

# Life Goes on: Hard Bread and Lyricism on the Island of the Sponge Divers

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*In memory of Thodoris Eleftherio*

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## 1.

On the Aegean island of Kalymnos they make hard bread. The *koulouria* baked each morning on Symi are rings of white dough coated with sesame seeds, crisp on the outside, soft in the middle, and stale by midday. But the distinctive bread of Kalymnos, *krithini kouloura* or *paximadia*, is a rusk made of tough barley flour fermented with anise and mastic, and slow-baked to an unrelenting hardness to last six months at sea.<sup>1</sup>

The people too have a reputation for being tough, divers especially. Much of the mountainous island is rock, and in the Kalymnian stories of sponge diving, there's a special pride in qualities of extreme endurance. Since the divers had always been champions whose manhood was intimately linked to acts of daring, once the deep-sea diving suit they called the *skafandro*, the man-boat, became available in the mid-1860s, the modern dangers of the new diving tech were easily assimilated into an old code of heroism. Or at least this was how it seemed to the cultural anthropologist H. Russell Bernard when he studied the Kalymnian sponge fishing industry in the 1960s.

A century after the *skafandro* made it possible to dive deeper and stay down longer than ever before, there was another transitional moment. Satan's Machine, as they also called it, was still in use, but soon to be replaced by the first scuba diving suits. At the same time the recent invention of the synthetic sponge was severely impacting the demand for sea sponges. In 1950, more than a third of the male work force of the island had been directly involved in the sponge trade, but by the mid-1960s this was dwindling.<sup>2</sup> Still, Kalymnos remained home to fifty sponge merchants and a range of artisans, and several hundreds of men were employed in sponge fishing. A few were naked divers who harvested sponges in the ancient way, but nearly everyone was using the now battered old *skafandro*.

I was working on a book about the Aegean sponge industry, and when I wrote to Russell in Arizona, though we'd not had any contact before, he responded immediately. Very kindly he sent me all his writing on the topic, together with a copy of the documentary film he helped to make, *Matadors of the Deep* (1974), which makes for an irreplaceable record of the sponge diver's craft. In what must have been an extraordinary research trip for the young PhD candidate, he spent a month in 1965 travelling with the Kalymnian sponge fleet off the coast of Libya. His records are full of images of the sponge divers' daily life: the lack of sleep, the sunburn, the seasickness, the longing for home, the diver crossing himself three times while the deck hand is dressing him in the diving suit, the jump from the bow of the boat into the sea, the comrade on deck timing the dive with a half-minute sand glass and

shouting ‘torna’ at each turn, the cigarette which the diver must smoke on surfacing since if he couldn’t inhale the smoke he’d be sent down again to recompress, the crew working together to tend to him if he began to feel the pains. Only at dusk, when all the dives were done, could they eat. The single meal of the day was shared on deck, several men squatting around a bowl of *fasol* beans with tomato sauce, or macaroni and tomato sauce, or lentils with lemon and vinegar, or rice pilaf, or *fasol* beans with olive oil, sometimes with meat and sometimes not, always with olives and *krithini kouloura*.

Back on Kalymnos, the careful count Russell made of the community of artisans and shops on the island in that year reads like a poem about the diligent self-sufficiency of local craftsmanship: twenty-five cobblers, fifteen barbers, eleven bakeries, nine distillers, eight furniture makers, five tanners, three goldsmiths, three salt grinders, three knitting shops, two weavers, two coffee grinders, a paint maker, a soap maker, a blanket maker, a button maker, a kerchief maker...<sup>3</sup> Fifty years on, the lists of names invoke an entire way of life on the brink of dissolution, though nostalgia at the imminent impact of transnational modernity was not his concern.

What Russell wanted to know was why so many Kalymnian sponge divers were dying or becoming disabled. Even decades after John Scott Haldane’s decompression tables had been widely available, the *skafandro* still claimed a devastating number of men’s lives. During the time he travelled with the fleet, out of just 19 divers, one man died, two were paralysed, and at least nine suffered more minor cases of the Bends. And in the year of 1965 as a whole, an astounding 7% of the divers who set out from Kalymnos harbour after the Easter festivities in the Spring never came home, or returned to their families permanently disabled. And these were only the most severe cases. Over 90% of all the diving accidents, Russell explains, were treated at sea.<sup>4</sup>

Why did this happen? The men lived an extraordinarily difficult life on a small wooden vessel for six months at a time, far from family and community, in conditions of extended sleep deprivation, inadequate food, and constant exposure to the elements. The diving gear was obsolete, and the divers generally knew little about the medical dangers of diving. Instead, Russell says, they had their own theories and folk remedies relating to the Bends.<sup>5</sup> Also, and most significantly, they took risks. ‘Kalymnians as a group employ extraordinarily risky methods of diving’, he writes<sup>6</sup>. All too often, the divers would linger too long on the sea floor, ignore the commands from on deck to return, untie the lifeline, and finally ascend too quickly to the surface. They knew the risks, but they did it anyway. Why?

The situation he describes was a seemingly intractable one in which economic pressures had become entangled with a prevailing code of masculinity. Knowing that they might never return from the diving trip, Kalymnian divers insisted on being paid all their wages in advance. This then put huge pressure on them to fulfil their debt to the captain by bringing up enough sponge. The only way they could do this was by the dangerous means of rapid ascent and repetitive dives. So if you wanted to meet your sponge quota, you had to take extreme risks. At the same time, Russell says, this economic trap had become enmeshed with the status of the divers on the island as folk heroes, men who were not afraid of anything, young men who took risks. As he put it, ‘the hallmark of manhood among Kalymnian divers is intrepidity to the point of defying death’.<sup>7</sup>

And of course, it was not only the men who had to be tough. Running the household while your husband was away at sea had for generations given women a powerful social role, at least for half the year. Once the new diving technology brought heartbreak to the island, the women of Kalymnos found in themselves a different sort of power in the fury of grief.

The first protest against the *skafandro* took place in May 1885, with the early news that many Kalymnians had died at sea. It was a Sunday and from churches all over the island, keening women poured out to stand in circles, touch stones to their foreheads, and fling them into the centre of the circle. The curse was an ancient one, performed now on the merchant-captains and the *demogerontia*, the island senate, who’d sent their young men out to die. Afterwards, the women streamed down from the old capital to Pothia, the port recently built from the new sponge profits. As Michael Kalafatas describes it, writing about his grandfather’s long poem which was itself such a protest, ‘the women wanted their rage to be seen and known at the new centre of money and power’.<sup>8</sup>

It is not recorded what lasting impact, if any, these or the many other protests that followed may have had on the authorities. But eight decades later in 1963 when Kalymnian women marched on the mayor's office, the sponge industry was sufficiently in decline, and the divers' mythic status in the community sufficiently weakened, for him to give in to their appeal. This time, their demand was quite specific: that the island close down its only brothel and force the divers to stop the notorious wild spending and lavish lifestyles that the wealth from the *skafandro* had made possible. It was a victory of a kind, and Russell thinks it spelled the beginning of the end of the island's sponge fishing days.<sup>9</sup> Still the terrible injustice of the industry remained a deep wound to the whole community, and it rippled through the generations. As one sponge diver's wife says to the camera in *The Sponge Diver's Dance*, 'it is a job which gave us comfortable bread. But bitter bread. Lots of bread, but bitter.'

These days only five sponge boats leave from Kalymnos in the Spring, and the diving tech is fairly safe, but the memory of collective trauma is fresh and one particular dance from the island, the *Mechanikos*, enacts it explicitly. It begins with the wailing song of a violin and a group of men taking the first graceful steps of a Syrtos circle. Then the main dancer enters, leaning on a cane, and shatters the symmetry of this ancestral form. Like the cloth-capped young men in old Kalymnian movie footage who lean on the shoulder of a small boy or walk with difficulty along the harbour wall with the help of a cane, the man at the centre of the dance is disabled by the Bends. He shakes uncontrollably, his steps are desperate and slow, and he uses his hand to lift a paralysed foot, halting, falling at the feet of the others, painfully getting up. It's shocking and astonishingly direct. When at last the music changes and the main dancer tosses down his cane to join the circle, his terrible stumbling remains in the memory even as it is transformed.

## 2.

It was with a mass of such images in mind that I stepped off the ferry from Symi. It seemed to me that the impact of the sponge industry on the region since the arrival of the *skafandro* was a sort of microcosm of our global eco-social predicament: mine the seabed for all its worth until it's nearly all fished out, no matter the devastation or how many young men die or become disabled along the way. Though the islands of Symi and Halki were also key participants in the boom-and-bust century that sponges made possible through this process, Kalymnos is the particular place they still call Island of the Sponge Divers, and I hoped to hear some stories.

Over a couple of days, my husband Michael and I explored the port and spoke with many people. We met Aphrodite, a woman of about my age who occupied a shop filled with shells and sponges, what is called a sponge factory. We saw the bronze bust of Nicholas Vouvalis on the harbour wall, a powerful merchant who became something of a philanthropist after his particular success in linking the Kalymnian sponge trade into the industrial networks of the British Empire and the middle-class desires that it nurtured. We heard from our Danish hotel manager about the Syrian refugees who came to the island in 2014 and 2015, and how the islanders fed them and gave them shelter. We met an elderly man who went to sea with the sponge fleets as a teenager after surviving the Hunger of the German occupation, and whose grandfather was a diver who was swallowed by a shark and then spat out again because of the *skandalopetra*, the diving stone, he was holding. Finally, on the last day as we were saying goodbye to one of our favourite sponge sellers, I thought I should explain to him something of what I was doing.

'You see,' I said awkwardly, 'it seems to me that if you look at a sponge, it's like a key to this whole region, the heart of it. The history, the environment, the people... Everything flows through it.'

He simply stared at me for a bit, and I was about to try explaining again what I meant. But it was a stare of recognition.

'There's a painting you must see,' he said.

'I'd love to, but our ferry is about to leave...'

'No, you must see it.'

It was one of those clear instructions such as the traveller receives in an old tale: unambiguous, emphatic, and impossible to ignore. Take this path. You'll not regret it.

'It's in a taverna in the next street,' he explained. 'The picture is a dream the painter had, like a vision. It's a painting of a sponge and an angel, and the sponge is giving birth to Kalymnos.'

We found it down a narrow alley, with a couple of men sitting at a table outside.

'Kalimera,' I said. 'Is this the place with the painting of a sponge?'

'Yes, go inside. Please.'

The historical artefacts were like others we'd already seen: the photographs of divers and boats, the carefully-made model caique, and even the collection of giant mussel shells. But the paintings were a portal to another realm.

In the picture our friend had sent me to find, a massive sponge rests on rocks in a glorious dream of sea and clouds and wings. A smiling woman or angel or goddess with magnificently long hair rippling down into the water is rising over it on a great white dove with an olive branch in its beak, or perhaps she is herself the dove, the dove who is flying above the sponge, while above her head someone holding a lyre, surely Apollo, soars by on a dolphin. In the far distance are the masts of the Kalymnos harbour but these are tiny, peripheral and the mystery of the sponge which, as Kostas said, is giving birth to the island, is taking place at sea and radiating into the sky. The mood is serene, even ecstatic, and the entire painting is suffused with a light flooding from the great sponge at the centre as though the object of desire that people would risk their lives to bring home had transcended its materiality as commodity to become a radiant image of the precious, a sort of Grail. It was something I'd intuited but this was the only time I ever saw it represented: the living sponge at the heart which powered the islands for centuries, and is now almost vanished.

Across the room a naked diver with the athletic limbs, sculpted features, and curly hair and beard of a Greek god stood forever gazing at a magically illuminated underwater world alive with sponges, seaweeds, and shipwrecked treasure. Over his groin he held the white *skandalopetra*, while the rope that ties it to the boat was a fine line of paint reaching up across the canvas, into the blue above. In another painting a diver wearing the *skafandro* is harvesting sponges with a knife from an ocean floor alive with fish, starfish, seaweed. And in the last picture a sponge caique sails happily in a radiant blue sea, white sail aloft in a blue sky dappled with clouds, with the Greek flag flying, blue and white.

Held silent in the midst of this luminous celebration, I realised how little I knew about sponges or the people who dived for them. The pain and terror and tragedy of the industry that I'd learnt about from the work of Russell Bernard and others were one story, and it had confirmed my understanding that the ruthless pursuit of short-term gain has little concern for environmental or social justice. But what about the joy of the dive, the mythic power? The paintings called up a radiant world inside of this one: invisible until you make the voyage.

'These pictures are very wonderful,' I said to the man who had spoken to us in English from the small green table where he was sitting outside. 'You see, I'm interested in the stories of sponge diving. I'm trying to write something about sponges.'

I didn't know what his English was like, so I found myself gesturing with my hands, making the shape of a sponge about the size of a large ostrich egg.

'No, no,' he said firmly. 'That is not a sponge! This is a sponge.'

And he made a shape in the air like a great round cheese.

'Okay, I understand.'

We all laughed.

'Come and sit,' he said.

'Thank you.'

We explained that our ferry would arrive in a few minutes, so we couldn't stay long. But the moment was too rare to lose.

Sitting together at the little green table, we spoke about the paintings and about the sponge at the heart of Kalymnos. The other man was a weathered old diver who nodded at us but let our new friend do the talking. He told us he'd written a long poem about it all, and when we showed interest he called for a copy from inside the shop. A woman came out with a meticulously produced volume of poetry. It was written in Greek of course.

'It looks beautiful. Where could I buy one?'

‘No, not buy,’ he said. ‘I give it to you.’

He explained that the first poem in the book was the one about the sponge. I said I’d ask someone to translate it for us and send him a copy. He was glad.

‘Have some ouzo!’ he said.

We really had to leave soon, but who cared. The woman brought out a glass for us to share, and a plate of olives, tomatoes, kouloures. It was our first ouzo, and he said to sip it.

‘You are so kind. Thank you.’

When I told him Michael had written a poem about the Aegean on Mother’s Day while we made the ferry crossing, he wanted to read it.

But then he explained, ‘You see, in English I can understand, but *I can’t hear the music*. So I need to read it in Greek.’

‘Sure. It’s all in the music, isn’t it?’

We said we’d try to get him a translation, and he told us his name: Thodoris.

‘It means Gift from God.’

‘I think you are our gift from God,’ I said.

He smiled, and we kissed and said goodbye. It was time for the ferry. As Thodoris remained sitting in his chair, I realised that he had only one leg.

### 3.

In performances of the *Mechanikos*, the lyrical capacity to turn extreme suffering and disability into a dance gives a richer and more nuanced interpretation to the Kalymnian reputation for toughness than a simple notion of bravado or physical endurance. And once I was able to read it, the fifteen-page poem ‘Ppoink’ by Thodoris Eleftherio had some of the same quality. I’d sent a scan to my friend the poet and sociologist Ari Sitas, and soon a generous email came back with his translation.

Ppoink, ppoink, ppoink... There’s a ball bouncing from one stanza of the poem to the next, and as the sound of it keeps punctuating the story of the island’s history, Thodoris asks a question that doesn’t go away either: ‘How did we end up like this?’ How did I end up aimlessly kicking a plastic ball around by myself under a streetlight at Kalymnos harbour? How did the island lose its ancient and lucrative sponge fleet, and become instead a place visited only by cruise boats, tourist boats, and ferries, ‘full of curious eyes / And strange languages / they want to take photos of us’? How did a tough and energetic community become reduced to a spectacle for the globalised gaze?<sup>11</sup>

Michael and I were part of it all, of course. Our photographs show Thodoris seated beside me outside the sponge-diving kafenia: wooden chairs with grass seats, little wooden table painted green, white tablecloth printed with a map of the island, old stone wall hung with a big wooden fish painted red and blue, a bottle of water on the table, Coke ads on the drinks fridge. The white-haired old diver sharing the table with us is looking away, but Thodoris has his arm around my shoulder, cloth cap and bearded.

I realised he’d wanted me to read the poem because it puts sponge-diving at the heart of the island’s story: the ‘great danger, sacrifice and honesty’ of the naked divers’ quest for the black sponge, the maddened shark who head-butted the caique for a long long time after the grandfather of the man we met escaped his jaws (afterwards he was known as the *Fisheaten*), the captains and the people who could afford high quality ouzo and became rich from the invention of the *skafandro*... The new technology was supposed to be an improvement, Thodoris writes, but all the safety rules were unknown or breached. Part of this was ignorance, but it was also a story of pain and injustice in which unscrupulous captains forced men to dive in all conditions. Yet having said this, he also makes a point of noting that some captains were deeply caring.

As for the divers, he is awed by their epic struggles and imagines the extraordinary qualities of mind and body that their work demanded:

To dive  
 In a peculiar world of weight  
 Of power  
 Of speed  
 With a sense of drunkenness  
 Of fear  
 Of arrogance  
 Of untold power.

The poem honours the lyrical power of their lives and the misery their deaths left behind. Thodoris says he hopes through his words to save the lithe body of the diver from oblivion, and to admire the beauty of the island's luckless men.

What he does not do in the poem is to answer the question asked near the beginning. How did we end up like this? How did the divers' craft become so diminished? Since forever it had been the island's core pursuit and the defining source of its wealth, but now, as Aphrodite explained to us at the sponge factory, only five or six sponge boats still go out to sea. The question is not easily answered. Or else perhaps, the answer – entangled as it is with over-fishing of the sponge beds that increased so dramatically from the 1860s after the appearance of the *skafandro*, the departure of many spongers to Florida in the early 20th century, an exodus which escalated after the Italian Occupation in 1912, the mid-century appearance of the synthetic sponge, the impact of the massive sponge death that took place in 1986, and the growing and seemingly inexorable currents of international trade – is painful to face.

Instead, having celebrated the divers and retold the tragic tale of lives sacrificed for profit in the name of an ancient heroism, in the last lines of the poem Thodoris remarks that there are very few seamen left who can sit sipping coffee and telling stories that recall past glories. These days, he writes, the community is drowned by new problems. In such a condition, 'The world is fast and loud / And full of shiny modern things / Cars and new machines'. The island fills up with tourists, and with the fraternity of serious rock climbers who in recent years have begun to arrive equipped with special shoes and colourful kit to conquer its cliffs, sprawling out like ants across the rocks. If Russell's research on Kalymnos in the 1960s recorded the tenuous life of a traditional community on the cusp of irreversible change, Thodoris' poem is a quiet witness to the contemporary space the island has since become. The tone is sad, even elegiac. But not entirely so.

Right from the curious title, 'Ppoink', there's a hint of something more. Over the next fifteen pages, the story of the Sponge Diving Island keeps being interrupted (or accompanied? disrupted?) by the word 'ppoink', which is the sound of the ball the speaker is bouncing against the stone wall of the quay. There's a listlessness about this solitary bouncing, a sort of ennui, but it does set up a rhythm and it's playful and ironic. Even more so since the ball is a plastic planet Earth! This means that the rhythmic repetition of this incessant ppoink ppoink lifts the poem out of simply mourning the loss of the old ways into something more present and alert.

'Time has passed on,' Thodoris writes towards the end, and the primordial morning is now peopled with modern humans:

And I can see the rose-fingered dawn  
 And a ship coming in to dock  
 Pouring out tourists  
 Tourists and climbers.

Bitterness, cynicism, despair, anger... these could be obvious responses to the brutal abuse of young men in the name of company profit, or the more recent occupations of the island by foreigners. But the point of view towards the end of the poem is more subtle.



Since tourists and climbers have begun visiting Kalymnos, Thodoris writes, 'Laughter and joy has returned!' It's an ironic moment. Whose joy? At whose cost? But still, it acknowledges the presence of joy. And though the speaker himself, having told as much of the story as he wishes to share, says he's tired and off to bed, his tale of bewilderment and tragedy and loss in the poem is presented not as melodrama, but as a calm and resilient witness to change.

It was an attitude that I'd glimpsed in Thodoris himself. When we visited the island two years later our friend had just passed away. But in the photographs we took that morning, he faces the camera with a gentle mixture of irony and friendliness. And then there were his final words as we set off for the ferry, and he remained seated because of the leg.

'Life goes on,' he said, with a nod. 'That is the beauty.'

## ENDNOTES

1. Thanks, as always, to Michael Cope for many journeys and conversations, and for being my first reader. And thank you to Russel Bernard for much assistance, to our friends on Kalymnos for some extraordinary meetings, and to Ari Sitas for the generous work of translation.
2. Bernard, H. Russell. 1976. 'Introductory Remarks on the Ethnography of the Islands.' *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 268: 302.
3. Bernard 1976: 303.
4. Bernard, H. Russell. 1967. 'Kalymnian Sponge Diving'. *Human Biology* 39(2): 122.
5. Bernard 1967: 122.
6. Bernard 1967: 126
7. Bernard 1967: 129.
8. Kalafatas, Michael. 2003. *The Bellstone: The Greek Sponge Divers of the Aegean*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press: 53.
9. Bernard 1976: 304.
10. Vassiliadis, Vassilis. 2003. *The Sponge Diver's Dance*. <https://vimeo.com/48480128>
11. Eleftherio, Thodoris. 2016. 'Ppoink.' Trans. Ari Sitas. Athens: Iolkos Publications: 11-25.  
This and all subsequent quotations from 'Ppoink' are from the translation by Ari Sitas.