

## DONKEYS IN LOVE ON THE ROOF: A CASE STUDY OF A “STRANGE” CUSTOM IN A GREEK ISLAND COMMUNITY

*The donkey is one of the international symbols of fertility. In the Greek case, in particular, this symbolic quality (along with others) has been attributed to it since the mythological years and has remained with it, as shown in this study, until nowadays. The case studied herein is a “strange” custom of the 1<sup>st</sup> of May that is performed only in the village of Kynidaros in Naxos, Cyclades, Greece. That day donkeys are lifted up the roofs of the houses of the village to provoke – in a magical way – fertility for the humans and the earth. The study presents the folk interpretations of the custom as evidence of a forgotten early meaning of it and its symbolisms. The folklore interpretation of the custom is also provided and its function today is investigated as it is organized solely by the members of the local cultural community. Finally, the variations that occurred through time to the cultural representation of the animal in the Greek world as imposed by the hegemonic discourses of the ancient Greek literature and the Christian religion are presented in brief.*

**Keywords:** Donkey, Dionysus, Priapus, fertility, roof, 1<sup>st</sup> of May, Naxos, Kynidaros.

### The context of the study: A short Anthropogeography of the Naxian village Kynidaros

This work deals with a rather unusual custom, namely, the lifting up of donkeys on the roofs of the houses on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. This custom takes place in a village (Kynidaros) in the island of Naxos (Cyclades, Greece). The article, first, presents the context of the custom and the ritual of its performance along with the animal's representations in the Greek literature and Greek Orthodoxy. Then, it proceeds to interpret it from a folklore perspective and discuss its current function in the community, mentioned above.

The village Kynidaros, which is the place where the custom under discussion in this study takes place, is located at a 14-kilometres-distance east of Chora, the capital of the Naxos Island, in Greek Cyclades. Its inhabitants managed, with equal determinism, to capitalize on the mountainous and mainly infertile area imposed all around them by diachronically creating small tillable slices of ground in the gorges, making them worthy in every possible way. Wherever there was water, gardens were created for cultivation of all sorts of vegetables and fruit. In areas lacking the valuable water, wheat was sown and vines were planted, which consume far lesser quantities of water. It is well known that a piece of land, which becomes a *home place* after its appropriation by people determines

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their financial and social structure and affects the formation of their character and civilization. In this vein, it is no coincidence that Kynidaros has remained for centuries an agrarian and sheep-raising economy. Agriculture, therefore, and cattle-raising as a complimentary activity have been the main financial sources of the village during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while after the 1950's, some of the inhabitants were involved in the extraction of marble (the subsoil of the area is rich in it), a productive activity which has remained a significant source of income until today (Klouvatos 2011: 28). The geomorphology of the area, the short in size tillable ground, the small income, the increasing after the 1960's needs of the family unit forced them to be also involved in construction work or to offer salaried work as seasoned workers in the villages of the plain areas of the island (Sergis 2011). Another noteworthy privilege of the area, but not a determinant one, is its calcareous petrification that allowed the construction of limekilns for the production of the valuable lime.

The ethnic composition of the population has not been scientifically investigated. It is, however, generally believed that the native population has been occasionally enriched by immigrations from Tsakonia of Peloponnese (early 18<sup>th</sup> century) and from the island of Crete (1770). I studied carefully the local folklore to investigate whether the herein discussed custom existed in these two areas reaching a negative conclusion.

The inhabitants of Kynidaros are connected, more than any other Naxiot, with dance and music and they have created a splendid respective tradition (Spiliakos 2003: 33; Spiliakos 2008). The characterizations *Gypsies* and *Sorrowless* that are ascribed to them as satirizing attributes by the other Naxiots are symbolic representations of their identity, its distinctive elements (Sergis 2005). The former refers to the Gypsies who are the main carriers of music in Greece, while the latter, to a deep sophisticated attitude towards living, the tendency to enjoy life through feasts and joining in common or private fun and entertainment. It refers to an "imaginary society" of happy and constantly enjoying life community. They say in the village that "the small children first learn how to dance and then how to walk" or "*even if only one of them were left alive, he would continue to dance*" (Klouvatos 2011: 66). This, indeed, outstanding *cradle of music and dance* should be interpreted in historical and social terms. The musical and dance tradition in the village has been taught, perpetuated and passed from generation to generation because it had become an integral part of the daily life of the people in a more intense degree than in the other villages of the island of Naxos. These children were initiated to learn the distinctive attributes of their traditions since their very early years, because this was a dominant feature of their cultural identity. Some Naxiots knew how to produce specific products of fine quality (e.g. cheese) and transmit their skills to the children which is a similar process to what happened in Kynidaros with the *tenure* to the spiritual creation, the art of dance, verse, composition and music.

### **The ritual performance of the custom**

The Barbius' legend of a donkey which climbed on the roof of his master's house (a funny carnival-like inversion of the world) and jumped up and down after having envied the grace with which a monkey did a similar 'show' in order to eventually and unfortunately get his master's unpleasant 'reward' or the modern Greek proverb "marjoram at the doorstep, donkey on the tiles" which is said in case of absurd deeds, similar to the Latin *asinus in tegulis*<sup>1</sup>, are in a way realized to our days in the afore mentioned Naxiot village if not on a tiled roof, but on an earthen one in older times and a cement one in modern times.

The night before the first of May the *young* of the village (I stress the youth element in terms of age) gather for the customary merry making. Klouvatos, describing the ritual performance of the custom, stresses that at some moment the young gathered secretly with great discretion and method in order to execute the plan of the locating and gathering of the donkeys (Klouvatos 2011: 100). The custom, in order for its goals to be fulfilled “demanded” its protection from the malicious “bad eye”, from the malevolent powers in general that lurked to deter the expected results of the performance of the custom. The secrecy in which the “silent water”, for instance, was carried home or a “secret mass” was performed are respective reinforcing examples (Sergis 1994).

The ritual of hoisting up the donkey should be performed in a strictly specified way for many reasons mainly the safety of the performers but that of the animals as well. The animal was tied from its thorax and belly, was lifted up to the roof where it would stay during the night until the midday of the following day. The picture of a good number of donkeys scattered on the roofs must have been an impressive spectacle in the past! I stress that this custom is a genuinely regular one and not one that was revived the last decades in as much as oral narrations confirm that its performance was never interrupted during the 20th century.

The ritual of getting the animal down from the roof was more difficult in practice. They had to tie the front and gear legs of the animals (to make them harmless), to throw them very cautiously down on the ground of the roof, to carry them to the edge of the roof, to tie them in the similar manner they used when they lifted them up and then their descent down began. This phase demanded great coordination of movement and time, as it is required in similar cases, with the same person, giving the orders and synchronizing the pace (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Young men lifting a donkey on the roof. Accessed at <https://www.zoosos.gr>.

### The folk interpretations of the custom

There are two folk interpretations for the custom in the village today. According to the first one, the herbs that grew on the old earthen / mud roofs should be cleaned. It is said therefore that they invented the solution of lifting up the donkeys on the roofs where they remained for a week. In this way, they first provided food for the animals for a week but they simultaneously cleaned the roofs to press them (with particular cylinders) later on to make them as waterproof as possible (*Sergis* 1994: 30).

To the second, the inhabitants of Kynidaros used to visit the neighbouring village Siphones, which is not inhabited anymore but recorded since 1573 (*Katsouros* 1955: 91; *Theophilos* 2004), on their donkeys the following day of the 1<sup>st</sup> of May (which is the day the local saint was celebrated). The heads of the families escorted their daughters to this exceptionally flamboyant social celebration. To prevent his girlfriend from going with her father to this feast, a young man lifted up their donkey on the roof of their house. The story became known all over the village and henceforth the deed of this young man was established as a custom.

Both interpretations do not sound valid enough to start the custom, to me, despite the fact that nothing should be rejected *a priori* in a scientific discussion of folkloristic phenomena because in many cases they can turn into the creative starting points for a scientific interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation.

### The key concepts of the custom

The interpretation attempted in what follows is based on three key terms: *spring* - 1<sup>st</sup> of May, *roof* and *donkey*. To my view, as will be shown below, these terms with the functional cohesion among them interpret the custom.

**1<sup>st</sup> of May (*Protomagia*, in Greek).** The spring used to be a critical phase for the survival of the “traditional” community since it was then that the vegetation resumed and came to life from hibernation. This transition was accompanied, to have a wishful outcome, by a plethora of performative customs and rituals aiming at the expulsion of winter with a fertility worship focus rituals.

The 1<sup>st</sup> of May, in particular, being the first day of the month, was itself a *passage* day, the culmination of the orgiastic spring (*Frazer* 1991: 254 onwards). The “traditional” societies divided the life of their members in phases and, therefore, ought to solve the various problems that were connected to the *passage* from one phase to the other. To serve this aim, they had enacted a wealth of *rites de passage* (*Gennep* 1909; *Turner* 1967; *Turner* 1974; *Turner* 1977). These are customarily determined, regularly recurring *symbolic*<sup>2</sup> activities, with a concrete structure and a communal character, which are related to the upgrading in social position or the mental and material condition of the members of the community. They marked the liminal points of the social life (e.g. birth, marriage, puberty, immigration) but also the transitional time points of the cycle of the year (e.g. first day of the month, midday, solstice, first day of the year, etc.) (*Sergis* 2007: 22).

The happenings / events (*dromena*) of the 1<sup>st</sup> of May were a stop-over before the end of a series of corresponding activities serving the same aim that had begun since the twelve days around Christmas (*Dodekamero*), which were continued with the Dionysus’ happenings (*dromena*) of carnival and spring and were completed at Easter and the beginning of summer. The booming of nature and its awakening from its hibernation, the

expected from this *fertility* process of the nature and the people, which will expel the fear of famine (as a primary danger), is a stable motif of all the rituals and theatrical *dromena* that took place in the “traditional” civilization during this long lasting period. I remind that the *fertility worship*, the fact of the union of two persons is the root of *comedy* and constituted a central motif of the folk theatre (Puchner 1989: 45).

Some examples from the Greek and Naxian area follow: that day, the day of phytomorphic disguises (disguise to look like a plant), a boy, the so-called *Mayboy*, was dressed up with leaves and flowers and accompanied by other boys visited the houses and shops of the village (Megas 1975: 124 onwards), to carry the message of the great celebration via the wishing carols to the inhabitants. At Corfu, they used to carry around the town a tender cypress decorated with flowers and kerchiefs, a symbol that refers to the phallus and signifies the *phallic-fertilising* character of the custom. G. Megas’ description from Messimvria of Northern Thrace (nowadays at the Bulgarian territory) is probably the most representative one. The women went to the vines, rolled about the grass urging their genitals to “eat the grass” (to come in touch with the life-giving mother earth, to draw fertility powers from the inexhaustible earth), ate, danced, feasted in general, spelled the smutty words required by the ritual, wished to themselves to be married or pregnant the following year (*kai tou xron’ villara*), constructed a red phallus (the red colour is a fertility one signifying blood, life) with red soil or a red piece of wood and decorated it with green herbs and flowers (symbols of regeneration) and handed it one to the other to use it symbolically, imitating the human sexual intercourse. At Glinado (a village in Naxos) during the 1970’s one could still hear funny jokes about the phallic “maywood” that the couple should at any case touch in the evening of the previous day or the use of the “indecent” and “dirty” words during the knitting of the May wreath (Sergis 1994: 446–447). This shows the functional dimension of the “indecent” during the wedding, the carnival and other rituals of a fertility character (Sergis 2007). The fertility of the earth, the people, of the animals constitutes the basis of every life and survival (Puchner 1989: 44–45).

**The roof.** Abiding by the divine cosmogony, people construct their own cosmos, their residence, a microcosm of the world, which, in its turn, is a divine creation. The construction of a house represents the Cosmogony and a likening to the creation of the world is apparent here. In this sense, the residence is *sacred*, is an *imago mundi* that needs to possess a spirit, a soul to be protected. People used to sacrifice people or animals at the foundation of their house for the spirit of the sacrificed to pass over to the construction itself and add life to it as Oikonomidis explains (Oikonomidis 1997). The chimney of the house, over the fireplace, creates bonds with the supernatural. It belongs to the axis mundi. It is a point of entrance to it just like its central door. The roof of the house symbolizes heaven as the floor symbolizes the earth and the four walls the equal in number directions of the cosmic space. It is simultaneously its “upper-threshold”, it is considered in all national folklores around the world a *sacred space* since it is the edge between the “herein” world (represented by the house) and the “upper” world, the heaven, the world of the supernatural, it is the seat of well and evil-doing demons. There are dozens of theatrical *dromena* that are related to the roof and its afore described character (see, Rose 1922: 38; Eliade 2002; the entry “roof” in the journal *Laographia*, v. 23).

**The donkey.** In what follows I briefly present the process of evolution of the representations of the donkey, an initially (sacred) religious and sexual symbol, in the Greek territory<sup>3</sup>. This evolutionary process is characterized by an ambiguous human behaviour

towards the animal. Mircea Eliade's (*Eliade* 2002; 1981: 33–34) or Roger Caillois' (*Caillois* 1950<sup>4</sup>) *ambiguity of the sacred* constitutes a basic theoretical interpretative principle for the issues presented in this study. Another important element that should be reminded at this point is that the various identities, characteristics or qualities attributed at different times to animals are not but symbolic representations of human behaviours. Humans have *talked* about themselves through animals ever since the animistic and totemic period of their religious civilization and rank themselves or express their social differentiations through them. The donkey is a symbol of fertility widely used universally.



Fig. 2: Donkey-headed demons.  
Accessed at <https://image.slidesharecdn.com>



Fig. 3: Dionysus on a donkey.  
Accessed at <https://i.pinimg.com>

During the Minoan period in Crete, when the deities were still zoomorphic, donkey-headed demons appear who wear masks and the skin of this animal. Given the multiple interactions between Crete and Egypt and the fact that the *asses* are not indigenous animals of the latter one can easily assume that they were transferred there from the former. In Egypt the donkey was considered the god Seth's sacred animal, a red-eyed and red-skinned sexual god, who is depicted donkey-headed

with an erected tail. At the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC he was transformed into an evil demon for an unknown reason (*Bulliet* 2012: 250 onwards). To the mythology of this country he was Osiris' brother whom he murdered either by slicing his body urging him to enter a coffin during a feast as a joke or to test the crowd. He then quickly closed the cover of the coffin, sealed it with lead and threw it at sea<sup>5</sup>. These "deeds" explain and interpret (to the folk spirit) the fact that in Egypt Seth personalizes the initiation of murder, lying, brutality, the evil itself as contrasted to the benefactor god-man Osiris.

From Crete (as an intermediary stop) the spirit of these cultural elements passed to the Hellenic territory of those times. *Silinoi* of the ancient Greek mythology were imaginary creatures with their phalli in erection, bearing half-donkey and half-human characteristics (Fig. 2).

Since the early periods of the ancient Greek religious worship, Greeks related the donkey with Dionysus (Fig 3), Priapus, and Pan but also with Hephaestus (Fig. 4) and Hestia (Lafaye 1914; Deonna 1956; Imellos 1988). Their relation with Dionysus and Priapus mainly interest us in this study. The character of the Dionysian worship in Greece is well known and will not be elaborated here but we indicatively mention that Dionysos is depicted on ancient vases on a donkey with its phallus in erection (Forsdyke 2012: 102, 103) which drives him to his passions. Aristophanes writes about the donkey that carried in a basket the sacred utensils with which people used to build Dionysos' worship image at the Eleusinian Mysteries. Related to this is the ancient Greek proverb "an ass carries mysteries". Silinos is



Fig. 4: Hephaestus and Silinos.

Accessed at <https://il.wp.com/www.mlahanas.de>



Fig. 5: Coin of Mendi.

Accessed at: <http://www.kassandratour.gr>.

depicted in ancient representations as an escort of Dionysos on a donkey with its phallus in erection, dead drunk. Among the dozens of examples I can mention, I select to refer to ancient city Mendis at Chalkidiki (Northern Greece), whose prosperity at the early 6<sup>th</sup> century and onwards is verified by the wide circulation of its currency and was mainly due to the exportation of its well-known "donkey of Mendi"<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 5).

Less known but of equal importance is probably the relation of the animal with Priapus. This phallic god born in Lampsakos of Minor Asia expressed the reproductive energy of nature, the idea of the reproduction through love, love-meaning Eros as a primordial power of nature that secures the perpetuation of the species. It was a symbol of the sexual instinct and the masculine sexual strength. His close relation to Dionysus, Adonis, and Aphrodite is interpreted by the connection of his worship with similar fertility deities and worships. Ancient Greeks usually depicted him as defaced but always with an enormous erected phallus (I put emphasis on this property as it is linked to the respective one of the donkey) (Fig. 6).

Phallus expresses the sexual vigor and held an outstanding position at the cultural practices of the Greek world<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, the offer of symbolic phalli in ancient fertility



Fig 6: Wrought in relief Priapus from the castle of Kalyva Xanthi (Thrace, Greece). Accessed at <http://anaskafi.blogspot.gr>

rituals in which the new weds ought to ride a huge Priapos' phallus before the wedding ceremony (to signify that the god first reaps their decency) can be interpreted. The woman offered to the god the first elements of her upcoming intercourse with the man (Adamandiou 1911: 104–105). In the modern Greek folk theatre (substantiated by numerous well-documented scientific evidence of remnants of ancient Dionysus' worship), this performance held a primary position in spring folk theatrical performances. Their presence in dromena of the 1<sup>st</sup> of May has already been mentioned earlier. Other indicative examples follow:

- the “indecent” performances during the custom of Mbourani at Tyrnavos (Thessaly, central Greece) with wooden, of clay or made of carrots phalli (see the synchronic view of this custom by Avdikos 2014: 214-215);
- the ritual scenes at the midwife's house on her nameday (8<sup>th</sup> of January) when *inter alia* the married women and those who had just given birth to a child had secretly made a huge phallus and female external genitals

decorated with flowers, which all present women had to kiss as they entered the feast;

- the Makarona at Chios island (a phallic wooden image that had to be buried on the Monday before Easter, etc. (for all the above, see, Puchner 1989: 51, 225).

In the ancient Greek mythology, Priapus is taken to be Zeus' and Aphrodite's son or in other variations Dionysos', Adonis', Hermes' or even the donkey's son (and escort) (Kakridis 1986: 243). It is also said that once he met a donkey whom Dionysos had provided with a human voice (for having carried him once somewhere) and dared the animal to compare their genitals. When the animal was found inferior (or the reverse) Priapus killed it and Dionysos sympathising with it transformed the animal to a constellation of stars (Kakridis 1986: 243–244). This competition is related to the establishment of the ceremonial of the sacrifice of donkeys to Priapus (see, Politis 1874: 475)<sup>8</sup> or possibly to the constellation. Apart from the donkey, his other “sacred” animals were the ox, the ram, the rooster, etc. all of them being diachronic symbols of sexuality. In this vein, one cannot exclude the possibility that he was identified with one of them during the zoolatry period.

To an ancient Greek myth, the nymph Lotis had escaped the attack of the lovesick god but woke up due to the braying of the donkey which happened at the moment of the rape attack and then she prayed to the god to transform her to a lotus (see also in Ovidius, book IX, verses 346–356). One can easily correlate lotus to the erotic desire, the sweetness and oblivion. Maybe this is one more representation of the female external genitals in the form of a lotus the power of which makes men forget their destination (see, for instance, the

Homeric land of Lotus eaters). All the above support the postulation in the ancient peoples' consciousness<sup>9</sup>, that Priapus had been associated with the Dionysus' ecstasis, sexuality and drunkenness. It should be noted here that mythological figures like Priapus are related with the fertility and phallic artifacts and amulets we often see in the museums.

As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, however, the donkey has attained more representations with their main characteristics being *stubbornness* (its merciless beating being the consequence), *laziness*, *gluttony*, *stupidity*, *ingratitude*, *lack of refinement*, etc. Its presence is quite frequent in the so-called "noble literature" where the mythical discourse and all the ranking categories had been imprinted. The poet Simonides, for instance, who lives in the aforementioned century, in his libel against the female sex maintains that women are of animal descent (Forsdyke 2012: 101). The woman who draws her descent from the female donkey then is lazy, greedy and lovesick ready to be seduced by the unethical enjoyments of Eros:

*The other [woman was made] by a grey female donkey, that is beaten by everyone,  
Under great pressure and heavy threats, she managed to finish well her housework with great difficulty.*

*In the meantime, at the back of the house she always chews day and night, eats and heats herself at the fireplace.*

*She has also unappeasable desires for love, welcome is the one who will escort her to... bed (West 1972: 101).*

The stubbornness and greediness along with its low status and inferior position to that of the horse are outlined by Homer (Bough 2011: 57) in his *Iliad* (Homer, *Iliad*, rhapsody 11: 558–562). More specifically, the horses are magnificent, beautiful, of great value, robust, durable, symbols of freedom, gifted with human qualities (they, for instance, sympathize with the humans at their master's loss (Homer, *Iliad*, rhapsody 23: 279–284), loving (they carry their qualities to their rider – see rider heroes and saints in the modern folklore). This donkey-horse distinction has expressed since then the social differences and was "legitimized" later (see the riders' social class in Solon's Athens) which are depicted in Modern Greek proverbs that have survived until today:

- from donkey to horse (declares a promotion or upward social mobility) or vice versa from horse to donkey, meaning the opposite
- when the horses die the donkeys' price increases
- my own donkey is better than a young horse owned by someone else, etc.

In more than 20 Aesopean myths (6<sup>th</sup> century BC) the donkey's representation is negative: It is mainly depicted as a stupid, ungrateful (in one case), lazy, greedy creature and clever (only once). Quite remarkable in these myths is its lack of self-awareness depicted by its wish to identify with qualities possessed by other animals, which usually ends in a pitiful way. The negative picture of the animal has certainly been reinforced by these myths because they were widely known as pleasant folk reading passages (Bough 2011: 59). In addition, in Apulius' well-known *Golden Ass* the animal is described as stubborn, stupid and lustful (ibid: 59-60). I am of the view that the lowering of status of the domestic (in general) animals should be associated with the ever-increasing intensity of their exploitation by the humans.

The most important, however, shift in the "identities" attributed to the donkey has occurred during the Hellenistic period, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC in particular, which was a determinant turning point for the evolution of the religious life in the wider Greek area. At that

point, the symbol of the ex-god was demonized *without his worship to be completely put to the oblivion*. The established for centuries, until then, religious life receives an “intrusion” of new “sacred persons”, the *demons*, which are creatures in-between the *divine* and the *human* condition. The followers of the philosophical dogmas of that period (Plato, Orpheus, and Pythagoras) accepted the view that through them they would resort to magic and were trying to find excuses for them (Cumont 1949: 88). During the same century, “eastern” religions poured into the wider Greek territory the practices of which led to a magnificent *religious syncretism*. The latter was due inter alia to the more human dimension of the new deities. Whatever reminds of *magic* constitutes an additional element to a continually spread folk worship which has the demons as its central features. During the Hellenistic period with the gradual abolishment of the city-state and the creation of the Universal World, the lack of stability, the effect of various philosophies (Stoics, Epicurean, Gnostic, Neo-Pythagorean, Neo-Orphism) and the eastern influences (Egyptian, Persian, Jewish, etc.) the transformation of the old “urban” Greek religious life was completed. Magic was gradually correlated with superstition, the occult religions and the demonic worship. Black magic was so exorbitant during the era of the Roman Empire that exceeded all imagination (Green 1990: 598). In this context, the views for the “in-between species” of demons constituted a common religious conception (Sergis 2010: 66–67; Imellos, 1972: 143).

The tradition of the donkeys-demons was widely spread ever since the post classical ancient Greece: the ancient *onoskelis*, a surname of the dreadful Embousa, is the *onoskelia* or *onoskelou*, the *onoskelikon ghost / demon* (Politis 1871: 93) of the upcoming years, which is depicted as a wild beast resembling the humans until the thighs and “having its legs and feet similar to those of the donkey’s” (Koukoules 1948: 251–252). The correlation of a donkey (mainly black) with the devil is not a paradoxical fact to my view. N. G. Politis, “the father of the Greek folklore”, records sacrifices of he-goats to Dionysus and donkeys to Priapos and observes that “the demons transformed themselves to these two animals, which, to a large extent, were shaped from the ancient myths about these deities” (Politis 1874: 475). The donkey’s connection to magic is also certified by the presence of some of its body parts in the materials used to make *misethra* (a sort of harmful magic) in Greece in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: some of the opponents used to throw a head of a black cat along with a pig’s, a dog’s and black donkey’s hair in front of their enemies’ doorstep in order for their enmity never to end (Imellos 1972: 67).

Christianity, to my view, has greatly contributed to the change of the till then conception of the donkey and conformed it to its own ideological cosmos. It becomes now a symbol of peace and humility appearing at important moments of the history of Salvation always playing a subordinate role, for instance in the crib of the Christ’s birth, the flight into Egypt, the Christ’s triumphant entrance into Jerusalem (Fig. 7, 8) (Gilhus 1997: 85). Messiahs and the holy kings of many peoples usually appear on donkeys (Bulliet 2012: 261). The narrations of the Christ’s triumphant entrance into Jerusalem in the gospels use this ancient Jewish (inter alia) symbolism (Loukas’ Gospel, 10’, 30–36; John’s Gospel, 10’, 14–16). Given the dichotomy body # spirit in the Christian ethic theory, the symbol of sexuality of the previous years gets to transform itself into an opposite stereotype: purity, with the huge phallus of the previous years turning into a tiny brain (Bulliet 2012: 287) and thus the characterization of the animal as a stupid one to be established. To a newer theological interpretation, the previous “impure” symbol now stands for the heathens (= the non-Jewish and the non-Christians, see, for instance, in the Mathews’ Gospel, 6, 32), the invitation

of new peoples to Christianity on whom Christ will rule and will be recognized by them as their Master and king<sup>10</sup>.

The references of the Holy Bible to the ass indicate a special relationship of the animal with the world of the spirits since it was believed to possess prophetic abilities (Rough 2011: 58). God chose to reveal to Varlaam his sins through a donkey so the donkey represents wisdom and becomes a good example of a suffering animal. This representation of the ass is further reinforced by the Christ's entrance to Jerusalem on a donkey. Let us note at this point that due to the Jewish donkey-worship or the Christ's birth in a cave-stable or his entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey, the Christians were ridiculed by the heathens as being donkey-worshippers, an "accusation" widely spread in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD [For the inscription DEUS CHRISTIANORUM ONOKOETES, the depiction of the crucified Christ as donkey-headed (Fig. 9) and the relevant reactions on the part of the Christian scholars, see Bulliet 2012: 246 onwards; Politis 1920: 187].

The attitude towards the animal has not changed in Greece until nowadays, being two-folded and ambiguous, just like its invented ambiguous character: (a) as a sacred animal, as symbol of fertility / sexuality influenced by the remnants of its primitive representation and, (b) as "loaded" with all the aforementioned accumulated in time negative characteristics of its "identity". This means, to my view, that the so-called Minor Tradition (folk) doubted and refuted successfully the Great one (Redfield 1955) since it managed to keep until today the ancient characteristics of the animal alongside with the others. In what follows, I provide strong evidence supporting the survival of a) the *sacred character* of the animal and, b) *its quality as a symbol of fertility / sexuality* in modern Greece.

a. *The sacred character of the animal*

Bulliet verifies the until recently valid in Arabia *sacred quality* of the ass mentioning that



Fig 7: *The flight of Jesus to Egypt.*  
Accessed at <http://www.eikonografies.com>



Fig 8: *The Christ's triumphant entrance into Jerusalem.* Accessed at  
<https://hellasorthodoxy-kmyst.blogspot.gr>



Fig 9: Satire against Christians: Donkey-headed Jesus Christ. Accessed at <https://commons.orthodoxwiki.org>

in one of his informants' village the donkey's braying during a funeral ceremony was taken to be a bad omen because they believed that its voice was a reply to the screams of the souls which it could hear from the hell, the kingdom of the ancient god Seth (Buliet 2012: 256–257). This information is further supported by similar beliefs in the Greek territory until at least the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is noteworthy that all the following references are related to the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, maybe the most fertility-related day of the “cycle of the year” in the consciousness of the Greek people as already mentioned earlier.

In Komotini and wider Thrace (Northern Greece) they used to consume garlic (it denotes abstinence) so as not to be cheated by the donkey (Kyriakidis 1910–1911: 408; Stamouli-Saranti 1951: 211). Additionally, in another recording from the same town, the cause of such a behaviour is also mentioned which is that the inhabitants did the same thing before the donkey's braying so as not to be deceived. To prevent this

unpleasant possibility they spelled the following phrase: *a knot on the back, a wolf on your tail* (Kyriakidis 1934–1937: 671; Korais 1998: 195; Stamouli-Saranti 1951: 211).

People of Rhodes island were afraid to hear the voice of a bird or a donkey without having eaten something before, because they believed that the above mentioned would happen to them. For this reason, they used to eat fava beans, so as to prevent the donkey from taking their voice (Vrondis 1934–1937: 594).

b. *its quality as a symbol of fertility / sexuality*

I present here some examples that show that the donkey keeps its quality as a symbol of fertility / sexuality.

1. All the middle-aged Greeks and the elder ones who have been brought up in the context of the folk civilization know from their ancestors' narrations and project in all relevant conversations nowadays the sexual symbolism of the donkey, which survives untouched as an idea as in the other similar cases (rabbit, rooster, cat, bull) despite the fact that they might have forgotten the narrations that caused this symbolism.

The reproductive period of the donkey coincides with the rebirth of the nature in springtime. May is the month when the female donkeys are at their oestrus. The following widely known verse told among the above mentioned Greeks declares the human extreme erotic desire and attributes quite explicitly to the “creature” – symbol its correlation with fertility and sexuality.

*I wish I were a donkey in May and a ram in August  
a rooster throughout the year and a cat in January.*

2. The traditions that relate him to the vine, Dionysus' beloved plant (Imellos 1988).

3. The custom from Kynidaros that is discussed in this study is one more magnificent reminder of this fact.

### The scientific interpretation of the custom (*dromenon*) of Kynidaros

The old lady from Kynidaros Athina Toumbakari in her narration offered me the key-words for the suggested here interpretation: in older times people did not lift up just any-one animal at any time on the roofs. On the contrary, they lifted a male and a female animal up on opposite roofs, so as to allow them to flirt. These were her exact words that include, to my view, the essence of the issue under discussion. The animals were symbolically involved in a wedding ceremony. The manifestation of the love desire between the animals and eroticism as presage to the birth of new life and the transfer of this to the entire living and inanimate nature constitute the scientific interpretation of the custom / *dromenon* under investigation in this study. In other words, the imitation of the fertilizing actions by fertility symbols will transfer it to the inhabitants of the house themselves and their crops. They will thus guarantee a good production for their fields, a prosperous remaining of the year to the principle of the “corresponding magic” (Frazer 1990). The couple male-female in the folk theatre has a fertility worship character; the virtual marriages that are performed all over the country during the carnival period are all connected to the fertility and reproduction of life, being its antecedent. In this sense, the custom is one of the hundreds existing in the Greek territory with a specific magical aim. The inhabitants of Kynidaros, in other words, were aiming at a similar target as in the aforementioned examples of *May-boy*, the women that rolled about the grass to come in touch with the earth and receive the fertility that it contains, etc.

Therefore, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, aiming to allow fertility in their own house since the animals were not allowed inside it through its door, they came to establish the entrance of fertility in it through another “in-between” place, namely, the roof.

The argument that the custom is related to the transfer of fertility to humans, earth and nature is further supported by the following from the same village.

A custom of a similar fertility function: the theft of the flower pots (Klouvatos 2011: 103–104). Along with the lifting up of the donkeys on the roofs, the previous day of the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, the young people once more, with the same secrecy described earlier in this work, entered the house-yards of the girls’ they were in love with and “stole” their flower pots. They subsequently left them in central points of the village until the evening when their owners would look for them or would be returned by the young men themselves, so as to enjoy another meeting with their beloved. I believe that under the symbolic action of the theft lie the theft / abduction of the women themselves, which constitutes an ancient practice, a social and historical experience for the Greek, female population (Psychogiou 2004: 165). It can also be associated with the upcoming loss of virginity, the sexual intercourse. It also reminds us of the exceptional value of stolen goods in the folk civilization: whatever is possessed by beggary or theft has an additional (Megas 1967: 532) value and power.

It was an amorous day, which, being the first of the month, abiding with the folk people’s analogous magic-thought, should continue and end being amorous in order for the young people to enjoy love during the rest of the year.

(b) The even more relevant custom of *donkey riding* on the same day. They led a couple of donkeys to the main square of the village (the main social place of the village) to copulate in front of the gathered community. This was another way to pursue fertility magically and symbolically through an erotic symbol and the sexual intercourse, which constitutes the beginning of the new life. The “traditional” people believed that they would succeed in fulfilling this ultimate goal through *theatre*. The ancient Greeks offered to the humanity

the theatre-drama, which had as its initial step a song to Dionysus, namely, *dithyramb*, while the modern ones created a wealth of folk theatrical dromena starting from the winter and spring gatherings (groups of people who go around the village visiting the houses and performing particular theatrical / magical dromena) until the more complex theatrical forms, leading thus the way from more primitive forms of theatre to more elaborated ones (Puchner 1989: 27 and passim).

(c) The swinging of packsaddles in the air: They tied from their balconies or another high point and left to hang over the streets the packsaddles they used on their animals to carry things or themselves with safety. In this case, the container (packsaddle) is projected instead of the content (donkey-symbol) (Fig. 10).



Fig 10: Packsaddle hung in an alley of Kynidaros. From the photo archive of K. Klouvatos.

The nucleus of the scientific interpretation suggested in this study, I suspect might have been widely known among the inhabitants until a particular time point in the far past, that has the year 1539 as its substantiated historical starting point (Klouvatos 2011: 26). Passing the time, it was nonetheless forgotten and instead the earlier mentioned folk interpretations were invented and survived being easier to be understood by the younger.

### The function of the custom today

Nowadays in Greece (I remain in this area only) the concepts of *continual transformation* and *modernity* are central and thus the upcoming studies will be based on them. The archaic goal of dromena has been completely forgotten, they are all in a theatrical form, their symbols have lost their sacred aspect and primitive symbolism and they survive as mere entertainment because people like them. They have become a spectacle of consumption, enjoyment, a profitable touristic product mainly because their performance is organized by municipalities and cultural associations without, however, losing their character of being elements of identity of some local societies (Fig. 11). Most of the dromena are folkloristic survivals of the “old” ones whose modern, multiple functions are well known. One of them is the conservation of tradition, which is based on the attraction that the “worship of the past” exerts on people. In any case the concepts ‘folklore’ and ‘folklorismus’ are often complementary and overlapping concepts and, thus, difficult to separate. If the saying “one age’s folklorismus is the next age’s folklore” is taken as correct then one might claim that the reverse is also likely to be true (Newall 1987: 131,146). The divorce with the forms and conceptions of the past is not absolute as aforementioned. I indicatively mention an element that survives keeping transformed: the reviving dromena allow the people the role of the co-protagonist once again (during their creation and performance) and re-introduce them to the game of communal creation and participation. Dozens of young people work with disinterestedness for a performance to be prepared, some others for “concurrent cultural events” (as they name them) to be organized. In this sense, the folk “community” as a selective subject is temporarily reconstructed. The motives for their involvement in such activities, the created feelings

and emotions, the new meaning attributions to the “old”, the reaffirmation of the cohesion of the community constitute areas in which the modern folklore research is greatly interested in. The modern *staging* of the dromena does not constitute a “downgraded civilisation” as some romantics complain they are. They are transformations of the “old”, its new meanings, the without any elaboration intruder, which all create a very interesting research field. Nowadays, in particular, humans’ need to meet again the “poetry of the customs” and those ceremonies that help them escape from the exhausting rationalism and bring them closer to their inhibited mythical world is much more acute. It goes without saying that every era has its own aesthetic criteria for poetry and its own definition.



Fig 11: Donkey on a roof wreathed with vine and programme of celebrations on the first of May at Kynidaros. Accessed at <https://www.zoosos.gr>

\* \* \*

Focusing on the particular custom under investigation in this study we observe the following.

1. The young people aged between 20-25 have undertaken the organization of the custom, who discuss the details in the main cafeteria of the village for a week. The rope, for instance, used is at the hands of the “unofficial” head of the group, who keeps it at his house until, in his turn, he hands it over to the next, younger to him person. This activity is, to my view, one more proof of the forgotten sanctity of the animal since it refers, for instance, to the safeguarding of the holy icons for a whole year in the house of the faithful who offered the most at the church during the customary icon auctions (Varvounis 2002). The rope, as an instrument of the dromeno, possesses sacred – magic qualities as the sacred icon kept in the young man’s house.

2. It remains a pleasant folk spectacle liked by most of the people. To this end, it is also enriched by improvisations to become more impressive (*Klouvatos* 2011: 102). They decorate, for instance, one of the donkeys with a hat and a tie, they dress it, etc. (*ibid*) (Fig. 11). All these constitute interesting elements that should be recorded since they are likely to be the future form of the custom, if people like them and are thus repeated many times. In this vein, these interventions / changes of the dromena, which have nothing to do with the deeper essence and meaning of the custom, are very important for the Folklore study. This issue brings to the fore the discussion of the framing of the customs within certain concrete historical time-framework (*Bausinger* 2009: 127). This perspective claims that there is only one accepted or established “rigid historical form” of the custom or dromeno (the older one) to which all its modern revivals should conform to.
3. The fame of the custom has ensued quite naturally in the course of years and has not been pursued. Most Naxiots have visited at least once the village to watch the indeed unusual custom. The Mass Media of the island are present and have greatly contributed to its advertisement. The same goes for the non-Naxiots visitors as well. When the 1<sup>st</sup> of May coincides with Easter the visitors are more and its advertisement wider.

The participation of the young men in the ritual of the custom is essentially one of the most important chances to “become men” or to demonstrate their manhood. I refer to the *social function* of the custom, which is rather weak nowadays but “not entirely lost”. In past years, this constituted an initiating test of the adolescents so as to be integrated in the community. During it the young man presented the picture of the ideal masculine identity composed by robustness, temperance, dexterity, sovereignty, participation in collective actions, manliness; it was in other words one more festal presentation of the ideal social role of the men and, to serve this aim, an appropriate behaviour substantiating the above qualities was a prerequisite on the part of the participants. Let us not forget that the whole celebration was watched by all the inhabitants of the village and the other visitors and broadcasted on TV, which signals that the custom does not remain within the borders of the village anymore.

At this point a problem, indicative of the transformations that have occurred in the Greek society, needs to be put afore: while finding the animals to be used for the custom was once an easy task, being in abundance in the village, nowadays constitutes a major problem. The organizing group maintains that they can hardly find 5 or 6. The local cultural association was obliged to buy two animals the previous two years, which they charged to certain inhabitants of the village, who thus possessed for free these animals under the condition to take care of them and allow them to be used for the performance of the custom. Given the fact that there are always peculiar people, some of the owners of these animals refused to hand them for the ritual arguing that they might be at risk during the rituals. It is said that one of them informed the police against the young men who, to him, had abducted his animal a fact that had not remained uncommented by the local folk poet: “Galis and his companions along with Zolotas / went and broke Mbombiras’ door. / Mbombiras thought that it was locked, / but the donkey was on the roof. / Mbombiras went to the police, / to catch the responsible for this violation of the law. / Mougies went and fixed his door / and Mbombiras calmed down” (*Klouvatos* 2011: 102). Another one was “forced” to hide his donkey in his house to avoid its “requisition”.

Recently, the custom was also performed in the neighbouring village Galini located at a distance of a few kilometers North East of Kynidaros. Historical evidence or oral tradition that would confirm its performance in previous times does not exist. However, this village (Galini) has become a centre of the Naxian entertainment during the summer months with one or two restaurants offering nice and cheap food. Therefore, the financial motives of the «copying» of the performance of the custom are quite evident, which causes the discontent of the Kynidaros' inhabitants especially those who own shops and gain profits from the annual folkloristic revival of the custom. In previous years there was also a feast organized by the tavern owners of the village on the previous to the 1<sup>st</sup> May night, which was quite profitable. Lately, however, this has been forgotten as well.

### By way of a conclusion

This study has discussed the various identities attributed diachronically to the donkey, namely, a symbol of fertility and sexuality, and has concluded that they are still valid despite the fact that the pragmatic material that created them has been put to the oblivion. Nonetheless, all these qualities are human inventions transferring arbitrarily the good and bad aspects of their character on animals. The real qualities of the animal are its endurance, even in very hard conditions, its loyalty, its tenderness, its frugality, its enormous offering to the folk people in the traditional civilization (in both peace and war periods) etc. It is a valuable, benevolent partner of the humans who demands to be recognized as such (see, *Bough* 2011: 66). In general, let us praise the primitive beauty of all animals and their dynamism remembering that the civilized people (via knowledge and civilization) have been alienated setting themselves outside the Nature but that the animals have remained within its realm. In this sense, humans have a good opportunity through animals, by sincerely approaching them, to find again the lost thread connecting them to their lost identity. All these views were put to the limelight by Ailianos some centuries ago (170 – 235 AC) in his work *On the animals' qualities*: The spiritual qualities of the animal and their behavior, he maintains, are considered worth highlighting to become an example for humans, who, due to the progress of their civilization, have proceeded to a distortion of their naturality: the Nature, and the spontaneous truth and ethics of nature are conserved only in animals.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The narration that includes this proverb is by Timalchio. To him, it is horrible (*horribilis* in the Latin text), which sounds as an unbelievable one. It is actually an experiential narration / legend in which the acting subjects are the horrible shrews who transformed the inanimate body of a child to a doll of straw and sent to death a fearless young man from Cappadocia, who dared to hit one of them with his sword, three days later (see *Meraklis* 2005; *Rose* 1922).
- <sup>2</sup> For extensive literature on symbols and their meaning, see Alexakis, Vrachionidou, Oikonomou (eds), 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that this is a universally known fertility symbol (*Cooper* 1992: 362–363).
- <sup>4</sup> We should, however, acknowledge the roots of this in R. Otto (1917), when he viewed the religion as a *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*, and in Emile Durkheim (1912).
- <sup>5</sup> This is a very common motif in ancient Greek and universal mythology. The guilty daughter, for instance, or her illegal offspring (separately or together) are thrown in the sea, in a sealed urn, which symbolizes the test via water: in essence the human being dares the divine to verify whether the exposed being is worth living or sparing (*Adamandiou* 1911: 142–144).
- <sup>6</sup> In Modern Greece, the most common name attributed to donkeys in all sorts of legends, narrations, fairy tales etc. is *Mentios*.

<sup>7</sup> For similar practices and behaviours of peoples of North Eastern Africa, Egyptians, Indians etc., see *Bulliet* 2012: 252–254.

<sup>8</sup> The modern Greek poet Kostas Varnalis (1884–1974) was inspired for his poem “The sacrifice” by the aforementioned quality: «your peaked cap / Midas, from the hairless peak / get down / and go and fetch from the barn / the two-year donkey, / rutting on heat / whose skin glitters / and no master rides on it/ and its youth passes from its back / upright, its phallus is full of vigor!/ bring it in the middle of the threshing-floor/ and when it reaches the foot of the plane-tree / throw it on the earth,/ it’s its turn to / glorify the fertility gods, my offer to be heard! / tonight I am getting married. For this reason / you deserve such a slaughtered animal / robust / defaced Priapus, / you are like the hot donkey yourself».

<sup>9</sup> *Priapia*, a collection of 80 love epigrams of the Roman period (the August’s time probably), resound this conception at the Roman period as well (*Hooper* 1999).

<sup>10</sup> This view has been accessed at <http://kyrigma.blogspot.gr/2011/04/20-4-2008.html>

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**Сергис М.Г. Ослиная любовь на крыше: «странный обычай» в греческой островной общине.**

*Осел является одним из символов плодородия у многих народов мира. В Греции этот символ существовал с мифологических времен и сохраняется до сих пор. Рассматриваемый в статье случай выглядит «странным» ритуалом 1 мая, который проводится только в деревне Кинидарос в Наксосе (Кикладские о-ва, Греция). В этот день ослов поднимают на крыши домов, чтобы спровоцировать магическим способом плодородие для людей и земли. В исследовании представлены народные толкования обычая как свидетельство забытого раннего его значения и его символики. Представлена также фольклорная интерпретация обычая. Вкратце описываются вариации поверий вокруг животных, сложившиеся под влиянием классической греческой литературы и христианства.*

**Ключевые слова:** Осел, Дионис, Приап, плодородие, крыша, 1 мая, Наксос, Кинидарос.