

What makes a village?

ἡ ἀποστολή ἡμερῶν ἡμῶν. Simon Badellay

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From the littered overbuilt shores of Corfu lots of people still reap perfect images of the island landscape that so enchanted those who passed through before mass tourism – the monastery of Panagia Vlacherna and Pontikonissi omitting the roar of the airport and the multistoried hotel on Kanoni, the pretty sight of Gouvina Cove where you can park by the road a few hundred metres from the end of the dual carriageway at Tzavros, and a small crop with a photocopier can easily disappear the cloned boxes and concrete skeletons that disfigure Barbati, and from a distance even the jutting hull of the Nissaki Beach Hotel can be blended into the towering cliffs of Pantocrator, though ignoring 'Seashore Villas' plonked on what was once the village of Ag Spiridon near the car-blocked streets of Kassiopi is a little trickier, but removing the endless plastic detritus from the beaches needs no army of earnest litter-pickers - just a tiny upward shift of the lens records the sublime landscape of archetypal Greece above the sparkling blue of the Kerkyra Sea, as from the dizzy heights of Angelokastro the cliffs of Capes Iliodoros and Plaka facing the Adriatic horizon distract from the disastrous shamble of Paleocastri...

It was the better-off who recorded their memories of Corfu's charms; incubating their future commodification. For peasants, fishermen, small shopkeepers, beauty lay in health and harvest; the two connected. Once upon a time, when people gazed longingly at the green island from the rocky mainland of Epirus they saw its wealth not in its landscape but its fecundity, as a family judging a prospective daughter-in-law might rate child-bearing hips, above a pretty face [Of these observations Jim Potts remarks: 'Succinctly stated. But I sincerely believe that even the poorest peasants appreciated Corfu's natural beauty and recorded it in their own ways, through orally-transmitted tales, folksongs and proverbs, for instance. Is it not possible to feel a sense of profound regret, even while cutting down olive trees to build a better house or to make some money to pay to educate one's children? The sense of regret increases with time.'] Only in the last fifty years has Corfu's harvest changed from what grew here to what disembarked from ships and planes. The shift in wealth that followed – from the grand farm estates of the nobility - the signorini thriving and then just surviving on the close cropping of tenant labour - needed and got little help from government. Oil in Arabia and Texas turned arid scrubland into gold. Tourism in Corfu made hard-worked seaside estancias into cornucopias. Sea, sand and gravel were already here. Cement made new byres, the digger and the dozer swiftly cleared the island curtilage of unnecessary trees. An olive grove or a vineyard anywhere on the island sprouting concrete in place of roots could send your children to university and show a way, other than emigration, to escape a life of sweated labour, as a fibreglass boat with a glass bottom over one busy summer could replace the hazards and uncertainty of fishing round the year. Landscape enjoyed by those with the means to gaze upon it, that had inspired painting and poetry became publicity and copy to attract the new wealth of millions. I hear myself muttering – 'You make all this sound like a bad thing' – 'Well and no' – I reply – 'Yes and no' – The noble leftwinger Lord Bertrand Russell remarked that – 'the central dilemma of social that you can ruin anything by making it available to everybody' – 'only governments instead of being bought by the Lopachin's so excited about laying an axe to Corfu's cherry orchards had pursued a research based policy that had regulated the massive changes brought by mass tourism; created an infrastructure that was less piecemeal and opportunistic' – A broad smile grows on my face at my naïve pomposity. – 'Surely you jest?' – I exclaim – 'these messy changes always going to be irresistible, any attempt at planning overwhelmed not just by greased palms and brown envelopes but by human yearning. Try testing your commitment to properly regulated planned development of tourist infrastructure against another lifetime of horizon-less poverty heaped on the deprivation of centuries' – The challenge of Ano Korakiana; a few years back – three or four at most – there was a discussion, probably one of those animated debates in which I've sat in the back nodding sagely as though my Greek is good enough to follow the arguments, in which villagers, in large numbers explored whether they should have a taverna or indeed any other commercial establishment in the village that catered for and attracted foreign visitors. I first heard of this meeting from two British neighbours in the crowd awaiting midnight the Easter Saturday before last – 'They decided, on balance' – said Wesley – 'that they would not.' – This confirmed the presumption I heard a few years earlier when we were planning to buy a house in the village that – 'Ano Korakiana doesn't welcome tourists.' – To suggest that Ano Korakianas do not welcome strangers – for all those 44 voting last Sunday for Golden Dawn to keep foreigners out of Greece – would be slander. Apart from the fact that an overwhelming majority of eligible voters here voted for the left including the KKE (third in the poll here), this village is nothing if not hospitable, not just to people who have made their lives here but to passing tourists on foot, on cycles and in cars, who stop to look about, sometimes puzzled as to where to buy a drink or a meal.

Such people are sometimes treated to these; as guests, not customers.

So? So what makes this village? What makes any village? Itâ€™s a question elaborated across the world. I have urgent thoughts on this, I feel a need to know and understand. This village has a website, as with all Greek villages - a global diaspora, a history, a documented history that goes back over a 1000 years...and a permanent population that qualifies it as a working village in the eyes of government. It has a medical centre staffed at different times through the week, and of course it has the Spyros Samaras Philharmonic Society of Korakiana, including its superlative band that performs here, in Corfu Town and across Greece, with practise rooms (a new finely restored band-room higher in the village will probably be ready next year), instruments, uniforms and regular rehearsals - an institution linked to a choir and dancers who rehearse and learn in both the band-room on Democracy Street and in the Agricultural Co-op which also processes olive oil; providing space for meetings and village celebrations like Carnival through the year. It has 35 churches - the one most used Ag Georgios, Ag Spiridon, Ag Athanasios, Ag Isidoros. I cannot list all their names though they are described in Kostas Apergis' history but also the semi-ruined Prophet Elias...marking the ancient village boundary on the hill a mile away and Kiriaki, a church below the village. Thereâ€™s a taxi service on Democracy Street - almost opposite us, and buses to and from the city. Thereâ€™s a second olive processing factory below the village, a furniture making workshop, a carpentry shop, a thriving bakery serving other villages and two grocery shops on Democracy Street and a kindergarten and nursery and a kafeneion - a place where there's still a mainly male attendance there overseen by Maria, its proprietor. Another kafeneion - John Laschari's, ceased in 2007.

The village primary school closed last year and is to be replaced by a special school serving the whole island. Ano Korakiana appears to have a museum for an exceptionally gifted village sculptor who worked in the first part of the 20th century but disappointingly, this though full of invisible sculpture, with parking spaces and displays signs saying itâ€™s a museum, is, I am authoritatively assured, never open. There is another business Luna Dâ€™Argento below the village, a venue for weddings and dances, also occasionally for the whole village as at the cutting of the New Year Cake, Vassilopita, and next to that a stable for horse trekking and riding lessons run by our friend Sally. I cannot attest to how many other skills and talents are exercised in Ano Korakiana. There are people who in repairing or rebuilding parts of their houses are conscientious about maintaining its architectural character what experts sometimes call 'vernacular'. (Example 1 - Nick and Sophia's house. Example 2: George Poplis's work and Sally and Mark's house - scroll down. Example 3: The restored Music School). Our house lost some of this vernacular at the hands of an English builder hired by the previous English owners who destroyed its balcony and steps, replaced by us via the admired skills and taste of Alan Barrett of Ag Markos. There are doctors, pharmacists, house-painters, plasterers, carpenters, artists, probably writers preferring anonymity, many wine makers, woodcutters preparing and delivering fuel, gardeners cultivating vines and vegetables, gardeners growing a festival of flowers - geranium, roses, honeysuckle, jasmine, bougainvillea, wisteria, cane and arum lilies; a few farmers tending larger fields, small vineyards, keeping sheep and goats, chicken, turkey, guinea fowl, ducks and geese and of course harvesting olive oil from their olive groves - the islandâ€™s most distinctive crop; plumbers and mechanics and builders, roofers, private tutors teaching English and other skills; engineers, accountants working in the city. Kostas is the village priest. Ano Korakiana fields a football team that triumphs across Corfu and beyond, but hopes of having a local football field - one a quarter completed that has sat fallow below the village for over a decade seem to have expired. This is made less problematic by the existence of two pitches finely maintained that Ano Korakiana can share with its neighbor Skripero, sited close to the T-junction between the winding south-westward lane out of Ano Korakiana where it meets the road to Sidari. Ano Korakiana has organization. It has committees for the band, shareholders for the Co-op. It has government. It debates and makes decisions about events and direction. Some say it has the best water on the island. Does all this make a village a sustainable community? [A cautionary essay on the village in England, Bagnor, where I grew up between 1949-1960 - translated. and posted on Ano Korakiana's website.]

...and some thoughts from an earlier entry in *Democracy Street* which draw on the experiences of Geert Mak in Jorwert - reported beautifully but without the 'aren't they quaint and eccentric and charming' tropes of some commentators on villages (from a review)...The point is made, and reinforced by research carried out by others around the world that villages divided by space and time have more in common with each other, than they do with their nearest urban neighbour. Villagers are proud of the small differences. Jorwert is very special to Jorwerters. They are proud of tradition, and cling on to the facets of it that survive the changes in technology and bureaucracy as best they can. They believe in the future and in the family. And that is what the country, and therefore the village, life is all about. It is not about being an individual. It is not about making money or acquiring stuff. It is all about survival. Making sure that what you have done outlives you, and that your children are there to take it on and take it forward and protect it as you have done. This is true of every village, everywhere. What is also true of every village in northern Europe is that since the end of the second world war, the local people have had to cope with the Europisation of regulation. The disaster of the Common Agricultural Policy played out with the best of intentions and the worst of results. This is as true for the dairy farmers around Jorwert as it is for the sheep farmers of Wales. The lure of education, of easy money, of city life and hedonism affected the children of Jorwert, just as it did those of the French mountain youngsters or those in the Spanish plains. Schools struggled and then closed. Shops followed them. Churches remained the focus, but in protestant northern Europe they didn't have the hold they had in the catholic south which isn't to say the whole of Jorwert didn't put aside their personal faiths the day the church tower collapsed and set about figuring out how to rebuild it. Mak examines all of the issues in true journalistic fashion, supporting his arguments with academic study and local example...

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