Chapter Four

Hierophanies and Miracles

It was God, God who did it all. Religious people could see them; blasphemous ones could not. I had this boy, a saintly kid. He’d spend his time in the church from an early age, incensing and doing all kinds of chores. Lazaros, his name was—he’s here, in the photo. So…this youth kept seeing light. He says to Yannis, “father, see that light?”—“I don’t see it, son.”—“It’s over there; look,” he says.—“Well, I can’t see it.”—“Can’t you? Well, I see it.”

He saw St Catherine, a very miraculous icon. He was very young and he was sleeping together with the other kids. Suddenly the whole room lit up and her shadow nodded to him to keep silent, to say nothing;¹ she approached him and said, “don’t speak out; I love you. Get up, come over here.” She had him get up and they went to the door. I had this little canister by the door, and she says “don’t speak out² and come with me; I love you.” He was little, no more than ten, and he got scared; he stayed in the room where we slept [the canister in his hand], and called out at me…“Mother!” As soon as he’d said that, she was gone; he looked up, and our Lady had gone up in the icon stand. The next day he woke up crazed with fear. […] Whenever he said his prayers he saw the Holy Virgin. At some point I go up;—“Mother…”—“What is it, son?”—“Tell me, who is the saint with the forks in this icon?”—“It’s St Catherine—why?”—“I’ll tell you something, but say nothing to father or he’ll scold me…”—“I won’t!” And he told me his story…how the Holy Virgin approached his bed “and the whole room shone. She took me by the hand, had me get up and said she wanted to take me out and tell me something; she was going to take me somewhere, and I shouldn’t [tell anyone].”—“Oh, son, it was the Holy Virgin and she loves you,” I said, “she may have wanted to show you some treasure or something.” He was scared.³

There appears to be no surprise, not a trace of fear in these encounters between pious people and saints. Awe comes later, as the miracle is told in words and becomes part of collective memory.⁴ As in many parts of Greece and Cyprus, each Madonna in Lipsi has her own name and Grace, no matter how the priest tries to explain that there is only one Holy Virgin with many different designations depending mainly upon
her representations. The excerpt I just cited makes it clear that Virgin Mary prevails and may well be equated with other female saints.

**Apparitions of the Holy Virgin**

Every icon, wherever it may be (in a church, shrine, home, or boat) has its own history, and the further back in time this history goes the more awe it commands when verbalized.

My mother had some icons there—one tinkled like a ring, an old one, many years old—I tell her “the ring is tinkling”—its sound. So I see this woman in the house, all in black, guarding me! She has tears in her eyes, and says to me “get up! Go tell your aunts to bring back the collection they stole from me.”—“Motheeere!” I say, “Panaghia!”—you were there, too [addressing his wife]—“all dressed in black, with shiny clothes and a headscarf” and I tell her, “Get up”—“where are we going?”—“To the aunt who lives closest.”—“Aunt, Aunt! Tell me, did you go to any monastery and do something? I just saw Panaghia Kimissi,”5 I say to her.—“Oh, my child, yes!” she says, “we went to...we made a collection”; people were poor back then, as I told you, so one of them had given some oil, another one some incense...they ate the oil and forgot all about it. Rain started to fall, they were drenched, and went back barefoot! To Kimissi—you hear?6

Each Panaghía in Lipsi has her own miraculous deeds, her own church, and ultimately her own narrative cycle7. Thus in addition to the sanctity of each site associated with apparitions of the Holy Virgin, the timeline of the community’s history in the modern era continues to be invested with miracles and hierophanies. The following is an excerpt from a life story that refers to WWII and can be also seen as oral history. My aged interlocutor, 87 years old in 2001, vividly describes how he was arrested by the Italians for spying for the British between 1942 and 1945:

They took me to Leros. I was interrogated for 8 days in Leros, every day. On the eighth day a skipper—a friend of ours, a good man—came over to pick up some barrels and bring them back with wine from our own. [...] They brought me out and said, “Do you see him? We’ve cut his hair. With you, it will be the nose and the ears. Tomorrow you’ll talk, or it will be your last day.” The next day was a Friday. The man who’d come for the barrels heard all this; he heard it, my girl, came back to the island and went at once to my father. He says, “tomorrow is your son’s last interrogation. We’ll have to help him as much as we can, if he