

**Manolis G. Varvounis<sup>1</sup>**

mvarv@otenet.gr

## **Folkloristics of Streets in Athens and Greek 'Urban Folklore'**

### **Abstract:**

The streets of a city are its linchpins. They, above all, determine the urban fabric of the city and they form the places where communication and cultural expression takes place. They are the fundamental points in the way of life and in experience in urban space. Many and varied are the ways in which one may examine the importance of streets of the history and culture of the cities and towns of Greece. In what follows certain thoughts regarding the importance for folklore of streets will be set forth. We are dealing here with a type of post-modern symbolism, which in the view of Paul Hanson is redefining the content of popular culture in our cities. Within this culture streets play a major role, in that they unite and divide and bring about contact or separation and so express and pattern in schematic form identity and otherness.

**Keywords:** urban folklore, newly-established customs, urban streets, observances, rituals, cultural interest, multicultural communities.

Contemporary research in folklore and particularly the field of 'urban folklore' has turned its attention to, among other things, the question of the importance for folklore of roads and, indeed, of central streets in towns and cities<sup>2</sup>. This has come about, since such central streets, in that they receive the many inhabitants of a city and cater for their needs, are no longer primarily of importance in terms of communication alone, that is, of primarily utilitarian importance. Given the way they are laid out and the meaning they have acquired, they are indeed frequently indices of aspects of the organized, traditional daily life of their cities.

1 Manolis G. Varvounis is professor on Folklore in Democritus University of Thrace (1992 seq.), Head of the Department of History and Ethnology (2016 seq.) and Director of the Laboratory of Folklore and Social Anthropology (2015 seq.).

2 See for the urban folklore in Greece the study of Kouzas (2012a, 69-172), with bibliography and patterns.

Similar tendencies are to be observed in the international literature of folklore research. In the view of most foreign scholars of this branch of modern folklore, the popular culture that develops in the streets of a city is one of the most characteristic forms of popular culture. Contemporary folklore should indeed study phenomena, not so much in isolation, as in the context of the society that creates and manages them. Besides, this same principle has entered the theory and practice of Greek folklore, thanks to the 'socio-historical' method which was introduced to research in Greece by Michail G. Meraklis<sup>3</sup> and which today forms a basic methodological tool of Greek folklorists. This is a vital theoretical basis, which informs both the existence of current subject orientations of folklore and the ways in which research is organized and carried out.

Greek folklore studies have not remained untouched by these developments, albeit in a basic form. As is well known, the first in Greek folklore scholarship to speak of the folklore of the streets and particularly in its celebratory manifestations was Dimitrios Loukatos (2003, 37). Since then, there have been many publications on the subject, some to be found in the Greek literature on the subject, but most in the non-Greek bibliography. This academic literature offers a systematic study of streets as part of public space and as examples of how such space is constructed, so that it defines daily life and the actions of the inhabitants of a city.

A folklore scholar today is indeed in a position to write a great deal about the central street of a town or city. Of all this, we shall touch below on only three matters, which, however, are of fundamental significance for the definition of public space and, indeed, for various neighbourhoods of Athens. The first is directly related to the definition of sacred space through the layout and character of roads.

The existence of churches and chapels directly defines sacred space. It defines the street as a place for religious ritual, which therefore endows it with a particular colouring. In the roads of Athens, urban religious processions (litanies) are performed, in which the icons of the saints of the churches in question are borne around the parish on the evening of Good Friday. In fact, in Athens the priests have made it an institution that the Good Friday funeral canopies of Christ of neighbouring parishes meet halfway through the course of the procession, so that prayers may be said together, after which each

<sup>3</sup> See Meraklis (1989, 46), where the method is presented, with specific case studies.

party heads for its own parish church. The priests of these churches during the three days from 5 to 7 January every year bless the shops and houses of the roads that belong to their parishes, thus making a real start to the New Year and the human activities and expectations that it encompasses<sup>4</sup>.

The involvement of religious feelings and of ecclesiastical ritual in the functionality of the street contributes to the attempt to endow the street with a staged ritual significance. Thus, as Regina Bendix observes (2006, 34-36), newer roads acquire something of the mystique that surrounds the old streets of agricultural and pastoral communities in the countryside, which are frequently tied to memories of old rituals, by reason of their antiquity. What Benjamin Botkin describes as the mythical repository of old points in the urban fabric (Botkin 1976, 78-80), is directly tied to the rituals of the community and not normally erased and replaced in the consciousness by anything else.

The second question concerns the handling of memory in the streets of Athens. The very names of the streets themselves constitute an act of remembering, since the rendering of a name is of particular interest in terms of the link between the road and the procedures and practices whereby the historical memory of the inhabitants is preserved. Similar practices in the formation of road names are to be found both within and outside Europe. Here one should note that, as Lyn Lofland writes (1973, 25-28), it is exactly this link between public space, in this case, roads, and the collective historical memory of the community that gives meaning to the public space itself and turns it from a non-place, of simple practical use to a one formed in tune with popular consciousness. The links between streets and the historical past of a community, in the view of Lofland, do not merely earn streets recognition in the eyes of the inhabitants of the area. Such links also lodge roads in the consciousness of those who arrive subsequently to live in the area, since individuals and groups move so much in urban areas and frequently change their residence.

At the same time, these links lend public space a particular character and offer ways of culturally incorporating the space and interpreting it, as Seyla Benhabib has shown, with examples (1992, 45-58). Such processes are probably necessary for a city-dweller of today to experience and regard as familiar a space that is large-

<sup>4</sup> Varvounis (2014a, 124-126), gives some examples of these rituals, with bibliography.

ly unwelcoming and impersonal. Thus, in the view of Benhabib, he or she can live and organize his or her life in this space, and create and love the area as a substitute for the utopian habitation that most city dwellers imagine for themselves. This they do mainly when they experience the loneliness and inhumanity of large cities, with their impersonal and sometimes inhuman character.

The third point involves the organization of public space in the roads of Athens. The buildings that line the streets usually follow the standard plan of urban habitation, whereby the ground floor forms shops and the floors above are occupied by residences. Here we should note that the laying out of green spaces within the urban landscape is directly tied to the love today's city dweller feels for nature, which he or she cannot experience in urban daily life. As Jan. Gehl has noted (2011, 67), in order to define life in buildings, one has needs to juxtapose it to nature, in accord with the structural opposition 'nature' vs 'culture. This need for green spaces is catered to by oases of green in cities, a phenomenon that exists in almost every urban residential area throughout the world. And the more recent a suburb is, the more green spaces it has.

On the other hand, the public good is served by the shops and street markets that are organized at two points in the road, as it is also served by the branches of banks and the local tax department, which are housed in premises on other side of this road. The co-existence of public and private gives the public aspect of the street a mixed character that one finds in all city or town centres in Greece. In cultural terms, this character defines the street and its social and cultural functionality. At the same time, it forms the basis for the shaping of this public space and for endowing it with meaning, an aspect that Greek folklore scholars have not yet sufficiently noted and studied.<sup>5</sup>

The shops located and functioning in the streets of Athens, and particularly those in neighbourhoods and local districts of the capital, cater to the whole range of human needs, real and symbolic. On the basis of their contents and their functionality we will now attempt a very general classification by category. Such a taxonomy is very rough and ready and could certainly be altered and amended, but it does represent the situation of shops at the present and the

---

<sup>5</sup> See Varvounis (2014a, 301), with special examples about parishes and rituals from Athens in Greece, and bibliography.

corresponding needs of the inhabitants of the area during the time at which the matter was recorded, in the spring and summer of 2013.

- I. *Enterprises supplying foodstuffs,*
- II. *Restaurants, places of entertainment and socializing,*
- III. *Enterprises supplying materials for building purposes and domestic and professional equipment and appliances,*
- IV. *Enterprises pertaining to clothing, shoes, gifts and cosmetics,*
- V. *Enterprises catering to educational needs,*
- VI. *Enterprises pertaining to the management of the stages of human life,*
- VII. *Enterprises relating to cars,*
- VIII. *Enterprises concerned with the provision of specialised services,*
- IX. *Enterprises pertaining to health,*
- X. *Enterprises catering to the contemporary needs*

Although to record shops in such a fashion may seem somewhat trite and commonplace, nevertheless if we consider such a listing in the context of today's urban culture, it may prove to be a testimony to the traditional everyday life of the inhabitants in various areas. It will give us information on their dietary habits and choices in clothing, on how they manage their lives, on their free time and on their childhood and death, that is, on the main stages of life in an urban environment.

The importance of recording matters in this way has been stressed in the non-Greek bibliography, too. Clearly, the needs and the corresponding consumer cultural prototypes are shown in the commercial enterprises of a town and from these we can draw information regarding the traditional daily life of the inhabitants, even in more modern cultural environments. The distribution of commercial enterprises follows certain stable patterns that are dictated by the demands made by the market. The fact that such enterprises are subject to the basic rule of commercial life, the law of supply and demand is what links them directly to the daily life of the inhabitants and what makes them of interest to scholars of folklore.

The streets of Athens and almost all urban streets are constructed for world of adults. For children, they are almost a forbidden area, full of danger, both real and mythical, which means that, if children are to be exposed to the streets at all, then parents or guardians must agree to this and must accompany their children vigilantly. There are certainly children's playgrounds, whither children go accompanied by their parents and play, and it is this that differentiates urban streets and roads from those of villages and country settlements, where children could play unaccompanied by guardians, and generally still do to the present day. There is in any case the point that the inhabitants of a village all know each other, while the small size of such settlements tends to lessen the dangers faced by children and to ensure more humane quality of life for all, young and old.

Insights concerning the symbolic functioning of the streets of Athens are certainly of importance in terms of folklore, as is the study of street lights decorating the road during the twelve days of Christmas and during Easter celebrations, which are connected with the impressing upon public space of the fact of the celebrations in question. It is not a matter of chance that non-Greek scholars of folklore have systematically studied festive decorations in public spaces, while Seta Low has systematically recorded them (Low 2000, 69-70).

The streets of Athens, with their walls, their bus stops and their surfaces used by all are the perfect place for putting up posters and for advertising. In his research into the matter, Armand Mattelart has shown (1991, 125) that the study by scholars of folklore of such advertisements, whose circulation is governed by the laws of the marketplace, may yield an enormous amount of information regarding morals, customs, tastes, consumers' needs and the daily cultural choices made by the inhabitants of a city. That is to say, such research contributes decisively to the study of folklore in an urban context and the streets of a city make up the natural habit for the development of this type of advertising, the examination of which is clearly a matter of interest to contemporary folklore studies.

Bus stops are situated and positioned in the streets of Athens in relation to areas and places for parking private cars. They indicate clearly how the city-dweller of today deals with yet another fundamental necessity. This need is linked with communication and moving around, in an urban environment that is complex and not always

particularly friendly and that demands increasingly greater routes in terms of distance and time, if the basic human needs of communication and survival are to be met. Seen thus, the study of folklore in an urban context should clearly deal with the movement and management of vehicles and of drivers, too, in the urban residential surroundings of today.

Even the greenery planted, as it is, in particular precise positions, in the streets of Athens, is of importance. This, in conjunction with the scattered replacements made to the surfaces of the pavement lying in front of houses that use whatever slabs the house owner prefers, thus becomes part of the phenomenon of the privatization of public space, noted and studied in the international scholarly bibliography.

This phenomenon is very widespread in strategies for the handling of public space, which various bodies attempt to appropriate, albeit sometimes only temporarily, since possession of such space endows them with prestige and ensures that their activities acquire a certain impressiveness. Monika Salzbrunn, for example, has shown very clearly that various ritual events of organized religion spread out through the public space constituted by city streets (Salzbrunn 2004, 178), thus demanding that such rituals meet with general acceptance and be made use of. Sylvia Rodriguez, too, has studied the strategies whereby the use of public space<sup>6</sup>, and in this case of streets, is frequently linked with the tourism industry, with the result that every type of ritual ends up as a tourist attraction, as part of the structuring of what is termed 'staged authenticity'. This we have looked at above. Its basic aim is to attract a flow of visitors to the urban communities of today.

Clearly every main street functions in supplementary fashion with a sequence of smaller sidestreets, many of which are laid out as pedestrian precincts, along which the sequence of shops continues and to which the activities of the main street extend. These satellite roads are the result of the geographical spread of the functions that are typical of the urban residential environment. They are in particular the result of commercial activity over as large an area as possible with the largest possible body of consumers. Thus we also look here at these side streets together with the main road, since they are a means by which commercial activity spreads and radiates into the

6 See with some comments and bibliography in Low – Smith (2013, 245).

mainly residential space of the area.

On the other hand, obviously these commercial concerns cater to basic needs. Thus, although many enterprises close because of the lurking financial crisis in Greece, nevertheless in new enterprises there is not much change to be seen either in their areas of specialization or in the ratio of one type of commercial activity to another. Similar discoveries are recorded in the non-Greek literature on the subject, which indicates that what we observe here is a phenomenon that is independent of particular economic conditions and particular countries. Thus examination of the servicing of various needs that is evident in the number and type of commercial concerns does indeed offer a map of the daily life of the population of Athens<sup>7</sup>.

Contemporary European communities are multicultural *par excellence* and Greek urban communities, above all that of Athens, are developing in this direction. In the final analysis, then, the coexistence in such environments of rituals, of commercial concerns and of the strategic and symbolic representation of the family define Greek urban public space and impose urban rules of organization and function. We are dealing here with a type of post-modern symbolism, which in the view of Paul Hanson is redefining the content of popular culture in our cities. Within this culture streets play a major role, in that they unite and divide and bring about contact or separation and so express and pattern in schematic form identity and otherness.

And yet this is a process that is evolving before our eyes and we cannot predict how it will develop and what form it will take in the future. What we have looked at above derives from folklore-oriented observations arising from everyday perambulations through the streets of Athens, with its historic past and its exceptionally interesting cultural present. The study of the folklore of the city street is therefore of direct interest to today's scholar of folklore.

---

<sup>7</sup> About these Kouzas (2012b, 505-558), has indicated some special notes, with bibliography.



## Bibliography

Bendix, Regina. 2006. *In search of authenticity: The formation of folklore studies*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

Benhabib, Seyla. 1992. *Models of public space: Hannah Arendt, the liberal tradition, and Jürgen Habermas*. New York.

Botkin, Benjamin Albert. 1976. *New York City folklore: legends, tall tales, anecdotes, stories, sagas, heroes and characters, customs, traditions and sayings*. New York: Greenwood Pub Group.

Gehl, Jan. 2011. *Life between buildings: using public space*. London: Island Press.

Kouzas, G. Ch. 2012a. Αστική Λαογραφία: θεωρητικές διασταυρώσεις - ιστορική διαδρομή - θεματολογία. Από τη μελέτη των 'βιομηχανικών επιτηδευμάτων' στην έρευνα των σύγχρονων μεγαλουπόλεων. In Ελληνική Λαογραφία: Ιστορικά, θεωρητικά, μεθοδολογικά, θεματικές 2, eds. M. G. Varvounis – M. G. Sergis, 69-172. Athens: Herodotos.

Kouzas, G. Ch. 2012b. Ο κόσμος της λαϊκής αγοράς: προς μια κοινωνική ανάγνωση των λειτουργιών και των προεκτάσεων των σύγχρονων υπαίθριων αγορών. Λαογραφία 42. Πρακτικά Πανελληνίου Συνεδρίου 100 χρόνια Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας 1909-2009 (Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών, 11-13 Μαρτίου 2009) – Πρακτικά Ημερίδας «Η έρευνα των λαϊκών διηγήσεων στον ελληνικό και τον διεθνή χώρο»: 505-558.

Lofland, Lyn H. 1973. *A world of strangers: Order and action in urban public space*. New York: Basic Books.

Low, Setha M. 2000. *On the plaza: The politics of public space and culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Low, Setha M. – Smith, Neil (eds.) 2013. *The politics of public space*. London – New York: Routledge.

Loukatos, D. S. 2003 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). *Σύγχρονα Λαογραφικά. Folkloreia Contemporanea*. Athens: Filippotis.

Meraklis, M. G. 1989. *Λαογραφικά Ζητήματα*. Athens: Bouras.

Mattelart, Armand. 1991. *Advertising international: The privatization of public space*. New York: Psychology Press.

Salzbrunn, Monika. 2004. The occupation of public space through religious and political events: how Senegalese migrants be-

came a part of Harlem, New York. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34 (4): 468-492.

Varvounis, M. G. 2014a. Νεωτερική ελληνική λαϊκή θρησκευτικότητα. Thessaloniki: Barbounakis.

Varvounis, M. G. 2014b. Λαϊκή θρησκευτικότητα στον ελληνικό αστικό χώρο. Μελετήματα νεωτερικής θρησκευτικής λαογραφίας. Thessaloniki: A. Stamoulis.

## Μανολις Γ. Βαρβουνις

### Φολκλωριστικά αττινских улиц и грчки „урбани фолклор“

Улице града су његове жиле куцавице. Изнад свега, оне откривају од каквог штофа је град начињен и стварају места комуникације и културног израза. Оне су кључне тачке начина живота и искуства у урбаном простору. Постоји много различитих начина на које се може испитати важност улица у историји и култури грчких градова. У тексту који следи, размотрићемо важност уличног фолклора. Суочавамо се с типом постмодерног симболизма, који, према Полу Хенсену, редефинише садржај популарне културе у нашим градовима. Унутар те културе, улице играју главну улогу, уједињујући и делећи, као и доносећи контакт или одвајање, и, тако, шематски, изражавају и пресликавају идентитет и другост.

**Кључне речи:** урбани фолклор, новоуспостављени обичаји, градске улице, очување, ритуали, културни интерес, мултикултурне заједнице