

The meaning of Apokries as celebrated in Greece

Greece's Carnival season, known as Apokries, is a period which traditionally begins ten weeks before Greek Orthodox Easter and culminates on the weekend before 'Clean Monday', (Ash Monday) – when carnival celebrations reach their climax. Lent started on Wednesday, March 1, 2017 this year, and ends on Saturday, April 15th 2017, a period of 40 days.

The word Αποκριά or Απόκρεω (Apokria) literally means 'without meat' and the word carnival comes from the Latin 'carnem levare' meaning 'without meat'. The period of 'carnivale' is a preparation to fast during the period of Lent which follows, but the origins of this revelry can be traced to Greek paganism. The festival began centuries, if not millennia, ago. History is full of festivals associated with fertility symbols and rites. Some historians and archaeologists believe that fertility rites are one of the oldest forms of religious rites in Greece.

Apokries last for three weeks prior to Lent and covers twenty-two days and three Sundays.

First Sunday is the Sunday of the Prodigal son

Second Sunday is the Sunday of Small Carnival

Third Sunday is the Sunday of the Big Carnival (Shrovetide Sunday)

Or in Greek:

Κυριακή του Ασώτου

Κυριακή της Απόκρεω (μικρή αποκριά)

Κυριακή της Τυρινής (Μεγαλη

Αποκριά)

This is called the Triodio (Τριώδιο) The characteristic of Carnival is disguising and wearing costumes and masks that offer anonymity and freedom of expression. This festival dates to Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of wine, fun and fertility. Held in late February and early March the Dionysian festivals also celebrated the rebirth of nature marked by the beginning of Spring. In ancient times the celebrations were over a period of three days whereas today they are held over three weeks. In Athens, on the first day they would open the jars of the new wine and made libations to Dionysus, singing to thank the god for the wine and on this day the Athenians allowed their slaves to drink with them.

On the second day, there was a procession of entry to the city of Dionysus on a boat with wheels, on the boat there were people disguised as Satyrs teasing the people with profanities creating joy. Other Satyrs were dressed in animal skins or evergreen plants and one man aimed to look like a billy goat with a high propensity to sexuality; this male goat symbolised the god Dionysus who was 'married off' to the wife of the archon of the city in a 'sacred marriage'.

On the third day koliva (κόλυβα) were dedicated to the god Hermes, who accompanied the souls to the after-life and by doing this it was believed that the departed souls came back amongst the living on this day. But it was feared that dark

souls would come back from Hades so the people surrounded their sacred places with a red thread, thus preventing them from entering.

Patras organises the largest carnival held in Greece. Other prominent carnivals are held at Xanthi, Rethymno, and Tyrnavos.

In Athens people have masquerade parties and the goal is to dress up so as not to be recognised. People wander the streets dressed in masquerade garb, hitting strangers on the head with a club (naturally only a plastic club). Friends get together and knock on other friends' doors in dress-up and in this case as well as at a party one must guess who is hiding behind the dress-up and the mask.

In modern times Apokria ends on Clean Monday (Καθαρή Δευτέρα). On Clean Monday, the koulouma (κούλουμα) are held where everybody goes off to the countryside, eats Lenten food, and fly's kites.

Apokries is celebrated with great gusto on Kythera, as the photographs testify.

Apokries is one of the few Greek traditions that has not transplanted well in Australia; probably because the dates here are 6 months removed from Spring – coinciding with the beginning of the southern hemisphere Autumn.

Apokries in Kythera 2017



Photos courtesy of John Tzortzopoulos of Platea Amos