



photos courtesy of Aphrodite Matsakis

Village Staples

Panegyria, Mantinades, Psilokouloura—just a few traditions that embody Greek village life on Karpathos

By Aphrodite Matsakis

Some communities are based solely on geography, where people live in the same area, but don't necessarily know or interact with each other; others, such as professional associations, on common interests; today, we even have virtual communities, which only exist in cyberspace. But closest to our hearts,

as Greek Americans, are communities based on warm personal relationships, where people share common values and history, celebrate life's joys together and support each other during hard times. Such emotionally and culturally based communities can be found in family clusters, church groups and in many Greek villages.

The twelve villages of the island of Karpathos, located between Crete and Rhodes, are no exception. Despite centuries of foreign rule and recent social change, many of the folk dances, elaborate traditions and foods reserved for weddings, baptisms and other major life events, along with the holy day panegyria (festivals) and the nightly peripato (promenade) persist, albeit in somewhat altered forms than in the past.

CELEBRATORY PREPARATIONS

Like all Karpathian panegyria, residents of my father's village of Othos take a community approach to celebrating the feast day of St. Panteleimon, which occurs every July 27. Almost everyone helps prepare the feast for celebration. Some help with the traditional meal served on the church courtyard following the liturgy; others host open houses for fellow villagers and visitors from the Karpathian diaspora.

The men roast lamb and tend to huge pots of bulgar and trays of roast potatoes; the young serve and clean up; and the women prepare the desserts and specialties such as, psilokouloura (small hard sesame covered breads designed in elaborate circles and braids), sesammomeli (honey mixed with sesame seeds), and Karpathian baklava.

On Karpathos, people refer to baklava that can be found anywhere in Greece as xeniko (foreign) baklava, which is made with layers of phyllo dough and chopped nuts and sweetened with syrup or honey. Karpathian baklava is simply referred to as baklava on the island, and it is nothing like what most think of when one speaks of baklava.

Making the uniquely flavored and shaped Karpathian baklava is a complex process that begins by rolling out dough and then cutting it into one-inch strips. The strips are then folded into a criss-cross diagonal oval-shaped design where one oval ring is surrounded by another, with some space in between. The oval rings, held together with cloves, are then fried in oil, saturated with a honey syrup, and sprinkled with cinnamon. Sometimes people add chopped almonds or pistachios.

Because the dessert is so labor intensive, making Karpathian baklava is a group effort. In fact, the preparation of this baklava is a unique village custom in this area. As women and children of all ages bake together, they talk about matters large and small. Even those who say little can experience a sense of belonging.

"The women don't just roll dough. They cry about their lives and hug each other. They talk about happy things too, tell jokes, give each other advice and sing Karpathian songs," commented my daughter. "Mom, Karpathian women don't need a women's support group. They live in one!" Even today, despite bakeries and imported boubounieres, women still gather together to cook, bake and assemble.

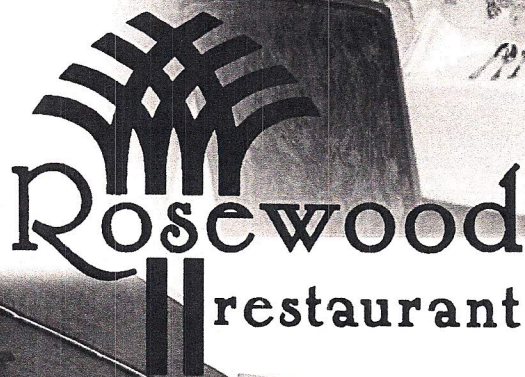
CAPTIONS: *Opposite page:* Weddings on Karpathos are a community event. Relatives of the bride and groom parade with the groom to the bride's house to escort her to church. They are led by musicians who sing mandinades to the new couple, as do others. Notice the man in the middle carrying a huge tray of pastries, as a gift to the bride's family.

Top: Musicians play a lyra and laouto at the wedding. *Middle photos:* Guests dance the sousta. The guests with handkerchiefs pinned to their shoulder are family members or close friends. *Bottom:* Everyone gathers to hear the mandinades sung to the new couple, often clapping along



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cook, bake and assemble koufeta for weddings and baptisms or prepare *koliva* for funerals.

JOYFUL TRADITIONS

Saints day celebrations best reflect many of the Karpathian traditions that have been in place since the 15th century. For example, on the day commemorating St. Panteleimon, people first attend Divine Liturgy. After the liturgy, people circle St. Panteleimon Church three times, dancing a slow distinctively Karpathian dance to the music of a lyra (a three-stringed wooden instrument), a *laouto* (a type of lute), a violin and perhaps a *tsambouna* (a small bagpipe type of instrument). This tradition is truly symbolic to the meaning of *panegyri*, which literally means "everyone going around together."

After the afternoon meal, the musicians begin playing in the middle of courtyard, thus commencing hours of lively sousta dancing, which involves shuffling forwards then backwards to an intricate rhythm. Although similar to other soustas, the Karpathian Sansta has its own unique steps and melodies. Arms are always criss-crossed, bringing the dancers physically closer than if they were simply holding hands, thus promoting a sense of unity.

All Karpathian dances are danced in a circle—a universal symbol of unity, wholeness and the life cycle; and Karpathian celebrations have so many circles people can't help but feel connected. The musicians, who face each other in a circular pattern, are encircled by circles of people seated all around them. Then comes the dance circle, which is encircled by rings of people seated behind them. This arrangement permits more people to see each other face-to-face and more opportunities for verbal and non-verbal interaction than if the musicians, dancers and non-dancers were further apart or in rows.

One of the most socially binding forms of interaction is through *mantinades*, song poems of two-to-four 15-syllable couplets, which are also found in Crete. The musicians start the *mantinades*, but soon others join in with theirs. Some *mantinades* are standard or written beforehand. But most are spontaneous, often

Panegyri

“pan” – all or everybody,
“gyri,” – to go around

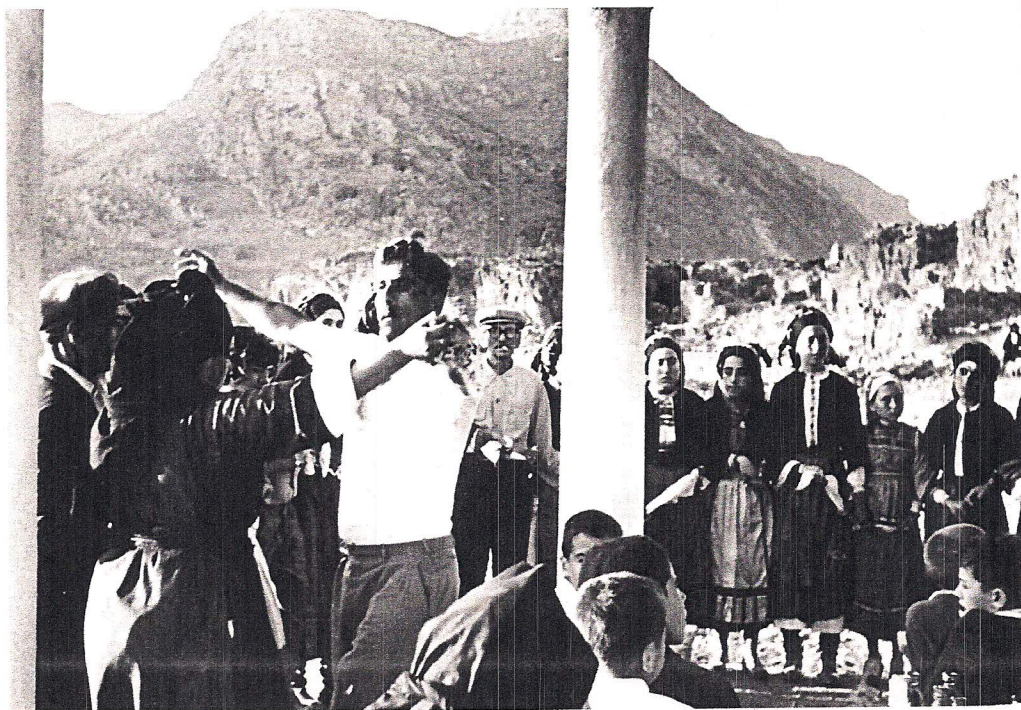
It literally means
“everybody going
around together.”

highly personal expressions of the singers' feelings about almost anything—love, loss or aging; their village, Karpathos or God; or their delight in nature, their child or their goat. By describing common human emotions, evoking their native land (and telling funny stories), *mantinades* help people identify with each other. Since Karpathians grow up with *mantinades* and considerable poetic license is allowed, anyone can create one, even a child.

Mantinades cement human bonds most powerfully when they publically proclaim affection, appreciation or respect for a particular person (or family). Imagine the sense of *koinonia* (community) you'd experience if someone sang (or recited) a *mantinades* honoring you in front of others! At engagements and weddings, the new couple's parents do more than exchange gifts of gold, sweets and wine in a highly ritualized manner: they exchange *mantinades* praising or blessing each other, each other's families and missing loved ones. Sometimes they forgive each other too (if warranted). *Mantinades* are also sung at baptisms, name's day and Efta birth celebrations or at outside cafés, whenever musicians and villagers spontaneously decide it's time for Karpathian music to fill the air.

DAILY RITUALS

Every night (weather permitting) most people are outdoors socializing. Some sit outside their home or near a church or *vrisi* (fountain) while others take a *peripato*, a long walk around the village. The *peripato* isn't a power walk; it's a “let's enjoy nature and visit with the neighbors” walk. People greet each



other, often stopping to talk or go to a *kafeneio* or sweet shop. Despite the popularity of television, the *peripeta* continue, allowing people to know each other in ways that few who live in fast-paced urban areas know their neighbors.

The beauty of Karpathian customs is that they are not age segregated, which helps maintain intergenerational ties. Yet sometimes the very traditions that bind a village together can have certain restrictive effects or lead to gossip. Nevertheless, all the research indicates that people who participate in and feel a sense of belonging to a community report more life satisfaction, suffer fewer emotional ills and enjoy better recovery from surgery and serious illness than those with few personal ties and no group affiliation.

At a recent *panegyri*, a tourist child instinctively joined the sousta line. She didn't know the steps and although she danced for hours, she never learned them. But the sparkle in her eyes showed that she learned something more important: the joy and security of *koinonia* as expressed in the linked arms of the sousta circle. It remains to be seen how increased technology, tourism and pop culture will affect ancient Karpathian customs. Meanwhile we who have had the privilege of participating in these traditions will cherish them forever. ☺



The panegyri of St. John is an occasion for dancing the sousta and wearing of traditional clothing in the remote village of Olympos. Men will accompany the dancers on traditional instruments, including the tsambouna and the lyra.

Karpathian Baklava

On Karpathos, people refer to baklava that can be found anywhere in Greece as *xeniko* (foreign) baklava, which is made with layers of phyllo dough and chopped nuts and sweetened with syrup or honey. Karpathian baklava is a diamond-shaped oval dessert that can last up to six months because no dairy products are used.

Baklava Ingredients:

2.2 lbs all-purpose flour
1 cup olive oil, plus oil for frying
cloves
1 teaspoon salt
water
roasted almonds or walnuts to serve

Syrup Ingredients:

2.2 lbs sugar
2 cups water
juice of one lemon
5 or 6 kernels of Mastic from Chios

Directions for Baklava:

In a bowl, pour the olive oil, salt and one-half cup water. Knead by hand. If you see that the dough has too much flour in it, which may cause the dough to break into small pieces, add more water until the dough becomes smooth and tight. Let the dough rest.

Divide the dough into pieces. Form each piece of dough into a thick, oblong shape.

There are two ways to create Karpathian Baklava: a traditional method that uses a dowel rod (see images), and a more modern process, which uses a pasta machine.

For the traditional method, roll out each piece of dough thinly using a dowel rod. (Make sure to flour the dowel rod and the table you are using so the dough does not stick to either item.)

Then fold or roll the dough that was just rolled out into a log shape. Slice the log into one-inch strips. Separate the layers of each

section of the log using your fingers and then secure with a clove. Repeat the process for each piece of baklava.

If you opt to use a pasta machine to create a thin layer of dough, run each piece of dough through a pasta machine. First run the dough through the machine in position 1, then run the dough through the machine in position 3, and lastly run it through in position 5.

Lay the strips of dough on a flat surface and cut the dough into one-inch strips.

Take one strip of dough and wrap it around your finger four or five times. When finished wrapping the dough around your finger, secure it with a clove. Repeat step for all pieces of baklava.

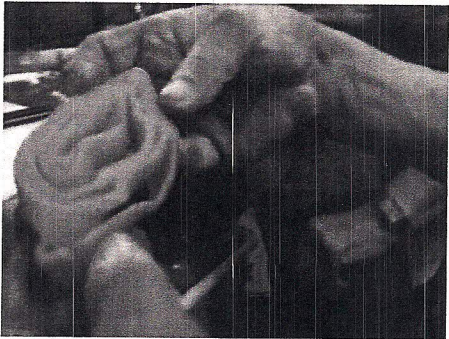
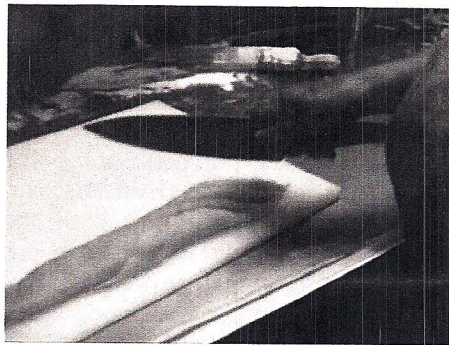
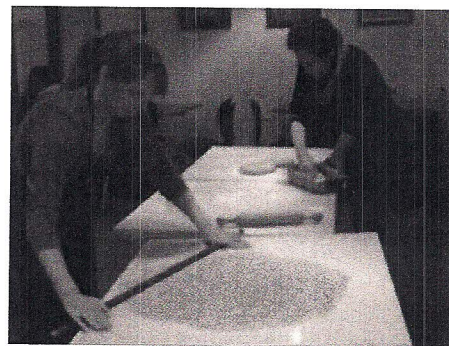
In a deep frying pan, put in oil and fry each piece of baklava.

Directions for the Syrup:

In a saucepan, place 2.2 pounds sugar and 2.1 cups (1/2 liter) water. Let it boil until it thickens. For an aromatic syrup, submerge a cheese cloth sack with Mastic from Chios and the rind of half of a lemon, and squeeze the juice of half of a lemon into the mixture. Let the syrup boil until it thickens. When ready, turn off the fire and with a slotted spoon, drench each piece of baklava in the syrup.

Remove, and sprinkle with roasted almonds or walnuts.

—*recipe courtesy of eliasmamalakis.gr and translated by Amalia Deligiannis*



Images from Making of Traditional Baklava Video from <http://www.karpathian.com.au/>