

A Land for Strangers
Non-Native Individuals and Communities in Cyprus
edited by Carlotta Brignone, Lorenzo Calvelli,
Giulia Gollo, Lorenzo Mazzotta

Some Reflections of a Foreign Orthodox Priest in Cyprus

Václav Ježek

Independent scholar

Abstract This paper stems from the author's service as a priest in the Cypriot village of Askas, offering insights into Cypriot (village) culture from an outsider's perspective. The village serves as a microcosm where community dynamics and nature shape Cypriot culture and religion. Examining urban-rural dynamics and cities' cultural role, the author asserts that, despite Cyprus' historical dynamism, enduring constants emphasise the importance of 'roots' amidst migration. The priest and Church play a central role in fostering social cohesion in Cypriot society.

Keywords Cypriot society. Village culture. Community culture. Migration. Church. Priest.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Askas, a Cypriot Village Between Departures and Returns. – 2.1 Departures. – 2.2 Returns. – 3 The Church between Departures from and Returns to the Village. – 3.1 Feasts and Liturgy. – 3.2 The Land and the Crop. – 3.3 Politics. – 4 Fellow Priests. – 4.1 Father Andreas. – 4.2 Father Neophitos. – 4.3 Father Michailis. – 4.4 Father Adam. – 5 The Dynamics of the Cypriot Orthodox Church and Society. – 5.1 Internal Migration and Adaptation. – 5.2 A Movable Priest and the Role of the Church. – 5.3 Kykkos Monastery. – 6 Askas and its People. – 6.1 Muchtaris. – 6.2 The Mangas. – 6.3 Kafenio. – 6.4 Refugees and Internal Refugees. – 7 Conclusions.



Studi ciprioti 5

e-ISSN 2724-3648 | ISSN 2724-279X
ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-917-7 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-852-1

Peer review | Open access

Submitted 2025-01-23 | Accepted 2025-01-31 | Published 2025-07-24
© 2025 Ježek | © 4.0

DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-917-7/008

1 Introduction

The following is a small reflection drawn from the author's personal experience as an Orthodox priest in Cyprus. After a year-long service in the village of Tseri, he moved to the mountain village of Askas, in the district of the capital Lefkosia and in the Troodos Mountain range, where he served as a priest in the years 2010-15. The experience itself was peculiar in many respects. First and foremost, it is uncommon for a foreign priest to serve in a traditional Cypriot village. Adding to the peculiarity, the author is a Czech Orthodox priest, hailing from a predominantly atheist country, where orthodoxy is not even a traditional confession. Given its singularity this experience seems worth relating. Hopefully holding a broader interdisciplinary value, the following will touch upon observations about the migratory nature of human interaction and life in the context of Cyprus.

2 Askas, a Cypriot Village Between Departures and Returns

After looking back and establishing a kind of common denominator of contemporary life in Cyprus as seen through the prism of the author, which is also related perhaps to the Cypriot historical context, one can state that it is a dynamic of return and departure. Cyprus is an island of departures and arrivals, of returns and dreams of returning. Of cultures leaving and new ones entering. Of lost battles and battle victories. A story of the power and humbleness of the Church. Of people in exile and people coming back. Of resilience and defeat. Though this may sound as a romantic exaggeration, in fact it reflects the actual situation in Cyprus, whether the inhabitants of Cyprus realise it or not. As in many other areas of Europe, the interplay with the past represents a kind of burden, requiring the contemporary inhabitants of Cyprus to rediscover new ways of understanding their past within the dynamics of a globalised world.

Most of the episodes recalled here took place in Askas, a small village near to the larger Palaichori in the Troodos mountains. A few of them instead happened in Tseri, formerly a village now a suburb of Lefkosia. Both the villages (i.e., Askas and Tseri) are affiliated with the recently established Metropolitanate of Tamassos and Orinis. This was created on the foundations of one of the oldest dioceses in Cyprus. Tamassos is indeed associated with the ordination of St. Heraklidios by the apostle Paul and Barnabas (in the year 45).

Askas is noteworthy due to many reasons. In numerous mountain villages in the Troodos time seems to have stood still with their architecture, social culture and art bearing witness to a remarkable continuity with past centuries. Askas, for example, has a long-standing

iconographic tradition from the twelfth century onwards. Moreover, its inhabitants can trace back their ancestors for many generations, even if modern large-scale emigration makes the populations' development and its social fabric more complicated.

Next to the village there is a small valley with beautiful and tall Mediterranean pine trees. Here you can find a tiny chapel dedicated to both Saint Paraskevi and Saint Christine. Popular both in the West and East, Christine the martyr very likely originated from either Italy or Phoenicia. Her dedication is rare in Cyprus. In this sense, the chapel itself proves the conflation of the Greek orthodox tradition with Western influences brought to Cyprus by foreign rulers. The chapel icons indeed display in their lower registers the figures of benefactors according to the Western iconographic style of that period. Given its high artistic value, one may wonder why this building was built in the middle of nowhere with no houses nearby. Though located in a remote area, this chapel is a valuable example of Byzantine art blended with foreign influences.

2.1 Departures

Like many mountain villages in Cyprus, Askas has been affected by the large-scale migrations to other Cypriot regions, to bigger cities or simply abroad. Sometimes the villages successfully handle this phenomenon, but they often simply go extinct. Needless to say, these results are detrimental to the preservation and further development of local Cypriot culture. Such a situation is not peculiar to Cyprus. Quite the opposite, it is typical of almost all the contemporary national narratives. While consistently endangering villages with its economic policies, the modern state still publicly promotes the preservation of the village as a stronghold of traditional culture.

Living in large cities such as Paphos, Limassol or Lefkosia mostly entails an anonymous existence, detached from a constant or static and specific place, which would be normally offered by the village setting. Here the city in Cyprus resembles any other city in the world. This relates to the broader question of whether contemporary large cities are capable of facilitating, producing and not merely absorbing culture as such. We could argue that in larger cities any culture is dependent on continuous migration from outside. The city does produce culture, but this always draws upon external inputs whether historical or contemporary. In the case of Askas, interpersonal relationships are the primary factor in cultural development. The question of whether and how cities affect such a development is another story.

Of course, one may believe that any specific culture, such as that of Askas, is not necessary at all, since culture is an artificial construct without concrete relevance. However, the Cypriot context

demonstrates that culture is interrelated with other aspects of humanity, e.g. society and sustainability (Duxbury, Cullen, Jordi 2012). The destruction of village culture thus means destroying mankind in one way or another. The loss of these traditional contexts appears even more sad when no alternative is offered.

Completely abandoned villages constitute an interesting phenomenon in Cyprus. The reasons for abandonment are various, e.g. economic and military (Şenol Sert 2010, 240). For example, an old Bronze Age site is now an abandoned village, full of ruins surrounded by vegetation, and is found in the valley next to the village of Palaichori (close to Askas). According to local interviewees, the village was abandoned after undefined and infectious illnesses and other odd events occurred. The inhabitants spontaneously decided to move out. Nowadays no one dares to live there. The experience has remained in the collective memory and hinders resettlement.

2.1.1 Mobility and Social Interactions

Many of the mountain villages in Troodos were and still are independent from each other, both culturally and socially. Even today communication and social interaction between neighbouring villages, such as Askas, Phterichoudi or Palaichori, is limited for one reason or another. Difficult mobility conditions may have contributed to this situation, but other factors play a role as well. Among them, the local mindset, according to which the village is the primary self-sufficient unit in Troodos. Earlier on, wandering priests came from other parishes just to serve the liturgy in each village and then left. This surely fostered some contact between villages. Contact was also ensured by wandering salesmen.

Today contact is easier. Nonetheless, vestiges of bygone eras are still evident. For example, an elderly man in a fifty-year-old van, selling completely “ridiculous and useless things”, used to visit Askas. After decades of shouting and calling during the various sales visits around villages, he got a high-pitched voice that easily attracted the locals’ attention. However, his products were so distant from the real needs of the villagers that he never sold anything. Still, this never discouraged him from coming back and stopping his van in the main square of the village. He probably knew he would not sell anything but his long-standing habit prompted him to go there nonetheless. It is evident that in the past sellers like this man were of pivotal importance not as to exchange commodities as to bring news. Circulation of information was indeed particularly difficult in mountain areas, regardless of the small size of Cyprus.

The relevance of mobility to the survival of small villages has been acknowledged by the government as well. According to local

sources, the government was invested in mobility policies especially after the occupation in 1974, in order to make the population of mountain regions move to cities, notably Lefkosia. This apparently abstract claim holds significant relevance, as Askas' contemporary depopulation is directly linked to this 'government policy'. In recalling the recent past, the villagers often expressed emotional anger, as they find commonalities with the current situation.

2.1.2 Communal Lifestyle

2.1.2.1 Agriculture

As a general rule, migration to cities leads to a change in lifestyle, so that younger generations show an increasing disinterest in agricultural activity. When looking at the uncultivated and abandoned fields and terraces of Askas, one can be caught by a general depression. The very same terraces that men strove for carving out from the rugged and harsh mountains now lay uncultivated slowly deteriorating. This is not only a question of agriculture but primarily of culture and way of life. Often foreigners are the ones working in the fields, younger people losing touch with physical labour. Fields used to be owned by various families. Despite the unavoidable land fragmentation, the yield was excellent, as the fields were systematically and effectively cultivated through various processes (Burton, King 1982, 187).

The land and landscape formed the culture of every Cypriot village. Somehow many people who migrated to cities thought that they could carry their cultural characteristics with them, but sooner or later they realised that their individual and collective culture was tied to the land and vice versa. You could not take your identity with you, either you had to return or build a new one. Culture here was linked with religion understood here also as a belief in the unpredictability of nature, and this unpredictability demanded respect and awe. Religion in this sense is nothing else than the belief that you cannot control forces and you have to simply 'believe'.

The younger generation from Askas and elsewhere in the mountain areas has lost contact with the land. The relationship with farmland is a complex one in Cyprus. After selling their lands to live a more comfortable lifestyle more comfortably in the city, some richer landowners and farmers have regretted their decision, often missing their previous occupation in the fields. Causing a lacking sense of community, decreasing population further facilitated migration. In the villages affected by depopulation, people felt more and more isolated and eventually decided to move to cities, hoping for greater social connection. This created a spiral still ongoing. The lesser the

people living in the villages the greater the pressure on those left to move out as well.

The community-based mentality of Cyprus strikes any foreigner the most. This is especially true for a priest used to the strong individualist environment typical of Central Europe. However, it is not only about a different philosophical paradigm (i.e., Western individualism vs Eastern collectivism) but rather about concrete implications in terms of societal life. A communal based society relies on a particular, socio-cultural, agricultural and religious environment in a given human context. Therefore, we may suggest that collectivism – to be intended as a tension to community –, or rather the community as such, accrues to the internal core of the human being and is not an artificial or ethnic construct. Accordingly, it does not relate to any East/South/West division. In other words, community is essential to human survival. The question whether other contemporary models of societal life can offer such a community-based platform is still unanswered. Most communities who are dependent on nature for their essential needs and closely related to nature do have this communal character.

Many people who moved from Askas to cities have realised that preserving their village-based communal lifestyle is impossible, and when they come to visit back in the village, they complain about it. The former wider community of the village is replaced by sporadic and chaotic individual relations in the cities. What, however, still preserves the communal nature of Cyprus generally is that all inhabitants of larger cities occasionally visit the villages of their ancestors, so as to maintain some relations with their co-villagers and relatives as well.

2.1.2.2 Buildings and Architecture

The backbone of the village's communal life has always been the church and the *kafenio* 'coffee house'. However, even these institutions underwent transformation due to migration. While the Orthodox Church unsurprisingly builds new churches to accommodate the growing populations in the cities, the individual village parishes are struggling to fulfil their role of being a cohesive community force. Nevertheless, the city parishes cannot fulfil the same central role of those in traditional smaller communities. This also relates to the role of priests. City priests usually live elsewhere, thereby having an anonymous relationship with their parishes and the believers, whereas in the villages priests used to live inside the village, so as to be fully integrated in their communities after years of pastoral work.

The villagers always had the opportunity to know their priest very well. This did not always translate into positive feelings towards the

priest or vice versa but it did testify to an intimate relationship between the priest and his community. While in the village the priest and his parish were active 24/7, the city parish usually livens up on Sundays and feast days. Being the community's foundations is the primary role of the church and the parish. Given that the city parish is progressively losing this role in the society, there are only two possibilities for the traditional parish, either to survive by changing its way of reaching out or to disappear by making way for the individualism and anonymity of the city. In the past, cities such as Lefkosia did develop a village community-alike environment. The medieval buildings and planning of the old town in Lefkosia indeed suggest a sense of well-knit communities. Older houses usually have an enclosed courtyard which very likely was the gathering point of the extended family and the workspace of craft manufacturing. Such an architectural organisation undoubtedly facilitated community growth.

Obviously, modern cities do not always follow this architectural tradition. It seems that previously the city was modelled after community contexts, whereas now this is not always the case. The naturally community-based architecture has been evolving over time, as the city architecture responds to the needs and character of the community involved. If there is no need for a sense of community, there is no architecture of this kind. Whether intentionally or not, the houses in Askas, similarly to most mountain villages, are more or less adjoining, sharing walls and other facilities which foster a close-knit community environment, at least architecturally. Houses in Askas were made of stone; the roof was made from bamboo straw and slim wooden beams covers by tiles. As usual, the architecture was best suited for the local climate very cold during the winter and hot in the summer. The rooms were tiny and often more people shared small rooms. Stones were used for road pavements as well.

The stones are sharp in Askas, recalling the mountains or caves typically depicted in Byzantine icons. The churches in the Troodos also display a type of architecture usual in Cyprus but rather resembling northern European buildings with sharp angled wooden roofs to endure strong snowfalls (Pelekanos 2016, 18). Furthermore, the traditional house in Askas also offered space for mules, the standard transport means, as well as for other animals such as goats. In their lower parts, or basements, houses contained huge tanks for water and wine. These giant ceramic bowls were conical in shape. Given the variable supply of water, these containers were crucial.

Modernity also carries with itself various new elements, which are at odds with the local landscape and the traditional architecture. They appear as kind of unwanted intrusions destroying the uniformity of the community as a whole. For example, in the centre of Askas one can find many dysfunctional cars left by their former owners on the road. These cars contrast with the fabric of the village and its

surroundings. In the centre of the village below the main road, there is a giant sycamore, standing out in the area. This tree is at the corner of winding road next to a stream. During the night big rats used to climb the tree up and down along the branches in strange dynamic movements. Underneath the tree there was a rusty wreckage of a car from the seventies. Father Andreas, a retired priest from Askas, used to sit on his balcony above the main road. Along with the author, he was always present in the village. They shared the impression that the Church and the *kafenio* were the only stable lighthouses around which everything was constantly changing and moving about.

2.1.2.3 Land and House Property

Compared to Greece, owning a house is considered extremely important in Cyprus. The Cypriot parents have the unwritten obligation to provide their offspring with means (e.g., land) to help build a house upon marriage. Due to the available resources, in Askas the parents usually give to their children one of the already owned parcels instead of a new one. More recently, the chances of owning a house have significantly decreased. The economic hardship was such as there were many bank foreclosures.

Despite everything, it is typical of the village tradition not to sell the house or the land one owns. The Church is particularly conservative in this regard. It rarely sells its own buildings, as its constitution forbids it. When this happens, it is usually fraught with public outcries and scandals.¹ In Askas any attempts to sell the parish lands would be tantamount to a declaration of war. In Askas itself, there were many empty houses and a few well-maintained. Their owners could leave for years or months coming back sporadically. Nonetheless they were so attached to their land/house that rarely someone decides to sell their property. Such an attitude seemingly complies with the 'curse' of all migrants, who keep bearing a certain image of their home without ever being able to discard it. The former *Muchtaris* 'village chieftain' could mention many houses that were built on the basis of various idealistic or romantic plans but are now empty or only sporadically inhabited. The most striking example is newly built house on top of the highest local peak in an almost inaccessible area. The former *Muchtaris* stated:

There was this young man who insisted on building a house here. I sold him an 'impossible' piece of land high up the mountains with

¹ *Katastatikos chartis tis Agiotatis ekklesias tis Kyprou* 1979.

no possible use. He built a house there but I have not seen him come here for years.

Many people originating from Askas, maintained contact with the village by visiting on Saturdays and Sundays. They were called the *Savatokiriakes* 'weekenders'. These are usually people who grew up in the village and then moved to cities, but still come mostly every Saturday and Sunday. Not surprisingly the more generations pass by, the less attachment to Askas remains. It is obvious how people who have more responsibilities in the city gradually reduce their visits to Askas to once, or even less, a year.

2.2 Returns

Nowadays, there is a general interest in rediscovering one's heritage and roots in Askas. While a couple of decades ago, the catch call was to move for work or other reasons elsewhere, today there are growing numbers of individuals who decide to move back to the village seeking peace and comfort. Adapting to village life is difficult for those coming back from the cities or simply for city folk desiring to live in the village for the first time. The most recent developments show a remarkable interest in living in Askas. The fabric of the village also consists of individuals living alone or a solitary life for one reason or another. For example, many started businesses there. There are also some eccentric individuals.

2.2.1 Marios

Marios is a young man who earlier on moved to Lefkosia with his first wife. He is a very temperamental individual who is easy to provoke. Life did not turn out well for him in Lefkosia as he got divorced. Recalling when being alone in a flat, he remarked: "I did not know anyone around me". "The neighbours did not talk to me, and I felt isolated". He then found a new wife who did not mind the isolation of a mountain village - at least until now - and moved back to Askas. He bought a small parcel in the area close to Saint Paraskevi/Christine. His house is at the edge of a small hill, not far from another isolated property. This other property is made of wooden beams overlooking the majestic valley. This wooden house belongs to a rather eccentric individual Michailis, who built it in Russian style, as a log house with wood imported from Russia. Marios is now learning to cultivate the land, and has hobbies, such as collecting old English Morris cars and renovating them.

To build the house, he took out a mortgage. Eventually, he built the house, which is difficult to access during the winter period. And

he loves the peace and quiet of the neighbourhood. Regardless of the isolation has maintained friendly relations with everyone around, and even became the local village chieftain (*Muchtaris*) later. He is calmer now no longer following his temper, matured as many mature and return somewhere.

2.2.2 Georgios

There are other houses built on isolated parcels around Askas, often testifying to the various degrees of the psychological state of the individual who built them or began building them. This is so, since they were often started by people who dealt with their psychosomatic issues through a project of building a house. Many Cypriots see building a house as a kind of hobby or therapeutical process. The richer are obsessed in building more and more houses. The poor simply leave a house unfinished if they do not have the resources to finish it.

After many years of living with his mother Nikki, Georgios eventually found a foreign lady (from the Philippines) twenty years younger and married her. He is now in his fifties and is a chain-smoker. As he already had a heart operation, he has been discouraged from building a house by himself, and his mother was willing to leave him her own house. He has insisted on building his own house, nonetheless. Now the couple struggles to conceive children but, hopefully this will change. It seems that foreign women are more inclined to accept the rather isolated lifestyle in the villages.

2.2.3 2.2.3 Andreas

Andreas, who has recently died, was still young when he returned to the village after his wife had left him. His little daughter decided to stay with her mother upon the divorce. Therefore, he could easily move back into his parents' house, still on the brink of poverty. Having six children (four sons and two daughters), the parents could count on the woman's revenue only. The husband had often been unemployed because of his precarious heart conditions. The wife cleaned houses and public roads but also worked as a cook in some local restaurants.

Andreas' father did not have a good relationship with Father Andreas due to a past conflict between the two. This "prevented" him - as he put it -, from going to the church for many years. Andreas stated many times, that he loves the Church, but because he does not like the priest Father Andreas, he simply does not go to church services. The author told him that this should not be an excuse for not going to church, but no, he insisted that "until Father Andreas will be

there”, he will not go to church. After some time, Andreas’ mother, who was the backbone of his household, died suddenly. Andreas’ father was devastated, always expecting himself to die before his wife.

Upon his return to Askas, Andreas settled in with the intention of renovating his parents’ house. A former employee of Mercedes-Benz, he was an extremely talented auto mechanic. He did not have his own garage and was forced to repair cars directly on the road parked next to his house. He was often lying underneath them dangerously close to passing cars, lifting the broken cars with a primitive metal mechanism. Villagers considered him a genius in his own right, and everyone from the village brought their cars for repair. This created even greater wonder at the fact that he returned not using his skills to make a career elsewhere. Suffering from diabetes, he died in his late thirties due to a sudden heart attack. At that time, many of his brothers and sisters were unmarried or divorced testifying to the difficult times in Cyprus. They all returned together to their parents’ home, seeking comfort and stability.

2.2.4 Michailis

Michailis, who was in his sixties at the time of the interview, was from a rather wealthy family. They indeed owned a considerable number of small plots in Askas. Like many other older people, Michailis was given an astronomical payout upon his retirement. According to the Cypriot regulations, high pension payouts used to be the norm, but they predictably turned out, to be unrealistic. However, using (part of) this pensioner money, he built a log timber house overlooking valley of Saint Paraskevi. This seemed rather strange, since he owned several houses in Askas and could have stayed in anyone of them.

Michailis loved his village Askas, but his wife of many years did not share his enthusiasm for the village. She found it to be isolated and preferred to stay in Larnaka, where the couple had a house also. This gradually developed into the couple’s mutual alienation and Michailis then found a Ukrainian woman to help him around in Askas, which however led to further problems in his marriage. His log timber house stands on the edge of a precipice with a beautiful view overlooking all over to Lefkosia. The place can get very windy. He looks at the view down below overlooking the Cypriot plateau. We can wonder whether he has a true bird’s-eye view on things. Michailis was just not satisfied in any of his houses, but perhaps the problem was not with the place where he lived but with his soul. In any event, his journey led him to be even more isolated.

3 The Church between Departures from and Returns to the Village

The Church and its monasteries have imperceptibly but steadily sustained the local areas in many ways, as in the past. One might claim that, beyond the question of religious belief, European scholarship has overlooked the significant role of priests and, churches in the development of communities. Rather, recent debate has focused on the positive relations between natural environment and monasteries or churches (Mallarach, Corcó Juviniá, Papayannis 2014, 357), but arguably this is only one aspect and there are many more to be explored from a social and anthropological perspective.

As a priest serving in a village, the author has repeatedly realised that 'simply being there' is one of the most relevant tasks of a priest. The priest and the monastery or church are like reference points in times of confusion and loss of perspective, as it happens every day. This was true in pre-Christian times as well, though according to current religious traditions.

3.1 Feasts and Liturgy

The Church's contribution to local areas can be primarily seen in relation to religious feasts and liturgical rites.

3.1.1 Mnimosina

The priest facilitates and at the same time in a way symbolises family and community gathering such as those for the commemoration of the dead (*mnimosina*). The priest is always invited for the *mnimosina* coffee usually after the liturgy on Sundays. People who commemorate their deceased during the liturgy or during vespers invite the priest to come to their houses for a coffee or some other refreshment, where members of the extended family also are present.

The commemoration of the deceased is a long-standing Mediterranean tradition. It does not only express some link with the past, but also enlivens the idea that the community incorporates all the cosmos, the living, the deceased and the future generations symbolised by the children. Even those who usually neglect to visit the village, do so on the date of the commemoration of their deceased relatives. The commemoration of the deceased is an important aspect of how villagers see a continuity with the past and delineates the ahistorical nature of the village itself.

Father Andreas of Askas told the author that in the earlier days, priests would descend on mules to other villages travelling around

serving liturgies were it was required to do so, and then after a couple of days or weeks re-emerging back home. This kind of liturgical movement of course helped to create liturgical unity in style and the dissemination of one type of liturgical style of singing, serving etc., to other areas. Or on the contrary occasioned the evolution of new forms. This also betrays a kind of mobility of the priesthood.

3.1.2 The Groups of 'Theologians'

The priest's sole association with prayer, social activities and community work has partly led to the emergence of a specialised corps of *theologoi* 'theologians', who supposedly provide theoretical theology and are usually found preaching in the church. In other Orthodox traditions there is no such phenomenon and the priest is expected to be fully educated and able to preach by himself. Perhaps the practice of professional theologians/preachers is a remnant of earlier periods. Under the various occupational periods of Cyprus, Orthodox priests did not have the chance to receive education and the latter was a privilege of non-clerics. Even earlier, lay people used to participate to a greater extent in the liturgy, just as in the synagogue for example, with preaching alternating between people. Or it may draw upon the Byzantine tradition of professional teachers and theologians.

It can happen that the official theologian/preacher offers sermons of a rather substandard sort or lesser quality. This might appear funny, when thinking of their avowed rhetorical skills, sometimes even patronised by some bishops. Father Andreas of Askas had a 'healthy disrespect' towards these wandering theologians, and, with the pragmatism typical of the village used to tease them because of their purely rhetorical and completely detached from reality sermons. The villager's evangelisation is consistently attempted. Occasional lectures are given by visiting missionaries to offer education. However, villagers generally distrust such a theoretical approach to religion and rather prefer a kind of realistic spirituality.

The author of this article used to give sermons frequently. On such occasions, Father Andreas, who was still alive at that time, would stand at the side of the church and shout during the sermon "Oh come on, it is too long, stop please", or "now that is an observation we did not know". He used to constantly interrupt the sermons, complaining about them being too boring and things like this. Similarly, to an opera performance, where people throw tomatoes if the singer is not up to their expectations. Father Andreas' behaviour would be unacceptable anywhere else but is indicative of the villagers, realistic spirituality and their inclination towards truth and 'real' life. The author learned to appreciate these interruptions, as they made the sermons even more lively.

3.1.3 Local Saints and their Cult

The rediscovery of a local saint, or the popularisation of his or her cult, can provide a new stimulus for the local community's development. In the neighbouring village of Fterikoudi, there is a cave where a local saint named Avvakum reportedly lived, and whose body was buried there. Visits to his tomb are associated with various healings, including in relation to hearing. Recently a few monks have arrived and established there a small heritage. This has attracted interest in the area. As the neighbouring village Askas has benefited from this too.

The region where Askas is located also holds the popular monastery of Machairas. Yet on the road to the monastery of Machairas from the direction of Palaichori there is a completely abandoned village. Given the arid mountainous surroundings with the little vegetation except for isolated trees, the conditions are extreme and inhospitable. Accessibility to the area is so difficult that mules or donkeys would probably be the only means of transportation useful here. Located in a dry valley amidst tall sharp hills with arid ground and stones, the village cannot rely on agriculture. The houses were necessarily built above each other in terrace style. Yet, regardless of this desolation, the owners are reluctant to sell their lands. Rather, strolling around the village, one can see old worn-down shutters on rusty nails hanging in the wind as if inviting people into the houses.

3.2 The Land and the Crop

When speaking of de-population, one should keep in mind that many of the villages in the Troodos mountains are products of ancient migration from the coastlines. It is a well-established fact that many villages such as Askas at first welcomed people escaping from the Ottoman, Latin or Arab invasions. The rather unusual dedication of one of Askas' churches to John the Forerunner and his beheading might also suggest this. This dedication indeed evokes an atmosphere of death and imminent martyrdom. Coastal inhabitants then decided to move up to the mountains, in order to find greater security and peace even if this essentially meant a decrease in agricultural opportunity (Papacostas 2014, 192).

Considering the extremely bad conditions in the mountainous regions, any long-term habitation must have been the result of desperation in most cases. As proved by the archaeological records, it often took some time for the newcomers to find place worth settling in. Askas itself seems to have been originally founded in a lower area a few kilometres from the present site. The ruins of a small chapel dedicated to saint George are indeed located in that area. Perhaps also

filled with houses then, the site of the chapel was later abandoned in favour of the present site, located at a higher altitude. It was common for a village to be first located in one place and then moved to another. The area around the above-mentioned chapel of saint Paraskevi/Christine next to Askas might have undergone a similar process. However, nobody knows whether this chapel was intended as a structure separated from or integrated into the village.

The obsession with owning land does not however correspond to an equally obsessive desire to work in agriculture. Terrace fields and hard-earned agricultural land has fallen largely into decay. Observing as the tiny fields built in terrace style into the hard stony mountains, we can only imagine how difficult it was to fight for every inch of arable land. The mountainous land around Askas consists of high positioned terraces which in today's world would hardly be considered as worthy of being cultivated. The terraces are made from stone laboriously carried up or locally gathered and structured into *skala* small-spaced 'terraces', where only three olive trees and perhaps some vegetables can fit. The water had to be carried on mules, or donkeys. Travelling through the standard path of a local farmer again, the author himself climbed up on one of these terraces in the mountain. If one was to imagine bringing water and supplies all the way up, it would seem necessary the whole day to complete the task. Let alone working in the sun with primitive tools. The terraces were usually filled with olive trees, wine trees/scrubs, and almond trees. Poor families used to have only a few terraces with likewise a few trees. It was not rare for a family to offer a single tree as a donation to the church. The parish in Askas would own individual trees given by donors.

The younger generation has largely lost interest in cultivating inherited land, thus many of the terraces are going to ruin, like perhaps village culture itself. This is also true for the wine shrubs, which are left uncultivated. The uncultivated vineyards are an even more sad sight, given the prestigious role wine production used to have in the past. Though water supply has improved, cultivation has not grown. The inhabitants of Askas used to wake up early in the morning to their fields, with the priests being no exception. These people were so used to this work that they could never stop, not even if significantly handicapped by health or other issues.

Priesthood did not replace one's life as a farmer; it was rather understood as an addition to it. One could easily encounter the late Father Andreas walking with his stick to a terrace. Similarly, Father Neophitos from the neighbouring village of Palaichori also lived a humble life, working hard until his old age. Both the houses of Father Andreas and Father Neophitos were extremely humble inside. Old worn-down wooden furniture, walls unacceptably covered with dust and black dust from the furnaces burning wood or coal. Walls

with extensive cracks. Humble small rooms. The two priests would sit on their animals and tend to the fields, then come to serve in the church. They did not need wristwatches, because they knew by the very minute when to come down to the village, pray and serve in the church. The harmonious relationship with nature corresponded with a harmonious relationship with the liturgical cycle. Instead, the new generation of priests is quite different. Priests nowadays come to serve the villages from Lefkosia or the cities without living in the local parish. The connection with the village and its land, and the Church is thus disrupted.

3.3 Politics

The Orthodox Church has had a special role in Cyprus, which was further enhanced by the historical developments themselves. The relationship of people with the Orthodox Church is much more intimate than it is in Greece. In the framework of the occupation in 1974, the Church was viewed as the defender of Cypriot cultural and ethnic values. In fact, the resilience of the Orthodox Church is remarkable. Cyprus was first (from 1191 to 1571) occupied by Latin Christian powers (from 1191 by the Lusignan's and from 1489 by the Venetians) then by the Ottomans, and eventually subdued to the British rule. Given these events, complex processes making the community and the Church a unity must have contributed to the survival of the Orthodox Church.

However, just as in Greece, the leftist tendency in Cypriot politics and population, as well as the internal formalisation of the Church itself, had undervalued the role of the Church in the society. The traditional formal position and role of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus is a curse and blessing at the same time. On the one hand, the modern Orthodox Church can be likened to a situation where one lives a serene life, always counting on the parents' help, regardless of when and why one returns to them. Analogously, the Cypriots somehow rely on the Church to be always there but without realising that one needs to build and develop this institution, otherwise it will die like anyone's parents and there will be no one to fall back on. On the other hand, the Church has difficulty in realising that it should be more than a formal institution, in order to survive. Family breakdowns, high divorce rates, and detachment from traditional land agricultural activities, coupled with the modern chaotic lifestyle undoubtedly contribute to the fact that less and less young people know how to live in contexts with rules and responsibilities. This affects the Church as well, because nowadays men and women can rarely fit into the demanding role of the priest or the priest's wife, as it entails self-sacrifice and discipline.

In the cities priesthood has often become a career path instead of a 'calling'. This further worsens the future development of the Church.

Moreover, the priest may find it difficult to embrace pastoral activity, seeing it as a decrease in formal authority in society. The lesser the authority the lesser the possibility of changing society to the better. In other words, Cypriots want the visible priest to be around but do not want to listen to him. Of course, there is an inherent paradox here, because priests are constantly required to change yet remain the same, in order to improve themselves spiritually and also their frock. Especially in the villages the priest is like a kind of ambulance moving around and making everyone feel safe, or at least as if the ambulance was near if necessary.

Modern research on Cyprus and its Church, insofar as brilliant, has paid little attention to the socio-anthropological or spiritual aspect of the everyday function and dynamics of the church and priesthood in the villages or any enclosed and independent cell community. While the topic is often approached on the basis of institutional and documentary sources, field work seems useful to understand its socio-anthropological or spiritual aspects.

The expectations about an Orthodox priest in Askas and those about an Orthodox priest in Central Europe, where the author served, appear different. People in Askas were not in need of theological convincing, as they all believed and attended church regularly. The priest in Askas or any other similar village is required to be emotional sympathetic, empathetic and highly skilled in acting within a community. Only once he has convinced the community of his ability to 'feel' and thus gained their respect, the priest might start to speculate about issues in theology or belief. The spirit of egotistical individualism and gradual destruction of all forms of emotion broadly understood make this extremely difficult.

Given the peoples' general attitude, contemporary priests are often unable to fulfil the basic role of being a community figure, regardless of their intellectual education. This is essentially linked with the Orthodox emphasis on spirituality and mystical theology as a means of interaction with the community. According to this theology, the saint, believer or priest is supposed to be 'near God', and this proximity provides the individual priest with the ability of strengthening the community. While in other contexts, the priest or minister is part of the community in terms of function, here the priest must facilitate the construction of the community. By offering spiritual mediation, he gives the community the power to be a community. In today's logic of course the community needs no such power to be a community.

A similar logic can be seen in other religious contexts, where the divine or its carrier is a kind of source of power for the community. In many native contexts, it is believed that community needs something - often linked to the sacred - that solidifies it and gives strength to be such. Something similar happens in the Old Testament with Moses, who was not only a leader or theologian but gave

'strength' to the community. Perhaps, the real reason for the resilience of the local communities and the Church in Cyprus under foreign rule lies in this aspect.

4 Fellow Priests

Before the current decline of population, Askas used to have more priests in the village, which made sense due to the size and number of the then existing parish churches.

4.1 Father Andreas

Father Andreas grew up in a humble environment. Life was simple but had its joys. He often recalled how Askas' streams were full of *chelonia* 'turtles'. His father would catch them and cook them, and he loved them very much. *Chelonia* as well as other animals unfortunately disappeared from Askas because of poisons used against *kunupia* 'gnats'.

According to the villagers' accounts, Father Andreas was ordained at a very young age. The village was in need of a priest and there were not many candidates available. The *Papadia* 'wife of a priest' was eight years older than Father Andreas, and the local gossip indicated that nobody was 'interested' in her. They married when Father Andreas was around nineteen. This means that the *Papadia* was around twenty-seven years of age when she married, an extremely late age for a woman to marry in Askas, not to mention that her husband was uncommonly much younger. She gave birth to eight children. They all moved away from Askas, though keeping houses in the village. She reportedly was particularly tolerant with her children. It is believed because she was well aware of being older than Father Andreas.

The author himself saw more than once both Father Andreas and his *Papadia* working hard on the fields, perhaps the *Papadia* even more so. This proves the village saying "He did not work so he became a priest" wrong. The *Papadia* appeared a soft-hearted person, as if there was 'no single bad bone' in her body. She used to smile like some female saint emanating absolute tolerance and acceptance of the other. Her smile was that of a person in harmony with herself and emanating love. She was not particularly talkative. After one of her sons died of a heart attack at the age of around forty-five, her health started getting worse, obviously because of the sorrow. She was then diagnosed with dementia and, not long after this diagnosis, died. Father Andreas conducted his wife's funeral himself, without showing any emotions during the service.

Colloquially speaking, Father Andreas was “hard-headed as a mule”. Such a hard-headedness is perhaps essential for faith to survive, even though it might be of discomfort for people around. According to locals, most mountain priests of the past generations possessed this hard headedness combined with a great sense of spiritual realism. In Father Andreas there was no room for trifles or naïve and pretentious piety but for a faith stemming from a perfect blending of healthy idealism and pragmatic awareness of the people’s needs and characters.

4.1.1 Father Andreas’ Sensitivity to his Parishioners’ Feelings

After forty years of priesthood, Father Andreas learned to understand the state of his parishioners, and perhaps his own as well. Most importantly, he knew what kind of burden to load and what kind of burden not to load in his pastoral work. This perhaps is a skill one can gain after years of service. This approach entails putting on believers such a burden as to enable them to take on further burdens only after they are ready, according to Matt. 11:29-30. Many times, this resulted in comical situations. Once, for example, a lady asked to the author of the present paper to pray for her health after the main liturgical service. The author was at that time serving with Father Andreas. After the liturgy, the author prolonged the service, adding prayers for health choosing a longer service. After a while, Father Andreas interrupted these prayers saying: “Come on, you don’t have to pray for so long!”. Everyone there heard this remark.

Hearing this, one may doubt Father Andreas’ piety, but the truth is that he knew that this lady used to ask for these prayers repeatedly. Accordingly, extensive attention to the required prayers was not needed. Moreover, this could also prevent others from asking for similar petitions. Therefore, he proved himself right. His inherent ability to feel for the wider community as a whole at any moment was the criterion directing his actions. This does not mean that Father Andreas was a living saint. He also had many downsides, including being gullible, and that at times he got offended too easily.

4.1.2 Father Andreas and Reading

Father Andreas would sit on his balcony, reading constantly. The contrast between his love and knowledge of literature with his hard agricultural work and rustic appearance was striking. He loved classical literature including Dostoevsky. Without making generalisations, in the past education and commitment to hard physical work were not in conflict. The Communist social understanding of the working

class versus the so-called intelligentsia appears false and misleading, as if hard physical labour automatically dissociates from education. This reflection is still important, as hard physical work should not prevent one from being educated, contrary to what public discourse often suggests.

Father Andreas used to read extensively, constantly improving his basic education. He had graduated from the local seminary in Lefkosa, the main educational institution for the Church of Cyprus. Often there was a discussion in the village about the fact that previous generations who had a basic education seem to be more educated than today's university graduates. Kostas, the head of the parish council, used to repeat that in the past basic education was on a "higher level than today", so that even barely educated individuals resulted fairly-well educated, according to modern standards.

4.1.3 Father Andreas' Political Activism

Father Andreas proved his 'hard-headedness' especially during the crisis of the then archbishop and president of Cyprus Makarios. The Holy Synod (i.e., the highest governing church council) then consisted of only three members, generally a small number for an independent Church. In March 1972, they demanded him to resign from one of his two appointments, since he was both the secular Republic President and the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus. All three members of the Synod (i.e., the Metropolitan of Paphos Gennadios Machairiotis, the Metropolitan of Kition Anthemos Machairiotis, and the Metropolitan of Kirenia Kyprianos Kyriakides) agreed on him stepping down from the post of President of Cyprus.² In the Synod of 7 March 1973, Makarios was deposed and defrocked but later reinstalled by a wider Orthodox Synod convened by Makarios himself (Clerides 1989, 100). Archbishop Makarios did not have the slightest intention of resigning. For this reason, he has been regarded as hungry for power, eventually causing the Turkish invasion.

While the political rival of Archbishop Makarios, the general George Grivas, accepted the decision of the synod, it is difficult to ascertain the laity and clergy's response to that. The Greek Junta seemingly supported the bishops. This claim can be confirmed by the events involving Father Andreas. His *Papadia* told the author that at that time officers associated with Grivas used to spend were

² The *New York Times* reported this event in its issue of 10 March 1973, 3. See also the article by Douglas, J.D., "God and Caesar in Cyprus". *Christianity Today*, 15 February 1974. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1974/february-15/god-and-caesar-on-cyprus.html>.

spending hours talking with Father Andreas during the night. Very likely they were looking for supporters among priests. The church's walls still display a fading graffiti sign saying Enosis. Father Andreas supported the Synod and subsequently faced persecution. He was denied access to the parish church and someone else came to serve there. He set up a private church in his own house, without receiving any salary for many years.

His hard-headedness prevented him from leaving to his *Papadia's* dismay, who was instead concerned about the dire economic situation. At some point, as he related, the anti-Archbishop group offered him a lucrative priestly position on the island of Hydra in Greece. He decided to stay in Cyprus nonetheless. Later on, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus somehow put the ecclesial crisis to an end.

4.1.4 Father Andreas' Last Years and Inheritance

The year before his death was marked by a kind of personal melancholy. The loss of his son, and the controversy with the icons (see below), perhaps saddened him to such an extent that he did not come out of his house, feeling tired and ill. He wrote a book called about the wall paintings of Askas' church that were previously covered by paint and had to be restored (Demostheni 2008). Furthermore, Father Andreas wrote two books of stories about Askas. They were printed in a limited number and therefore exposed to oblivion. The Father gave one copy to the author of the present article, who can testify to his high level of education.

4.2 Father Neophitos

Father Neophitos served in the neighbouring Palaichori, a slightly larger village and well known for its Unesco listed churches. At the time the author knew him, he was around seventy-five, his voice was unfortunately barely recognisable, partly because of the many years of chanting. He used to serve frequently and at length, as recommended by the ethos of the Orthodox Church, at the church of Saint Luke, which unfortunately did not preserve its older iconography, differently from other churches in Askas or Palaichori.

Father Neophitos grew up in very humble conditions. He was from a poor family with many children, and later worked in the mines of Troodos and other mines. Decades ago, the working conditions in Cypriot mines were inadequate, resulting in many health issues. Regardless of the bad working conditions, many miners from the

villages were pleased by the great sense of community of the mine and the prosperity of some local villages associated with the mines.³

Afterwards, Father Neophitos began working in agriculture and tended his own small fields. Today he continues to work in the field regardless of his age, and still has *Tsura* goats. Over the years, many younger priests were sent to the village to replace or help him, but there were always conflicts. Eventually, the author was asked to help him, since many priests simply did not get along with him. Tolerance appeared to be the key to success in cooperating with Father Neophitos.

The parish and its priest are like a living organism, where everything is essential and needs to be maintained without abrupt artificial intervention. Father Neophitos simply does things in his own way and you either accept it or not, if not, you need compassion in changing things. Tolerance here did not mean a surrender but appreciation of the things as they are.

4.3 Father Michailis

Father Michailis was not a priest from Askas, but the author got to know him when he was serving in the suburb of Lefkosia called Tseri for a short period of time. Tseri was originally a small village which later became a suburb of Lefkosia. Father Michailis is a refugee from the occupied areas of Northern Cyprus, the Karpasia region, which is one of the most beautiful areas of Cyprus with beautiful beaches, and olive groves.

Father Michailis is a tall man, now around seventy-five. He is gradually losing his voice due to a throat condition, perhaps caused by years of speaking and chanting, just as in the case of Father Neophitos. He grew up in one of those idyllic villages close to the beautiful beaches in Karpasia. As he calls it, “a village of honey, lemons and fish”. He grew up in a large family. He must have been a handsome man, judging from the pictures portraying him at a younger age.

Not that he has many photographs. He has a portrait of himself as a young priest wearing the clerical hat in his living room in Tseri. Then, there is the customary wedding photograph in the living room. Many priests from the older generation typically hang their photographs as ordained priests in their living rooms. Family photos are not missing in any of the living rooms of the Cypriots. Usually there

³ See *Report on the Health effects of the Asbestos Mines on the Population of Neighbouring Communities*. <https://www.gov.cy/media/sites/24/2024/05/Report-on-the-Health-Effects-of-the-Asbestos-Mines-on-the-Population-of-Neighbouring-Communities.pdf>.

is a cluster of family photos all over. Portraits of little children, older children and so on. Cypriots love family photos, which explains the large quantity of photo shops all around.

Father Michailis emigrated to Tseri from his village in Karpasia in 1974. Yet, after living in Tseri for decades, he does not completely feel at home here. He never stops describing the earthly paradise he left in his home village in Karpasia. "You had fish from the sea, citrus trees with lemons, in a word a paradise on earth". He also recounted when the Turkish forces came to the village, they firstly asked: "Where is the priest?". The occupational forces knew that by capturing the priest they could affect the local inhabitant's morale. Father Michailis managed to flee to the South just in time before being captured.

4.3.1 Father Michailis' Family

Just as the *Papadia* of Father Andreas, his wife is like a living saint. Hailing from the village as Father Michailis, she always takes care of the family, accepting and understanding others. Father Michailis has four children. They all grew up, in a different context to that of their father and mother. They all rely on the mother/*Papadia* for support, but you cannot say whether they will embrace the same family-orientated life as their parents. One of the daughters cannot have children, whereas the other is married but financially struggling. Among the sons, one cannot find a wife. Another still lives in the parent's house. Life is more complex and perhaps lonelier for the present generation.

In Cyprus, children are used to counting on their parents' love and patience when it comes to psychological and financial support. Though not peculiar to Cyprus alone, this seems more pronounced here because the 'caring' generation, already disappeared elsewhere, is still present in Cyprus. In the past, most Cypriot children were brought up in well-functioning, nurturing and happy families, despite any possibly disturbing external events.

Whether the new generation will be able to do the same is another story. Rising divorce and unemployment rates, individualism, lack of social responsibility, and dependency on parents and relatives for financial survival are just a few of many features, which will undoubtedly turn out problematic in the long run, calling into question the possibility of benefitting from family stability in the future.

4.3.2 Father Michailis' Virtues

Father Michailis is a popular confessor. He has the most important characteristics for a priest - humility, humbleness and especially tolerance. If you are tolerant, you can automatically associate with

people from any time period or social context, including the youngest generation. Father Michailis does not understand science, he does not have a degree from a university, but he 'understands all' because he is humble. His priestly acceptance and openness compensate for the lack of a more general education. Perhaps this kind of openness is even more important than a commonly intellectual or academic openness, since it is also based on and linked to with humility and acceptance brought about by love.

He proved his openness on many occasions. Welcoming the refugees from the North in Tseri was not automatic at all. Even though villagers from Tseri opened their hearts towards the refugees from the North, still, the influx of new people disrupted the existing tight social fabric of the village and presented challenges of integration. Traditional Cypriot villages were like closed families, and any foreign elements were viewed with suspicion.

His investment in issues related to divorce is another example. Father Michailis was from a generation that did not know divorce. Until the sixties, Cypriot society did not have high divorce rates. The reasons for increasing divorce rates are difficult to ascertain. However, divorce in Cyprus displays specific features. As Father Michailis stated, "divorce among young people is like a game". They believe that changing partners has no consequence and it is like changing friends as a child. People are confident that here will always be 'someone' there, regardless of how one behaves. For Father Michailis it is incomprehensible that the same person can commit adultery more than once.

The transition from conservative family values to high divorce rates occurred rather quickly in Cypriot society, the reasons for which are rather unclear. Amongst the older generation, there is criticism of this trend, some do not understand the logic of adultery. As one villager from Askas suggested, "what is the difference between a woman you have at home and one you desire to commit adultery with?". However, regardless of this Father Michailis, has an endless spirit of forgiveness for divorcees, truly complying with the Orthodox spirit of forgiveness and non-judgemental pastoral approach.

Perhaps, the extended family-based structures typical of Cypriot society paradoxically functions as a catalyst for divorces. A divorced person can often turn to his friends and relatives for help. For example, one such case is Father Michailis' neighbour, who lived in a nicely furnished flat in Tseri. He was a young man, with a good career, perhaps slightly presumptuous. He had five children, all from a different foreign woman, and a Cypriot wife. Despite this he took care of all his children, the situation was rather awkward, of course and potentially uncongenial to the children.

The young man worked in a state-owned company renowned for over employing people, paying high salaries and demanding little from its employees. His financial stability and abundant spare time

had maybe been conducive to his lack of responsibility more in general. For, while he financially supported his children, substantial care was provided by his parents and extended family. The parents used to come down and clean the apartment, look after the children and so on, simplifying his life with so many children. Of course, any moral judgement here stems from the simple question of whether he would always benefit from his parents' help in the future, with his grandchildren, for instance.

4.4 Father Adam

Another priest working at that time in Tseri was Father Adam, who was a migrant himself from the now occupied Kirenia. He did not achieve such a popular approval as Father Michailis, due to his past as a folk dancer. He had become a priest only upon marriage with a local woman from Tseri. Despite he had undeniable qualities as a manager of the parish affairs, the fact that his wife was of local origin facilitated his assignment. As a priest he mastered a kind of oriental ability to flatter his superiors, which helped him to achieve many goals. He often stated that "the only one who can do whatever he wants is the bishop". He accepted this fact and life was simpler.

5 The Dynamics of the Cypriot Orthodox Church and Society

5.1 Internal Migration and Adaptation

Priests and generally migrants from occupied areas into non-occupied areas were usually accepted with some difficulty, causing not little tension. Interview with long-established inhabitants of in Tseri provide evidence of mutual antagonism against the newcomers after 1974. The after-1974 new migrants were sometimes viewed with suspicion and considered intruders of sorts.

Coming from Northern Europe one is surprised that in such a small island as Cyprus originating from one village and moving to another is regarded as a highly traumatic experience of adaptation and alienation. Even after forty years, many former migrants of Tseri do not really feel at home. This shows the remarkable micro-community structure of Cypriot society, where essentially it is the atomic village or community, rather than the state, that provides individuals with their identity.

Such was the case of Tasos and Loula. They came from a village called Asa in the occupied territories to Tseri after 1974. Provided

with a portion of land, they built a house without however, never really getting used to it. Nostalgic pictures of their former village hanging everywhere in their living room proves Loula's constant desire to visit it. And indeed, she used to comment on how difficult it had been for them to be accepted into Tseri.

5.2 A Movable Priest and the Role of the Church

In contemporary Cyprus priests do not live permanently where they serve, turning out to be like hired professionals who come and go. This situation also strengthens the laity, since it indirectly gives a leading position in the matter of parish administration to the laity.

In fact, any good priest could be rejected by the parish council, often consisting of theologically uneducated individuals or simply individuals who are not socially or ecclesiastically adept or pastorally sensitive. The Cypriot bishops' higher respect towards laity and parish councils compared to other Orthodox Churches is a positive counterpoint.

Many of the newcomer-priests' problems arise when they set about changing things in the parish abruptly. Frictions with the community can easily lead to the priest's rapid departure. Though preservation of local liturgical practices and habits provides for an organic development and structure, local traditions need to be aligned with common liturgical principles to a certain extent.

Akin to the Roman Catholic Church, the bishops' authority in the Orthodox Church is very prominent. In areas such as Cyprus, or the Middle East in general, the social importance of Orthodox clergy accrues to historical reasons as well. For, during the Ottoman period, Orthodox Cypriot bishops served as leaders of the local communities and Orthodox priests as administrators of sort (Wilson 1992, 21).

This recent past still causes resentment, even if unjustified. There are many popular stories of how, during the Ottoman period, ordinary people bequeathed their possessions, houses, or resources to the Orthodox Church. Orthodox individuals reportedly gave their property to the Church, which was given the right to have possessions, as they did not want it to fall into the hands of the Ottomans. This kind of dynamic is often believed to be one of the reasons for the apparent wealth of the Cypriot Church. However, firstly, scholars working on this subject should first agree on a definition of what the Cypriot Church was back then (Hadjianastasis 2009, 75).⁴ For, as the author has seen and confirmed even today, the Church was not

⁴ The land management in the Ottoman administration was not based on the feudal principles typical of the previous Latin rule. See Sakellaropoulos 2022.

a concrete institutionalised concept in Cyprus but rather a conglomeration of complex social and cultural elements.

Whether myth or reality, the alleged wealth of the Orthodox Church is still a very current topic in Cyprus. Especially refugees from the North often call for the Church to “give up its lands”, and offer it to the people who were left landless. The same rhetoric was often heard in the villages’ *kafenios* having concrete consequences as well. For example, when priests bought *Kumandaria* wine for the liturgy, they were charged more than ordinary customers with this explanation “the priest pays a higher sum”.

Contemporary economic crisis makes things worse with people blaming the so-called businessman clerics and bishops, such as the Metropolitan of Kykkos, Nikephoros, for their alleged lack of spirituality (Roudometof 2019, 113). However, despite the criticism, the reality is more complex and philanthropic projects should be credited to the Church by public discourse as well. In fact, the almost gigantic philanthropic activity of people such as Nikephoros Metropolitan of Kykkos goes unnoticed, since it usually occurs hidden behind public view. Due to the pronounced emphasis on the community as the centre of the bishop’s power, it is a great challenge for the Church to maintain the balance between bishopric authority and laity. Given increasing loss of historical prestige, however, the Church must find new ways of working with the community.

Despite similarities in power structures, we can generalise here that, while in the Roman catholic tradition the ecclesial power was primarily directed in the confines of judicial authority, the Orthodox Church developed more spiritual authority. In fact, Orthodox clerics’ authority depends on the community, something that may turn out unfeasible when related to the many possible problems that can arise. Furthermore, the communal nature of the Cypriot ecclesial environment meant and still means, that criticism about the Church is encouraged and thus larger. Everyone feels entitled to criticise this or that cleric in their daily life, with the Church necessarily becoming more resilient. This ecclesial mentality is peculiar to the Cypriot Orthodox Church, proving to have remained unaffected by influences of Western Christianity in this regard, contrary to other fields such as architecture, and art.

The spiritual setting is of paramount importance in Cyprus, with the candidates for bishopric ideally coming from monastic settings. This conventional background favours obedience and respect toward the bishop due to the overall spiritual understanding of authority in the Orthodox Church we mentioned above. When this does not occur, the authority of the bishop will not be perceived as spiritual but rather linked to administrative position.

Authority without spirituality is tyranny. The Roman Catholic Church with its emphasis on a judicial structure provided for better

procedural safeguards but of course could have missed the greater spiritual dimension. The ways of how these ecclesiological positions functioned side by side in the historical context in Cyprus is subject to further research.

5.3 Kykkos Monastery

Associated with great spiritual, historical or national aspects, some monastic establishments serve as models for other churches, monasteries and parishes. A notable example in Cyprus is the Kykkos monastery, which also houses the icon of the Mother of God Kykotissa.

Many well-known figures come from this monastery, such as the contemporary Metropolitan Nikephoros of Kykkos, former *higumenos* 'abbot' of the monastery. Of humble origins, he ascended the Church ranks thanks to his great economical acumen and managerial capabilities, becoming the abbot of Kykkos monastery. Despite many accusations of "scarce spirituality", the metropolitan Nikephoros reportedly remained simple and humble in his heart, reflecting his humble origins. Retaining childlike simplicity and love in one's heart even after rising through the ranks is important. He betrayed this childlike framework when he once told the story of his happy childhood experiences, which were humble but happy at the same time. As a child, he used to play around the forests close to Paphos, eating watermelons (*karpusias*), living a carefree life of a peasant's child, before entering a career in the Church from early childhood.

Similarly, the current *higumenos* of the monastery Agaphonikos has proven himself over the years as a great manager and caretaker. The economic crisis has hit the monastery as well as its assets hard. There are many popular legends about the monastery's wealth to the detriment of the numerous philanthropic projects sponsored by the monastery. The management of Kykkos is no easy task and must be passed over to a person who has proven himself as a good manager. Over the years, Father Agaphonikos, the present *higumenos*, has proved himself of managing ecclesial and administrative affairs. In addition to this, he also has remarkable spiritual qualities so that people come to him for spiritual advice.

The abbot Agaphonikos looks extremely stark and strict but at the same time has the 'heart of a baby' like his predecessor Metropolitan Nikephoros, as he always tries to satisfy all the requests of help from the people coming to the monastery. After checking the veracity of their needs Agaphonikos often helps individuals anonymously. The downside of being popular is the paradox that the monastery is struggling to attract new monks.

The Cypriot ecclesial structures are built on the absolute prerequisite of obedience to the superior. For obvious reasons, this will

perhaps hinder new ordinations. The greatest challenge in the Orthodox Church mentality is to fulfil the commandments of the superior, even if one disagrees. Regardless of whether one believes something is right or not, one must act according to the orders. This humility is hard to come by and is sought after in future leaders. For generations brought up in a spirit of independence and individualism, concepts such as humility, obedience and self-sacrifice are even more difficult to follow. In this context, clergy from mountain villages had greater independence.

6 **Askas and its People**

The village school in Askas no longer functions because there are not many children left in the village. There are many textbooks and educational posters lying around in the former school building offering an almost romantic perspective of years gone by. Depopulation of the village has brought its fruits. Some teachers previously lived in Askas, as bachelors. There used to be a house hosting incoming teachers, the last of which demanded that the entire house was painted in shades of green.

Not long ago in Cyprus attaining a humanities degree was regarded as prestigious. Classical education, letters and literature allowed for a civil career, the only secure, and therefore sought after, form of employment. Nowadays, humanities have fallen into disrepute, with prospective students preferring degrees in the exact sciences. A decrease in the prestige of the humanities is also naturally related to a decrease in the prestige of theology.

Depopulation negatively affects all facets of life. For example, village communities are no longer able to provide for their own local priest, as younger clerics are not motivated to work in a slowly dying village. The author decided to go to the village and work as a priest upon the local bishop's request. Initially, there was some concern about a foreign priest in a traditional village of Cyprus. Upon hearing that a *xenos* 'foreigner' would come, many people from the village raised their doubts.

Some inhabitants regarded this as both evidence of gradual decline of mountain culture and as a sort of betrayal, by disinterested local priests. However, the ultimate acceptance of a foreign priest testifies to the multicultural tolerance in the island favoured by its long history and shows that the carriers of a given culture can be transient, here a foreigner bearing and advancing the local Cypriot ecclesial culture. Nonetheless, depopulation and its consequences are concrete, resonating in the village psyche and causing sadness. A certain Bishop Gregorios on one occasion came to serve in the village chapel of Saint Paraskevi, and after the liturgy being

surrounded by mainly elderly believers he started to literally cry and stated "Let's all prayer so that our younger generation, our children will once again find the way to Church". This somehow also evokes the relationship between culture and the Church.

Any priest coming from outside of Cyprus must learn to 'communicate'. It is perhaps fair to state that priests from outside of Cyprus or Greece would be surprised and unprepared by the high necessity of being able to communicate with 'everyone about everything' and the social role one needs to fulfil. The village priest moves around and is supposed to talk about any possible theme. The people expect the priest to interact with people with any background and enquire about their mood, situation and so on. The priest is a community builder and caretaker. In this regard, the role of the priest's wife is more relevant than that of the priest himself. Indeed, she interacts with the community even more than the priest. For this reason, it is of pivotal importance yet difficult to find a woman suitable for such a role.

After five years of service in Askas, the author was eventually accepted into the community, despite a limited improvement in his communication skills. Without a perfect command of local Greek, which was tinged by a dialect, the language barrier was still significant after this time. But, thanks to her talent in communicating the *Papadia* was accepted into the community more rapidly than the priest. When the author was about to leave, an elderly woman told him: "We have accepted you as one of us, but now you are leaving, such is life".

6.1 Muchtaris

Beyond the priest, there are many other important village figures including the *Muchtaris*, modelled after the Ottoman village administration.

However, today as in other periods, being the village *Muchtaris* is no joyous position and many villagers believe that the amount of envy, hatred and criticism that this function attracts is truly 'unbearable' for any individual. As one lady called Eleni once stated, the *Muchtaris* is essential in the village "so that one can criticise someone and feel good". The village *Muchtaris* is essentially a divisive figure, since in most cases he has strong support but also fierce opposition. Interestingly, in the village of Askas, this opposition and support of any *Muchtaris* was usually equally distributed.

Not long ago, in Askas there were impending elections while a long-term serving *Muchtaris* was in charge. The election battle was fierce, with intrigues, lies and gossip and with anonymous pamphlets thrown all over the village, even claiming that the opponent was united with some evil forces against the truth. Every vote and expression of support had serious consequences on social and political networks.

Unfortunately, as perhaps expected, hatred emerged among the two candidates. Later, the ultimately triumphant candidate was accused of squandering public finance. Although this charge has not been confirmed yet, the toll on his family and life was huge. He experienced a divorce and had his family dispersed.

It is also true that this particular *Muchtaris* had rather strange ideas. He had various 'theories', including that "all the best people" from Askas had moved to Lefkosia or elsewhere and those who had stayed "could not make it anywhere" and, for this reason, remained in Askas. He showed a mixture of contempt for the villagers and desire to be the liberator or hero of Askas, initiating a time of development. To an outsider, a village election of this kind may appear a little comical. The fierce battles and lasting, mutual hatred may seem exaggerated in a village setting but are indicative of the fabric of community and its birth pangs.

6.2 The Mangas

Likewise important was the head of the village parish council Kostas. His nickname *Mangas* 'the cool hand guy' characterised him as an absolutely cool person, thought it was uncommon for a person in his late fifties. He used to work daily on the fields but nonetheless maintained a perfectly clean appearance, wearing nice shirts and coats. Whatever agricultural work he pursued, this did not prevent him from coming and maintaining a well-groomed appearance and having a suit on.

When the author began his service as a priest, Kostas was the most well-liked person in the village. He used to attend every liturgical service and was always willing to help. In fact, anywhere the priest went for a service Kostas came along. Soon, the two men became friends. When Kostas was a child, his father left his mother and she had to bring up Kostas with his two brothers by herself in a nice but very damp house. The latter was close to the stream, located in an area in Askas full of insects and associated with many forms of diseases.

Kostas married a lady who reportedly originated from an extended and poor family of thieves. Anyway, his wife was a very nice communicative person, and her relatives offered to Kostas the large family experience he had never had, with frequent gatherings at his house for coffee. He had a son, who will probably remain in Askas permanently along with his girlfriend, meaning that their house will not become a mere weekend house.

However, the great test for Kostas' popularity came when the bishop decided to take away the majority of the Byzantine icons from the parish churches of Askas. The churches of Askas contained an interesting and rich collection of icons dating from the twelfth century

onwards. The iconographic material is especially important since it traces the development of styles and traditions over hundred years in one given parish. The masterpiece in this collection was the Askas cross, a wooden processional cross dating back to the twelfth century. It was housed in the church of *Timiou Stavrou* 'Holy Cross', one of the oldest churches in Askas located in the small central square of the village. It became a kind of symbol of the village, after having been underestimated for a long time.

What happened with the icons is a typical example of the contemporary attitude toward antiquities and their preservation. Often moved by sudden interest in the piece of an art in question, requests of transfer are allegedly made to avoid deterioration. In those cases where there are inadequate conditions, transferring an object of historical significance is obviously the best option for its preservation. But as past experiences show, most objects after surviving in their original conditions for hundreds if not thousands of years, were damaged, if not totally destroyed, after being moved to museums and other locations.

We may recall here the case of the Ethiopian biblical manuscripts. When scholars arrived at the Garima Monastery in Ethiopia, they were amazed, seeing how one of the most ancient illustrated copies of the Gospels had survived in such a 'primitive' setting. How is it possible that, in Europe, despite the available technological instruments, there is nothing preserved as well as this artefact? Of course, more factors play a role in the preservation of artefacts, as we can see, not only the desire to preserve them.

In the case of Askas, the 'museological' fervour was moved by the desire to: (1) preserve the icons by transferring them to a safer museum; (2) to make them more accessible to a greater public; (3) direct the attention toward the bishop of the area. Sometime before these events, some icons had been given for professional restoration, but returned with damages, particularly to their colours. The unfortunate rush to restore icons has led to many such disasters in Cyprus.

The treatment of historical objects, such as the icons, in Askas was interrelated to the future of the village. If the village was to attract visitors, it was not favourable to move its valuables or objects to an altogether different area. Indeed, the villagers began to criticise the bishop because, on the one hand, he kept promising to do everything possible to develop the village, while, on the other hand, he intended to move one of the main attractions of Askas.

At one point, the bishop gave the order to Kostas Mangas, Father Andreas and one loyal member of the parish council to take down most of the older and valuable icons to his newly built museum close to Lefkosia. The situation was unfortunate because the bishop did not inform anyone about this decision except these three individuals and this spirit of secrecy made things even worse. The car came and

took the icons but soon everyone found out. This created a huge crisis in the village, with the three men regarded as the main culprits and smeared throughout the village. On that occasion, the power of the community proved great, being able to punish and exclude any individual who fell into disgrace. This exclusion in the village setting meant almost the same thing as death. Various delegations went to the bishop's office asking for the icons to be returned to Askas. The episode was a tragicomical test of character, since, as usual, many who initially had heroic plans and spoke great words backed down and 'chickened' away.

As a local priest, the author informed the bishop that the decision to take away the icons was, from the point of view of conservation, a good one but, from the point of view of long-term development of Askas and the preservation of its heritage, rash decision. Things go even more turbulent when the villagers decided to meet the bishop in a local tavern to discuss the issues. The bishop came by car. While the bishop was ascending to the tavern, the situation was tense, and a few local heroes had to be calmed down since it appeared they intended to physically attack him. The verbal discussion soon turned into a brawl between the villagers, about different issues and past disagreements. Eventually the situation calmed down just as quickly as the tensions raised. The bishop promised to build a museum in Askas, saying of himself to be touched that "many other villages were lining up to give items to new diocesan museum". After the bishop with the icons left, the situation calmed down, but the community was divided and angry, with major impact on Kostas Mangas, Father Andreas and others who supported the decision to move the icons.

From being the most popular person in Askas, Kostas had descended into the most hated person, since he was seen as being primarily responsible for the icons' lost. The respect for Father Andreas also plunged rapidly. Kostas as an individual was of course angry, being in disbelief about his loss of popularity. Nowhere the anger and loss of status were more pronounced than at the *kafenio*, and the tables at the *kafenio* with their pre-ordered *taxis* 'order' of seating were shuffled into new 'diplomatic' alliances. Kostas began sitting with the then unpopular *Muchtaris* and departed the more prestigious card playing table and group accordingly. The exclusion from the prestigious tables at the *kafenio*, resulted in Kostas taking great offence and for a couple of months disappearing from the *kafenio* altogether.

According to the opinion of the author, building a proper museum in Askas and leaving the icons there was the best option, leaving the icons in their 'natural place' (i.e., the church) was the best solution. This position however, did not meet with approval from Father Andreas. At that time, he seemed to have resigned on the idea that Askas would ever continue existing, likely due to his scepticism about the villagers' destiny after his death.

Father Andreas took the developments and the villagers' criticism personally and decided not to attend any services thereafter, and did not appear in church till his death. Many people of the older generations regarded the removal of the icons as a kind of removal of their ancestors from Askas and as a complete betrayal. As a certain Michalis stated:

I wish they return the icons made and commissioned by our fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers and ancestors... They had already left us, and now the icons associated with them are also leaving.

The position of Kostas was also difficult and, for one reason or another, he gave up his position as the chief of the parish council. He also was a little saddened by the author's opinion on the question of the icons and this created some tension, because as he stated: "You have thrown me out somewhere down the road, even though I fully supported you".

Of course, everyone involved was right to a certain extent, and this incident shows the complexities of community/parish relationship in the context of the diocese and its bishop. No one was really at fault here, everyone was well-meaning, proving how the community can be shaken without any real problems or issues.

6.3 Kafenio

All the village controversies start and end in the village *kafenio*. The *kafenio* is a place of refuge and has many other social functions. Traditionally, the men intended the *kafenio* as a 'refuge from their wives', or other people. Considering that the houses were very small, and that the extended family was cramped into a couple of small rooms, with many children running around, the outdoors, including the *kafenio*, were perhaps the main areas of communal interaction.

The *kafenio* in Askas is a family-owned business, the main figures of which are Kostas and his mother. Kostas never married and has been brought up in a humble and simple manner. Contemporary women would probably frown on the lifestyle he would offer. He comes from a family of complete frugal strictness. His bedroom was small with an iron framed bed, covered with one of those old-fashioned giant mattresses there were a simple cupboard, and a small table with an old-fashioned alarm clock. Kostas, as anyone brought up in Askas, realised that life in the mountains is tough and harsh and one needs to be prepared. Dwindling population makes things even more difficult for the *kafenio*.

Men would sit around for hours in the *kafenio* and drinking many coffees, usually well-dressed in Sunday clothes. The coffees could have been combined with the local spirit drink *zivania*. *Zivania* is a roughly forty per cent spirit made from wine remnants and has been used to cure almost everything, from a cold, to broken bones. Chain-smoking was a feature of all men in Askas, but times are changing, and smoking is receding.

The *kafenio* is usually frequented by men but this is not always the case. In Askas, playing cards and gambling with candy is popular. The gambling, however, was more serious in earlier periods. Down in the cities, the *kafenio* can be associated with political parties, each *kafenio* associated with a given political party with a flag of that party hanging around. For a person from Eastern Europe who experienced communism, the leftist Cypriot parties often represented by their *kafenios* appear somewhat comical and naïve. As a foreign priest one must be careful not to alienate people in one's homilies by implying anything bad about communism or the leftist parties. For coming to church and believing in communism are highly compatible with the Cypriots.

6.4 Refugees and Internal Refugees

6.4.1 Kostas

From 1974 onwards Askas also welcomed some refugees, who either inter-married or found themselves living here. One such refugee was again Kostas, who was from Cyrenia. He ended up in Askas, because his wife's sister lived there. They decided to build a house, a decision which Kostas regrets now. Kostas usually works hard for many hours, continuously preparing hamburgers or other foodstuffs in one restaurant in Lefkosia. He is also a little angry at Father Andreas, because he did not sell him and his wife a better land to build a house. Instead, he had to build a house on a rather steep slope and his house is yet not finished, standing on thick concrete legs with a hollow space beneath like some awkward animal. Father Andreas did not give the permission to sell him a plot belonging to the Church, which would have been more suitable for a house.

Kostas is not happy. He misses Cyrenia, the sun, the sea, the warm people and weather. He believes that people from the coast are more peaceful than the more 'nervous' mountain people. His wife loves to talk to people, and it is impossible to get around her house without stopping for coffee. But, just like Kostas, she is sad, because there are few and fewer people to talk to. This even further elevates the regrets of coming here to Askas. The migration, the cold mountainous weather, and the lack of people certainly do not improve Kostas' mood.

6.4.2 Janis

The family of Janis, a neighbour of Kostas and coming from Cyrenia as well, has been living in Askas for generations. His life was also touched by the events of 1974, when his son did not return from military service and was captured by the Turkish forces. For the past decade he has been waiting for his son to return in vain until the recent death notification. Janis was a widower for a very long time and never married again. He always welcomed the company of women, permitting himself at least a kiss if nothing else. One of the previous village chieftains built a small memorial on the main road indicating “for the lost son”. Janis, like many others, did not miss any opportunity to talk with anyone willing to listen to him.

6.4.3 George Kokis

George ‘Kokis’, a widower as well, also lived a long time by himself. His wife died of cancer and was taken care of by a Philippine woman called Photini. After some time, Kokis decided to marry Photini, displeasing his children who were concerned about this marriage. She was around thirty years younger than George. Photini, just like many women who worked in Cyprus and who originated from the Philippines, was homesick. Many women left behind their little children in the Philippines, and had to reconcile themselves to communicating with them through odd internet connections. Photini was by herself having no children and therefore could stay with George. George used to go out with Photini to the fields every day. Later every Saturday they would get up at three am to take their produce down to the market.

To keep his family calm, George, though in his late sixties, decided to build a small house on a piece of land donated by a friend of Photini. They moved to this house leaving all the other fields and possessions to George’s children. George had recently passed away and one can wonder whether his children will be willing to come to Askas and continue with the work on the fields. In the meantime, Photini is living alone.

Some people say that George’s ancestors had obtained their possessions in an unfair way, at least as far as one house is concerned. There was a desperate man, who needed to feed his children and said to one of George’s ancestors that he would give up his house for a goat with milk to feed his children. George’s ancestor agreed and thus bought the house paying with his goat. Villagers believe that this brought bad luck on the family. George had a book from the nineteenth century, he believed was priceless and showed it to the author with pride, claiming that it had “all the knowledge in the world”. It

was however an ordinary book. George was a brilliant psaltist who sang in the church, even without any official training. The singers in the church were volunteers and did not receive financial aid.

6.4.4 Apostolos

Apostolos was a fellow psaltist of George. He had four sons, one of them being called the “lost son”, since he had some troubles with the law and had to leave Cyprus. The other sons remained in Cyprus, and became more attached to Askas as the years went by. Apostolos misses his son, but nothing can help. Apostolos unfortunately was inclined to womanise, and his faithful wife tolerated most of these escapades. She belonged to those women of the past generations who were faithful to their husbands no matter what. Just like Nikki, her close friend whose husband died at the tender age of thirty after a car accident and, even though she is now seventy, she never remarried again, claiming loyalty to her deceased husband. Later Apostolos calmed down and found a new connection to his wife. Unfortunately, they did not have many years left together when this happened, since Apostolos was developing throat cancer due to his other habit of chain-smoking.

He went for an operation in Greece and, once back, he resumed chanting in the church, even though the doctor had forbidden it and he did not feel well. The author did not know about this sacrifice until his death. One day, during a liturgical service, he suddenly stopped chanting because his voice was no longer functioning, and no one realised what happened and what was the problem and the author told him to continue singing while he just stared at him. Not long after this crisis, he passed away from a heart attack after drinking his morning coffee. His wife displayed great emotion at the funeral. Still now always wears black clothes and spends her time at the local monastery.

At funerals in Askas, just like baptisms, weddings and other liturgical celebrations, there was great participation. You were baptised with all the villagers present; you had your wedding with all the villagers present; and you died with everyone watching you in your coffin. Such a spirit of communion will likely be extinct soon. As we have indicated above, the Church, the people, and the priest were always present in every moment of one’s life. Prayers and the liturgical cycle were not a one-time Sunday event, but accompanied people everywhere. You woke up with prayers, worked with prayers, and ended the day with prayers. The older prayer books contained prayers for almost possible situations in the village and in relation to agriculture. It is not a question of emphasising only the Christian context here, but rather the sacral nature of reality as it unfolds in these communities.

6.4.5 Another Kostas

Returning to the village at least after retirement is a constant theme in Askas. Some return in a state of personal brokenness or failure. Some return but their families or especially wives are not sympathetic to the idea any more. Kostas who lived close by to the *kafenio* just like many villagers spent most of his life in Lefkosia, and just like many nourished the idea that someday he would return. For the past five years he has been building an extension, reconstructing the house he had in Askas. He had a wide smile with some old-fashioned gold teeth. He was visibly excited when he came over the weekends working on his house. He believed that Askas was the best place on earth. Looking forward to coming and living there. When he was about to finish the house, he got an aggressive form of cancer. After a couple of weeks, he died. His daughter finished the renovation now but there is no Kostas any more. Perhaps she will have attachment to that place like her father had.

6.4.6 Andreas

Loneliness is of course difficult to manage, and unless there is a spiritual task, ideal or higher goal to follow, in the mountains some may even lose their sanity. Andreas was a rich person, often provoking envy among the villagers. However, his mental health was not sound, and kept deteriorating over time. As he had remained unmarried all his life and did not have any relatives who would be interested in his fate, he was very lonely. Therefore, his mental health deteriorated to such an extent that he made a ridiculous decision to buy a run-down restaurant in Lefkosia, which everyone knew was not going to make any money. He did this apparently to alleviate the 'unemployment' situation in Cyprus but ended up losing everything he put into this venture. He died alone, with no relatives around.

6.4.7 Poppy

Poppy is the wife of (another) Kostas and is one of the wives more open to the idea of returning to Askas with her husband. She is seventy and her husband seventy-five. Both grew up in Askas but later spent the most part of their lives in Lefkosia but love the village. Kostas enjoys going to the *kafenio* and playing cards. Playing cards at the *kafenio* is an important feature of life in Askas. People can spend hours there. Kostas convinced Poppy to come and live permanently in Askas, leaving their house in Lefkosia behind. While Kostas plays cards in the *kafenio* 'gambling' chocolates and occupies himself with

gardening, watering and endless tasks, Poppy does not have much to do in Askas. Even though she grew up there, she does not have that many friends there, at least friends who would remain over the weekend. All the friends live in Lefkosia, in one of its suburbs, Lakatamia. The complexity of city life or life elsewhere either means that you learn to appreciate the simplicity of village life and its beauties or simply disconnect from this life.

Many men have married foreign women and many of them are happy to share their life with their husbands in the mountains. However, even in these cases, many women find it hard to adapt to the conditions, being used to completely different environments. In Askas a tragic event happened. A young woman from Ukraine was killed by someone, either because of jealousy or other problems. Her body and the body of her lover were never found. Some say that their bodies were burnt by someone in the valley with the small chapel of Saint Paraskevi/Christine, since some villagers sensed "bodies being burned".

7 Conclusions

If any concrete conclusions can be drawn from our brief sketch, these would entail an emphasis on the village community as a backbone of Cypriot culture. The resilience of the village and its Church produced an environment, which could absorb foreign elements, peoples and influences, without the risk of destroying or losing at the same time the basic cultural and anthropological identity inherent to and produced by such a community.

The contemporary discourses often neglect the broader socio-anthropological role of the sacred in Cyprus, often reducing the sacred or the Church to their institutional expression. Whatever we believe in, the village environment demonstrates that some referential stable static points must exist for a given social unit to continue and survive. The contemporary emphasis on global abstractness simply does not cut the mark for cultural and community survival. The community 'needs' a reference pointing to its core and basics just as the individual human being or person does. Religion was not produced as the first but as the last thing in line. The more physical hard labour the villagers engaged in and the more problems they encountered and overcome the more religious they became.

The Cypriots who migrated and still migrate find it difficult to immediately identify that core of beingness and identity in other contexts. This is of course the common experience of all migrants, but the difference is that if you have migrated or migrate to another enclosed functional environment, this will compensate for your loss of community and identity. But if you migrate to the typically abstract

contemporary cities, you essentially have nothing left or anything left of your culture and traditions cease to exist.

If the 'land' produces culture, culture produces attitudes to land then, and if there are no such attitudes, obviously there is also no culture. The data from a village such as Askas clearly demonstrates the notion that culture is inherently linked with religion (Belzen 1999, 231). In its turn, religion is linked, among other things to the land. Regardless of belief in any confessions or atheism, religion entails unpredictability and indeterminacy, which are the governing forces of nature.

Furthermore, there is no artificial East/West or South/North or ecclesial/non-ecclesial divide, just as there is in reality no sharp distinction between evil and good, or right and wrong, but a complex interplay of elements. Migration and foreignness are not negative concepts, if society provides for viable carriers of community. The community is able to absorb, accept and transform.

Bibliography

- Katatatikos chartis tis Agiotatis ekklisias tis Kyprou* Ο καταστατικός χάρτης της Αγιατάτης Εκκλησίας της Κύπρου (The Statutory Map of the Holy Church of Cyprus) (1979). Lefkosia: Church of Cyprus. <https://books.google.de/books?id=zcUYnwEACAAJ>.
- Belzen, J.A. (1999). "The Cultural Psychological Approach to Religion. Contemporary Debates on the Object of the Discipline". *Theory and Psychology*, 9(2), 229-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095935439992004>.
- Burton, S.; King, R. (1982). "Land Fragmentation and Consolidation in Cyprus. A Descriptive Evaluation". *Agricultural Administration*, 11(3), 183-200. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0309-586X\(82\)90115-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0309-586X(82)90115-7).
- Clerides, G. (1989). *Cyprus. My Deposition*, vol. 1. Nicosia: Alithia Publishing.
- Demostheni, A. (2008). *O Askas kai oi ekklisies tou O Askas* και οι εκκλησίες του (Askas and its Churches). Askas: Askas, parish.
- Duxbury, N.; Cullen, C.; Jordi, P. (2012). "Cities, Culture and Sustainable Development". Anheier, H.K.; Isar, Y.R.; Heolscher, M. (eds), *Cities, Cultural Policy and Governance*. London: Sage, 73-86. Cultures and Globalisation Series 5. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446254523>.
- Hadjianastasis, M. (2009). "Cyprus in the Ottoman Period: Consolidation of the Cypro-Ottoman Elite, 1650-1750". Michael, M.N.; Kappler, M.; Gavriel, E. (eds), *Ottoman Cyprus. A Collection of Studies on History and Culture*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 63-88. Near and Middle East Monographs 4.
- Mallarach, J.-M.; Corcó Juvifiá, J.; Papayannis, T. (2014). "Christian Monastic Communities Living in Harmony with the Environment. An Overview of Positive Trends and Best Practices". *Studia Monastica*, 56(2), 353-92. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275641016_Christian_Monastic_Communities_Living_in_Harmony_with_the_Environment_An_Overview_of_Positive_Trends_and_Best_Practices.
- Papacostas, T. (2014). "The Troodos Mountains of Cyprus in the Byzantine Period. Archaeology, Settlement, Economy". Michaelides, D.; Parani, M. (eds), *The*

-
- Archaeology of Late Antique and Byzantine Cyprus (4th-12th Centuries). Recent Research and New Discoveries.* Paris: Centre d'Études Chypriotes, 175-200. Cahiers du Centre d'Études Chypriotes 43. <https://doi.org/10.3406/cchyp.2013.1062>.
- Pelekanos, M. (2016). "The Role of a Post-Byzantine Timber Roof Structure in the Seismic Behavior of a Masonry Building. The Case of a Unique Type of Timber-Roofed Basilicas in Cyprus (15th-19th Century)". Cruz, H.; Saporiti Machado, J.; Campos Costa, A.; Candeias, P.X.; Ruggieri, N.; Catarino, M.J. (eds), *Historical Earthquake-Resistant Timber Framing in the Mediterranean Area*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 17-31. Lecture Notes in Civil Engineering 1. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39492-3_2.
- Roudometof, V. (2019). "The Economic Activities of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus". *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 1(185), 107-24. <https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.39246>.
- Sakellaropoulos, S. (2022). "The Ottoman Period, (1571-1878)". Sakellaropoulos, S., *The Evolution of the Political, Social and Economic Life of Cyprus, 1191-1950*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 35-112. Palgrave Studies in Economic History. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91839-2_3.
- Şenol Sert, D. (2010). "Cyprus, Peace, Return and Property". *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(2), 238-59. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feq016>.
- Wilson, R. (1992). *Cyprus and the International Economy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-12186-1>.

