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“Monasticizing the Monastic”: Religious Clothes, Socialization and the Transformation of Body and Self among Greek Orthodox Nuns

Eleni Sotiriou *

Abstract: The paper explores the role that religious clothing assumes in the socialization process by which a lay person becomes a monastic. The study is an ethnographic one focusing on two Greek Orthodox convents. By analysing the habits’ symbolic and practical value in the different stages of monastic life, it shows how the nuns by putting on the habit embody and enact monastic values and practices and how the habit is implicated in the transformative project of both the body and self and becomes the locator of an authentic Greek Orthodox monastic identity.

Keywords: Greek Orthodox monasticism, gender, materiality, socialization

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Introduction

In Greece, there is an age-old dictum that the “habit doesn’t make the priest”. It is usually employed not only by unbelievers and popular anti-clericals who refuse to respect religious authority, but also by sincere believers, indicating that material and external forms of religiosity are secondary to a deeper and pure inner faith. Interestingly enough, the same dictum is frequently used by the laity in discussions that may concern both male and female monastics, or anyone within the church hierarchy, who may be perceived as abusing their monastic or ecclesiastical vows or their position within the religious sphere. Indeed, the “habit” is chosen as the contested focus of spiritual identity against which all secular moral judgment and anti-clerical sentiments are directed. Because of its visibility and the fact that in Greek Orthodoxy is used to cloth the body of both clergy and monastics, it becomes the single most important marker of an inner, altered, spiritual self. Moreover, the use of the word “make”, or rather its negation in the above mentioned maxim, is crucial because it allocates to the habit some form of agency that makes apparent its “constructing” capacity. The specific interest of this paper is an analysis of the role of the *schema* – the “habit” of the Greek Orthodox female monastics – in the process of socialization of the nuns and the construction of their monastic identity.

If there is one aspect often emphasized in ethnographic studies of Greece is the visible, exterior, performative, sensuous and mystical nature of Greek Orthodoxy, as opposed to the more interiorized and textual faith of Western Christianity (Dubisch, 1990; Kenna, 2005). This difference is also apparent when one considers Greek Orthodox monasticism, especially in its world-negating attitudes and otherworldly orientation. Remaining always faithful to the ascetic ethos of early Christian monasticism, it exhibits traditionalistic tendencies which include, among other things, a neglect of, or even an enmity towards, intellectual preoccupations. Such preoccupations are seen not only as inferior or useless, but more importantly as detrimental to the sense of the paradisiacal state and the attainment of eternal life, both primary goals of monastic life. Thus, the focal point is shifted from the intellectual examination and reflection upon theological doctrines to the material, experiential and practical aspects of Orthodoxy in general, and of monastic life in particular. As it will become apparent in the course of this paper, practice (in the sense of lived

experience, *askesis* and *mimesis*) becomes the main mechanism of monastic education, while interaction with material objects becomes crucial to the internalization of monastic values and, I would argue, emblematic of the authenticity of a spiritual state of being. At first sight, such an assertion may seem paradoxical given the fact that one of the lifelong aims of the monastics is detachment from all material aspects of existence. Yet it is rooted in the Orthodox understanding of the created material cosmos, which is not ontologically evil and which will be transformed eschatologically into a qualitatively superior state. Orthodox theology is anti-Manichaean and supports both the sanctification of the human being and of the whole material creation through the belief in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. As a Greek Orthodox monk once told me, “matter is the house of God”. In this respect, the dualism between matter and spirit is surpassed; matter is imbued with spirit, and spirit is manifested through matter. Thus, considering Orthodoxy means re-considering the dualities by which the Western scholarly mind articulates “otherness” (Hann & Goltz, 2010). The relationship between the constituting elements of such dualities within Greek Orthodoxy is a far more complex issue and as the old dictum with which my introduction has started reveals, favouring the one or the other element by Orthodox Greeks is both contextual and contingent.

Late anthropological studies have also emphasized the importance of transcending the dualism of subjects and objects by paying attention to the material aspects of culture and the way objects possess agency, thereby affecting the making of persons, institutions or cultures (Tilley, Keane, Kuechler, Rowlands & Spyer, 2006). With respect to Eastern Christianity, such studies have tended to focus on the religious efficacy and agency of mainly two material things that receive the greatest veneration from Orthodox believers, that of relics and icons (Hanganu, 2010; Keane, 2014). In particular Hanganu (2010, p. 51), in his examination of the theology and materiality of icons in Eastern Romania, revealed how the theology of the “image and likeness” of Eastern Christians informs their understanding of personhood and materiality and becomes a useful tool in explaining the “biographies” of material objects used in devotional contexts, and the way in which “spiritual beings, humans, and religious objects undergo entangled transformations and accumulate layers of relational biographies”. Any study concerned with the significance of objects in the context of religion will also greatly benefit from the illuminating work of

the social psychologists Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) on the meaning of things. Though in a different context – that of the household –, they argue that “objects permit the cultivation of the self”, they “mediate conflicts within the self”, “express quality of the self”, serve as “signs of status”, as “symbols of social integration”, as “role models”, and have a “socializing function”. In the light of the arguments offered by such research, I propose to “singularize” the monastic habit and use it as a particular lens in order to examine the process of socialization and the transformation of body and self within a community of Greek Orthodox nuns, and to show how the social, the institutional, the divine, the human and the material are implicated in this process as mutually constituting. My analysis will begin in the first part with a discussion of the main methods used in “monasticizing” the newcomer and by an examination of the most important verbal, material and symbolic strategies of the novitiate and the ritual of tonsure – the main rite of passage by which the novices are incorporated into the closed community of the convent and the most intensified transformative moment of the self. It should be noted here, that the prime and lasting aim of the nuns is union with the divine. The novitiate and the ritual of tonsure are considered by the monastics as different stages in achieving this mystical union. Both may be viewed as snapshots in time in which the material appearance of the nuns is radically changed and in which the habit takes central stage assuming a heightened significance. The second part of the paper will discuss the meaning of the habit for the nuns and its function as an agent of socialization in the construction of a new ritualized body and a genuine monastic self.

The data upon which my observations are made derive from fieldwork carried out in the early 1990s in two Orthodox convents in Greece and from many more recent but shorter subsequent visits to them, as well as, from discussions with male monastics. The two main convents of my research are what I call “sister convents” since both are under the direction of the same *hegoumeni* (abbess) and both are located in an urban environment; the convent of A. in the centre of the city, while the convent of P. in what used to be the outskirts of the city, but which in recent years became an increasingly populated area. For the purpose of a clearer articulation of the ideas presented in this paper, I will use the word “habit” to refer to monastic clothing instead of the Greek word *schema*. Additionally, the word “habit” is, more often than not, used by both monastics and the laity in Greece for the black long tunic or *raso*, worn by

all members of the religious hierarchy, irrespective of gender and which is only one of the many garments that are used to make up the “habit”. In this paper, the word “habit” will be used to denote both the *schema* and the *raso*, depending on the context. Also the words “clothes”, “garment”, “dress” and “attire” will be used for my analytical purpose interchangeably.

While I deal with the issue of language, a final point should be made concerning the word “uniform”. Uniforms have been the subject of analytical research for the past few decades, and their importance as key agents of socialization in many areas of everyday life has been highlighted by many scholars. These areas range from schools, hospitals and governmental offices to what Goffman (1961, p. 17) has termed “total institutions”, such as the military, mental asylums, convents and monasteries. However, recent dress scholarship has emphasized the multifaceted and pluralistic character of uniforms, both in their design and function, and the need to look beyond their obvious role in ensuring conformity, discipline, order, pride and authority (Craik, 2005). In the case of the Greek Orthodox nuns under study, what I find of particular interest is the fact that while their monastic dress may be viewed as a uniform – which in its current form is fairly recent considering the long history of Eastern Orthodox monasticism¹ –, I never heard neither the nuns nor anyone else, monastic or lay, to refer to it with the Greek word used for uniform, i.e. *stoli*. This fact is quite intriguing when one considers that etymologically the word *stoli* is “related to garments worn by those staffing a fleet, as well as similar to the words used for expressing decoration or beautification, namely ‘fancy dress’” (Yagou, 2011, p. 101). Even though the nuns of this study considered themselves as following the angelic life and believed that they eventually would be “staffing” the *tagma* (battalion) of angels in paradise, the absence of the word *stoli* from their vocabulary is suggestive of the meaning and value of the habit for them not as the garment of conformity, discipline and religious distinction – meanings that the English word uniform might convey –, but rather, to

¹ To my knowledge, there is no comprehensive study of the Greek Orthodox female monastic dress. Most historical studies concentrate on the habit of Byzantine nuns (Ball, 2009-2010) or on the clothes of monastics in late antiquity (Krawiec, 2009). The habit of Greek Orthodox monks and nuns in its current form is, according to Papaevangelou (1965), established around the middle of the 19th century after the foundation of the independent modern Greek state.

use Krawiec’s term, as “the garment of salvation” (2009, p. 125). Intriguingly, the only time that the nuns used the word *stoli* was in relation to their soul. The nuns described themselves as “dead to the world”. This state of existence required not only the de-beautification of the body, in the sense of its neglect, but its total denial. Only such redesigned bodies could contain a beautified soul. Beauty for the nuns was a symbol of salvation and divine love, and was often conceived as paradisiacal light and brightness. However, it was only by being donned the habit and being immersed in its blackness that such beauty and salvation could be achieved. In this respect, the habit becomes both the “garment of salvation” and the “*stoli* of the soul”. It is the garment which will make the ultimate goal of the nuns’ earthly lives realizable.

Clothing in Black: The Ritual of Monastic Socialization

Forbess (2010, p. 140), in her work on Romanian Orthodox nuns, pointed out that knowledge and monastic training was not textual, but based rather on “participating in ritual and working life”. In the same way, in the convents under study, monastic socialization was a process favouring experiential knowledge over the study of biblical, patristic and liturgical texts. Such knowledge was achieved through the engagement of the nuns in ritual activities and the ritualization of everyday life. Even the most mundane task had to have, in the nuns’ own words, “the seal of God”; it had to start and end with the sign of the cross and be performed with the mind focused not on the task itself, but on the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me”). Bell (1992, p. 98) sees “ritualization as a strategic form of socialization”. She argues that “ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’, and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors” (Bell, 1992, p. 74). Ritualization was the strategy of setting the boundaries between the secular and the monastic world in the convents, and of legitimating the spiritual supremacy of the latter. Furthermore, in the convents belief in God was regarded as the lower stage of spirituality, one reserved for the laity that live among the distractions of the secular world. In Greek Orthodox monasticism, belief in God should be coupled with

experiencing God. This is a state of being that in the convents was mainly achieved through work that was spiritualised by employing continuous prayer during the performance of tasks. The nuns’ continuous evocation of the Jesus Prayer had the effect of tapering feelings and thoughts, leaving just the doing in their place. In this way, they became like “empty vessels” ready to receive only the purest of knowledge, that of the divine. Greek Orthodox, as indeed the whole of Eastern Orthodox monasticism, is performative in its nature. God, who is perceived by the nuns as male, can reveal himself, his love and intentions for each individual nun in the most menial of activities. As I have already mentioned in my introduction, intellectual pursuits were regarded not only as inferior, but also as dangerous, for they could be an impediment to the experiential knowledge of God. The cornerstone of such knowledge was obedience, and the main teaching method was practice, self-discipline and control.

From the eighteen nuns who were members of the convents of A. and P. only half had finished secondary school and only one of the nuns had a university degree. The educated nun was the one that spent the longest period as novice and was always given the most repetitive, boring and humble of tasks to do. “She should learn to see with the eyes of her heart instead of her mind”, as the other nuns explained to me. Education was seen to contain the seeds of pride. Thus, what was emphasized was “obedience to the spirit rather than the letter” (Forbess, 2010, p. 150).

Clothes and Religious Predisposition: the Newcomer

The process of the “monasticization” of newcomers and their inclusion into the community of the nuns under study was a carefully selected one and started from their very first visit to the convent. The newcomer could stay in the convent as guest for various lengths of time and was allowed to perform several minor tasks, ranging from reading the text during vespers to sweeping the yard or cleaning the oil lamps in the church. All these were done under the watchful eye of a senior nun who became her guardian and instructor. Usually, one distinguished the person that aspired to be a nun from the other female guests in the convent from her external appearance. A prerequisite for all visitors to the convent is, up to this present day, the wearing of “decent clothes”. What is usually meant by this is a blouse that covered the arms and a skirt of at least knee-length for women, while men should wear long trousers. Yet, during my fieldwork, the women that visited the convents of A. and P. with the purpose of becoming nuns were

even stricter in their choice of clothes. They were often dressed in dark – though not black – coloured, floor-length skirts and loose, long-sleeved blouses on top of which they wore their baptismal golden cross, while their hair was never left loose². By concealing their body, these women concealed what they perceived to be as the most sinful aspect of their identity, i.e. their sexuality. Their choice of clothes was their strategy in fashioning an asexual body worthy of salvation. In a way, they wore Orthodox piety and morality.

Outside the convent, however, these women were often the subjects of social criticism and mistrust for their public display of over-zealous religiosity. They were considered by many Greek men and women as conservative, anachronistic and out of touch with the realities of modern life. In fact, there is a special term that Greeks use for a woman that is dressed in that way: “*theousa*”. The label has clear negative connotations and is indicative of religious bigotry and hypocrisy. Her way of dressing is perceived as a provocative form of religious arrogance that should be challenged. Indeed, many believe that a “*theousa*” is a woman with a skeleton in her cupboard, and that her modest appearance, rather than being the outcome of her desire to be close to God, is a means for hiding her supposed past immoral (often in the sexual sense) self. A similar category for men, though, does not exist, perhaps because men’s choice of clothes is more restricted, thus limiting their capacity to embody religiosity the same way that women do. A full analysis of this issue falls outside the scope of this paper. Suffice, for my purpose here, to point out that the aspiring novices when they were gazed on the streets, were considered as “dangerous ‘others’” (Shilling, 1993, p. 55), for they posed a threat to commonly upheld notions of modernity and secularity; thus, their religiosity had to be “tamed”. This explains why the same women commanded the respect of those they criticised them when they entered the convent and expressed their desire to become nuns. Usually, after a few short periods spent as guest in the convent the newcomer took the decision to enter the convent as a novice.

² This way of dressing is also the visual marker of Greek women that belong to various Orthodox sisterhoods (usually affiliated with certain brotherhoods of theologians) and played an active part in missionary work within the country during the 20th century. See Giannakopoulos, 1999.

The Novitiate

The novitiate is the most intense period of instruction during which a revolution in life patterns had to be confronted. This meant a drastic alteration in daily habits such as eating, sleeping and washing, in speech and in body gestural language, tedious labour, the relinquishment of even minor decision-making on one’s own behalf, and adherence to a timetable that allowed no room for self-directed activities or even the luxury of being alone. The abandonment of the secular world and the start of the novitiate were marked symbolically by the abandonment of one’s own clothes. In the convents of A. and P. there was no formal ceremony marking the beginning of the novitiate. Simply, the *hegoumeni* gathered together all the nuns, and a blessing was read to the newcomer who then was dressed in a black long-sleeved, full-length robe. On top of that a black, half-length garment called *kontorasaki* was worn. Moreover, the head was wrapped in a long black *mantili* (scarf) leaving only the triangle of her facial features revealed. The head covering symbolized her complete obedience to God. The gathering was finished by the symbolic bodily gesture of bowing first in front of the *hegoumeni* and then in front of all the nuns and the asking of their forgiveness. Obedience to God was combined with obedience to the hierarchical order of the convent. According to the nuns, obedience was the most trying of all monastic vows. Hence, this was the beginning of a long, and often painful, training for the novice; obedience was first mapped onto her body by means of dress and bodily gestures, and later became progressively internalised³. From this time onwards, the newcomer was considered to be a proper *dokimi* (novice). The lengthy process of the metamorphosis of the old self had begun. The act of riddance of the secular clothes was its “inauguration” (Bruder, 1998, p. 95).

The wearing of the black garments was a poignant moment for the *dokimi*, for it visually communicated her decision of dying to the world and of cutting all cherished ties with it, starting with the renouncement of her own kindred. In the beginning, such decision was always described to me as one of mixed emotions of happiness on the one hand, and of loneliness and homesickness on the other. Parents were also struggling emotionally to accept the decision of their daughter to become a nun. Black, the colour of nullity and death, invited the analogy of the living

³ For a good discussion of the obeisance practice as an embodied strategy, though in another context, that of Buddhist monasticism, see Reinders, 1997.

dead. Indeed, parents often felt that they “buried their daughter alive”. The role of a loving and charismatic *hegoumeni* and of the convent’s *spiritual father* (confessor) was crucial in mitigating both the deep distress of parents and the emotional strain that such stress produced for the novice. The support also of the senior nuns and the sharing of their experiences of the novitiate assisted the novice in her decision to remain in the convent. Finally, the metaphorical use of kinship terminology, borrowed from the secular world and of familial sentiment, helped to create not only an alternative *oikoyenia* (family) for the novice, but a more authentic and spiritually superior one, based on “true kinship” with Christ (Iossifides, 1991). The *hegoumeni* was addressed by the novice as “mother”, the convent’s confessor as “father”, while the rest of the nuns as “sisters”.

According to the *hegoumeni*, the “clothing in black” of the novice served three purposes. First, it acknowledged the novice’s entrance in the community. Second, the black garment of the novice had the effect of integrating her within the monastic community without the potential effect of undermining the status quo by creating feelings of jealousy among the nuns. Third, since the black robe and the *mantili* were the outward signs of the novice’s dedication to God, it was believed that these will help to provide a measure of restraint on the novice against leaving the convent when and if she faced any crises in her calling.

As far as the duration of the novitiate is concerned, the normal practice in the Eastern Orthodox tradition is that of three years. However, in the convents of A. and P. this period was often prolonged. Taking the decision to progress to the next spiritual stage of the monastic profession,⁴ the donning of the *Great* or *Angelic Habit*, involved the consent of the *hegoumeni*, the *spiritual father* and the novice herself. Absolute certainty for the novice’s suitability to become a “perfect nun” was the utmost

⁴ In Eastern Orthodox monasticism there are three successive grades after the completion of the novitiate. In each stage the monk or nun is donned a number of specific garments that make up the full habit: the first stage is the *rasophoros* (the bearer of *raso*), the second is the Lesser Habit or *stavrophoros* (the bearer of the cross), and the third and final stage is the Great or Angelic Schema or *megaloschimos*, in which the monk or nun receives the full habit. In the convents of A. and P. the two first stages were omitted in favour of a longer novitiate which would ensure the total commitment of the novice to the monastic life before the pronouncement of any vows, the renouncement of which is considered in Greek Orthodox monasticism to be the gravest sin. For a good description of the different grades, see Gothóni, 1993.

criterion for progressing to this stage, and this was not only based on the attainment of a certain degree of spirituality on the part of the novice and her inclination, but, and more importantly so, on the intuition of the *hegoumeni* and/or of the convent’s *spiritual father*. In the end, monastic socialization was less dependent on the strict observance of the convent’s rules than on the exercise of the virtuous disposition of the novice. Moreover, the enlightened decision of the convents’ spiritual elite achieved through prayer was believed to reveal the will of God, and could shorten or prolong the novitiate or the progression of the full-fledged nun to the convent’s hierarchy. Worthy of attention is the fact that the current *hegoumeni* of the convents became a nun having served only a year into the novitiate and a *hegoumeni* after only twelve years from her tonsuring ceremony. As in the case of Forbess’ (2010, p. 147) Romanian nuns, the Orthodox principle of *oikonomia* – namely, the mild application of church rules – paired with intuitive and revelatory knowledge opened the way for the nuns “to seek new potential and assert a more creative involvement in their own training”.

The Tonsuring Ceremony

During my fieldwork I was fortunate to be present at the *koura* (tonsure)⁵ of two of the novices. The ritual was described down to the last detail in the *typikon* of the convents, the book according to which the life of a particular monastery or convent is regulated. The scriptural corpus of the rite has a long-standing tradition, dating back to early Christian monasticism, and is the same for all Greek Orthodox monks and nuns. Variations, though, exist due to the incorporation by some monasteries and convents of some aspects associated with the major church rites performed for the laity. The main purpose of such additions is to render the tonsuring ritual more accessible to those involved. The novices were members of the secular world prior to their entry in the convent. Their monastic socialization in the convents under study often involved not the eradication or the repression of their secular knowledge, experience and feelings, but rather the metamorphosis of those to religious ones.⁶ The monastic ritual of tonsure has great symbolic meaning and is a true rite of passage through

⁵ *Koura* denotes the shearing of the hair. Yet, this constitutes only one aspect of the Eastern rite of tonsure, which also includes the acquisition of a new name and of the habit.

⁶ See also Forbess, 2010, pp. 146-147.

which the novices, or those of the lower monastic stages, became “perfect” monastics.

The two novices who were about to become *megaloschimes* (those presented with the *Great* or *Angelic Schema*) have been fasting and praying for a week before the ritual. During this period of time, they were also excused from all their duties within the convent so as to be liberated “from all earthly and temporal things”. This helped them to achieve a state of mind devoid of all earthly thoughts, leaving them free to converse with the divine and to seek spiritual guidance and support in the new life they were about to embark upon. Confession was also regarded as an essential preparation for the ritual, since it was believed to involve the “cleansing” of the soul, making it worthy of union with Christ.

The whole atmosphere in the convent of A., where the nuns had served as novices, was a festive one. The feelings of the novices were likened to those of a woman before her marriage ceremony. They were excited because “they would become his brides”. The night before the ritual I watched the two novices as they were prostrating themselves and bowing down to the floor before the icon of Christ in the convent’s church. They spent the night praying. Their mental prayer was accompanied by a “bodily prayer”, thus focusing their whole being entirely on the divine. In the early evening their habits were placed behind the *iconostasis*⁷ of the church on the altar, and a special prayer was read asking God to accept the novices and thanking him for choosing them from the “sea of humanity”.

The novice’s habits were made by the other nuns, but the material and their shoes, although identical to those of other nuns, were purchased by the godmother of the would-be nun. The institution of godparenthood had been added to the ritual by the *hegoumeni* for financial reasons, but also for expanding the binding ties of the convents to the local community, and for making visible to the outside world their desirability in attracting new recruits, and correspondingly, the elevated spiritual status of the convents. Nevertheless, the godmother’s role in the tonsuring ritual was a passive one. She was present but inactive, standing behind the *hegoumeni* during its whole duration. Her role was confined to solely sponsoring the ritual

⁷ The *iconostasis* is a partition with doors and icons that separates the nave from the sanctuary in Eastern Orthodox Churches.

financially⁸. Several women, regular visitors of the convent, were eager to sponsor a novice. Such an act was regarded as almsgiving, as well as a source of spiritual blessing.

During the early morning of the day of the ritual, the church of the convent of A. was filled by the convent’s nuns, as well as, relatives and friends of the two novices. The two novices were dressed in long-sleeved white *chitones* (robes) that reached their feet. On the *chitones* three crosses were stitched with red thread: one on the back and one on each side of the chest. Their long hair was left unplaited down their backs, and on their feet they wore white socks. Here, the marital symbolism is evident. The wearing of the white gown and the white socks by the novices is reminiscent of the wedding dress worn by brides and is taken to suggest the material and spiritual purity of the novices. Indeed, the tonsured nuns were referred to as “brides of Christ”. Moreover, the entrance of the novice to the convent’s church was suggestive of the arrival of the bride to the church at the wedding ceremony. In both cases, the principal character is escorted: the novice by the *hegoumeni*, the bride by her father or in his absence by some other relative. Interestingly enough, though, the white gown worn by the novice on the day of her tonsure is also the garment of her burial.

The two novices entered the church escorted by the *hegoumeni* and another nun and walked towards the Royal Gates where they performed three series of three prostrations: the first to the entrance to the church; the second before the Bishop’s Throne; and the final one before the bishop who officiated at the ritual. They then prostrated themselves in front of the *hegoumeni* and each of the nuns asking them for forgiveness. The bishop then posed to the novices the following questions:

(1) Do you renounce the world and that which is of the world, according to the Lord’s commandment?

(2) Will you remain in the monastery and in ascetic striving even until your last breath?

(3) Will you continue in obedience, even until death, to your superior and all the brotherhood in Christ?

⁸ In the convents economic transactions were always mediated by a lay person, because such transactions could ground the nuns too much on the secular world and also jeopardize their vow of poverty.

(4) Will you endure every affliction and privation of monastic life for the sake of Heavenly Kingdom?

(5) Will you preserve yourself in purity, chastity and piety?

To each of these questions the novices answered: “Yes, with the help of God, honourable father”. These five promises corresponded to the three vows declared by the novices. Church tradition condenses the substance of monastic dedication into the three vows of obedience, chastity and adherence to the spirit of non-acquisition (poverty). In vowing obedience, the novices renounced individual will and submitted themselves fully to the will of God, the *hegoumeni*, the leaders of the church, and to the convent’s rules as stipulated in its constitution. Obedience, as we have seen, is regarded as the basis of monasticism, since celibacy and poverty can also be practised by the laity.

After the pronouncement of the vows, the bishop described the perfect life of Jesus Christ, which the novices should seek to imitate in order to represent on earth the polity of God. He then continued by inviting the novices to receive what he referred to as a “second baptism” and to become “daughters of light” cleansed of all their sins. At this stage, the novices received their religious names. These were usually chosen by the *hegoumeni* after consultation with the novice, and were said to reflect some aspect of the novice’s personality. Most of these names were not normally found among the people of the secular world. They were names of little known saints who themselves had been monastics or combinations of two words which were indicative of the nun’s relationship with the divine. Some examples are Arsenia (the name of a little known saint), Christonymphi (the one who is the bride of Christ), Agapi (love), and Taxiarchia (the commander of the battalion of angels).

The acquisition of a new name was regarded by the nuns as one of the most important aspects of the ritual. It signified the denunciation of the old self and the acquisition of a new “pure” one free from all the sins of the past. As one of them pointed out to me: “A new way of life requires a new name. I think it is essential because it completely frees you from your past.” Others made a closer connection with marriage: “Since we are brides of Christ, we ought to have a new name as lay women take on the surname of their husband after marriage.” Apparently, both the nuns and the lay women eventually fulfil their social identity through their relationship to a divine or human male. While the acquisition of a new

name was important for the nuns, they rarely made use of it when they were addressing one another. In the context of the convent, one was referred to simply as “sister” or in the case of *hegoumeni* as “mother”. Paradoxically, the very act that objectified the transformation of the old self, namely the renaming of the would-be nun, was also the one that endangered her communal identity. Individuality, exemplified in the use of a name, was the very thing that the novices have strived against all along (see also Rives, 2005, pp. 484-485).

After the pronouncement of the new names, the bishop took a pair of scissors, passed them to the novices, who in turn passed them to the *hegoumeni* and from her back to the bishop. This process was repeated three times, after which the bishop cut a few hairs from the heads of the novices in four places, thus creating the sign of the cross on their head. The passing of the scissors from the novice to the *hegoumeni* symbolized that from then onwards the physical and spiritual well-being of the novices was her responsibility. Then, the hair that had been cut was mingled with beeswax and placed at a corner of the *iconostasis* near the icon of Christ, signifying that the novices were now consecrated to Christ, and henceforth had no power over their own bodies. In the *hegoumeni*'s own words: “the hair is the commencement of the body and is offered as a sacrifice to God, symbolizing the offering of the whole body of the nun to Him. The fact that it is cut in the sign of the cross indicated the nun's death to the secular world.”

After the ritual the hair cuttings were moved to a permanent location under the altar. This meant that the nuns were forever bound to the specific convent where their tonsure took place. Changing convents from then on would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. In almost every culture the treatment of hair from the head has great symbolic significance. The shaving of the head or the cutting of hair generally marks a transition from one social status to another (Campbell-Jones, 1979, pp. 175-176). Specific treatments of hair may also be understood as boundary markers. In the case of the nuns, the shearing of hair symbolized their withdrawal from the world, their social death, as well as the denial of their sexual roles.

As we have seen, the ritual of tonsure has been pronounced as the “second baptism” of the novices. The cutting of the hair, the giving of the new name and the use of godmother as a sponsor of the ritual attest to this

view. The effects of both the baptism of infants⁹ and of the second baptism of the nuns are viewed in the convent as the same: illumination by the Holy Spirit and the remission of sins. The purifying function of the tonsuring ritual is analogous to that of the baptism. The infant is purified from original sin, while the novices, having lived in the world before entering the convent, from personal sins.

After the cutting of the hair, the tonsuring ceremony reached its most heightened moment, namely the acquisition of the habit. The bishop brought the clothes forward from behind the *iconostasis* and presented each item of clothing with a prayer explaining its symbolic meaning. First, he gave the *imation*, which is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved black robe symbolizing divine justice and replacing the leather piece of cloth that Adam wore after the Fall. Second, the bishop gave the *schema* and the *polistavri*, which both symbolize the crosses that one must bear in life and are reminiscent of the burdens and trials of Christ. The *schema* is similar to an apron, which is drawn over the head. The black cloth covers the front of the torso and is embroidered with letters running alongside a cross stitched in red colours. The letters read as follows: “Jesus Christ Victorious. The place of martyrdom is becoming paradise”. The cross stands on the mound of Golgotha, and the skull at the base of the cross is that of Adam. It is believed that the crucifixion of Christ took place in the same location that Adam was buried. According to the nuns, Christ in his descent into the kingdom of death broke open the bars that imprisoned those who had died before his time, and in his own Resurrection led Adam with him to the light. In this embroidery, the nuns are reminded of their mortal nature, as well as of the promise of resurrection and eternal life. Moreover, the black colour of the clothing is also perceived by the nuns as a promise of future resurrection. The *polistavri* (many crosses) is composed of a series of crosses, which form the figure eight. The crosses are made from an intricately knotted black string. The arms pass through either loop of the figure eight. The nuns maintained that the *polistavri* protected them from the Devil.

The fourth item of clothing that the bishop handed to the postulants was the *zoni*, a leather belt/girdle, symbolizing their chastity and that their worldly and bodily desires had ceased. After that, the bishop gave the

⁹ Baptism in the Greek Orthodox Church usually takes place within the first year of an infant’s life. Only converts to the Greek Orthodox faith are baptised as adults.

novices their shoes: simple black sandals to indicate they are “ready to do the will of God” and that “as the shoes are subjected to the feet, so the rest of their body should be subjected to the soul”. The fifth item to be donned was the outer *raso*, a black, long-sleeved, full-length garment. The *raso* is said to be “the robe of indestructibility and modesty”. All the above mentioned items of clothing were worn under the *mandias*, a black, sleeveless, coat-like garment. Since it was worn over all other garments, it indicated that the novices were “wrapped in their *mandias* like in their grave”. The fact that it is sleeveless reminded the novices that from then on “they are without hands and therefore should not perform any work which is connected to the secular world, or harm any human being”.

The final items of clothing that the bishop gave to the novices to wear, were the head coverings. The first, called the *koukoulion* (cowl), is like a cap, which was embroidered with a red cross on the top. This resembled the cap worn by infants at baptism and symbolized innocence. The cap was secured by a head-band called *soudarion*, which again had a red cross embroidered on the front. Next came the *mantili*; lastly, the *kalima* was placed on the head: a garment with a red cross resembling a hood, hanged low over the head and flaring onto the back. The nuns referred to the *kalima* as their wings: “As the Angels have wings, so do we.” Each head covering was claimed to protect and guard the nuns against evil thoughts. The symbolism of the red crosses found on the cap, head-band and *kalima* was that of the blood of Christ and his suffering and indicated that the novices were now “soldiers of the Heavenly King”.

Thus, there is both martial and marital imagery connected with the tonsuring ritual. Yet, the nuns spoke of their union with Christ mostly in metaphors that continued ordinary female roles: they were either “his brides” or “his children”. By representing their relationship with the divine in those terms, it appeared that they were making possible a new dynamic of divine and human interaction. Passive worship of a distant Godhead was replaced by active love of an accessible being. An intellectual comprehension of religious truths was substituted by the need for an emotional experience of oneness with Christ. For the nuns to become one with Christ, they had to identify with him. In this sense, it can be argued that they were both male and female. Borrowing from Turner’s (1967) terminology of the rite of passage, we can argue that the nuns lived their lives in the “liminal” space between heaven and earth. Their liminal position was reflected also onto their gender identity. As long as they lived

in this world, reaching angelic asexuality could only be achieved by the blurring of gender distinctions.

The ritual ended with a blessing and a liturgy during which the two newly professed nuns received Holy Communion. They were also given a candle and a cross – both symbols of the religious life –, which they had to carry for seven days. The cross was said to allude to the passage: “And he who does not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10: 38). The candle, on the other hand, symbolized the light with which the nun was going to be filled when she received the *schema* and referred to the passage: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5: 14-16).

The nuns also had in their possession a *komboschini* (knot-string). This is a rosary of cloth beads, which the nuns associated with the Jesus prayer and which helped them to count the invocations and the bows that accompanied them. It was often referred to as their weapon since it helped them to fight temptation and to concentrate their thoughts on God. The *komboschini* is made up of a number of knots depending on the desired length; each knot is composed of nine crosses symbolising the nine *tagmas* (battalions) of angels. It is believed that monastics will make up the tenth *tagma*.

When the ritual ended, the people who had gathered at the church greeted the newly professed nuns by kissing first the cross they were handling and then their right hand. Then each one asked them: “What is your new name, sister?” The sisters pronounced their new names and then everybody gave them the following wish: “May you have a long life, may you please God, the Angels, the people and your *hegoumeni*. May you have patience and obedience and a good end.” Then the nuns answered: “Amen. May your wish help me.” As the people left the church, the nuns offered them *koufeta* – almonds covered with sugar – similar to the ones offered at church weddings of lay people. The novices were now “perfect nuns”. From this moment onwards, they were called *monaches* (literally meaning “alone”). By virtue of their name, they had to succeed in unifying their whole person through the integration of will and thought, becoming one on all counts, and remaining alone with themselves and Christ, who resided in them.

From an observer’s point of view, the tonsuring ritual appears to be a complex one, involving a condensation of elements that are suggestive of the three major church rituals associated with life-cycle events: baptism, wedding and burial. It assumes emotive power for the participants by creating such parallels. In this way, it makes it possible for the nuns to conceive of their bond with the divine in metaphorical terms drawn from human relationships, thus rendering it a concrete and approachable one. Through the tonsuring ritual the nuns committed themselves to a way of sanctity distinct from the sacramental way of ordinary believers. Although united to the rest of the church, their life could no longer be the same as that of the merely baptised Christians. They perceived their life as “holier” and “purer”. Whereas the life of the baptised oscillates between the bad and the good, theirs oscillates between the good and the best. It was aimed at the greatest perfection, one that would succeed in eliminating all division and would allow them to become one with Christ. Within the religious framework constructed by the monastics, the laity would always find itself in a subordinate position.

The Force of “Habit”

In the ritual of tonsure, as we have seen, the symbolic meaning of the wardrobe that consists the habit was uncovered revealing that each garment is a spiritual saturated fabric and a medium of both connecting the nuns with the divine and “setting them apart” from laity. This, however, invites the following questions: How did the nuns experience its vesture outside the ritual context of tonsure? What was its role in the nuns’ everyday effort of constructing a monastic identity? Since it enveloped the body of the nuns, what was its function in the “fashioning” (Davis, 2005) of their monastic body? Crane (2002, p. 6) argued that “identity cannot float free from materiality”. Indeed, in the context of Greek Orthodox female monasticism, clothing, body and identity are inextricably linked together in the “making” of the nun. Using Bell’s (1992, p. 98) notion of the “ritualized body”, I will argue that with the acquisition of the full habit, through the ritual of tonsure, the nuns acquired also a “practical mastery” (here Bell uses Bourdieu’s term) of a strategy for ritualization, “a social instinct for creating and manipulating contrasts”. Through the very act of wearing the consecrated habit of their tonsure, or at least parts of it,

everyday and every hour of their lives up to their death, the nuns literally “put on” monastic values and map onto their bodies the distinctions by which monastic structure was reproduced and made superior.

In the convents of A. and P. the nuns never took off all of the garments of the habit, not even in their sleep. The first and basic item of the habit, the long sleeved black-robe, was both their nightdress and their everyday working garment. Disrobing was regarded by the nuns as one of the greatest sins mainly for two reasons: First, disrobing (as taking off the habit) was associated with the total abandonment of monastic life, a sin that secured eternal damnation. Second, disrobing (as undressing completely) made visible the corporeal reality of the body, the locus of evil thoughts and desires that the nuns strived all their lives both to tame and to transform into the greatest desire of all, that of divine love. The fear of being contaminated by nakedness¹⁰ was also demonstrated by the prohibition in the convents of washing the body (*alousia*). Along with the body, the hair should also remain unwashed. The nuns were allowed to untie and comb their long hair only once a month. Washing was seen as an act of pampering the body and as such completely antithetical to the monastic ethos, for it “opened”¹¹ one to temptation. This prohibition was also applied to the visitors of the convents. In the context of the convents, the “closed mode of orientation”, to use Hirschon’s (1989, p. 237) words, which favoured selectivity, interiority, exclusion and the creation of boundaries, prevailed in all dealings with matters of “this world”. “Openness” was a positive state only in relation to God. The comparison of the habit to “a door”, made by one of the nuns, exemplifies this point: “The habit is the door to paradise, you wear it and you are at the threshold.” One of the ways that the nuns understood the use of the habit was as their “garment of salvation”. Yet, like all clothing, the habit both reveals and conceals. Its salvific power could only be revealed through its use to conceal the physicality of the nuns. The habits’ many layers of different black garments sealed completely their body and became their grave into this world. Its

¹⁰ Nakedness became an acceptable “garment of salvation” for some ascetic women in the early monastic period, particularly for those that were repentant prostitutes. For a discussion of acceptable and unacceptable forms of female nakedness in late antique monastic literature, see Krawiec, 2009, pp. 139-146.

¹¹ Interestingly enough, in the secular context “open” is regarded as a positive state, while “close” a negative one. For a discussion of this symbolic opposition and its ramification into various aspects of social life and belief in Greece, see Hirschon, 1989.

first layer, the one that always touched the body of the nuns, became (in their own words) their “second skin”: the skin of their new transformed body, which was purified during their tonsure by their second baptism¹² and by having been vested in habit; a body devoid of all sinful desires and emotions but one: anticipation of paradise. Thus, for the nuns to disrobe would have been like “shedding their own skin”. The fact that the garments of the habit are seamless, with no buttons¹³ to unbutton, produced an association with the undergarment of Jesus at the Cross: “seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom” (John 19: 23). Putting on the habit required a movement from top to bottom, from heaven to earth, signifying for the nuns the “putting on of Christ”. Undressing required the reverse movement from earth to heaven, a movement that because of the corporeal reality of the nuns could be achieved only in death. Here again the liminal position of the nuns is made apparent.

As a Greek Orthodox myself, when I went to church as a child, my mother showed to me an icon of the “all watchful eye of God”. During my fieldwork, however, the nuns made me aware of the “all watchful eye of the Evil”. According to them: “The more absorbed one becomes in the spiritual life, the more open one leaves oneself to temptation. The Devil’s constant preoccupation is his war against those who wear the habit. The *polistavri*, which means many crosses and is part of our *Angelic Schema*, provides us with the all round protection because the Cross is the most powerful sign against Evil.” This statement reveals not only the apotropaic power of the habit, but also the fact that the habit is symbolic of the liminality of the nuns. By wearing the habit, the nuns of A. and P. molded their bodies to create “pure” and in their deathbed even “holy” ones worthy of *theosis* (deification). Their habit as symbol of their liminality bestowed upon them an amount of “limited reverence” and placed them firmly in the religious hierarchy. Visitors in the convent, bowed and kissed their hand, and when an old nun died during my fieldwork, the lay people treated her dead body in much the same way as they treat the relics of saints. They kissed the

¹² The ritual of tonsure, as we have seen, is described as the “second baptism” of the nuns and has a purifying function analogous to that of baptism. However, purification here is not achieved by immersion in water, but through the renunciation of the old sinful nature and the putting of a new, transformed and divinized one by the energy of the Holy Spirit.

¹³ Like water, buttons are material things of “this world”; their negation affirms the higher spiritual state of the nuns.

forehead and touched the habit in the hope that some of the spiritual power of the dead body and its cloth will be transferred to them.

Although the nuns felt that by putting on the habit they were “chosen from the sea of humanity” (as we have seen in the ritual of tonsure), they also understood that the attainment of this state was not a given, but required great spiritual and physical effort. Putting on the habit was just the beginning of a long road to salvation. This effort was modelled to that of the role models of the nuns, who were the saints of the church, some divinely gifted elders of Holy Mountain Athos with whom the nuns had contact, and the older and more experienced nuns of the convents. Through the human and spiritual help of the latter, but more importantly, in the mimetic ethos of the physical discipline practised by the saints and the evocation of their help, the nuns were taught how to strive for perfection and how to surpass the difficult obstacles that one could encounter on the way to salvation. Ironically, their training started with a material thing, namely the habit. Their first training lessons were on self-discipline that regulated such ordinary habitual practices as eating, speaking and bodily movement. In the monastic context, I would argue, the habit had a profound socializing effect. What follows are some examples of the socializing function of the habit; they are by no means exhaustive. Indeed, it will take a whole book to examine its rich symbolic meanings and multi-fold functions within the Greek Orthodox monastic context. One function that stems directly from its material design is the re-structuring of the body of the nuns. This in turn helped the nuns to internalize monastic values and expectations and to normalise them. The following examples show how this function comes into effect.

An integral part of the Greek Orthodox nun’s habit, as we have seen, is the *zoni* (leather belt/girdle). This was an item that the nuns removed only in their sleep. The *zoni* instilled into the body the values of chastity and self-control. The nuns wore the *zoni* tight on to their bodies, particularly in meal times to control their appetites. According to the nuns, too much food will please the body and excite the senses, thus producing thoughts of sinful and worldly desires. Rigorous fasting was practiced to succumb the body to the spirit. Among the nuns of A. and P., the effort for spiritual perfection could some times be measured by the holes in their *zoni*. At the same time, external signs of rigorism were reprimanded for they could result to hubris and lay the emphasis on individuality. The body should

succumb to the spirit, but at the same time to the communal body of the convent.

Self-control, obedience, humility and modesty were further mapped onto the body by the use of the *mantili* (scarf). Greek Orthodox monks and nuns, as I have already pointed out, wear the same monastic clothes. The only difference among them concerns one item of the head coverings. While male monastics wear the *kalimavkion*, which is a hat, female monastics wear the *mantili*, which is a scarf, much like the *hijab* in the Muslim world. The *kalimavkion* is related more to the male ecclesiastical authority and hierarchy and its preservation both within society and the religious sphere. The *mantili*, on the other hand, signified the complete obedience of the nuns firstly to God, then to the male hierarchy of the church, and finally to the *hegoumeni*. The nuns of A. and P. interpreted the *mantili* as a means that facilitated the application of the vow of obedience and self-control. Their interpretation, however, was based on their previous gender socialization in the secular world. They stated that, as women, they were more prone to talk and particularly to gossip. *Fliaria* (empty speech) was considered a sin in the monastic world and could easily lead to gossip, an act that within the convent could endanger communal unity and morality. The fact that the *mantili* was worn tight behind the neck, covering a small part of the chin and the cheeks, inhibited in a way speech, thus making possible the active quietness that communion with the divine required, which was also part of the monastic world and reflected both in its structure and in its spatial organisation. Monasteries and convents in Greece are called *hesychastiria*, meaning places of quietness. Furthermore, the *mantili*, as a sign of obedience and respect to a male Godhead and to the male church hierarchy, was also worn by many of the female visitors to the convent during the Divine Liturgy. While the nuns were wearing only the *mantili* as head cover when they were going about their normal everyday work, during the Liturgy and on special devotional days, when more people visited the convent, were also putting on the *koukoulion* as a sign of their angelic life and of the superior spiritual position of their community vis-à-vis the laity. Finally, the sandals, which were more like slippers open in the back and worn always with thick black socks, hindered the kinetic ability of the nuns, imposing a tempo of walking that was characteristic of a restructured body, dead to the pleasures of this world.

All these structuring abilities of the habit and the resulting intentions, thoughts and behaviours of the nuns appeared to them as “natural” or, to

use Bourdieu’s (1977, pp. 78-79) term, “unconscious”, grounded in the repetitive, habitual ways of conducting their monastic lives. Furthermore, the control and self-discipline developed by the nuns through the medium of the habit should not be considered only in the passive sense as imposed from outside, but also in an active sense, since the nuns used it to create a new and true monastic self. The body is covered, and the habit – as the nuns’ second skin, and not their real skin – becomes “the frontier of self” (Crane, 2002, p. 6). From the very beginning of their monastic life, the nuns were trained to transform old habits, thoughts and feelings in order to afford the experience of a new, radically altered self that is constructed in the image or “likeness of God”. They often talked of being “at war” with themselves, about the “death of self” and of “self-emptying” in order to achieve “spiritual rebirth” and “oneness with God”. The process of the transformation of self, however, lasts up to their death. They were and still are enrolled to “a prolonged, interactive process of embodied spiritual training” (Bruder, 1998, p. 113). Their clothing is one strategy – though not the only one – by which they are educated, as well as the means by which their new identity is exteriorized and realized. The nuns’ goal of a new spiritual self in everlasting union with the divine is not only an individual, but also a collective one. Thus, the habit becomes also the “locator” (Krawiec, 2009, p. 145) and the distinct marker of communal identity. As a consequence, the sinful behaviour on the part of one nun puts in question the spiritual standing of the whole of the community. This is very well captured by one of the nuns’ phrases: “One should be careful not to shame (*ntropiasi*) the habit” (my own emphasis). In her statement, the *habit* does not include only the members of the convent, but also all Orthodox monastics.

Historically, monastic clothing in its various forms was created with the intention to communicate ascetic monastic values and to set the boundaries between the Self and the Other. In the Greek Orthodox case, this meant not only the differentiation of the clergy and the monastics from the laity, but also of Greek Orthodox monastics from the Western monastic orders. The habit as the locator of Greek Orthodox identity and authenticity is, therefore, crucial to all Greek Orthodox monastics. While among the ecclesiastical hierarchy the issue of simplifying the habit of the clergy has been discussed several times, among the monastics such a debate was never raised. My enquiry on the subject among the nuns of my study invited the following answers: “The habit is part of who I am and what I believe in. To

take it off is not to be a nun anymore”; or as the *hegoumeni* put it: “If you take away the habit, what it remains is just a title without a way of life.” Most Orthodox nuns and monks echo this view. An authentic monk or nun is the one in habit.

Conclusion

In his introduction on the book entitled “Materiality”, Miller (2005, p. 38) emphasizes the need “to show how the things that people make, make people”. In this paper I hope I showed that “the habit *does* make the nun”, particularly when the nun is a Greek Orthodox one. Scholars have tended to treat the socializing effects of material things as more or less obvious, rarely making them the focus of their research. The case of the monastic “uniform” proves the complex ways in which material things are implicated in the process of religious socialization and identity formation and the need for contextualization. The habit proved to be the locus of the nuns’ identity due to its visibility, symbolic value and practicality. It contributed significantly both to the socialization of the nuns in terms of securing uniformity and social integration and to their physical and spiritual training. At the same time, it was and still remains the symbol of their religious status and authenticity. However, one should be reminded that the nuns were fully socialized members of the secular world before entering the convent. Thus, this is a study of the re-socialization of the nuns into the monastic world. The habit, a material thing, helped them to spiritualize their bodies and to create a genuine monastic self. The mind, however, still made sense of the spiritual in terms of secular categories learned outside the convent. This was most evident in the case of gender. The aim of monastic life is angelic asexuality, an aim that could only be achieved in death. By putting on the habit the nuns “put on” Christ, they must identify with him. The habit allowed them a limited degree of maleness by conferring to them some measure of religious authority. Yet, the nuns continued to conceive both their progression in spiritual matters and their relationship to God in terms of their gender: they were either the “brides of Christ” or his “children”. This is not to suggest an incomplete procedure of re-socialization of the nuns, nor an unsuccessful one, but rather, the deep importance of primary socialization.

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