

Introduction

Preliminaries

This book is about a fashionable topic – symbolic domination. My reason for writing about it is simple. I wanted to understand how a small, and at one point largely self-contained, self-sustained, and overwhelmingly rural society that had embarked on a journey of socioeconomic transformation quite accidentally, has ended up sixty years later and despite itself being a prisoner of its own devices. I wanted to understand this process of self-victimization largely because for half of this time I was on board travelling along.

This is the story of Greek Cypriot society¹ and its journey to a destination variably called locally “modernity,” “Europe,” or “the West.”² In more general terms, it is an attempt to explore how societies, like individuals, become subjects in Foucault’s (1982) sense of the term, that is, how they tie themselves to a particular identity and submit in this way to other, more powerful societies. In what follows, I explore these issues by focusing on the foremost Cypriot cultural celebration: the wedding. What have the major changes in wedding celebrations been since the early 1930s, the point of departure of this study, and how did they come about? How are weddings celebrated today? To what extent are they differentiated, and along what lines? What do they signify about Greek Cypriot culture itself, its internal dynamics, tensions, and contradictions, and the dilemmas that it is currently facing?

These questions may seem the parochial concerns of an obscure little island in the Eastern Mediterranean. Weddings themselves are often considered “folkloristic” and rather banal to be of contemporary interest. Nothing could be more misleading. Unlike other societies where weddings seem to be largely a family affair, in Cyprus they have been and still are the

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most important cultural celebration, something of a master symbol that encapsulates, expresses, and helps to reproduce a complex way of life, as current and vibrant as any other we know. In order to understand this way of life, wedding celebrations are one of the first things that one must turn to. As for the culture itself, I hope to be able to show that its significance transcends the national and regional boundaries of Cyprus and poses crucial questions about the meaning of such ubiquitous notions as the West and the politics of globalizing processes like Westernization.

In its recent history, Cyprus has been an Ottoman province for three centuries and a British colony for almost one.³ This historical legacy continues to animate the island's present and shape its future. Caught in the interstices of what is often called "the Great Divide" – between Occident and Orient, the West and the Other – Cypriot society is striving to rid itself of what is retrospectively depicted as the Orientalizing "affliction" of the Ottomans, and to capitalize on the "civilizing" experience furnished by the British presence. Post-colonial Cyprus then, lends itself, more than any other place perhaps, for the study of global hegemonic processes that are constantly referred to, but are not as frequently critically questioned and analyzed. For what does it really mean to say that other societies and cultures are Westernizing? Is this a process of homogenization and sameness as anthropologists have maintained all along? Is the West a destination to be reached, an object to be appropriated, or a specter that haunts those under its spell? What are the assumptions that underlie these notions and what are the politics that sustain and reproduce them?

The present study may be read as a commentary on how one society grapples with some of these questions. It is an analysis of how Greek Cypriots reify the West – in contrast and in many ways parallel to the way Westerners reify themselves (Carrier 1992) – in their struggles for identity and power. The main argument is that during the last sixty years or so the notion of the West has emerged as the dominant idiom through which a series of relations of inequality are both resisted and legitimated: between social classes, age groups, men and women, city dwellers and villagers, mainland and Cypriot Greeks, and between the two main communities on the island, Greek and Turkish Cypriots. I also argue that through these struggles Greek Cypriots express, enact, and inadvertently reproduce a historical experience of symbolic domination – the recognition that their cultural identity is inferior to that of the countries of Western Europe and North America.

My thinking about these issues has been influenced by several writers. In his work on Greece, Herzfeld (1986, 1987a) furnished us with critical

insight into the nature of Greek identity: the polarity between the European front that Greeks display to foreigners and the Oriental aspects of their culture which they acknowledge among themselves. This is the predicament of a culture which has been historically assigned to the “margins of Europe,” of a people expected to play the role of the “living ancestor” of Europe but also function as a palpable reminder of the consequences of Orientalization (Herzfeld 1987a). This insight is particularly relevant in the case of Cyprus, a predominantly Greek-speaking island, which, as a British colony, has been marginalized in a more tangible and perhaps more fundamental way.⁴ I have sought to elaborate Herzfeld’s argument further by showing that the dichotomy extends far beyond the “inside/outside” axis. My aim has been to ground the dichotomy in the social order and to show that it follows the logic of symbolic struggles between social groups. Greek Cypriots do not display a European front only to foreigners, but also to one another – the weddings of the urban middle class are precisely such a display. Similarly, acknowledging an Oriental identity is not merely an act of reflexivity and soul-searching, but also a strategy of legitimation. An “authentic” local identity is often viewed not as a flaw, but as something to be proudly displayed, as indeed “village” weddings so graphically demonstrate. In the same vein, when the Cypriot bourgeoisie laments the “backwardness” of Cypriot culture, its aim is to differentiate and distinguish itself. For the reference is not to what it takes to be *its* culture, but that of villagers and the working classes.

The book also draws heavily on Bourdieu’s work, particularly *Distinction*, and the argument that culture – on account of its opposition to nature – is “predisposed to fulfil . . . a social function of legitimating social differences” (1984:7).⁵ I employ this insight to show that in culturally dominated societies the process of legitimation is decisively reinforced by appeals to “higher authorities.” In Cyprus where people are in addition predisposed to view the countries of Western Europe and North America as the site of the highest culture, association with Western symbols and practices serves to legitimate the legitimation.

Distinction has been criticized on several grounds, but the most relevant here is the view that the book relies on an ahistorical structuralism which reifies French culture on a massive scale (Frow 1987; Gartman 1991:421). Other, more sympathetic readers have noted similar problems and suggested ways in which Bourdieu’s “theory of practice” may be developed to account for change (Lash 1993). These criticisms should not be taken lightly. It is true that one of the auxiliary analytical concepts in *Distinction* is “social trajectory” – the change in perceptions, evaluations, and actions

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that individuals undergo during the course of their lives. Nonetheless, Bourdieu's largely synchronic approach forces him to focus more on the reproduction of class culture than its transformation.

The present study does not seek to explain change in any theoretical sense. However, it employs an empirical, diachronic perspective which I hope renders change intelligible. The inevitable synchronic juxtaposition between "village" and bourgeois weddings in chapter 5 is an analytical strategy. It is not intended to suggest anything remotely close to a state of equilibrium. For even though distinction is maintained and reproduced, the process takes place within a dynamic field. Emulation of the dominant culture, initially by the "petite bourgeoisie" and subsequently by villagers and the urban working class, triggers strategies of further differentiation in a cycle of transformations and counter-transformations.

I return to this dynamic element in the last chapter where I examine the symbolic confrontation between Cyprus and Europe. I argue that in this particular field of power relations, emulation triggers strategies of denial rather than further differentiation. Cypriot claims to a European identity are frustrated through the essentialization of Cypriot culture so that change is depicted either as loss of character or an imitation of the "original." I suggest that the conditions of possibility of such denials are to be found in the complex interplay between the monopolization of the means of symbolic production – that is, production of legitimate culture and superior identity – and the recognition, implicit or otherwise, that Cypriots accord to Europe as the only legitimate source of it.

Questions of method

This study is not intended as a polemic either against Europe and more generally the West or the Greek Cypriot bourgeoisie. At the same time, I do not deny that my personal circumstances as a member of a dominated society and my background as a member of a dominated social class cannot be easily divorced from my decision to undertake this study and the point of view that I take.

In a dominated society such as Cyprus there is virtually no prospect of escaping the poignant conclusion that one's cultural identity is inferior. The educational establishment teaches, with all the seriousness that befits it, that in the global scheme of things Cyprus is "underdeveloped" or, more recently, "developing." The mass media popularizes similar "scientific" truths: the country has a relatively high "infant-mortality rate"; "life expectancy" is not as good as in Europe; the level of "literacy" is still quite low; there are not as many telephones or television sets "per 1,000 inhabi-

tants” as in the “developed” world. In casual conversation the rhetoric has it that, as far as Cypriot culture is concerned, *imasten piso pou ton kosmon* (we are behind the world), or that *zioumen ston meseonan akoma* (we still live in the Middle Ages).

Moreover, anyone who spends time in Europe or North America is sooner or later forced to deal with one’s tainted identity. And no matter what one does or says, one is in the end confirmed as culturally inferior. Ethnocentrism need not be blatant and direct. It is already incorporated in the way Others have been historically constituted. For example, the seemingly innocuous question, “What is the position of women in Cyprus?” is more often than not rhetorical. It presupposes the “knowledge” that they are in fact dominated.⁶ One may deny the “backwardness” of one’s culture – “Men and women are equal” – in which case one is simply not believed. Or one may defend it – “Women in Cyprus are not promiscuous” – in which case one simply confirms one’s backwardness. Alternatively, one may take the middle ground: acknowledge the backwardness but emphasize the modernizing trends – “They are still subjugated, of course, but things are changing, particularly in towns” – in which case one implicitly acknowledges the other’s superiority for setting the standards.

My return to Cyprus and the study I was undertaking was partly an attempt to come to terms with myself – my village, my working-class background, and my current position as a member of an educated elite; the culture that I grew up in and doubtless carry with me consciously and unconsciously, and my place in this culture. I am also aware that the choice of weddings as an object of study has not been exclusively determined by the “rational” considerations that I cite below. It is also partly related to my personal stance toward marriage, family, and the celebration of values associated with these and other conventional social institutions. When I was still living on the island, I stubbornly refused to attend any weddings, but it was only after I became an anthropologist that I understood why. On my return, my family treated my decision to study weddings with surprise and disbelief, and subsequently with silent anticipation that “I have finally changed.” I may have disappointed them.

The point in making these comments is not to suggest that I endorse a relativistic philosophy that treats every account as the subjective outcome of one’s social position in the world. It is to show that I am well aware of these issues and their potential influence on my work. I certainly do not claim the status of a free-floating intellectual. Undoubtedly, there is no vantage point outside history and, as it has been recently put, we all write “fictions” and “partial truths” (Clifford 1986a). However, it is also the

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case, and many people seem to forget this, that some truths are less partial than others. I strove not to turn this work into a polemic and I hope that I have succeeded. At the same time, I do not deny an ethical disposition that places me on the side of the weak and the dominated.

The choice of wedding celebrations as the object of study and the time span of around sixty years over which I propose to carry out this investigation require further elaboration. There are several methodological points that need to be made, some general and theoretical, and some specific to the Cypriot context.

The first and rather obvious point is that weddings fall under that broad theoretical category that anthropologists call ritual. Whatever the differences among anthropologists, for instance, as to the precise meaning of the term, it is safe to say that, as a minimal consensus, rituals constitute occasions where people act out collectively whatever it is about themselves and their society that they consider important. As one anthropologist succinctly put it: ritual constitutes “a neatly demarcated frame of time and space [within which] the norms and values of a culture are enacted, usually in a condensed, exaggerated form” (Brandes 1988:6).

Brandes alludes to certain features of ritual that have received considerable attention in anthropological literature. It has been argued, for instance, that rituals are set apart from everyday life in a conceptually, temporally, and spatially distinct framework (Douglas 1966); that they tend to condense a wide range of meanings in a few symbols (Turner 1967); and that they are enacted in an exaggerated and often redundant manner (Tambiah 1979). We must also add to these features the fact that rituals are often public events. All these have been cited as factors that account for a certain “didactic” dimension in ritual, its ability to impart norms and values to the individual, whether participant or participant observer. As Marcus and Fischer (1986:61) point out, rituals are “much more accessible as the collective and public ‘said’ in contrast to the ‘unsaid,’ the understated, and the tacit meanings of everyday life.”

The nature of ritual, then, makes it a prime candidate for the study of any culture. For the anthropologist working in Cyprus, wedding celebrations offer an additional incentive. Unlike the countries of Western Europe and North America where they are considered to be a “family affair,” in Cyprus they are truly a public event. In his book on the wedding industry in Scotland, Charsley (1991:95) reports that the number of guests at the four weddings he studied ranged from 47 to 161. In Cyprus, an average-sized wedding numbers 1,500–2,000 people, while weddings with twice as many guests are not unknown. To place these figures into perspec-

tive, it is necessary to bear in mind that Greek Cypriots number around 600,000 souls (Republic of Cyprus 1991a:39). An average wedding, therefore, is attended by almost a half percent of the population. In the United States this would amount to over a million guests.

A time span of about sixty years takes us into the early 1930s, a period that, as I will show below (chapter 1), had been a turning point in the socioeconomic and cultural history of the country. The subsequent decade in particular, was a time of profound and dramatic structural change, and it is in these changes that the foundations of Greek Cypriot modernity should be sought. Loizos (1985) provides a concise summary of the sociostructural transformations during this period. Here, it should suffice to say that two fundamental, concomitant processes were already under way. The first was the transformation of a subsistence economy, based on cereal cultivation and stock raising, into a cash, market economy based on irrigated, mechanized agriculture, light industry, and services, most notably tourism. Second, there was a massive exodus of the rural population and an influx into the major urban centers, particularly Nicosia and Limassol (Attalides 1981). If the 1940s, then, was a period when drastic socioeconomic and cultural changes were already well under way, any diachronic, comparative study must take as its point of departure the preceding decade, namely, the 1930s.⁷

I spent a total of fourteen months in Cyprus, between June 1991 and July 1992, though fieldwork was not my only preoccupation. A substantial part of my time was allocated to a non-academic, mundane pursuit, namely, making a living. When in the spring of 1991 it became apparent that my research proposal was not likely to be funded, I decided to proceed with fieldwork and seek a money-making vocation to sustain the anthropologist. The combination was not ideal perhaps, but in one sense it rendered my research more penetrating. My presence as an anthropologist was less conspicuous and intrusive and although people were aware that I was doing some kind of research, they often responded to my questions the same way they would have responded to their friends and acquaintances.

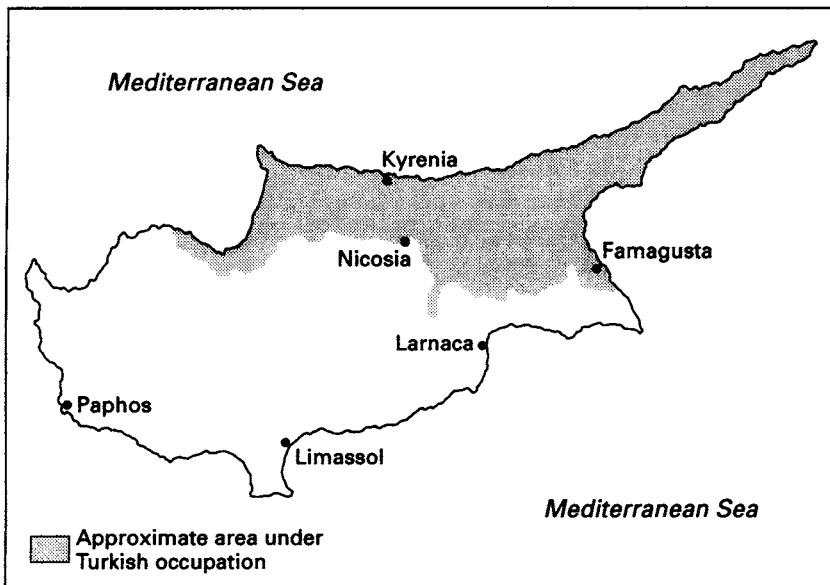
I spent the summers of 1991 and 1992 working as a bartender in the heart of Paphos's tourist area and the rest of the time as a teacher of English at a private school in Nicosia. The arrangement compromised my ability to do fieldwork in other parts of the country, but the impact on the quality and quantity of the data that I have collected was minimal. There are several reasons for this. Being a very small society, both in terms of population and area,⁸ Cyprus is culturally relatively homogenized.

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Moreover, since I was to investigate tradition and modernity, Nicosia, being the capital and the largest Cypriot town, proved to be an excellent location for the exploration of the latest trends in wedding celebrations. Paphos, on the other hand, is considered by many Cypriots as the most traditional – meaning “backward” – area. As the saying has it, *Paphitin anayionis, katsoshiron meronis* (raising a Paphian [is like trying] to domesticate a hedgehog). By studying wedding celebrations in Paphos and Nicosia, then, I was effectively studying what Cypriots themselves consider to be the old and the new. Whatever else was there came between the two. Nonetheless, to minimize the risk of missing out on important practices that might have been going on in other areas, I attended as many weddings outside Nicosia and Paphos as possible. In total, I attended sixteen weddings: six in Nicosia, five in Paphos, three in Limassol, and two in Larnaca. At the same time, I followed closely the local magazines and newspapers which keep an eye on the *kosmiki zoi* (social life) in all parts of the country, frequently reporting on “selected” weddings and publishing many photographs.

On the basis of the information that I collected from older informants and folkloric accounts,⁹ I reconstructed the wedding celebrations of the 1930s and made them the point of departure for the exploration of subse-

Figure 1. Sketch map of Cyprus



quent changes. My aim has been to uncover the forces of change, the internal dynamics and processes that shaped these practices and transformed them into what they are today. In the next section, I attempt to place these issues in perspective and present a brief introduction to the main body of this study.

Weddings

In some societies, people save money all their lives so that when they die, they can have a decent funeral. In others, what counts most is a decent wedding. Greek Cypriots adopt the latter view and go out of their way to stage grand weddings that cost large amounts of money, require considerable investment in time and effort, and involve thousands of guests. To have a “close” wedding is almost an oxymoron and to many simply inconceivable. When asked to explain the sense in staging grand celebrations, they often provide a simple, rhetorical answer: “One gets married only once.” And although this is still largely true in Cyprus,¹⁰ the significance of marriage as a social institution does not by itself explain the importance that people attach to weddings as a cultural celebration.

Writing in the late 1920s, Surridge, a British colonial administrator, was clearly impressed by the extravagance of wedding celebrations in an otherwise impoverished countryside:

Marriage festivities are customary and also extravagant in most villages if the strictly practical point of view is adopted . . . A waste of time and a needless display perhaps, but there is little else to break the monotony of life in the fields.

(1930:25)

As I will show in the next chapter, the 1930s were a period of extreme poverty and hardship for the vast majority of the population. Nonetheless, “weddings were weddings,” older informants insisted, even if it meant that, to do what one needed and was expected to do, one was compelled to borrow money and often be plunged into crippling debt. The significance of wedding celebrations in Greek Cypriot society has been more recently noted by Loizos. In Argaki, a village in the Nicosia district now under Turkish occupation, “Weddings were *the* social events of the village calendar” (1981:27). Local ethnographic studies (Markides *et al.* 1978; Averof 1986), even though couched in the functionalist paradigm, likewise depict weddings as a principal celebration. But the most telling indication of the importance accorded to weddings is their sheer size. In a society of just over half a million people, they are invariably, even though not always willingly, attended by several thousand guests.

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One of the main arguments of this study is that wedding celebrations have been transformed from rites of passage to rites of class distinction. The weddings of the 1930s were characterized by several rites that can be made intelligible on the basis of Van Gennep's (1960) tripartite structure. Nonetheless, it would be only partially true to say that these rites marked the transition of actors from one social position to the next. At the same time, by reproducing the major cultural categories, weddings contributed to the reproduction of the social order and the inequalities embedded in it, primarily between age groups. The emphasis on relations of inequality is not meant to deny that weddings also reproduced kinship, the family as an economic unit, and other social institutions. Rather, my aim is to highlight those forces that were primarily responsible for subsequent changes so that contemporary wedding celebrations may become intelligible.

The role of weddings as rites of passage, important though it may have been, cannot by itself account for the importance that Cypriots accord to them. The weddings of the 1930s must also be understood as "potlatches" in Mauss's (1967) sense of the term. Like potlatches, they followed the logic of gift exchange, were characterized by extravagance and conspicuous consumption, and were animated by a similar agonistic spirit. In effect, the hosts sought to surpass the generosity or *fouartalliki* (the disposition of the big spender) of others in past encounters and to anticipate manifestations of it in similar future events. And just as potlatches operated as mechanisms of social ascendancy, so weddings enhanced prestige and moral authority. At the same time, by reproducing the ideology of the big spender in a society marked by economic inequalities, they contributed, inadvertently but inevitably, to the legitimation of relations of exploitation among the dominant social group – adult men.

The potlatch-like character of wedding celebrations is one of the elements least affected by change. Contemporary weddings are as competitive and extravagant as they have ever been, itself an indication that the *fouartas* (big-spender) ideology continues to be a critical factor in the struggle for prestige and power. Nonetheless, the celebrations have been transformed in many, often striking ways. Of all the changes, four are particularly conspicuous. To begin with, the duration of celebrations has been drastically curtailed from five days in the 1930s to a single day. Second, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of guests, itself an indication that the shorter version does not necessarily signify trivialization of the event. Third, the ritual display of the bride's virginity, initially to all guests and subsequently to kin only, has been universally abandoned. Not only is sexual access to the bride possible long before the