

The Remains of A Party A ‘Thick’ Description Self-Ethnography on the Run

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Abstract: *This is an ethnographic account of a ‘party’ held at the locals of the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece. The Academy is an educational institution providing vocational education and training to young Greek males and females wishing to make a career in shipping as deck officers or marine engineers onboard merchant ships. The text is a ‘thick description’ of the demeanours of the actors, their behaviour within a precise cultural context, as well as the meanings emerging from and attributed to that behaviour. Moreover, this ‘thick description’ tries to analyze and interpret the interconnections between the expression of a spontaneous behaviour and the hierarchical positions existing within the context of an educational institution. Furthermore, it might contribute to a better understanding of the role a regulated social criticism can play in the preservation and reproduction of hierarchy within organizations.*

Keywords: *ethnography, thick description, native ethnographer, education, seafarers, ethos, hierarchy, Greece*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘communities of practice’, as formulated by Wenger (1998), conceives of engaging in social practices as fundamental to the process of learning and information sharing. Moreover, learning through information sharing is both culturally situated and in constant interaction with the wider economic and social environment of the community of practice. In other words, such communities can at the same time be embedded in a particular culture or sub-culture while belonging to a globalized social and economic network. This is the case with communities of practice operating within the arena of maritime vocational education. Greek maritime education is one of these institutions that are both firmly embedded in a particular culture, thus possessing an identity resulting from that fact, and responsible for reproducing a labour force targeting the global market.

In this article, the Merchant Marine Academy is understood as a ‘community of practice’ serving to reproduce the basic elements of the Greek nautical ethos, or *naftosini*, meaning ‘the human quality of being a good (Greek) seafarer’. However, within this particular ethos, the theme of hierarchy is omnipresent. The organization of the Merchant Marine Academy represent a micro-cosmos regulated by a hegemonic authority and subjected to a strict hierarchy. Hierarchy can assume many faces; it can be perceived through a variety of schematic visualisations and configurations. The ‘thick description’ of a ‘party’ that follows is an account of a liminal moment that suspended, and sometimes inverted, the established hierarchical arrangements the Merchant Marine Academy. As such, it might contribute to a better understanding of the role a regulated social criticism can play in the preservation and reproduction of hierarchy within organizations.

2. THICK DESCRIPTION

PART ONE: Forgetting Hierarchy

1. Breaking down the rules 1: Teachers, Captains, Engineers, Coast Guard Officers, Clerks, Auxiliary Staff and Students, all form an equality based and dancing community.

It was a Thursday of February with a particular name and significance in the Greek calendar: it was a ‘Tsiknopempti’. ‘Tsiknopempti’ means ‘Thursday where people eat smelly grilled meat’ (a

composite word, from 'tsikna', the smell of charred meat, and 'Pempti', Thursday). That day is the start of the carnival season which culminates ten days later with the parade of the 'Karnavalos' (:carnival) which is then followed the next day by "Clean Monday" (Kathara Deftera : 'Monday of cleansing') and the official start of the Lenten period. For the Greek Orthodox Church it is traditionally the last day people are allowed to eat meat (the next ten days only cheese-eating being allowed), before they start the long period of fasting from all animal products, during the period of the 'Great Lent' of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Although 'Tsiknopempti' isn't recognized by the Orthodox Church, for it is a remain of pre-Christian pagan customs associated with Carnival, it is somehow in interaction with the ecclesiastical calendar; it could be understood as a persistent non-Christian custom, involving impious practices such as transvestism and mimics of social disorder, to whom the Christian penitence that follows is a negation. Thus, 'Tsiknopempti' is a special day indeed, incorporating sequences of meaningful events from two different and conflicting –but deeply interweaved– traditions: that of the pre-Christian pagan tradition, visible in the symbolisms of the Carnival, and that of the Eastern Orthodox Christianity, not explicitly visible but nevertheless present in the widespread feeling of an imminent end of the pagan license. There are authors who make allusions of a possible semantic correspondence between the two sequences of rituals, the pagan and the Christian one (Terzopoulos 1998).¹

It wouldn't be easy to assess to what extend the 'Party' at the Merchant Marine Academy of Greece, held on a 'Tsiknopempti' afternoon, was actually incorporating the complex symbolisms of that particular day. There were no masqueraded people, as it is custom for the celebrators of 'Tsiknopempti' evening, and no demonstrations of transvestism. Teachers, clerical and auxiliary staff and students came in their casual clothes. Coast Guard Officers came in duty uniform (not the one reserved for special occasions and public ceremonies). When the School's loudspeakers called for the general gathering at the Students' Restaurant the event had been announced as a 'festive party' (*eortastiko parti*), provoking the caustic commentaries of the audience ('for a party is always festive... it can't be but that' commented a hilarious captain). The arrangement of the tables in the Students' Restaurant was reminiscent of a modern styled reception, with food in canapés on the table and no chairs for the guests to sit down on them. There was an empty space in the middle of the hall, in anticipation of the possible dancing performances of the dinner-guests. The music, already playing and under the supervision of a student DJ, was more on the *disco* side and definitely not Greek. I took my place at the end of a table and started observing what was happening around me.

There was plenty of meat on the tables, indeed. Pork steaks, *paidakia* (lamp chops), *souvlakia* (pork skewers), *gyros* (twirled pork meat), sausages and other carnal goodies were offered in abundance. All of them had been cooked to the heart, charred enough, covered with greasy 'tsikna' and smelly well beyond average. It is important to note that the smell is significant in itself, for it is a part of the day's set of symbolisms. In the traditional 'Tsiknopempti', when celebrated in a village or a town's neighbourhood, every household was supposed to make explicit and vocal the fact of grilling fat meat. An efficient means for doing so was to spread the largest possible amount of smelly smoke all around. By doing so, a message was communicated: 'we are spreading so much smoke around; it is therefore obvious that we are fully participating to this day's celebration'!

The spectacle, and smell, of all that grilled meat was definitely standing as something 'naturally fitting' within the long established 'Tsiknopempti' tradition. Reluctantly, I grasped a piece of charred meat and placed it under my teeth. It tasted good. Soon I found myself keeping at hand a plastic plate full of the entire variety of meats present on table. I did what everyone around me was visibly doing; I devoured avidly all that prodigious quantity of animal proteins mixed with animal fat and charcoal smoke. A number of generous mouthfuls made me feel better. After taking a look at the surrounding tables I realised that every table was occupied by colleagues and work mates of the same administrative affiliation. Captains were sitting next to other captains, Coast Guard officers were sitting next to their duty mates, and so on.

A rhythmic sound of African-American music raided my ears; the DJ was exploring the limits of his audience's tolerance to *rap*. To my surprise, people weren't annoyed too much; they seemed preoccupied with something else. I paid attention to discover what it was. It was an alcohol outlet. People were serving themselves white or red wine, bottled beer, or even *ouzo*. That was a good idea. I rushed there to serve myself a glass of white wine.

The music changed once more, this time from *rap* to more mainstream American *pop*. I was standing by a table occupied by members of the Engineering Department. I took a look around me; there were tables occupied by members of the Deck Officers' Department, tables occupied by Coast Guard Officers mixed with clerical and auxiliary personnel, and tables occupied by students. There was a slight change in comparison with the previous arrangement of the tables. The table that was previously occupied by an exclusive band of auxiliary personnel was now empty; all its members had joined other tables, mainly these ones occupied by the Coast Guard Officers. Making a quick translation of the situation, I concluded that there was a movement from the bottom of the hierarchical ladder to the upper positions, the auxiliary personnel having been the first to initiate it. The auxiliary personnel's choice didn't look very innocent to my eyes, for in a School like the Merchant Marine Academy the Coast Guard Officers' order represent, at least on the official level, the top of the hierarchy, the uniformed incarnation of the State's authority.

'The first effect of "Tsiknopempti", if such an effect exists, is that the auxiliary personnel has fused with the Coast Guard Officers', I remember having said to myself at that moment. I took an attentive look at the tables around which Coast Guard officers and auxiliary personnel were standing. They seemed united in a communally shared hilarity. I couldn't identify any rigidly observed hierarchical arrangement of positions and stances. Men and women in uniform, or without, were telling jokes to each other, relating supposedly interesting life stories, and smiling to their interlocutor. There was no overly perceivable eroticism, though, or any open challenge to the authority of the high rank members of the Coast Guard.

I decided that these tables hadn't a particular interest for me and diverted my attention to the table I was standing by, the one occupying the central position among those of the 'Engineers'. Soon, I realised that there was a kind of logic in the way everyone was standing by someone else. There were four 'poles' of attention, or attraction. These 'poles' were represented respectively by two members of staff occupying high positions within the Academy's hierarchy, a member of staff whose highly sophisticated skills had been institutionally recognized by a North American university, and a marine engineer known for his wide, and faithful, network of female friends. Most female members of staff (of the Engineering Department) were standing by the latter, while the three others were receiving the attention of a mostly male cohort.

Having in mind that arrangement of the tables of 'Engineers', I decided to change position and moved over to the one of the two tables of the Deck Officers' Department which seemed the most promising of interesting encounters. In fact, the one out of the two 'Deck Officers'' tables was occupied by the most energetic members of the Department, seafarer captains that I knew well enough, including some among the most influent members of that 'community of practice'ⁱⁱ. They already were the most loud comate among all tables, apart those occupied by students.

The seafarer captains were loud enough, louder than anyone else except students. They were telling jokes, teasingⁱⁱⁱ each other, teasing others. They were demonstrating a special talent in teasing engineers. The engineers were trying to respond to the teasing, often unsuccessfully. The dominant stance of the seafarer captains was dominating the stage. Nevertheless, the tasty food and the good wine started having a beneficial effect on people's mood. Members of staff and other personnel were exchanging courtesies and compliments. Smiles became bigger, with smiling faces filling up the reception hall. The first timid steps of a licentious behaviour were appearing; some signs of flirting behaviour between colleagues, or between students, became visible. Everyone started looking more relaxed, less inclined to observe rules about rank and status. Some students started approaching their teachers to greet them. Although no one seemed to forget his or her position, a freer and more comfortable approach characterised these interactions. The senior Coast Guard Officers, including persons of the highest rank of the official hierarchy, were passing by all the members of the personnel to give them a warm and friendly greeting. People started changing tables, mixing with members of different sub-groups. It was then possible to see captains exchanging some courtesies with engineers, or teachers complimenting Coast Guard Officers and vice-versa, the kind of encounters that are not occurring frequently in the everyday life of the Academy.

The DJ was doing his best to warm up the gathering. The music was the same as in every fashionable night club. A number of students took the initiative and started dancing. They were soon joined by more of their peers, although the imbalance in the female/male ratio of the

students was limiting the choices (there were approximately three young ladies for ten young men, a ratio clearly superior to the one existing in the normal attendances in classrooms).^{iv} Some brave male students approached the tables of the staff and asked a number of their female teachers to dance with them. Their initiative didn't meet any tenacious resistance. The male colleagues of the dancing female teachers haven't expressed any signs of discontent or resentment for the fact; they seemed rather amused. Almost all faces kept smiling, in an atmosphere plenty of good will and amusement.

People's behaviour became even more relaxed and freer; soon, there were no more obvious signs of any hierarchical ranking separating individuals. Teachers, Captains, Engineers, Coast Guard Officers, Clerks, Auxiliary Staff and Students, all looked as if forming an equality based –and dancing- community.

2. Breaking down the rules 2: *In Vino Veritas*: Alcohol as a catalyst of unmediated behaviour.

While everyone looked amused and happy, the consumption of alcohol was steadily increasing. After having positioned myself at a table just next to the alcohol outlet reserved for the personnel, it became easier for me to start making some improvised and rough statistical research on the differential alcohol consumption among the dinner-guests.

Captains were clearly the thirstiest for alcohol, followed by Coast Guard Officers and members of the auxiliary personnel. Engineers and clerical staff were the less avid consumers. On another level, men were surely drinking much more than women, with the notable exception of the female staff of the Engineering Department whose drinking performance wasn't inferior to the moderate, after all, performance of their male colleagues. The differential alcohol consumption being as described, and keeping that more or less stable ratio, there was another element indicating a change; I observed a progressively increasing frequency of people returning to the outlet in order to be served, which was obviously translating an increasing overall consumption of alcohol. Another indicator of the rate and of the total volume of alcohol consumption was the speed with which wine bottles were being emptied, as well as the number of already empty bottles put on the floor around the outlet. The whole picture made me realise that the majority of the personnel wouldn't take much time to become seriously affected by the virtues of alcohol.

I changed my position and took a tour around the outlet reserved for the students, at the opposite corner of the hall. The image was similar to what I had witnessed in the first corner; the students were equally thirsty as their teachers, the majority among them exhibiting a rate of alcohol consumption similar to that –moderate enough, but far from insignificant- of the engineers. Not being able of staying at two different places at the same time, I decided to return among my colleagues at the other side of the hall. When I got there, I realized that the alcohol had already produced its effects among my own peers. The general mood was always hilarious and joyful, but teasing among members of the personnel had been increased. It was a very particular form of teasing, a mixture of friendly joking, brief touching, scant and quickly forgotten embarrassment, and, when occurring among members of the opposite sex, a mutually provoked and uncomplainingly received light erotic excitation.

In a spontaneous reaction, I remembered the words Clifford Geertz had written while describing his famous *Balinese Cockfight*: 'In Bali to be teased is to be accepted' (Geertz, 1973: 416). 'If it is so', I said to myself, 'then maybe in Greece, among the population of the Merchant Marine Academy, to be teased is to be invited to play'. The second thought I made, immediately after that first one, had been: 'Yes, but of what precise elements that play is made of? And what is the prize for being a good player?'

3. Teasing: Who stands by whom, and why?

I searched for regularities. I paid attention to words, moves, gestures, and manipulation of objects by humans, in order to discover, if there were any, regularities and patterns of behaviour. These latter could serve me as the key to unlock any closed *box of meanings* explaining what these people were exactly doing during that seemingly meaningless 'festive party'.

I had already recognized teasing as a form of important interaction in that setting, so I decided to focus my attention to that. Supposing that my initial hypothesis –'in Greece... to be teased is to be

invited to play'- had at least a chance to be correct, I quickly made a sketchy mind map which could help me in bringing some order into the torrent of images I was receiving from all directions. That mind map could be schematised as follows:

A rough mind map of teasers

- A. *Who is playing with whom?*
- B. *Are players arranged in couples, or are there any groups?*
- C. *Does gender play a role in the formation of playing dyads (or triads, etc.) and how important that role seems to be?*
- D. *Are there any players taking the initiative to tease more frequently than others, or is there any turn-taking in initiating teasing?*
- E. *Of what elements a play is made of? (The structural elements of teasing).*
- F. *Is there some sort of progression (a tendency to follow precise steps in interaction, leading to greater, or lesser, complexity) perceivable as an internal logic (: rules) of the play?*

4. The Map

A. *Who was playing with whom?* It was urgent to gather some rough data indicating to what, and where, my attention should be oriented to. What I was witnessing wouldn't last for very long, and the next time that an analogous picture would be available to my scrutiny would probably take a whole year to come. From a first view almost everyone looked like playing with everyone else. Colleagues were teasing colleagues, civilians were teasing officers in uniform (and vice-versa), men and women were teasing each other, and some students were performing their first shy steps in teasing staff.

A second, and more attentive, view revealed some differences and tendencies. Some individuals were more energetic in taking the initiative of a playful interaction, while some others seemed adopting a more passive role. On another level, the 'teasing play' wasn't diffused in the hall in an indiscriminate way. Some sessions of mutual play among precise persons persisted more than others. My attention was attracted by that latter phenomenon and I focused on that. After some minutes of scrutiny, I detected the existence of *a number of frequencies*:

a) There were dyads of players. Not all players were engaged in dyads, but among the *enduring*, or *recalcitrant*, players, couples represented a majority. I have labeled as 'enduring' any player that performs enduring 'play sessions', lasting more than the average twenty seconds^v of a passing teasing attempt, while a recalcitrant player would be someone who insists in retaking the initiative of teasing even when his or her first attempt had been unsuccessful, meaning that he or she hasn't been able to initiate a sustained interaction. For classificatory purposes, I categorized as enduring any 'play session' that was longer to conclude than the basic one, the latter being formed by just one invitation to play (the initial teasing) and one response to that (the conclusion of the basic 'play session').

An example of a basic 'play session' is the following: A male engineer passes by a female colleague while he looks like lackadaisically walking across the hall. As he reaches at a small distance from her, 1,5 metres in average, he stops, smiles at her and says: 'Today you look prettier than ever, Maria!' She turns her face to him, but her body doesn't follow the move, keeping her previous position, staying oriented towards the hypothetical center of the group in which she is already a partaker. She smiles, offers him a very brief eye contact, and then answers: 'Thank you Giorgos, have a nice Tsiknopempti' (*Nase kala Giorgo, kali Tsiknopempti*). After that she almost diverts her attention from him, but not entirely, probably waiting to discover if the male colleague has received the whole message. The initiator of the contact understands her lack of enthusiasm and saves face in a seemingly spontaneous manner. Still smiling at her, or just vaguely to her direction, he moves on again, walking unconcernedly, till he reaches another person or group. Then his smile is diverted toward that new contact. The previous, unsuccessful, 'play session' is finally concluded.

b) Most of the rest of *enduring*, or *recalcitrant*, players were playing in groups. These groups weren't large; they numbered four or five persons at maximum. Nonetheless, a rough regularity

was clearly visible: in all teasing groups the composition was involving either a gendered variation –females and males together-, or an occupational variation –captains and engineers bantering each other-. It is important to note that there was no teasing amongst homogenous groups.

c) In fact, it would have been highly improbable for someone to be a *recalcitrant player* without being engaged in a dyad or within a group of players. It should suppose that a particular person repeatedly takes the initiative of teasing, inviting others to play with, but meets a systematic refusal. Although such a case would have –theoretically- been highly improbable, at least in my early perception of the situation, nonetheless it existed. It was represented by a very idiosyncratic male student.

d) Most dyads of teasers were formed either by a woman and a man, or by a (male) seafarer captain and a (male) seafarer engineer. In fact, the only exception to this rule, an enduring dyad of two (seafarer) captains, concerned a litigious interaction sparked by an accusation of ‘treason’ (because one of the two captains had left the ‘table of captains’ and spent quite a long time at the ‘table of engineers’, ostentatiously flirting with a female member of the Engineering Department).

B. Are players arranged in couples, or is there any groups? Most of enduring and recalcitrant players were arranged in sexed (a woman and a man) or related to specific occupationally formed couples (captain-engineer). There was some play developing in groups, mostly occupation-oriented (around the ‘tables’ of departments), although presenting less intensity or perseverance. The final conclusion could be that a ‘teasing play’ is mostly an affair of two individuals engaged in a flirtatious (female-male) or status-challenging dyad (captain-engineer). It seems that in both cases what is at stake is a *negotiable quality of association*.

C. Does gender play a role in the formation of playing dyads (or triads, etc.) and how important that role seems to be? Gender certainly plays a role in the formation of dyads, although the most animated and vibrant couples tend to be those composed of a captain and an engineer.

D. Are there any players taking the initiative to tease more frequently than others, or is there any turn-taking in initiating teasing? There was definitely a (rather small) number of persistent ‘players’. The most energetic category of ‘players’ was that of the seafarer captains. Turn-taking was occurring mostly among players who had already been vocal as ‘recalcitrant’.

E. Of what elements a play is made of? (The structural elements of teasing). As it was to be revealed later, after having put under scrutiny the entire array of the performed action elements, a teasing ‘play’ in that particular setting, and in regard to the most significant of its forms, could be analysed as following:

- a. An initial time period of supposed *indifference*. The (virtual) player observes his or her surroundings in a discreet manner.
- b. *Targeting*: the prospective player identifies who is going to be his or her target in a ‘play’ session.
- c. The seemingly adventitious *contact*; the player takes care to look like if he or she had tumbled down on someone, supposedly unexpectedly.
- d. The ritual of the *conflict*; the two individuals measure each other, provoke each other, and express arguments to the other’s detriment.
- e. The (temporary) *resolution* of the conflict; in (almost) all of the observed cases, the reconciliation of the conflicting parties is coupled with the promise of a future high-powered renegotiation of the present outcome.

F. Is there some sort of progression (a tendency to follow precise steps in interaction, leading to greater, or lesser, complexity) perceivable as an internal logic (: rules) of the play? The above mentioned ‘structural elements’ are ritualistically timed. They represent a sequence of precise steps following an inherent logic of action. The individuals who play within this setting seem to follow a number of implicit rules of behaviour. It would be possible to translate and read the sequence of the observed actions as follows:

- a. *Indifference* is a semiotic starter; it posits the subject in the advantageous position of the bearer of a morally neutral agency.

- b. *Targeting* represents the shifting of the individual agency's focus to a suitable, for the purposes of the subject, nod of associations.
- c. *Contact* is the materialization of the individual agency's associative virtuality, substantiating its grasp on the 'social' dimension of the subject's desire for intersubjective recognition (the "I am speaking to you... and everyone else is listening to us" stance).
- d. *Conflict* represents the clash of representations. These representations are articulated in distinguished encompassing world views where the (agency driven) speaking (legislating?) subject is positioned in an always higher hierarchical rank than that of his/her interlocutor. In practical terms, and in a conflictual setting, the interlocutor is always supposed to be inferior to the speaker, according to the speaker's world view.
- e. *Resolution* could be translated as a provisional armistice of an enduring conflict. As long as the conflicting parties are present on the field, the battle of mindsets still rages, making marine engineers virtual avengers of the deck officers' haughtiness and hubris.

5. The remains of Hierarchy: some patterns of standing by someone, or just forgetting everything, with a purpose

While the female-male dyads were following some generally observed rules in similar settings – politeness, a slightly flirtatious stance, persevering smiles-, the captain-engineer couples were obviously marked by status anxiety. Captains and engineers were engaged in a 'play' which was the concatenation of well staged performance. The steps were the following:

- a. An engineer walking lackadaisically (*'indifference'*) approaches a captain (*targeting*) addressing him an 'innocent' greeting (*attempt of contact*), presumably in conformity with the rules of politeness.
- b. The captain responds with a belittling answer, making fun of the engineer's supposed good will (*contact accepted; starts conflict*).
- c. The engineer jumps on the occasion and takes his place at the captains' table (*conflict consolidates contact, makes it enduring*). He complains loudly –in order to be heard by all persons around- about the particular captain's lack of 'humanity' (*Ti anthropos ine aftos? Den bori na milisi san anthropos? = What kind of human is this man? Can't he talk as a human being?*)
- d. The captain responds using new insults, this time putting into question the human quality of the entire craft of the engineers. (*Ine anthropi I mihaniki? Gia des enan anthropo! = Are engineers human? Take a look at a human!*). The captain's words are underlined with a gesture, addressed to the observers, meaning 'look at him'! At this stage the conflict transcends the interpersonal level to engage groups and categories; this is done with the initiative of the representative of the most dominant party, i.e. the captain.
- e. Then, the engineer passes to generalisations too: 'What can you expect from a captain? Only such a (bad) behaviour!' (*Ti perimenis apo ena pliarcho? Mono tetia symperifora!*).^{vi} At this stage the representative of the less dominant party accepts the step-up of the conflict.

This kind of oral dual can go on for quite a long time, more than five minutes, on an alternatively escalating and decreasing tone, involving arguments relative to each craft's supposed strong and weak points, or to each individual's alleged manly prowess.

During a time period of, approximately, an hour and a half, corresponding to the first part of the 'festive party', I have counted half a dozen of similar captain-engineer sustained and conflictual interactions. All of them resulted in the same, as described above, pattern of interpersonal interaction.

6. Breaking down the rules, again: The breaking down of the rules of politeness

Till that time captains and engineers were the only ones who weren't following the generally accepted –in the particular cultural setting- rules of politeness and this only when in interaction between them. All the others, various staff and students, were behaving in a friendly, often hilarious, but always somehow reserved manner. Boundaries weren't transcended. Men were polite and sometimes flirtatious with their female colleagues, and vice-versa, but without any

publicly perceivable excess of demeanour. Superior rank Coast Guard Officers were polite, even mellow, with their subordinates, but everyone seemed to recognize and honor hierarchical differences. Students had already made attempts to socialize with their teachers, but without giving any sign of forgetfulness of barriers. During that first part of the party everything looked as if the School was just celebrating one more festive occasion. It seemed that embarrassment and shame still were major forces of contention, inhibiting any further assault on hierarchy.

Nonetheless, after an hour and a half of eating grilled meat and drinking alcohol, the spirits of the gathering had started to turn more animated and less disciplined. At the end, serious and non-stop alcohol consumption had been able to lift the barriers of embarrassment and shame. The visible result was the breakdown of many lasting hierarchical, or just social, boundaries.^{vii}

The first politeness-based boundary to fall was the one prescribing a reserved demeanour within the female-male interactions. Men and women started exhibiting a more open flirtatious behaviour, playing around the limits of sensuality. The dyads thus formed seemed to enjoy their newly acquired freedom of expression. They looked like if they didn't care for the others' opinion anymore. Gestures became more explicit, more direct; the bodies were giving synchronized performances of mutual attraction. Nevertheless, that attraction was still embedded in a ritual of teasing. It didn't look really serious; nothing beyond what everyone there would have called 'innocent play'. Suddenly, people were experiencing a new, more pronounced, tolerance for each others' actions. Gestures and movements that would have been criticized in an acerbic style one hour ago now were thought as 'innocent', almost 'normal'. Yet, I retained the fact that it was the observers of other people's 'playing sessions', not the players themselves, who were trying to downplay the significance of that extension of the limits of tolerance.

To my eyes, it became obvious that the rules of politeness to observe in male-female flirtatious settings weren't addressed to the partner as much as they were addressed to the third parties.

The second politeness-based boundary to fall was that of the observance of status differences among Coast Guard Officers, and between them and the rest of the staff. Inferior rank Officers were becoming more and more joyful, and playful with their superiors. The same could be said about the auxiliary staff's stance vis-à-vis high ranking members of the Coast Guard. For the first time since the beginning of the 'festive party' it was possible to see simple members of the auxiliary staff, officially at the very bottom of the Academy's hierarchy, teasing superior Coast guard Officers. These latter were responding rather well to that challenge at their authority, adopting a hilarious and playful stance, forgetting their habitual weighty posture.

The third politeness-based boundary to fall was that separating students from their teachers. There were more and more students approaching the teachers' tables, taking the initiative to ask them to dance together or just expressing the desire to exchange jokes and puns with them. The members of staff were receptive to these initiatives of their students, sometimes even upgrading the intensity of the student/teacher 'play sessions' through the adding of a more pronounced teasing character within the conversation. Nevertheless, that overbid was in most cases done by seafarer captains and marine engineers; the rest of the staff was still somehow reserved when in interaction with their students. However, all reservations were to be forgotten as the time was passing and the alcohol consumption continuing. One more politeness-based boundary to fall was that of observing the queue while waiting to be served a glass of wine.^{viii}

7. More alcohol, more *veritas*, less hierarchy: students are taking over the screen of the spectacle, mixing with teachers, teasing teachers, flirting overtly and disorderly. (Dance: *I will survive*)

The empty bottles of wine were accumulating around the alcohol outlet in an ever accelerating rhythm. They were so many of them that I gave up counting. It was then possible to *smell* the spirit which was filling up the reception hall's atmosphere and sustaining the festive mood of the participants. I had a strong impression that the entire gathering was soon going to cross an important threshold.

The loudspeakers whipped out a grind and then started filling the place with a dynamic but melodic beat; it was being sung in English, yet everyone was understanding the lyrics of that classic: it was Gloria Gaynor singing 'I will survive!' That worked like a banner, a watchword

full of a powerful meaning shared by almost everyone. The DJ, a witty student, had pulled the right trigger for a mighty lurking force to be unleashed. In less than a minute the entire reception hall became the stage of a previously unthinkable exhibition of uninhibited energy, strong emotional outbursts, and widespread eroticism. Students, belonging to both departments indiscriminately, were coming from everywhere, grasping teachers' arms and literally dragging them to the dancing floor. Teachers seemed overwhelmed, although pleasantly enough if not willingly condescending, by that sudden step-up of their students' staged status challenging situated action. At the other hand, students didn't limit their energetic invitations to dance to their teachers. They managed to drag with them a good number of willing partners among the members of the clerical staff –although avoiding the auxiliary staff- and a few Coast Guard Officers. Soon, the dancing floor was full of people of all ages and occupational specializations, mixing indiscriminately, dancing together. The general impression was that of an equality-based joyful community, a *communitas*.

- a) However, a more careful look could discover some exceptions to that seemingly general rule of indiscriminate mixing. I have been able to discern some rough regularities in the students' initiatives:
- b) Almost all of the students dragging teachers to the dancing floor were male.
- c) Male students weren't limiting their action to female teachers; they were dragging male teachers as well.
- d) There were female students taking a similar initiative, but they were addressing their action to female members of staff –mostly to members of the clerical staff, but also to the few female Coast Guard Officers-.
- e) Cases of female students dragging female teachers to the dancing floor were extremely rare, but this was possibly due to the fact that male students had been quicker to take this initiative and, as a consequence, almost all of female teachers were already dancing.
- f) The few female members of the auxiliary personnel not having been invited to dance, took the initiative and invited themselves to the dancing floor. The male members of the auxiliary personnel stayed close to the Coast Guard Officers who weren't dancing, not moving from their tables, concentrating their attention to the glasses full of wine they were keeping in their hands.

At the moment when the final notes of “I will survive!” were hitting our ears, the reception hall had been transformed into a stage dominated by the students. They had took over the screen of the spectacle, dancing with staff, mixing with teachers, teasing teachers, flirting overtly and disorderly. One last barrier was yet to fall down, that of male teachers dancing with female students.

8. The final breakdown: Teachers and students dancing on tables together. (Dance: Greek *Tsifteteli*).

Once again, the DJ made the right move at the apparently right moment. Dancers and spectators were still under Gloria Gaynor's spell when a very different set of notes hit their ears. Strong and sharp, these notes were forming an oriental staccato that no one could ignore. For the great majority among us, the participants of the 'festive party', it was simply impossible to remain indifferent to its emotional delivering power. It was the sound of a *tsifteteli*, an energetic, and highly erotic, gypsy dance.^{ix} Modern Greeks usually adore it.

In Greece, a *tsifteteli* dance is often the occasion for a session of erotic –and not only-exhibitionism. In night clubs and dancing halls, female clients –not professional dancers- step up on the very tables they were till that moment sitting around of and start dancing. This action usually takes place towards the end of the clubbing soirée, when the seemingly uncontrollable bursts of eroticism are flamboyantly put on stage.

At the initiative of some very energetic male students, a number of females, students as well as members of the staff, were solicited to jump on the tables and start dancing, which they did. In a couple of minutes the reception hall looked like a modern Greek nightclub. The ladies were

dancing on the tables while the male members of the gathering, having placed themselves around the tables, were clapping hands rhythmically to the staccato of the *tsifteteli*.

Suddenly, something that never occurs in a night club happened.^x A few men jumped on tables and started dancing, to the loud applause of the audience. All of these male *tsifteteli* dancers were mature seafarers, whether captains or marine engineers. It is important to note that what they were performing wasn't the 'normal' male part of a *tsifteteli* dance, that consisting in accompanying the female belly dancer with claps and supporting movements, but the belly dance itself. Such a performance, if given in a different setting and by less dominant and self-assertive males than the actual seafarers, would almost automatically lead the observers into assuming an *effeminate personality* of the dancers. Of course, situated in the particular time and place, the dancing seafarers' performance didn't generate assumptions of that kind, rather the opposite. The spectators, meaning almost everyone in the reception hall, were addressing to the dancers smiles full of deference and admiration.^{xi} The moment was one of these that remain unforgettable in the history of an educational institution.^{xii}

Although my attention was fully captured by these intrepid male dancers, I couldn't but work out some ideational associations that sparked almost automatically in my thought. 'Here we are!', I said to myself, 'we are in a full "Tsiknopemti" symbolic setting, whether intentionally staged or not'. While not forgetting that my ideations were always under the threat of surrendering to the temptation of producing presumable conclusions, I was nonetheless tempted to see the dancing seafarers' performance as a manifestation of role reversal, emerging from the carnival's logic. The (undoubtedly dominant, by the School's ethos' logic) *tsifteteli* dancing seafarers were enacting a performance that was meaningful on more than one level: they were assuming a presumable effeminate role – 'dancing the belly' as a female, and by that producing a staged effect of ritualistic role reversal- while, at the same time, enjoying immunity against the virtual accusation of effeminacy in the 'real world', thanks to their highly enjoyed privilege of being considered as archetypical male figures within the particular setting's ethos.^{xiii}

In defence of the above suggested interpretation I should mention the fact that not a single landlubber member of staff ever dared to imitate the seafarer belly dancers, and this till the end of the 'party'. The only individual who dared to do so while not being a 'real' seafarer, was a highly idiosyncratic student acting as an *enduring* and *recalcitrant* player, a native of Chios island,^{xiv} who has been previously mentioned in this text.

Joyful and flexibly self-assertive seafarers were belly dancing, landlubbers were clapping hands, everyone looked happy, but something was missing. That was just my personal subjective impression of the moment, but the sequence of the events rather confirmed it.

After a few minutes of solitary dancing, and after wholeheartedly enjoying the peers' and students' attention, the seafarer dancers invited more people to join them on the tables. The signal (in the form of an assertive hand gesture) having been sent by the initiative of the most dominant among these dancing males, all the others quickly imitated the leader's move. Their chosen partners were female students. These latter didn't hesitate much before responding to the call. Being members of that audience who was offering hand claps to their teachers' performance, they promptly jumped on the tables in order to join them. As a consequence, and in a couple of minutes, a number of 'festive' tables were occupied by *tsifteteli* dancing couples, made by a male seafarer teacher and a female student. Then, everything came back into 'order'. Male seafarer dancers stopped making dance their own belly, diverting everyone's attention to the female student's now dancing belly, and reassuming the typical male role in that dance consisting in clapping hands and helping the female partner perform the most demanding steps and movements.

Now everything looked like the spectacle one can observe in a Greek nightclub, with male and female dancers executing their typical performances, except for a small, but meaningful, detail: the status difference between the actors of the two sexes.

The disparity in hierarchical rank was even more accentuated by the fact that, in some cases, the dancing couples had been formed between males occupying the upper positions within their peers' official hierarchy and females occupying positions at the lower end of an unofficial ranking within their own gendered sub-group for which the classificatory criterion was the relative mate attraction power. It was that particularity of the choosing-a-dance-partner process which made me

suspect that we were all, dancers as well as spectators, still functioning within the 'Tsiknopempti' logic. In fact, the extremeness of the status difference, grounded on any perceivable classificatory system, was almost an aberration in regard to the rules of matching. It represented a breach of 'normal' associative logic. That suspension of the rules of matching/mating was underlined by a number of ostentatious gestures on the part of the male dancers, a staginess consisting of a simulation of the entire variety of symptoms affecting a male fallen under the spell of an overwhelmingly attractive female. As that latter characteristic wasn't actually the case, the female dancers having been chosen among the till then least solicited students, the entire performance which was put on stage^{xv} had something of a burlesque mimicry of a 'real' erotic encounter occurring in a non-carnival time.

Burlesque or not, the spectacle of the odd-matching couples had a clearly positive effect on the spectators' mood. The theatrical staging of belly dancers was met by enthusiasm from students and staff. Soon, a mass of joyful faces and clapping hands filled up the entire reception hall. People abandoned 'their' tables to gather around the improvised stages of a (self-sarcastic?) mimicry of a danced –and eroticized- relation to the semantically opposite.^{xvi}

'That's how it should be' (*tora ine opos prepi*), commented an enthusiastic male student, before resuming his clapping hands performance.

'It's just perfect' (*ine telio*), overbided a female student, offering all her attention to the dancers, while standing hand-in-hand with one of her girlfriends.

'It's more than I have expected for', I remember saying to myself at that moment. I could have never hoped for such a senses-fulfilling spectacle at the moment when I was deciding to join the, so called, 'festive party' of the Merchant Marine Academy.

9. The End of Hierarchy: everyone thinks that everything is possible. (Dance: *La Ronde*...).

The DJ struck once again. Attuned to the public's evolving mood, he gave the call for the entering in the next phase of the 'festive party'. A radical change in the musical style occurred. After the final notes of a famous *tsifteteli* song had been heard and echoed enough, after the last luscious movements of young female bellies had been executed, the music turned to a different register. A new musical pattern made its entrance to the scene, one of the most acclaimed *hasaposerviko* dancing songs having being aired from the loudspeakers.

The signal was so powerful –and the timing so correct- that everyone surrendered at discretion to it. In less than a couple of minutes the entire disposition of personal positions and topographical arrangements had radically changed. The belly dancers, female main performers or male auxiliary performing partners, stepped down from 'their' tables/improvised stages and walked quickly to the central dancing area of the reception hall. The rest of us, teachers, students, and other staff, rushed to follow them.

A few moments later, the entire festive population of the Merchant Marine Academy was dancing a Greek version of *La Ronde*. Positioned in a bodily formed circle, oblivious of any ranking and hierarchy, we were energetically celebrating the end of all segregations. We were –feeling being-equal. The head of Department holding my right shoulder while dancing, and the least solicited female student holding the left shoulder of the male student who was holding my left shoulder, all of us were communally celebrating an unforgettable moment: that of the symbolic end of hierarchy, of all divisions, all segregations, all hierarchical rankings.^{xvii}

La ronde was more than thrilling; in the participants' stated understanding of the moment, it was an instance of virtual collective potency: everything was possible, and everyone was capable of that accomplishment.^{xviii}

PART TWO: Hierarchy Reintroduced

10. Who dances with whom? Not an innocent question. (*La Ronde* is ended; one by one, again).

Dancing *La Ronde* has taken quite a long time, perhaps more than twenty minutes. Then the music changed once again. The *hasaposerviko* gave its place to a mixture of Greek and 'foreign'

—meaning mainly American- dance songs. In their great majority, these pieces of music were either Greek *Tsifteteli* or American *rock-and-roll*, making a rather peculiar alternation of sounds and styles. Nevertheless, the most important change was the one concerning the way people were dancing. Having abandoned the collective circles of *La Ronde*, they switched back to arrangements in couples of dancers. As a result, a number of male dancers, mostly students, left the dancing floor for being supernumerary in relation to the number of female dancers.

I paid attention to the arrangement of the dancing couples. In a spontaneous drive, I searched for the persons who had already formed dancing couples during the previous to the *La Ronde* dances. Yet, to my surprise, this wasn't the case. Now the composition of the couples was different. There were no more odd-matching couples giving burlesque performances, nor any eroticized association between individuals who could be perceived by bystanders as semantically opposite.^{xix}

I have witnessed a number of cases revealing of a radical and very quick- change in the participants' mood. I shall relate just one case, a communicative sequence among many similar encounters, perhaps the most revelatory one in terms of practically enacted dispositional positioning of associatively engaged actors:

1. A female student approaches tenderly the male teacher with whom she was dancing with during the previous session of mimics of 'real' erotic encounters, that part of the participants' dancing performances which were supposed to represent the 'Tsiknopempti's' role reversal logic.
2. The teacher shams not to realise her presence, at a distance of two metres or less.
3. Nonetheless, at the same time he makes a few small and careful steps towards the opposite direction, distancing him from the lower status female student.
4. The lower status female student, probably still keeping in her memory their previous mutual performance, makes one or two more timid steps toward his direction.
5. The teacher still shams not to see her, keeping his look supposedly absorbed by something that is happening on the dancing floor.
6. The female student stares at him for a second, then makes a last attempt to retrieve a quality of relationship that she enjoyed during the 'carnival time'; she makes one more timid step towards his direction, while giving him a couple of rather desperate stares.
7. The teacher diverts his attention to a female member of staff. He engages a conversation with that person.
8. The lower status female student leaves the place in an outburst of umbrage.
9. No more contact is then recorded.

A few moments later, the above mentioned teacher is dancing a *rock-and-roll* dance, or rather a slow-motion version of that, on the hall's dancing floor with a female member of staff. Many students and staff applaud with good grace, but no one is paying too much attention to the event. In my subjective understanding, it seems that all performances have lost at least a part of their emotional punch.

11. Dance performance: givers and receivers. What kind of dance? (*Tsifteteli* or *rock*?)

Once again there were many couples dancing on the hall's floor. If put under scrutiny, a number of newly established regularities might have seemed emerging. These were the following:

- Dominant seafarers were dancing with the most attractive female members of staff, teachers or members of the clerical personnel, or even female Coast Guard Officers.
- Captains were the most successful in finding an attractive female dance partner, of any order.
- A number of actively engaged in dancing performances seafarer engineers were dancing with the publicly acclaimed as- most attractive female members of staff other than teachers.^{xx}
- A number of actively engaged in dancing performances male members of auxiliary staff were dancing with willing females who were members of the same order, or subaltern Coast Guard Officers.

- There were no more same sex dancing couples, as was previously the case involving male seafarer captains and engineers.
- There was a difference in the dancers' behaviour in regard to the particular dance they were performing. Actually, dancers of *tsifteteli* were less concerned with their partner's status than *rock-and-roll* dancers. All the couples engaged in a rock-and-roll dance were composed by a dominant male seafarer and a (publicly acclaimed as) attractive female.

In other terms, the 'Tsiknopempti' role reversal mood had come to an end, and that effect was more evident in face to face interactions.

12. Better than equal: the alpha male dances better. (Specially the Greek traditional)

After many *rock-an-roll* and *tsifteteli* dances had been displayed and applauded, there was an obvious fall-off in the participants' energy. People seemed happy but exhausted. The DJ quickly understood that and made the right move at the right moment in order to canalize the action according to some generally observed rules in nightclubs and similar venues. The loudspeakers became mute for a few seconds –to underline the radical change of musical style that was going to take place- and then the reception hall got filled up by a bundle of very different notes, almost 'heavy' to the ear, the notes of a *zeibekiko*.^{xxi}

Among the crowd who till then was so much energetic on the dancing floor only a few young men and two or three young women opted to stay there, switching to the new kind of dance; most of the people just left the dancing floor to join 'their tables', while a smaller crowd remained *around* the dancing floor to give claps to the dancers. The *zeibekiko* style is a very particular one, requiring a high degree of mastering to be successfully danced, even if at first sight it looks quite easy, for the absence of prescribed steps and movements. A *zeibekiko* is an improvised dance known to celebrate male dominance.

I was back to one of 'my tables', a table of captains, filling myself one more glass of wine and observing what was happening on the dance floor and in the entire reception hall. The small group of students was still dancing, and a number of other students were helping the performance by clapping hands; still, the general mood wasn't very alive. People seemed tired; a few had already left the party, without any excessive goodbye ceremony. At that moment I thought that the Academy's 'festive party' was close to its end. Suddenly, I saw a kind of an unexpected movement close to the dancing floor; people were moving here and there or turning around to watch something, or someone. I was intrigued and paid attention to discover what it was.

I saw him. The seafarer captain, bolt upright and proud, serious, smileless, looking as if waving the flags of his entire sea-beaten experience together with his deep knowledge of the milieu – everything from strong maritime networks to *monahovaporos*^{xxii} related social circles-, he was walking slowly, heading to the center of the dancing floor. Once there, he stayed still, unexpressive, a cast-iron figure. For a few moments the already dancing students didn't realise what was happening, so they continued to dance, whirling around the lone captain. Then, one by one, they became aware of his presence. They first looked surprised, then somehow embarrassed, and finally stopped dancing and moved over, making place for the leading figure, in a movement full of deference. Now the seafarer captain was staying alone on the dancing floor. On top of that, the captain had the attention of all the rest. Those who were previously dancing and those who were clapping at them now had formed a circle around the dancing floor, in anticipation of the captain's dance. The same did many others, students and members of staff.

The moment had come. With an assertive gesture, his open arms stirring the air, his body in a flighty balance as if defying the law of gravity, the captain started his personal dance. The moment was his and he knew it. The rest of us, almost the entire gathering, started clapping hands.

He proved to be a real master; a master of his dance, of his own body, of the dancing floor and the entire audience. His dancing movements were close to perfection, or at least that was almost everyone's impression at that moment. That impression, the impact of his performance on the audience's feelings, took a shape, a tangible form, materializing itself in the physical arrangement of the participants vis-à-vis the spectacle's stage. Little by little, following an almost imperceptible movement, particular individuals had taken specific positions around the dancing floor as hand-clappers. It was then possible, for an attentive observer, to draw a map indicating

everyone's positioning to the rest of the participants. That 'human map' could be summarised as following:

- In the center of the stage, the dominant seafarer dancer was giving his performance.
- In a first human circle that was formed around him by the most enthusiastic 'cheer leaders', some of the most salty captains^{xxiii} were kneeling^{xxiv} while clapping hands. In that first circle there were also some students, all of them kneeling as well; these were the ones who were previously dancing the *zeibekiko* themselves, and their hand-clapping mates.
- In a kind of second concentric circle, loosely formed around the first one, there were many members of staff, mostly captains^{xxv} and clerical or auxiliary personnel. A few seafarer engineers were with them. These engineers were the ones with whom the dancer had had the previously mentioned 'teasing play' sessions. Many students were also part of that second human circle, belonging in their great majority to the Deck Officers' Department. Almost all of the participants in that second circle were kneeling while clapping hands.
- It might be possible to talk about a third circle surrounding everyone already mentioned, in a sense that all the remaining participants of the 'festive party' were heedfully watching the lone dancer's performance. Among that crowd, a few were clapping hands as well while the majority didn't. No one was kneeling, but everyone's attention was concentrated on the dancer. In that virtual third circle there were many engineers, the quasi-totality of Coast Guard Officers, and a large number of students.

A number of inferences can be drawn from the above 'human map'. One of the most salient of its features is perhaps the physical positioning of the individuals in the bounded space of the 'party' and in regard to rest of the participants. It could be possible to give a contextualized account of the observed tendency consisting in positioning one's self in the social space according to some patterns of association through interaction. Thus, it had been possible to identify a first associative pattern in the tendency of the 'salty' seafarer captains to offer the loudest mark of closeness and deferential solidarity with the leading figure of their sub-group. Here, we should note the difference between the sub-group of the 'salty' seafarer captains and their less 'salty' peers. Both sub-groups are colleagues in the same department, have the same professional qualification and a comparable work experience, possess in general the same technical competence, and are conscious of their role in the Academy and beyond. Nonetheless, there is a differentiation between the two sub-groups on the ground of a few rather hidden, because never put deliberately on stage, criteria. These latter are mainly the active participation in maritime-related nepotistic networks and a personal experience of being (or having been, or having worked for a close relative^{xxvi} who was) a '*monahovaporos*' ship-owner. It is important to note here that these two criteria of closeness between peers, translated through a partially ritualistic embodiment of stances and behaviours in the context of a collective feast, are these which emerge as representing the uppermost qualifiers for a seafarer's inclusion into the Greek nautical ethos' mindset. In other words, the most enthusiastic 'cheer leaders' of the dominant seafarer captain were the ones who shared with him the totality of the 'successful seaman's' characteristics required by the Greek nautical ethos –from being a sea-beaten seafarer to fully participate in the Greek maritime network-.

The above mentioned embodiment of affinity in terms of Greek nautical ethos, identified during the time of a 'party', isn't the only example of such a relation observed in the every day's life of the Academy. Similar interactions, using a detectable by the observer body language, occur quite frequently. Nevertheless, it was during the time of the Tsiknopempti's 'festive party' than all embodiments, the 'salty' seafarers' one along with these of the rest of the participants, could be observed at the same time, and in a comparative manner. It was during the time of the 'forgetting/reintroducing hierarchy' ritual that the human element of the entire Merchant Marine Academy was putting itself on stage, implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, displaying the constitutive parts of the Greek nautical ethos of which it is seemingly the purveyor.

Another associative pattern emerging from the 'festive party's' human map involves the complex interaction between the dominant dancing captain and the few seafarer engineers who were active in accompanying his dance with hand claps, big smiles, and enthusiastic commentaries about the excellence of his performance. These applauding engineers were the ones with whom the dancer

had had the 'teasing play' sessions. The type of association involving the dancing captain and the applauding engineers presents itself as the procedural continuation of these status-challenging dyads (captain-engineer) engaged in teasing interactions during the beginning of the feast. It seemed then that what was at stake was *a negotiable quality of association*. If that first conclusion wasn't totally wrong, then we might argue that the applauding engineers' stance was a part of that negotiation. Under such a scrutiny, it could be useful to consider what might be understood as the object of the negotiation. We remember that during the 'teasing play' interactions between captains and engineers the stake was each one's respective status, or relative hierarchical ranking. At the other hand, during the dominant captain's dance, such a type of relation, a kind of *antagonistic egalitarianism*, wasn't detectable anymore. The applauding engineers were obviously kneeling before the lone (male captain) dancer and complimenting him. If these two stances seem at a first sight incompatible, then maybe it could be useful to take into consideration the structural separation of the festive time into two different parts: the first one, translated as that of 'forgetting hierarchy' by the researcher, and the second, translated as that entailing the reintroduction of hierarchy into the participants' symbolic language.^{xxvii}

Now if we tried to situate this negotiated association within the Greek nautical ethos' prescriptive patterns of behaviour, we could discern a possibility for an engineer to challenge the (his) captain's status only in a particular –teasing styled- way, and this only as a precondition, or logical antecedent, for a final reassertion of the master's supremacy. In other terms, we could say that what we have witnessed during the 'festive party's' alternation of stances, wasn't but a condensed, and more or less ritualized, representation of what is permissible, by the Greek nautical ethos, in the day-to-day interactions between modern Greek seafarers.

13. Dancers and spectators: steps and movements of a choreographic hierarchy

I, the researcher, the native-turned-ethnographer, the liminal between-and-between two departments teacher, was contemplating the dominant seafarer captain's performance which was capturing everyone's attention. Till that time I had been able to fulfill my self-ascribed role of 'objective' observer of the events with a possibly debatable but honest sense of disciplinary informed duty of faithful representation to my object of study. Yet, things were to change, to my bewilderment.

The beginning of an instrumental song without lyrics hit my ears, a classic of all times for a Greek-minded musical ear and a Greekly-sensed responding mind. It was the '*zeibekiko tis Evdokias*'. Among the people who have ever listened to that piece of music, a great number agree that it represents one of the happiest moments in the contemporary urban Greek musical production. Its engaging power was so strong that I felt it irresistible; in a few seconds I was on the periphery of the first circle around the dancing floor, lurking for the occasion to jump in. The same was true for a number of colleagues, marine and landlubber engineers, Coast Guard officers in uniform, as well as other staff. All of us were ready to take over the stage by assault. Many students had comprehended our movement and were already clapping hands to us. Like a cohort of assailants, eager to have our own part of glory, we had formed a circle around the dancing floor, expecting to take it by assault. This time our circle wasn't there to applaud and glorify the dancing captain; our stance was surreptitiously aggressive, hostile to his persisting domination of the party's stage. We were just waiting for him to understand that and go, giving us space. Many students had already realized our pretension and, being rather positive to a change in the balance of forces, were encouraging us with a strong applaud and loud exhortations. 'Go on teacher, dance!' (*Prohora daskale, horepse!*) I heard many voices exhorting me to conquer my piece of the stage, and my part of glory. These were some students who usually demonstrated sympathy for me. Other students were encouraging their preferred teachers, mostly marine engineers, to do the same. I looked around and saw faces disfigured by barely hilarious smiles. There was a lot of tension hidden under the remnants of a festive disposition.

He heard the students' voices. He saw us while he was still whirling around the center of the stage, following the rhythmic notes of the *zeibekiko*. Just for a brief moment, the lone dancer showed some signs of hesitation. His movements became slower, his steps shorter and less assured, his open arms looking heavier as if lacking energy.

Among all the potential candidates to dancing there were two who had advanced closer to the center of the stage: myself, and a mature seafarer engineer. We exchanged stares in a spontaneous movement. He seemed as determined as I was; I realized that we were already in competition for the struggle of succession. *Zeibekiko* is a solitary dance, for one and only dominant dancer.

I first felt and then saw a dark stare striking me with force; it was coming from the still dancing captain. Then his stare stroke with even greater force the mature seafarer engineer, the other candidate for the succession. The captain looked him right in the eyes, persistently, powerfully. The captain's dance stopped just for two seconds or so, two decisive seconds. The two men, both sea-beaten seafarers, the superior officer of the engineering department and the master of the ship, were measuring each other. For a not entirely conscious reason I felt that I wasn't really part of the game; it was a duel between seamen, something that I haven't the right to make my way into.

With a sudden move, more of a runner's start than of a dancer's gait, the captain continued *his* dance. Now his movements were once again quick and energetic, his steps longer and assured, his arms assertively stirring the air. It was obvious. The captain had decided to stay there and stand his ground. He was ready to fight, in a powerful symbolic way, for his dominance. Almost automatically my eyes looked for the engineer.

What I saw on his face is hardly describable. A mixture of discrepant feelings and emotions were running wild from his forehead to his chin. I thought been able to discern pride and contempt, envy and revolt, habit and duty, among many. I couldn't say if he was smiling or on the edge of an outburst of anger. Or maybe that was just my subjective impression, because I was projecting on him my own emotions of the moment. In any case that wasn't important anymore for I had decided to step back and let the seafarers deal with each other. All my attention was captured by the engineer and his reactions.

The engineer stayed still for a few seconds, hesitating. Then I saw a big smile covering his face. His feet bended, making his body bow, permitting him to take the position of the regular hand-clapper in a traditional *zeibekiko* dance. He *kneeled* before the captain in the habitual position of the lone dancer's celebrators. He was now giving rhythmic claps to the captain. I was in awe, yet somehow teed off. The entire picture was not really fitting in my personal world view.

Everyone, or almost, followed the engineer's example. Staff and students were once again clapping hands for the dancing master. I wasn't following the general move, refusing to go with the flow, trying to liberate myself of a strong feeling of inhibition that was forcing me to stay still and embarrassed. Fortunately, and after having searched for a few moments in my inner resources, I discovered a way to escape. I remembered that I was an ethnographer, perhaps a native one but still an ethnographer. What I was doing there was to be a participant observer, a role that permitted me to take my distance from my field when I felt it was necessary for the integrity of my work. So I took my distances, which made me feel better almost immediately. Now I could have some fruitful thoughts about the events that I was observing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I realized that what was happening in front of my eyes was a reenactment of the elementary roles and positions within the Greek nautical ethos. The staged play wasn't innovative, not even really improvised. On the dancing floor's stage we were repeating symbolically the regular parts of a play that engages seafarers and affiliates in their day to day interaction, in 'real' life. The engineers are challenging the masters' dominance, playing 'teasing plays' with them, giving their own performance of symbolic revolt. For such a reenactment, a 'festive party' on a 'Tsiknopempti' evening represents an excellent occasion. Then, in the symbolic representation of the relation, what happens is what the rules of Greek nautical ethos prescribe for 'real life': everyone bows before the master's authority, reproducing stances and behaviours consecrated by time and habit. The entire performance wasn't but a reaffirmation of the structuring rules of a dominant ethos, presented on the symbolic level.

I smiled, without any hard feelings this time. I had the strong and positive feeling that my participant observation had come to an end. I gave a last applaud to the dancer, to the engineer, to the students. They returned me many unequivocal smiles. Then, slowly, respectful of the ritual's place in my informants' world, I stepped away of the dancing floor. It was time to retake my place. I hurried out of the reception hall to write up my notes, anxious not to forget anything.

4. CONCLUSION

Education and training at the Merchant Marine Academy is interwoven with and constantly informed by a dominant ethos that, in its turn, is constantly interacting with the individual characteristics of its members. I argue that the Greek nautical ethos assures both the cultural homogenisation and the cohesion of Greek communities of practice related to shipping, while at the same time ensuring the effective screening of candidates to membership in these communities as well as the entire Greek maritime network.

The 'thick description' included in this article was that of a regulated and non-chaotic liminal moment of social critique, a critique seemingly targeting one of the constitutive elements of the dominant ethos, that is hierarchy. By incorporating the spectacle of its own critique, the Greek nautical ethos finally regenerates itself while preserving the reproduction of a very particular community of practice.

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ⁱ Provided that the magic elements of the fete remain dominant, Carnival also forms a symbolic victory not only over authority, but also over death. As ethnographer Miranda Terzopoulos (1998) notes 'the idea of death underlying the totality of worshipping during Carnival -whose major part takes place in the open air, over an earth still humid due to the season- brings into prominence the multi-significance of the earth itself, both as a recipient of dead bodies as well as a womb and provider of all living forms. The identification of earth's fertility with that of a woman's, offers the grounds for a series of mimic performances carrying the ambiguous theme: ploughing-copulation. Having rendered identical, plough, wedge and phallus, become stellar symbols of the Greek Carnival, not only as theatrical props of the masked characters, but also as themes of the chanted songs, and offer, through the identification of man with nature, a promise of fertility and eternity. . . Reconciliation with death offers a feeling of existential freedom, which, above all, is manifested as a dispute of every secular or religious authority.'

ⁱⁱ The term 'community of practice' was coined by anthropologist Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, a PhD in artificial intelligence and a learning systems theorist. Their basic idea is that learning possesses a practical social dimension, which means that it develops through an active participation in groups and networks sharing the same interests and experiences. This approach was first presented in their jointly written book *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991). Later it was developed in more works by Etienne Wenger (1999; 2002) and Jean Lave (1993), shaping the concept of *community of practice* as an

instance of human interaction where situated learning takes place. In a subsequent paper of Wenger (c 2007, accessed 2009) there is a definition of communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.' Wenger maintains that 'communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour.' For Wenger not every community is a community of practice, for that latter necessitates the coexistence of three characteristics: A domain –shared interests and competences-, a community –the existence of joined activities, discussions, solidarity between its members, and the sharing of information-, and a practice –the tangible sharing of a repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems- necessitating time and sustained interaction. For a further, and more detailed, documentation on *communities of practice* see Etienne Wenger's *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity* (1998). The same author has also produced more focused papers, as the one which treats technology issues through the lens of his particular approach (2001), or a number of works dealing with the application of this approach to knowledge management issues in organisations (2000, 2004). Another important work dealing with similar issues is Barbara Rogoff's *Learning Together: Children and Adults in a School Community* (2001), coedited with Turkkanis, C. G. and Bartlett, L. which presents an educational approach grounded on learning occurring through a participational process involving many learners. My own idea here is that seafarers, or, more precisely, nepotistically networking Greek seafarers –imbued by the distinctive elements of Greek Nautical Ethos- can be viewed as a "community of practice" for they possess almost all of the above mentioned characteristics of such a form of human association. They have a domain, they form a community, and they are engaged in a sustained interaction producing a meaningful –to them- practice.

ⁱⁱⁱ But how could we define 'teasing'? According to Neil Korobov (2001), 'teasing is one of the most ambiguous, ubiquitous, conceptually enervating, and analytically elusive forms of interaction' (2001: 314). To support this view he cites the works of Paul Drew (1987) and Cheryl Pawluck (1989). Trying to make a classification, Korobov distinguishes between two opposing views of the social function of teasing. The first one, represented by Deborah Tannen (1994, 1999), Donna Eder (1993), Carol Strachle (1993), Deborah Schriffrin (1994), and Deborah Cameron (1997), asserts that teasing is 'a way to reduce social tensions, to connect with others, or to teach children relational skills –basically ... a tool for socialization' (Korobov, 2001: 314). In this logic, teasing would also be 'a way to enhance solidarity, strengthen social bonds, experiment with novel linguistic responses ... or communicate liking without being held accountable for one's feelings' (Korobov, 2001: 315). The second view, represented by William Pollack (1998) and James Garbarino (1999), couples teasing 'with bullying and view it as an incipient social evil that often culminates in violence' (Korobov, 2001: 314). According to this second view, young males in particular are 'inundated by a patriarchal cultural-code that teaches them to be complicit with stoic masculine social norms. The result ... is "hegemony" –seen as incipient misogyny, exploitative sexuality, aggressiveness, unemotionality, and a drive for control'. (id.) Korobov himself asserts that his own apperception of teasing 'brackets' both of these views. (id.) He attempts an analysis of teasing activities, focusing on the use of some the most 'salient and common linguistic devices for teasing' (id: 316), which are a) Speaking for another b) Simultaneous speech (interruption and overlap), c) Repetition of certain lexical terms, and d) Exaggerating intonation and laughter. In his approach, Korobov employs Michael Bamberg's (1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000) 'positioning analysis' as a 'methodological tool ... connecting the ethnomethodological and conversation analytic orientation ... with critical discourse analytic impulses to combine content analysis with performance analysis of *how* (emphasis in original) conversational topics and interactive strategies are linguistically indexed ... and in terms of which self-presentation strategies' (Korobov, 2001: 317). In my understanding, although Korobov's approach is a highly interesting one, the researcher could have made a more substantial use of Erving Goffman's analytical tools to better grasp the subtleties of 'self-presentation strategies' of the individuals engaged in teasing interactions. On another level, and always in his approach, there isn't any attempt to investigate the participants' interactive strategies through the lens of a 'non-verbal communication' analytical and classificatory stance –something that would have probably involved the use of analytical tools developed in the field of *kinesics*–.

Commenting on the above mentioned two different views and interpretations of teasing, I would suggest the existence of two different types of interpersonal behaviour, referred under the same label-word –'teasing': a) teasing as a device for communicating liking, an associative behaviour *concealing* hierarchical arrangements and conflictual dispositions, and b) teasing as an attempt of hegemonic control of the Other, an associative behaviour *exposing* loudly the desired, by the initiator of the action, hierarchical arrangements. Moreover, it isn't perhaps an adventitious event that all five proponents of the 'communicating liking' reading of teasing are female, while the two proponents of the 'hegemonic control' reading of teasing are male, and possibly with origins in an ethnic minority. This differential understanding of a complex set of behavioural phenomena mantled under the same label-word might be revealing of the situated, and gendered, character of the cognitive process in action.

^{iv} Please note that these figures are valid for the time of the data gathering, that is February 2009. Since then, the female/male ratio has been modified in favour of the female presence at the Academy.

^v It is a rough, although recorded studiously, estimation that the average duration of a teasing attempt, if not followed by a more sustained communication, is of approximately fifteen to twenty seconds.

^{vi} This kind of ‘play’ between a captain and an engineer, observed during the ‘festive party of Tsiknopempti’, has in fact many similarities with analogous interactions between members of the two crafts occurring in the School’s everyday life.

^{vii} For the role of alcohol as a ‘symbolic vehicle’ helping people to effectuate the transition from one state of social relations to a different one, or from one associative pattern to another one, it would be interesting to take into consideration Kate Fox’s (2008) remarks on ‘drinks rules’. For Fox ‘in all cultures, alcohol is used as a symbolic punctuation-mark –to define, facilitate and enhance the transition from one social state or context to another. The transitional rituals in which alcohol plays a vital role range from major life-cycle ‘rites of passage’ such as birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death to far less momentous passages, such as the daily transition from work-time to play-time or home-time’ (Fox, 2008: 201). Elaborating specifically on the passage from work-time to play-time, Fox makes mention of that latter’s characteristics that encompass different instances of ‘misbehaviour’, a breach to the usually followed rules of politeness, together with a number of ‘positive’ consequences such as ‘relaxation’, a decrease in the degree of observance of rules enforcing hierarchy associated to increased social bonding (Fox, 2008: 203, 204). Nonetheless, for the same author, that ‘cultural remission’ or ‘legitimized deviance’ characterizing the ‘play-time’ induced, or just facilitated, by alcohol consumption doesn’t mean freedom for everyone to behave as they please but refer to ‘temporary, *conventionalized* (emphasis in original) deviations from convention, in which only certain rules may be broken, and then only in certain, rule-governed ways’ (2008: 204). Another very interesting work on the role of alcohol as a catalyst for the eruption of hierarchy-challenging behaviours is Brian Moeran’s study of “‘Sake” drinking in a Japanese pottery community’ (1986). For Moeran ‘Drinking acts as an outlet for repressed feelings, seen to be brought on by the way in which the individual is expected to subordinate his own interests to those of the group in Japanese society. It is only while drinking that a junior may forcefully criticize a senior to his (or her) face, and only while drinking that a senior will accept such open criticism. Drinking is seen to break down all social barriers. It is a “frame” for egalitarian relations which nicely counter-balances the hierarchy of everyday life’ (1986: 2).

^{viii} Although observing queues isn’t such an important characteristic of modern Greek culture as it is, for instance, of the English culture (Fox 2008), rather the opposite, it is nonetheless thought of as a ‘right’ and well mannered behaviour among members of the Merchant Marine Academy’s Faculty.

^{ix} There is an abundant, if not loquacious, literature about *tsifteteli* as part of the *rebetiko* music tradition. However, in this text, I consider all reported actions as constitutive parts of a real-time functional and symbolic framework, independently of their supposed antecedents. Under such a (non-historical) scrutiny, in today’s Greece the *tsifteteli* music and dance is presented as clearly dissociated from the traditionalist *rebetiko* music-and-lyrics performances. *Rebetiko* (plural: *rebetika*) songs are (can be) seldom *danced*; *tsifteteli* at the other hand is always an instrumented and orchestrated dance.

^x There is a rather common misunderstanding concerning the gendered distribution of the *tsifteteli* dancing performances in Greece. There are accounts reporting cases of men dancing the *tsifteteli* in several occasions. There are authors, like Angela Shand (1998), arguing that ‘a typical *tsifteteli* is not performed by a single belly dancer, but by a massive amount of dancers populating one large dance floor. *Tsifteteli* can be danced by men and women alike, in solo, couples and group formations’. This is an error of perception of the two genders’ differential role in that dance, as well as a confusion between what actually a –foreign or inexperienced- visitor can observe in a number of non-traditional nightclubs and what is traditionally regarded as a ‘right’ way to execute a *tsifteteli*. In a ‘regular’ *tsifteteli* dance, the one usually performed in more traditional nightclubs throughout Greece, it is the woman who dances the substantial part of *tsifteteli*, a variation of belly dance. Quite often a man is dancing *with* her, helping her to effectuate the most corporally expressive and difficult movements, or clapping hands and calling for the other people’s attention to her, but without executing himself the belly dance movements. In simpler terms, a male *tsifteteli* dancer in a ‘regular’ dance performance isn’t supposed to *make dance his belly*. At the other hand, there are accounts of male *tsifteteli* dancers who, indeed, put on stage a genuine dance of that kind, involving a real belly dance. Nevertheless, these performers are regularly labeled by their spectators, male as well as female, as openly effeminate, which means that they are supposed to act as, or assuming the role of, women. This disambiguation is important in order to understand how gender roles are incorporated in the ritual of this highly erotic dance, and also in order to decipher the ‘role reversal’ symbolism of the male dancing performances during the ‘festive party’ of the Merchant Marine Academy on a ‘Tsiknopempti’ evening.

^{xi} I can't be assertive in regard to what extent that admiration was genuine enough, but I do remember having observed landlubber 'captains' and 'engineers' enthusiastically clapping hands at the slightest, even if somehow washed up, dancing 'achievement' of the seafarer dancers.

^{xii} As a great number of participants' *post factum* accounts reveal.

^{xiii} For a discussion on archetypical male figures see Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (1991); Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Re-discovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* (1990). For a more thematically amplified discussion on the matter, including spirituality relevant discourses and practices, see Patrick M. Arnold, *Wildmen, Warriors, and Kings: Masculine Spirituality and the Bible* (1991).

^{xiv} Well known for its shipping industry tradition and its 'socially' embedded Greek nautical ethos.

^{xv} Literally, for the tables made perfect little theatre stages.

^{xvi} The expression 'semantically opposite' is used here to translate the meaning of a number of participants' accounts –gathered after the fact- making mention of 'matching an extreme man with an extreme girl' or, on a rather ironic tone, that 'they have found each other's fitting partner.' On another level, but still in reference to this study's context, it would be interesting to take into consideration Raoul Eshelman's discernment of 'semantic opposition' as it is presented in the analytically elaborated relation of 'verticality/horizontality' (Eshelman Fall 2001/Winter 2002).

^{xvii} As stated (*oli itan to idio*: 'everyone was the same') in a number of interviews taken after the fact.

^{xviii} As revealed in ulterior participants' accounts.

^{xix} 'Everyone has retaken their place' (*Oli xanapiran tis thesis tous*) was the comment that I have heard while listening to people's conversations during that period of time.

^{xx} As revealed in numerous *post factum* participants' accounts.

^{xxi} Zeibekiko is part of the widely popular Rebetiko urban musical tradition of Greece that flourished after the arrival in the Greek mainland of the Christian Orthodox population of Asia Minor following the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Among the dances associated with Rebetiko, Zeibekiko is known to be an individual, highly personalised, dance, traditionally executed by a dominant male dancer of the lower classes (a 'mangas').

^{xxii} A *monahovaporos* (plural: *monahovapori*) ship-owner is someone who possesses just one ship, or owns merely a part of it, a co-owner in a partnership with a number of other co-owners. Sometimes the *monahovaporos* ship-owner also serves as its captain. Viewed from a historical perspective, the modern *monahovaporos* ship-owner is the heir of the sailing era *karavokyris*, the man of the 19th century who was at the same time the owner of the sailing ship, its captain, and one of the merchants using its transport services (Harlaftis 2001).

^{xxiii} Meaning that these seafarer captains possessed a number of characteristics making them same-spirited as the dominant dancer. They had a deep knowledge of the shipping industry's life in all its forms and organisational ramifications, including an active participation in nepotistic maritime-related networks.

^{xxiv} In Greece, it is common for people who accompany someone's dance by hand-claps to kneel before the dancer. It is a particular form of kneeling, or we should better say semi-kneeling, for the hand-clapper kneels only on one of his or her legs, usually the left one, while keeping the other in a runner-ready-to-take off position.

^{xxv} These were some among the less 'salty' seafarer captains, together with many landlubber members of the Deck Officers' Department.

^{xxvi} By close relative it is herein meant a consanguineous kin of the third degree, a patrilinear or matrilinear uncle. To these it could be possible to add a kin through affinity, Wife's Father.

^{xxvii} Kneeling, rhythmically clapping hands, complimenting, and forming a circle around a lone dancer are translated as symbolic marks of a status difference, and this not only by the author of this paper but also by a considerable number of research participants.