

## Teaching, Researching and Living in the Field: The Challenges of Applied Ethnography as Education

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### Abstract:

Every summer for the past four years, a small group of Greek and foreign students gather at the mountainous village of Gonies Malevyziou in central Crete to participate in the monthly International Field School “Engaging Local Communities in Heritage Management through Archaeological Ethnography”. The School is organised by the Heritage Management Organization and the Cultural Association of Gonies. Teaching ethnography to non-anthropologists in the field is challenging as it brings multiple and interchanging roles for teachers and students alike. In this process of collective ethnographic learning, where the teaching setting is also our living setting and research setting, we often wonder about the entangled roles in the production of knowledge and interpretations articulated through theoretical readings, daily chores and lived experience. The demands of active research running side by side with methodological instruction and teaching create different expectations that shape the learning experience in unpredictable ways. This paper discusses some of the issues involved in this process: What is the local community members’ position as producers, instigators, and transmitters of this knowledge? How are our multiple identities as teachers, researchers, friends, visitors, and locals/non-locals articulated within and outside the field? Finally, how is the knowledge produced managed and controlled by the community and the people responsible for the summer school?

**Keywords:** archaeological ethnography, community engagement, cultural heritage, summer school

### Introduction

Every summer for the past four years, a small group of students gathers at the mountain village of Gonies Maleviziou in central Crete to participate in the month-long International Field School “Engaging Local Communities in Heritage Management through Archaeological Ethnography” (Anagnostopoulos, Kyriakidis, Stefanou 2022). This summer school is integral to the “Three Peak Sanctuaries of Central Crete” archaeological research project. It is organised by the Heritage Management Organization in collaboration with the Cultural Association of Gonies. The field school calls participants to learn by assisting in the ongoing ethnographic research and community engagement projects. Locals, in turn, actively participate in this field school by acting as instructors on their ways of life and by controlling the content of knowledge produced (Stefanou, Anagnostopoulos, Kyriakidis 2017). These particular aspects of this School shape its relative strengths in teaching research and engagement and create many ethical, methodological, and theoretical issues briefly addressed in what follows.

The “Three Peak Sanctuaries of Central Crete” archaeological project was initiated by Dr Evangelos Kyriakidis in 2007 (Kyriakidis, forthcoming; Kyriakidis and Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Kyriakidis and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). It is a long-term study of material from three previously excavated Minoan peak sanctuaries<sup>1</sup> in the mountainous area of Malevizi in central Crete. The main sanctuary studied, Filiorimos, is directly above the village of Gonies, while the other two are far from the nearest inhabited area. This focus, coupled with pressure from the local community, made the team relocate to Gonies and make the village its vantage point.

Archaeological ethnography (Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009; Hamilakis 2011; Castañeda and Matthews 2008, Mortensen and Hollowell 2009) was an integral part of this project from very early on. Ethnographic research aimed to investigate how locals interacted with and felt about the remains of the ancient past in their vicinity. Our methods combined ethnographic fieldwork with public archaeology actions. We intended to involve

as many people as possible in producing knowledge about the history of the place and the management of its heritage. In time, this ethnographic research created a space of encounter between locals, experts, artists and institutions that led to the communal production of knowledge about the place.

The heritage management aspect came into the picture as a response to the wishes of locals for the regeneration of their village. Gonies is now a small community of some 180 inhabitants, mostly elderly. Most of these people have witnessed a traumatic decline in the once robust village community that peaked at over a thousand souls in the first decade after WWII. Successive efforts to curtail the outflux of people caused by urbanization and the drop in profit of agricultural produce and animal husbandry were unsuccessful, leaving the current villagers with bitterness and disappointment. Despite these intense feelings, the village community – a dispersed but closely knit group of people living on several continents, in rural and urban places, today connected through technological innovations such as social media – maintains a strong sense of resilience that pivots on the location itself and its manifestations in memory and identity.

The village's current inhabitants do not privilege any connection with the ancient past since they draw their identity from much later histories of involvement in the irredentist struggle of Crete for union with Greece in the 19th century. Their stories are of brigandage, forced mobility, and male bravery, not of place-based genealogies that reach back to Minoan times. Despite this fact, archaeology plays a very prominent role in the community, mainly through the actions of specific individuals. It is seen as a way to bring visitors to the village and create jobs and services. It is also seen to protect communal land from the encroachment of energy companies, who lease large areas of pastures for a few euros to install solar panels and air turbines. Finally, there is a sense of local pride involved since neighbouring municipalities have already claimed their Minoan paths to the top of Mount Ida. Local scholars are struggling to put their village on the map of the itinerary that king Minos supposedly took every nine years to the tallest peak in Crete to pay respect to his father Zeus and renew his mandate. Therefore, the presence of archaeologists in the village is welcomed if also closely watched and controlled by locals.

Gradually, a research project that initially began as an investigation of the remains of the ancient past in the present became a historical ethnographic project about the recent past and the future of a rural community. As the ethnographic research progressed and began to engage more and more people, our interlocutors urged us to focus more on the recent history of the place. We gradually realised that, besides our appointed role as archivers of local knowledge (people tell us that we are writing “the big book of Gonies”), we also play an essential social role in engaging, supporting and – why not – entertaining people who have very few outlets for sociability and creativity. This realisation came very early on and influenced how we did research and public archaeology in the village. In this learning environment, knowledge about the past would be communally created. Locals would have the opportunity to act as instructors of their ways of life (cf. Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008:1).

### **Designing and implementing an ethnographic Field School**

The field school began in 2014 to complement our ethnographic research in the field. We invited students from different backgrounds to learn methods for social research and archaeological ethnography by doing research in the field. The cultural association of the village and the community itself offered housing and spaces for teaching. Because of the limited capacities of the school in terms of personnel and the community itself (housing, resources, provisions for students), participation is usually limited to five or six students each year. Lectures are relatively few, mainly presenting our approach to research and training students in research methods while also initiating them to each year's theme (e.g. archaeological landscapes, weaving, oral history and material culture, memories of WWII). Most of the time in the village is spent in participant observation and ethnographic interviews.

Since this is an international school, most interviews are carried out with translators, usually Greek-speaking students or staff members. We encourage students to learn Greek and return to do their research. Yet, the need for translation is always present in any context of social interaction within informal learning environments, particularly in our core training and learning spaces such as the local coffee shop, the community's elderly home, people's private houses and the local feasts. There is a dual situation here. Overlapping discussions often in the local dialect, excitement, debates, narrations and questions were all to be deciphered not only through verbatim translation but also through body language, the tone of voice, any simple gesture, a smile and a frown, the body posture, the tilt of the head, the hands placed on one's body, the gazes. Pages and pages of notes, voice recordings and photographs taken by our students acted as a reminiscence of each moment in a specific place with specific people.

On the one hand, there is the fact that ethnography is metaphorically a kind of translation of any social interaction and social contexts. On the other hand, there is the fact that linguistic translation is needed in the field to overcome language barriers (see Leavitt 2014, de Casanova and Mose 2017). Being aware of such language barriers, the locals would often stop and urge the translator, a Greek-speaking student or member of staff, to explain what was being said. At other times the conversations went on and on, and somebody was quietly translating simultaneously. However, during official interviews, the interview guide was collectively created in advance, and each answer was translated on the spot.

This learning process was initiated as complementary to our project. It gently grew to form an integral part of our study and engagement in the field. Our presence in the village was gradually mediated through the field Schools' ethnographic team. Additionally, these Schools became a highlight in the seasonal life of the village from the start. They are eagerly expected by village inhabitants who often expressed their happiness about the lights of the usually empty houses being on at night whilst we were there. They were also anticipated by a larger circle of participants from Heraklio or nearby villages, who looked forward to attending every public event as a chance to visit the village.

Teaching ethnography to non-anthropologists in the field is challenging as it brings multiple and interchanging roles for teachers and students alike. During our month-long field school, various roles and knowledge levels are in function. As instructors, for example, we have to split our time between the demands of research and the needs set by the instruction of students. This raises several issues that are not so easily addressed through academic teaching methods. For example, the level of acquaintance and familiarity with members of the local community that has been created through our consistent presence in the village is usually taken for granted by students. One of the tasks that have been more demanding in this respect is to convey the amount of work involved in establishing such bonds. Therefore, the relative merits of long-term ethnography in anthropological research are hard to teach experientially in a brief period of the school. It is a process that can only be highlighted through lectures, presentations and seminars and is not as viscerally felt like the relationships themselves.

Simultaneously, the research interviews acquire a repetitive character since we are split between delving deeper into the life stories of specific individuals and just having a social discussion that will be instructive to students present. In our understanding, we aim to instruct students on the method of approaching anthropological research in the field and not so much on the content of this research. However, the content itself makes anthropological research a viable research method. Students are necessarily attracted to the themes developed and demanded more in-depth work, which is thrown out of context when prior knowledge of the interviewee and their background is lacking.

In this process, where ethnographic learning is also the setting for teaching, living and research, entangled roles in producing knowledge and interpretations articulated through theoretical readings, daily chores and lived experience come up at every turn. While we navigate social relationships with interlocutors with the mixture of awkwardness and affective investment that is common in ethnographic situations (cf. Davies 2010: 12-3), it is still harder to convey a sense of how these relationships can be managed in the field to those we instruct, especially since our students themselves have multiple roles to handle at once, such as researchers and learners, observers and observed, whilst also supporting their gender and social identity, as well as their aesthetic self, their dress codes and music tastes. For example, it is tough to give a sense of how lavish hospitality can push the ethnographer out despite the first impression of acceptance, as Michael Herzfeld so aptly points out (1987:21). The first reactions to expressions of Cretan agonistic hospitality are usually enthusiastic and cheerful on an individual register. They are actions that inspire and charm our students as a rule. In particular, many instances of social life include the younger male locals habitually indulging in informal drinking competitions. As we participate in every event, we are offered copious amounts of raki, the locally-produced strong alcoholic distillation. The pressure to drink in such situations is intense. The more the guests drink, the better they feel they fit in the community. Refusing to drink is difficult, and sometimes excuses must be made up and kept up with – such as taking medication. The invitation to excessive collective drinking is an act of hospitality for the locals. It functions as a test and even a rite of passage that secures the entrance to the “*parea*”, the group of friends. In such situations, our rather unattractive task is to effectively deconstruct these relationships from a research vantage point while at the same time demonstrating our allegiance to, and care for, research and friendly relationships in the field. Nicely refusing, discreetly avoiding, finding excuses, being present, moderately drinking, participating in the joy, being present but in a different way than expected. This balance is hard to reach and

sometimes elicits visceral responses from our students, who are still unaccustomed to the delicate social dynamics and deep-seated antagonisms in place in such a small community.

The demands of active research running side by side with methodological instruction and teaching create different expectations that shape the learning experience in unpredictable ways. Members of the local community may adopt, consciously or not, multiple roles, often performed simultaneously, as producers, instigators and transmitters of knowledge, or subjects of observation, who at times convey narratives, habits and practices unfamiliar to the students.

Some of our interlocutors have consciously picked up on their role as instructors to the students and are very happy to repeat their stories and information. They understand their role as active instructors of the mores and history, and they perform it with pleasure and panache. They wait out the translators to do their work, and they pace the interviews according to the information conveyed. Most are alert to themes and issues that may interest us and actively point the research process to them. Others openly wonder what we do precisely, and ask about our aims, the reasons behind each season's project, and if/where we will publish our findings. Usually, most will comment that our practices seem unfamiliar because they have not graduated from primary school and find it difficult to follow our research. Others may have grandchildren in university and, thus, associate us with endless hours of studying and computer work. However, the majority of our interlocutors are happy with the role of the instructor, which, given their open hospitality and pride in their work, seems to be adding value to their lived experiences and empirical knowledge. Also, the fact that they are knowingly being observed by the students, who often come from diverse cultural backgrounds, makes them want to present the best of themselves and their household. Making Greek coffee or "koulourakia", the local homemade cookies, discovering local herbs, walking the landscape together, instructing how to eliminate the evil eye, demonstrating the uses of past household objects are all themes vital to the community's daily life, ones that are happily transmitted to our students by local female and male instructors.

On the other hand, our students are considered active subjects in this process. After many exercises that strengthen their observation and ethnographic writing skills, they have to establish rapport and familiarise themselves with people of all ages, places, habits, ways of communication, body language, etc. They learn to observe without being indiscreet, participate without being judgemental, and abolish the perception that they're there to show the locals a different, perhaps more desirable reality about life, gender relationships, and self-realisation. For most of them, everything is new but at the same time looks familiar, especially if they do not come from urban contexts or if they had grandparents from rural areas. Yet, they are receptive to the fact that the locals ask them about their habits in their countries of origin, their tastes and cooking traditions, which at some point during the summer school they demonstrate by cooking for the village inhabitants.

On the other hand, living in Gonies for a month, students have to come to terms with the fact that they are the objects of observation. In this small community where difference does not matter only when it is 'sheltered', innocent and harmless, and comes with our 'recommendations', the students' look, their dress codes, hairstyles, piercings, attitude, their openness or shyness, their religious beliefs, their dietary preferences, even their sexual orientations occasionally, are matters of open or hushed debates and commentary.

Usually, our students are well welcomed. They are the ones who often seem to be going up and down the village roads looking at 'things', the ones who generate pride among the villagers because they are perceived as those that make Gonies known to their places of origin. They are expected to shear sheep and collect the wool, cook and drink, go to church, go to christenings and funerals, learn traditional dances, help out the elderly in need, keep one company over coffee, and comfort. The locals regard our students' experience of living in the village for a month as immersive and successful, to a lesser or greater extent, according to parameters such as their ability to drink as much alcohol as possible, their ability to stay up late at night and actively participate in feasts, their meat-eating habits, their aptitude for manual work, especially for males, and their household skills, when it comes to female participants. Gender roles and their demands can often be frustrating during the project, especially if the students' performance is required on different public occasions.

Alongside the constant responsibility for our students' wellbeing and safety, the consistency of our research and our methods, the quality standards of our teaching, the negotiation or satisfaction of the demands of the local inhabitants, the constant direct or participant observation, the numerous translations, the endless hours on the field, the compassion towards the elderly in need of a hand or a hug, and the annual production of the final deliverables of our project, we experience a variety of feelings that range from fear and anxiety to satisfaction,

fulfilment, happiness and empathy. Of course, these do not leave us unaffected, as we perform our multiple identities as teachers, researchers, visitors, locals or non-locals, and sometimes as friends. These also direct the diversity of our attitudes and stances, the fact that we wish to maintain our professional and personal integrity, to manage to be friendly but not cross boundaries, to not insult but not be insulted, to be supportive of diversity, to balance the often conflicting needs of locals, students and the research itself.

Working and thinking self-reflexively is a core part of ethnographic research. Thus, any attempt for meaning-making merge our contextualisation with the contexts that the locals communicate to us, relating to gender issues, love, emotion, belief, reminiscences, and practices. In this context, each year, we attempt to monitor the ways knowledge is produced, managed and controlled by the community itself and the people responsible for the summer school. At the end of every season, we organise a public event, be it a small-scale temporary exhibition, a heritage trail, a screening, etc., based on our ethnographic observations and the villagers' oral testimonies, aiming to present the results of each field school. There are times that it feels odd to be so self-referential, seemingly attempting to display to the village inhabitants elements familiar to them, closely relating to themselves and their lives. Our aim is not to show the tangible and intangible elements they shared with us but to present our ethnographic information and our experience of their own life experiences in new interpretive ways.

Within the framework of Greek archaeological research, public/community archaeology and archaeological ethnography are two largely underdeveloped research arenas, mainly due to legal and institutional entanglements. Rather than perpetuate this problem, in the international field School, we acknowledge local communities as integral constituents of the field since they directly or indirectly influence our research questions and the processes and progress of our study. By co-producing and co-managing approaches of the ancient or more recent past with the local community, we end up with more affluent, less clinical, and more locally relevant results.

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### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Peak sanctuaries were places of ritual activity that is marked by the deposit of clay figurines and vessels, on top of mountains of hills, during Minoan times in Crete.

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