Village reborn in humanity

Mediation in the making of the humanitarian arena

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1. INTRODUCTION

The laboratory

In this paper I focus on a very familiar place, 'my anthropological village', Skala Sykamias, a small fishing community in Northern Lesvos. This border community became the *focal point of the European refugee crisis*. First, because it was the gate into Europe for hundreds of thousands of displaced travelers from the 'East' who followed the Aegean route during the long 'summer of migration'. Second, because it attracted the attention of many thousands of humanitarians from all over the world, particularly from Northern Europe, and, effectively, became the frontstage of the humanitarian regime in Greece (see Papataxiarchis 2016a).[1]

Here I want to consider the effects of the refugee crisis on this community, the transformations that took place as *the village became entangled with humanitarianism* and subjected to the unsettling as well as shaping power of the (primarily humanitarian) forces that permeated it. I am particularly interested in the impact that the establishment and functioning of the assemblage of humanitarian structures, mechanisms and practices had on the locality. I call this process '*humanitarianization*'. At the analytical level, I depart from the narrow version of the concept of humanitarianization, which suggests the use of the language of rights and humanitarian values for the justification of practices that actually contradict or even violate these values (see Lemberg-Pedersen 2021). I also distance myself from the normative notion of 'humanitarian space' (suggesting neutrality) that dominates the official humanitarian vocabulary (see Hilhorst and Jansen 2020). Instead, I employ a broader version of the term humanitarianization that focuses on the *structural processes* generated by humanitarian interventions and their *impact* on localities. In this regard my argument is closer to studies which discuss the transformation of borderscapes under humanitarian rule or analyze the merging of humanitarian with securitarian concerns in the governance of national borders (see Walters 2011, Pallister Wilkins 2016 and Rozakou 2020). In the case

[1] For these reasons Skala has turned into a laboratory and is a constant source of inspiration in my efforts to understand multiple aspects of the refugee and migration issue in Greece. For example, see Papataxiarchis 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2022.

of Skala the humanitarianization of the locality was intrinsically linked with the transformation of the border regime and the emergence of a *caring border* at the place of the securitarian one.

For the purpose of my ethnographic analysis, I approach the *humanitarianization of the locality as a complex, threefold process* i.e., a process that, as it unfolds, produces transformations on three levels. *First* in *space*, with the establishment of camps, offices, and other spatial structures for humanitarians and asylum seekers only. In fact, a new humanitarian spatiality, which I have called '*humanitarian village'*, was born out of this process. *Second*, in *meanings*, with the transformation of the locality's identity as a traditional agricultural and tourist idyl into a topos of '*solidarity*'. And third, in *social relations*, with the rise of new networks between the different categories of actors and the opening of the locality to a global audience through a sequence of honors, ritual visits and other celebratory acts.

I start with a discussion of the humanitarianization of space, then I proceed to the analysis of the visual production of a 'solidarian topography' through the use of photos and the subsequent changes in the identity of the locality and, finally, I turn to the global networking of this small rural locality which was achieved by the transformation of Skala into a site of humanitarian pilgrimage and global significance. The above order of presentation does not reflect a chronological succession of events since it is impossible to reduce the humanitarianization of the locality in a linear time sequence (and frame it as a classic historical narrative organized in phases).

At the local level, the European 'refugee crisis' was a *generative* event, involving both the deconstruction and the reconstruction of established historical forms of action and patterns of sociality. The travelers of need who came from 'the East' broke the locality. The humanitarians who came from 'the West' contributed to the break down but also remade it in a new humanitarian form, what I coined as 'humanitarian village'. First the visitors from all sides dismantled the very defenses and the cohesion of the local community. They made it a '*broken place'* (Papataxiarchis 2016a). And then the humanitarians reconstructed it by imbuing a new content, attributing to it a quality of universal significance, eventually turning it into a topos of 'solidarity'.

Almost one hundred years after its creation in 1922 by Anatolian ethnic Greek Christians, who were forced to leave their homes and come to Lesvos as refugees, *Skala was reborn*. This time *not as a refugee but as a humanitarian village*. It was reborn in (universal) humanity in a double sense – as an icon of humanness (*anthropia*) and empathy to the predicament of the displaced travelers and as a topos of universal significance and global reference.

Mediation as a vantage point of humanitarianization

In this paper I approach the impact of humanitarianization on the locality from the angle of *mediation*, thus revisiting materials that I have discussed from a different perspective elsewhere (Papataxiarchis 2016a, 2017a, 2017b).

In normal times mediation usually steps on representation. It is the elected representatives, such as the chair of the local council, who stand for their localities, who go and mediate on behalf of local citizens to the authorities or other interested parties (often regarded as 'external'). In this regard mediation has a standard orientation, it is directed from the bottom upwards, from within outwards. The above pattern of mediation was reversed during the refugee crisis, when the traditional 'hold' of the state bureaucracy over the village community collapsed and, subsequently, the historical power structures lost ground. This

was a moment of big opportunities. The world urgently 'visited' the locality thus creating a *huge demand for mediators* at various levels, bringing *many new actors* into play and upsetting the local socio-political scene. To the extent that the new players assumed protagonistic roles they challenged the existing power configurations (including the authority of traditional power holders and mediators) and made important contributions in the humanitarian restructuring of the locality.

Mediation is a valuable *vantage point* to follow the three-fold process of humanitarianization both on the ground and from above. It has a number of *merits*: it turns the attention to interstitial spaces, encounters, linkages and networks, it shifts the analytical emphasis to actors and their strategies and provides a key to understand the logic of interaction between the involved parties. Most important, it unravels the *creative* potential of this process. Through the angle of mediation, I want to show that the direction that humanitarianization eventually took was not given, in a teleological manner (as the myth of 'refugee solidarity' suggests), but it was decided on the way, all the way, through contestation and negotiation between a great diversity of actors. Mediators played a key role in this creative process, particularly through reconfiguring established meanings .

On the methodological level this work relies on successive chronological layers of ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Lesvos and Mytilene combined with oral history and the analysis of materials from long, open structured, interviews.[2] Besides having witnessed from within the unfolding of the humanitarian crisis in Skala, I was also personally involved in various capacities at various stages, and therefore, I have been part of the phenomenon in many respects some of which are discussed in this paper.

2. THE HUMANITARIANIZATION OF SPACE: CONTRASTING MODES OF MEDIATION

Skala first became a spatial, humanitarian fact before it turned into a visual, solidarian fiction.

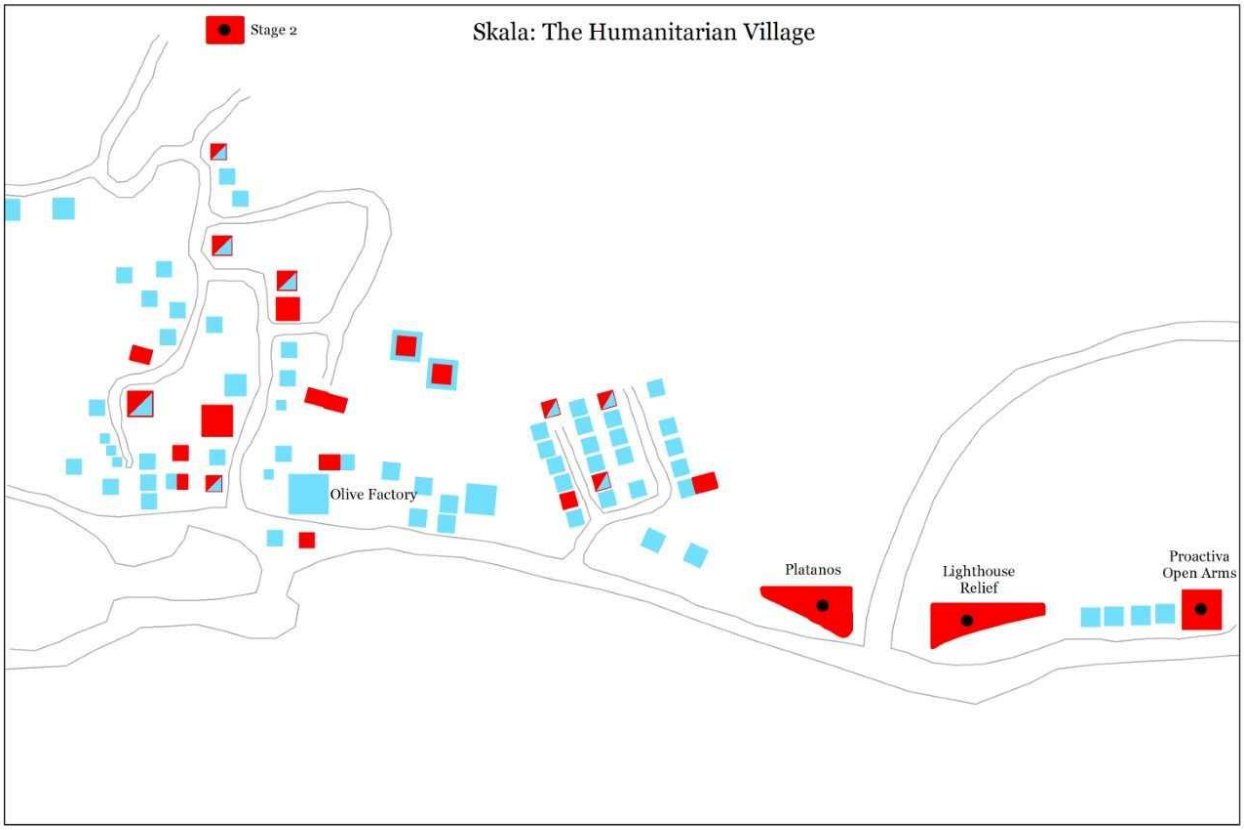
This small fishing community was privileged to become a key site of the humanitarian regime in Lesvos for two main reasons. First, because of its geographical position since it is the only port in the middle of the northern coast of the island and quite near to the Anatolian coast. Second, because of its great visibility as a relatively friendly environment for humanitarians and refugees (in contrast to the nearby town of Molyvos). From the very start, therefore, the great attraction of the coastal frontline as the place of 'first contact' of Northern Europeans with the displaced travelers in need turned Skala into a *humanitarian magnet* where 'West' meets 'East'.

The spatial transformation of the village was realized in a short period of time, immediately after the official declaration of Greece in a state of humanitarian emergency by the UNHCR and the establishment of the humanitarian regime on the Aegean islands in early September. The orderly chaos of the summer 2015, when locals, volunteers, and tourists struggled with very few resources to cope with the challenge of the increased flows and cover the huge gaps in assistance with no state support, was replaced by the initially chaotic order of humanitarian 'structures' and initiatives that settled in the village. Within few weeks (and as the flows continued increasing) the village landscape radically changed. The UNHCR adopted Skala as its operational center and the site of the regular coordination meetings of the so called 'North' where all officially recognized humanitarian actors -including major ones such as I*OM*, *HRC/IFRC*,

[2] A good part of these interviews was realized in the context of the *Human(c)ity* project.

Mercy Corps, *Samaritan's Purse*, *Human Appeal*, *MSF* and *WAHA*– coordinated their activities in 'protection', 'medical aid', 'wash', 'shelter', 'food' or 'transport'.

The foundation of three camps -the, so called, camps of *Lighthouse*, *Platanos* and *Stage 2*- and subsidiary medical and support 'structures', with the hundreds of humanitarian workers and volunteers who were offering their services there daily, made the difference. Particularly the first two, because of their unofficial origins, attracted the attention of grassroots volunteers and activists from all over the world. Humanitarians settled in the couple of small hotels and mansions, rented rooms, houses, and flats; they habituated the 'correct' tavernas and cafeterias in the village square as well as renting offices and warehouses for the material donations that were flooding the village (see Map). In a few weeks with all this activity the center of gravity of village life shifted away from the square and its small fishing port to the shore and the route that united the three camps. The village also achieved an unprecedent vibrancy and a social life around Gozi, the favorite cafeteria of humanitarians, that was open 24/7!



Map: The humanitarian village (spaces used for humanitarian purposes are marked with red)

This complex process of spatial humanitarianization was made possible by individuals with special skills (including languages, knowledge of social media and social capital as well as humanitarian sensibilities) who occupied strategic positions at intermediate levels. Some were locals (or 'Athenians' of local descent who spent long periods in Skala), others were living on the island and had kinship links to the village. A third category comprised Greek and non-Greek 'outsiders' who lived and worked on the island before the 'refugee crisis'. These mediators played a decisive role not just in securing access to the locality but also

in shaping the very direction and eventual outcome of the whole process. Here I will *compare their role in the foundation and local operation of the two grassroots initiatives -Lighthouse and Platanos-* and the making of the two reception camps.

Lighthouse

Lighthouse was founded by a group of Swedish and Norwegian volunteers who administered a huge sum of money from donations. The initiative was the product of the wave of sympathy that was generated by the photo of young Aylan Kurdi in northern Europe. The first steps were taken under the guidance of an experienced Swedish professional humanitarian (and crisis manager), GB, (CEO of Procamp), who was a relative to JM, the young leader of the group in the field during the first phase. Access to Skala was mediated by CS, an American orthodox priest fluent in Greek, who was based in Norway and for many years was active in Leimonos Monastery where the University of Agier was holding summer academic activities. Before the crisis CS was running 'Filoxenos', a philanthropic project in Lesvos, and in this capacity, in early October he established a base in Skala and after collaborating with the UNHCR secured a role in the making and running of the *Stage 2* camp in Skala. Yet, the overall identity of the *Lighthouse* project was produced by the rank and file of young, Nordic volunteers whose cosmopolitan humanitarianism blended well with the philanthropic orientation of the mediator and the technocratic efficiency that the initiators of the project strived to achieve. The official adoption of *Lighthouse* as a partner by the UNHCR and its eventual transformation into an NGO were the successful outcome of the professional foundations of this project.

The founders of *Lighthouse* negotiated their presence in Skala following the model of 'hospitality'. They addressed themselves, through CS, to the President of the local council and asked his permission to make a camp as well as discussed with him the terms of their operations in the village. In asking local hospitality they recognized the 'sovereign right' of the locals to decide on who and with which agenda would deal with the local humanitarian crisis. However, in many similar instances hospitality offered just a façade of sovereign control since the decisions were taken and the actual humanitarian work was done by foreign professionals. Apparently, this negotiation was part of a larger arrangement that led to the creation of the *Stage 2* UNHCR camp in Skala. Their behavior was quite typical of the way the UNHCR and other foreign professional humanitarians organized their humanitarian intervention in Lesvos and elsewhere in Greece. It was also reminiscent of the way many anthropologists (including myself) handle their entry into (their) local communities.

This gesture of respect and recognition was functional and, in this regard, beneficial for both parties. The foreign humanitarians were being granted access to private and communal spaces (such as the 5 X 5 football ground that was transformed into the *Stage 2* camp or buildings to be used as warehouses) in order to offer absolutely necessary services, thus justifying their presence there to a wider audience of donors and sympathizers. The local community, on the other hand, besides retaining a certain, although limited, control of the humanitarian scene, could gain some extra benefits in an otherwise desperate situation. This is clear in an official document, a sort of contract ratified by the local council (and the UNHCR), in which the specific terms of the foreign humanitarians' presence in the village were stated - operating their camp (as well as the UNHCR *Stage 2* camp) on rented land, securing the cleaning of the shores, roads, and public spaces, modernizing and equipping the local rural dispensary etc.

This was, therefore, a pragmatic arrangement based on *material reciprocities*. The president welcomed the foreign humanitarians in the locality and made their life easier in return to a number of benefits for the community. The model was grounded on the *realistic* assessment of the situation on the ground. It was also closely tied to the growth of the humanitarian economy. The local president in mediating from the side of the village played a key role in the employment of locals in the local humanitarian industry, in securing income for the small tourist 'industry' of the village and in getting money to improve local infrastructures.

'*Platanos*'

Platanos, a primarily Greek project, stepped on pre-existing 'solidarity' initiatives and networks that were spreading all around Greece since the economic crisis of 2010. It was the product of a coalition between informal 'solidarity' initiatives in Athens and Lesvos. Some of these initiatives were linked with the *Pedio tou Areos* initiative in Athens and *Chorio oloi mazi* (Village all together), a confederation of initiatives offering support to refugees in Lesvos. The refugee crisis was an important step in the wider integration and fusion of informal activist networks throughout Greece in a broad movement and *Platanos* is an excellent example of how grassroots mobilization in support of the displaced people developed during this period.

It all started on October 1st, when 10 activists (most of whom related to anarchist squats in Exarcheia) responded to the call in the Facebook (for extra hands) by NGO *Agkalia*, a core initiative in the 'solidarity' network of *Chorio oloi mazi*, and arrived to the agrotown of Kalloni in the center of Lesvos to offer their services. They were immediately directed to Skala Sykamnias by AZ, a middle-aged farmer, who eventually became one of the leading members of *Platanos*. According to AZ Skala was a self-evident destination because of the good reputation of the village and the refugee background of its inhabitants. In leftist Skala there were already locals who participated in the island's 'solidarity' networks.

Once in Skala the activists looked for a suitable space near the shore to put their tents. They opted for the best available place, a small elevation with few benches under a huge plane tree, on the dirt road that the displaced travelers crossed in thousands all day long, a road that united Skala to Molyvos, a few meters from the entrance of *Synoikismos* ('refugee quarters') where the descendants of the 1922 Exodus of ethnic Greeks from Anatolia still live. This was communal space, a sort of park, used by the locals as recreational ground during the long summer afternoons. When the activists arrived there, the park was used by some volunteers visiting from Mytilene (for example from KETHEA) for certain support activities. The presence of the activists soon transformed the park into a fully-fledged camp that drew the attention of few locals who offered resources and support. Among them was TM, a local experienced fisherman, and his wife, LM, an ex-president of the local Cultural Association. Both of them, together with people who originated in the village but lived elsewhere, Leftists with good connections with Syriza, the party in government, played a key role in the survival of *Platanos* despite strong reactions. TM, who was among the more energetic fishermen in rescue, trained the *Platanos* rescuers, and LM, who has been very active in helping refugees during the summer, offered freely the basement of her house, took responsibility of the *Platanos* warehouse and eventually became the 'connecting link' between the 'structure' and the local society. Others, such as a prominent Syriza cadet in Sykamia, offered their houses to accommodate *Platanos* volunteers. Yet their strategy of interacting with local authorities and the Leftist president of the local council reinforced divisions within the Radical Left.

Platanos was conceived as a 'solidarity initiative' premised on horizontality, self-organization, autonomy, and an egalitarian stance vis a vis the displaced travelers. Some of the founders of *Platanos* made a sharp distinction between 'solidarity', that was closely linked to self-organization and a sort of prefigurative politics, and 'humanitarianism' (*anthropismos*) that was criticized for apolitical philanthropy. They had a politically vital mission informed by the highest, moral standards of 'disinterestedness'. 'Solidarity to refugees' worked as a moral principle that legitimized their choices including the overcoming of 'hospitality'. It was the same political logic that informed the multiplicity of squats in the urban quarters of Exarcheia. Yet, as one of the more active activists of the first phase and the only doctor in the founding group, Chr.D., told us, this was not a squat: 'in times of emergency you do not require permission to use public space in order to help people in need'. The activists had the moral obligation and the solidarian right to surpass the etiquette of hospitality.

Therefore, in contrast to *Lighthouse*, *Platanos* activists did not get permission to settle in the communal park nor did they ask the mediation of the local president for other services. As the initiative grew stronger and drew attention, as volunteers and donations started arriving to *Platanos* (and not to Skala) from all around Greece, the activists pursued their project against the will of the local council. And as the tension with the island municipal authorities intensified and the president started worrying that *Platanos* was overcoming Skala (in fame and visibility), a sense of entrenchment against 'enemies' developed in *Platanos*' ranks. The rise of the anti-fascist red flag in the entrance of *Platanos* (opposite to *Panagia Gorgona* [Mermaid Madona] chapel on the rocks) suggested a stance of radical autonomy vis a vis the locality.

What difference can a bench make?

There were important similarities as well as differences between the sibling initiatives of *Lighthouse* and *Platanos*. Both were the local offspring of the 'refugee crisis', founded at the same time, on the ground, by volunteers and activists, and occasionally joining their forces offering mutual assistance. Both established roots in the locality in the forms of camps, warehouses, and residences. Both covered the full range of vital services in first reception (and even rescue). Both involved many hundreds of foreign and Greek humanitarians during their operation. Both adopted iconic status in grassroots humanitarianism.

There were also important differences in the nationality of their founders, their agendas, their formal statuses, and their trajectories. *Lighthouse* eventually became a fully-fledged NGO (registered in Sweden), official partner of UNHCR and expanded its activities in mainland Greece. *Platanos*, on the other hand, retained its unofficial, grassroots profile and after the EU-Turkey deal and the drastic reduction of arrivals to the islands, gradually stopped its operation in the summer of 2016.

What I find most interesting are the different models of mediation they applied *and the paradoxical impact that their different approach to the locality had on the level of representation*. Eventually the two projects were implicated in very different ways in the process of humanitarianization and this was reflected on their wider impact.

By applying the model of hospitality *Lighthouse* was *accepted yet kept apart*, as a *foreign humanitarian enclave* (that was tolerated on the condition that it was useful). Its foreignness, in combination to the technocratic tendency to clearly demarcate the *Lighthouse* camp with a sort of a fence and an official entrance, certainly contributed to its spatial and social *segregation,* the separateness of the foreign volunteers. In combination to the general suspicion towards (foreign) NGOs, these factors limited its wider

impact that remained much smaller in comparison to their significant actual contribution in the management of the crisis.

Platanos, on the other hand, despite the difficult relations with village authorities, achieved an impact that exceeded its actual contribution on the ground. How did that happen? The activists were unanimous in setting a 'structure' of first reception very near the village and successfully resisted all attempts by the municipal authorities to be removed, if necessary, by violence, from *Platanos*,[3] yet they were divided on their spatial strategies. The principled ideologists were isolationists: they insisted on the 'solidarian' purity of the project, regarded Exarcheia as the real base of the initiative and insisted on a clear differentiation from the locals. The pragmatists, on the other hand, were integrationists: they stressed the autonomy of *Platanos* from the paternal initiatives, its rootedness in Skala and the need to interact with the local community. They supported the vision of an open camp, outwards oriented, not rigidly separated from its local environment by any sort of material boundary. Eventually their approach prevailed and resonated with locals who were attracted by the social excitement surrounding the functioning of the camp. For example, once the camp was established (with a dispensary run by a Protestant NGO offering services to locals as well) the women from the Synoikismos resumed their everyday summer routine, thus integrating the camp in their everyday neighborhood sociality (the so called *yitonia*).

Eventually the mountain came to Mohammed. The (village) neighborhood and the (activist) camp, the bench and the tent, ordinary sympathy to the displaced people and principled 'solidarity' thus merged, in unpreceded ways. There was a lot of innovative potential in this merging.

3. HUMANITARIANIZATION AS VISUAL RESIGNIFICATION: THE MEDIATIC PRODUCTION OF A 'SOLIDARIAN' ICON

The achievement of visibility was a key phase in the process of humanitarianization. This was done through both mainstream media and social media (primarily Facebook).

The force of media coverage of the humanitarian drama that unfolded at the shores of N. Lesvos and the visibility of Skala multiplied from the moment that the three camps started operating. The humanitarian (re) spatialization in Skala was very important. The very presence of large numbers of young volunteers and activists, who were very active in the social media, drew wider sympathetic attention to the village. *Platanos* and *Lighthouse* had their 'communications officers' who were responsible for the administration of the relevant pages in Facebook with tenths of thousands of 'followers'. The two camps run a double life, in physical and virtual space. The virtual camps gradually developed a life of their own, with activities in big cities, in Greece and abroad, raising humanitarian awareness and attracting donations for the 'good cause'.

Yet even more important was the actual mode of spatialization. The *Platanos* camp (departing from standard practice) was in open view, passers-by could watch, participate, and even share a meal with the volunteers (in contrast to the *Lighthouse* camp that was clearly demarcated, inwards looking, hidden in the olive grove and difficult to enter). The insistence of *Platanos* on the humanitarian use of public space

[3] See the crisis with the municipal authorities and similar moves against the presence of NGOs and reception facilities in Molyvos and Kleio.

de facto encouraged the (however limited) osmoses between the activists, the displaced people, and the locals. Local women continued socializing in the area of *Platanos*, sitting on their favorite bench (at the entrance of the camp), watching and commenting on the unfolding of history at the doorsteps of their village (instead of watching it through their TV sets), and occasionally offering some help, a good sympathetic word or an encouraging smile.

A photo: 'The three grannies with the refugee baby'

It was a moment like this that was captured by the Greek freelance photographer Lefteris Partsalis, in mid-October (see photo). Three elderly women sitting on a bench at the entrance of *Platanos* were feeding (with care) a baby while his/her refugee mother was smiling from a short distance. This photo of 'the three grannies with the refugee baby', the second most important photo of the European refugee crisis, as it immediately became viral in the social media and was reproduced in the national mainstream media, made the difference.

Partsalis was visiting the island for the first time, on his own expenses and had no local connections. Once there he followed the same route with hundreds of journalists and photographers at the time and went to Skala (where he stayed for 10 days). Yet in performing a journalistic routine he played an innovative role that led to the *resignification* of the humanitarian scene. He departed from the mainstream representation of the refugee crisis and reconfigured the dominant spectacle of the caring border (with the strong soteriological tone) that focused on the dramatic rescue. *He shifted attention away from the 'pain' of rescue in the frontstage to the 'joy' of welcoming in the backstage*, from the refugees to the locals, something that was made possible by the outwards looking camp. In a discussion we had with him he said that after 4-5 days of taking photos only of pain he decided to shift his look from the shore to the backstage. The three elderly women who were asking the refugee mother to let them help in feeding the anxious baby drew his attention. It looked 'as an oasis'. 'Watching the caring attitude of the locals was

like a ray of sunshine'. He said that he 'believed in this image'. Therefore, he selected it in his portfolio as the 'representative photo' of the day.

In his initial posting of the photo Partsalis commented on the 'lessons of *anthropia* (humanness, humanity or human compassion)' that were offered by the three protagonists in the photo. Next day a local website (Lesvosnews.net), which first published the photo, gave emphasis to 'care' as a defining ingredient of motherhood and commented on an elderly woman's 'joy of becoming again a mother'. This was also the view of MK, the woman who was holding the baby in the photo. In one of her first statements besides saying that she 'did not do anything' (thus disclaiming responsibility for the attention she was receiving) she stressed that 'once a mother always a mother'. The next days the contest over the meaning of this popular photo continued in the national press and television.

The symbolic meaning of the photo (and its eventual socio-political function) was decided in the end not by its maker but by the powerful media apparatus that appropriated the photo (and at the same time 'highjacked' the lives of the depicted persons). The photo quickly drew the attention of the government that was sympathetic to the cause of the displaced people. On November 3, during the first relocation of Syrian refugees from Venizelos airport to Luxembourg, it was used as a big background poster at the joint press conference of Alexis Tsipras, the Greek Prime Minister, and Martin Schultz, the President of the European Parliament. The Greek PM commenting on the photo stressed that 'this is the image of Europe we want'. From there on, the photo, in connection to other similar visual materials, played a key role in the entanglement of the locality with official humanitarianism and, particularly, in the shaping of a Greek brand of the humanitarian project. The photo of the three elderly women interacting in a friendly manner with a newly arrived refugee woman and her baby was metaphorically used to suggest the disinterested generosity of locals and was associated with what was coined as *allileggyi* (solidarity). Following its wide circulation in the media, the photo was used on many occasions as a core symbol in a state project that I have called 'patriotism of solidarity to refugees' (Papataxiarchis 2016b, 2022). For example, it figured as an emblem of Lesbos (in a pamphlet produced by the Municipality) during the visit of the Pope in mid-April, it was used as a poster at the Mytilene airport and was shown in major photographic exhibitions in Greece and abroad.

The photo of the 'three grannies', together with many other visual documents from Skala and the northern coast, provided the raw materials with which the humanitarian village was resignified and upgraded in a 'topos of solidarity'. The official, state brokers of 'solidarity' *translated* ordinary acts of compassion, empathy, sympathy, or even friendly curiosity in something larger and, most important, essential, they turned them into *an essence inscribed in geography* (in a way that reminded the use of space in nationalist rhetoric). 'Solidarity' was assumed to be endemic in places, such as Skala (and Lesvos), where humanitarianization was more advanced and successful. These were thus declared to be *topoi of 'solidarity'*, places with the metaphysical power to shape human character, or places which had a 'character' (e.g., openness) that was reflected on the people who inhabited them.

This is briefly the story of *how through a chain of mediators Skala developed from a spatial, humanitarian fact into a visual, solidarian fiction*. Off course these 'topoi of solidarity', the humanitarian village as a solidarian icon, were *misrepresentations* of the actual humanitarian situation, something that one of the authors of the solidarian fiction (in a moment of self-criticism) clearly admitted. The public façade of the humanitarian village simplified and essentialized in solidarian terms a highly diversified, complex, and conflictual humanitarian arena (see Hilhorst and Jansen 2020), in which the *main* driving force of

humanitarian assistance were (not the locals but) the foreign volunteers and activists. The mediatic depiction of a shining 'solidarity' overshadowed the dark side of refugee exploitation and the painful civil strife that undermined social cohesion.

4. HUMANITARIANIZATION AS GLOBAL NETWORKING: OF HUMANITARIAN PILGRIMS AND FOLLOWERS

Once 'solidarity' was essentialized in spatial terms, Skala became a precious depository of humanitarian and solidarian value, the main supplier of the so called 'heroes' of the humanitarian era, and therefore, a place of great significance for humanitarians all over the world. There you could find and honor (local) persons who exemplified in a paradigmatic way the humanitarian character. There you could find and 'borrow' the so precious humanitarian substance (allegedly endemic in the physical environment) by just meeting in situ these exemplary persons. There you could celebrate the spirit of 'welcome' that for a few months was pervading North European societies.

Humanitarian pilgrimages and pilgrims

In this regard Skala became a sacred place, the site of humanitarian pilgrimages from all over the world, the humanitarian Mecca of the early 21st century. The magnetic power of Skala (among humanitarians) multiplied but also changed once the village turned into an icon of 'solidarity'. A *new wave of visitors* was added, smaller in numbers yet different in kind and with much greater power. It included top officials, such as the President of the Hellenic Republic, the leader of the opposition in the Greek Parliament, the President of the Italian Parliament, Greek ministers or top EU politicians and state functionaries, officials, and celebrities, such as the American actress Suzan Sarandon and the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, personalities of national and global stature who *came not to help but to honor those who help*. The visit by the High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, in early October had confirmed the special position of Skala in the newly established humanitarian regime of Lesvos and Greece (as the humanitarian capital of the 'North'), yet it had primarily an operational significance. However, once the photo of the three grannies became viral offering immense visibility to the three elderly women, *these pilgrimages assumed a ritual form* that typically focused on a visit to the house of one of the three elderly women, preferably MK, while also involving a meeting with the local authorities. It was as if the village community had a double, politically official and humanitarian, representation.

A reverse trend, of local 'humanitarians' travelling away to receive honors, prizes, and other signs of humanitarian distinction, soon followed. In these the village was *represented* by its humanitarian/ solidarian 'heroes' (and not by the elected officials). It seemed that the humanitarian village had its own internal symbolic ranking, one that was forcefully contested by fellow villagers. Some fishermen, who repeatedly engaged in rescue, received honors by important institutions abroad, such as the European Parliament or the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, and MK, among other honors she got, became the 'woman volunteer' of the year.

Through this flow of honors, prizes, and smaller acts of recognition and the two-directional mobility that came with it the humanitarian village was *networked at a global scale*, in humanity. Skala was thus integrated in the humanitarian mainstream.

The global networking of Skala through the flow of honors was based on the energetic involvement of mediators -from the traditional ones, who had made the very existence of the humanitarian village

possible, to new style humanitarian entrepreneurs, or academics! Honors flowed along the established channels of mediation. The more the village was drawn into the center of the humanitarian ecumene the clearer the alternative networks of mediation became. Yet the growth of this parallel 'economy of prestige' and social recognition had another important effect: it changed the configuration of power between official (mainly government) and unofficial (mainly grassroots) chains of mediation.

The Nobel Peace Prize

This becomes evident in one illustrative case, the candidacy of the people of the Aegean islands for the Nobel Peace Prize, when two separate nominations, one bottom-up, at the grassroots, and another top-down, at the level of the government, took place. The key persons proposed in both nominations were locals from Skala.

In November 2016, Alkmini Minadaki, an architect from Crete and member of the grassroots campaign group *Avaaz*, published a petition nominating the 'Aegean Solidarity Movement' for the Nobel Peace Prize. According to the *Avaaz* petition: "On remote Greek islands, grandmothers have sung terrified little babies to sleep, while teachers, pensioners and students have spent months offering food, shelter, clothing and comfort to refugees who have risked their lives to flee war and terror".[4]

The nomination was composed in an egalitarian, 'solidarian' way. It embraced sixteen collective initiatives (that constituted the 'solidarity' movement in the Aegean) from nine islands while avoiding the shift of focus on individuals. Yet, because the protocol of Nobel nominations demanded reference to particular persons, the names of few specific individuals were explicitly stated in a sub note of the petition. The choice of these individuals was a very a difficult decision and was done with great scepticism. In the end and after long consultations three were selected to represent the 'thousands of anonymous people who have mobilized as well': "fisherman Thanasis Marmarinos from Lesvos for saving hundreds of lives in sea-rescue operations; Aimilia (Militsa) Kamvisi for nurturing refugee children as if they were her own; and shepherd Nasos Karayannakis from Limnos for spontaneously feeding the hundreds of hungry and devastated refugees". The first two came from Skala.

The protocol also required a formal letter of nomination to be signed by academics. The project of finalizing the nomination, composing the formal letter, and selecting the signatures of the academics was realized by a small group of academics, one historian and two anthropologists, in a very short period. I had the privilege to be part of this campaign and witness the whole process (of mediation) from within.

In late January 2016 we started our campaign in academic circles. After all there was still a lot of sympathy for the Greeks who, after being forced to sign a third Memorandum with the EC, were now facing a new predicament. Eventually the campaign was very successful. On February 1, 2016, *Avaaz* announced that "Archbishop Desmond Tutu joined over 628,000 citizens and over 230 academics from 111 universities in supporting the call for Greek islanders to be considered for this prestigious award".

Yet, during the same period another nomination on the same issue was prepared not at the grassroots but at top, government level. This official project, that followed the *Avaaz* nomination, was conceived by the then Minister of Migration, Yiannis Mouzalas, who has origins in Lesvos, in a conversation with a friend of his, SM, a prominent journalist on the island.

[4] See Guardian (24/1/2016).

The minister formed an official committee with ex-officio members the presidents of the Greek Academy and the Hellenic Foundation of Culture as well as the Rector of a Greek university, to select -in fact to ratify- the candidates who were chosen by the minister and his advisers. Yet the actual work was done by SM through his local links in Lesvos and particularly Skala. In our long interviews with the minister and SM the logic of the government's proposal became clear. They decided to follow the formal requirements of the Swedish Academy and focus on three persons who represented three main categories that played a key role: ordinary people, self-made rescuers and foreign volunteers. The committee was concerned with differentiating its proposal from the one *Avaaz* had made. Visibility was a key parameter. At that moment the evident choice for an ordinary person with great visibility was Militsa Kamvysi. Also, they looked for a fisherman (who needed to be different from the fisherman nominated by Avaaz). The right person was selected by SM's entrepreneur friend in Skala who proposed SV, a fisherman who was employed in his business and was very active in rescue. In the third place they wanted someone to represent foreign 'volunteers' and eventually opted for a celebrity that had visited Skala some weeks earlier, the American actress Suzan Sarandon.

At some stage the embarrassing fact that there were two nominations became known. The rational choice was to turn them into one. In the post-referendum conjuncture, when the *Syriza-Anel* government faced difficulties with the grassroots movement, the merging of the nominations proved to be an extremely challenging task. According to the academic EK, who negotiated the merging of the nominations with the Ministry, the minister's demand to include the American actress in the place of the collectivities led to the collapse of the negotiation. From *Avaaz's* side the official nomination was a 'public relations' move that contradicted the solidarian spirit. From the side of the Ministry *Avaaz'* move was complicating matters and their insistence on not including Sarandon was treated with suspicion as subversive of the government's proposal.

Despite their differences and the complications, the two nominations had some remarkable similarities. Both relied on personal (kinship and friendship) networks, were realized to a large extent by 'outsiders' who mediated, were part of wider political projects and, finally, confirmed Skala as the main provider of solidarian 'heroes'. Particularly the Government's nomination received great publicity by the media, in Greece and abroad. It is quite characteristic that in many newspaper and television reports the news about the Nobel campaign was followed by a photo of the three grannies and extensive reportage from Skala.

On November 7, 2016, the day that the Nobel Peace Prize winner was announced, tenths of journalists from all over the world (including China) gathered in Skala. The betting offices regarded the Greek nomination among the favorite ones. In the refugee quarters of Skala, outside their houses, the three elderly women gave a press conference. There was anticipation and tension concerning the whereabouts of the huge sum that went with the Prize. Eventually the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Colombian President for ending a long and bloody civil war. Yet the work was done. Through the campaign for the Nobel Peace Prize, Skala was confirmed as the symbolic capital of the humanitarian regime in Greece, the 'humanitarian village' par excellence, and, in this regard, achieved a broad global following.

The global networking of Skala, through pilgrimages and honors, was thus accomplished. The official emphasis of the official Nobel campaign on humanitarian personalities and the much greater publicity that the official nomination got in the media eventually worked in favor of the community, which at that time was the main supplier of solidarian 'heroes'.

5. CONCLUSION: HUMANITARIAN GRASP

In this paper I employed the prism of mediation in order to follow the humanitarianization of a locality and address three sets of questions on the effects of humanitarianization in space, in representation and in networking. How did the process of humanitarianization impact spatial arrangements in this locality? How was the public image of the locality transformed in humanitarian terms? What was the social impact of humanitarianization on local lives? In addressing the above questions, I showed the shaping power of agency and the role of accident in the unfolding of humanitarianization in time.

In summing up my argument I want to take my analysis one step further and discuss the changing configuration of power between official and unofficial networks of mediation in the course of humanitarianization. In the above context I will show that in this particular case humanitarianization took the form of *hierarchical encompassment,* not to say *grasp*, of the locality by the powerful humanitarian regime.

The use of space for humanitarian purposes has been a decisive factor in the shaping of the 'humanitarian village'. The spatial arrangements of asylum seeker reception, including camps and other 'structures', the specific routes to be followed by the newly arrived refugees and, overall, the emergent humanitarian geography have been important issues of contestation between the various categories of actors. On the one side, xenophobes, and other sceptics of humanitarianization wanted both asylum seekers and humanitarian actors *out* of the local community. On the other side, as it became clear, two *alternative strategies* of humanitarianization of space emerged and eventually confronted each other. The *segregationist* strategy aimed at the clear demarcation and differentiation of space used by asylum seekers. In practical terms that meant that camps and 'structures' should be in 'safe' distance from the village settlement, that asylum seekers are kept out of the spatial zones of everyday activity (squares, shops or even houses). This strategy was actually adopted by official actors, involving the UNHCR and the local authorities, and was justified on practical or technocratic grounds. The *integrationist* strategy aimed at the mixing of the asylum seekers with both locals and humanitarians: locating the *Platanos* camp near the *Synoikismos*, opening the camp to everybody or encouraging the asylum seekers to follow the quickest path to *Stage 2* and walk through the main square of the village. This strategy, that was supported by pragmatist 'solidarians' on ideological grounds (of disinterested 'solidarity'), eventually prevailed. The mixing of locals with asylum seekers in the context of the '*yitonia*-camp', this hybrid socio-spatial formation, played a key role in the process of humanitarianization. The solidarian pragmatists with the help of the photographer-mediator, who accidentally found himself in the middle of the '*yitonia*-camp', delivered to the higher level a powerful image of empathy and harmonious symbiosis between the locals and the displaced people. This was off course a half-truth that suited the government's official 'solidarian' project.

From the beginning of 2015 national and international media had turned their attention to the Aegean islands as the main theater of the humanitarian drama, giving emphasis to rescue. Yet this shift in mediatic interest had been *upgraded* once the humanitarian regime was established in the region and the power of humanitarians who were active in the social media was added to the impact of mainstream media. It also became *more focused* on localities and local people (e.g., fishermen) as arrivals reached meteoric

heights and local media and journalists became more active in mediating the situation on the ground to global audiences.

Very few places in Greece had the advantages of Skala -frontline community, point of entry into Europe, big numbers of arrivals and the highest ratio of insiders/ outsiders, high intensity of humanitarian work, mix of grassroots with official humanitarian organizations- as a potential center of the humanitarian intervention. Yet, besides all the above advantages, what distinguished Skala was the *unique mix of makeshift camp and yitonia*, a property that, once it was accidentally captured by Partsalis' photo and delivered to the higher level of strategic handling by the government, turned into an achievement of long-term significance which had an impact that superseded the expectations of the pragmatist activists of *Platanos* all other supporters of this mix.

As we saw, the appropriation of the photo of 'the three grannies' by the *Syriza-Anel* government and the media and the circulation of the photo through a chain of mediators was a decisive step in the making of the humanitarian imagination and a breakthrough in the local course of humanitarianization. The hegemonic project of turning the minoritarian grassroots sympathy to the asylum seekers into a new patriotism developed top-down and relied on the active engagement of networks between top politicians, local journalists, and other interested parties, who 'discovered' and promoted local 'heroes of solidarity' thus integrating them in their own networks (that increasingly corresponded to the main 'factions' of the local political scene).

This was a violent process involving reconstructions and resignifications. The humanitarian village became a topos of 'solidarity', thus achieving a new kind of visibility. Also, members of the local community were subjected to a radical resignification. Some of them became figures of national (not to say international) significance. Militsa Kamvysi became the national prototype of the 'woman volunteer', the fishermen who helped turned into 'heroes'.

And a final point: the engagement of the locality in the patriotic project, particularly through the official use of the photo, had structural effects. On the one hand, it further stratified the 'humanitarian village' turning it into a *hybrid political formation*, with a dual hierarchy: the elected officials of the community on the one side, the holders of humanitarian symbolic capital on the other. The later became the actual 'voice' of 'solidarity' and in this capacity they started representing the locality in official venues elsewhere in Greece or abroad.

On the other hand, it effected the configuration of power between official and unofficial actors. During the humanitarianization of the locality the difficult coexistence of official with unofficial logics and chains of mediation was a source of tension and, even, conflict, often turning the 'humanitarian village' into a humanitarian arena (see Hilhorst and Jansen 2020). In the phase of visualization, when grassroots empathy was appropriated in the state project of 'solidarity' patriotism, the official network of politicians and journalists started taking the upper hand. At the same time, in the context of the patriotic project the official network of mediators consolidated its position within the humanitarian scene, extending its reach from the ministerial level 'down' to local inhabitants. The honors and the pilgrimages that followed further reinforced the domination of the official version of the 'humanitarian village' as the depository of humanitarian excellence.

Yet, at the same time, as the analysis of the campaign for the Nobel peace prize suggests, the antagonism of the unofficial to official networks of mediation intensified. Also, the hierarchical encompassment of the

locality in the wider humanitarian project became a source of dispute and friction. Among the side effects of the honorable attention given to local 'solidarians' we can list the antagonism between local networks, the growing scepticism of locals towards the honored 'solidarians' and the intense moral questioning of their motives on the grounds of disinterestedness. The psychological burden that was put to locals who received honors and had no experience in handling a similar public attention was heavy. New fissures were added to the broken place.

This is how the humanitarian grasp of the locality was realized. In two moves. Official humanitarianism incorporated, first, the unofficial, grassroots component of humanitarian activity and then, the locality.

POSTSCRIPT: THE RELIC OF THE CARING BORDER

If humanitarianization is a path, then at its end lies a humanitarian relic -the relic of the caring border.

After *Platanos* withdrew from the local humanitarian scene and the center of gravity moved to the South, in Mytilene (and RIC Moria), Skala, the 'humanitarian village' par excellence, emptied of the weight of an actual contribution in humanitarian management, gradually assumed the role of the symbolic superstructure of the humanitarian regime. It became the ritual provider of the symbolisms and ideas that justified the humanitarian intervention on the island.

One a half year ago, in August 2021, the President of the Hellenic Republic, Katerina Sakellaropoulou, visited Lesvos for the first time after her election to office in 2019. Her official visit to the island included a stop in Skala where she, together with the many officials and journalists who escorted her, went to Militsa's house. There she paid tribute to the contribution of the three elderly women during the refugee crisis. 'You are our grannies', 'you are the soul of Greece', 'you made us proud' she said. A few hundred meters away, at sea, Frontex and the Greek Port Authorities were (and still are) performing the most systematic and massive project of (official) push backs that we have ever witnessed in the Aegean. By blatantly violating human rights and international law they have been realizing EU's conservative political forces' project that assigns Greece the role of, in Von Leyden's words, 'the shield of Europe'. Under similar circumstances the humanitarian pilgrimage was eventually transformed from a ritual of empowerment and recognition into a ritual of concealment and mystification. The caring border has become the façade of the securitarian one.

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