Escaping the Polarising Gaze – Gambling Spaces in Cyprus

Julie Scott*

Abstract

Fifty years of Cypriot independence have been marked by the progressive spatial segregation of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. In public discourse, the island's spaces are discussed largely in terms of the legitimisation of claims to ethno-national territory, whilst the discursive and non-discursive spaces opened up for officially sanctioned encounter, collaboration and co-existence, remain subject to the polarising scrutiny of the public sphere. In this paper I briefly discuss another kind of space to which I was alerted in the course of carrying out research on gambling in the north over the past 15 years. Gambling in coffee shops and at cockfights has traditionally been both semi-clandestine and tolerated, forming a kind of 'third space' in which people recalled Greek and Turkish Cypriots gambling together. The paper considers the range of gambling spaces and their potential as zones of indeterminacy and agency to counter the polarising tendencies of the Cypriot public sphere.

Keywords: gambling; indeterminacy; stereotypes; reciprocity; cultural intimacy; gender; class

The 50 years following independence in Cyprus have seen the progressive spatial segregation of its Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities. Separated, since 1974, by the Green Line, and, before that, by the more fragmented and informal, but nevertheless militarised, boundaries and checkpoints which criss-crossed Cyprus during the 1960s and 70s (cf Thubron, 1986) we have become used to hearing Greek and Turkish Cypriot relations discussed primarily in terms of the contested legitimacy of competing states. Until the relaxation of restrictions in 2003, contact on the island itself – other than on the British sovereign bases, which have remained in place, and have continued, since independence, to employ both Greek and Turkish Cypriots – has been largely limited to a few highly regulated sites of officially sanctioned encounter, collaboration and co-existence. These have included the bi-communal and conflict resolution groups meeting in Ledra Palace and other points in the buffer zone; and the mixed village of Pyla, where Greek and Turkish

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Cypriots have continued to go about their daily lives within a shared village space, in the process confirming, or, alternatively, confounding, a range of expectations concerning the ability of Cypriots to get along together. For, as Papadakis (1997) has argued, the anomalous status of Pyla, which came about due to its location bordering the British sovereign base area of Dhekelia, has placed the village and its inhabitants under intense scrutiny, transforming the intimate spaces of the village into analogues of competing ethno-national polities. This polarising gaze has continued to permeate moves towards the 'normalisation' of relations following accession of the Republic of Cyprus to EU membership in 2004, ensuring that quotidian undertakings, from attempts to establish collaborative tourism ventures (Scott and Topcan, 2006), to individual decisions to cross or not to cross the Green Line (Dikomitis, 2005; Demetriou, 2007), take on a character which is both politically and symbolically highly charged.

It is in this context that the popularity amongst Greek Cypriots of gambling in casinos in the north should be addressed (cf Webster and Timothy, 2006; Rollins, nd). Demetriou (2007), for example, argues convincingly that reports of Greek Cypriots 'flocking' to the casinos and brothels of the north contributed much to the 'moralization of the practice of crossing' in the south (p. 998), permitting the state to reformulate the discourse of the border, and in so doing to reassert the presence and authority of the state, which the atmosphere of liminality and euphoria accompanying the initial opening up of the Green Line had appeared to challenge. There is another aspect to these gambling expeditions, however, which positions the state somewhat differently, and which is fraught with ambiguity. Gambling is one of those activities which, publicly at least, tends to provoke embarrassment, disapproval and denial, and as such falls squarely within the ambit of what Herzfeld (1997) has labelled 'cultural intimacy'. He uses this term to refer to those aspects of lived experience which are deemed to detract from the dignity of the public image promoted by the nation state, but which form a kind of secret insider knowledge which is the basis for a shared identity and sense of solidarity amongst its citizens. In this sense, it simultaneously undermines, and underpins, more formal versions of national identity and belonging. Cultural intimacy, in contrast to official ideology, argues Herzfeld, is characterised by its lability and ambiguity. Unencumbered by the 'literalness' (p. 53) that characterises official discourses of the state, cultural intimacy revels in the creative spaces opened up through the emergence, distortion and slippage of contextually generated meaning. Thus contingency and indeterminacy are features of cultural intimacy in general, as of gambling more particularly, where uncertainty is not simply a matter of unpredictable stochastic processes, but arises from the unreadability and, ultimately, unknowability, of the intentions and capacities of others (Malaby, 2003). Moreover, the world of gambling is not that of the zero sum game – in contrast to the way in which 'the Cyprus problem' is frequently played out in the public arena. Cassidy's (2009) work on casinos and betting shops in London, for example, draws attention to the practice of gifting 'luck money'– evidence of the belief amongst regular gamblers that spreading the luck and the money around is the way to generate more of both.

In this short paper I should like briefly to consider the cultural intimacy of gambling spaces

and their creative potential to counter the polarising tendencies of the public sphere. The impetus for this approach came from research I conducted on gambling and casino tourism in Cyprus, prior to the relaxation of Green Line restrictions which saw large numbers of Greek Cypriots appear at the gaming tables in the north (c.f. Scott, 2001, 2003; Scott and Aşıkoğlu, 2001). Whilst carrying out that research, I was alerted to the persistence of long-established gambling traditions and behaviours in unregulated and semi-clandestine venues, as well as in the casinos themselves, and to accounts of gambling involving Greek and Turkish Cypriots in the course of which, informants insisted, much Turkish Cypriot land around Kyrenia was lost to Greek Cypriots in card games.[1] Even more interestingly, others subsequently vehemently denied that such 'mixed' gambling could ever have taken place. Many Turkish Cypriots I spoke to, aged in their forties and fifties, remembered cockfights in Larnaca before 1974, which took place around the back of St. Lazarus' Church, and featured both Greek and Turkish Cypriot participants. And in a recent thesis exploring attachment to place among Greek and Turkish Cypriot refugees, Dikomitis (2009) recounts an event reported to her by Greek Cypriot friends:

> 'At the funeral of a Greek Cypriot man there appeared four bodybuilder-like men in black suits who insisted on carrying the coffin. Nobody knew who these men were, not even his close relatives. It turned out that these men were bouncers in a Turkish Cypriot casino and they wanted to pay their last respects to their good client!' (Dikomitis, 2009, p. 157).

I shall return later to the possible constructions placed on these gambling stories, and others like them. Drawing largely on my research in the north of Cyprus, and recent ethnographic work on gambling and contingency more generally,[2] my aim in what follows is to contextualise such stories within the discursive space of gambling where, I suggest, complex, cross-cutting and transgressive gender, class, and ethno-national relations have traditionally been articulated and expressed. In considering their significance to Cyprus 50 years after independence, my conclusions are, as befits the subject matter, speculative.

Gambling and the State

In both parts of the island, gambling has been the object of regulatory activity, which has had the effect of sanctioning certain types of gambling in particular licensed locales, whilst criminalising

1 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this paper for bringing to my attention a recent case of the rumoured loss of a popular Greek Cypriot-owned restaurant on the gaming tables of the north. Whilst 'historic' cases of pre-1974 gambling debts have largely retrospective significance in terms of what they say about the remembered past of ethnic and property relations on the island, current cases can be expected to play more directly into contemporary post-Annan Plan political discourses of sovereignty and ethno-national territory. In the case referred to, the debt was reportedly repaid from within the Greek Cypriot community.

2 For example, new work by ethnographic researchers in this field presented at the conference *Calculated Risks: New Perspectives on Gambling*, at Goldsmiths College, University of London 17-18 September 2009.

unregulated gambling in unlicensed venues. This can produce bizarre effects. In November 2009, the UK's *Daily Mail* newspaper reported the arrest in Limassol of forty-two 'elderly women' for playing cards for small stakes in a private house (Theodoulou, 2009). Police in the north routinely confiscate the tables and chairs of coffee shops where illegal gambling has been reported (Scott, 2003). Whilst the state lottery, horse-racing and football betting are the only licensed forms of gambling in the south,[3] the north has, additionally, licensed upwards of 30 live gaming casinos, mostly attached to the larger hotels and dedicated resorts. State involvement in gambling has been accompanied by its incorporation into the discourse of 'the Cyprus problem': a recent review of the advisability of opening casinos in the south, commissioned by the Commerce Ministry, argued strongly for the 'repatriation' of Greek Cypriot gamblers within a gambling regime authorised and legitimised by the state (Theodoulou, 2006);[4] whilst the development of the casino sector in the north is heavily imprinted by its post-colonial history and dependent relationship on Turkey (Scott, 2001), and serves further to reinforce the ambivalence towards state institutions, which, as Navaro-Yashin (2006) has argued, runs through Turkish Cypriot society. The onward march of the state-regulated gambling industry brings with it a relentless squeeze on the intimate spaces of 'traditional' gambling: the coffee shops, the private clubs and houses, the cockfighting pits – which, nevertheless, continue to adapt and survive in the new conditions by becoming increasingly clandestine and intimate. Yet, as Herzfeld (1997) reminds us, it would be a mistake to overestimate the capacity of 'the state' to proceed as a coherent unitary actor. Throughout the period of my research, Turkish Cypriots were technically barred from entering or gambling on casino premises; and yet this same period saw them become established as fashionable 'modern' leisure venues for Turkish Cypriots in groups and couples (Scott, 2005). In numerous establishments, I was told, the management would be informed in advance of impending raids, so that any Turkish Cypriots could be ushered out of a back door; whilst others counted off-duty police officers among their regular clients. Meanwhile, in the village setting, where technically illegal card games and other forms of gambling continue in unlicensed informal venues, gamblers, coffee-shop owners and off-duty policy officers strive to maintain a delicate balance between the conflicting calls of duty and village sociality. Rather than fall into one of two oppositional categories, as the terminology of licensing would suggest, gambling spaces could be said to occupy positions along a continuum, framed by the large, externally operated leisure casinos at one extreme, and the village coffee shops at the other. Indeed, the manager of one such large modern casino, whom I interviewed, disparagingly dismissed the smaller, locally owned licensed casinos as 'coffee shops'. What this

3 In addition, betting shops offer on-line 'casino' gambling, operated from outside the country. I am grateful to the anonymous journal reviewers for reminding me of this development.

4 Thus I would argue that the discourse of the state's control of gambling is framed rather differently in respect of Greek Cypriots gambling in the north, compared with the issue of off-shore operated internet gambling. (See note 3 above.)

manager had in mind were the casinos operated by an older generation of Turkish Cypriot owner-manager, whose venues retain a strong flavour of the private gambling clubs they had operated in London's Mayfair and Soho before the advent of the 1968 Gambling Act.[5]

Unregulated Gambling Spaces

Ten years ago, aficionados of cockfighting in the north were bewailing the combined effects of the animal rights lobby and the steady emigration of the Cypriot gypsy population on the availability of fighting birds and the ability to hold events. My own visit to a village cockfight – accompanied by the sister of a cockfighting enthusiast of the village, and her nine-year old daughter – reflected both the changes and continuities of the passing years: the event was marked by heightened secrecy and security, but also by its informality and sociability. Informed of the time and location at only the last minute, we joined an otherwise exclusively male crowd in a large hangar-type construction full of light and noise, set up behind a house in the centre of the village, and were greeted by a number of the men and young boys present, who knew my friend's family, and asked why I had not brought along my three-year old son, whom my friend had minded during the day. Seated on tiered wooden benches arranged around the ring, and sipping tea, beer and soft drinks, we watched as men preened and fluffed up the birds in the ring, and listened to the banter from the crowd, as combatants were matched up, odds offered, and side-bets entered into by individual pairs of men around the ring. Meanwhile sentinels, stationed with mobile phones on the road leading in and out of the village, kept watch for signs of unwelcome police presence.

In fact, much of the action around cockfighting occurs elsewhere, before or after the actual bouts, in people's homes and back gardens where the breeding, purchasing, and care of the birds, takes place. In this, as in other types of gambling, particularly in unregulated venues, cockfighting is a highly gendered activity. Whilst women raise chickens for family consumption and take care of the egg-laying birds, men care for the fighting birds, and, women joked, would spend hours either alone with their birds, or visiting other aficionados, discussing and experimenting with the best regime of food and vitamin supplements, breeding future fighters, or caring for injured birds. Appearance at the cockfight marks the brief public display of competitive masculinity by both the birds and their owners. Each individual bout, on the occasion I witnessed, was short, and ended before any serious injury could be inflicted. Unlike the Balinese cockfight, famously analysed by Geertz (1973), the birds in Cyprus are not equipped with spurs, and the aim is not to kill or cause serious damage. Rather, male bonding and competition, as evidenced in the matching of combatants, the acceptance or rejection of challengers, the tending of injured birds, and in the betting and banter which takes place during the fight, is the name of the game.

The cockfight creates a temporary space which, like the pre-1974 cockfights remembered by

5 For a vivid account of one such club, see Ackers, 1968.

my informants, is at the heart of the village, and simultaneously hidden away; visible and invisible, it creates a space apart, whilst at the same time it is embedded in the social relations which surround it. These are features it shares in common with other unregulated venues, such as the coffee shops where card players gather. These features create the conditions for a particular type of knowledge and reciprocity, which are the stuff of cultural intimacy. They arise in part from the dynamics of play itself; from the shared suspension of conventional temporality, in games which may go on for hours or days; and from the willingness of the players to take a risk; in particular, to engage with the unknowability of others in games such as poker, where '... the game behind the game ... is one of strategic concealment and disclosure as one attempts to give others an inscrutable posture while simultaneously making one's own guesses about other players' situations' (Malaby, 2003, p. 86).[6] The bounded spaces of gambling simultaneously constitute highly creative spaces for the exercise of agency, the situation of willed indeterminacy opening up room for negotiation and manoeuvre to a degree scarcely realisable in daily life. But these bounded gambling spaces are also anchored in a wider social world, through which they are also made possible and sustained.

Reference has already been made to the significance of gender in the moral and symbolic economy of gambling. Class, too, has a role to play in the articulation of gambling relations. The town-based gentlemen's clubs, for example, form self-selecting socially homogenous gambling groups where approximate parity of income establishes the conditions for reciprocity within the group. In contrast, reciprocity in the democratic atmosphere of the village coffee shops, where men of all classes play together, is assured by reference to wider village relations. The self-interest of the coffee shop owner in encouraging play to go on in order to increase his takings from the rent of the tables, is tempered by his consideration of public opinion in the village, and the social pressures which can be brought to bear on him through female and kinship networks, when a man spends too much time or money, or runs up excessive gambling debts. Equally, social pressure and the threat of local gossip are effective in ensuring that gamblers' debts are paid. Gambling does not take place within a separate moral universe, but within a framework of structural reciprocity, which is held in place by the balancing of social obligations in a wider context – even if, as sometimes happens, these obligations have to be met by family or kin, rather than by the gambler himself.[7]

As Malaby's (2003) careful ethnography of gambling locales in the Cretan town of Chania illustrates, sums of money won or lost are but secondary considerations in the elaboration and performance of masculine prowess in these all-male games. But what is 'real' masculinity, and how is it most effectively expressed? The content of these categories is far from clear or fixed. I have listened to stories of village coffee shop card games that have gone on for days, and been struck by

6 As Malaby observes, games in which unpredictability derives primarily from social indeterminacy, tend to be characterised by a higher degree of social intimacy than those where the emphasis is on 'the gambler's luck', as the games in casinos tend to be.

7 Or herself. The articulation of class with gender works rather differently for women than men. Cf Scott, 2003.

the ambivalence evidenced in the narrator's account. Part admiration at the heroic recklessness and disregard for sleep, comfort or domestic concerns, and part condemnation of their irresponsibility and lack of self-control, this equivocality reflects a tension at the heart of what it means to be a man – also aptly expressed in the story of Şevket Kısmet, published as part of a series *İçimizden Biri* – 'one of us' (literally: one from inside us) – in the newspaper *Kıbrıs* in July 1998. This is the tale of a gambling man going to the dogs, who is saved by the love and restraint exercised by his wife. It is notable both for the strong message about gender roles, and for the nostalgia which informs the story of the man of the people who, we are told, embodies *real* Cypriotness, in the form of a reckless but big-hearted masculinity typical of the chaotic, cosmopolitan port of Limassol where he grew up, a world lost in both time and space. At the same time, the article also suggests, this figure of the gambler is contradictory. It has a darker side, associated with 'cultural backwardness', addictive behaviour, and domestic violence, which is 'out of place' in modern Cypriot society.

Stereotypes, Reciprocity, and Contingent Identity

When Cypriots began to pour across the Green Line in 2003-2004 to visit the villages, houses and property left behind decades previously, fears that the re-opening of old wounds would lead to renewed tension and conflict proved to be unfounded. Neither, however, following the initial euphoria, did the opportunities for encounter radically advance the desire for reconciliation. In important recent ethnographic research with Greek and Turkish Cypriot refugees, Dikomitis (2009) explored the nature of the longing for home amongst Greek Cypriot former inhabitants of the village of *Larnakas tis Lapithou* and the Turkish Cypriots now living in *Kozan*, as the village is known to them. The visits of the former inhabitants, returning after decades of dreaming of an idealised village, produced profoundly ambiguous feelings in both the *Larnatsjiotes* and the *Kozanlılar*. In most cases, the interest of the *Larnatsjiotes* was in renewing their links with buildings, landmarks, and sacred spaces, and the remembered social relationships they embodied, rather than negotiating their difficult feelings towards those currently occupying their properties, who themselves had been similarly uprooted from villages in the Paphos region. Significantly, Dikomitis found that the visits reinforced rather than dispelled the stereotypes which each held of the other. Gestures towards establishing relations of reciprocity – through small acts of kindness, consideration or hospitality – continued to be filtered, in subsequent discussion, through persistent stereotypes which, ultimately, were expressive of a certainty that 'the other' is a known quantity and that, moreover, 'they' lack some essential quality possessed by 'us' (Herzfeld, 1997). The sense of 'damaged reciprocity' implicit in these judgments is indicative, not of 'structural nostalgia' for a vanished time of shared cultural intimacy *(ibid);* but rather, of the persistence of belief in the fundamental incommensurability of the losses that have been endured (Jackson, 2005).[8]

8 'Another way of making this point is to say that all exchange involves a continual struggle to give, claim or redistribute some scarce and elusive existential good – such as recognition, love, humanity, happiness, voice, power,

I should like to suggest here that anecdotes about Greek and Turkish Cypriot gambling offer a kind of heterotopic alternative to the experience of damaged reciprocity evidenced by such visits. Gambling anecdotes themselves are recognition of shared cultural intimacy – just as their denial amounts to a repudiation of the same. The stories are double-edged. I first heard about joint gambling in relation to land and property losses, a sensitive topic which plays into ethno-national narratives of grievance and victimhood, for example, in the case of Turkish Cypriot-owned land lost as a result of violent conflict, or to more economically powerful Greek Cypriot interests during the 1960s and 70s. Yet attitudes in the case of land said to be lost as a result of gambling seemed more ambiguous. One possible reason for this is the acknowledgement of contingency in matters relating to gambling. With its emphasis on uncertainty, individual agency and performance, the blame for gambling outcomes is not so easily apportioned.[9] This ambiguity is further reinforced by the social context in which gambling took place, that is, in the spaces of social intimacy outlined earlier – semi-public and semi-private, in clubs, coffee shops and private homes. Both factors suggest a situation in which gender and class could be more salient boundary markers than ethno-national identity, and it is thus not surprising that card parties were a favoured social pastime amongst Greek and Turkish Cypriot couples of the island's elite. In this connection, friends drew my attention to the figure of Dr İhsan Ali (1904-1978), a medical practitioner and one of the leaders of the Turkish Cypriot community in the Paphos region, who was also known to enjoy gambling at cards with Greek and Turkish Cypriot friends. An active public figure in sports and cultural organisations as well as in national politics, Dr Ali steadfastly opposed separatist politics and took a number of controversial stands, which earned him the hostility of extremist nationalists on both sides (Irkad, nd). When he accepted the post of Special Political Advisor to President Makarios in 1964, 'Dr Ali was classed as a traitor by his own nationals and seen as peculiar by the Greek Cypriots' (Kouzali, 2009). 'His efforts', wrote his nephew Özdemir Özgür 'were all directed towards achieving harmonious, friendly relations between the communities in Cyprus' (*In Memory of Dr Ihsan Ali,* 1995).

Whilst Dr Ali remains a controversial figure, efforts are being made to prompt a public re-evaluation of his work, his contribution to conciliation, and his legacy for a future united Cyprus. According to a tribute recently published on the website of a Paralimni-based firm of lawyers, 'It was very hard for Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots *at the time* to understand Dr İhsan Ali's morals and visions' (Kouzali, 2009) *(emphasis added).* The question I raise here is whether the

presence, honour or dignity – whose value is incalculable. And it is precisely this ambiguity that makes it impossible to reduce intersubjective reason to a form of logico-mathematical reason – for while the latter works with precise concepts abstracted from material, bodily and affective contexts, the logic of intersubjectivity never escapes the impress and imprecision of our lived relationships with others' (Jackson, 2005, p. 43).

9 Unless there are accusations of cheating, and even these are tempered by the circumstances and company in which such accusations arise. Cf Malaby, 2003. See also note 1, above.

values represented by Dr Ali in the early days of Cypriot independence were simply 'out of *time*' – in other words, ideas which required the passage of time and the growth of historical understanding in order to become widely accepted – or whether they were, more properly speaking, 'out of *place*' – that is, rooted in a mode of reciprocity and knowing which was not at home in the literalness and fixity of the formal public sphere, but rather in the social spaces of cultural intimacy, of which gambling and play form an important part.

Conclusion

Fifty years of independence have, despite raised hopes and false dawns, been characterised by growing polarisation on a number of levels. My aim, in this short paper, has been to draw attention to a space in Cypriot life which escapes the polarising gaze. In closing, I return to the story of the Greek Cypriot gambler's funeral, attended by the burly Turkish Cypriot casino 'bouncers' – an excellent gambling anecdote, which draws not only on the stereotypical figures of casino life, but also on the ways in which gambling can lead to surprises – good as well as bad – and the confounding of expectations. But I should also like to draw attention to the ways in which this anecdote is made, in the telling, to conform to certain other expectations, through the presumption, for example, of the instrumentality of the relations displayed – in other words, that the deceased is the *client* of the casino bouncers, rather than their *friend*. I suggest that gambling activity – whether in the unregulated spaces of past and present, or even in the present-day casinos of the north – constitutes a kind of 'third space' characterised by ambiguity, the embrace of indeterminacy, and shared cultural intimacy, which is not generally a feature of current relations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Might it also offer a functional alternative to the model of damaged reciprocity dominant in so many other areas of Cypriot life?

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