A SHORTAGE OF NAMES:
GREEK PROPER NAMES AND THEIR USE

One common understanding of a proper name is that it should designate an individual person or thing. In the village of Spartohori (Meganisi, Lefkada)[1] I was acquainted with five men called Georgos Politis, five called Nikos Zavitsanos, three called Gerasimos Aryiris, and so forth. Moreover, out of a total adult male population of permanent residents which stood in 1980 at approximately two hundred and five,[2] twenty-eight (or one in seven) were called

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[1] Spartohori is one of three villages (Spartohori, Meganisi, Vathy) on the tiny island of Meganisi (20 square kilometres) which lies off the Ionian island of Lefkada (Lefkas) between it and the west coast of mainland Greece. Field work was conducted between 1977 and 1980, and was made possible by a series of generous grants from the Philip Bagby Bequest, University of Oxford, and subsequently by the SSRC. My thanks are due to both bodies.

[2] This rather cumbersome formula needs apology. Like most villages in rural Greece, Spartohori has been subject to considerable emigration, both overseas and to urban centres in Greece, mainly Athens. Many if not most Spartohoriots resident in Athens and elsewhere return regularly to the village, and some are amongst the most active and prominent in village affairs and should certainly be considered members of the Spartohoriot community. On the other hand, their number is obviously somewhat difficult to calculate (some, for example, might be resident in Spartohori for three or four months of the year and frequently between times, others for only a few weeks of the year, others after an interval of several years). In order to give an exact number, I have restricted myself to what I have elsewhere referred to as the 'core' population, i.e. those

Georgos, and while somehow everyone else always seemed to know which Georgos was being discussed (presumably because there were sufficient contextual clues), I did not. For a professional coffee-shop eavesdropper, i.e. a field-worker, this was a considerable disadvantage, and to be told when I timidly asked 'Er ... which Georgos?' that they were of course discussing *that* Georgos did not help matters. I began to feel there was a rather unfair shortage of personal signifiers, and part of this essay will try to discuss why that should have been so.

It must be admitted that the way people are generally named in Greece follows a pattern whose basic features are familiar throughout Europe and the Europeanized world: that is to say, every Greek possesses both a given or Christian name (his or her *onoma*) and a family name or surname (his or her *eponymo*). In a relatively small and largely endogamous community such as Spartohori, however, these two names, even if used in combination, are often insufficient to specify a particular individual - hence my five Georgos Politises etc. - and it is worth pointing out at this stage that one difference between the Greek manner of naming and that employed in most other European countries is that normally Greeks are limited to these two names since they receive only one given or Christian name.[3] On official documents, however, including the *taftotita* or identity card which Greek citizens are required to carry, greater specificity is given by the inclusion of both one's father's and one's mother's names: thus one could be identified as Georgos Politis son of Nikos and Maria. (And in fact the middle initial that frequently appears, for example, in the names of Greek writers and scholars does not stand for a second Christian or given name, but for the Christian name of their father in the possessive or genitive case.) Greek officialdom remains a touch ethnocentric about this, for although the disembarkation card that one must complete on arrival in Greece is conveniently translated into English, French and German, a certain confusion sets in when the Greek asks for 'name of father' and the English, French and German asks for 'middle name *or* name of father'. I have always been called Roger, but in fact Roger is the last of my three Christian names, the first two being Francis Pelham which were also my father's two Christian names (and my grandfather's two Christian names). On my first trip to Greece I naively attempted to fill out the disembarkation form as accurately as I was able, entering 'Francis Pelham Roger' as *my* given name(s) and 'Francis Pelham' as my father's given name(s) - though admittedly the latter pair were not simultaneously my middle name(s) which in accordance with my passport would be 'Pelham Roger'. This was solemnly corrected by the

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Spartohoriots whose only place of residence is Spartohori. Even this number fluctuates, however, since families might spend a period of their lives in Athens (or overseas) before deciding to return to the island; moreover, of the core population, many of the men are sailors and thus absent from the village for months on end.

[3] This is not without exception amongst the middle class and in urban areas, but it is the norm.

immigration official. 'Francis Pelham' was struck out of my given name(s) leaving only 'Roger' (in fact my third given name) and 'Francis Pelham' was left on the next line as my middle name(s) or name of father. I protested that this was a mistake. *Both* my father and I had the same Christian name(s), and then I possessed a further middle name, 'Roger', not shared with my father. This was declared an impossibility on the grounds that if my father's name(s) was Francis Pelham then this must be my 'middle name(s) or name of father', *ergo*, Roger was my given name. I now make a point of conforming to this expectation.

The use of one's parents' Christian names in addition to one's own Christian or given name (singular) is, however, largely an official one. In Spartohori children were occasionally referred to as, for example, *O Georgos tou Petrou* (Petros' Georgos), and wives were occasionally referred to in a similar manner, for example *I Maria tou Petrou* (Petros' Maria), but these, I think, were genuine cases of description rather than of naming as such.[4] Certainly adult men were not referred to as 'son-of' anyone. What in Spartohori (and in rural Greece in general) takes the place of a middle name, or rather, fulfils some of its functions by enabling one to distinguish onomastically between, say, the various Georgos Politises, is the *paratsoukli* or 'nickname' of which there are two sorts: personal nicknames acquired and carried by individuals, and family nicknames which come very much to resemble surnames with which, I believe, they are historically connected.

In what follows I shall try to make some brief comments on each of these types of names: Christian or given, family or surname, and *paratsouklia* or nicknames.

Christian Names

On the billboards of Melbourne (possibly the third largest Greek city in the world) there is at the moment [Spring 1988] a rather clever advertisement for a particular brand of ouzo. It reads 'Such-and-such ouzo: for every Con, Nick and Haris'. The advertisement is clever, I think, because it transposes an English cliché into a Greek context but in reference to Greeks who have themselves been transposed into an English (or at least anglophone) context. But there is also a hidden irony, for the cliché on which the advertisement trades is a fossilized one. Not many English (or Australians) are these days called Tom or Dick or Harry. 'Tom' has perhaps made something of a come-back in recent years, but the 'traditional' anglophone male names cluster around David, John, Peter, James (and, in Australia, Robert) whilst at the same time the anglophone world is also full of Shaynes, Waynes, Jasons, Garys, Bretts and whatever else ephemeral fashion has dictated for a particular generation. I do not know how many 'Christian' names there

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[4] In some areas of rural Greece a woman's attachment to her husband was marked by the actual loss of her own Christian name and the adoption of her husband's with a feminine suffix (see Campbell 1964: 186).

are for male anglophones, but there are an awful lot. Not so in Greece, however, where fashion has played a lesser part and where 'Con, Nick and Haris' have pretty wide currency. Again, I do not know how many Greek Christian names are actually in use, and I imagine an exhaustive list would run into hundreds, but they are nevertheless a more limited set and not much open to increase by invention. In fact my two hundred and five adult male Spartohoriots shared a total of forty-five Christian names between them. That is, I suppose, a reasonable array, and roughly one Christian name for every four men; but of those two hundred and five males, twenty-eight were called Georgos, seventeen were called Nikos, sixteen were called Gerasimos, twelve were called Stathis, twelve were called Michalis, eleven Andreas and ten Spiros (as it happens 'Con' and 'Haris' do not seem to do particularly well in Spartohori). The point is, however, that in Greece a Christian name is supposed to be indeed a *Christian* name - the name of a saint which tags its bearer as a member of the Christian community. This has certain social and ritual implications which I shall come to shortly, not the least being that what is traditionally celebrated in Greece is not a person's birthday but his or her name-day - the day of the saint whose name that person bears. But the requirement of a *Christian* Christian name has the obvious effect of warding off the vagaries of fashion.

Not, however, entirely. Vicky is now a fashionable girl's name, and to the best of my knowledge it is an importation and owes its popularity to a certain Greek pop-star. Olga, too, is not an uncommon women's name in Greece, and if it sounds rather un-Greek this is because it was borne by a Queen of Greece who was not herself very Greek.[5] More interestingly, however, Greece's rediscovery of its classical past, which can be dated roughly from the end of the eighteenth century and coincides with the move towards national independence, resulted in a recurrent fashion for classical names - Odysseus, Penelope, Leonidas, Herakles, Sokrates etc. The Church (whose hierarchy was against revolution and independence from the Ottoman Empire) also pronounced against this pagan fashion,[6] and I have been told that during the recent period of the Junta (1967-74) efforts were again made to prevent children from being baptized with un-Christian Christian names. But a note of caution is needed here, for, historically, pagan and Christian names have genuinely fused. In common with its equivalents in the rest of the Christian

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[5] Olga of Russia (1851-1926) wife of George I, King of the Hellenes.

[6] A Patriarchal Encyclical of 1819 (from Gregorios V) concludes with the following: 'And the innovation introduced, as we have heard, of giving ancient Greek names to the baptised infants of the faithful, taken as a despising of the Christian practice of naming, is altogether inappropriate and unsuitable ... parents and godparents in future are to name at the time of the holy and secret rebirth with the traditional Christian names, to which pious parents are accustomed, the [names] known in Church, and of the glorious saints that are celebrated by it' (quoted in Clogg 1976: 88).

world, Maria is probably the commonest woman's name in Greece; but Eleni (i.e. Helen) would be one of the competitors, and what name more redolent of Greece's mythological past than that? Yet there is, of course, a St Eleni - just as, indeed, there is a St Socrates. One can often have one's Hellenism and sanctify it too. But there is not, I think, a St Odysseus, and for those who bear non-Christian Christian names a delightful piece of pragmatism solves what might have been a problem - one simply celebrates the saint's day whose name phonetically resembles one's own most closely.

But it is not only the canonical set of saints' names which limits choice or invention. Within village communities two other factors play a part: one is the question of divine patronage; the other is the existence of a hereditary naming system.

Every village has a church. Every church is dedicated to a particular saint. With greater or lesser credulity that saint is held to be the village's patron, and his or her icons mark the entrances and exits to and from the village. Dedications and vows are made to patron saints for it is common knowledge that they do not dispense their favours entirely gratis. One way of paying one's dues is to name a child after a saint. The village church of Spartohori is dedicated to Agios Georgios. I suspect this explains the preponderance of the name Georgos in Spartohori (28 cases out of 205).[7] The second church outside the village (to which the cemetery was attached) was dedicated to Agios Nikolaos; more to the point, Agios Nikolaos is the patron saint of sailors, and the Spartohoriots have always been seafarers, originally in wooden caiques in which they traded around the Ionian Islands and as far afield as Italy, as fishermen (an occupation which they still pursue), and nowadays as crew on cargo ships and tankers sailing literally from China to Peru. This, I think, explains the popularity of the name Nikos (17 cases out of 205). Moreover, some 'local' saints have wider jurisdiction - or rather particular icons or shrines of a saint are deemed miraculous and exert wide influence. One such miracle-working shrine is that of Agios Gerasimos on the island of Cephalonia (where the saint's body lies in its sarcophagus) not far south of Meganisi. Gerasimos is a popular name in Cephalonia, but also throughout the region including Meganisi and the village of Spartohori (16 cases out of 205).

As for the hereditary naming system, it is normal for first-born sons to be called after their paternal grandfather. This means that names will alternate down a line of eldest sons (Georgos, Nikos, Georgos, Nikos etc.); it also means that first-born male cousins will bear the same name after their common grandfather (as will first-born third cousins after their common great-great-grandfather - if the system survives intact that long). Thus within a small village community the retention of names within a family will combine with the tendency to use locally efficient saints' names to limit further the stock of names in actual currency.

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[7] 'Georgos' is the demotic form of 'Georgios', the saints always being referred to by the archaic (Church Greek) form.

The naming system, however, is far from being a rigid one.[8] First, it is only eldest sons whose name is predetermined. Second sons are often named after their maternal grandfather, but this is not a strict requirement. Eldest daughters are usually named after either their maternal or their paternal grandmother, and some effort is usually made with both boys and girls to cater for both sets of grandparents, but again the requirements are not strict. The 'system' (if so it may be called) could better be described in terms of an effort made by each family to keep its stock of names alive. Thus if some particularly beloved uncle or aunt has recently died or emigrated to Australia or America, the next child born to a family may well be named after that uncle or aunt in order 'to keep the name alive', even if this means giving him or her priority over a grandparent. Such commemoration or perpetuation does not, I think, have metaphysical implications for the Spartohoriots; it is, nevertheless, a matter of some importance and in extreme cases even a first-born son may be named after someone other than his paternal grandfather should the family have just suffered some acute loss. Conversely, an aged grandfather may have his name carried on not by a grandson but by a granddaughter if parents fear they may be unable to supply a male successor in time or not at all - hence a Georgos becomes a Georgia. The only prohibition is that sons and daughters are not named after their own father or mother.[9]

I have suggested that the combination of this hereditary naming system with the use of locally efficacious saints' names limits the Christian names in actual currency: thus in Spartohori Georgos is a popular name because it is the name of the village's saint, and once someone is named Georgos it follows that this name will reappear amongst his descendants. Sometimes, however, it is the appeal to a saint which actually disrupts the hereditary system (and once again it should be stressed that the 'system' is more a matter of conventions and preferences than of 'rules'). In a number of cases I discovered that a first-born son had been called Georgos or Gerasimos when I thought they should have been called Petros or Andreas after their grandfather. It turned out that their parents had remained childless for a number of years after marriage and had turned either to the village saint or to the miracle-worker in Cephalonia after whom they were then obliged to name their child. (I might add that such stories were repeated rather gruffly by the men who in my presence attributed credulity in the powers of the supernatural to women alone - nevertheless the

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[8] See Herzfeld 1982 for a discussion of the relationship between 'rules' and apparent exceptions in Greek naming systems, and also for variants in other areas of Greece.

[9] Again, this prohibition is not a universal rule throughout Greece. The second son of the current president of Greece, Andreas Papandreou is named after his father. For rural examples see Herzfeld 1982: 296.

children were called Gerasimos or Georgos, and their grandfather had to wait for another child.)

The question of who actually names a child is, however, an interesting one. From all of the above it is clear that the parents choose the name. Ideologically, however, this is not so. According to Church dogma, and according to the villagers' own construction of the situation, it is a child's baptismal sponsor, his or her *nonos* or *nona*, who has the right to bestow a name on the child whom he or she is baptizing. Here again I must return to the point that in rural Greece a Christian name is supposed indeed to be a Christian name; for it is the ceremony of baptism and the bestowal of a Christian name that marks a child's inclusion into the Christian community and his or her achievement of full human status through spiritual rebirth, and it is not until that ceremony at which the child is introduced by his or her sponsor into the Christian fold that the child has a right to bear a name. The Spartohoriots were quite punctilious on this score. The wife of a friend of mine had recently given birth to their first child, a son. Some weeks after, my friend, Andreas, made his reappearance in the coffee-shop (for in Spartohori even men are required to shun public life for some forty days after the birth of a child).[10] Andreas's aged father was called Gerasimos. It therefore followed that Andreas's son would be called Gerasimos. Having offered Andreas the conventional felicitations on his paternity, I inquired (merely to confirm what I knew would be the case) what his son was called. There was a rather embarrassed silence, and Andreas then said, 'He doesn't have a name.' Not realizing that I had committed a social solecism (or worse), I barged on by saying, 'Well, he'll be called Gerasimos, won't he?' There was an even more embarrassed silence, after which Andreas muttered, 'Probably.' About three months later, Andreas's child was baptized. I went to the baptism, and of course the child was baptized Gerasimos by his sponsor. On the way back I called into one of the coffee-shops in which two old men were talking, one of whom was a relative of Andreas and had also been to the baptism. To my astonishment the other old man asked what name the child had been given. 'Gerasimos,' replied Andreas's relative. 'Ah, Gerasimos,' said the other, rolling it on his tongue as if he'd never heard it before, 'a good name!'

Surnames

Forty-five Christian names, then, accounted for the two hundred and five adult males permanently resident in Spartohori, but with seven names (Georgos, Nikos, Gerasimos, Stathis, Michalis, Andreas and Spiros) accounting for over half that male population. The total number of surnames or family names represented in the village also seems at first quite generous: twenty-eight in all. Of these, however, three were unique to individual nuclear families (recent

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[10] It is normal in rural Greece for women to remain at home and certainly not to enter church for forty days after childbirth and until they have been churched.

immigrants to the village) and of Spartohori's total of one hundred and eighty-six households occupied year-round by at least one person,[11] just over half could be accounted for by only five family names: Aryiris, Zavitsanos, Politis, Ferendinos and Konidaris.

The paucity of surnames in Spartohori can be explained, of course, by the fact that the village is a relatively isolated, relatively closed, relatively endogamous community. Moreover, when marriages have been contracted with outsiders, it has been more normal for women to leave than for men to come in.[12] The situation is not very different from what one would find in a small agricultural village in England, or Ireland or many countries besides. It would be interesting to know, however, at what stage the bulk of the Greek population started to use surnames. I suspect there is no clear answer to this since much must have depended on region and on status. The great aristocratic Byzantine families were of course named; in the Ionian islands the noble families recorded in the Venetian *Libri d'Oro* (subsequently burned by the French revolutionaries) have names which are old enough. Moreover, a census of landowners on Meganisi made by the Venetians in 1720 and a book of baptismal records for the church of Agios Georgios in Spartohori from 1730 onwards record family names - many of which are still carried by the island's present population - which shows that even the peasantry was equipped with them by then. Quite how fixed these surnames were is perhaps another matter, for they show a considerable resemblance to what is now a parallel system of family nicknames and I suspect their generation followed a similar pat-pattern.[13]

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[11] Again Spartohori's fluid demography necessitates this cumbersome phrase. The actual number of houses (in good repair) in Spartohori stood at 252, but of these 18 were permanently closed up (their owners being overseas or permanently resident in Athens) while 48 were occupied on a seasonal basis only.

12 For the normal reasons of patrilineally inherited property - houses and land. Earlier this century, however, Meganisi was the recipient of considerable immigration.

[13] The problem of determining the date of 'fixed' surnames is well illustrated by Angelaki E. Laiou-Thomadakis in her discussion of names (1977: 108-41). In Macedonia in the early fourteenth century peasants were designated by two names, a baptismal name and some other - a profession, an indication of geographical origin, a nickname, or an indication of relationship with someone else. Clearly trade names persisted into the next generation or generations to become 'family' names, but 'the stability of this family name is not very great' (ibid.: 123).

Admittedly, most Greek surnames (like most English surnames) 'mean' something (e.g. Mavromatis, 'Black-eye'); but in fact many of the names carried by the Spartohoriots are simply place-names or names of origin (e.g. Zavitsanos, 'from Zavitsa'; Sklavinitis, 'from Sklavina'), and historically, Spartohori and the island of Meganisi were the recipients from the end of the seventeenth century of a growing population of refugees and/or outlaws from mainland Greece and also from the other Ionian islands. That those who settled on this hitherto uninhabited and conveniently out-of-the-way little island should have become known by their place of origin is not surprising.[14] The surname Thiakodimitris is a nice case in point, for Thiaki is the local form of the name Ithaki, i.e. Ithaca. Thiakodimitris thus means something like 'Dimitris from Ithaca' - and indeed the Thiakodimitris family did come from Ithaca in the nineteenth century.

The Skiotis (or Sikiotis), which accounts for nine households in Spartohori, is another interesting case, for after the fall of the Aegean island of Chios to the Turks in 1695, some twenty-two families of refugee Roman Catholics were eventually settled in Lefkada (which the Venetians had taken in 1684), and the island of Meganisi was made over to them for their support. For various fiscal reasons these Chiot families were constituted as a separate 'nation', the 'Nation Sciotti', i.e. the 'Chiot Nation'.[15] Now it must be that the surname Skiotis presently carried by Spartohoriots on Meganisi means 'Chiot' and is connected with these historical events. But here we strike another point of some importance in the acquisition of surnames, for these Chiots who were settled in Lefkada already possessed surnames which appear in the Venetian records. Moreover the island of Meganisi was made over to them for their support and they were empowered to collect tithes. No mention is made of the Chiots ever having actually lived on Meganisi which, at the time, was about as desperate and uncomfortable a place as could be found and not fit, I think, for Catholic gentry even if they were refugees. It is much more likely that those Spartohoriots who now carry the name Skiotis are not the descendants of the Chiots themselves, but the descendants of those who worked their land on Meganisi for them. They were the Chiots' 'men', and having no surname of their own (or perhaps none that it was wise to own) became known as the Skiotei.

This process of the servant taking the master's name was not, I think, uncommon in rural Greece. What might perhaps represent an extreme case occurs with a very peculiar surname found only on Meganisi (though not in Spartohori) and in Corfu and Messolonghi -

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[14] Meganisi was allegedly uninhabited up to the Venetian conquest of 1684 and subsequently became settled by refugees of various sorts from mainland Greece (then Albania) and also, it would seem, by outlaws and pirates from both mainland Greece and the other Ionian islands.

[15] For the history of these Chiot refugees see Svoronos 1940.

namely Daglas.[16] The Meganisiots were all convinced that this was in fact the Scots name Douglas (which according to one old man proved that the Douglases were Greek). It is possible, however, that a less radical version of the hypothesis is true. Corfu came under British rule in 1814, and after the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1828 mainland Greece received its share of British romantics and soldiers of fortune of whom Lord Byron, who died at Messolonghi, is but the best known. It is by no means inconceivable that a name like Douglas was transmitted to the locals.

Nicknames

The point of the above is that inasmuch as surnames amongst the peasantry seem often to have been adopted as a result of particular circumstances or experiences, they begin to look very much like the *paratsouklia* or nicknames which currently constitute a sort of parallel system to the official surnames on everyone's identity card.

As I have already mentioned, however, nicknames are of two types: personal and family. Personal nicknames are acquired in a manner probably familiar to most of us. They refer to some particular characteristic of their bearer, or (more commonly) to some little history. Thus one man, always known as Psim, had in his youth and during his military service once addressed a young woman seated next to him in a railway station as '*Psychi mou*' ('My soul'), an affectionate but very familiar appellation which, in the Meganisiot accent, almost contracts to '*Psim*', and at which she, being a better class of young lady, took offence - or at least so the story goes. He has been Psim ever since. Moreover, he is the only Psim on Meganisi. This proper name thus serves to give him unique specification, and in fact every man on Meganisi has a *paratsoukli* - though such nicknames are more often used as terms of reference than as terms of address. Not every man, however, has acquired his own and personal *paratsoukli*. Many, perhaps even the majority, carry the nickname of their father (or grandfather or great-grandfather). Thus my friend and protector in Spartohori was universally known as Gregoris Politis Tsigaras ('Cigarette'), just as his son was Georgos Politis Tsigaras - the nickname having originally derived from Gregoris's grandfather to end up functioning as a second surname for his descendants. Indeed, before the requirements of officialdom fixed every one with a surname, one might presume that this was exactly what a surname was - an hereditary nickname. Many men, however, carry two nicknames - a personal nickname and their family nickname. Quite how a personal nickname becomes converted into a family nickname so that it is transmitted to the next generation to displace the hereditary nickname

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[16] Daglas was one of the commonest family names in Katomeri, but there was no Daglas in Spartohori. There appears, in fact, to have been relatively little intermarriage between the villages of Meganisi, which hold each other in mutual contempt.

derived from some earlier ancestor I do not know. Clearly, however, the conversion does occur, and I can only guess that it is (or was) a somewhat uncertain process which depends on the fame (or notoriety) of an individual and consequently on the likelihood of his descendants being known after him.

The result, however, is that those five families whose official surnames account for over half the village have in fact fissioned over time into smaller agnatic groupings designated by family nicknames, and it is these nicknames which really count. As I mentioned at the outset of this essay, there were five men in Spartohori called Georgos Politis; there was only one, however, called Georgos Politis Tsigaras. Moreover, though every Politis might assume himself to be related to every other Politis in some way or other (just as almost every Spartohoriot is related to every other Spartohoriot in some way or other), a Tsigaras *knows* that those who share his family nickname are indeed his relatives, the descendants of a common ancestor probably within living memory.[17] And, of course, such knowledge is important in a community which is largely endogamous but which also respects the extensive rules of consanguinity and affinity set down by the Orthodox Church. Nowadays a Politis might well marry a Politis; but a Tsigaras would never marry a Tsigaras. If the rule of exogamy is important to the definition of kinship groups, then the *paratsoukli* functions as a better label for the group than the official surname. Indeed, I suspect that all that has happened is that state control and the requirement of a legal identity have helped to make endure a family name that once would have changed every three or four generations.

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[17] For the technically minded, possession of a common *paratsoukli* was offered to me by an informant as the definition of the (agnatic) *soi* since possession of a common surname was considered far too common.