



Volume 3, Issue 1 (Spring/Summer 2020)

[Review] *Tradition in the frame: photography, power and imagination in Sfakia, Crete* by Konstantinos Kalantzis

Ilektra Kyriazidou

Keywords: Crete, visual anthropology, exoticism, nationhood, power

Recommended Citation:

Kyriazidou, I. (2020). '[Review] *Tradition in the frame: photography, power, and imagination in Sfakia, Crete*' by Konstantinos Kalantzis', *entanglements*, 3(1):81-84



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[Review] *Tradition in the frame: photography, power and imagination in Sfakia, Crete* by Konstantinos Kalantzis, Indiana University Press, 2019, 321 pp.

Ilektra Kyriazidou

Abstract

This review discusses Kalantzis' *Tradition in the Frame: Photography, Power and Imagination in Sfakia, Crete*, an innovative ethnography of the visual planes and frames of imageries and performances of tradition in Sfakia, Crete. The book studies the visual in the composition of its representations, imaginations, sensations, embodiments, histories and ideologies.

Tradition in the frame: photography, power and imagination in Sfakia, Crete, offers a visual ethnographic study of the masculine and bodily aesthetics of Sfakians as they are shaped by national and local imageries of tradition. Sfakians, natives of a rural area in the southwest part of the island of Crete, claim distinctiveness in the mountainous landscape they inhabit and performances of masculine tradition. Sfakians' vision of tradition is complexly entwined with nationalised ideas of locality and masculinity, exoticizing representations produced by outsiders, a growing market of Cretan products, tourism and modernity. This entanglement is the focus of the book's multi-layered accounts of the visual and its sensory aspects of the area and its people.

The book is organised around three sections and themes: the 'spatial and national contexts' of Sfakians' self-images, the dynamics of power in the articulation of the national and the local, and engagements of locals with modernity. It is a challenging read including complex ethnographic details and transversal connections between chapters. As Kalantzis maps in writing the visualities of external visions of Sfakia and local practices, and as these are co-implicated in what he calls a 'cyclical synergy' of circularities and in-between ruptures, it shapes the style of ethnographic writing.

External envisioning of Sfakia plays out in a reservoir of visual material in media and popular culture, posters, postcards, tourist guides, commercials, emphasizing ideas of 'masculine bravado', 'a resistive spirit' and 'ruggedness'. The book studies the meanings and reductive generality of this material that incorporates nationalised ideas of locality created in folklore epistemologies. Its effectiveness in producing a 'myth' of Sfakia is examined as a frame that constructs the area in national imagination and creates expectations that locals conform to a version of locality articulated by the centres of power. This is tangible in 'photographing framing', in 'omnipresent' images of Sfakian men as rugged mountain figures dressed in local attire that places locals within a 'visual typology'.

But these photographs are 'commercial and national, yet simultaneously local and personal' (p.61), Kalantzis explains. As he depicts with illustrations and text, visual domains overlap; such pictures taken in the past by outsiders (photographers, scientists, urbanites, travellers) become valuable on walls in homes as sole memories of deceased kin, displays of tradition in restaurants, sold as postcards to tourists, exhibited in museums, circulate through books magazines and marketing strategies of the Cretan culinary culture. These photos and others of Sfakians as guerrillas fighting against Ottomans, are part of family history and 'ancestral heroism' and acted-out in contemporary embodiments of an idealised past, suggesting an 'experiential historicism' in which the past becomes actively present.

The 'dominant iconography' of locality in which locals did not have privilege until recently, mediates their sense of place, family, and bodily aesthetics. However, ethnography describes how Sfakians employ photographs in ways that 'exceed' original instrumentality and enjoy 'pleasures' in embodying stereotypes and in creating spheres of experience that audiences cannot comprehend and thus control, what Kalantzis calls 'recalcitrant alterity'. These are microsubversions that foster 'transgressions' in the political making of tradition according to institutional agendas and external demands, and complicate simple oppositions between centre and periphery of power, representation and creation.

Approaching 'tradition in the frame' Kalantzis shows the limits of self-invention for Sfakians but also the possibility for reiteration as dispersed acts of defiance. This is as much a matter of perspective of the visual as 'a primary realm of struggle' (p. 9), as much an ethnographic outcome of engaging the relational matrix of visual imageries and bodily aesthetics in Sfakia. Kalantzis takes pictures, records locals' and outsiders' opinions and reactions and examines the ideologies in the production of historical photos and links between historical moments in the frames and body postures that replicate the national imagery of Crete and resonate with a local imagery of tradition. Encompassing embodiments and sensations in the visual, he stresses how the aesthetics of tradition are mined with ambivalences. Sharing historical photos with his informants, the past and the visual become phenomenologically present, as they 'iterate specificity' to the 'anonymous typology' of the images by ascribing the names of the sitters, telling their stories and imitating their voices. Sfakians seem to be concerned with bodily appearance and appreciate visual-social worth in the images, yet, criticise posing as excessive self-regard and subjugation to a spectacle.

Ambivalence governs Sfakians' engagements with modernity and tourism, perceived as a form of subordination but also necessary for economic survival (e.g. EU subsidies and road construction projects). We see how modern elements are censored in visual frames of local appearance and disapproved by outsiders who criticise Sfakians for failing to modernize and for staging inauthentic and profit-driven performances of traditionalism. This internally reproduced critique and what Sfakians experience as alienation of aspects of local culture (e.g. shepherding), fortifies their desire to embody the past. The experienced ambivalences enable a 'montage logic' in embodied practices, selecting and combining the modern and the traditional in ways that allow Sfakians to claim tradition amidst 'external gaze' and the contradictions between narratives of progress and nostalgia for the past.

The book reveals the complexities and political aspects of Sfakian masculine aesthetics that as shown, during the crisis strengthen national imageries of locality as ‘native resistance’ to institutional powers. It produces concepts for approaching the politics of bodily aesthetics as they unfold in ambivalent sites of belonging. If we allow some elasticity these can acquire new forces. For instance, linking ‘recalcitrant alterity’ to the public appearance in Sfakia last summer of an Athenian drag performer in a sparkly outfit and a Cretan masculine headscarf, the notion populates different aesthetics that lay claim to materiality of masculine tradition (headscarf) not in possessing (or exoticizing) it, but in striving to undo categories of gender and nationhood. The valuable theory produced by the book’s in-depth ethnography of the complex milieu of tradition in Sfakia and the way it links to the meanings, limits and creative subversions in visual frames, can take many movements-directions as it joins together the anthropological study of Crete, gender, exoticism, nationhood, agency, and resistance.

Ilektra Kyriazidou has a BA in Philosophy from the University of the West of England, an MA in Social Anthropology from Bristol University and recently completed a PhD also in Social Anthropology at the University of Kent. Her doctoral research examines the intimate ways austerity is experienced by people living in a low-income neighbourhood in Thessaloniki, Greece. Her thesis explores forms of intimacy, as an affective emergence and as embodied continuity, in neighbourhood and household relations and amidst experiences of precarity.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3948-2575>