Chapter Six

Ordinary Days and Talks

People in Lipsi love the winter, even if it is the summer that provides them with most of the income with which to meet the year’s expenses. The tourist season essentially ends by late August, and the population becomes more “compact” again: the tourists and the expatriate relatives leave, the schoolteachers return, and life goes back to its familiar everyday pattern, less stressful and focused on the joys of family and friends, on hunting and fishing, and on animal and land farming: the local authority’s call for a sustainable, environmentally sound, development of the local economy and life and the advent of the financial crisis have led to a switch back to primary production, which now goes into the hands of the younger generation and attempts to introduce modern methods. A large part of winter’s tasks is focused on the summer: construction and maintenance of buildings and boats, fishing octopi and deep-freezing them for next summer, looking after the cattle, crops, and greenhouses. Before the advent of tourism, the year’s provisions were made in summer and fall, whereas now they are made in winter to meet demand in the summer months (high shipping rates have a considerable effect on the cost of living in Lipsi).

Daily Chat

Every time I found myself in Lipsi outside the tourist season I was able to follow a quiet pace of joyfulness and an unaffected sociability that was greatly conducive to participant observation. This serenity helped my integration in the community for as long as I was there. It is typical of the hospitality I experienced that I had an open invitation to lunch at three or four homes, where I was taken into account in the daily cooking in case I stopped by: most restaurants remain closed in winter, and my friends knew I had no time to see to my meals as I had to run around the place from morning till night.

A typical day for many people begins with a morning coffee at 6, a snack around 10–11, lunch around two o’clock or earlier, a brief midday rest, especially for the aged, the afternoon coffee around 4,
and the exchange of visits, or “neighboring” from six o’clock onward, where they serve a tisane made with aniseed, or mountain tea, or hyssop and honey. Given this pace, chat flows freely in ever-working kitchens around messy tables, with the TV sets on, the many children coming and going between school and other activities, mothers screaming about unfinished homework and neglected errands: conversation is open, with many participants coming and going, after a while indifferent about the recording.

Children, just as adults, take their turn in processing the oral-narrative stimuli of their culture, conveying what they hear and at the same time producing their own oral narratives. I remember the nursery-school children arriving at the beach of Lientou one morning in June, holding hands and chanting: “Ex-cur-sion-ex-cur-sion, oh your smelly shoe!” (e-kdhromí-e-kdhromí-to-pa-poû-tsi-sou-vromei?) Or the improvised boys’ counting-out rhyme my son repeated to me, all-excited after playing with his friends: “Milk-milk with locusts/full of cockroaches—the sweetest of all menus/you drink some and get sick/and then you die—you’re out!” In my view, schoolchildren in Lipsi continue to live and grow under the terms of an oral culture, which goes some way toward explaining the learning difficulties of several students, even relatively good ones, particularly with essay writing.

There is more chat outside the home, at the harbor, in coffee shops and ouzo bars, at the shipyard, in bakeries, groceries, and hairdressers’ salons. This chat keeps community members abreast of news and aware of problems, organizes them (the municipal authority’s proclamations are also oral, announced from a car all over the village’s road network, as with the criers of old, and disseminated as news); it helps people remember major events as well as those who are no longer among them. These chats—exchanged within a small, closed, and essentially oral community as news items through which its members communicate as a whole—spread like rumors and thus get repeated by word of mouth. The funniest and most important ones also go from one generation to the next, forming a broader narrative substra-tum that straddles “tradition,” everyday life, reality, and the imagi-nary. It was thus that several of my interlocutors referred me to the “author” of one of these stories, which started out some decades ago as a love letter addressed to his future wife:

I’d been working at the Papastratos factory for eight years. […] And then [Stassini] walks by—she was from Galaxidi, not made up but as the day she was born. […] So I go and dress up, I had a gabardine out-fit I’d bought in Malta, I was all spruced up. […] I go and sit outside,