

Symbols of Identity: Castellorizian Wedding Rituals & Customs

by Dr. Vassiliki Chryssanthopoulou, Athens



Check AFK Website For More Details On Wedding Traditions And Customs: www.australianfriendskastellorizo.org

I had the opportunity to participate in many weddings and pre-wedding rituals, while pursuing research for my doctoral thesis with the Castellorizian community of Perth, Australia (1984-86). By the end of my fieldwork I, too, like most of my informants, concluded that the wedding rituals constituted "key symbols" of Castellorizian culture and identity and that by practising them, participants expressed their identification with Castellorizian culture.

Rituals of Protection and Fertility.

Weddings are rites of passage. They mark the transition from being unmarried to being married, from belonging to your family of origin to creating the basis for a new one. For this reason, the bride and groom are considered to be in a transitional stage, thus needing spiritual and metaphysical support to be able to accomplish their passage to married life successfully. This protection is provided by religion, but also by rituals through which the community of relatives and friends bestow its blessing to the couple, enlists the spiritual support of saints and ancestors and creates a shield of supernatural protection from any evil influence that might target the bride and groom.

The threading of mousoukaria or cloves, still practised in Perth, though rarely, is often combined with the kitchen tea and is an all-female ritual. On Kastellorizo, cloves previously soaked in water, used to be threaded into armathies or necklaces, to be given to the girls to wear round their necks while making the bridal bed; two necklaces with a gold coin attached to each of them, were also given to the bride and groom to wear. The bride washed her hair using the water in which the cloves had been soaked. In the rituals I observed in Perth, female relatives and friends of the bride threaded cloves to make a necklace for her, then some armathies for themselves. While threading the necklace, the women would sing songs of praise to the bride. Although I heard various interpretations of the meaning of this ritual by Castellorizian women, its main purpose to keep any evil influence, especially the evil eye (to mati) at bay, is clear: by creating a 'protective circle' for the bride, consisting of cloves, the women attempted to strengthen her, spiritually and metaphysically.

The Savvatovratho, "the joy of the wedding", as Castellorizians refer to it, is the climax of the pre-wedding celebrations. The rituals of the spreading of votania and of the blessing of the bride's and groom's wedding clothes take place as part of it. Votania are herbs with grey leaves and a strong scent that lasts well after they have become dry. They grow wild on the hills of Kastellorizo and the locals use them to make a drink which helps control diabetes, as I was told. However, they are famous for their place in the Castellorizian wedding and every Castellorizian has heard the song referring to them:

I am falling from the votania, to kill myself,
 and my love is calling out, hold him, for God's sake!

On Kastellorizo, the votania are traditionally gathered by boys with both parents alive (a good omen for the marriage-to-be) on Friday before the wedding and are left in the church of the All Holy One of Chorafia overnight to be blessed. The following morning the boys carry them to a boat that takes them round the harbour of Kastellorizo three times, while the accompanying

relatives and friends sing wedding songs. Later, the votania are taken to the homes of the bride and groom, and placed in a sheet tied in a cross-like fashion, and carried around the house by a relative, accompanied by people singing, to be finally scattered everywhere in the house and on the participants. They remain scattered until after the conclusion of the wedding. In Australia, where the votani does not grow, people use lavender to perform this ritual, but still employ the word 'votania' to refer to it. The original meaning of the ritual consists in enlisting the support of nature, of the wilderness where the votani grows, and in soliciting the highly desirable fertility for the new couple. This is evident by the fact that in the past, the bride used to bathe or wash her hair in water in which votania had been boiled.

The votania ritual is combined with the censuring of the bride's and groom's clothes. Frankincense (mountzouvi) is lit in a shallow dish, and the bride's and groom's clothes are passed over the cleansing smoke while participants sing the following song:

Tonight is the Saturday evening ritual
 and there is a scent of mountzouvi in the air,
 May it bring good luck to the clothes being smoked.

The censuring of the bride's and groom's clothes invites spiritual protection from the powers of religion and nature for the couple who, by not being married yet, are believed to be particularly susceptible to supernatural dangers such as the power of the evil eye. So strong is Greek people's belief in the power of evil, willingly or not, from people's eyes and affecting others' health and happiness that the Orthodox Church had to accept it and to provide for its cure by means of a special blessing by the priest.

Tradition, Identity and Change

Although it is anchored in the past, tradition refers to the present and future. The wedding rituals and customs that Castellorizians have preserved in the diaspora, in Australia and elsewhere, fulfill important values and become a statement of identity for individuals and families when practised. Castellorizians continue to employ them in a creative manner, bestowing on them new meanings and connotations. To give an example, while on Kastellorizo doing fieldwork in July 2009, I came upon a wedding procession heading for the church of St. George of the Well. The bride, an Australian Castellorizian, was carrying a red umbrella, matching beautifully with her white frock (photo on page 3). I was very moved, and it reminded me of the words of the Castellorizian song referring to the bride's trousseau:

Come, Christ and Panayia, let me open the chest,
 to take out clothes threaded with gold and a red umbrella.

Traditionally, this umbrella was to be held by the bride, to bring colour to her pale face, because of the wedding preparations. For our third generation bride, however, carrying this umbrella was rather a statement of belonging, of being part of the place where it all started and of its culture. Or, perhaps, she may have used it for the same reason as the brides of old, thus merging old and new meanings in a personal re-working of Castellorizian tradition.

Australian Friends

KATOUMARI

By Connie Gregory, Melbourne



If you are of Kastellorizian descent and have never tasted Katoumaria, one of the great sweets of Kastellorizo, you are seriously deprived. It is to die for! It is a fried pastry dish, rich in butter and spices, made for any happy occasion, or when the fancy takes you. I learnt to make it from my late mother-in-law Eftihia Gregory (nee Palassis) who was widely acknowledged as an outstanding cook. It is presented at the table on a large platter and everybody takes some to their plates and eats with their fingers. It disappears in minutes.

Katoumari, the Queen of Kastellorizian sweets, and the Turkish Katmer have a common origin. It is recorded that the cuisine of the ancient Orghuz Turkic tribes included, amongst other things, yahni (stew), yufka (flattened bread), chorek (ring-shaped buns), and katmer (layered pastry). Katmer can be salty or sweet depending on its filling. The use of layered dough is rooted in the nomadic character of early Central Asian Turks and a rod-styled rolling pin, the oklava, was used. I also found that the Urla district of Izmir (Smyrna) in Turkey is still famous for its Katmer. If you are interested in this historical information, go to Wikipedia and type in "katmer".

I corresponded with Yelda Gokdag, a Turkish cook in Switzerland who has a culinary website. She said that modern Katmer is a type of pastry, made of yufka (thin sheets of dough, i.e. phyllo dough). Sugar, butter, cream and pistachios are added, and folded in. Then cooked in a pan with a little bit of butter. She was not familiar with the description of Katoumari.

According to Yelda, the Turkish Katmer often has a savoury or sweet filling, so it seems that the Kastellorizians put their own stamp on this fried pastry to create the mouth-watering butter-soaked and spiced Katoumari that we know today. It is also made the same way in parts of Cyprus. Various types of fried pastry exist throughout the Middle East, Asia Minor and beyond.

At the Kastellorizian Association of Victoria Clubrooms in September last year, Evelyn Salvaris and myself demonstrated how to make it because everyone likes to eat it, but young people, and often their parents, don't know how to make it. Food is an excellent way to keep young people interested in their heritage and the demonstration was a huge success accompanied by lots of enthusiastic advice. Huge amounts of Katoumari were devoured to much acclaim.

The following detailed recipe will guide you to making perfect katoumaria, or better still, if you have somebody in your family who still makes it, ask to go and watch them make it and pay careful attention to the method.

If you are visiting Kastellorizo, there are women there who will make it to order – Despina Misomike, Despina Matsos, Chrisafina Amygdalou, and Anastasia Mayafi.

KATOUMARI (Makes four Katoumaria)

- 1 kilo plain flour
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 cups (750ml) warm water
- 1 teaspoon vinegar
- 800g butter approximately
- Ground cloves, sugar, and cinnamon

Place flour in bowl, add mixed liquid (water, oil and vinegar) stir with a wooden spoon to combine and then knead for five minutes. Turn out on bench and knead for a further 5-10 minutes on floured surface until pliable and non-sticky. Rest for a while in the fridge. Divide into four portions. Roll out one portion until quite thin, (a long piece of dowelling does a better job than a rolling pin), keeping a circular shape. Brush liberally with melted, but not hot, butter. Let stand a few minutes. Make a hole in the centre and roll the dough back on itself, forming a long rope, and then cut the rope. Run hands along rope and squeeze gently. Coil both ends until they meet, butter one coil and twist it on top of the other and then roll out to a little less than the size of the frypan. (I use a large Tefal pan). Place generous amount of butter in heated pan. Cook katoumari slowly for about 20 minutes each side until golden brown. Remove and sprinkle with sugar and spices. Break up to serve, adding a liberal dose of sugar and spices. Place on a large platter. Discard butter in pan before frying the next one. Or, have two pans going at once!

Notes: Four is a lot of Katoumaria – so divide recipe to make two. Can be fried and frozen whole, wrapped in foil and then in a freezer bag. Can be reheated by several methods, e.g. zap quickly in microwave and then reify before breaking up, or reheated whole or broken up in the oven before adding sugar and spices. Dough can be made up to a day ahead, wrapped in oiled clingfilm and refrigerated.

Islands of Kastellorizo

Why we married on Kastellorizo



CHRISTINE BRACHER July 2009

"My Kastellorizian grandfather, Nicholas Paspaley, never returned to Kastellorizo after his arrival in Australia in 1918. In his memory, I have had a lifelong dream to visit Kastellorizo with my extended family. My wedding was the perfect magnet to bring brothers, cousins, uncles and aunts, even second cousins to the magical island simultaneously. My grandfather was there in spirit, smiling down as he watched three generations of his family celebrate our wedding with traditional Kastellorizian customs such as the savatovratho. It is a testament to the depth of Kastellorizo's traditions that these customs continue to be faithfully observed. This and the serene beauty of Kastellorizo are why my husband, Ashley Salter and I return year after year and chose to exchange our vows in Kastellorizo".

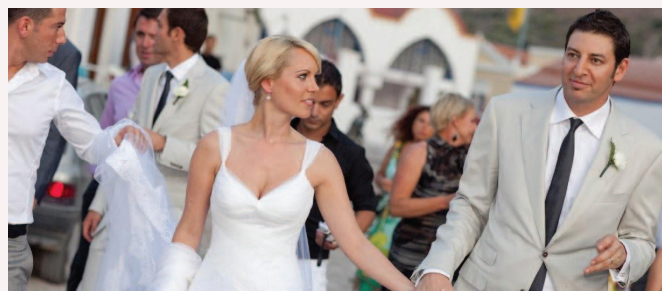
GEORGE & DANIELLE KAILIS July 2008

We both felt a connection to the island from our first trip to celebrate my father, Victor's 60th birthday. In discovering such a beautiful and remote place we also found a second home. There was so much to learn about the island, its history, and family connections that were very emotional. Its rawness and tranquility is exceptionally unique. For us, it is the ultimate place to relax and unwind from the rest of the world, but it still feels like home.

We wanted to share our experience of Kastellorizo with our family and friends so our decision to get married there was a very easy one. We wanted a simple, relaxed wedding with only our close family and friends without being at all stressful, so Kastellorizo was the perfect setting.

The more we learnt about Kastellorizo's culture and wedding ceremony, the more special it became with the beautiful and unique customs of the 'savathovratho', making it a truly unique experience for many of our guests, who were all in awe of the island and its culture.

We chose the church of St George of the Well as it is the Church that George's grandfather was baptised in, and whose family house (pictured in the background below) is just behind the church. It was such a privilege for us to be married on the island. Everyone was so helpful and made us feel so welcome. Kastellorizo is definitely a place we both hold very close to our hearts, especially now that we have so many more amazing memories of being there.



BASIL ZEMPILAS September 2009

If you're going to have a Kazzie wedding – then why not have it on Kastellorizo!

I had always wanted to get married on the island where my mum Jessie was born, and fortunately Amy shared my enthusiasm. It was very special, 90 friends and family joined us for what was the best few days of our lives.

The "Savatovratho" was a highlight singing "Mana Hara" on Kazzie where these traditional songs were born, and the wedding ceremony and reception were perfect. After the ceremony, just like my grandfather Vasilis Zempilas and his bride Dialecti Boyatzis 82 years earlier, we stood on the school steps for a group photo with our guests. That's a moment in time Amy and I will never forget.

We may not call Kastellorizo home, but that doesn't mean we have forgotten what it means to be Kastellorizian. Like the symbol of the island (used in our wedding invitation), we continue to honour the cross, the anchor and especially the heart of our ancestors.

AMY ZEMPILAS September 2009

I had heard so much about Kastellorizo for so many years. When the island finally came into view as I was standing on the boat, it took my breath away.

I was standing next to my mum and we looked at each other and started to cry. Seeing Kastellorizo for the first time was so meaningful in many ways because I felt like we were returning to where our story first began. Basil's mum was born there and there we were, 80 years later, watching her waving the boat in. Not only is Kastellorizo breathtakingly beautiful, but the history of the island's resilience and the strength and determination of its people has been handed down through the generations. As a third generation Australian, I feel incredibly blessed and privileged to now be a part of the ongoing history of the island, with all of its wonderful traditions and customs.

Kastellorizo

On an island where time stands still and dreams come true... A comment from an AFK sponsor

Kastellorizo is a unique destination for a wedding; it combines history, tradition and natural beauty. Many couples from Australia have held their wedding reception on the private terrace of the Megisti Hotel which is right on the water overlooking the Aegean Sea. Perfect for dancing! If you are lucky and you happen to get a full moon on your wedding night just as one couple did in 2008, then it is truly magic. You have to adjust your expectations to keep in mind that resources and staffing are limited because of the island's remoteness. Flowers, decorations, band/DJ, bonbonieres, candles, the wedding cake, as well as all equipment such as tables and chairs, professional waiters and chefs all come from Rhodes. Clearly all this is dependent on reliable transport too, so everything has to be organised well in advance. You can customise your wedding to suit your needs in realistic, yet unforgettable ways.

Menus can vary from traditional Kastellorizian Festive meals and sweets as well as more contemporary tastes. However, meals are served in buffet style rather than a la carte because of staffing.

Experiences shared from Megisti Hotel. <http://www.megistihotel.gr>

Proverbs of the Month - Dr Paul Boyatzis, Perth

Vrexe kolo na fas patella.

(You have to wet your bottom to catch patelles.)
(Patella is a shell fish stuck on submerged rocks in the sea)
Nothing comes easy in life. Work hard if you wish to succeed.

Tou zogathorou tou psara, tou kinigou to piato, tris fores ine athiano ke mia fora gemato.

(The plate of the gambler, the fisherman, and the hunter, three times is empty and once full)
Don't depend on "activities of chance". In years gone by these activities were frowned upon as a form of living. To some extent gambling is still regarded as risky when it passes from the social to the serious.

AN ISLAND IN TIME

Castellorizo in Photographs 1890-1948

Nicholas Pappas and Nicholas Bogiatzis

'To turn the pages of this extraordinary book is to visit the island of Castellorizo in its heyday – and in the harrowing times that followed...'



AN ISLAND IN TIME, CASTELLORIZO IN PHOTOGRAPHS 1890-1948 is a chronicle of fifty dramatic years told through photographs. The images, many never before published, enable readers to experience the island's recent history by looking upon bygone generations and by entering the island's harbour and forgotten laneways. Over a thousand Castellorizians are shown, many of them the forebears of families in Australia and in other countries far from their island home.

After years researching archives and contacting families across the globe, the authors have gathered in one publication some 220 images which together document a half century of a past community and culture. Castellorizo's history, displayed through its people, places and politics, appears for the first time in striking close up, as well as in magnificent panoramas. The visual splendour of weddings, the sombre spectacle of funerals and the pleasure of social gatherings are presented against a backdrop of more momentous events that were ultimately to determine the island's harsh fate.

At the same time, the island's foreign rulers during these tumultuous years—Turks, French, Italians and British—are seen parading their pomp and splendour along the quay and around the island town. Theirs were the relatively short-lived stays that brought with them policies and hostilities that were to transform Castellorizo's 19th century grandeur into rubble in a mere fifty years.

Throughout the book, detailed captions provide useful insights into the photographs and enable a comprehensive understanding of this important period in Castellorizo's chequered history.

The book is to be released in mid 2010.

Details on how to purchase a copy will shortly be available on both the Australian Friends of Kastellorizo website:

www.australianfriendskastellorizo.org
and
www.castellorizohistory.com.au

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