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NARRATIVES ACROSS SPACE AND TIME:
TRANSMISSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS
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VOLUME I

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VOLUME I

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Self-Representations in Greek Women's Life Stories

This presentation will focus on *intra-familial female life stories*. A special feature of our research was that the female narrators were related to the interviewers: more specifically, they were grandmothers from agrarian regions in Greece who were narrating the story of their life to their granddaughters. The questions that will be of interest to us here include: 1) On the basis of what cultural values do these forebears project themselves to their descendents (individual/family prestige). 2) Do familial relations influence the way in which the narrators present their individual and family histories? 3) Is there a pedagogical-advisory dimension to the narrators' discourse? 4) How is a dialogue created between two generations of women who have been raised and socialized with different cultural values? 5) How truthful and "realistic" do the descendent-interviewers consider the life stories of their grandmothers to be?

A. Life stories as a folklore narrative genre

Folklorists included life stories and life histories among the oral literary genres they began to study in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This change was primarily observed in the U.S., where the study of Native American story-telling was quite important even in the era of Franz Boas. Nevertheless, North American Indian stories were not easy to include in the classifications of genres that prevailed in Europe, and for this reason North American folklorists were more open to generic variations than their European colleagues (Klein 2006, pp. 8-9). Among these "new" genres were the "urban" or "contemporary" legends analysed by Alan Dundes, Jan Brunvand, Linda Dégh, and others (Hand 1971). The parallel development of research programs that utilized life stories and life histories in the fields of oral history, sociology, and social anthropology encouraged folklorists' interest in these genres. Studies of "narratives of personal experience" by the sociolinguists William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967, pp. 12-44) (which Labov later refined on his own) and a more general "narrative turn" in the humanities and social sciences

exercised considerable theoretical influence on folklorists. In addition, developments in ethno-methodology, conversation analysis, micro-sociology of the type practiced by Erving Goffman's, the thinking on poetic language developed by the Prague linguistic school (Garvin 1964), various forms of structuralism (Bauman and Sherzer 1989), and above all the "performance turn" in folkloristics with the theory of "verbal art as performance" introduced in the mid-1970s by Richard Bauman (1975, pp. 290-311; 1984; cf. Bauman 2002, pp. 92-98) have all influenced folklorists' approaches to narratives.

Greek folklore began to take a more substantial interest in life stories and life histories from the 1980s onward. The interest of contemporary Greek folklore in life stories is twofold, and concerns either a) the transcribed texts of life stories interviews, which it approaches as a *sui generis* narrative type in relation to its social implications, or b) a method, road, or path linking the life narrative to oral history via the study of cultural groups and micro-societies. The university folklorists who turned the interest of folklore to life stories were Michalis Meraklis and Alki Kyriakidou-Nestoros.

Michalis Meraklis took an interest in life stories for their own sake, approaching them as a *genre of oral literature* rather than as biographical notes from an informant for a folklore collection. With the help of his students, he began gathering authentic autobiographies, chiefly from rural sources, in 1975, while serving as Professor of Folklore in the Philosophical School of the University of Ioannina. Meraklis defined autobiography as "a *sui generis* narrative genre in which the narrator himself took part in the events he narrates, or at the very least was an eyewitness to these [events]" (Meraklis 1993a, pp. 247-255). Comparing autobiography to other traditional genres of narrative, for example the folktale, which is comparatively closer to it (at least in a formal sense), he ascertained that autobiography is first and foremost an individual work.

However, the life and subjectivity of the members of a traditional or even modern agricultural community are relative, since individual life experience is formed within the framework of a collectivity which subsequently determines the formation of collective consciousness and memory, such that "even when it was not at all the narrator's intention, in speaking about himself, about his personal and family life, he was simultaneously speaking, to a considerable extent, about the lives of everyone" (Meraklis 1993a, p. 248). This discovery concerned narratives of agrarian origins, specifically the autobiographies of individuals from Epirus (1993a, pp. 247-255) and Messinia (1993b, pp. 257-264) studied by Meraklis.

Alki Kyriakidou-Nestoros (1993, pp. 227-232) chose the method of studying life stories of a specific social group, e.g. refugees. These were examined in greater depth in a series of post-graduate theses at the Philosophical School of the University of Thessaloniki written under her supervision (Panagiotarea 1994; Potiropoulos 1998). She considered it necessary to include personal narratives in the history of an era, and to crosscheck them against corresponding written sources where these existed, or against further oral testimony, in order to bring to light those facts of history and daily life which the absence of written testimony had left unrevealed. Having proposed that the object of folklore is the study of traditional culture, she considered whether it was possible that in modern society there still exists a "traditional side" in an individual's life, which she identified with "oral, person-to-person, 'authentic' [according to Lévi-Strauss] communication". She believed that we all live part of our lives in a "traditional" way, which characterizes whatever we call "oral history" and is today identified at the levels of the family and individual rather than at that of the community, as had been the case for traditional societies (Kyriakidou-Nestoros, *ibid.*).

M. Meraklis' proposal for textual research was followed by related studies by Minas Alexiadis (1985, pp. 38-50; 1997, pp. 5-14), with work on autobiographical interviews from Soroni, Rodou and Asia Minor, by Manolis Varvounis (1997; 2000a, pp. 374-380), with studies of written autobiographical texts in which he attempts to link folk autobiography with historical fact or to study the themes in a life story of a folk musician (Varvounis 2000b, pp. 453-457). Evangeli Datsi (1999) analyzed the *Memoirs* (*Apomnimonevmata*) of General Makrygiannis on the basis of the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony, while Giorgos Vozikas (2002, pp. 119-148) explored the life stories of farmers from Serres, analyzing the convergences of folklore with social history and literature in his study of autobiographical texts. Rea Kakampoura (2008, pp. 195-205) has recently noted that folklore's interpretative analysis of biographical narrative texts is done on interdisciplinary terms, and aims to detect the meanings in these fragments of tradition, as well as the acceptance, rejection, or clashes with tradition by individuals, who recall the past through the prism they have adopted at the moment of narration through the mediation of the researcher. Evangelos Avdikos (1998a; 1998b; 2001, pp. 152-158; 2002), Vasilis Nitsiakos (1995, pp. 79-132. 2003), Konstantina Bada (2001, pp. 230-240; 2003; 2004), Vaso Rokou (2004), Anna Lydaki (1998; 2005, pp. 131-150) and Eleni Spathari-Begliti (1997), all employ narratives and life stories within the framework of their field research, as a method connecting folklore with oral history.

B. Theoretical framework

The life stories we shall consider here come from the *Archive of Life Stories* of the University of Athens' Primary Education Faculty, Department of Humanities. The Archive contains recorded – and more recently, videotaped – life story interviews and their written transcriptions. The interviews were conducted by students in the Primary Education Department within the framework of folklore courses taught by Professor M. Meraklis and the speaker. The Archive contains 528 life stories and life histories of individuals of Greek descent who narrated their personal experiences, focusing on family history, their childhood memories, and their job/profession, an experience that was continually being reevaluated and brought into converse with the great social, economic and historical changes of the 20th century in Greece (Second World War, the German Occupation, the Resistance, the Greek Civil War, the Cypriot struggle for the independence against the British, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus – for the 87 Cypriot narrators), thus comprising interesting primary material for the study of the links between individual and broader, collective-cultural memory (Kakampoura 2008, pp. 109-110).

Statistical analysis of 466 interviews, for the purpose of recording the social characteristics of the narrators, brought to light the differences in the narrators' educational level and professional activity, confirming the "inequality" of the two sexes, which is understood as the one-sided historical, cultural and political discrimination determined by male dominance (Dimitriou 2001, p. 9). Among 246 life stories of women born in the first half of the 20th century, 30.6% of the narrators had not finished primary school, and 10% were illiterate; corresponding percentages for males were 16.9% and 1%, respectively. Women's professional activities were primarily conducted within a traditional framework, as 26.1% declared themselves "housewives", 20.4% "farmers", 12.6% "seamstresses", and 13.5% "private employees" (Kakampoura 2008, pp. 142-143).

Recognizing that the time and place the narrators were born and raised would influence their way of thinking, their choices, their activities and the way they presented all of these in their narratives, we chose to study eighty semi-structured interviews of women born in the 1920s and the early 1930s mainly in small agricultural villages of Central and South Greek countryside (Kakampoura *op. cit.*, p. 143).

The interpretative-phenomenological analysis of life stories accepts the constructive nature of memory and the subjectivity of beliefs about

social identity, which, however, is largely defined by one's gender, educational level, social class, and sphere of activity. The personal beliefs of the narrators were formed within long-standing systems of habit and custom – *habitus*, according to Bourdieu (1972, pp. 174-189; 1980, pp. 87-109) – which are incorporated into institutions, traditions and behaviors, and function on the one hand as elements of collective representations, and on the other as givens of social practices within the group. According to psychologist F. Bartlett (1932), cultural values select and determine what is remembered in every culture. An important conclusion that follows from his work and provides keys to interpreting "memory" in life stories is the fact that belief and memory are each mediated by cultural cognitive schemata, beliefs, expectations, attitudes and emotions, practices, and rituals. Thus, new data or events are adjusted to existing schemata and incorporated into these, making the revision of the latter difficult (Paradellis 1999, p. 35).

Cultural values are largely determined by the analytical category of *gender*. The theory of social construction (constructivism) approaches gender as a symbolic presupposition for the subject's identity, as well as the social outcome of his actions. As the anthropologist M. Strathem (1988, p. ix) maintains, gender is the category by which "male" and "female" are differentiated. As a relationship category or stereotype, gender is culturally determined. Its symbolic importance differs from culture to culture and is ascertained through the analysis of the "symbolic logic" governing the act (Strathern 1981, p. 688; Papataxiarchis 1992, p. 23).

C. "Female prestige"

Recent data from Greek ethnography have shown the "household model" in kinship practices (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991, pp. 5-8). According to "household model", subjects understand their world not on the basis of individual choices, but by reference to the "obligations" that result from the "world order" stemming from kinship and familiarity (Papataxiarchis 1992, p. 68). If we accept that prestige is a type of social promotion and recognition that is culturally determined by the dimension of "gender" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981), then the question arises: Is there a "female prestige", and if so, on the basis of what cultural values is this promoted by the Greek peasant women in the life stories under investigation? We will now consider a number of examples:

Maria K. (A.Z. 292[1]) was born in 1929 in Katochi, Mesolongi. Her father was a farmer, her mother a housewife. She had eight siblings, four brothers and four sisters. She went as far as the second grade in primary school, when her mother had her learn to sew, which she did only within the house. She worked in the fields and helped her family with their own crops, as well as in the fields of fellow-villagers. She notes that she had very good relations with her siblings and parents. In 1952, upon her parents' finding her a husband, she married. After marriage, she worked in her husband's coffee-shop, which she soon took over, as her husband suffered a stroke and remained paralyzed. Her marriage resulted in three daughters: the oldest married young and remained in the village; the second finished (senior) high school, and the youngest finished university. The two younger daughters are married and live in Athens. She lost her husband about 22 years ago. She kept the coffee-shop until she retired and received her pension. She still lives in Katochi, Mesolongi. She narrated her life to her granddaughter.

Prestige is a positive means of self-presentation for the narrators. Individual prestige is influenced by the value system and prevailing customs of the time and region in which the narrators have grown up and been socialized. "Female prestige" is not entwined with terms involving power and social status on the public stage of the community like male prestige. Maria K.'s individual prestige appears implicitly, in the way she refers to the hardships she encountered in raising her children, running the coffee-shop by herself since her husband was paralyzed and since, in accordance with custom, she had to provide dowries and marry off her three daughters. Projection of "female prestige" is done through her individual sacrifice and self-denial in service to her family's advancement and prosperity. This concept of *individual sacrifice* is projected in the narratives of many women from Greek rural regions as a "natural" action that is taken for granted, as the only choice women had and as one in accord with their gendered role, which recognized them through motherhood and devotion to their family. Here I am referring to ways of self-presentation that are repeated, like a sort of "motif", in these narratives, without suggesting that there are no other, "unexpected" means of self-presentation that may diverge from the ideas presented here.

The historian Maria Papathanasiou (2003, pp. 134-143) notes that in

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1. A.Z. 292 = *Afegese Zoes* = Life Story. The number indicates the order of the interview in the registry of the Archive of Life Stories in the University of Athens' Faculty of Primary Education.

biographical interviews she conducted during her research on childhood in Krokyleio of Dorida (a mountain village in Roumeli) the stereotypical view of the mother, during the early decades of the 20th century, was positive for both male and female narrators. The mother was the mainstay of the family at the daily level, "the one who tirelessly cared for the children, the one without whom the family would have fallen apart", even though she was not always present due to the many household and farm labors she had assumed. Research by social psychologists has shown that traditional Greek women drew their inner strength and self-esteem from continuous giving, which was recognized as a positive value by members of the agricultural community. As Charis Katakis (1998, p. 127) points out, "the more she herself (viz. the traditional woman) deprived herself of material pleasures, the more she increased her psychological and social pleasures".

Another narrator Maria F. (A.Z. 528) was born in 1926 in a small agricultural settlement in Venerato of Herakleio, Crete; she was the eldest of eight children in a poor peasant family. Of her mother she notes: "She was a good mother. Very strict, but she raised us right, the boys and girls both". The woman as mother is often presented as strict and severe, particularly in female life stories, but she is the one who struggles to secure her family its material needs, and to bring up her children – particularly the girls – on the basis of gender roles (see also Papathanasiou 2003, p. 141; Meraklis 2004, pp. 64-66). Her contribution, accomplished through sacrificing her individuality (in countless life stories there is mention of the fact that the narrators' mothers served themselves the smallest helping of food), acknowledges her as "successful" in familial memory, often idealizing or even sanctifying her.

Another cultural value that emerges from female life stories is "family prestige", either that on the paternal side of the narrators or that of the family they themselves created upon marrying. Among poor peasant women from large families, family prestige is entwined not with material, but ethical values. Thus, the *image of the loving and united family* is projected as a core value in most of the intra-familial female narratives.

> "*– I had good children. And a very good daughter. I watched out for her like basil in the flowerpot. My son was good too, he loved his sister. As little children they were close and loving. They lived in a close circle with their mother's advice.*
> *– So you were very careful about how you raised them, eh?*
> *– Very. No mother raised her children like I did*", says Evangelia M. (A.Z. 271), a seamstress from Yaltra Evoia.

In answer to a question about their relationship with their parents, most of the narrators initially answered positively. However, in a fair number of cases they went on to narrate (specific) events that did away with the image of an idyllic family life. M. Meraklis (1993a, pp. 247-255) noticed that there were two opposing tendencies as regards the function of memory in autobiographies from the rural regions of Greece he studied: a *realistic-objective* one – which ultimately prevails – and an *idealizing* one, which is understood on the basis of the psychological function of the optimism of memory, even that of difficult moments in the past. He evaluates as positive the element of subjectivity in folk autobiographies in the folklore analysis of the life of members of a rural community, which he further believes reflects to a considerable degree a more inclusive communal life experience.

For written autobiographies, a number of models for "truth" have been proposed (Kohli 1981, pp. 69-72). These models include: honesty, subjective truth, historical truth, imagined (fictional) truth, and truth rendered honestly. However, as N. Denzin notes (1989, p. 23), in the analysis of biographical texts we are dealing with something more than various types of truth. Reality (*facts*), experienced states (*facticities*), and myth/ imaginary events (*fiction*) are also involved here. *Reality* refers to events we believe have already occurred or will occur, for example, the date today. *Experienced states* describe the way in which mutually interacting individuals experience this reality (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 119; Husserl 1962, pp. 184 & 410). *Myth* is a narrative (recounting, explanation) that treats real or imaginary events as well as experienced states. According to the above, *truth* refers to those statements that are in agreement with reality and experienced states as these are known and commonly accepted within a social group (Peirce 1959, p. 18). There are thus "true myths" and "false myths", that is, myths identified with reality and experienced states as they are known or experienced, and myths that alter or misinterpret these perceptions. An honest narrative myth is faithful to reality and experienced states. It creates states of verisimilitude, or something which for the reader of the written autobiography or the interviewer-listener to the oral life story constitutes credible experience.

In the present research, the interviewers prepared a report on the investigative process employed for the interview, in which they were asked to evaluate the narrator's honesty. The interviewers expressed their views about whether their forebear's narrative appeared honest and credible to them, or whether they believed, on the basis of both the cognitive and emotional experience of the interview as well as the

cross-checking of information with connected narratives from other, related individuals (triangulation), that the narrator (male or female) was embellishing or concealing certain events. It is impressive that all the descendent-interviewers initially reported that their ancestor's life story convinced them of its honesty, of its being a ¨realistic narrative¨. In a second, reflective approach to the interview, they identified moments at which the narrator projected herself (individual prestige) or members of their family (family prestige) in an especially positive light. In the course of a third reading, they attempted to listen carefully for what lay hidden behind the *silences* in their ancestors' narratives, by their avoiding responses to painful questions, since these recalled unpleasant or traumatic past experiences, some of which they had securely locked within their subconscious. Nonetheless, the general evaluation of the *truth* of the narratives argues in defense of their honesty.

The fact that they are revealing their lives not to a researcher, who is a stranger to them, but to beloved granddaughters, also lends their narratives a *pedagogical-advisory* dimension. At the conclusion of the interviews, the grandmothers advise their granddaughters to create their own families and become good wives and mothers, and in response to the question concerning what they consider to be the happiest moment in their lives, they normally refer to the personal and professional successes of their children and grandchildren, once again incorporating their individual happiness into the broader category of familial happiness.

> "*The happy times of my life are now, now that my children are married and doing well – may they live long lives, may they be happy; they'll have children, marry them off, and enjoy many happy moments too*", concludes Chrysafo K., a peasant woman from Dafni Kalavryton in Achaia (A.Z.449).

The *pedagogical-advisory* dimension of the interviews lies not only in the sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious desire on the part of the narrator-forebears to transfer the family values by which they themselves were socialized; occasionally the interviewer-descendents themselves seek such advice directly.

> "*– As a grandmother, what advice would you give your granddaughter?*
> *– Well, my child, for you to be a good woman, to never tell lies, to be a woman of God, to take communion, to respect your parents very*

much. 'Buy the blessing of a parent and climb every mountain'...!" (A.Z. 449)

The grandmother-narrator's advice bears the mark of the cultural values of traditional rural Greece: respect and devotion to both family and religion.

The intra-familial life stories provided by grandmothers to their granddaughters also comprise a dialogue between two generations that were socialized within different historical and social frameworks. When she was about to start school, Maria F. (A.Z. 528) moved at the age of eight from her paternal home in a rural settlement in order to live in the home of her aunt in a large neighboring village, where she completed primary school. Her granddaughter asks her grandmother about her possible *personal desire* to continue her schooling. The grandmother's response:

"*– We had a priest, and he wanted to send me to a school to study midwifery. But in the meantime he left for very far away, and anyway, he died not long afterward. His name was Father Dionysios*"

does not satisfy her granddaughter, who insists:

"*– You mean you didn't want to continue with school?*
– What was I to do after he died? I didn't have any support after that, and then the war came and things went from bad to worse. Did I want to go to school after that? There was a war on."

The grandmother's desire for schooling was determined by collective cultural practices as well as historical circumstances. Before World War II, this woman's education and professional occupation were not determined by her illiterate family, but by the decision of an educated and venerable individual whose opinion held weight in the community: the priest. The narrator presents this practice of transferring individual decision-taking and responsibility to the community as completely natural; at the same time, she does not understand the insistent questions by her granddaughter, a university student who has been nurtured on the idea of the necessity of education as an element of social inclusion. The representation of the narrator's childhood and adolescent experiences is recorded during an era (the Second World War) when *survival*, not *standard of living*, was the preeminent personal and social project.

Intra-familial life stories are structured by the mutual influence ex-

erted by face to face interaction. Often, the efforts of the interviewer-descendent to elicit specific narratives they have heard in the past from the narrator-forebear fall upon deaf ears. In the above interview, the granddaughter wanted to hear the pedagogical advice of her great-grandparents, which her grandmother Maria F. (A.Z. 528) was accustomed to relating to her in the form of proverbs and traditions. But the grandmother-narrator wanted to talk about something else, about how she had tended the corpse of her sister-in-law. She believed that the service she had performed then was rewarded by her grandchildren's advancement, including of course that of her granddaughter-interviewer. The idea of the narrator's individual happiness and joy is included in, and subordinate to, the idea of the family's progress, while the advice requested by the granddaughter is not given through the usual traditional narratives, but through the projection of the narrator-grandmother's experienced ethical stance.

The interviewers are interested in learning about the relationships of their grandmothers and grandfathers with the opposite sex in the days of their youth, and they usually ask them to judge the love affairs of modern youth (Nitsiakos 1999, pp. 171-182). In one case (A.Z. 528), the narrator Maria F. presents herself through the value of the honor of a modest virgin maid, who had no sexual contact with her fiancé throughout the three years of their engagement. Her memories of courtship focus on important details such as the touch between the man's and the woman's hands during the community group dance. Expressing a negative view of modern youths' premarital relations, she implicitly educates her granddaughter in the traditional value of initiating sexual relations within the framework of marriage.

The interviewers want to learn details about how their grandmothers and grandfathers met, and they ask about whether feelings of love were present, motivated by their own internal romantic expectation of discovering deep emotions in their family roots. The meetings of their ancestors, arranged through the intervention of relatives in accordance with the usual marriage practices prevalent in rural Greece until at least the 1950s, dispelled the myth which the interviewers themselves admitted in the reflective analysis of the interviews to having built up around their family history. This myth was based upon their own expectations and the emotional criteria that most of them, particularly the women, consider necessary for marriage. This is why they insisted on investigating the narrators' emotional memory, with the subconscious expectation of hearing a love story, and sometimes, the female "silence" breaks (see also Skouteri-Didaskalou 1991, pp. 261-278). The experience of sexual

relations in traditional Greek society has not been investigated by folklore studies, due to the prudery of academic folklorists, the thematic approach to folklore material, and the idealization of the folk tradition. Nor has it been studied by social anthropology, which has examined the relations of the sexes chiefly through the prevailing institutionalized discourse, which is male-dominated (Nitsiakos 1999, pp. 171-182). In the prior narrative (A.Z. 528), the grandmother-narrator admitted that she liked her husband because he was a "fine lad," and noted the virtues of his character, which are interwoven with the cultural values of male honor found in the traditional agricultural sphere: he provided his sisters' dowries; her uncle praised him for his husbandry and economy, which offered the narrator the sense of security created by the traditional male cultural value of the husband as protector and (good) provider.

Conclusion

Analysis of the interpersonal nuances of women's intra-familial life stories reveals that they are the products of mutual construction: they are "two-way interviews" (Askham 1982, pp. 555-573) in which the familial relation of the parties involved shapes their discourse and endows them with a pedagogic and advisory dimension which is reinforced by the familiarity of their sex. They are dialogues between two generations of women who have been socialized by largely distinct cultural values and actions. The grandmothers sought, sometimes directly and sometimes through the example of their own experienced "moral" behavior, to transmit to their granddaughters the traditional cultural values of the Greek countryside, in which they were themselves acculturated, by narrating the story of their lives. They project their selves through the sacrifice of the ego for family prosperity, promoting above all the image of a beloved and united family. However, this image is re-signified and sometimes subverted through the narration of the actual experiences of family life. For their part, the granddaughters shape the dialogue by posing questions based on their own expectations and modern views about relations between the sexes and the social role of women. The narrative process has a *confessional* character, with a *therapeutic dimension* for the elderly narrators' sense of self-respect, even providing a sense of immortality at the end of life (Biggs 1993, pp. 61-66; Phillipson 1998, pp. 23-28), while reflectively reinforcing the granddaughter-interviewers' own *sense of identity*.

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