

# Being 'there'

## At the front line of the 'European refugee crisis' - part 1

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*In his ethnographic dispatch from the front line, Evthymios Papataxiarchis describes the unfolding of the refugee crisis in his fieldwork site of Skala Sykamnias, Greece. In Part 1, published in this issue, he describes the various theatres of engagement and the diverse motivations of the actors involved. In Part 2 he looks in more detail at the refugee camps and the political debates surrounding the crisis. Ed.*

### I. There

#### 'My village'

Skala Sykamnias is 'my village'. There, on the northern coast of Lesbos, I spent two years doing fieldwork that marked my anthropological youth. I know the place and its people first hand. I have walked up and down the gentle slopes of mount Lepetymnos with the olive groves and the citrus trees, practised fishing in the narrow (6 miles wide) strip of water that separates Greece and Turkey, associated with its inhabitants, made lasting friendships, and studied the ethos of commensal sociality in the coffeehouses and the work of matrifocal kinship in the households. Ethnographic knowledge of Sykamnia has informed my understanding of modern Greek society and my writings on a wider set of issues ranging from gender, kinship and politics to immigration, hospitality and the production of difference.

Since the late 1980s, from my base in the Department of Social Anthropology and History in Mytilene, I have followed from a distance the village's demographic decline but also its transformation into a tourist idyll and the prosperity that this has brought to the community. Its current enmeshment in the refugee crisis which has been sweeping the island of Lesbos since last summer, has brought me back to the village in successive visits. My intention has been twofold: to support all those, including my friends, who face this extreme challenge, and to try to make sense of the local ramifications of the crisis.

Concern for the village, sympathy, and a sense of debt to its inhabitants: these are the biases that govern this account of the community's current predicament. Yet I have to admit my bewilderment before the destabilized, fluid and conflictual scene I have encountered there. In this respect, I should clarify from the very start that this essay is not ethnography proper but rather a testimony of the ethnographer's aporia in front of a broken community.<sup>1</sup>

#### The informal gate of Europe

Skala Sykamnias is undisputably the informal gate into Europe. This tiny village community – with only 140 permanent inhabitants, descendants of Anatolian refugees of 1922, who combine fishing with tourism and olive growing – dominates this part of the northeastern Aegean island of Lesbos that the international humanitarian agencies operating on the island call 'the North'. It is the only fully fledged coastal settlement with a port lying in the

middle of the 12 km long coast of small beaches and rough and rocky strips stretching from the beach of Eftalou in the west to the peninsula of Korakas in the east.

Being in this strategic position at the eastern edge of Europe, Skala has experienced pressure from population movements since the mid-2000s when the first refugees from Iraq crossed the 'blue borders' into Greece. The year 2015, however, was a turning point. Out of the one million refugees that entered Europe, nearly one fifth of them – more than 200,000 – used Skala as their entry point.<sup>2</sup> The huge influx of refugees has turned 'the North' into a 'war zone' without a war. The dirt road crossing the lower slopes of Lepetymnos just a small distance from the sea, a road that in normal circumstances would be empty during autumn, in mid-October was crowded with men, women and children who, after getting ashore from their small dinghies, marched on foot towards the 'first reception camps' in Eftalou and Skala.

The thousands of refugees and informal migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Somalia who arrive in Skala on a daily basis, are eventually transported to the official centres of registration where they are divided into those entitled to refugee status and the subsequent right to continue their journey, and those who are not. Yet Skala also attracts a multitude of other Greek and foreign visitors: volunteers, activists (including some of my students), 'tourist-volunteers', NGO (non-governmental organization) personnel, doctors, state officials, missionaries, 'entrepreneurs' of various kinds, Greek and foreign journalists and photographers, and politicians, as well as an increasing number of social scientists – who interact with various categories of locals – activists, volunteers,

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Fig. 1. Lesbos and its northern coast.

Fig. 2. Panoramic view of Skala Sykamnias.

Fig. 3. The Skala Sykamnias port with both caiques and rescue boats.



**Fig. 4.** Reconfigurations: Turning the life jackets into signposts.

‘middlemen’ (particularly those of foreign origin who take advantage of their linguistic skills and local knowledge to provide specialized services) and bystanders. These massive human flows coming from opposite directions, alongside parallel flows of objects and money, have a dramatic effect on local communities: they change everything.

## II. What is (actually) there?

### *Human encounters on the front line: The rescue*

The beaches around Skala are the ‘front line’, where the first encounters between the refugees and those expecting them take place. This is where the laborious quest for displaced ‘others’ by the volunteers comes to a climax. Usually, initial contact is visual, turning binoculars into a core symbol of the encounter. In the course of the winter and after the mobilization of the first professional rescue boats (from Proactiva, and Greenpeace in cooperation with Médecins Sans Frontières) alongside the local fishermen – who have undertaken the largest share of sea rescues, saving many lives – the locus of actual contact has shifted from the shore to the sea. The very sight of an inflatable refugee boat creates a burst of energy – some have called it ‘a festival’ (*panigyri*) – among the volunteers. Both the rescue boats and the people on shore rush to meet the newcomers. Under normal circumstances this might appear rather extreme – a sort of competition over who can act quickest. Under difficult circumstances however, when it is evident that human lives are at stake and that a speedy reaction can make the difference between life and death, the unleashed energy of the rescuers seems imperative. After all, more than 800 dead or missing persons in the Aegean – a casualty rate which remains huge despite the tremendous efforts of the rescuers – are a bitter reminder of the dangerous nature of the short trip.<sup>3</sup> The boats, often half-filled with water, are led, or, if necessary, carried to a safe spot.

At the beach, the anticipation of physical contact is very strong: getting into the water to help the disabled; carrying babies, small children and the elderly; embracing the fit ones; calming those most stressed with a hug – bodies that come together. Journalists and volunteers taking photos, together with other bystanders whose motives for being there are more ‘materialistic’, mix in with the crowd of helpers, adding to the complexity of the scene.

A little bit further away, in the camp, ‘first reception’ takes a more organized form: replacing wet clothes with dry, feeding, transporting. There, but backstage, is the support team – those who sort out or recycle the dirty clothes, clean, help with cooking etc. If the open sea is the operational field of the lifeboat crews, the shore is the domain where medical practitioners are mostly needed. During midwinter, they declare battle against the greatest threat: hypothermia – a battle which, whenever it is lost, reveals the dark side of the encounter. But most of the time, the encounter is bright. Safe passage is a moment of joy, captured in smiles, relief on the faces of worried families, and in the rigorous determination of the young men to walk to the transport camp up the hill instead of waiting for the bus.

### *Symbolic hierarchies*

‘Saving lives’ and ‘taking care’ of the immediate needs of the newcomers: this is what primarily takes place on the front line. Ensuring the safe passage of displaced people and the continuation of their journey into Europe comes secondarily. From a volunteer point of view, being on the front line and offering these services has a special value. It is a mark of distinction. It makes all the difference.

This can turn the front line into something of an obsession. You feel ‘stuck’ (*kollimenos*) to it, and once away from it, you yearn to return. The volunteer experience has

a sharply local focus; in narratives it becomes inscribed in the place, primarily in the beach and the nearby camp, thus geographically fixing the encounter. In the volunteer imaginary, particularly in the many photos which report the crisis, the locality is reconfigured as the stage of the refugee drama in which the beach and the camps occupy the centre ground and the most popular emblem of the locality – the little chapel of Mermaid Madonna on the rocks – is in the background. This powerful imaginary recasts the hitherto dominant symbolic geographies of the locality and fosters anxiety among local villagers.

Being there, on the front line, differentiates everybody – even the activists whose egalitarian ethos despises hierarchies – according to the length of stay and the type of duties they perform. At the top of the symbolic hierarchy that is produced in the course of these encounters are the fishermen, the lifeguards and the (often professional) lifeboat crews, particularly those who have earned the marks of distinction on the ‘battlefield’. For them, the flip side to altruistic behaviour is the power and pain of having to decide on crucial matters of life and death.

### *Encounters with things: Use vs monetary values*

The continuous flow of necessities – clothes, medicine, foodstuffs etc. – and money from all around Greece and the rest of the world to the first line of the refugee crisis is the other side of the human flow. In the student quarters of the big cities, outside the occupied buildings, there are marker boards listing necessary items for the week. Similar lists of items are posted on the websites of the various collectivities. These items are transported, often freely, to particular sites on Lesbos, stored in large warehouses and circulated among the collectivities when necessary. They are meant to be used by the refugees, sometimes also by the volunteers, yet in principle stay outside the sphere of monetary exchange. They focus directly on the individual person – meant to be immediately consumed – and are totally alienable, being the epitome of the free gift, to be constantly replaced in the course of the refugee journey. There is also another flow of things moving in the opposite direction, escorting the refugees on their journey to Europe. Those items that provide the infrastructure for the journey – boats, engines, lifejackets, but also clothes – are treated as expendable by the refugees and thrown away once they have served their function.

The way these material remains of the refugee journey are being treated by locals is another matter and a source of controversy. In particular, good quality engines and the more valuable parts of dinghies have often become the object of hoarding. They are treated as part of the natural environment and as such are considered available for ‘harvesting’ by those who are entitled to do so according to the moral code governing fishing. Some fishermen apply a customary interpretation of the law: if you rescue a boat which is adrift at sea, you have the right to possess it. Otherwise it is a case of first come, first served. In all instances, the appropriation of engines or parts of boats for commercial purposes is stigmatized as an inappropriate form of exploitation, particularly if it is made possible by actions that risk refugee lives or show disrespect to the refugee drama. On the other hand, according to the local authorities, those who are entitled to possess the boats are expected to clean the beach of debris left by refugees.

From another perspective, the material traces of the journey are re-signified by being reduced to raw materials which are then transformed into useful items – such as signposts, bags, toys etc. – which are put at the service of the refugees, either directly or indirectly (by being sold and turned into monetary income for the refugees), yet in new functions that are free from their initial connection to the specific refugee experience. A more radical version of





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**Fig. 5.** *The rescue:* Syrians and Iraqi refugees arrive from Turkey at Skala Sykamias, Lesbos, Greece, 30 October 2015. Spanish volunteers (rescue team - with yellow-red clothes) from 'Proactiva open arms' help the refugees.  
**Fig. 6.** *After the rescue:* A mixed crowd on the beach of Skala Sykamias.  
**Fig. 7.** *Fragile lives.* Drawings by refugee children in the 'first reception' camp of Platanos (plane tree) in Skala Sykamias.

this perspective demands that engines are 'destroyed' and turned into junk. Only in this capacity can they be appropriated to be sold as metal – thus ideally covering the cost of cleaning the beaches.

From the same perspective, the refugee journey, the very flow of displaced persons, defines a sphere of circulation, not just of human beings but also of material things, which ideally has to be properly demarcated from the sphere of commercial transactions and money that made this journey possible. Money is all around: it has a powerful symbolic presence in relation to the huge profits of the traffickers or professionals who take advantage of the refugees, the large monetary donations managed by the NGOs, or the salaries of the professional humanitarians. It is there to be contested, to become the target of fierce criticism, to be made invisible, or turned into an object of loathing. In the same context, the material traces of the journey are ideally treated as being free of any monetary value, defined as the functional ingredients of borderless people. It is not just a case of people coming first and things second, but rather of things being material yet transient aspects of the person.

**Knots**

All these flows have a huge impact on social space. They give it an asymmetrical, irregular shape, adding new dimensions, turning it into a sort of refugee 'scape' focused on the displaced who, in the last analysis, play the lead role in this spatial reformation. Everyone and everything else goes where the refugees go.

Yet despite the fact that they are constantly on the move, the repetitive patterns of their movements mark certain points in space as focal. The flows of people and things revolve around a centre. A kind of gravity attracts them to the front line where they meet in large concentrations to form knots. In early October, these knots were recognizable by the presence of elementary facilities – a tent with medical supplies, a table and a pot for food – all on the beach, very near to the point of refugee arrival. The more successful knots had a separate internet existence which facilitated the flow of volunteers that made them possible. Out of these knots, in a bottom-up process, the 'first reception' camps were established.

**III. 'There' equals differentiation**

'There' amounts to a highly differentiated refugee 'scape'. On one side are the hundreds of thousands of displaced people who come from the 'East'. On the other is the colourful multitude of thousands of newcomers mainly from the 'West' who hold the initiative in their encounters with the refugees and the local people. A great variety of motives and strategies inform this rich field of interactions. Despite their blurred boundaries and confusion in actual practice, or their intermingling within individual life courses, at the discursive level these strategies create distinct, flexible and mutually contested identities. In this capacity, they transform these ephemeral encounters into an 'event' with far-reaching consequences.

**Refugees**

The newcomers from Turkey, the refugees and informal migrants, are no doubt driven by the motive of survival and seem united in a simple strategy: to pass through into northern Europe. A recent UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) survey of 245 Syrian refugees has shown that 90.8 per cent of the interviewees wished to seek asylum elsewhere in the European Union (EU).<sup>4</sup> They may stay in the area for a few hours maximum per day before they are transported to the transit camp and the identification centre in Moria. Their passage from Skala, which otherwise has far-reaching consequences, is limited





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to these first encounters, yet their sheer number gives the place the power to attract world attention. A fleeting, yet so powerful, presence.

**‘Solidarians’**

Among the newcomers from different parts of Greece there is a category whose presence is informed by strong ideological imperatives. For the ‘solidarians’, being there is part of a utopian project: making a self-organized collectivity built on ‘solidarity’ and ‘horizontality’ – bringing together people from all different quarters in order to stand by the refugees with ‘dignity’. Their strategy is part of the wider ‘solidarity movement’ that has spread all around Greece in the years of austerity. Activists came to Skala almost from the start of the crisis and ‘occupied’ communal space, thus extending the highly politicized model of ‘solidarity with the refugees’ that has recently become prominent primarily in the student quarters of Athens, to the outskirts of Europe, where it is more needed. ‘Humanism’ (*anthropia*) – not humanitarianism – and disinterestedness are their motto, and the framework in which they make alliances and relate to the few locals who support their project.



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**‘Volunteers’**

For the largest category of visitors, the ‘volunteers’, being there is often reduced to a narrower agenda: to ‘help’ those in ‘need’. ‘Help’ may be conceived in a variety of ways: in ‘humanitarian terms’, as a duty of compassion to a suffering fellow ‘human being’ and a response to a ‘need’; in civic terms, as a defining ingredient of civic duty, often inspired by the understanding that this tragedy is also ‘history in the making’; or in strictly religious terms, as a moral imperative informed by a sense of community with Christ and an opportunity to ‘preach the word of God’. The ideological inspirations which underpin long-term volunteering lie on the same continuum as the widespread mix of curiosity and compassion that dominates the strategies of the mass of volunteer tourists who have flooded the island recently.

At the very core of all these strategies is the quest for agency, though it may be founded on fundamentally different values: i.e. autonomy from, or even against the state, built on the egalitarian and morally libertarian project of supporting the displaced and the dispossessed vs. transnational citizenship achieved through volunteering at the front lines of ‘history’ or religious salvation for everyone.

**Professional humanitarians**

All the above strategies contrast with the role of ‘humanitarian worker’, which is where ‘successful’ volunteering often ends up. This is a profession within the bureaucratic structures of humanitarian organizations – some of which can be very large. Here, individual strategy becomes subsumed within the policy of the organization; the political or religious ideal is replaced by the quest for technocratic efficiency in the provision of humanitarian aid. What matters is the successful completion of the humanitarian ‘mission’ which is inextricably linked to the reproduction of the humanitarian organization itself. These objectives become specific as they are reduced to important, tangible targets, so nicely captured within the plain terminology of the big humanitarian organizations that dominate the weekly coordination meetings under the UNHCR: ‘protection’, ‘food’, ‘wash’ or ‘winterization’.

Humanitarianism as a profession gradually absorbs ordinary ‘volunteers’ into emergent structures of governance that represent alternatives to the Greek state. Many locals (including many graduates of my university), some with a background as ‘solidarians’ or ‘volunteers’ and/or with degrees in the social sciences, are currently employed by these big organizations. In contrast to the highly experienced staff who stay on the island for rather short periods,



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Fig. 8. Watching the Turkish border.  
 Fig. 9. Some of the material remains of the sea journey in the nearby chomateri (rubbish dump).  
 Fig. 10. At the ‘hot spot’ of Moria.





**Fig. 11.** *The actions of the three grannies as the subject for journalistic reporting.*

1. I have, therefore, avoided references to the relevant anthropological literature on the many topics that are covered in this essay. I just want to mention the important anthropological research of Heath Cabot, Sarah Green and Katerina Rozaïkou on the refugee crisis in Greece and the relevant work of Maurizio Albahari, Ruben Andersson, Didier Fassin, Heidrun Friese, Raffaëla Puggioni and Miriam Tichtin in connection with other parts of southern Europe. It is important to notice that the situation which I describe in this essay depended on the opening of the so-called ‘Eastern Mediterranean route’ and the ‘Balkan route’. By the time this essay goes to press the Balkan borders are closing. We are entering a new phase of the European crisis.

2. UNHCR *Europe’s refugee emergency response: Update 16*. December 2015. <https://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=381>. See also: International Organization for Migration (IOM): *Mixed migration flows in the Mediterranean and beyond: Compilation of available data and information* (reporting period 2015). [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation\\_reports/file/IOM-Mixed-Migration-Flows-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-14-January-2016.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/file/IOM-Mixed-Migration-Flows-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-14-January-2016.pdf) (accessed 6 March 2016).

3. See IOM *Mixed migration flows*, op.cit., p. 20. Also see the IOM’s *Missing migrants project* at <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.

4. UNHCR *Syrian refugee arrivals in Greece: Preliminary questionnaire findings*. April–September 2015. <https://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=248> (accessed 6 March 2016).

5. See <http://www.thirdwavevolunteers.com>.

these junior professional humanitarians rely on short-term contracts. It is apparent that their professional future is completely dependent on the spatial and temporal fluctuations of the refugee crisis.

### ‘E-volunteers’

The groundedness of local professional humanitarians, although totally necessary, is surpassed by some foreign freelance ‘volunteers’ who seem to place humanitarian action on the ground in the service of an e-career. These e-volunteers pursue their careers with words, photos and all kinds of signifiers, before a global audience on the internet. Their strategy is largely performative: their actions are meant to be placed on a visual register that becomes available to everyone, primarily through social media, thus attracting large audiences of ‘followers’ and the necessary resources to keep on travelling. Some are activists of repute; others are just agile travellers. A few among the most successful of them are surfing the globe in the quest for natural disasters, the field of distinction *par excellence* for a volunteer. In its turn, their presence on the front line, together with other disaster specialists, places Skala and Lesbos on the global map of the great disaster sites of the 21st century alongside the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004), Hurricane Katrina (2005) or the Haiti earthquake (2010).

All of them are ambitious performers, highly conscious of their volunteer personas and therefore very hard to miss: they look after their e-self, bear distinctive markers of identity and dress accordingly. They are also keen on leaving traces of themselves, like the ‘Third wave volunteers’ diplomas<sup>5</sup> that decorate the walls of the local cafeteria.

### Well-wishers and other humanitarian pilgrims

Next to the e-volunteers and the ‘disasterologists’ are those in search of concrete, journalistic or scientific information – or just ‘intelligence’! Representatives from the EU or the Greek government – from ministers and politicians to low-ranking officials – come to inspect the local scene before they formulate policies and (why not?) share the ‘energy’ of the place. Others combine their first-hand experience with a gesture of solidarity with the ‘solidarians’. Some, the most famous – usually artists and politicians – will make a statement of sympathy. Their visits increase the visibility of the place and make it a popular site of pilgrimage. Journalists and photographers from all over the world just do their job: they usually do not stay long, eager to collect the valuable story or take the photo that will make the difference. They are everywhere, mixed in with the crowd of helpers, often with an ‘enthusiasm’ that annoys others. Among them is the occasional anthropologist who ‘tries to understand’. Understand what? Such cognitive ambition is

misplaced. The deconstruction of the place has dismantled any easily recognizable ‘object of study’ besides the self-evident manifestations of the crisis. The place has turned into a rich laboratory for studying almost everything and nearly nothing – the human condition!

### Ordinary people

#### The ‘grannies’

At the other end is the strategy of ‘not doing anything’, so popular among those who were always there – the locals. ‘We haven’t done anything’. 83-year-old M.K. responded to hungry journalists with this rhetorical disclaimer while walking in the hall of international fame as one of the ‘three grannies’ who had been ‘captured’ feeding a refugee baby by a photographer. She meant that they were doing what they always do. Strategy reduced to habit – the habit of taking care of babies and children, the continuous performance of motherhood in the child-centred matrifocal neighbourhoods of Lesbos. Feeding a refugee baby is more than ‘business as usual’, but a historical opportunity for an elderly woman to be an energetic agent in the only – i.e. culturally specific – way possible: that of looking after children.

#### The fishermen

Almost the same could be said about those fishermen (such as T.M. and S.B.) who ‘save children’. It is a matter of ‘doing what has to be done’ – the ‘duty’ of ‘the men of the sea’ who cannot afford to leave people who are in danger without assisting them. Again it is a matter of habit – this time a very costly, risky and often dangerous habit, that requires a combination of special skills, stamina and moral courage in order to be sustained in such a challenging situation. And some fishermen have excelled themselves in this test of character for a long time, ever since the mid-2000s when the first boats started coming. In the end, this is a complex matter of ‘local knowledge’, ‘pride’ and control over the essentials of one’s own life. After all, the narrow stretch of water that separates the two continents is their courtyard; they are ‘harvesting’ it year after year – and you cannot have people, particularly children, dying on your liquid doorstep.

#### Staying on the sidelines

Yet, distinction is for the few. Full-scale, prolonged exposure to the challenge of rescue is not an option for the majority, particularly for those whose occupation keeps them backstage. The risk is too big to take. Hospitality has its limits, and the overall size of the challenge has exceeded them. The olive factory near the port with its hectic rhythms during the harvest season is a reminder that life goes on. The coffee shops at the periphery of Skala, in Kaya or Sykamnia, provide small havens, places of retreat, for the sceptics who often dispute the authenticity of altruistic behaviour, and others who are tired of the fuss of the main square and the seclusion of their homes.

The majority of the villagers remain at the margins – silent, tired and perplexed. The elderly in particular, struggle to retain an (ancient) rhythm of life when their world has turned upside down. Some villagers take the opportunity to attempt the rather profitable shift to humanitarian tourism. Others, particularly those who stand to lose from the crisis because they are employed in the big hotels of Molyvos, are frustrated and worried. Yet, given the magnitude of the challenge, and especially given the paranoia in some countries fearful of the scale of the refugee crisis, it is surprising that, in Greece at least, the reactionary, xenophobic voices are few and muted. ●

*To be continued in part 2*