THE FESTIVAL OF AGIOS ATHANASIOS
Abstract: The festival dedicated to Agios (i.e. Saint) Athanasios is celebrated on 18 January in Greece. The following account if the festival is based on the celebration as it is carried out by the Anastenarides and the Anastenarissas (i.e. those who celebrate the Anastenaria festival) in the village of Agia Elenē in Greek Macedonia. This is the second most important festival of the annual ritual cycle of the Anastenaria, and is dedicated to the saint who by his very name, i.e. Ai Thanasē and Charo, is particularly related to death. After the blessing of the agiasma (‘holy water’), the celebrants dance barefoot over red-hot coals in the konaki, the shrine of the Anastenarides. Over the next two days, they visit all the houses of the village. Afterwards they dance in the konaki. On the third night of the festival, a meal is served for the celebrants in the konaki.

Key words: Anastenaria, Anastenarides, Agios Athanasios, agiasma, konaki, ritual dance.

Agios Athanasios in Agia Elenē on 18 January

This celebration was my first encounter with the village of Agia Elenē in Greek Macedonia in 1992 during an extended period of fieldwork, when I visited quite a few religious festivals several places in Greece, and most of which I have described in detail in another context (Håland 2007a: ch. 4, cf. also 2007, 2008). Important in this connection are the Anastenarides and the Anastenarissas, i.e. those who celebrate the Anastenaria (i.e. to Anastenari/ta Anastenaria) festival on 21-23 May. However, an important ritual during the ritual year of the Anastenarides is also celebrated on 18 January, the day dedicated to the
saint, Athanasios, when they celebrate his death and also the name day which also is related to Death, i.e. Ai Thanasē and Charos (Loukatos 1985: 94 f.; Romaios 1949: 94 ff.).

According to the Greek researcher Maria Michæl-Dede (1973, 167, cf. 1979, 223) the festival dedicated to Agios Athanasios has nothing to do with the Anastenaria, since the former is a festival dedicated to a local saint which has been mixed with the festival of the Anastenarides: „The Anastenari itself has been mixed with the local cults of other saints, especially of Agios Athanasios, something which has been extremely misleading to the investigation of the custom (Michæl-Dede 1973: 167).”

On the other hand, animal sacrifices are related both to the Anastenaria and the festival of Agios Athanasios in northern Greece and although the Anastenaria is celebrated by the Anastenarides, their saints are celebrated all over Greece as is also Agios Athansios, and all these saints are important within the Greek Orthodox Church. Furthermore, Agios Athanasios is also connected with another important event during the ritual cycle of the Anastenaria, since preparations for the main festival begin on 2 May, the day the Orthodox Church celebrates the deposition of the relics of Agios Athanasios.

According to the Greek scholar G. Megas (1982: 54 f.), people generally sacrifice bulls and sheep in public on the festival dedicated to Ag. Athanasios in the rural areas of Northern Greece. The sacrifice aims to ensure health and happiness for the villagers. Despite the public common sacrifice, however, each family find it necessary to sacrifice a cock for their own happiness, this chthonic symbol was also associated with Asklepios and the realm of the dead in the ancient world. Megas continues his description, telling that it is said to be bad luck to start any kind of work on this day, a saying we also meet in other contexts when people celebrate a festival, and which might be related to its implication of signifying a passage rite within the annual year cycle.
The importance of the two deceased saints, *Agios Konstantinos* and his mother, *Agia Elenē* (Fig. 1), in this area of northern Greece is also illustrated by the village, Konstantinos, which is situated in the vicinity of the village of Agia Elenē, where I carried out several periods of fieldwork in 1992. *Agios* Konstantinos is identified with Kōnstantinos the Great, the first Roman Emperor to profess Christianity. He converted to Christianity in 323 CE (was baptised before his death in 337) and dedicated Konstantinople (named after him), formerly Byzantium, as the new eastern capital of the Roman Empire. In later Greek Orthodox tradition he is regarded as the founder of the Byzantine Empire and the defender and saviour of the Christian religion. He was the son of Kōnstantinos from a previous marriage with a „woman of the people“. Many said that she was a maid servant in a guest-house, and was named Elenē (see Lemerle 1990: 10). According to F. Schott-Billmann (1987: 60, see also 123) *Agia* Elenē was originally a poor Jewish prostitute. My informants in the village named after her, are very concerned about her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where she discovered the True Cross, and brought fragments back home.
On the eve of the festival of Ag. Athanasios, I visited the village church which however seemed deserted and desolated. Apart from the village priest, only a woman entered lighting a candle before she departed again. In the church I see some votive gifts and jewellery dedicated to the icon depicting Agios Konstantinos and Agia Elenē. When asking the local priest if there would be a celebration tonight, the answer was: „not as far as I know“. When arriving at the konaki the shrine of the Anastenarides, later the same evening, I understood why the priest didn’t know anything. The rituals of the Anastenarides are regarded as a competitor by the Official Greek Orthodox Church (cf. Håland 2007a: ch. 4).

When leaving the church, I head for the konaki, which is situated at the edge of the village, as in other villages where they celebrate the Anastenaria, such as in the village of Melikē in Western Greek Macedonia, where I also conducted fieldwork in 1992. Next to the konaki is a small chapel and a spring house, agiasma. Agiasma signifies both „holy water“ and the spring house, a small chapel-looking building, that consists of a door opening on a damp

Fig. 2: Agiasma, the well, next to the konaki in the village of Agia Elenē (Greek Macedonia). (Author’s photograph)
stairway that leads down to the well (Fig. 2) where they fetch holy water. On the other side of the road is an enclosure which reminds of a sporting ground with benches all around. This is the dancing place, „alōni“ (i.e. threshing floor), the site of the fire-dance. Here is also the water tower of the village, as in Melikê, where an important ritual takes place at the start of the Kalogeros festival during carnival when people gather in front of the church dedicated to Agios Athanasios which is situated close to the water tower of the village (cf. Håland 2005).

When I arrived at the konaki earlier that afternoon, the main entrance was closed, but later people started to gather. Inside, three persons sit in a kind of „trance-looking“ peace, one of them is Nikos, the last person who became a member of the group. The fire is lit in the fireplace, and a particular person tends the fire, since this is a hereditary task within a particular family. The four walls of the room are lined with benches. The icon shelf is situated in the corner, and five embroidered table cloths hang over light purple „velvet curtains“ which also are decorated with crosses, on these table cloths are also some silver- and gold-plated ex-votos (i.e. tama/ta). Two olive-oil lamps are suspended above the icons. Between the corner and the fireplace, several candles are lighted in a brass-device filled with sand, similar to those found in all Greek-Orthodox churches. Behind, three large white candles (lampades) are lit. The fireplace is situated to the right and
on the other side three large drums are hanging. Beyond the main room is smaller room, an office. Pictures from the festival hang on the walls. Here are also several pictures from the Kalogeros festival, and pictures showing women in traditional costumes. Outside, some people are talking.

The manager of the konaki enters the agiasma and goes down to the well, which is going to be blessed tonight. Close to the top of the stairway is a bench on which are placed an icon, some olive-oil bottles and other implements. Downstairs, and next to the well are three icons (Fig.3). Next to the agiasma is a bigger chapel. Generally, the festival of Ag. Athanasios starts in the morning by celebrating a liturgy in the local church. Afterwards, a procession of Anastenarides visits all the houses of the village, blessing all the icons of the families, and in the evening they dance in the konaki. According to the manager of the konaki, this program will not be followed during the festival in 1992, since one of the villagers died recently. So, the festival started around 5 o’clock in the afternoon, and the 1992-version of the festival of Ag. Athanasios was somehow “interrupted” since an old woman died in the village. Accordingly, they did not tour the houses of the village on Saturday and Sunday as they generally do according to custom. Since the woman died and was buried the following day, they did not dance in the konaki on the first evening, i.e. on Friday on the eve of the day of Ag. Athanasios. They shared a meal in the konaki, on the third evening, i.e. on Sunday.

On Saturday, the festival day then, I was back in the konaki to witness the celebration, and people start to gather in the holy building: When a believer arrives at the konaki, the person approaches the holy corner and the icon shelf, drop some money on a plate, picks up candles to be lighted, and puts them in the sand of the aforementioned brass-device. Afterwards, the pious bows her or his head in front of the icon shelf although the icons have not been collected yet. They kiss the table cloth and cross them-

1 In the bigger township Serres however, Ag. Athanasios is celebrated on 19 January, perhaps because most people will be in Agia Elenē on the festival day?
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selves. After a while, the leader of the Anastenarides, Tasos Reklos, arrives. He wears two large sēmadia (i.e. large red and white kerchiefs which generally are draped over the icons), tied together at the corners around his neck. He arranges them on the icon shelf, kisses the table cloths, and carries the censer along the icon shelf making the sign of the cross. During this ceremony, everybody rise. The leader wishes „Chronia Polla“ (i.e. Many Years), and ask them to sit down. Two musicians enter carrying their Thracian liras.2

A new member of the group is lead forward towards the icon shelf, and told what she shall kiss: the two table cloths which are found towards the left over which the sēmadia are arranged. Another musician arrives and takes one of the drums. When the ceremony starts, approx. fifty persons are present in the konaki, but more people are arriving constantly. The purification ritual starts: Tasos gives the censer to an old black-clad widow. She censes, i.e. carries the censer over and along the icon shelf, the fireplace and all the participants from the left, i.e. towards the right, in a counterclockwise direction. People wave some smoke towards their faces with their hands, while crossing themselves. The woman goes out on the stairway at the left entrance and censes, afterwards into the smaller room. Next she goes out the other door leading to the balcony and the kitchen which is also outside. In this way all the konaki and everyone present are censed. Next, and successively, two men carry out the same ritual, followed by the leader and another person. One of the Anastenarissas starts dancing while carrying the censer. On her way around the room, the dancer censes the konaki again. Afterwards, a procession of Anastenarides is constituted to go and fetch the icons: the leader hands over the censer to an Anastenaris. The one who always takes care of the fire gets a long white candle. Afterwards, they leave the konaki, leaded by the musicians. Next follow the one who carries the censer

2 It is worth mentioning that as in Greek churches and monasteries people correct me, if I, coincidentally, should happen to sit with my legs crossed, a position which, unfortunately, is more convenient and which I unconsciously adopt when taking notes.
and the one who hold the candle. The procession goes to the old konaki, which is situated to the left of the church. This is the place they used to gather before the Folklore Society of Agia Elenē built the new konaki around 1980 where they gather now.

On the second floor, is one of the most sacred and powerful icons in the village. Here are also sēmadia and other holy symbols. Tasos incenses over the icons and the other symbols with the incense burner, he also incenses the people who are present and the whole room as well as the corridor outside, paralleling the former ritual in the new konaki. Afterwards, he distributes the symbols to some of the members.

The icon belonging to the house is always carried by the same person. When the symbols are distributed, they circle the room and start dancing. To receive the symbols in their arms seems to be some sort of reflex movement: the saint speaks to the person, or possesses the faithful and the dance starts, it is a kind of „sympathetic magic“ (i.e. magic, that depends on a resemblance or perceived similarity between the object, substance, or action used in performing the magic and the desired effect). The communication between the saint and the Anastenarides is also the core element of the cult, since the Anastenaria presents ecstatic dance by people who are possessed by their saint. These initiated persons are in a state of trance. After some dancing, the whole congregation leave the room and descend by the stairs. They set off to the house where they have the oldest icon in the village. When the leader has carried out the ritual censing around the holy room, they also dance for a while in this konaki of the house, since in fact several houses in the village have large icon shelves and thereby konaki according to the members. These are „important houses“ (baria spitia), where the members of the group live, and the icons and the sēmadia can rest on the large icon shelves during their visits.

When the Anastenarides have collected their icons and other symbols, the procession of Anastenarides return to the new
konaki following their regular ritual manner: They enter one of the gates, continue across the dancing place, and leave by the other gate. In this way the dancing place is purified, and they always move in a circle counterclockwise or „always to the right“ until ending up in the konaki. In inside, Tasos places the icons on the icon shelf (Fig. 3), arranges the sēmadi and incenses around the room. Before the dance starts, he carries the icons around the room in the ritual counterclockwise direction, and is then joined by one of the Anastenarides on another round. The dancers very soon take off their shoes and continue dancing barefoot. The man who tends the fire spread out burning pieces of coals onto a square sandy part in front of the fireplace, lined by stones. Between this dancing place and the wooden floor is a sort of mat or cover where people might wipe off their feet on their way from the red-hot coals. It seems that some people are in a closer relationship with the saint than others, since the same people most often start the dance, particularly the man and woman from the „Petrakis‘ house“, the owners of the oldest icon, the „Petrakis icon“. They dance for

Fig. 4: Sēmadi and icon in hand, an Anastenarissa dances over red-hot coals in the konaki on the festival of Agios Athanasios 18 January 1992 in the village of Agia Elenē (Greek Macedonia).

1Regarding the counterclockwise direction – from the left to the right – this is the same way as the Greek round dance goes, and all orthodox liturgical rituals within the church. Actually many researchers have illustrated the importance of the right-handed („always to the right“) processional movement within Greek culture: how the right-handed dance pattern stands universally for the undeviating forward movement of blessed and auspicious giving in baptism, marriage, in kinship and at death, see Håland 2007a: ch. 4 and 6, see also du Boulay 2009.
a while. All the time, Despoina Strikos, the wife of the drummer, stands ready, holding a glass of water, a water carafe and a towel. One of the black-clad women, the most eager dancer, Marika (Fig. 4), strives to get one of the other members into the coals as well. He apparently strives with serious problems. After a while, he yields and the two dance for a long time (Fig. 5). The Anastenaria has neurological/psychiatric explanations, because the Anastenarides become purified through the dance while fighting their own problems. Thus, the individual participant tries to solve her or his problems through the dance.

Both the receipt of the incense burner, the icon and the other symbols from the leader as well as the return of these to the leader, constitute a particular ritual: the recipient person kisses the hand of the person who holds the symbol. They also kiss the hand of the leader, but it seems that the kisses of Marika’s hand are the most devout.4 The dance ends just before 8 PM, and many leave the konaki. They will also dance tomorrow. After a while, the music starts again, and they throw more wood at the fireplace. One of the Anastenarides breaks down and cries in front of the icons, and is comforted by Tasos. He sits down and removes his shoes, meanwhile one of the younger Anastenarides dances in front of him. After a while he accepts the icon and starts dancing. The black-clad Marika dances around carrying the incense burner. Other members dance carrying the other symbols. They continue the dance until late evening. The village church rests empty and deserted, but konaki and the two other chapels, agiasma included, are illuminated beneath the full moon, and in the konaki people dance. The day’s celebrations ends very late by the procession of Anastenarides bringing the icons back to their houses following the same ritual ceremony as when they picked up the icons.

4 One may compare the ritual kisses in the church of Olympos, Karpathos island (Southern Greece) after the Resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday, Håland 2007a: ch. 4.
Early Sunday afternoon, the women, particularly Despoina Strikos and her mother-in-law, Sötēria, clean and tidy up in the konaki. Sötēria, takes care of the kitchen, preparing the communal meal, which is an important part of the festival and which will be laid out on the floor in the konaki the same evening. They start “when people have arrived”, i.e. around 6 o’clock PM as usual. After the dance they are served the ritual meal.

Women and the Anastenaria

Loring M. Danforth (1989: 99) has rightly argued that the festival is a possibility for women to exercise power. This is also illustrated by the woman being the first to carry around the censer, a woman is also the first to start dancing at the Ag. Athanasios-festival, although, on both occasions, she gets the censer from the leader, i.e. a man. Similarly, men always carry the icons in the processions. Men also lead the processions. Perhaps this is also the reason that Danforth in the article, „Power through Submission in the Anastenaria“ (1983, cf. also 1989), has argued that this empowering of women mainly relates to the generally subordinate and
powerless women within Greek society (vs. Alexiou 2002). One may, however, argue that the festival in many ways first and foremost is related to the female domestic sphere. The festival represents “women’s things” in general, i.e. religion, illness, and family life (cf. Håland 2007a, 2009). Generally, women are the first to light a candle, to dance, and the buses coming from other villages during the main festival, most often are loaded by female pilgrims. Women, in general, have an exceptional place in the thoughts and feelings of the Anastenarides, according to M. Michaël-Dede (1973), who also stresses that the respect shown to Agia Elenē appears to be the oldest element of the cult and seems to be related to the cult of the Great Mother. When Elenē died on 18 August 327 or 328, her son established cult for his holy mother in the garden of the Nymph, Daphne, dedicated to Apollo.⁵

References:


ФЕСТИВАЛ АГИОС АТАНАСИОС (AGIOS ATANASIOS)

Фестивал, посвећен свецу Атанасију (односно – Agios Athanasios), прославља се сваког 18. јануара у Грчкој. Опис фестивала заснива се на прослави коју спроводе Анастенариди /Anastenarides и Анастенариси/Anastenarissas (односно – они који прослављају фестивал Анастенарија) у селу св. Јелене у грчком делу Македоније. Ово је други по важности фестивал годишњег обредног циклуса Анастенарије, и посвећен је свецу чије се име (тj. Ai Thanasē и Charo) дословно односи на смрт. Након благосиљања „светом водом“ (agiasma), слављеници играју босоноги по црвеном, ужареном угљу у конакију (konaki), светилишту Анастенарида. Следећа два дана, они посећују све сеоске куће. Након тога, они играју у конакију. Треће ноћи фестивала, у конакију се слављеницима служи јело.