

Sacred Forests of the villages of Zagori and Konitsa

In memory of Oliver Rackham (1939-2015)

I. Brief presentation of the element of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

1. **Name** Sacred Forests of the villages of Zagori and Konitsa

Other name(s):

Ecclesiastical forests or Klisiast(i)ka, Vakuf(i)ka forests or Vakufa, Kouri or contracted to Kri (e.g. Kouri at Panagia or Kri of Panagia), livadia. Occasionally, the name of the trees themselves indicates that they have a special protection status (e.g. Megala Pournaria, Large Oaks).

2. **Identification and definition**

Sacred forests are those forests that communities look after as protected areas. Collective representations define them as places of special importance for the local communities, which associate them with the local history and landscape. They are often related to the natural resources that the community conserves, because they are important for its survival. Even more often, they are forests that protect the villages from natural disaster. Some sacred forests are not directly connected to the churches or other religious buildings that can be found inside them. Yet there are others that contain within their territory churches, chapels and shrines that have a religious purpose. These forests are preserved as the inhabitants of the local communities avoid utilising them for fear of being punished by supernatural powers. Today, such parts of the planet are classified as Sacred Natural Sites, which are defined as sites of special spiritual significance for their local communities as well as sites of special bio-cultural value, globally important both for cultural diversity and biodiversity, particularly because of the natural organisms associated with the ancient trees and forests.

3. **ICH domain**

• **Oral traditions and expressions**

We have documented many personal stories, narrations of incidents or traditions involving supernatural punishments, vows, exchanges, appearances and meetings with the supernatural protectors of the forests. Some of these may reproduce ancient myths or literary texts that contain elements of tree worship and which appeared in pre-war school textbooks. Typical examples are the history of Erysichthon, the “Royal Oak” by Alexandros Papadiamantis and “The curse of the pine tree” by Zacharias Papantoniou. Even so, whatever the sources of the beliefs regarding violations in the sacred forests, the forces that punish are the protecting saints, with whom the inhabitants interact and negotiate with or appeal to. Moreover, with excommunicated forests it is curses that threaten material destruction, misfortune, social exclusion, health problems, death and the possible condemnation of the soul of the violator to eternal hell.

- **Social practices – rituals – festive events**

Religious rituals (e.g. vigils, services) and festive events (e.g. offering of food, festivals) are held annually in the churches located within the forests. Research has also recorded the memory of excommunications that took place in the forests as well as their ritual procedures (presence of a specific number of priests, black candles, upturned cauldrons, etc.).

- **Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe**

The characterisation of forests as sacred is related to local knowledge about nature and the management of natural resources. The inhabitants believe that these forests act as protecting forests as they grow in areas that, if they were to be deforested, would suffer from rock falls, avalanches or the flooding of streams within the villages. They also protect the springs and underground aquifer of each village. Moreover, forests with evergreen oak trees were a source of available pollarding while forests with conifers and broadleaved trees situated next to a village could be used for construction work that benefitted the whole community (e.g. building schools and churches).

4. Place (administrative region, prefecture, municipality)

Epirus, Municipality of Zagori Municipality of Konitsa.

5. Key words

Sacred forests, vakufiko forests, vakufia, ecclesiastical forests, klisiastika, kouri, kri, livadia, protecting forests, excommunicated forests.

II. Communities, Institutions and/or individuals concerned

The guardians of the forests are the local communities that maintain them. Many institutions and individuals are active in promoting the sacred forests as a cultural good as well as significant sites for nature conservation. The most important are:

- **University of Ioannina**, Department of Biological Applications and Technology (BAT)

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Information: Theoni Trangas, Associate Professor, head of BAT

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- **University of Ioannina**, Department of Biological Applications and Technology, Ecology section, "Conservation through Religion: the Sacred Groves of Epirus" THALIS programme

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- **University of Ioannina**, Department of History and Archaeology, Folklore section

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- **Municipality of Zagori**

Address: Asprangeloi Zagoriou, 44007

Information: Vasilis Spyrou, mayor

Telephone: 26533 60300

Email: d.zagoriou@1376.syzefxis.gov.gr

Website: www.zagori.gov.gr

- **Municipality of Konitsa**

Address: Dimarchiou Square, Konitsa, 44100

Information: Giorgos Kallinteris, deputy mayor for Culture

Telephone: 26553 60309

Email: gkallint@yahoo.gr

Website: www.konitsa.gr

- **Notern Pindos National Park** (Vikos-Aoos and Pindos National Forests Management Agency)

Address: Asprangeloi Zagoriou, 44007

Information: Georgios Mallinis, chairman of the Administrative Board, and Alexandra Papigioti, Environmental Information consultant

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- **Med-INA**, Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos

Address: 23 Voukourestiou St, 10671, Athens

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- **Delos Initiative**, IUCN (World Conservation Union)-WCPA (World Commission on Protected Areas)

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- **Vjosa/Aoos River Ecomuseum**

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- **Ecomuseum Zagori**

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- **Zagori Development Corporation**

Address: 13 Dosiou St, 45333, Ioannina

Information: Eleni Pangratiou, architect and geographer, secretary of the board

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Specialised information on the element

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III. Description of the ICH element

1. Short description

The sacred forests of Zagori and Konitsa are sites where chopping trees is forbidden and where it is feared that cutting down their branches can result in supernatural punishments. In most cases, sacred forests are not church property but communal or public land. Even so, the inhabitants of the communities recognise the Church as their customary manager.

2. Description

Sacred forests often function as protecting forests that protect the nearby villages from landslide phenomena (e.g. rock falls or avalanches), and they are not at all uncommon in mountain locations, such as the mountains of Epirus. Furthermore, in the past sacred forests may have functioned as reserve forests. Such forests, comprised usually of evergreen oaks, could offer their branches in periods of prolonged heavy snowfall so that the animals each family kept in its pens could survive. Community decisions determined the management in such exceptional cases and the benefits accrued to the Church. Also, on certain occasions even the sacred forest timber was used for works of public benefit. One such example is the forest of Gradistas in Kapesovo, some of the trees of which were used in the construction of the Paschaleios School (1861), thus enabling the Kapesovo community to participate indirectly in the donation made by the Paschalis brothers.

A forest could be described as sacred if it was dedicated to a church that was located within its boundaries or the central church of the village. Excommunicated forests can also be found in many villages. Excommunication was used for forests as an unspecified threat to any would-be violator, the consequences being exclusion from the community and the rites of the Church – even his or her own funeral – social stigmatisation and the scourge of bequeathing eternal damnation.

3. Spaces and means of performance or implementation of the ICH element

Spaces that are associated with the performance/realisation of the ICH element

There is usually one sacred forest in each village included in the research area. Most sacred forests are located close to the villages and are often adjacent to their outermost houses. The exceptions are forests that are linked to old abandoned villages. In these abandoned sites, the church usually now operates as a chapel. Even so, it is still cared for and the adjacent forest is maintained in a good condition. Moreover, when the forest serves a specific purpose its location can be at quite a distance from the village. A typical example is the excommunicated forest of Mikro Papingo, located on a steep slope at a distance of 1.5 hours walk from the village. Its location at an altitude of 1,550 metres, with the outskirts of the forest running into the summer grazing grounds where trees do not grow, is due to the fact that it protects the village from landfalls.

- **Equipment, modules and accessories (such as e.g. tools, utensils, uniforms etc.) that are used for the preparation and the performance of the ICH element**

Even though in other areas, holy sites are associated with rites such as the raising of trees or placing crosses on them, such practices were not recorded in Epirus during either the fieldwork or the archive research. The inscribed or iron crosses on certain trees are not related to ritual practices but originate primarily from the visits of Patrokosmas (1714-1779) to Zagori and Konitsa, where such traditions are especially popular. Moreover, they may be connected to footpaths that lead to chapels, be indicators of the ownership and use of a tree (e.g. as a summer pen) or be intended to protect the tree from lightning.

Many sacred forests, however, along with their churches are involved in epiphanies. In such cases, a villager will have found a religious icon in a miraculous way. The icon then moves each evening to the spot it has chosen or appears in the dreams of certain villagers, until the church of the saint has been established on the spot where it was found (e.g. Palioseli in the village of Lakka in Aoo, Konitsa and Vovoussa in East Zagori).

The stories about sacred forests often narrate the consequences of profiting in a forbidden manner from them. They tell of the appearance of the supernatural guardians of the forest or their messengers, such as giant snakes in the dreams of the violators, as well as punishments varying from being momentarily turned into marble, minor or major accidents, to serious illnesses or sudden deaths at a later time. Many older people remember the stories told to them by their grandparents of the ritual of excommunication, which they could describe in exact detail.

- **Products or material objects in general (handicrafts, worship or secular vessels, goods, food, etc.) that are developed as an outcome of the performance or implementation of the ICH element.**

Sacred forests encompass a wide variety of vegetation forms as they neighbour onto villages that are built at altitudes of 600-1,500 metres. When descending from the highest to the lowest altitudes, we find forests with junipers, beeches, black pine, mixed deciduous forests, deciduous oaks and “prinones” (shrub land). In both Zagori and Konitsa, where most villages are built within the zone of oaks, mixed deciduous and oak forests, the forests are usually sacred. What is important, however, is not the type of vegetation but the age and form of the trees. Here we find perennial species occurring in their natural shape, when

elsewhere they appear as bushes, sculptured by intensive human use, the most typical species being the yew. It should be noted that the presence of the oak is not connected to the survival of ancient Greek cult practices, but it is a natural presence in the regional ecosystems, as well as being the most important tree in the local flora for the life of the local communities.

4. Transmission of the ICH element from one generation to the next

- **Description**

One of the greatest threats faced by Sacred Natural Sites is indifference. The few people who continue to live in the villages of Zagori and Konitsa, in particular the elderly, know their sacred forests. But, we should not overlook the fact that these are two of Greece's most sparsely populated municipalities according to the latest census (2011) and, in the winter, their villages can become completely empty. The older people, especially those who lived in the villages, tell stories of god's wrath in response to the desecration of their sacred site. Often, however, when people who have lived in the city return, either to retire or if they have been educated, they dismiss the fear of supernatural punishment as superstition. Just as with the younger villagers, these people, aware of the existence of these forests, talk more in terms of the need to conserve them not from fear of the supernatural but of respect for nature and the history of their homeland.

Procedures for dealing with ritual offences that functioned locally as initiation processes, such as the prohibited gathering of wood lying on the ground for the customary New Year's and Christmas bonfires, no longer exist as there are practically no children left to gather wood in these villages, as almost no schools remain open. The fires are now usually lit with wood that the Municipality purchases and distributes to the cultural associations that organize the events.

Even so, the inhabitants of the villages believe in the power of their sacred site and consider its existence essential for practical, spiritual and aesthetic reasons. The practical reasons are chiefly associated with the protection that these forests afford the villages, which would otherwise be at risk from landslides. The reasons for respecting the site bind its condition and fate to that of the community and give meaning to the protective character of the forest, not only in functional terms but also on the level of the imaginary, connecting it, for example, to incidents of collective transgressive behaviour, from which the whole community suffered (mainly during the Second World War). The aesthetic reasons are mostly to do with the view of the sacred forest from afar and with its importance as a place of recreation. Some communities have embarked upon an effort to showcase their forest, spearheaded by local cultural associations and active villagers. For example, at Kapesovo there is a board with information on the sacred forest of Gradista and its history and a map for visitors, who can follow a circular route in order to see the whole forest and its most impressive trees.

- **People or institutions that are involved in the transmission of the element**

The most important people with knowledge are the oldest inhabitants of the villages because they have a living faith in the value and sacredness of the forests and have experienced the sites. Parish wardens also play an important role as they often oversee repairs and reconstructions to the churches, cutting

down trees that may damage them. The local priest is also very important as, if he himself believes in the value of the trees, then the congregation will follow.

Some of this knowledge has disappeared and can now only be found in the writings of local researchers (e.g. the manuscripts of the teacher and amateur folklorist and botanist Kostas Lazarides [1904-1987], who took a great interest in documenting and describing the natural world of Zagori and whose study *My village [Koukouli of Zagori] and its Folklore* [manuscript 3229/1967] received an award from the Academy of Athens). It can also be found in the works of intellectuals who fell in love with the local folklore and nature, such as the forester Panos Grispos, who published *Forest Folklore (Dasiki Laographia)* in instalments and an alphabetical order of entries in *Epirotiki Estia* (1967-1972, vols. 16-21). It is also in the work of local authors, who sometimes mention the sacred forests when discussing the history and traditions of their villages: *“One upon a time there was a dense forest, which they called “kouri”. The villagers found this forest, they wouldn’t let anyone chop down trees there, nor branches, nor graze goats, because it was above the village and they wanted it to grow and to expand and hold the rainwater so that the village wouldn’t drown”* (Haralambos Rebelis, 1953, *Konitstiotika: The beginning of the story of “The wolf and gypsy”* (the informant was Tolis Hariton of Turnovo).

1. History and genealogy of the ICH element

1. Historical information or regional narrative about the emergence, continuity, presence and adjustments and/or modifications of the ICH element

The results thus far from the dating of the trees in the sacred forests indicate that they are 250-400 years old, dating them to before 1750. In that period, at least at Zagori, excommunication was an especially popular way in which to resolve economic or social problems, such as theft, disputes over grazing land, establishing land boundaries and false witnesses.

We often find that forests that were initially dedicated to the central church and which needed even greater protection were excommunicated. Subsequently, in particular after the liberation of Epirus, joint community decisions led to Forestry Policing Directives, which transferred the customary protection of the forests to the contemporary framework, defining permitted and prohibited uses. Even so, in the minds of the people, the greatest fear was not of the forest ranger but of the saint-punisher and the supernatural guard of the forest.

“Don’t get your hands on the village, nor on the vakufi; exploiting the village is unjust, exploiting the vakufi a shame”

(Popular saying)

As the modern era approached, the prohibitions on used of the forests were increasingly undermined. The reasons for this were, first of all, the undermining of the community institutions that resulted from transferring authority from the local/communal level to the distant centre, in particular after the liberation (1913). Another reason has been the decline in population and ensuing abandonment of the villages, which has changed the nature of communal control and made unaccountability possible. Finally, the rejection of many old practices and beliefs as incompatible with modernisation and progress. Most documented incidents

show that increasing numbers are violating the old rules, which the previous generation followed. Typical examples mention the piety of the mother and the rebellion of the daughter or collective violations that occurred with the breakdown of law and order and general disruption during the Second World War.

The further population decline in the post-war period meant that farming was abandoned and vegetation regrew. Hence, it was not necessary for the few remaining inhabitants to search for wood or branches on the *vakufi*, as the place had become filled with ungrazed scrubs and overgrown forests. Conversely, the absence of an authority that could impose order and the weakening of institutions could have led to the relaxing of prohibitions and the wholesale destruction of the sacred forests. This did not happen, however. On the contrary, we can say that incidents of violations are the exception to the rule and are still today associated with horrific stories of the punishment of the hopeful usurpers, which continue to reinforce the need to conserve the sacred forests in the collective consciousness.

2. Updating of data (at least every 5 years)

V. Importance of the element for the Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. Enhancement

The sacred forests of Epirus are excellent examples of environmental management, demonstrating in a unique way the practices, ethical codes and values that govern conservation practices on a small scale. Moreover, today they are given meaning within a modern interpretative context, with the added aim of conserving their bio-cultural importance and values.

A large group of scientists of various specialities and nationalities is collaborating on the THALIS programme “Conservation through Religion: the Sacred Groves of Epirus” at the University of Ioannina. The academic director for the study of their history is Vassilis Nitsiakos, professor of Social Folklore in the Department of History and Archaeology at the University of Ioannina. The academic director of the programme is Professor John M. Halley of the Department of Biological Applications and Technology, who has been working (2012-2015) to document the bio-cultural value of the sacred forests of Zagori and Konitsa. The Thalís programme is co-founded by the European Union (European Social Fund) and national funds through the Operational Programme “Education and Lifelong Learning”, part of the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF). Investment in the knowledge society is through the European Social Fund. This research programme attempted to understand the function of sacred forests and to showcase them as forests that represent the strength of the natural ecosystems of Epirus and successful small-scale management systems. More specifically:

- These forests, as they are associated with the oldest trees in the area, can function as ecological laboratories for the study of the biodiversity and the organisms related to very old trees, which are rare on a global level and worthy of protection.

- The history of the sacred forests, as it is recorded in the annual growth rings of the trees, may give us important information on the climate history of the area.
- They can be used as examples of successful small-scale conservation programmes with the participation of local communities, something that in many cases has not been achieved by modern forms of conservation.
- Developing sacred forests into tourist destinations is not advisable, except in very select cases, as for many Sacred Natural Sites uncontrolled tourism poses a significant risk.
- In order to highlight the importance of the Sacred Forests of Zagori and Konitsa on an international level, the partners of the THALIS programme, as well as the author of the proposal, have already taken initiatives to promote the issue at European and international conferences and workshops (e.g. Sacred Natural Sites).

2. Safeguarding measures

- Research, recording, photographing/filming, creating/enriching collections, digitization, publications.
- Collaboration with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the associated Metropolitan dioceses and forestry services (Ioannina, Konitsa, Metsovo), with the foresters of the Municipalities of Zagori and Konitsa, as well as with the Vikos-Aoos and Pindos National Forests Management Agency and local community representatives for documenting the history and public consultation on the conservation of the sacred forests.

Appendix

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Pre-existing documentation

Available bibliography (indicative)

Available data

Agency:

Type of research:

Type of data:

Inscription of the element in other inventories

National Inventory–Technical sheet of the element

Place and date of drafting:

Author

Name and surname:

Title:

Accompanying documentary material

Bibliography-archive research:

In situ research-interviews:

Audio recording:

Records:

Photo recording:

Video recording: