The guests of Lesbos: Hospitality among Syrian refugees in Greece

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Abstract

Having escaped a brutal war, the hungry Poseidon of the Aegean sea, and looking towards an uncertain future in Europe, Syrian refugees in Greece find themselves liminally suspended between a tragedy they have just escaped, and the hope for safety in the European hinterland. In limbo, they must endure police detentions, antiterrorism interrogations, and rely on the kindness of strangers and charities for the fulfilment of their most basic human rights. To recount their journeys, experiences, and hopes, instead of focussing on victimhood and tragedy alone, this paper explores Syrian stories of dignity, and practices of survival and resistance through hospitality. Specifically, it analyses how, through the Syrian cultural idiom of *karam*, Syrian refugees who arrive in the Greek island of Lesbos attempt to maintain a degree of their own agency, humanity and dignity, in the face of incredible adversity and uncertainty. Moreover, employing the idiom of hospitality, Syrian refugees attempt to negotiate their precarious position vis-a-vis the countries and institutions — states, security, humanitarian — that they encounter outside of Syria. In this way, this work challenges prominent stereotypes of refugees as tragic but essentially 'voiceless' figures, empty and homogenous signifiers, as 'helpless' and in need of saving victims, as apolitical and dehistoricised objects of knowledge.

'The sea took them!'

'Where are you from?' I asked Miriam, who was sitting by the side of her sleeping son at the Kara Tepe registration centre in Lesbos. 'From Midan,' she replied in Arabic. 'Oh, you have the best sweets in all Damascus!' I said. Miriam, who was very sceptical of me at first, suddenly lightened up: 'Yes, how do you know?' So, I told her, in rusty Arabic, that I used to live and work in Damascus as an anthropologist before the war, and that Midani sweets are deliciously renown, and that I have myself sampled truly marvellous delights in her neighbourhood. Sharing a memory of a past common to both, I sat and talked with Miriam for hours, moving occasionally with the shadow of a eucalyptus tree she was sitting under, in order to avoid the unforgiving sun which shone above us. This was September 2015 — the year that Europe received an estimated one million refugees, most of which came through the sea border between Greece and Turkey. Lesbos was the Greek island where the majority of arrivals passed through, most of whom were Syrian nationals.

Back to Miriam, who reluctantly at first, shared her family story of how both her and her husband were established journalists but were persecuted and narrowly escaped arrest. She then showed me photos of her sisters, mother, nephews, — they had already left Syria and were dispersed in Lebanon, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Mostly however, I was taken aback by a single, seemingly inconsequential, sentence that Miriam said: 'You know Maria, I brought some sweets, from Midan, with us. But the sea took them!'

That statement struck me as incomprehensible, so much so that I quickly changed the subject. Only that night I thought to myself: why would anyone who is leaving behind their home, their life as they knew it, fleeing war, choose to take with them something so useless and perishable as sweets? Perhaps, I could have understood if the family were eating them on the journey — sugar is a source of sustenance. But that did not seem to be the case. The sweets had something ceremonial, almost ritual, about them. Why would she take them on the dinghy boat? The sea has taken the lives of

thousands of people, why did it matter that it took the sweets? What was this woman, otherwise perfectly sensible and educated, thinking? The metaphor struck me as unbearably naive and painfully futile: it is almost as if she left her home for a temporary visit, and as a guest, she was even taking sweets for her new host.

That's the Syrian way: you never go empty-handed on a first visit. During my fieldwork in Greece that year, I would soon discover that hospitality, *karam* in Arabic, continued to play a hugely important role to Syrians seeking refuge, the same almost as it did to the Syrians I had met in Syria before the war. Far from naive and futile, Syrians were creatively and critically employing the cultural idiom of hospitality to express their experiences of refuge and to navigate their hopes and fears. This paper recounts how they do this, and how, through the Syrian cultural idiom of hospitality, Syrian refugees attempt to maintain a degree of their own agency, humanity and dignity, in the face of incredible adversity and uncertainty. Moreover, employing the idiom of hospitality, Syrian refugees attempt to negotiate, successfully or not, their precarious position vis-a-vis the countries and institutions — states, security, humanitarian — that they encounter outside of Syria. In this way, this work challenges prominent stereotypes of refugees as tragic but essentially 'voiceless' figures, empty and homogenous signifiers (Coutin & Vogel 2016), as 'helpless' and in need of saving victims, as apolitical and dehistoricised objects of knowledge (Malkki 1996). By focusing on practices of hospitality, Syrian refugees exercise their agency, dignity — and dare I say, even resistance — and by building on such practices the paper, I hope, contributes to what Heath Cabot (2016) calls the 'humbling' of ethnographic knowledge production.

Exceptional hospitality: doing ethnography in 2015 Lesbos

Hospitality is not only a cultural trope for Syrians, it is also the distinct possibility of anthropology, which is almost entirely dependant on the generosity of our informant-hosts. Indeed, in ethnographic practice, it is the very 'impossibility' of hospitality (Derrida 2000) that makes anthropology possible (Cadea & Da Col 2012; Herzfeld 1987; Pitt-Rivers 1968). This paper is the result of such a debt, a long-term hospitality that stems from ongoing research about and in Syria since 2008 (Kastrinou 2016). However, the specific ethnographic observations that animate its analysis of Syrian hospitality are based upon fieldwork research carried out in the island of Lesbos in 2015.[1] Research findings, therefore, are reflective of both the broader Syrian cultural idiom of hospitality, as well as spatiotemporally-bound to an exceptional and intense period: the year 2015, in which the island became the main transit point for thousands of refugees that were traveling towards the European hinterland through Greece.

As 2015 witnessed Europe's so-called refugee 'crisis,' the island of Lesbos came to embody the crossing of the European border and for this reason the time and space of research hues both the ethnographic data and its analysis. Prior to 2015, an increasing number of immigrants and refugees had used both Lesbos and Greece as a transit route already since at the beginning of 2000s (Cabot 2014; Green 2012). Moreover, although the idyllic island of 86,000 residents has its own history of displacement, population exchanges and migration (Papataxiarchis 1988), in 2015 it experienced an unprecedented scale of visitors, not only in the number of refugees it welcomed, but also in the resulting entourage of state, intra-state, and humanitarian workers, volunteers, academics, journalists and curious tourists. Post-2015, Lesbos stoped being the main entrance point to Europe due to the EU-Turkey Agreement, in effect since March 2016, becoming instead the first and largest EU 'Hotspot' in the Aegean.

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But let us stay a little longer in 2015, as the year was exceptional for another reason: like a 'space of exception' where normal law is suspended, so were Greece's as well as European Union's 'normal' border security controls. Specifically, the Schengen Agreement and Dublin Regulation, which administer EU immigration and asylum procedures, were temporarily suspended in order to allow refugees to transit through the Balkan route to the countries of central and northern Europe. However, at the same time, securitisation continued and proliferated by other means. The EU's border control agency, FRONTEX, played a main role in border patrolling, registration and identification process of refugees, while the more refined security response to immigration was being prepared in the shape the New European Agenda on Migration and the 'Hotspot Approach' which institutionalised securitisation, incarceration and policing as the main policy response to migration (Neocleous & Kastrinou 2016; Fernando & Giordano 2016).

Along with the securitisation of the refugee 'crisis,' came the humanitarians: beyond individual and collective — but local — expressions of solidarity to refugees, national and international humanitarian organisations, agencies, NGOs, charities and volunteers flooded the island. Although many operated on different registers and sometimes even competing ethics and practices (see Papataxiarchis 2016a and b), 2015 was a significant and exceptional time precisely because non-state institutions of 'care' ushered in a humanitarian government and morality (also see Rozakou 2012). To understand part of the processes on the ground in Lesbos, Fassin's concept of 'humanitarian reason' is relevant here because it describes both humanitarian government and a new moral economy: a politics of compassion founded upon inequality made 'somewhat bearable' through enlisting 'the secular imaginary of communion and redemption' (2012: xii). In this way, the lives of the helpless and the destitute, of the refugees and the poor, become precarious: 'lives that are not guaranteed but bestowed in answer to prayer, […] defined not in the absolute of a condition, but in relation to those who have power over them' (Fassin 2012: 4). Incumbent upon the bureaucratic hospitality on offer by state and humanitarian institutions (the reception centres, the charities, the national and international NGOs), refugees in Lesbos found themselves enmeshed in unequal relations that structurally positioned them as powerless. An expression of this structural classification of powerlessness, was the inability of reciprocation, of counter-gift, which constituted them as helpless and voiceless objects of sympathy (Ticktin 2011). Not only was the hospitality on offer in Lesbos unequal, but it was also 'ambivalent'(Fassin 2012: 133): like previously in Sangatte, France, humanitarian agencies co-existed with the security apparatus (such as FRONTEX, Greek army and police, among others). Hospitality was 'ambivalent' in another way: it granted not political asylum to refugees, it conferred none of the rights and protections of the 1951 Refugee Convention, only a temporary 6-month registration paper which offered protection from deportation on humanitarian grounds in order for the refugees to continue their precarious journey. As Fassin explains 'more consensual, the logic of compassion now prevailed over the right to protection' (2012: 145). The remaining pages articulate how Syrian refugees sought to resist this totalising humanitarian logic.

Arrival: From hosts to guests and the shifting sands of hospitality

The conditions of reception on Lesbos in September 2015 were far from ideal: in the event that a boat successfully made it to the shore, the people on board would often have to walk across the island in order to arrive at the Kara Tepe registration centre in the island's capital city of Mytilini. Cars, buses and taxis could only take them illegally, due to an anti-smuggling law that dates from the time of the Greek Junta. Following the journey under the burning sun, the refugees would eventually arrive at the registration camp exhausted. The first stage of the registration process was run by FRONTEX: the EU's border police would check documents and stories and provide translation if Arabic-only documents existed. The refugees would then be registered with the Greek police, and Syrian nationals would obtain a 6-month humanitarian permission to stay, with which they could travel (until March 2016) to other European destinations, where they could submit an application for asylum. Depending on the time of arrival, and arrivals on that day, this process would take from

about four hours to a day. The refugees would then buy tickets for the next boat to Athens, and they could even pay already from Lesbos for a bus fare that would take them to the border with FYROM, from where they could continue their journey. Outside the camp, an array of legal and less legal entrepreneurs would sell mobile SIM cards, expendable goods, travel tickets and euros in 'competitive' rates. These more or less visible entrepreneurs had more shadowy doubles, described to me by a local as *korakia*, meaning crows: the people that take the engines of the used boats, either to sell them on or to send them back to their 'partners' in Turkey.

On the shores of Lesbos, explanations of the contempt and cruelty with which the international community are treating Syrians were often heard in Arabic: 'they treat us like animals!' 'Is this Europe?' Amira, a well-to-do engineer from Damascus, exclaimed to me, pointing to the dirt at the port where she waited for the next ferry to Athens. 'We have the money to pay for aeroplanes and for rent — why do they treat us like this?' 'Syrians gave refuge to so many people!' others exclaimed. Generosity and hospitality, along with discourses of dirt, were recurrent motifs among Syrian refugees, threading together collective memories of Syrian generosity, with the contemporary inhospitable reception often experienced. 'Syria is a rich cake and everyone wants a piece of it,' Sami, a Syrian Kurd said to me at the port of Lesbos. Europe, France — the old colonial power — even England and Germany 'want a piece of Syria,' Sami continued, echoing widespread explanations of the Syrian war as a manifestation of a previous war: a neocolonial rendition taking place on the hundredth anniversary of the Sykes-Picot agreement (Chatty 2014).

The irony of the historical role reversal from host to guest is not lost among Syrian refugees who remain acutely aware of the fact that Syria has a long history of receiving refugees, and, on the whole, providing them with humane and dignified conditions (Chatty 2010). Prior to the on-going war, Syria was estimated by the UNHCR to have been the second largest refugee-receiving country in the world, hosting the majority of Iraqi refugees, as well as one of the largest populations of Palestinian refugees. Syria gave refuge to internally displaced people following the occupation of the Golan Heights in 1967 and 1973. These were not isolated events: Syria, at the crossroads of continents and civilisations, has been a place of refuge to a variety of vulnerable minorities and ethnic groups that found themselves often forcibly displaced by the carving of modern nation-states in the 19th and 20th centuries: Circassians and Muslims from the Caucasus, Armenians escaping genocide, even Cretan Muslims and Greek Christian refugees from the Asia Minor Catastrophe (Chatty 2010).

Syrian refugees' understanding of historical role reversal was revealing not only of the fact that Syria accepted refugees and offered hospitality to often distant 'Others', but as a sharp criticism of the country the refugees found themselves. Their words emphasised the stark difference in the hospitality on 'offer.' Like a swords, such comments cut right through to the bone of Syrian experience of refuge and hospitality, and that of the millions Syrians who currently find themselves as precarious guests, as refugees.

Of cultural arithmetic and gifts: hospitality as refugee practice

In transit, the cultural practices that Syrian refugees use to navigate uncertain times and unfamiliar spaces are varied. Early into fieldwork in Lesbos, I noticed a concern with attendance and numbers, it transpired in insistent practical questions such as the following: 'I think that Germany has had too many Syrians. Maybe I'll go to Holland… Has Germany had too many?' Many of my Syrian interlocutors were very worried about the number of Syrians reaching Europe, and, uncertain of which country would provide the best chance for a successful asylum application. They were asking me for answers, as if my knowledge of other European countries would be the knowledge I would have for a neighbour. I was dumbfounded. This concern with numbers and attendance, an instance of *cultural arithmetic*, was evident in other situations as well. Many times I was told in a conspiring tone

that 'most of these people [waiting here] are not Syrians but they say they are.' Why were Syrians so fearful of fake or corrupt identities and numbers? Were they thinking of bureaucratic quotas of Syrians per EU country, were they applying some sort of bureaucratic rationality in self-managing their behaviour and asylum tactics? Then, I remembered an incident that had taken place in Damascus in 2009. Umm Samir and I were going for lunch at a pre-wedding gathering in our neighbour's house. As we approached the house and were ready to knock, Umm Samir saw two well-dressed neighbours who were coming in our direction. Although at a fair distance still, Umm Samir insisted that we should wait for them. When I asked why, she noted that is not nice 'for the host.' By waiting for the neighbours to arrive, Umm Samir was being mindful of her host, much like the Syrian refugees in Lesbos were thinking about their country-hosts.

Cultural arithmetic was one of the prominent aspects that coloured my fieldwork in Lesbos. The other was gifts. The most incredible gesture came from Aicha, a young woman who had fled Deir Er-Zor with her husband and her 3-year old only a week previously. 'Choose one to remember me… I brought these with me,' she said as we were trying to hang the few children's clothes she had on the registration camp barbed wire — they were soaking with sea salt. She wanted me to keep one of her pieces of jewellery. I had done nothing, I barely knew her, and we were only having a very informal conversation — no recorder, no interview, nothing. I said that I will take a picture and that it would be as if she had given me all. Aicha's was a hugely touching gesture, but it was by no means an exceptional gesture. Actually, most of the Syrians that I have met in Greece were either giving me gifts (such as buying me small souvenirs, offerings of food, or inviting me to coffee or tea), and treating me as a guest in the more permanent solidarity camp at the 'Village of all together' as if we were back in Syria (this means rounds of coffee, tea, sweets, fruit), and even (especially in the emotionally difficult first days) gifting me their trust and their psychological support to continue my research. Once an anthropologist always a guest — and so soon enough I found myself within the anthropologically familiar and strangely comforting position of being dependant upon Syrians — my own, most generous of strangers.

The significance of all these gifts cannot be emphasised enough. Gifts produce and reproduce powerful relations that bind both giver and receiver in reciprocal and ongoing ties (Mauss 1925). As such, gifts are embodiments of sociality, hierarchical and structuring of power relations, founded upon a promise for future reciprocity. Coming from 'dispossessed' hapless victims of war, as the stereotype of the 'refugee' implies, gifts perform powerful embodiments of agency, and even more powerful exercises in human dignity. The acute understanding of historical reversal from host to guest, the use of cultural arithmetic, and practices of gift-giving — what do all these practices have in common?

Istikbal in Arabic means receiving or welcoming, and it is the word that Syrian refugees use to describe their experiences of entering through borders and new state spaces. *Karam* means both hospitality and generosity and it is the term often used, along with *diafah* (also hospitality). To experience Syrian hospitality usually entails spending much time in the *madafa* or *qaa* of your host, drinking rounds of coffee, tea, even having lambs killed and cooked in your honour (Khalaf 1981; Gilsenan 1996; Kastrinou 2014). The specific details of your visit depends on your host, their power, (the guest is a prisoner of the host), and these speak to the social and political standing of the host, along with other considerations (see Louis Sweet 1974 for an analysis and typology of visitations). Hospitality is one of the most important cultural frameworks for guiding behaviour, structuring relations, avoiding and mediating conflict in Syria. Writing on the settlement of violence in Bedouin society, Khalaf notes:

> 'The laws of hospitality are founded on ambivalence as the work *katir* (guest, good inclination and danger at the same time) suggests. These laws, however, impose order, make the unknown knowable, and replace conflict with reciprocal relations. Codes of

hospitality do not eliminate conflict entirely, but only suppress and control it through enforcing respect. The Bedouins' proverb, "the guest walks in as an emir, sits as an *asir* (captive), and walks out as a *shair* (social critic)" expresses this well. The sanctity of hospitality, *hurmat al-diafah*, is so carefully guarded that a host… is obliged to offer protection even to his enemies. To take advantage of a guest or a fugitive is unthinkable; it would be bring the utmost dishonour. Similarly, a guest is expected to not take advantage of his host. The laws of hospitality have temporal as well as territorial limits' (Khalaf 1990: 232).

Beyond the territorial and temporal limits of a *madafa* or a *qaa*, the discourse of hospitality plays an important role in the representation of the Syrian, and not only, State as a benevolent father and generous host (Kastrinou 2016; Shylock 2004; Wedeen 1999). Extending this analysis of hospitality from the micro-level to the macro, the notion of *karam* (generosity and hospitality) helps to understand asylum and refugee policies of Arab states, argues Dawn Chatty:

> 'Countries of the region tend to avoid enactment of asylum laws largely because asylum
> is deeply rooted in notions of individual, family, and group reputation. In societies
> where providing hospitality enhances reputations for generosity, humanitarian intern-
> ment camps are unnecessary if not repugnant' (Chatty 2013: 84).

With its particular political connotations, the 'camp' evokes the Palestinian experience of both the suffocating process of what Bowman (2015) names 'encystation' within ever-encroaching Israeli occupation, or the experience of 'state of exception,' anomie and chaos — the Palestinian camp in Lebanon (Ramadan 2013). Many Syrians recounted to me with sad awareness of another historical irony: '*sourna mitle al-Filistiniyioun… bi dabt*!' (we have become like the Palestinians, exactly!). But how do cultural arithmetics and gifts resonate with the framework of hospitality and with Syrian experiences of refuge?

Syrian refugees use the framework of hospitality to construct themselves as guests rather than refugees, as visiting neighbours or old friends. Hence, the attention to numbers and attendance, what I called 'cultural arithmetic,' is indicative of a cultural concern to be a good guest and hence not to overburden one's host. This is what Khalaf explained, in the quote above, as the understanding of the guest of hospitality's temporal and territorial *limits*. Moreover, recalling the ironic unfolding of the reversal from hosts to guests, pronouncements such as 'Syria gave refuge to all' are indicative of the Syrian refugees critique of the hospitality on offer. When Syrians evoke historical precedent, they do so less to emphasise their own destitution, much less to evoke the sympathies of Greeks, Lebanese, or Europeans. On the contrary, they are utilising tropes of *empathy*, telling us: 'we were like you, we had cars and houses. We were better than you, we had clean streets and toilets. We were better than you: we gave refuge and hospitality to those in need.' But who listens?

Conclusion: Hospitality and humanity

This paper unequally crosses into three different registers of hospitality: the hospitality that the anthropologist is privy to as part of her rapport with her hosts; the ambivalent hospitality of 'humanitarian reason' which combines institutions of humanitarianism with institutions of security, and in doing so produces legitimate or illegitimate compassion rather than political protection. In relation to refugees, the register of ambivalent hospitality is the most well-researched (Fassin 2012; Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2011). Studies of state-centred reception of hospitality, as well as the hospitality of humanitarian and aid agencies, along with voluntarism, charities and NGOs, have proliferated in the past decades. Crucial in critiquing the structural, neoliberal outsourcing of state provisions, as well as the institutionalisation of, the often patronising and bio-political, regimes of 'care,' these works have tuned our attention at the darker side of hospitality, namely hospitality as the charity of the

strong, and as the dominant narrative for crystallising unequal power-relations between hosts and guests (Cabot 2016; Rozakou 2012). Yet, these approaches, to paraphrase James Scott, are seeing hospitality 'like a state.' This paper is a first attempt to complicate this institutional referential by focusing on a third register of hospitality: the hospitality of those that are often portrayed as 'helpless,' 'tragic' and 'voiceless,' the hospitality of the refugees.

Having escaped a brutal war, the hungry Poseidon of the Aegean sea, and looking towards a long, uncertain and often inhospitable journey toward central Europe, the Syrian interlocutors whose stories feature in this paper, find themselves in a position of structural liminality and uncertainty, literally between the death that they have just escaped, and the hope of refuge and safety that they seek in the European hinterland. On the fringes in Greece, poignantly pronounced by Michael Herzfeld as the 'margins of Europe,' these people must endure antiterrorism interrogations, rely on the kindness of strangers and charities for the fulfilment of their most basic human rights, and make journeys on foot across different European countries. In short, they have to endure in order to 'prove' that neither are they terrorists, nor opportunistic migrants, but 'dispossessed' and 'hapless' victims of war, destined to travel on foot across countries. And yet, most Syrians I met in Lesbos, were insisting stubbornly to hold on to *their* hospitality — like Miriam's Midani sweets. Unlike disposed and helpless victims of war, their practices of hospitality were inscribing a powerful message: 'We want to be welcomed here not because we are needy, but because we are like you. We are guests not intruders.' In so doing, Syrian refugees attempted to build reciprocal relations, to emphasise their shared humanity and history, calling loudly for dignity, not charity.

Utilising tropes of empathy, Syrian refugees contested the homogenising sympathy bestowed on them by the ambivalent hospitality on offer, while framing the experience and discrepancies between hopes and realities through the cultural idiom of hospitality. Perhaps, then, hospitality in the context of Syrian refugee experiences is best understood as a political strategy for exercising a degree of agency and autonomy, when the material, political, social and geographic givens are in flux. But beyond cultural instrumentalism, by offering hospitality at the most difficult of times, Syrian refugees were also powerfully re-affirming that their human-ness and humanity has not been lost as a result of war, dispossession and displacement. Perhaps then, even Poseidon might have been appeased by Miriam's delightful sweets, for a brief while.

Acknowledgements

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