performance of such intense rituals, coupled with the utter consequentiality that is attributed to those events by the participants, trigger a need for interpretation and continuous reflection. The sense of significance and the absence of any official theoretical schema into which it would fit, lead to personal, idiosyncratic interpretations that are gradually reinforced through subsequent participation in and narration of those events.

According to Whitehouse, the formation of exegetical concepts is crucial for the motivational drive to maintain and transmit these actions. The feeling created in the participants that a special role has been assigned to them provides the necessary motivation for them to disseminate these practices. Of course, the Anastenaria also include a series of low-arousal practices, and according to the fire-walkers those are of equal importance to the tradition. These practices lack any kind of official exegesis and/or authorization and, as they are actually opposed by the authorities, we would normally expect them to die out. Fire-walking also lacks official interpretation, but thanks to its highly arousing nature it manages to generate its own idiosyncratic exegetical justifications, which proves sufficient to motivate ongoing transmission for the low-arousal elements as well. Finally, the very juxtaposition between the doctrinal nature of the general religious framework and the highly arousing practice of fire-walking amplifies the effects of the latter for the participants and further contributes to the survival of this tradition.

But why should participants in high-arousal rituals feel that a special role has been assigned to them? How can such rituals create a sense of “revelation” for them, as Whitehouse argues? And how exactly does this revelation motivate the transmission of these actions? When we go through a traumatic experience, this certainly has a marked and lasting impact on us. But that does not usually mean that we want to inflict such traumas on others after our own experience – on the contrary. Ritual experiences, however, are usually viewed as intrinsically positive, even when they involve pain and suffering. So what is it about such experiences that motivates their participation and transmission? The next chapter will attempt to tackle these questions by attempting to link arousal to motivation at the physiological level.

Chapter 8 has examined the ways in which religious knowledge is disseminated within the context in which the Anastenaria are performed, revealing two distinct dynamics of transmission: on the one hand, the rituals and doctrines of the mainstream Greek Orthodox Church are transmitted through intensive and repetitive teaching, review and patrolling, not only from the Church but to a significant extent also from the state. On the other hand, the Anastenaria have no official doctrines, no sacred texts and no designated experts on dogmatic issues. Religious knowledge is not explicitly taught but is rather “revealed” to the Anastenaria through participation and personal experience

as well as through myths and narratives. This bipolar pattern of religious transmission is not unique to the Anastenaria and has been noted by ritual theorists who have pointed that ritual traditions around the world tend to be either highly repetitive and unexciting or infrequent and highly stimulating, and that each of these two combinations has major and far-reaching implications for the way these rituals are perceived and transmitted. In particular, it has been proposed that participation in highly arousing rituals tends to lead to increased exegetical reflection, producing a sense of meaning and providing motivation for the continuation of the practice. Indeed, there is abundant convergent evidence to suggest that performing an action can lead participants to modify their attitudes and that the more arousing or costly the action the more significant and meaningful it is perceived to be, even in the absence of any apparent utility. This powerful phenomenon of attribution of meaning and salience might be one of the main reasons why high-arousal rituals have and will be found in abundance around the world.

Chapter 9 will focus on the consequences of engaging in high-arousal rituals on a body level, attempting to uncover some of the physiological processes that may mediate the experience of performing such rituals.

9

The physiology of high-arousal rituals

As we have seen, the role of arousal in the transmission of rituals has already been emphasized. Harvey Whitehouse has claimed that emotional arousal is one of the two critical factors that determine a particular ritual's success (1995, 2000, 2002a, 2004; also see chapter 6). Lawson and McCauley have also recognized the role of arousal, referring to emotionally provocative sensory arousal, or "sensory pageantry" as they call it (1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002). Both Whitehouse and Lawson and McCauley also agree that arousal can have significant implications for the motivation of participants to maintain and transmit those rituals. This chapter will attempt to shed some light on this connection between arousal and motivation.

Arousal and consciousness

High-arousal rituals have by virtue of their form certain properties that often allow them to induce exceptional feelings, sensations and perceptions in their performers. The relation between the practice of stressful and strenuous ritual activities and altered states of consciousness has long been noted (e.g. Ludwig 1968). It seems that certain rituals may alter consciousness by eliciting the appropriate responses of the brain. Stress, physical exhaustion, sensory overload, repetitive music, dancing, fasting, the use of psychoactive drugs, all are some of the components of high-arousal rituals around the world that can have profound effects on consciousness.

Consciousness is a much-debated subject, and there is no commonly accepted definition of it. The many theories of consciousness that have been proposed are beyond the scope of this volume, but there is a consensus among scientists that there is no single central place in the brain, no "Cartesian Theater" as it were, where conscious experience takes place (Dennett 1991;

Dennett and Kinsbourne 1992; Hamer 2004); that is, consciousness is not a simple linear stream but a conglomerate of various permissive processes or properties within the brain (S. Greenfield 2000: 41). One such factor is arousal.

Through physiological arousal, stressful and physically demanding activities can result in the modulation of neurotransmitter levels and effectively alter consciousness. Several (although not all) of the Anastenaria often seem to experience an altered state of consciousness when they dance or fire-walk. In an empirical study that was conducted among the Anastenaria of Lagkadas (Ballis et al. 1979), an electroencephalogram (EEG) was used to measure the electrical activity in the brains of fire-walkers. Results showed increased cortical theta wave activity during the performance of dancing and related ritual actions, which has been linked with states of reduced consciousness such as drowsiness, hypnosis, meditation and trance (Aftanas and Golosheykin 2003, 2005; Cahn and Polich 2006; Winkelman 2006).

Indeed, to the external observer, some of the Anastenaria appear to be in trance when they dance, moving in repetitive and automatic movements and not responding to external stimuli. This does not happen to all of the dancers, and young participants generally seem to enter such a state more easily. This became particularly obvious when I studied video recordings of the ritual that I or others had obtained in the field. In these recordings it was evident that there were great individual differences. Some dancers would often turn around in response to a loud noise, alter their pace if someone got in their way, and occasionally fix their eye-gaze on a person or an object – often the camera. Others, in contrast, would never be distracted; they didn't respond to external noises, they stumbled on people who got in their way and showed no eye-gaze fixation whatsoever. Some participants did not even blink when a flash shone straight at their eyes. The majority of these latter participants who appeared to be in a state of altered consciousness were novice to the ritual. Several of them explicitly claimed to fall into trance while dancing, while some argued that they were possessed by Saint Constantine.

As Mihalis I'm afraid, but as an Anastenaris I'm not. When I go into the fire, someone else is leading me – the Saint. As Mihalis I may say stupid things, but on *those* days, as an Anastenaris, I don't. It's the Saint who's talking. When I start to dance on the fire, my spirit changes. Bodily Mihalis goes into the fire, but spiritually the Saint does. Even I [notice the emphasis on the I here] wonder why I'm not in control of myself then. Before I go into the fire, I have my own mind. I'm afraid of the fire, and think, "How can I go in? I'll get burnt." Then, when I get to the fire, Mihalis changes. I go in

as if I weren't Mihalis. (interview with a middle-aged Anastenaris, from Danforth 1989: 20; emphasis in original)

Thus, the performance of the ritual often seems to have profound effects on the participants' consciousness. As we will see, this can be expected in activities that involve such high levels of arousal. Intense arousal can have effects at the brain level that may radically change perception and consciousness, and actually produce meaning for those rituals and increase motivation for their performance.

The runner's high

In 1980, professor of psychiatry Raymond Prince organized a conference in Toronto entitled "Shamans and Endorphins". In this conference, it was suggested for the first time that phenomena such as shamanism, ritual trance and ritual healing do not operate only "on the basis of psychological processes such as denial...but also stimulate, aid, and reinforce endogenous healing properties" (Wedenoja 1981: 6). Since then, several other scholars have pointed to the role of endorphins in high-arousal rituals (Winkelman 1986, 1992, 1997, 2000, 2006; Dunbar 2006, 2009; Dunbar et al. 2005). But what exactly are endorphins?

Endorphins are hormones synthesized by the pituitary gland and hypothalamus of the brain. They were discovered in the 1970s by researchers who were studying drug addiction. Investigators had found receptors in the human brain for chemicals produced by the poppy plant, such as opium, heroin and morphine, and reasoned that these receptors could not have evolved in order to give us pleasure from synthetic drugs but must have some adaptive function. Indeed, it was eventually found that the brain produces its own set of neurochemicals which trigger the same neural receptors with opioid drugs. These substances were named endorphins (from endomorphines, meaning "morphines from within").

Endogenous opioids such as the endorphins are released in times of stress, arousal and pain; they interact with opiate receptor neurons, which are especially prevalent in the limbic system and affect emotion and motivation (Hebb et al. 2005). Their best-known function is their strong analgesic effects. Many pain-killing drugs activate these receptors to reduce the intensity of pain, and acupuncture presumably works in a similar way, mechanically stimulating the production of endogenous opioids (Han 2004; Sun et al. 2008). The effects of endogenous opioids can be reversed by naloxone, an opioid antagonist substance that is known to function

as an antidote (Lewanowitsch et al. 2006). Experiments have shown that those who have been administered naloxone display greater sensitivity to pain and are less susceptible to the pain-relieving effects of acupuncture (S. Greenfield 2000: 83).

From an evolutionary perspective, pain perception has a crucial survival value; it can function as a warning that we are too close to a fire; or that a sharp object is dangerous; or even remind us to change our body posture before we get thrombosis. But in some cases pain can become maladaptive, for example by distracting us from focusing on lethal danger or preventing us from fighting or fleeing at some crucial moment. In such circumstances, our body releases opioid substances like enkephalin, beta-endorphin and other tranquilizing agents to produce desensitization to pain (Jilek 1982: 301; Bodnar 1990; Szekely 1990; Hebb et al. 2005). If we get hurt while fighting or being chased by a predator, it is crucial for our survival that we continue running or fighting (Zotterman 1976; Hardcastle 1997). People who have been attacked and amputated by sharks often report that they didn't feel any pain during the attack (Baldrige 1977), and soldiers often get severely injured in battle without realizing it at that moment (Beecher 1959; Gardner and Licklider 1959). Experiments conducted on animals have shown that mere exposure to the presence of a predator can produce analgesia (Lester and Fanselow 1985), and pain itself can result in the increase of endorphin production, which eventually brings about analgesic effects.

Prolonged, strenuous exercise causes the pituitary gland to release substantial quantities of endorphins, resulting in a feeling of euphoria and refreshment that is commonly known as the "runner's high" (Wildman et al. 1986; Boecker et al. 2008), as it has been most commonly observed in marathon runners and other athletes. This endorphin "rush" can even become addictive, and some people may seek strenuous activities such as excessive exercise or extreme sports. This effect is common in athletes who cannot stop training even when serious injuries or illnesses occur, because they are "relentlessly searching for endorphin-induced mood elevations" (Chapman and De Castro 1990; Pierce et al. 1993).

Certain stressful rituals such as the Anastenaria have all the properties that would result in an excessive release of endogenous opioids. The stress involved in the preparation for the fire-walk, the intense physical activity involved in dancing for the better part of three days, sleep deprivation, sensory stimulation (caused at all levels by the suggestive music, the sighs of the Anastenaria and the cheers of the crowd, the smell and the burning sensation of the coals, the view of the frantic dancers) and dehydration caused by sweating while dancing for many hours, are all factors that can be directly related to the release of endogenous opioids.

Increased endorphin release can have short-term analgesic effects, and can therefore function to reduce sensitivity to heat and the feeling of pain during the performance of fire-walking. Of course, this does not mean that this increased endorphin production would actually protect the fire-walkers from getting burnt. After all, the shark attack victims who didn't realize that they had their limb bitten off by the shark were still mutilated nonetheless. The fact that fire-walkers do not get burnt can be attributed to the poor conductivity of coal. Let's imagine that we are baking bread in the oven at 250° Celsius. If we insert our hand in the oven and touch the metal pan for one second, we are guaranteed to get a burn or a blister; however, if we touch the bread for one second, although it has the same temperature as the pan (and for that matter so does the air surrounding it), we will not get a burn, although we will still feel the heat (Leikind and McCarthy 1985, 1988). This happens because metal is an excellent thermal conductor, while bread is not. Similarly, walking on hot coals will normally not cause injury to our feet, because wood is one of the poorest thermal conductors.¹ Nonetheless, exposure to such high temperatures can still be painful. But if endorphin levels are particularly high during the fire-walk, fire-walkers might not feel any pain at all. In fact, several fire-walkers have commented on the fact that they feel pain when they handle hot objects but not while walking on the red-burning coals.

One year, a scholar had come to investigate the ritual. He was sitting next to the village president and the policeman, explaining his theories on fire-walking; he had written a book or something about them. He was saying that the Anastenaria dance barefoot all day and their feet harden, and that a protective layer of mud gathers around them. If they took their shoes off just before crossing the fire, then they would certainly get burnt. At that moment, I was dancing with my shoes on (I never dance barefoot), unaware of this conversation. Then I took my shoes off and went straight to the fire. After the fire-walk, the scholar came to the *konaki* and asked to examine my feet. He saw nothing unusual; they were completely unharmed by the fire. When we left the *konaki*, I stepped on a burning cigarette that the drummer had dropped on the ground. I jumped up, and exclaimed "Giorgos, that's a very bad habit you have, throwing your cigarettes to the ground without putting them out!" The scholar told me in surprise, "Don't tell me you got burnt now!" "Of course I did", I answered. I raised my foot and he saw a blister. "You didn't get burnt by such a big fire, and you got burnt by a cigarette?", he said. I replied, "That one was God's fire; this one is the Devil's." (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

In addition to reduced pain perception, increased endorphin production can also bring about feelings of euphoria, placidity, tranquillity or even ecstasy (Boecker et al. 2008). These feelings follow a state of stress or terror in some rituals without any obvious reason, and subjects commonly (depending also on their general worldview) attribute this sudden shift and the relief that it brings to supernatural intervention (Henry 1982; Prince 1982a) and speak of miraculous healing (Freckska and Kulcsar 1989). The same can often happen in cases of near-death experiences, which produce extremely high levels of stress (see Potts 2002; Noyes 1980).

The other high

Another important class of brain chemicals are monoamines, neurotransmitters and neuromodulators that consist of a single amino group. Some of the best-known monoamines of the brain are dopamine (DA), serotonin (5-HT), norepinephrine or noradrenaline (NA) and epinephrine (Epi). Like endorphins, monoamines can alter perception, attention and emotion, and provide motivation by triggering reward mechanisms in the brain (Damasio 2000; Horvitz 2000; Martin-Soelch et al. 2001; Bressan and Crippa 2005). They are the biochemical mediators of emotions and values (Hamer 2004: 103).

Dopamine plays a central role in the brain's pleasure and reward systems, involved not only in identifying rewards but also in providing motivation to actively seek them. All of the known addictions, including drugs, alcohol, food and sex, are effective partly because of their ability to stimulate the frontal dopaminergic system (Schultz 1997; Grigson 2002; Wise 2005; McNamara 2006). Serotonin, however, is associated with the inhibition of negative emotions. In a sense, dopamine is the brain's carrot, while serotonin is its stick (Hamer 2004: 113). Serotonin also plays a key role in defining levels of consciousness, such as sleep and wakefulness. Norepinephrine affects attention, increasing the susceptibility of the brain to sensory input, and plays an important role in the consolidation of long-term memory (Southwick et al. 2002). Finally, epinephrine is probably the most commonly known neurotransmitter, more often by the name adrenalin. It activates a fight-or-flight response in the brain, preparing the body for emergency action. (These are only some of the most basic functions of these substances. The role of neurotransmitters is much broader and more complex, and still not fully known to us.)

Recently, a significant link between certain monoamines, frontal lobe functions and religiosity has become apparent, based on convergent evidence from clinical and neuroimaging research. Studies have found that genes

associated with monoamines can influence religiosity (Comings et al. 2000; Hamer 2004). Serotonin levels have been found to increase with the practice of meditation (Walton et al. 2005). Disorders associated with excessive dopaminergic functioning, such as schizophrenia and obsessive-compulsive disorder, are also associated with high levels of religiosity (Abramowitz et al. 2002; Deeley 2004; Brewerton 1994; Saver and Rabin 1997; Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998; Hamer 2004; Park and McNamara 2006; Rogers and Paloutzian 2006). On the other hand, recent studies have shown that patients suffering from Parkinson's Disease, which is associated with particularly low dopamine levels, display significantly lower levels of religiosity (McNamara et al. 2006; Park and McNamara 2006).

It has long been known that hallucinogenic drugs, which effectively modulate monoamine (and especially serotonin) levels in the brain, can provoke strong mystical or religious experiences (Barnard 1963; Pahnke 1963, 1967; Doblin 1991; Nichols and Chemel 2006; Lerner and Lyvers 2006). Due to this property, such drugs have been described as entheogens, which means "generating an experience of God within" (Ruck et al. 1979; also see Roberts 2006). Psychedelic substances can alter cortical function and sensory gating to produce a feeling of increased awareness and reality of one's own experience (Freedman 1968) and "a powerful and profound sense that something ominous or momentous is about to occur or is occurring, producing awe or amazement" (Nichols and Chemel 2006: 16–17).

Due to their strong effects and side-effects and their addictive nature, hallucinogens are not typically used in experiments with human subjects today, and most of the clinical data from such experiments come from the 1950s and 1960s. One of the best-known experiments of this kind was conducted in 1962 by Harvard professor Walter Pahnke, and became commonly known as "the Good Friday Experiment" (Pahnke 1963, 1967; also see Doblin 1991). Pahnke designed a double-blind experiment, where twenty Protestant divinity students were administered small capsules before attending the Good Friday service in Boston University's Marsh Chapel (hence this experiment is also known as "the Marsh Chapel Experiment"). Half of the subjects took capsules that contained 30 mg of psilocybin (an active ingredient found in psychoactive mushrooms with mind-altering effects similar to those of LSD), while the other half was given active placebos (nicotinic acid). After the service, participants were interviewed and two extensive follow-up questionnaires were administered one week and six months after the experiment. Pahnke's hypothesis was that the hallucinogen, administered on religious subjects and within a relevant religious setting, would induce experiences indistinguishable from spontaneous mystical experiences.

Pahnke used a numerical scale and blind independent raters to quantify the experiences of the subjects in nine categories of mystical experiences (see table below). The subjects who received the hallucinogen reported significantly more mystical experiences than those of the control group. Six months later, the difference was even more significant. Nine out of ten students that had taken the hallucinogen reported religious or mystical experiences, compared to only one of ten in the placebo group. More than two decades later, Rick Doblin (1991) conducted follow-up interviews with Pahnke’s original subjects. This study showed that all of the subjects of the experimental group reported that experience as having a genuine mystical nature and long-lasting contributions to their religiosity. All of them considered it as one of the high-points of their spiritual lives, and some even reported that this experience was the strongest spiritual event of their lives. Some also reported that the content of this experience was specifically related to the Christian message and the life of Jesus. None of the control group subjects reported any similar experience. In addition, all experimental subjects had had vivid memories of portions of their experience, while most of the control subjects could barely remember even a few details of the service.

Table. “Good Friday Experiment” experimental and control groups at six-month and long-term follow-up (from Doblin 1991)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Experimentals</i>		<i>Controls</i>	
	<i>Six-month</i>	<i>Long-term</i>	<i>Six-month</i>	<i>Long-term</i>
Unity A. Internal	60	(77)	5	(5)
B. External	39	(51)	1	(6)
Transcendence of time and space	78	(73)	7	(9)
Deeply felt positive mood	54	(56)	23	(21)
Sacredness	58	(68)	25	(29)
Objectivity and reality	71	(82)	18	(24)
Paradoxicality	34	(48)	3	(4)
Alleged ineffability	77	(71)	15	(3)
Transiency	76	(75)	9	(9)
Average for the categories	60.8	(66.8)	11.8	(12.2)

At six-month follow-up experiment $n = 10$, control $n = 10$

At long-term follow-up (in parenthesis) experiment $n = 7$, control $n = 9$

$p < .05$ for all category comparisons at both six months and long-term

The dopamine salience hypothesis

Since the administration of narcotics to human subjects poses obvious ethical problems, a safer way to understand the function of certain neurotransmitters is by studying specific mental conditions that are associated with abnormal levels of these chemicals. For example, extreme levels of dopamine are typically produced in schizophrenic patients and further increase before and during psychotic episodes (Strange 1992; Abi-Dargham et al. 2000; S. Greenfield 2000; Howard 2006). Schizophrenic behaviour can also be caused by certain drugs that increase dopamine levels such as amphetamines. In addition, similar results can be produced by the modulation of neurotransmitter levels through extreme stress and physiological and/or emotional arousal.

For this reason, it has been noted that high-arousal rituals can temporarily produce effects similar to those of schizophrenia (Frecska and Kulcsar 1989; Deeley 2004; Winkelman 2006). By drawing this analogy it is not by any means implied that the people who perform rituals such as the Anastenaria are schizophrenics or otherwise mentally impaired. The hypothesis advanced here treats certain mental conditions as similar to high-arousal rituals only to the extent that they can both alter consciousness in similar ways (Polimeni and Reiss 2008). However, we shall also see how religious rituals differ from such conditions, as well as from other highly stressful activities.

According to the “motivational salience hypothesis” (Kapur 2003; Deeley 2004), dopamine mediates the representation of the available external stimuli, producing a sense of a highly attractive or aversive reality, assigning salience and motivational importance to an experience. In other words, a brain dopaminergic state leads to a salient experience at a mind level (Kapur 2003). Whether drug-induced, stress-related or organically caused, extreme dopamine levels may cause subjects to experience delusions and hallucinations to which they attribute the utmost significance. Antipsychotic medication is mainly aimed to block dopamine receptors in the brain, thus lessening this sense of salience.

In moderate quantities, dopamine can enhance neuronal sensitivity and connectivity, resulting in a state of hyperactive brain networking. This is the pleasurable effect that some drug users seek when using amphetamines: a euphoric bombardment of sensations, stripped of any inner meaning (S. Greenfield 2000: 115–16). Extreme sports and dangerous activities offer a similar kind of pleasure by focusing the brain on raw sensations and emotions, and people who become addicted to such activities experience feelings of anhedonia during regular (low-arousal) daily activities (Price and Bundesen 2005; Franken et al. 2006).

However, when dopamine levels become excessive, as happens in certain mental conditions or with drug abuse, neuronal communication is impaired due to overload and inner processing of external stimuli is even more minimal. A flow of rapidly incoming sensations overwhelms the brain, producing, in the words of William James (1890: 488), “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (see S. Greenfield 2000: 115–16). But the human brain evolved to process and integrate complex information incessantly, and if deprived of such information it will produce it itself (Park and McNamara 2006), “filling in or extrapolating missing information, creating sensory constructs where none exist” (Nichols and Chemel 2006: 25), just as it does during dreaming. Stored memories, ideas and emotions are reshuffled, and an alternate reality is constructed, conditioned by the individual’s cultural context and experience. Under these circumstances, visions, hallucinations, delusions and apocalyptic moments can occur.

Such apocalyptic moments are common in many high-arousal rituals (Polimeni and Reiss 2008). Similarly, the Anastenaria often reported having hallucinations during the performance of the ritual, and particularly during the strenuous process of dancing inside the *konaki*. For example, one woman reported, “As I was dancing, I raised my eyes, and the ceiling was gone. There was nothing! I saw the sky above me, clear and blue. I saw the angels in white clothes, dancing and singing the Great Doxology” (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa). Other fire-walkers reported having seen Saint Constantine talking to them or dancing with them, while a woman told me that she saw (and felt) Saint Helen pouring water in front of her feet while she was fire-walking.

Another common effect of dopamine is a feeling of increased awareness and tremendous importance (Kapur 2003). This is in accordance with numerous statements that fire-walkers made reflecting on their own experience: “This experience has changed the way I see the world, the way I deal with things.” “It has opened my eyes.” “It has made me notice small details that I thought were insignificant before” (personal interviews with fire-walkers). In this process, the person invests top-down cognitive explanations on these experiences of extreme salience and significance in an attempt to rationalize an otherwise confusing sensation. These feelings are so powerful that they can often lead to apocalyptic insights. Characteristically, some of them said, “I came to realize that the whole universe was conspiring to bring me here to perform the ritual.” “I was called by Saint Constantine to perform the ritual.” “I realized that it was my destiny to become a fire-walker” (personal interviews with fire-walkers). Once a person arrives at such an explanation, it serves as a guiding cognitive scheme, an overall framework of further action and thought, driving him or her to find further confirmatory evidence even in the most mundane

and insignificant details (Kapur 2003: 15). Eventually, participants may develop a grand theory of their entire existence using a kind of post hoc reasoning to justify previous actions.

Stressful rituals can trigger a search for meaning. The sensory and emotional extravagance involved in high-arousal rituals begs interpretation, and dopamine can produce a feeling of significance and utter reality for this experience and contribute to a sense of supernatural intervention. Performers can feel that a special role has been assigned to them by the gods, and this provides motivation for them to maintain and transmit the ritual. If I take part in a group activity in the context of which I feel and I am considered by others to be special, then it is in my interest to help preserve and disseminate this activity. The more people consider this ritual to be important and meaningful, the more my own status rises. And this doesn't have to be a conscious process. In addition, as we have seen, these events can be considered highly consequential for the participant, as the Anastenaria often claim to have been healed of serious psychological conditions thanks to the performance of the ritual.

Fire-walkers also display a tendency to search retrospectively for connections between their experience and any kind of subsequent strange event. There appear to be people who perform the ritual without any specific reason and then begin to find a special meaning in it.

I realized that it was my destiny to become a fire-walker. Things were happening to me. Things that were not accidental. There was a whole set of what seemed to be coincidences, which I later realized were simply part of my life's nexus. In my village, in the mountains of Arkadia, there is a custom where the participants run to the mountain and climb barefoot on very harsh terrain full of sharp stones and thorns, and when they come back their feet are intact. Just like the fire-walkers go through the fire without getting burnt. This was happening at my village, you see....

Another thing is that I used to go climbing on the mountain, and I would always set my tent up and sleep at this place. Later, they told me that at that specific spot there used to be an ancient chapel of Constantine and Helen.... This way, I was naturally led to fire-walking through a process that I came to realize was my destiny. At the beginning I was thinking about it all the time, trying to find explanations. Now, even my personal reflections have stopped. I have stopped wondering. (personal interview with a young Anastenaris)

Similarly, people attribute dreams, illnesses, recoveries, deaths and all sorts of “signs” to their experience of fire-walking and their permanent connection to the saints that this brings about. And sometimes they seem to be seeking those connections really desperately. One woman once told me various dreams that she had had, and attributed a meaning related to the saints to each one of them. Finally, she described another dream, and told me, “This dream I had twenty years ago, and I still haven’t been able to find a meaning for it. But I am sure that one day something will happen to me in such a way that the dream will make sense” (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa).

Context matters

Of course, the effects of extreme stress and physiological stimulation are not unique to religious rituals. As we have already seen, similar neurochemical procedures may take place in the brain during the practice of various high-arousal activities. For example, engaging in activities that involve short but extremely intense bursts of arousal, such as bungee jumping, skydiving or flying a fighter aircraft, can rocket dopamine and adrenaline levels. On the other hand, activities that involve prolonged strenuous effort, such as long-distance running, can produce an endorphin rush known as the “runner’s high”. Other activities can modify brain activity in multiple ways. A raver who has taken amphetamines while jumping rhythmically for several hours to the loud repetitive beat of the music, under strong flashing lights, heavily dehydrated because of sweating and alcohol, can enter a trance-like state where perception is radically altered and hallucinations appear. So, one might ask, why do ravers not attribute these states to divine intervention? Why do they not typically have apocalyptic insights? Why do they not build worldviews around these activities?

To answer this question, we must consider the relevant context in which each phenomenon occurs and how this context differentiates between experiences. Visions and hallucinations violate our intuitive and empirical expectations regarding reality and our own perception. They are extraordinary events that nonetheless feel fully real, and this is something that begs explanation. If such hallucinations are caused by recreational drug use, the result is expected and indeed desirable. In higher doses, these effects can be exaggerated and scary. Pleasure can turn into fear and hallucinations into nightmares, causing the infamous “bad trip”. However, the presence of powerful, rhythmic and repeated stimuli, such as music and dancing, can drive the brain through the raw sensations. Despite the blurred sense of self-consciousness, the experience

of the raver is structured and contains no surprises, which can lead to a pleasurable sensational experience (S. Greenfield 2000).

The experience of the schizophrenic is similar to that of the bad trip. However, while the latter experience can be readily attributed to its pharmacological causes, the schizophrenic subject does not have the faintest idea about what is going on and needs to make sense of the situation. Even in a psychotic state, the mind will try to rationalize these incomprehensible experiences that feel so real and troubling, and will eventually come up with a theory. This theory might seem crazy to an outsider, but for the subject, given the “facts” as he or she perceives them, it will be the only explanation that makes sense of this blooming, buzzing confusion. And since these delusional explanations are constructed by the individual, they will be based on what is already in store, conditioned by the patient’s relevant cultural context (Kapur 2003: 15). Thus, a psychotic subject in Texas might speak of a conspiracy organized by communists or extraterrestrials, while a villager in Cameroon might speak of spirits or witches.

Finally, in ecstatic rituals such experiences occur within a highly structured context in which hallucinations, visions and other revelatory experiences are welcome and even expected. In fact, it has been argued that even when they do not produce them, such rituals function as a means of simulating religious visions by providing a rapid succession of semantically loaded imagery, which is associated with the current somatosensory experience, related to an existing framework of beliefs and attributed personal significance (Barsalou et al. 2005). Religious visions, dreams and hallucinations employ the same representational processes involved in ordinary imagery. Thus, through the use of religious pageantry (e.g. icons), actions (e.g. rituals) or pronouncements (texts and utterances) participants can be led to particular embodied neural states that represent them (Barsalou 2003). And how else could these states be interpreted, if not on the basis of the religious context in which the ritual is performed (Xygalatas 2008)? Salient familiar symbols and sacred objects channel the participants’ thought. They effectively say, “Remember, whatever perception of reality you have, whatever extraordinary events you are experiencing, they are related to and caused by the deity.”

Therapeutic trance

It is also possible that in certain cases the practice of high-arousal rituals can have some actual therapeutic results related to the physiological effects of arousal. It is known, for example, that endorphins can – at least indirectly – have positive effects on the immune system by promoting a sense of psychological

contentment (Dunbar 2006; Dunbar et al. 2005: 137). Research has shown that opioid substances can have significant (though temporary) psychotropic effects, which can be “antidysphoric, antidepressant, anxiolytic...and disinhibiting” (Jilek 1982: 339). Thus, endorphins can have beneficial results in cases of depression, dysphoria, and other psycho-physiological symptoms. Those who suffer from such symptoms display low levels of beta-endorphin (Darko et al. 1992; Djurovic et al. 1999) and evidence suggests that the effectiveness of antidepressant therapies partly relies on increased uptake of endogenous opioids (DeFelipe et al. 1985, 1989). Even better known in the treatment of depression is the role of monoamines. Antidepressants increase the availability of monoamines in the brain.² Moreover, because of the effects of arousal on the modulation of neurotransmitters, physical exercise is an established non-pharmacological form of treatment for depressive disorders (Chaouloff 1989; Meeusen and Piacentini 2001; Meeusen 2005; Sarbadhikari and Saha 2006; Blumenthal et al. 2007).

Indeed, the Anastenaria are seen by many of the participants as a healing ritual. Ethnographic records are replete with accounts of fire-walkers who report having been healed from some condition after the performance of the ritual, thanks to the beneficial intervention of Saints Constantine and Helen (see Danforth 1989). The great majority of these accounts congregate around a limited number of illnesses, typically mental conditions with vague psychosomatic symptoms that are linked with neurotransmitter imbalance. This woman, for example, claimed to have been healed from depression by performing the ritual:

— Why did you become a fire-walker?

— Because I got sick. I was suffering. I was sitting in a chair, staring at the window for two years. The doctors said it was melancholia. If it hadn't been for the Anastenaria, they would have locked me up [at a psychiatric clinic]. My husband was a good man, and he allowed me to call the Anastenaria and ask them for help. He didn't forbid me to walk on the fire. I danced on the fire and all went well. I was saved. (personal interview with a senior Anastenarissa)

To be sure, an additional powerful factor for the therapeutic effects of certain rituals is susceptibility. A ritual can function like a placebo: if you do not believe in its power, it will not work. James McClenon (1997, 2002) has argued that such rituals are more effective than conventional Western medicine has been willing to admit, and that this is precisely because of the placebo effects that they produce. Indeed, the conditions that are typically treated by such rituals, mainly stress-related and other psychosomatic conditions, are precisely

those that are particularly susceptible to treatment with placebo (Lasagna et al. 1954; W. Brown 1994; Kirsch and Sapirstein 1998; Fuente-Hernández et al. 2001; Khan et al. 2008).

It should be stressed that there is much more to this process than mere illusion. After all, the indisputable effects of placebo treatments work through normal physiological processes of bodily healing, although these processes are not triggered externally (pharmacologically) but internally (psychologically) and depend on the power of suggestion (Humphrey 2002). As we have seen, Panhke did not recruit random participants for the Good Friday Experiment but a group of divinity students, that is highly primed, susceptible individuals. Similarly, the Anastenaria are particularly religious, susceptible individuals in the first place. They believe that fire-walking is a miracle and that only the pious can do it. And when they try it for the first time and feel no pain, presumably due to endorphin-induced analgesia, it reinforces their theory.

I am not, of course, suggesting that by walking on fire one could be miraculously cured from an illness. However, under the right circumstances, participation in a group activity of this kind might help trigger a self-reinforcing process of improvement. People suffering from various stress-related conditions may benefit significantly from the intense physiological and emotional arousal as well as the social interaction involved in such rituals. In this sense, the benefits of participation are no different than those of engaging in other physically demanding group activities, such as sports. Religious rituals, nonetheless, may involve an additional benefit. Individuals often engage in the ritual activity already believing in its healing capacity. They are convinced – or at least hoping – that the ritual will work. As a result, they may, for example, attribute the pleasurable feelings caused by the endorphin rush to supernatural causes. This produces a placebo effect that might help kick-start a process of recovery. In cases of even more intense arousal that results in altered states of consciousness, visions and hallucinations may often appear, which are seen within their specific context as divine manifestations and revelations and function to cement belief in the efficacy of the ritual and motivate further participation.

Arousal and group cohesion

Context is important in yet another way. High-arousal rituals are almost invariably performed collectively, and this has crucial implications for their effects not only at the social and the psychological, but also at the physiological level. Anthropologists have long noted that collective participation in such rituals may foster social assimilation (Turner 1967), enhance prosociality

(Rappaport 1979; Sosis and Ruffle 2004), and reinforce social solidarity and group cohesion (Durkheim 1912; Radcliffe-Brown 1952; Swanson, 1978; Whitehouse 2004).

More recently, researchers have started to investigate the effects of synchronous action experimentally, and there is now ample evidence that motor coordination can result in enhanced social bonding. Studies of dyadic interaction (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1987; Bernieri 1988; Bernieri et al. 1994; Grahe and Bernieri 1999; Hove and Risen 2009) revealed a strong relationship between the degree of movement synchrony and participants' rapport. In particular, behavioural coordination has been shown to facilitate person perception (Macrae et al. 2008), increase liking between the interacting persons (Chartrand and Bargh 1999) and promote prosocial behaviour (Van Baaren et al. 2004) and cooperation (Wiltermuth and Heath 2009).

Although the exact mechanisms mediating this effect remain unclear, the functioning of certain neurohormones has been directly implicated in the process of social bonding. For example, the prefrontal dopaminergic system plays a role in social cooperation and reciprocity (Anderson et al. 1999; Fehr and Rockenbach 2004) and the formation of attachment bonds (Frecska and Kulcsar 1989; Winkelman 2006). Similarly, oxytocin and endogenous opioids play a well-established role in the formation and maintenance of social attachments (Schino and Troisi 1992; Martel et al. 1995; Moles et al. 2004; Beckman 2004; Dunbar et al. 2005; Dunbar 2010).

In a clever experiment, Cohen and her colleagues (2010) used indirect measurements of endorphin uptake in the central nervous system of rowers during training (direct measures are extremely invasive). The results of their study indicated that rowing as part of a group creates a heightened endorphin surge compared to rowing alone, even when there is no difference in effort expenditure, as measured by power output. Thus, the authors concluded that the collective performance of highly arousing tasks may lead to increased social bonding due to the euphoric effects of the endorphin rush. "When you experience an endorphin rush as part of a group, its effect is ratcheted up massively.... It makes you feel very positive towards other group members. It creates a sense of brotherhood and communality" (Dunbar 2006).

Finally, in a recent field experiment (Konvalinka et al. 2011; Xygalatas et al. 2011), my colleagues and I used heart-rate measurements to study synchronous arousal at an annual fire-walking ritual in the Spanish village of San Pedro Manrique. Our results showed an impressive level of heart-rate synchrony, although the ritual was performed sequentially and not simultaneously. In other words, there was synchronous arousal, driven by the structure of the ritual, even despite non-synchronous movement. Furthermore, heart-rate synchrony extended not only to the performers but also to the local spectators

who were seated and thus did not engage in any significant motor activity. And most importantly, this shared physiological response did not extend to non-local spectators, suggesting that the effects of the ritual are dependent upon the cultural conditioning of the participants.

These results might point to a function of affective mirroring, which can be facilitated by the appropriate biological and cultural processes that are triggered by the collective performance of high-arousal rituals. As human beings, we seem to be hardwired to connect with one another well beyond our conscious efforts. We tend by our nature to mimic other people's outward behaviour, and in doing so we come to adopt their inner states (Barsalou et al. 2005; Warren et al. 2006; Iacoboni 2008), a process that allows for the emergence of phenomena like empathy and emotional contagion (Christakis and Fowler 2009). Thus, we do things with those we like, but we also like those with whom we act. This has been termed the "chameleon effect" by Chartrand and Bargh (1999) who showed that we naturally and unconsciously tend to mimic other people's bodily states and that behavioural synchrony leads to increased inter-personal affiliation and social rapport. Furthermore, dispositionally empathic individuals exhibit the chameleon effect to a greater extent than do other people (Lakin et al. 2003), suggesting that behavioural synchrony might indeed serve facilitative functions in social exchanges (Cheng and Chartrand 2003).

In summary, it must be acknowledged that collective behaviour can be mediated by underlying psychophysiological factors just as much as it is by cultural factors (Mauss 1935; Ignatow forthcoming). With this realization, the words of Émile Durkheim, written a century ago (1912: 217–18), make more sense than ever:

The very fact of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and that quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation.... The initial impulse is thereby amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche grows as it goes along.... Probably because a collective emotion cannot be expressed collectively without some order that permits harmony and unison of movement, these gestures and cries tend to fall into rhythm and regularity.... They bring about such intense hyperexcitement of physical and mental life as a whole that they cannot be borne for very long. It is in these effervescent social milieux, and indeed from that very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to have been born.

Chapter 9 has discussed biological aspects of participation in the performance of high-arousal rituals and their ramifications for both the individuals and the groups that perform them. Like other emotionally and physiologically stimulating activities, such rituals may modulate brain neurochemistry, effectively altering consciousness and influencing the subjects' perception of the event. And within the appropriate cultural context, distinguished by the shared collectivity of a set of performative experiences and dogmatic beliefs, these events may become infused with rich, personally significant meanings. Furthermore, underlying biological factors can have implications that expand beyond the individual and may be responsible for some of the long-noted effects of high-arousal rituals at the social level.

Chapter 10 will attempt to bring together the various levels of analysis hitherto pursued in this volume, arguing for a multilevel study of the ritual, religion, and more generally culture itself.

Putting it all together

In this volume I have treated the rituals of the *Anastenaria* from a variety of perspectives: historical, social, cultural, evolutionary, psychological and biological. This multiplicity of analytical levels stems from the realization that humans are at the same time biologically based, historically situated, culturally embedded and psychologically driven social beings. This basic assumption may seem intuitive to many, and has indeed long been acknowledged by social scientists who called for a “socio-psycho-biological” study of culture (Mauss 1935: 122; Ignatow forthcoming). However, there are stark debates on the relationship between the various levels of explanation applied to human behaviour, leading to radically different approaches and often resulting in fragmented and conflicting views of human nature. This book has followed an integrationist rather than an isolationist path, based on a multilevel view of cultural phenomena.

Explanatory pluralism and multilevel analysis of culture

Most accounts of the relation between the biological, psychological and socio-cultural levels of analysis tend to subscribe to either one of two antithetical epistemological stances: a reductionist methodological individualism (the view that cultural phenomena can be adequately explained by the drives and actions of individuals; and a social constructivist position that culture is the sole determinant of human thought and behaviour (Thagard 2010, forthcoming).

The first model of inter-level relationships is the bottom-up reductionist approach, which argues that low-level theories can account for higher-level phenomena. Thus, social phenomena can in principle be reduced to psychological procedures, which can in turn be explained in terms of biology and so on. In practice, most kinds of explanation of almost any kind of phenomenon

involve some sort of reductionism (Slingerland 2008). Diseases are typically attributed to germs and viruses; brain damage can lead to behavioural changes; individual psychological dispositions can influence collective behaviour and so forth. Thus, the possibility of bottom-up causation is beyond any reasonable doubt.

There are, however, certain models of scientific reduction that make much more radical claims. Most prominently, “New Wave” reductionists argue that it is possible to reduce everything to the lowest level of explanation, which is that of particle physics, and that in doing so all other levels of explanation would eventually become obsolete. John Bickle (1998, 2007) has triumphantly called this “ruthless reductionism”. This view is philosophically defensible. After all, our mind is our brain, and the brain is nothing more than a lump of matter. Anyone who wishes to refute this simple claim will be inescapably led to empty metaphysical notions such as “the soul”. At the same time, however, ruthless reductionism is in practice both epistemologically naïve and methodologically unproductive. Higher-level phenomena are often so vastly complicated that they cannot be effectively studied at the bottom levels. For example, an ultimate explanation of shifts in voting patterns across the USA at the molecular level surely sounds like a ludicrous enterprise. Such an explanation is not theoretically impossible; it is simply practically unachievable given our current epistemological and technological capacities. Of course, one might claim, it doesn’t hurt to try. After all, scientific progress is gradual, and all grand scientific challenges are tackled one step at a time. I have no objection to that. Nonetheless, a more significant problem with ruthless reductionism lies in its epistemological presuppositions, as it seems to lead to an impoverished view of science. According to this eliminativist view, once the causal mechanisms have been identified at the molecular level, all other levels of analysis lose their explanatory power and collapse (Bickle 2003). Thus, New Wave reductionism fails to understand the hierarchical relationship of analytical levels in science and decreases “the theoretical, evidential, and experimental resources available for science to call upon” (McCauley 2009: 613).

An antithetical view of the causal relationships between analytical levels is the anti-reductionist downward causation model, according to which the direction of causation is top-down rather than bottom-up, that is lower-level phenomena are determined by higher-level properties (Campbell 1974). Thus, cultural notions can influence individual cognition (such as when we feel embarrassed in realizing that we are underdressed for some special occasion), psychological states can causally affect the body (stress can make you sick) and so on. That much is hardly ever debated. Most such downward causation models are in line with the emergentist view described by systems

theory (Bertalanffy 1968), claiming that that higher-level phenomena, once having emerged from lower-level processes, somehow acquire distinct ontological properties that cannot be reduced to lower-level causes. It is, nonetheless, important to keep in mind that even though the whole imposes some constraints on the parts (downward causation), it is still in fundamental ways constrained by the parts as well (upward causation) (Heylighen 1995).

This latter point is not endorsed by all proponents of the top-down model. For example, the thesis for the autonomy of the cultural level that has been discussed in chapter 6 is very common in anthropology. This view maintains that cultural phenomena are ontologically distinct and can only be accounted for in terms of other cultural phenomena; thus, biological, cognitive and other individual-level explanations are irrelevant for the understanding of culture. However, the cultural autonomy thesis includes a not-always-so-obvious but seriously debilitating contradiction. According to this view, any account of cognitive diversity should appeal to cultural forms and processes. Any anthropologist, myself included, would readily accept this assumption. At the same time, this position maintains that cognitive diversity is not due to biological differences among various peoples, since all humans come equipped with the same mental capacities. Again, I take it that virtually all anthropologists would also agree with this position. But once we accept those two basic premises, the autonomy of culture thesis begins to crumple. Any systematic investigation of cultural variability makes sense only on the basis of the biological unity of all human beings, as the underlying psychic unity of our species and the capacities that biology endows are necessary to do the primary explanatory work. "Citing variations in specific cultures provides little explanatory grip on the divergence of their associated cognitive profiles, if those sundry profiles are themselves construed merely as further examples of cultural variation" (McCauley 2000b: 147). By denying the causal role of biology in human behaviour, the cultural autonomy thesis adopts a blank-slate view of the mind which asserts that human nature is only what culture determines it to be. However, this parochial view of the mind as *tabula rasa* has failed the test of time, collapsing under the weight of tons of convergent evidence which show that humans can acquire whatever culture they find themselves in because they come into the world biologically prepared to do so (D. Brown 1991; Pinker 2002). Thus, "the cultural autonomy thesis encourages discounting just those investigations (in psychology and biology) most likely to stimulate fruitful anthropological theorizing about such mechanisms" (McCauley 2000b: 148).

Finally, a more extreme version of the top-down view is the kind of radical social constructivism proposed by certain (but not all) postmodernists who claim that our understanding of the world is not derived by observation but is entirely produced "by linguistic, cultural, and historical contingencies" (Hruby

2001: 54). This view in effect argues not only that cultural phenomena can be explained exclusively in cultural terms, but also that lower-level phenomena, including reality itself, are constructed by cultural forces. For example, Judith Butler (1990a, 1990b) has argued that there are no objective biological gender categories; gender, as well as the body itself, is nothing more than a social construction, and the distinction between male and female sex is a mere arbitrary fantasy forcibly imposed on us by the established linguistic and political norms. This astonishing view can hardly ever be taken seriously. In addition to being utterly unsupported by evidence, it is logically inconsistent due to its inherent contradictions, such as the authoritative anti-scientific rhetoric of its proponents who at the same time make anti-rhetorical and anti-authoritative claims (Rosenau 1992). It is also methodologically useless, due to its extreme (and often intentional) conceptual vagueness (Sahlins 1993). What is worse, it is epistemologically detrimental, due to its a priori rejection of explanatory accounts and its deeply ideological character (McKinley 2000).

The above models of cross-scientific relations are inadequate, as they are based on outdated, caricature-like conceptions of both science and culture. The ruthless reductionist view of the mind is in fact very rare among modern scientists, who are typically eager to look at both higher and lower levels of analysis for triangulation of their evidence and for theoretical and methodological inspiration (Wimsatt 1976; Bechtel 1986; McCauley 1996). On the other hand, the once fashionable radical social constructivism of the kind described above has largely faded since the Science Wars of the 1990s, as its conceptual shallowness was exposed – often in humiliating ways (Sokal 1996; Sokal and Bricmont 1998) – and even some of its fiercest proponents have since backtracked (e.g. compare Latour and Woolgar 1979 with Latour 2004). Finally, the thesis for the autonomy of culture has proven much more resilient, not least because of the valuable contributions of its proponents who stressed the importance of contextual details for the understanding of particular cultural phenomena and exposed hitherto overlooked power relations and biases. Those contributions notwithstanding, there are nonetheless serious problems with this thesis. First of all, and ironically enough, if one adopts the same critical stance towards this movement itself, it is easy to see how the members of a particular academic niche would want to maintain their established authority by excluding other levels of analysis and arguing for the self-referential autonomy of their own field. More importantly, the view that cultural inquiry should be conducted exclusively in terms of cultural categories and exhausted in exploring and interpreting “webs of meaning” has led to the incrimination of scientific approaches, comparative work and explanatory theorizing, inevitably debilitating a deeper understanding of culture. “The resulting neglect of and disinterest in formulating systematic,

empirically culpable theories on the part of post-modern cultural anthropology has created a vacuum that biological reductionists, such as sociobiologists, have been only too glad to occupy in the name of science” (McCauley and Lawson 1996: 174).

Thus, such unrealistic isolationist approaches are unable to account for complex cultural phenomena. A much more fruitful cultural inquiry should be based on an integrative, interdisciplinary, multilevel analysis, acknowledging and considering socio-cultural, individual-psychological, as well as neurobiological factors to provide an integrated account of human culture (Bechtel 1986; McCauley and Bechtel 2001; Bechtel and Abrahamsen 2005; A. Geertz 2010; Thagard forthcoming). In such an integrative model, culture can be understood as the product of a system of multilevel interacting mechanisms (Thagard 2010; Thagard and Wood forthcoming). In this system, causation is not unidirectional but moves both from the bottom up and from the top down (Roepstorff and Frith 2004). Thus, for example, psychological states can be influenced both by cultural and biological causes: disgust for certain foods can be triggered as an instinctive biological response to the source of food poisoning but also be caused by religious taboos; anxiety can be the result of financial instability as well as of hormonal imbalance; aggression can be provoked by rabies or by public hate speech. Indeed, even changes in top-level phenomena can be instantiated by bottom-level causes, and vice versa. For example, alcohol consumption at a party, operating at the molecular level, may lead to increased social cohesion, whereas public humiliation may cause you to blush.

This multiplicity of analytical levels necessitates and allows for explanatory pluralism, utilizing all available methods, theoretical strategies, experimental techniques and empirical findings across explanatory levels (McCauley 1996, 1998, 2007; Xygalatas 2010). A comprehensive study of religion, ritual and all cultural phenomena should take into account at least three levels of analysis: the biological/neurological (what goes on in the body), the psychological (what goes on in the mind) and the social/cultural (what goes on between minds) (Jensen 2002, 2003, 2009; Sørensen 2004; A. Geertz 2008, 2010). Anything less will lead to a diminished view of culture and a fragmented understanding of human behaviour.

Why it all matters

Based on such an integrative view of cultural forms as the products of multilevel interactions, I have tried in this book to provide a multilevel analysis of certain motivational aspects of the performance of the *Anastenaria*. I have outlined the

history of the Anastenaria, from their early performance in Eastern Rumelia to their relocation and subsequent development in Northern Greece, as well as the history of research and discourse on this community. This historical background is essential for an understanding of the main sociopolitical events that have shaped the tradition of the Anastenaria. Without this perspective, it would be difficult to grasp certain shared attitudes of the Anastenaria, such as their stance towards ethnographers and religious authorities, their view of the nation and their collective identity, the meaning of their songs and so on.

I have also highlighted – in very broad lines – certain contextual aspects of life in a rural northern Greek village, which have hopefully added to an understanding of the relationship of the Anastenaria with their saints, the importance of their icons, their views on miracles and religious healing, their social stratification and so on. I have dedicated some more detail in discussing their views on religious knowledge and revelation, in order to better describe what could be called the dominant ontological and epistemological stance among the Anastenaria, that is to say how they interpret their place in the cosmos and their interaction with the natural and the supernatural world.

I argued that such contextual information can be enriched and complemented by an understanding of the human mind, as it has evolved through an adaptive process of natural selection which has endowed all members of our species with the capacity to produce, acquire and transmit cultural knowledge. I maintained that such a perspective enriches cultural inquiry, providing complementary insights on the object of its study. Humans are not empty vessels, indiscriminately ready to be filled and determined by whatever content their culture imposes on them, any more than they are pre-programmed machines that operate according to unbendable, genetically predetermined principles. Instead, they come into the world with a set of cognitive inclinations and biases that allow them to perceive their surrounding world in similar although not identical terms cross-culturally and to place certain constraints on the kinds of cultural forms and representations that become successful.

One such highly successful cultural form is ritual, which is found in abundance in every known society, past and present. This universal distribution of such a – seemingly maladaptive – form of expenditure of energy and resources suggests that it is indeed part of the evolutionary baggage of our species (as well as many other species; see Eilam et al. 2006; Eilam 2007); that it draws on a set of cognitive predispositions; and that it may be related, directly or indirectly, to certain adaptive functions. Such functions can operate at various levels, such as providing a means for signalling fitness and/or commitment, generating social status, producing a sense of meaning or fostering social cohesion.

In particular, rituals that involve great degrees of physiological and emotional arousal may have certain individual-level effects that make those events more salient and meaningful to the performers. Thus, in order to get a better sense of what motivates the Anastenaria to participate in such costly activities, we could benefit from psychological findings that shed light on the effects of highly arousing events on memory, emotion and motivation. Such findings suggest that explicit concepts and beliefs can be not only the cause but also the result of actions and behaviours. For example, participating in the rituals of the Anastenaria can result in the post hoc attribution of meaning and salience to this ritual, even for outsiders. Furthermore, we could turn to biological evidence on the effects of arousal on the body and the brain. Without such evidence, for example, one would find it hard to explain why rituals like the Anastenaria seem to result in altered states of consciousness while others don't, why they provide a good framework for ritual therapy, why they often lead to visions and hallucinations and so on.

Those different levels and units of analysis of course could be, and very often are, tackled entirely separately and independently; however, their explananda are not unrelated, independent or autonomous. Humans are cultural, and historical, and psychological, and biological agents, and to negate any one aspect of their existence is to be blind to a large portion of their nature, in essence dehumanizing the very subject of study of anthropology, human beings. Only by realizing this multilevel nature of our existence can we begin to understand some of the basic ways in which people find motivation and meaning for their behaviours. Cultural variation is always recognizably human due to the psychic unity of our species, and it is only on the basis of such unity that this variation becomes meaningful.

Transformative rituals

According to the view defended in this book, human behaviour and experience is simultaneously enabled by our cognition, constrained by our biology and shaped by our culture. I have argued that this holds true for the Anastenaria as well. If we wish to understand the mindset of those participating in the Greek fire-walking rituals, whether we are primarily interested in identifying causal mechanisms or providing interpretative models, an integrative and synthetic approach will give us much more mileage than an isolationist and autonomist one.

For example, let's take Stella, the old woman who was suffering from depression whose words were cited in chapter 9. According to her own account but also those of other villagers, when she was a young woman Stella suffered

from depression, isolated in her room and avoiding contact with other people for two years. However, when I met her she was a perfectly normal and particularly engaging and talkative albeit timid person who showed no signs of any mental problem. As claimed by those who knew her, this change in behaviour occurred after she fire-walked for the first time. Now, based on the long and vivid descriptions that I obtained from this woman as well as from her fellow-villagers, allow me to offer a plausible reconstruction of how such a change might have come about, weaving the plot of her experience as a tightly knit web of interconnected strings operating at various levels.

This woman was a devout Orthodox Christian and firmly believed in the powers of the saints and their icons. Since her school years, she had been taught about various miracles performed by Christian saints and the heroic acts of Saint Constantine. Growing up in Agia Eleni, she attended the fire-walking rituals and listened to stories about cases of miraculous healing. She also knew about the wisdom of the old Anastenaria and how they often helped people overcome their problems. When her treatment by professional doctors did not yield any results, and upon the insistence of her family, she decided to turn to the Anastenaria for a new diagnosis. After all, the saints had healed several people in the village before; perhaps they could provide a treatment for her as well. Indeed, the Anastenaria confirmed her suspicion, or perhaps her hope: she was suffering from “those things”, which meant that the saints might be willing to provide the cure. All she had to do was dance on the fire with the sacred icons. After a long period of despair, there was now suddenly a ray of optimism.

From that moment on and for several months, Stella kept reflecting on the words of the Anastenaria, thinking that fire-walking might well be her last hope. When the time of the festival finally arrived, she was reluctant to visit the *konaki* despite all the encouragement from her daughter and son-in-law. She rarely left home any more, and knowing that it was going to be particularly crowded on that day made her even more uncomfortable. But when the *archianastenaris* himself came to her house and told her to get ready, she offered no more resistance. He led her to the *konaki* where the Anastenaria had already started dancing. At first she felt very uneasy, but once she got over her initial fears and reservations, things became progressively easier. The surroundings were wellknown and the people familiar. They knew about her condition and they didn't bother her with any questions or small talk. Besides, they had their own worries now. The music had started playing and some of the women were singing songs about the lost homelands. Everyone's faces were painted with grief and agony as they started swinging to the rhythm of the music.

One of the eldest Anastenaria approached her and gave her her hand. She joined the dance and simply followed the crowd. Soon, all her senses were stimulated: she could smell the incense, see the crowd and feel the icons; and then there were the drums and the lyres that made her mind blank and gave her a hypnotic sensation. She closed her eyes and moaned like the others did, “Ah, ah, ah!” Her heart was beating fast, and she felt so alive! This went on for many hours, and she was completely worn out when the music finally stopped. For the first time after two years, she had felt excited and active. She cried and thanked the saints.

The next morning, she was among the first people to go to the *konaki* and one of the first to join the dance. The same process was repeated, and she felt the same sensations. Finally, the last day of the festival something amazing happened. Like the previous two days, she was dancing for many hours. She felt tired and overwhelmed by all this, and being in a crowded place after all this time made her nervous. She had not eaten or slept much, and she had even fainted a couple of times during the festival. But just when she was feeling that she could not go on any longer, it was time for the icing on the cake. The pace increased and the dancers left the *konaki* and went towards the fire. She was terrified, but it was too late to quit now. She would have to walk on the glowing embers.

Stella was dancing around the fire while the others started crossing it, not daring to follow them. Then the *archianastenaris* took her by the hand and guided her through the fire. She felt more confident by his side and let him direct her. Just like she had heard so many people describe before, she walked on the fire unharmed without feeling any pain. She was exhausted and thirsty, but she kept crossing the fire, following the others. Everything seemed like a dream now. And then, a miracle happened. She saw the dim figure of a man’s face emerging from the smoke, just for a single moment. And before he disappeared, the man looked at her and told her, “All will be well!” No doubt, it was Saint Constantine. She was going to be cured! She was overcome with joy and confidence. She didn’t feel tired anymore. She didn’t feel pain, sadness or fear. She was suddenly alert and felt a surge of energy. She looked at the fire. It was glowing in a way she had never experienced before, brighter than ever. And the music was different. She wasn’t sure what it was about it that was different, but it didn’t matter. It sounded like heaven. She noticed the other fire-walkers. They also seemed different; they looked calm, liberated, almost floating over the fire. She heard the crowd cheer and she focused on specific words. Each word now seemed to have a new meaning, and it seemed so important. Each new stimulus now meant so much, no matter where it came from. But she couldn’t stay focused on it for more than a split second, and a new stimulus caught her attention. Everything was so full of meaning!

The next thing she remembered was sitting in the *konaki* with the other fire-walkers with a plate full of food in her hand. She didn't feel very hungry, but she ate it. She was smiling, and for the first time after the festival had started she exchanged a few words with other people. She went to bed exhausted, and fell asleep right away.

The following morning, Stella got up and took her usual place in her armchair in the livingroom, facing the window – the window she had been staring at for the past two years. She started thinking about what had happened the previous day. She couldn't even begin to describe the experience. It was simply ineffable. But she knew that it had to be a miracle. Or was she going crazy? Impossible! She was absolutely certain that it was real; there was no doubt about that in her head. Nothing had felt as real before. During the course of the next days she couldn't stop thinking about those extraordinary events. And every day that went by she was more convinced about the truth of the apocalypse she had experienced. She had seen the Saint face-to-face. He had even talked to her. He told her she would be cured! The knowledge that the Saint had decided to reveal himself to her made her feel important. She was filled with optimism. She started eating more. She even started taking her medication again. She felt an urge to get out, to meet some of the other fire-walkers. For years she had been fascinated by the stories she heard about them, about their rituals, their experiences; but now she had had the same experience herself. She could understand them now; and they could understand her.

It took her several days to take the decision to visit her cousin, who was also a fire-walker, but she finally did it. It was the first time she visited anybody's house in two years. The woman who opened the door was not surprised to see her. She knew she would come, she told her. They chatted for hours, and they talked about many things; but they never mentioned the Anastenaria. They didn't have to. They both understood. The next week, her cousin reciprocated the visit. After that, they began to see each other regularly, like they did before she got sick. Gradually, Stella started seeing more of her friends and relatives. She started going to the grocery store and the butcher, she occasionally attended church services, and she even went to Thessaloniki to visit her sister. She too was a fire-walker. After her own experience, she felt closer to her, as she did to the other fire-walkers.

Over time, Stella's memories of her first fire-walk grew more colourful and more detailed. She could now remember all those little things that she couldn't recall right after her performance; and even the smallest details were now manifestly meaningful. She felt that this event had been a real turning point in her life. She was grateful for fire-walking and considered it the most important thing she had ever done. She never missed a festival since. She paid

her dues to the Saint twice-yearly, every January and May, but she also helped with the preparations throughout the year. Furthermore, she had seen visions of the Saint two or three more times. At first she was confused and scared, but finally it all made perfect sense. The Saint's will had been fulfilled. It was her destiny. Thousands of small events had confirmed it, time and again. Events that to others might look perfectly random or irrelevant; but in her mind they were utterly meaningful, and proved the truth that was revealed to her. She had been saved by the Saint!

Notes

1. Introduction

1. For more on the use of the ethnographic present tense, see Hastrup 1990, 1992; Pina-Cabral 2000; Fetterman 2009: 127–8.

2. Tradition in the making

1. The word *Anastenaria* (Αναστενάρια) is a neuter plural noun which can be used to refer to the fire-walking rituals as well as to the fire-walkers and their communities (singular: *Anastenari*). The participants can also be referred to in gender-specific terms. The male form is *Anastenaris* (singular) and *Anastenarides* (plural), while the female form is *Anastenarissa* (singular) and *Anastenarisses* (plural).

There are various possible etymologies of the term *Anastenaria*. It is most likely derived from the verb *anastenazo* (αναστενάζω), to sigh, to moan, due to the groaning of the ecstatic dancers while dancing (see Christodoulou 1978; Danforth 1989: 4, 65). Some have argued that the term is derived from the word *anastainomai* (ανασταίνομαι), to rise, and jump in the fire. Danforth (1989) hazards that the word derives from the noun *asthenis* (ασθενής), which means ill, patient, preceded by the pleonastic privative *an-* (αν-). This interpretation might be biased, however, by the fact that Danforth views the *Anastenaria* as a healing ritual. Some folk etymologies consider the word *Anastenaria* to derive from the verb *anevazo* (ανεβάζω, to raise, elevate), or from the adjective *anischyros* (ανίαχυρος, powerless, weak).

2. See the following section on the history and the use of the theory of the Dionysian origins of the *Anastenaria*.
3. Fallmerayer's theory came into focus again during the escalation of the Macedonian Question at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. After the German invasion of Greece in 1941, it was promoted by the Nazis in an attempt to rationalize the inconsistency between their admiration of the ancient Greeks and the military invasion of modern Greece. Finally, the debate about Fallmerayer's theories resurfaced in the 1990s during the dispute between Greece and the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia over the use of the term "Macedonia".
4. The Turks followed a policy of religious tolerance within their empire. During the Ottoman rule, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople was the recipient of many privileges and tax exemptions by the Turks. Furthermore, the Patriarch was treated as

the unofficial head of all Christians, and priests became the leaders of local communities and were given the power to oversee civil disputes and to supervise education (Stewart 1998). In exchange, the Patriarchate abolished any claims for freedom or independence and called all Orthodox Christians to adopt an attitude of voluntary submission to the Turks (Just 1988). For this reason, when the revolution against Turkish rule started, the Patriarchate excommunicated the rebels and called all Christians to turn them in to the Turks (Filemon 1859: 112, 309–21; Kordatos 1924; Roudometof 1998, 2001).

5. Strabo, *Geography* 12.2.7: ἄν ἄν τοῖς Κασταβόλοις ἄστῃ τῇ τῆς Περασίας ἄρτμιδος ἄερῶν, ἄπου φασὶ τῆς ἄερεῖας γυμνοῖς τοῖς ποσὶ διὰ ἄνθρακιῶς βαδίζειν ἄπαθεῖς (“At Castabala there is a Temple of Diana Perasia, where it is said that the priestesses walk with naked feet unhurt upon burning coals”).
6. Strabo, *Geography* 5.2.9: ἄπὸ δὲ τῆς Σωροκτῆς ἄρει Φερωνῶν ἄπλιν ἄστῶν, ἄμῦμος ἄπιξωρῶν τινῶ δἄμονι τιμῶμῶν σφῆδρα ἄπ τῶν περιῶκων, ἄς τῶμῶς ἄστις ἄν τῆ τῶπῆ θαυμαστῶν ἄεροποιῶν ἄξονῶ γυμνοῖς γῶρ ποσὶ διεζῶσιν ἄνθρακίῶν καὶ σποδιῶν μεγῶλην ὀκατεξῶμενοι ἄπ τῆς δἄμονος ταῆτης ἄπαθεῖς (“Below Mount Soracte is the city of Feronia, having the same name as a certain goddess worshipped passionately by the locals, whose temple lies there, in which a remarkable ceremony is performed; for those possessed by the goddess pass barefoot over a large bed of burning coals and ashes without being hurt”).
7. For a more detailed examination of Megas’s work in particular and the ideological nature of the search for continuities in Greek culture in general, see Danforth 1984.
8. Note that for Kranidiotis the Anastenaria left their previous barbaric existence in order to return to the “homeland”, were they found “civilized conditions”. The Anastenaria themselves, however, rather saw themselves as having been banished from their Thracian “homeland” and forced to move to Greece, where they encountered particularly inhospitable conditions.
9. This chapter is a revised version of an article (Xygalatas 2011).

3. The ethnographic setting

1. Characteristic of this attitude is the reaction against anthropologist Anastasia Karakasidou, who in 1992 submitted her doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. In this work, Karakasidou argued that some inhabitants of the Greek village where she conducted her fieldwork considered themselves more Slavic than Greek. Soon, articles in the Greek press presented her as a traitor (due to her Greek nationality) and accused her, among other things, of “stupidity”, “cannibalism” and being a secret agent of the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia. The extreme right-wing newspaper *Stochos* published her address and car’s registration-plate details, making her a target for extremists, while she received death and rape threats (Roudometof 2002). In 1995, Cambridge University Press refused to publish Karakasidou’s manuscript, despite the excellent recommendations it received from the two expert reviewers, Michael Herzfeld and Stephen Gudeman. The stated reason was fear of terrorist violence against the Press staff. After this decision, the two editors resigned, followed by other members of the board, while various authors withdrew their contributions to CUP and/or called for a moratorium against it for obstructing free speech and inquiry. The book was later published by University of Chicago Press (Karakasidou 1997). The reaction did not stop at the author herself, but reached even

the subjects of her research, the inhabitants of Assiros. The Greek Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace requested the political leaders of the town sign a statement affirming the inhabitants' feelings of Greek identity. The latter then indeed replied in a letter to the Ministry and the press that they were "pure Greek, twenty-four carat, both in language and in national consciousness". They also felt that it was relevant to stress in their response that Karakasidou was married to a Yugoslav (which was not true), and "without a religious ceremony" (Karakasidou 1997: 230).

2. See Patronis 2002 for an analysis of the socio-historical reasons of the anti-collective attitude of Greek farmers.
3. According to the World Values Survey (WVS), Greece was seventh in the world in belief in God (91%) between 1998–2002. According to the Europe Social Survey (ESS), Greece had the highest religiosity rate in Europe for the years 2002–04. According to the Voice of the People Survey, in 2005 Greece was first in percentage of religious people in Europe and eighth in the world (86%) among surveyed countries.
4. Although the notion of the evil eye is sometimes thought to be a human universal, Alan Dundes (1992) has convincingly shown that it probably originated in the Middle East and its spread can be traced historically alongside the expansion of Indo-European peoples. Today, this belief is particularly strong in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Europe, especially in the Mediterranean, but can also be found in Northern Europe, North Africa and the Americas. However, Greece might well be the only Western country in which belief in the evil eye is so widespread.
5. In fact, many Greeks argue that there is some vague scientific reason for the evil eye, having to do with some sort of magnetic energy emitted from the eye. This argument, however, is contradicted by its treatment with a religious ritual.
6. The term "Grandfathers" is also used to denote the saints, and in the singular, "Grandfather" (*pappous*) particularly Saint Constantine.
7. Based on her exchange with Danforth, Jane Sansom (Sansom 2001: 165 n. 3) mentions that healing might indeed have been a more significant theme among the Anastenaria during the time Danforth did his own fieldwork, and has possibly somewhat decreased in significance since then as part of the more general socio-economic developments that have influenced the performance of the Anastenaria in recent decades.

4. Fire-walking in Agia Eleni

1. Even when the priests participated at the Anastenaria, the privilege of drawing water from the sacred well was exclusive to the *archianastenaris* (Megas 2004).
2. In a recent study that my colleagues and I conducted at the Spanish village of San Pedro Manrique (Konvalinka et al. 2011; Xygalatas et al. 2011), we measured the temperature of the coals during a similar fire-walking ritual at 677° Celsius.

5. Knowledge and revelation among the Anastenaria

1. In his famous treatise, *Magic, Science and Religion*, Bronislaw Malinowski coined the phrase "current mythology" to describe such narratives: "This personal renown of the

magician and its importance in enhancing the belief about the efficiency of magic are the cause of an interesting phenomenon: what may be called the current mythology of magic. Round every big magician there arises a halo made up of stories about his wonderful cures or kills, his catches, his victories, his conquests in love. . . . Thus myth is not a dead product of past ages, merely surviving as an idle narrative. It is a living force, constantly producing new phenomena, constantly surrounding magic by new testimonies. Magic moves in the glory of past tradition, but it also creates its atmosphere of ever-nascent myth. As there is the body of legends already fixed, standardized, and constituting the folklore of the tribe, so there is always a stream of narratives in kind to those of the mythological time “(1948: 63). I am grateful to Jesper Sørensen for bringing this passage to my attention.

6. Ritual and cognition

1. For an account of the cognitive revolution from the viewpoint of Thomas Kuhn’s theory of scientific progress (1962), see Lachman et al. 1979. For a view of the cognitive turn not as a true scientific “revolution” in the Kuhnian sense, but simply a rapid but continuous “evolution”, see Leahey 1992.
2. The term *emic* refers to an “insider” perspective, a description of a behaviour or attitude in terms that are meaningful to the actor. It is opposed to an *etic* perspective, which refers to the description of a behaviour or attitude in a culturally neutral way, or from the point of view of the observer (Pike 1954).
3. In their books, Lawson and McCauley refer to supernatural entities as “culturally postulated superhuman agents” (CPS Agents), while Bob McCauley subsequently suggested as more appropriate the term “agents with counter-intuitive properties” (personal communication). Although the semantic content of these terms remains largely the same, I prefer to use the more parsimonious term “supernatural agents”.
4. For more on recent work in the cognitive science of religion, see a few examples of monographs: Boyer 2001; Pyysiäinen 2001, 2004a; Atran 2002; McCauley and Lawson 2002; Barrett 2004; Dennett 2006; Tremblin 2006; and collective volumes: Andresen and Forman 2000; Andresen 2001; Whitehouse 2001; Pyysiäinen and Anttonen 2002; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004, 2007; Whitehouse and Martin 2004; Whitehouse and McCauley 2005; Slone 2006; Xygalatas and McCorkle forthcoming.
5. For example, in a study of a fire-walking ritual that my colleagues and I conducted at the Spanish village of San Pedro Manrique (Xygalatas et al. forthcoming), we used heart-rate measurements to determine levels of arousal during the ritual. Practitioners invariably stated that they felt very calm as they performed the ritual. In fact, they insisted that their heart-rate would be much lower during the fire-walk than in a relaxed state. Nevertheless, they were surprised to see the results of our measurements, which showed extremely high levels of arousal during the ritual, often approaching 200 bpm.

7. Costly rituals

1. Also see the thoughts of Frits Staal (1989) on the obsessiveness of ritual performance.

2. This emphasis on orthopraxy is evident in the Anastenaria. Of course, their rituals slowly change over time in various subtle ways, evolving like any cultural practice. However, the Anastenaria are militant about “correct” performance, and sudden changes result in confusion and anxiety. For example, when the Church officials withheld their icon in 1970, the Anastenaria of Agia Eleni felt that they were unable to perform the ritual without it and the festival was cancelled.

In 2010 I witnessed another indicative incident. During the festival, a young person (not an Anastenaris) died in the village. The funeral was set for the next day, and there was talk of whether it was appropriate to have the procession as planned on that day while a family was in mourning. That night, after the fire-walk, the *archianastenaris* told everyone that there was some bad news and that “tomorrow will be a tough day. We will gather here, but I am not sure what we will do.”

The next morning, everyone gathered and just sat there silently for several minutes. Then the *archianastenaris* said he wasn’t really sure what to do and asked the most experienced fire-walkers for their opinion. An old man was the first one to speak: “It is not right to have the procession”, he said. “We can’t be celebrating while a family is mourning.” Another replied “But the Anastenaria are not a celebration. We’re not having fun here, it’s serious business!” A woman responded to that: “But we can’t be playing music and stuff while others are mourning.” “But then, what should we do instead?”, the man asked. “How about a procession without the music?”, someone else said. “If we just carry the [icons of the] saints around the village, that is not a celebration, is it?” Somebody then raised the point that the Greek word for festival (*panygiri*) means “celebration”. Another man suggested, “Well, what if we don’t take the icons either? We just visit the houses. Then it’s not a festival.” A woman wondered, “And what kind of a procession would that be, without the icons? The point is for people to get the saints’ blessing.” “Ok”, a man replied, “so we don’t do the procession. But what will we do instead?” “Should we just gather at the *konaki* and do something else?”, said someone. “What would that be?”, asked another. The conversation carried on along the same lines for a long time. All agreed that it was not appropriate to carry out the usual public festivities but no one knew what exactly should be done instead. At the end, they decided to do nothing and the day’s activities were cancelled altogether.

3. For some earlier ideas on costly signals from the social sciences, see Cronk 2005: 610.
4. Zahavi’s gene-centred view exposed a more general logical problem in the theory of group selection, namely the “free rider problem”. If we assume that a trait is selected despite being costly to the individual and because it is beneficial to the group, then the most successful individuals within the group would be the ones that carried the costly trait to a lesser degree, as they would be able to take advantage of group membership without bearing the heavy costs, becoming free riders. However, this would drive the evolution of the group towards the opposite direction, thus cancelling the supposed effect of group selection. A beneficial trait for the group can only be selected if it is also beneficial for the individual, in which case explaining it at a group level would be superfluous.
5. In game theory, the prisoner’s dilemma is a type of game where two players have the option to either cooperate or defect, and their goal is to maximize their individual payoff. For example, a typical scenario involves two suspects interrogated separately by the police and offered the same deal: if one testifies against the other while the other remains silent, the betrayer is set free and the silent accomplice serves ten years in prison. If both stay silent, they serve only six months each. But if each one betrays the other, they both receive a five-year sentence. The first games of this type were devised by researchers working at

the Rand Corporation as a way to model human behaviour and influence government policy.

6. This does not mean, however, that there is any principle of group selection at work here. Although groups of people, or even entire states, can use costly signals as an effective strategy, groups and states do not “evolve” in the biological sense, as their constituent parts can change much more rapidly and arbitrarily than the genes of a species.
7. Sansom (1998) remarks that this does not necessarily mean that there is any kind of “ritual inversion”, nor is it necessarily valid to say that women “act as men”, as Danforth argues. In my view, Sansom’s claim is sound, however this does not lead to the dismissal but rather the rephrasing of Danforth’s claim. As Sansom notes (1998: 200), socially constructed behaviour in the Anastenaria is as strong as in other domains of life, however the gendered roles of everyday life are replaced by the roles of the Anastenaria, which are the same for men and women. Thus, women manage, for the duration of the festival, not to become like men, but to become equal to them. Danforth’s claim seems consistent with the recent changes in the composition of the Anastenaria. While traditionally women who performed fire-walking largely outnumbered men, this has changed in recent decades. As younger generations of women have begun to leave the constraints of the household, receive higher education, enter the work market and be less submissive to men compared to the previous generations, the percentage of women in the Anastenaria has dropped, and at the time of writing is slightly lower than that of men.

8. Arousal, emotion and motivation

1. Furthermore, the US Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 2005 mentions “reports of pressure exerted on Greek Orthodox military personnel not to marry in the religious ceremony of non-Orthodox partners, which might cause them to be passed over for promotion”. As another example, a lieutenant was punished by the court in 1993 because he argued with two soldiers about the truth of the Orthodox dogma (Areopagus no. 1266/93).
2. The following statement of the former Greek Archbishop Christodoulos (at that time Bishop of Demetrias) is characteristic of the Church’s position on this matter: “I do not hesitate to refer to some negligible, as far as their membership is concerned, religious minorities in Greece, e.g. the Evangelicals, the Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and others, who repeatedly drag our country in front of international fora, accusing it of violating human rights to their disadvantage. This of course is not true. It shows on behalf of those minorities the impertinent and blunt exercise of proselytism by unfair and illegal means against orthodox Christians in our country. Every legal and consequent response on behalf of Church authorities or of Justice against this practice is conveyed abroad as an alleged infringement in the free exercise of worship of those sects” (*To Vima*, 18/10/1992).
3. In this case, the Greek State offered a settlement, which was accepted by the suitor.
4. In 1989, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) included the works of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi in its list of worldwide literary treasures, part of the world’s cultural heritage.
5. Amnesty International appealed to the Greek Minister of Justice, stating that this decision is unconstitutional and violates the European Convention for the Protection of Human

Rights and Fundamental Freedoms which Greece ratified in 1974, and that “should the sentence be confirmed at the appeal hearing and Professor Alexiou imprisoned, Amnesty International would consider him to be a prisoner of conscience and would call for his immediate and unconditional release” (AI Index: EUR 25/024/2005 [Public]; News Service No: 329, 5 December 2005).

6. The titles of the religious education textbooks are indicative of this catechetical character. Primary education: *Life with Christ; The Way of Christ; Together with Christ in the Struggle; Christ Is the Truth*. Secondary education: *Preparation for the New World of God; Jesus Christ, the New World of God, and Us; Church: The New Community en Route; Orthodox Faith and Worship; Christianity and Religions; Themes in Christian Ethics* (source: Greek Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs [www.ypepth.gr]).
7. More recent examples include proclamations of the Church against the Greek translations of such books as *The Da Vinci Code* (D. Brown 2004), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (Rowling 2006), and *The Gospel of Judas* (Kasser et al. 2006), and films such as James Cameron’s documentary, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* (2007), without, however, succeeding in having them banned.
8. Whitehouse’s model was formulated on the basis of his research in Papua New Guinea; however, numerous scholars have discussed its importance for ethnographic research (see Whitehouse 2001; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004), the psychology of religion (Whitehouse and McCauley 2005), the study of ancient religions (see Whitehouse and Martin 2004), as well as for the study of religion in general (see the special issues of *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16.2 [2002] and *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 16.3 [2004]).

9. The physiology of high-arousal rituals

1. For example, the thermal conductivity (K) of wood or charcoal can be 2000 times lower than that of iron and 5000 times lower than that of aluminium (see Young and Freedman 2004).
2. For example, Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitors (MAOIs) block the breakdown of serotonin and norepinephrine by inhibiting the enzymes which oxidize them, thus leaving higher levels still active in the brain. Instead, TriCyclic Antidepressants (TCAs) prevent the reuptake of various neurotransmitters, including dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine, allowing a greater amount of these substances to be available for use by their receptor cells. Other types of antidepressants target the reuptake of specific neurotransmitters, e.g. SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors), NDRI (Norepinephrine Dopamine Reuptake Inhibitors) or SNRIs (Serotonin and Noradrenaline Reuptake Inhibitors) and so on (Chisholm-Burns et al. 2010).

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