

The Matrilineal Customs of Karpathos: The Ancient Ritual of "Eftha" Survives

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Special to The National Herald

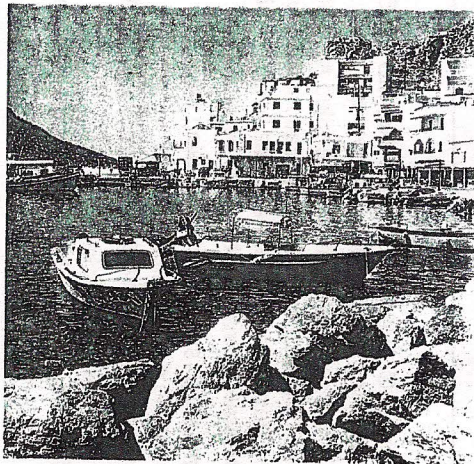
The island of Karpathos, located between Crete and Rhodes, is the legendary home of Prometheus. Some myths claim that all the Titans lived there once and called Karpathos the "land of the Titans." Because its jagged coastline provided so many safe havens for pirates, Karpathos is also known as "land of the pirates."

Karpathos is also a land where women held and continue to hold considerable moral, social and economic power. Karpathos is not matriarchal, in that women do not rule men, but matrilineal, in that property is usually passed from mother to the first daughter (the protokori), who is named after her mother's mother (not her father's mother as is customary in elsewhere in Greece). In return, the protokori is expected to take care of her parents as they age.

Variations existed. Some parents left their holdings to a first son or a relative named after the father; others gave each child a share, as is now required by post WW II laws. Yet these laws still permit protokoris to receive the lion's share and the tradition remains strong. As in the past, women without daughters frequently leave much of their inheritance to a niece, another female in the maternal line or, writes Lillian Bertos in 1981 "to the second son, who has been named after his maternal grandfather, rather than eldest son ... named after his paternal grandfather ... and if a male inherits lands from his mother, they are to be given to the daughter bearing her name."

Some contend that this matrilineal tradition may stem from early "mother right" agricultural communities allegedly located in parts of Europe, Egypt, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. By 1000 BC, most had been conquered by groups with more patriarchal values. But relics and vestiges remain in certain areas, including perhaps Karpathos. Most of these early invaders, it is argued, were nomadic, not seafaring peoples, and hence reluctant to brave the turbulent waters of the Karpathian Sea for an island with so many barren mountains and so little fertile soil.

Later patrilineal groups, from the Venetians and various crusader bands to the Turks, did conquer



In the summer the port city of Pegadia is flooded with tourists, but despite them and a history of invasions, Karpathian traditions survive.

Karpathos, but few made it their home. Reputedly after the Turks took over Karpathos in 1537, they were so afraid of its pirates that instead of inhabiting Karpathos, they sent officers to collect taxes from the local populace, most of whom lived in villages high up in the mountains to avoid pirate attacks.

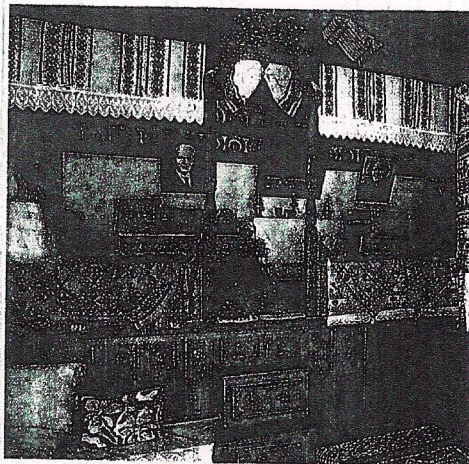
Karpathos, my grandparents' birthplace, is the second largest island of the Dodecanese. Yet save for relatively small olive groves, vineyards, orchards and fields, most of the soil is rocky. Cultivation requires enormous effort. Until recently, water was also scarce. For centuries such limited resources compelled many Karpathians, primarily men, to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Before they began coming to America, they left for the Middle East, Egypt, Africa, Australia and elsewhere, especially nearby Rhodes and Asia Minor. Prior to WWI and even as late as WWII, men who returned to Karpathos for a bride were often forced by economic factors to leave her there and return for visits (and to father children) when finances permitted.

In the absence of their men, Karpathian women tilled the land, pressed olives for oil and grapes for

wine; managed small businesses and other financial matters; maintained religious traditions; functioned as single parents and coped with invaders who demanded their land, food, labor or their daughters.

Today families are rarely separated and wealth is no longer measured in olive trees and goats. But centuries of keeping the home fires burning undoubtedly endowed Karpathian women with a certain self-confidence and status, which, most of my Karpathian relatives proudly assert, still make the birth of a daughter as much cause for celebration as the birth of a son. In contrast, recent research indicates that in most areas of the world, the United States included, not only men, but women too, show a distinct preference for a son over a daughter for their first born or as an only child.

In the "Eftha," an ancient ritual still performed on Karpathos, which refers to the 7th day after a birth, the mother and her mother play a central role. Based on written accounts, Karpathian friends and relatives, and the "Efthas" I've attended, the particulars of the ceremony vary from one village to the next and have altered over time.



The main room of a traditional Karpathian home has an upper level (called a sofa) for sleeping and devotions and a lower level for guests

Yet the basics remain relatively unchanged.

Seven days after a birth, family and friends (men, women and children) gather at the parents' home with gifts of food and drink. The mother and her mother then wrap the baby in (or pass the baby through) the father's best shirt (if a girl) or in (or through) the mother's best blouse (if a boy), symbolizing the child's need to love and respect the opposite sexed parent. The baby is then placed in a silk sheet held up by several protokoris. As they rock the baby back and forth, they sing mandinathes (self-composed rhymed couplets) honoring the newborn and its relatives. Traditionally, in some areas, this first set of mandinathes were primarily praises of the mother and grandmother.

In a table in the center of the room is a silver tray and the Aleuvra, a gooey mixture of wheat, salt and water (the essentials of life) spiced with cinnamon and cloves. The Aleuvra is shaped like a crater, yet soft enough to be cut by a fork. Inside the crater are fresh honey and butter, representing hopes for a rich sweet life for the child.

Nearby are seven thin candles in

a tray or in small bowls of sugar. One candle is for Christ, one for the Virgin Mary, and the rest, each for a Christian saint. The saint whose candle extinguishes first becomes the baby's patron saint.

After the mother and grandmother light the candles, guests place gifts of gold, money or religious significance into the silver tray, then take a forkful of Aleuvra, dip it into the honey and butter and eat it. Seven forkfills later, they bless the baby and its relatives often in the form of an original, highly personal and emotional mandinatha. Lamentations for deceased family members are usually coupled with wishes that the hares (graces, gifts, best traits) of the deceased live on in the newborn.

Music, dancing and food follow. Afterwards, guests take home the extras. The uneaten Aleuvra, however, is left for the Moirai (the Fates) who are expected to come that night and bless the child with a good life.

Oral tradition describes a pre-Christian "Eftha" where candles were named after the nine muses, the daughters of Zeus and Memory. These goddesses represent various forms of art and science. Despite

certain scholarly debates, there is a general consensus that this all female cast of talent included Calliope (epic poetry), Clio (history), Erato (lyric poetry and song), Euterpe (flute playing), Melpomene (tragedy), Terpsichore (dance), Thalia (comedy) and Urania (astronomy). The candle extinguishing first indicated the Muse who would endow the baby with her special gift.

Although the "Eftha" still lives, there are no statistics on what percentage of Karpathians, either on Karpathos or abroad, observe the tradition or in what form. I live in Maryland, but as the protokori of a protokori of a protokori, I feared that the Furies (also females) might bury me alive in an Aleuvra if I didn't have some kind of "Eftha" for my grandchild. Since my daughter married outside the faith, the candles were named after the muses not the saints and, in deference to the younger generations' insistence on personal choice, public blessings would not be required. Instead guests could write their good wishes on small slips of paper and put them on a silver tray for the parents to read later.

Also, the guests, even the Greek Americans, most of whom had never heard of an Aleuvra, could not be expected to eat seven forkfills of what looked like a glob of old clay with butter and honey on top. Instead small pieces of bread (white, whole grain, gluten-free and vegan-style) and bowls of organic honey (and sugar-free jelly) were provided for those who wished to adhere to the old custom in more modern way. After a brief description of the "Eftha" and a moment of silence for the departed, I put on some Karpathian music and sang a few mandinathes in Greek.

Years later, people who attended my watered down version of the Eftha, still talk about it. Several wished they had been given an "Eftha" instead a baby shower where women played games like "Dirty Diaper" or "Baby Bingo."

"I couldn't understand a word of those Greek poems," one friend commented. "But if someone had sung to me like that after I had my baby, I'd have felt like a goddess or something." Perhaps one purpose of the "Eftha" is precisely that - to reveal to young couples the divine nature of their newborn and their roles as parents.