

# The Transgressing Character of the Sacred in the Double Ritual of Anastenaria

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This article is double. It comprises a generalised theoretical introduction to the concept of the sacred as a transgressing factor of our postmodern profanity and the description of the ritual of Anastenaria in contemporary Greek Macedonia. This twofold ritual that is celebrated once in a year at the names day of Saints Constantine and Helen, starts with a ceremonial sacrificial of a bull and is integrated with a collective fire-walking of the initiated persons on the burning coals of a fire. Some ethical conclusions related to the Durkheimian concept of the sacred are discussed.

## FIRST PART

### PREFACE

*“Way up and way down are the same”*  
(Heraclitus)  
*“Rituals are symbols of social processes”*  
(Durkheim)

If the old saying of Heraclitus can be interpreted today as an inner journey of self-discovery coinciding with an external journey of discovering the World, the question is by what means could we succeed in both these journeys and what sort of knowledge do we really need to develop in advance to face new discoveries and to interpret them giving thus a personal meaning to our inquiries.

The symbolic order (Elias, 1993; Turner, 1969; Douglas, 1970; Strangelove, 1977)<sup>1</sup> has been for innumerable centuries the best invention of mankind aiming to give an *analogical* meaning to the Inexplicable and Unknown. Some, named the Unknown sacred or holy but the true essence of the Unknown can be described in every case by the lack of the relative knowledge necessary for its elucidation. The sacred thus can be defined as the need of giving interpretations to strange phenomena of practical life by the indirect way of

analogous thought i.e. when we cannot solve a problem, we give symbolic or representative solutions using metaphors from other resembling cases. We represent for example by the symbol of the cross the sum of our beliefs to a specific web of signification that compose Christianity. As told by Max Weber, man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. Culture consequently is a system composed by those webs, and the analysis of it has to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.

What is the sacred today? If by sacred we classify all extraordinary transcendent and outside the everyday course of events phenomena then the sacred under multiple forms is present in every society, traditional, modern (rationalised) or even postmodern. The true meaning of the sacred is a challenge to historians of religion, theologians and sociologists (Durckheim, 1954 (1912); Eliade, 1959; Caillois, 1939; Bell, 1979; Girard, 1972; Castelli, 1939). However, a fresh look by an anthropologically oriented research taking under consideration all successful and unsuccessful efforts of all these disciplines so far, needs to produce a new interpretation of its meaning as viewed under actual social and cultural circumstances.

To give a sociological example, the invention of the term secularization (Martin, 1978) as the process in which religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance, cannot explain how modernization effects in certain societies are parallel to an unexpected vitality of religion once more while religion is not imposed by public pressure and is rather a matter of personal choice. Following Luckman (Luckman, 1967), we can argue that individualism in contemporary, urban, consumer societies contains elements of transcendence and almost sacredness which are components of an “invisible religion”. Today, 35 years or more than a generation period after this theory, we can advocate for a further increase of individuality in

postmodern globalized society characterised by the explosion of technological communications and the plethoric information. The sacred can attract its sources from this communicative everyday reality (real or virtual) of our postmodern communication techniques and it can also be manifested under new forms completely non recognisable by traditional theorists. But the inner meaning of the sacred -that is the quest for the essence of Divinity and the relation of the human to it - is even enforced amidst the hidden and invisible religion of our individualities.

If for theologians and historians of religion, the public sphere has been for centuries the starting point of religious phenomena and if eminent sociologists such as Durkheim believed in the unifying force of the so called "collective conscience" as the foundations of all religious expressions, today religion and its sacred "*raison d'être*" can be better described by the means of individuality and personal quests. The limitation of religious institutionalisation in our days and the profanation of our activities and behaviours does not eliminate by any sense our needs for the comprehension of the unknown and the unusual. The revival of the sacred under these private circumstances, detect new "rituals" of comportment. These specified mostly individualistic rituals are "transgressing" our rational and ordered world inverting the premodern schema of the collective sacred transgressed by profane acts. Our postmodern symbols as mediated by rituals are much different in external characteristics and forms from the holy symbols described through centuries by the historians of religions, but they keep the same inner reason : the eternal quest of man for understanding the unknown. Postmodern symbols are transmitting the same as a virus the very substance of culture -meanings, social forms, knowledge, etc., creating thus our collective memory or personal culture.

To give some examples of postmodern collective rituals before descending to the individual ones, we can mention the collective habits of fanatical spectators of sports while supposed to support their favourite clubs. The violence exercised by these groups of spectators is a part of the everyday virtual violence exercised by media and reproduces the same characteristics: irrational need for violent expression enforced by the anonymity of the crowd<sup>2</sup>. There is not important solidarity among the hooligans while aggressing police or while destroying

material constructions. There is no meaning for these acts of violence and no further aim that could demand for a solidarity of the group. The only desire of the average hooligan is to recognise his acts of violence while watching TV in the same night recognising himself as the author of a part of today's actuality, playing the eternal game of Narcissus in front of his mirror-that is the Media magic glass-. But even if this desire cannot be interpreted by any means as sacred, there are many characteristics of these violent acts that remind old sacred deeds of the pre-modernity when people of small communities sacrificed animals in sacred rituals dancing afterwards for expiation. This violent act of killing a sanctified animal to get all its force through a communal ceremonial feast was considered as a sacred deed even if the very act of killing was a profanation or transgression of the sacred spirit of the ceremony. As Bataille says in his "Eroticism" after the transgression of the interdiction (of murder) and the profanation of the sacred ceremony, the interdiction is always enforced as well as the sacred character of the ritual ! [Bebergal).

Today, the well ordered and apparently faultless rationalised society is transgressed and violated by non profane deeds that cannot be described as sacred but hold the same sacrificial elements superficially irrational and destructive. What is really violated or transgressed is the sense of Order or organisation that tends to take global dimensions in the late capitalism. Thus, the inversion of the classical schema of the sacred as transgressed by the profane takes the form of the profane transgressed by new forms of the sacred aiming to exorcise the Unknown hidden behind the extreme order and trying to restore the primordial chaos. Science has not succeeded into explain Nature which is producing new forms of reaction to the accelerated human intervention. Also social sciences have not succeeded into explaining the multiple reasons of social interactions. Science has succeeded only into changing mentalities and influencing also our educational systems removing our interests from classical studies and humanities and focusing on technological studies which alienate the human being in long term. Science has succeeded also into demystifying the human way of interpretation of the supernatural by the use of the rational thought but humans do need myths in the end of this Millennium and all that commercial media do is to

exploit to the extreme this universal human need by serving audiences with falsified myths produced in the studios and using the simulating technics of electronic technology for producing false impressions by their artificial effects.

### **How to Define Transgression Under Postmodern Conditions**

#### ***a. The Sacred and Its Ecstatic Transgression***

Durkheim defined religion as: “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Apparently, Durkheim was right into relating religion to apart sacred things which were set and forbidden. But he was too much preoccupied by the social impact and importance of such a religion for human communities (organised to churches and acquiring a moral meaning of existence) to foresee that religion as resulting from the sacred was also an individual’s preoccupation. If humans were organised in small communities in the pre-modern times, this did not exclude the individual problematics to the Unknown and the Divine. Communities set cultural symbols and series of rituals characteristic of their life-styles which set individuals in the “common game”. For example the forbidden things considered as sacred, were interdictions that waited for their ceremonial (and for this reason sanctified) transgression through the profanation process i.e. by the way of the imitation of real practical acts of the everyday life. However, the inner meaning of what transgression might be is related to the eternal problem or need to give interpretations to things unknown. This hypothetical interpretation could drive the human to the limits of his existence where there was no place for longer interpretation. The best mean to arrive to that hypothetical or imaginative limit was the transgression. The elliptical and never integrated process of tending eternally to a comprehension of unknown things by transgressing them, pretending that there is not any interpretation during this very transgression was a major characteristic of the premodern or traditional era of mankind prolonged up to our days in many different parts of the globe that preserve oral tradition and related rituals. This mentality called “primitive” or “mythological” or

even “pre-logical” (Levy Bruhl, 1922) had -and still has in these remoted places- the handicap of ignoring the new tradition of the written culture or the power of Logos and its derivative, modern and rational science.

If modern science - as formed after Enlightenment in the path opened by Greeks - has promised to overpass all dead gods and demystify all primitive myths classified as fairy tales for children, it did also bring to the modernised part of humanity quite a lot of new and negative consequences. The extermination of the sacred from the everyday life and the institutionalisation of moral communities called once churches- at least in the first Christian era-<sup>3</sup> to the model of a concentrated powerful organisation - giving afterwards the idea for the ethnic state - brought existential agony to the individuals once more that transgressive ceremonies and ecstatic behaviours were not more allowed officially by the religious authorities. The profanation or secularization of life transposed the spirit of holy or sacred to its symbolic “cage” manipulated traditionally by the official Church(es) and people had to believe that this science based on empirical evidences and experimentation in laboratories imitating or simulating Nature had to be their salvation for the comprehension of the *Kosmos*. Commercial interests which followed this science and bought the most of it to sell it back in good prices under the forms of technological products finished into establishing a hallucinative web of massive media which define our lives by the pretext of information and entertainment. Returning to the classical era before the evasion of media, humans were alienated from the products of their work because they belonged to an impersonal huge mechanism of production owned and/or directed by impersonal directors (capitalism) or by the amorfous state of the socialist experiment. Not any form of transgression was permitted during this era that lasted till the last technological revolution that was the electronic evasion to our lives. (late seventies). Scientists played the game of God but their knowledge much removed from ethics and virtue once claimed by Socrates risked to turn into ruse. The exploitation of Nature and the violence of human conscience were acts realised during the omnipotence of science that cannot make scientists feel proud of. Recently we witness to a slow passage towards a new era of human culture called postmodernity or

postindustrial condition. The inner reason of such a transition has been the expansion of total alienation of human beings not only in their labour sites but also during the rest of their supposed to be free time. Consumer mentality as propagated by the mass media and all simulative techniques used for advertising products have been well established in the western life-style and human alienation has been expanded from the production to the consumption sphere. Simulation techniques have been used for exaggerating reality and presenting the world as a toy or rather as a multicolored artifice. Originality is rare and the copies are imitating the original forms better than ever. The meanings are also escaping the same as the original forms because they are cut into infinite fragments that make no sense but are easy to memorise because of their nonsense, the same as advertising slogans. The plethora of provided (pseudo) information is not a guarantee for any knowledge formation, in the contrary the claim for democracy and pluralism in the provision of non demanded information has resulted a falling of quality and a generalised cacophony in the massive media. The possibilities revealed by a new medium such as internet for human retroactive communication, has opened new horizons for many people but the quality of their communication depends on their formed mentality (as formed in most of the cases by mass media). What transgression of this extreme profanation or violation of life could demand? One thing is sure: Through mass information propagation, man became a lonely individual amidst impersonal masses or crowds, aiming to not collective aims and losing the sense of solidarity. What Riesman anticipated in the middle of the century as the coming of the era of the lonely crowd became an indisputable reality at the ending of this same century. The return to the self in the era of much proposed globalisation -that is a commercial hoax- is one of the uncontested truths of recent times. What the Ancients claimed as the knowledge of the self is presented as the only possibility for today's tired postmodern citizens provided that they would find successful ways to overpass their heavy alienation. The aesthetization of our postmodern lives laid to nowhere except to the consumer's model but for Ancients aesthetics was the third level of inner evolution after the acquirement of the knowledge of the self. Socrates claimed that "man must be who he really is and he has to

proceed to this act by the knowledge of himself." This is an ethical deed to use the potentialities of Logos or thought or rational knowledge in order to become yourself. The final result is to make World beautiful (*Kosmos* in Greek meant ornamentation in a metaphorical sense) and this aesthetic aim could be realised only by the harmonious collaboration of Ethos and Logos (Otto, 1969; Foucault, 1993)<sup>4</sup>.

This knowledge of the self, followed by its application to one's everydayness, seeks ways of expression once it succeeds to overpass the thick web of falsification of forms and fragmentation of meanings produced by the massive consumer and informative model. The heavy profanation of postmodern life and the pursuit of easy and superficial success (financial or social recognition of one's ...glamour) leaves in vacuum the primordial need of the human to KNOW still the Unknown things and to communicate with the essence of Divine whatever that might be. Transgression of institutions (most of them evolved to laws) cannot be dared. Sacrifices exercised during the innocent era of premodernity are considered as crimes or satanic ceremonies if not accepted by official religious or state authorities who manipulate postmodern symbols and related rituals (falsified to a tourist extend)<sup>5</sup>.

The quest of originality and true meanings is the new sacred task that humans need to fulfil. This task can be successful only in the margin of the dominant cultural model of the western consumer society. What was called anomie once in a negative way (social disorder) now takes the dimensions of marginalization that can prove itself successful if achieving its aim: how to create new ways of life different from the dominant alienating culture model mentioned above. What has to be transgressed of this vulgar profane world? Everything! How? Using the old sacred ways reinversed. There where transgression of the forbidden things was permitted instantly by a profane (and for an instance sanctified) act, there where the sacred pathos created ecstatic moments of passion and fever the pursuit of *methexis* with God or Saints or the essence of Divinity, today we have to transgress just the idiotic massive model of consumption and obedience to the hidden god of useless maximization of production and "development". Already social movements such as the ecological one, challenge and dispute the dominant model

and propose new alternative ways of practical life, of theory and communication. The unsupportable (and non demanded) Order of our western societies supposed to procure wealth and well-being have succeeded only into alienating their members and into providing unequal chances and career opportunities. The better way to transgress this profane and ice-cold Order presented as necessary, is to fight it by sacred passionate means, boycotting its rules and directives. In other words by not following the model of life that it proposes during the working and free time. The sacred of the future must find ways to transgress (by not loosing its essence and motivation) the miserable profanity that others decided for us the same as their much advertised products.

***b. Premodern Seduction Versus Postmodern Simulation or the Loss of the Metron***

Science as a product of rationalised knowledge attempted to interpret the “unknown things” that tormented the human being from primordial times. This quest for the production or creation of TRUE meanings has to respect the laws of measure or golden rule and to know when and where to accelerate and also to retard or to stop. Truth is the supposed to be last limit of originality and its transgression brings to falsification of the original thing. It is not enough to interpret the unknown, this interpretation needs also to be original the same as the things interpreted are. What the criteria of true or false interpretations could be? The desire of discovering reality and to live in this reality by not changing it, is the most powerful criterium of truth and originality. Nature gives the model to human societies as regarding this originality. Nothing in nature is maximal, all have their “measure” or optimum form. Also, nothing is integrated or completed except the dead forms, because death is a last limit and the transgression of the living. The sense of *elleipsoide* or something that is missing is omni-present in the Nature but humans pretend not to see it. Seduction for instance was in the premodernity a holy passion with all the characteristics of originality since humans seduced by the idea of Divine searched how to accomplish their relation with it before the establishment of the tyranny of Logos (Baudrillard, 1978). The knowledge of the self thus, cannot but be *elleiptical* and for this

reason important. *Elleiptical* does not mean false but original and true because Nature is *elleiptically* real and for this reason original and true.

However, modern science has transgressed in most of the cases the limits needed to be respected in its fever to conquer -and exploit afterwards- the unknown. The scientific arrogance of absolute potentiality created the rational aspect of substitution of the dead gods. This arrogance and scorn toward the “primitive” thought (characterised as irrational) paradoxally led humanity to the era of absolute falsification of meanings and the triumph of aimless life-style of consumerism during postmodernity. Virtuality as the extreme condition of simulation, substitutes more and more our everyday realities. Money that had been charged during ages with all the heavy symbolic meaning needed for human exchanges, became partly virtual and huge stock-markets are supposed to play with the offer/demand law of capitalism. In reality they invest virtual capitals in virtual enterprises aiming at the maximum of profits out of nothing, buying and selling fresh air. The symbols of nothingness or of extreme falsification created their analogous rituals aiming to the reproduction and maximalisation of the power of the already powerful in the expense of the weak. The mentality of maximalisation of all measure -even to the temporal measure by increasing all possible speeds- has its consequence to the formation of new aesthetic styles adoring not the harmonious, the graceful or the symmetric but the huge the heavy and the expensive. What seduces the postmodern human is not harmony but cacophony and exaggeration of forms. The imitation of the supposed to be original led art and style fashion in caricatural falsity and to cheap copies (Baudrillard, 1983). Computer technology can imitate or reproduce so well the original form that soon national currency will be perfectly falsified by deceivers and the governments will have to search for new symbolic ways of circulating values of exchange.

Summarising, by the above phenomena one can note that profanation of original desires brings to alienating aimless routines resulting to simulated forms and meanings while still claiming for the original. Rationalisation, instead of demystifying obscurity -as the dream of Enlightenment could be- succeeded to bring new scotadism: that of the falsification of reality. Primitive desire for representing by imitation the

Divine - by identifying temporality the self in the midst of the community with It -during the sacred and respected rituals, has been replaced by the actual desire to acquire more and more huge and "clever" techno-gadgets under the pretext that they "make our lives easier" missing the purpose of this eternal chase of acquisition. Postmodern man, the same as his modern ancestor (but more aided by technology and confused by media) searches infinite ways to exorcise the unknown of his existence and to expiate himself before its absolute limit that is death. Postmodern transgression of the sacred and original fear of death -repulsed and exterminated out of the public view and the media advertisements- is executed by the poorest of the means that could make even a cannibal to smile. Transgression of the originally unknown -and consequently TRUE- by false profane and poor processes cannot result but to the final existensial alienation of the human. The spectacularisation of everyday life and the peeping through the magic glass of a TV screen falsifies reality to the most and results to a total illusion. To live with artificial -very well known-material things does not solve the problem of what original -in form and meaning-could really and truly be.

The sacred exorcised as a dangerous and not commercialised force to the margin of social life needs to transgress all previous falsification with new true meanings and forms. Since humans refused to live in small communities, the massive function of the sacred seems impossible. The sacred needs real participation of the persons interested in common rituals designed by them for this purpose, not virtual conditions and simulative falsification of the reality. The sacred needs harmony and not cacophony for its expression and the liaison of the sacred desire to be seduced by the Divine with the real and true and also painful knowledge of the inner self, constitutes a par-excellence Ethos in close proximity with the original.

### ***c. Latency in Late Postmodernity as a Mean for Resolving the Impasse***

Marcel Mauss, the eminent disciple and nephew of Durkheim who continued the tradition of the "Maitre", tried to prove that society preceded all cultural forms and meanings and gave its flavour to their development. Also, the priority attributed to the collective conscience versus the

individual, obliged Mauss to develop the theory of the "total social event". After his posthumous critics<sup>6</sup>. Mauss' major contribution to the social sciences is having demonstrated by his analyses that the social by permitting the consciences' communication operates as the mediator of personal intentions. After him the impersonal (collective) conscience was given to the man before his personal conscience. Believing that human was rational since his early "primitivism", Mauss considered the notion of *mana* as the starting point -the famous "point zero" - of every symbolisation related to the holy or the sacred. Also by this notion *mana* was the point of insertion of the individual toward the social. "Every collective representation had been developed to myths the same as every general idea born in the individual mind could not be thought if not aided by concrete images" (Mauss, 1954).

Under this conception of premodern rational man, ecstatic phenomena exercised in *collectivity* or individuality, can be explained only as illusions and manifestations of sacred but false manias, the same as the first authentic physician of Antiquity, Hippocrates<sup>7</sup> classified *manias* not as God-given gifts (as believed by the popular tradition) but as illness of the psyche in urgent need of a medical treatment aiming to a definite therapy. To transfer our scenery to the today's postmodernity, extreme rationality of Logos as applied in science technology and societal organization aim to the extermination of whatever could remind the primitive condition of passion and enthusiasm. These psychic manifestations are -the same as in the school of Hippocrates- considered as marginal and needing therapy because deviating society from its organisation and order. But these phenomena, collective or mostly individual do exist even in our bureaucratic western societies, operating in latency and in margin of the society. When media have problems of increasing their audiences, they present some of the cases of sacred manias as bizarre illnesses in a much spectacular and exaggerated style. This falsification of the real happenings cannot proceed to the analysis of the causes of such manifestations. The task of actual Anthropology should be to examine and analyse and also interpret such phenomena not only in remote continents but in the middle of our postmodernity. The much exorcised "different" comes back in our era and theorists of Postmodernity as Lyotard

developed theories on this notion since 1984. *Otherness* also is a much discussed postmodern theoretical notion meaning what is other from what we are supposed to be (and maybe very close to what we are but we do not dare to recognise)<sup>8</sup>. Crossing borders of countries -that are demolishing under the global perspective-means rather the crossing of our own borders that centuries of Logos have built as barriers or as an imaginary Berlin Wall.

Our actuality also proved the increasing importance of personal and individual insecurity even in an era when extremely large amounts of money are spent for assurances and security measures. The probabilities of an aircraft to smash are more dependent to the UNKNOWN-and for this reason completely unpredictable -mechanical error of a computer that from a human (pilot or engineer) error. The increasing dependency of our lives to machines and automatization, brings a much severe insecurity than the optimist Sain-Simonism of Jules Verne could imagine a century ago. The crisis of the originality and hence of the authenticity derive from this insecurity. The doubt about the necessity of our acts is following this uneasy social -and global- insecurity. The rational profanation of the unknown and invisible sacred is proved to be not much more secure even if presented as real, true, well-known and visible. Cybernauts are surfing into the virtuality or uncertainty of the fantastical space named cyberspace which has more things in common of the ancient sacred than with the scientific profane. The sacred is transgressing the profane in late postmodernity because the tired citizen at the end of this Millennium once distanced from the illusive media, conceives reality as an unknown and unpredictable mystery and tries for the first time to "take the situation in his/her hands" hence the triumph of individual creation or adventure or decision. New latent sacred manias that cannot be classified as illnesses anymore are appearing massively but regarding remote individual cybernauts while surfing the Net. The famous IAD (internet addiction disorder) could not be proved by academic physicians as real (it is interesting the attribution: disorder).

Our recent postmodern societies of false impressive appearances and illusive mediated images for massive consumption, will succeed at least to one matter: To the increase of the individual degrees of freedom because of the

uncontrollable flexibility that every citizen acquires while transforming him/herself to netizen. Internet that started as an effort of military control, is a chaotic uncontrollable field where million of human interactions are exercised out of any possible censors every day! This social phenomenon could not be imagined by the most optimist anticipation 20 years ago. The sacred chaos is getting over the ordered and rationalised profane once more !

## SECOND PART

### INTRODUCTION

We shall not describe one more ecstatic cult. Rituals exercised periodically in remote rural areas usually refer to the community's need for economical and social prosperity and their characteristics are mostly profane. However, after the famous distinction first introduced by Durkheim (Alexander, 1988; Bell, 1979; Castelli, 1974; Pickering, 1969), between the sacred and the profane aspects of life, there still exist some sacred aspects of agrarian cults in latency, such as ceremonial sacrifice of an animal. The paradoxical fact in the case of the ritual under examination is the ceremonial dance that follows the sacrifice exercised by some participants "elected by the Saint" on the burning coals of a fire. These dancers who walk and dance or even stay immobile on the 300 degrees coals are characterised as ecstatic while trying to identify themselves with the protector Saint of the village. The focus of our approach is neither on the paradox of the dancers' "*akaia*" (not burning on the fire) nor on their general social attitudes, nor even to prove that this ritual is purely Greek and not Bulgarian (actually it is still exercised by Bulgarians too) as generations of Greek folklorists did insist with passion. A new method based on the notion of "*Ellipsis*" or latency (literally deficit) is proposed. The point is to precise what aspects of the sacred are vivid in co-existence with the everyday profanity of social life.

A "definition of situation" does not mean that we can construct situations arbitrarily. On the contrary, it can be interpreted that once we define a situation autonomously or heteronomously, whatever our attitude to it, the situation once defined can remain real. Even if we define a situation, we cannot execute complete control over our product. Once produced/defined, the

situation is alienated from us as a “thing” and become open to anybody’s interpretation. And we do not fabricate realities “*ex nihilo*”. But we refabricate on the horizon of a particular tradition. Human beliefs have been in close relation with analogous rituals or ceremonial collective acts that enforce these beliefs. The situations created during these acts are “seen” by the external viewers as paranormal or impossible but nobody can deny their reality. Thus, reality is not ever operating under Aristotelian logic even if his sophisticated epigones try to interpret it under this only angle. The actors themselves cannot give logic interpretations to their deeds since they do not consider them as logical (such as their everyday “profane” acts). The phenomenal riddle remain for actors and external viewers, but the most possible is that Social Anthropology after a century of rationalism and matured from its colonialism virus, can stand in the threshold of a new Millennium as the only “human science” able to search for “alternative” or “*elliptical*” (deficit) interpretations of bizarre and irrational phenomena manifested during collective ceremonial acts.

### Some Remarks

Under this scope the study of a ritual such as Anastenaria including ceremonial bull sacrifice and fire-walking considered as “sacred” and realised traditionally every year in the honour of the Saints Constantin and Helen by Thracian refugees fled from Eastern Romylia (ex Ottoman and now Bulgarian) to Greek Macedonia, takes a special value to a considerable degree for the following six reasons:

1. The cult of the Saints as founders of the village echoes analogous cults of the ancient Thracians related to the dead ancestors but this similarity serves not as a proof of “revivals” of the glorious antiquity to our modernity. On the contrary, the rich ceremonial and ritual background of this cult recognised as ecstatic may split new light to our very modernity.
2. To say that the “sacred” cannot “cooperate” with the “heroic”, is a doctrinal aspect, since these two elements of human spirituality operate as the two facets of the same coin. In the ritual of Anastenaria the rich musical repertoire of songs sung and/or danced consist a perfect combination of heroic and sacred scenarios that are present in the same songs in the most of the cases (Dede,1978).<sup>5</sup>
3. Functionalism that served as a biological starting point before turning to an interpretative school of social Anthropology, has been proved completely inadequate to explain phenomena such as “*akaia*” (resistance to the power of fire and high temperature). The error of the Malinowskian approach is that he did not evaluate the importance that fantastical elements such as symbols (Douglas, 1970) play in the life of common people even more when people do participate in collectivity in social rituals inside a community. The study of significative codes is never fruitful on the level of the phenomenon itself, but rather on the level of representation. We know that the roots of theatrical representation come from the eternal human need to imitate while performing collective acts such as rituals considered as important for the welfare of the community. The beginnings of the Art named theater-evolved further on to the Greek Drama,-can be traced in the supplicatory rural rituals of welfare and prosperity.
4. Oral tradition, neglected by our scholarship under modernity, is coming back in recent times under the indirect ways of massive iconic and virtual communications. The realm of the written knowledge as propagated by the academic education, seems to decline and educators are re orientating school and university curricula toward the new trend. Human oral and spectacular expression modes regain their former originality disputed during centuries of written scholarship.
5. The complementary to the ecstatic dance ritual of the bull sacrifice as committed by the same actors, must be viewed not as a “...”revival” of analogous ancient sacrifices such as *Boufonia* (expiatory sacrifices committed in ancient Athens) but in relation to the main ritual as an explanation of it. Fire as the unifying common element (Bachelard,1979) in both sacrifice and fire-walking is a purificatory power and also a revenging force that punishes the transgressors of an interdiction or taboo (Bataille, 1958). In all sacrifices the dialectics of the sacrificer/victim similar to the carnival role changes, culpabilises sacrificers (usually



- humans) because of the transgression of the murder interdiction. Certainly the cause of sacrifice has been expiation but the sacrificer needs to overpass his sin by the same way of purification: by dancing and extinguishing the fire. The sacrificer is usually one person but he represents the whole community. In their turn the community have to dance in a collective manner on the fire to overpass the collective sin and to purify the outrageous deed of murder.
6. Finally, the double image of the Saint/hero, young (micro-Konstantinos) and old (“*papous*” or grand-father) constitute one more manifestation of dual or complementary twin symbols by which humans ever since needed to express their ambiguity towards the divine and sacred powers (Sahlins, 1981; Douglas, 1970). The form of the young hero much related to Middle-Ages epic songs does not carry the sacred but rather the profane aspect of this bipole. The dancers while dancing on the fire, identify themselves more easily to a “possible” person, than to the unknown grand-father attributed to the historical personality of Constantine the Great, the Roman Emperor who established Christian religion as the only official one in his Imperium in the fourth century A..D. The holy icons carried by the dancers during the dance ritual, represent this person and his mother Saint Helen an influential personality to his decision. This interpolation of the sacred element in the heroic epic dance and songs of the profane young hero can also be interpreted as the need of the recognition of this ritual (characterised as pagan) by the official Orthodox Christian authorities. This is succeeded by the reference to the recognised Saint Constantine (old grand-father) and his mother Saint Helen both celebrated since the fourth century of our era in May 21 in the Orthodox religious calendar.<sup>5</sup>

As the eminent British Anthropologist I.M.Lewis notices in the preface of his 1977 “Ecstatic Religion”: “*Belief, Ritual and Spiritual Experience are the Cornerstones of Religion*”. The point is that the participants of a ritual considered as sacred surviving in our late modernity or postmodernity, such as Anastenaria, do believe in their holy ritual and in the same time they do have a spiritual and ecstatic

experience taking the dimensions of paranormal since they prove by their participation that they overpass the natural laws of heat produced by fire.

### The Songs and Dances of Anastenaria

It is doubtful whether the participants of the fire-walking could even enter the ecstatic condition needed for walking on live coals, if besides their faith to their protector Saints Constantine and Helen, they were not so full of rhythm, dance and melody. These elements are not only an expression of what Anastenarides feel and believe, but they also “create” by their musical means the sacred and enthusiastic atmosphere needed to overpass the “*pyros menos*” (the power of the fire). The verses of these songs are not the same and the singers add, compose or modify while dancing new ones that do not fit in the meaning in all cases. The main theme of the verses are however the heroic deeds of the young hero. But we must distinguish the songs sung during the crucial fire-walking and the songs sung during the initiation of the participants that is held in the “*conaki*” (the village’s first ‘s house). Also, a third category of songs, that of “*tavlas*” (on the table) are sung by the whole community and refer to practical aspects of everyday life. These songs that turn to usual thracian popular modes, do not modify or break the unity of the religious custom. The modesty with which the *Anastenarides* amuse themselves, underlines the very essence of their ritual i.e. decency, piety and love of freedom and peace, which only heroism and self sacrifice can preserve. The rhythm of the sacred song of little Konstantinos is 2/4 and in this rhythm the “*aghitikos*” (dance of the Saints) is danced. That is to say vv.vv.vv One more melody considered sacred (no verses with that melody) is also in 2/4 or 2/8. This melody is performed like all the other melodies of the feast, with their musical instruments (lyre, *davuli*(drum) and *gaida* ( pipe) but more enthusiastically. Thus, many Anastenarides feel that the “nerve” with which this melody is played, is a very real requirement for the performance of fire-walking.

Historically speaking, we know nothing about the reason why these songs and dances were adopted by the Anastenarides and are so tightly connected with their ritual.. Even if they are unable to explain the connection, the dancers

consider these songs as sacred and referred to Saints Konstantinos and Helen. The confusion of the two persons (Agios-Saint- Konstantinos and small Konstantinos) is even more impressive. For the dancers, both these persons fought bravely against the enemies of Christianity. Especially the small Konstantinos has all the referents to be a historical person, since, increasingly the heroes of the songs of the Acritic Cycle appear to have been real persons.

Nevertheless, the most impressive element is the decency of the songs and the dances. A religious and heroic spirit prevails in the verses, the melody, the steps, the movements of the arms and above all the ecstatic faces of the persons dancing. Both singing and dancing are in fact a prayer, in which piety and heroism find a unique expression through rhythm and melody.<sup>5</sup>

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The example of a collective sacred ceremony such as Anastenaria proves that:

1. The spirit of sacred is not based mainly on various interdictions as in official Orthodox cult but rather on participatory pathos (mania) of people committed in this ritual. Institutionalisation of cult is replaced by the seduction that fire as a sacred element exerts on the dancers. This challenge of fire is not an appearance or impression such as postmodern simulation techniques used by media to alienate human conscience. On the contrary the seduction of fire invested with all its symbols of heroic plus respected persons (the double Konstantinos) is not considered as a game of representation or reality's substitution with all its rules granted. The very action of collective participation to a ritual makes up its sacred character.
2. The essence of this form of sacralisation not as an inversion of a profane reality but as a moral deed "par excellence" consists on the total absence of the aesthetic category (Durkheim, 1906). The proof of this argument is that the way of aesthetic production (provided through imitation in the postmodern way of production/ consumption) is not important in Anastenaria ritual. Nobody imitates anybody or an advertising message or slogan. Originality is the only means of succeeding to the sacred aim: the fire must be won. Knowledge of the self is an absolute necessity and this concentration to the self through a communal practice takes the dimensions of a sacred act. Participants have the conscience of doing a holy deed otherwise they will be "punished" by the most powerful of the natural forces that is burning coals. We consider this conscience of dancers and fire-walkers as an ethical act par excellence.
3. This ethical aspect of a participatory ritual could not be operative if every dancer could not succeed into the mastery and control of his/her inner rhythms in harmonisation with the rhythmical tempo of the drum and the melodic sound of the lyre and the pipe. This strange synchronisation of outer and inner rhythms and melody -that is a perfect sample of harmony- presupposes an original not fragmentary knowledge of the self. Some argue about a knowledge of the God but the identification of dancers to the double symbol of a young hero and an old Saint advocate more for the knowledge of the self. The Socratic motto: "be thyself after you KNOW yourself" seems to take its best application in this case (Bohme, 1959; Versenji, 1963).

For Durkheim the definition of religion passes through the definition of what he considers as sacred (Durkheim, 1954 (1912); Filloux, 1990; Giddens, 1978). The content of this notion may change with time and different cultural context but as a reality it always exists and in this sense sacred is timeless. This eternity of the sacred is in contradiction with the temporality of its inverse the profane. But since the sacred is a highly absurd notion the same as alienation (both can never be taken as granted) the best approach would be to ask individuals or groups exercising collective rituals what do they hold to be sacred while declaring their experiences and describing their attitudes. The participants of the Anastenaria ritual do declare the holiness of their pathos and the purity of their aims while sacrificing the bull and dancing on the burning coals. The mythological and even cosmological (ancestral) background of Anastenaria social condition insist for a religious faith but official Church claims them as pagan or heretics. Their symbols are Christian (icons) but the way they use them recalls rather pagan festivities. Holy objects such as red handkerchiefs tied in their necks during the dance, are of major importance to them and their musical instruments are considered as sacred. But the most important aspect of their secular lives is that

their social organization is controlled by their ritual hierarchy (Dede, 1978).

The sacred element is surpassing or controlling once more their socio-economic profanity. Following the Durkheimian definition of the sacred, social organisation of a community is the best manifestation of a latent sense of sacred provided that it is operating under moral terms. Thus, the point is what can be the definition of an ethical attitude (Durkheim, 1906; Eliade, 1959; Filloux, 1990; Pickering, 1990). If the expiation of all social evil through ritual action can be defined as a moral deed, we can theorize Anastenaria as a sacred, moral, collective ritual traditionally transmitted in oral ways. The interest of its function is to note if it will succeed to survive in the few next years of the fragmented and simulated postmodernity that influence all the same inhabitants of urbanised metropolises as well as small villages in the periphery of our global consumptive societies.

There is one more point in this argumentation. The very essence of the sacred has been successful insofar as it is hidden. Ritual that is its manifestation is the "supplement" that demonstrates its own lack; it is a reproduction that seeks to renew for its participants the experience of absolute originality. The believer nevertheless affirms the social efficacy of ritual and of its linguistic variant, the rhetoric of the Saint-protector. By talking of this superior force, the believer hopes to bring us closer together in our *otherness* from him. The source of this collective origin is itself original; it only appears to increase with the "decline of public man" because the evolution of the exchange system provokes in us a sensitivity to the difference between the public and private spheres unavailable to our ancestors. The premodern individual defines himself in the sacrificial repetition of the original scene; his lack of a "private" identity makes him less capable of insight into the founding role of human mimesis than his sceptical modern counterpart. For some recent theorists such as Rene Girard, culture, violence and sacrality are all co-terminal realities. Violence has to be expiated by the act of sacrifice because it is a universal phenomenon. However, in our case the social environment of the villagers/participants on which the ritual is grounded has never produced any violent manifestation. The theory of violence as the universal source of all expiatory sacrifices connected to sacrality does

not make any sense in the case of Anastenaria sacred ritual and the sub theories of "double monstrueux" and "bouc emissaire" as enorchistrated by Girard are not verified.

**KEY WORDS** Sacred; transgression; profane; fire-walking; sacrifice.

**ABSTRACT** Individuals and crowds face a new challenge in postmodern era. In contrast to modernity, postmodernity is characterised by an extreme division of the subject (fragmentation) and by a complete illusion of means and aims, as propagated through alienating mediated messages (simulation). A third feature named "latency" has the sense of inconsistency of goals and the flexibility of strategies. Both in the West and the Rest (to use Wallerstein's distinction), people conceive the sacred under new influences coming mainly from the media and computer intervention in everyday life. Falsification of pictorial information in parallel with its uncontrolled inflation are responsible for spacio-temporal alienation. The result is the inversion of the classical scheme sacred/profane (conceived as the transgression of the former by the latter). One can speak today, rather, of the transgression of our everyday profanity by new forms of the sacred as developed and manifested under actual post modern conditions. Focus here is on this recent development of the sacred as manifested in contemporary rituals such as Anastenaria comprising ceremonial bull sacrifice and ecstatic fire-walking.

## NOTES

1. A passage from D. Strangelove's article in "Ottawa Courier" (Oct 1997), on "Sacred, rituals, symbols in postmodernity, is characteristic :

*Once human behaviour is seen as symbolic action—action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. The thing to ask [of actions] is what their import is". Moreover, culture is "public because meaning is"—systems of meaning are necessarily the collective property of a group—. When we say we do not understand the actions of people from a culture other than our own, we are in reality acknowledging our "lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs".*

*Many anthropologists have examined how social structure replicates the dominant pattern of symbols within the social world. Mary Douglas described social systems as constraining filters on how individuals perceive the universe. A social system frames a "potential symbolic field" and the selection of symbols from this field is a social process that serves to "govern choices in behaviour". The selected symbols of a particular social order represent the set of categories that are in use within the social world. This set of "in use" categories constitutes the social order's unique cosmology. For Douglas, the symbolic order (or cosmology) is not merely an expression of the social*

order. The operative symbols replicate the social set-up which generated the symbols themselves. How do symbols exercise this control? The symbols themselves lash back at the people and divert their attempts to change their lot into channels which do more to symbolise than to improve it. The natural symbols of society create a bias with strong philosophical and political as well as religious aspects.

Symbols exercise power over the social order by establishing shared categories of perception, categories which inevitably contain bias of one sort or another. This bias is continually replicated in the social order through ritual forms of social interaction. Douglas equates ritual with symbolic action and confirms Giddens' description of ritual as a medium of social reproduction. Rituals mediate symbols between individuals. The symbols in turn carry the bias of the surrounding social system. This mediation process frames the possibilities of expression and explains "how our different cosmologies imprison us." In modernity, with the extreme erosion of traditional social forms, how is the content of the social world's cosmology mediated to individuals? Rituals remain but the symbols rituals mediate are selected by mass media systems where once they were selected by the filter of the traditional social order. Ritual provides a medium through which symbols are communicated. In *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (1966), Mary Douglas describes how symbols flow through ritual and control experience. Douglas' ritual theory follows in the tradition of Emile Durkheim, who identified ritual as symbolic of social processes. She follows upon Durkheim's observation that rituals serve to control experience. Douglas explores how symbols and rituals surrounding the body create the framework of consciousness. Her ritual theory continues the project of Durkheim's sociology of knowledge by relativising the framework of modernity and the scientific enterprise itself. Douglas' analysis of how the body acts as a symbol of society and how body symbolism reproduces the surrounding social structure is not relevant to our discussion. Scattered throughout Douglas' writings are observations about the role ritual and symbols play in the social construction of reality. Douglas describes the individual as a "ritual animal". Social rituals create reality through "symbolic enactment." Rituals draw selectively from a common stock of symbols and thereby control experience in the social world. The symbols which rituals select and interpret frame experience by communicating cultural themes and excluding alien ("intruding") themes. For Douglas, ritual simultaneously creates and maintains a particular culture through mediating symbols that are thick with assumptions. These assumptions, latent within the selected symbols, control experience when they are communicated through the symbolic action of ritual performance. The ritual process of symbolic enactment is, for Douglas, a process of cultural self-knowledge. Rituals give visible expression to the particular form of social relations and thereby "enable people to know their own society." Ritual constructs culture through the selection and interpretation of a common set of symbols. Rituals also mediate culture

by communicating the structure of shared social forms (such as kinship) and by communicating the basic categories and standardized values which define culture itself.

2. From the extensive literature on hooliganism and youth related violence we select the following characteristic recent books and articles:
  - a. Brake M. 1980. *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth's Subcultures*. London: RKP.
  - b. Brake M. 1985. *The Sociology of Youth Culture*. London: RKP.
  - c. Cohen S.T. 1973. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. London: Paladin.
  - d. Danzinger K. 1971. *Socialization*. London: Penguin.
  - e. Dunning E. 1986. "The rise of the English soccer hooliganism," *Youths and Society*, 362 – 80.
  - f. Dunning E. et al., 1984., "Spectator violence at football matches" *BJS* 37. 221-243
  - g. Dunning E. et al., 1988. *The Roots of Football Hooliganism*. London: RKP.
  - h. Eisenstadt S.N. 1956. *From Generation to generation*. Glencoe Free Press.
  - i. Erikson E. 1968. *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. N.York: Norton.
  - j. Frith S. 1984. *The Sociology of Youth*. Causeway Press.
  - k. Gousgounis N. 1989. "Hooliganism and social change" (in Greek), Intern Congress of Violence in Athletic grounds, Athens.
  - l. Gousgounis N. 1994. Violence and Order in Youth "subcultures", *Socioloski Pregled (in English)*, 4: Beograd, 495-503;
  - m. Hargraves J. (ed). 1982. *Sport, Culture and Ideology*. London: RKP.
  - n. Harre R. et al. 1985. *Motives and Mechanisms An Introduction to the Psychology of Action*, London, Methuen.
  - o. Humphries St. 1981. *Hooligans or Rebels*. Oxford. Blackwell.
  - p. March P. 1978. *Aggro, the Illusion of Violence* London: Dent and Sons.
  - q. March P., E. Rosser and Rom Harre. 1978. *The Rules of Disorder*. London: RKP.
3. From the literature on Primitive Christianity we propose:
  - a. Bultmann Rudolf. 1950. *Das Urchristendum, Zurich*, Artemis Verlag,, tr. Francaise 1969, Paris: Payot.
  - b. Goguel M. 1946. *La naissance du Christianisme*, Paris: Payot.
  - c. Foakes Jackson, Kirsopp Lake. 1920. *The beginnings of Christianity*, 33.
  - d. Hinneberg, P. 1922. *Die christliche Religion*.
4. For a short literature on Platonic morals and aesthetics as well as the notion of the golden rule *metron* see:
  - a. Brumbaugh R.S. 1954. *Plato's Mathematical Imagination*, Bloomington;
  - b. Lodge R.C. 1950. *Plato's theory of Ethics*. London.
  - c. Gould J. 1955. *The Development of Plato's Ethics*. CUP.
  - d. Huber C. 1964. *Anamnesis bei Plato*. Muenchen.
  - e. Rankin H.D. 1964, *Plato and the individual*, London.
  - f. Schuhl P.M. 1952. *Platon et l'art de son temps*,

- Paris.
- g. Wild J. 1947. *Plato's Theory of Man*. CUP.
- h. Robin L. 1957. *Les rapports de l'être et de la connaissance d'après Platon*. Paris.
- i. Martin G. 1969. *Plato*. Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag.
5. For an analysis and interpretation of sacrificial ritual acts as related to the unofficial sacred see :  
Gousgounis Nikos (1981), *Anastenaria : Un culte des ancêtres morts en tant que Saints protecteurs de village en Thrace contemporaine*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation of 3th Cycle University Paris VII Jussieu;
6. Mainly Levi-Strauss C, in his *Systemes primitives de classification*;
7. About Hippocrates and his opinion on sacred diseases see:

ON THE SACRED DISEASE, By Hippocrates, Written 400 B.C.E, Translated by Francis Adams

*It is thus with regard to the disease called Sacred: it appears to me to be nowise more divine nor more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause from the originates like other affections. Men regard its nature and cause as divine from ignorance and wonder, because it is not at all like to other diseases. And this notion of its divinity is kept up by their inability to comprehend it, and the simplicity of the mode by which it is cured, for men are freed from it by purifications and incantations. But if it is reckoned divine because it is wonderful, instead of one there are many diseases which would be sacred; for, as I will show, there are others no less wonderful and prodigious, which nobody imagines to be sacred. The quotidian, tertian, and quartan fevers, seem to me no less sacred and divine in their origin than this disease, although they are not reckoned so wonderful. And I see men become mad and demented from no manifest cause, and at the same time doing many things out of place; and I have known many persons in sleep groaning and crying out, some in a state of suffocation, some jumping up and fleeing out of doors, and deprived of their reason until they awaken, and afterward becoming well and rational as before, although they be pale and weak; and this will happen not once but frequently. And there are many and various things of the like kind, which it would be tedious to state particularly.*

*And the disease called the Sacred arises from causes as the others, namely, those things which enter and quit the body, such as cold, the sun, and the winds, which are ever changing and are never at rest. And these things are divine, so that there is no necessity for making a distinction, and holding this disease to be more divine than the others, but all are divine, and all human. And each has its own peculiar nature and power, and none is of an ambiguous nature, or irremediable. And the most of them are curable by the same means as those by which any other thing is food to one, and injurious to another. Thus, then, the physician should understand and distinguish the season of each, so that at one time he may attend to the nourishment and increase, and at another to abstraction and diminution. And in this disease as in all others, he must strive not to feed the disease, but endeavour to wear it out by administering whatever is most opposed to each disease, and not that which favours and is allied to it. For by that which is allied to it, it gains vigour and increase, but it wears out and disappears under the use of that which is opposed to it. But whoever*

*is acquainted with such a change in men, and can render a man humid and dry, hot and cold by regimen, could also cure this disease, if he recognizes the proper season for administering his remedies, without minding purifications, spells, and all other illiberal practices of a like kind.*

8. On the notion of Otherness, see our article: Double culture, risk and cosmopolitanism or "Multicultural cosmopolitanism and the rhythms of eternal mystery, in *Haabrasi Vestrik* No. 1(15) Alma Ata 2001 pp 148-154 (in English)

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