

The Modern Greek Tradition and Identity

The modern nation of Greece is a country that is uniquely homogenous in culture and ideology. Although some western peoples might scoff at what they see as a weak or immature democracy, much more pride is felt among Greeks than resentment for their nation. The Greeks are not a dominating force in the political spectrum, nor could they wield a military attack with any efficiency, yet the Greek people have survived both subjugation under foreign rule and periods of civil unrest, only to emerge with the same vivacious love of all things Greek. The prevalence of Greece as a culturally unified nation and the persistence of an ancient language despite periods of foreign rule contribute to the notion of Greek identity, as does the practice of a uniquely Greek religion (Greek Orthodoxy). The question remains, however, whether the people of Greece will continue to hold strong to their heritage in increasingly modern times. Mrs. Anna Guatieri was born in Greece in 1958, and has witnessed an immense demographic shift towards modernization and urbanization—much more so than her contemporaries in much of Western Europe and the USA. After living in Greece for thirty-two years, Anna left to marry and start a family. She may be far from Greece, but, as with most Greeks, she maintains a strong sense of family and kinship with her relatives across the globe, and she certainly displays ideas and attitudes that contribute in no small part to her Greek identity. For one reason or another, as exemplified in Anna, Greek culture seems to be surviving in the face of urban change.

Anna Guatieri grew up on a small island of 200 people in the Aegean Sea off the eastern coast of Greece among the Cyclades islands. Having grown up in the 1960's, Anna has borne witness to a shift in Greek culture that is tied inextricably to the rapid modernization experienced in

many parts of the world in the latter half of the twentieth century. In an interview on March 18, 2004, Anna graciously described her childhood on the island of Kea. She is the daughter of a fisherman, and the youngest of seven children. She said with a smile that her children love to hear the stories of her childhood. They have a hard time comprehending what it must have been like to live in a village without cars, telephones, or electricity. Although it is evident that she enjoys looking back on her childhood, or at least relaying her stories to others, Anna did not romanticize her rural island life. She described the dramatic shift that she has seen in the nature of childhood and duty within the span of her lifetime, although she is only forty-six years old. “For me,” she explained, “If you ask if I want to be a kid again, I say no. It was a hard life.”^{1[1]}

In 1960 per capita income in Greece was just US \$500, but according to Anna, money was not very important.^{2[2]} Her family got by eating fish that her father caught and trading fish in the village for other commodities like vegetables and flour. Although Anna and her siblings attended both primary school and high school on the island, they also contributed to their family’s income from a very young age. During the summers the children delivered ice from ships at the island’s port to Kea’s seasonal tourists to use in their ice chests. Because tourism, a major industry in Greece, brought visitors mainly in the summer months, Anna and her siblings were able to attend school the rest of the year. As Anna recalled, in school they were given “American yellow cheese... powdered milk, and chocolate” as part of the aid received from the US during the post war period.^{3[3]} Between 1947 and 1966 Greece received approximately \$1.9

1[1] Anna Guatieri, interview by the author. 18 March 2004.

2[2] Library of Congress Country Studies. “Greece: Chapter 3. The Economy.” Julia Rogers Library. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>.

3[3] Guatieri.

billion dollars in economic and military aid.^{4[4]} In addition to the food the schools received, Anna recounted that they were given American prom dresses, which they would make into two or more smaller dresses for the girls. Indeed, while she lived in Kea, Anna was not afforded the luxuries that her children enjoy today. She was in for quite the shock when she moved to Athens at the age of sixteen and experienced the rapid modernization and urbanization not only of her life, but also of her whole country.

When Anna was a teenager her family moved to Athens so that she and her siblings could attend university. Anna described the difficulties of being thrust into an urban setting after living in Kea: “Life was harder [in Athens], because you go from 200 people to 5 million people... You’re lost... We were scared to go out the door. All these cars, all this noise, all these people.”^{5[5]} Anna was not alone in her arrival and subsequent alienation in Athens. Between 1951 and 1981 the population of Athens more than doubled.^{6[6]} As the Greek population urbanized, thousands migrated to Athens and Thessaloniki. Anna rightly noted that the massive movement that began in 1946 after Greece’s Civil War has reversed to a small degree since 1975.^{7[7]} She attributed the change to the fact that there are now more universities outside of Athens and because people have realized that the city is not the place for everyone. Despite the return of many Greeks to more rural areas, today approximately one third of Greece’s population lives in and around Athens, due in part to the influx of refugees into the country in the last

^{4[4]} Barbara Jelavich. *History of the Balkans: Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 407.

^{5[5]} Guatieri.

^{6[6]} Library of Congress Country Studies. “Greece: Chapter 2. Society and Its Environment.” Julia Rogers Library. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>.

^{7[7]} Jelavich, 437.

several decades.^{8[8]} Rapid industrialization and poor planning have led to air and water quality crises as well as to problems with land usage.^{9[9]} Anna described the transition she has witnessed in Athens: “Athens used to be a beautiful city. It was built [to hold] a million people—not five million...The city is packed.”^{10[10]}

It is important to note that although the city was crowded, the sharp rise in urban population was not accompanied by an equally dramatic rise in crime.^{11[11]} W. H. McNeill, who coined the term ‘metamorphosis’ to describe the demographic changes in distribution that occurred, attributed this phenomenon to the close-knit relationships among families.^{12[12]} As Keith R. Legg asserts in his book *Politics in Modern Greece*, for Greeks “membership in a family is superior to that in any other group.”^{13[13]} Anna attested to the close nature of Greek families in her interview. She explained that in general, families do not allow their children to be on their own unless they’re “safe or married.”^{14[14]} When Anna attended university in Athens, her father found a new job in the city, and her whole family migrated to the city in order to support her. In Greek society today, the family structure still prevails as the most influential element in a

^{8[8]} “Greece: Chapter 2”

^{9[9]} Ibid.

^{10[10]} Guatieri.

^{11[11]} John S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis. *Greece: The Modern Sequel From 1831 to the Present* (London:

Hurst and Company, 2002), 156.

^{12[12]} Ibid.

^{13[13]} Keith R. Legg. *Politics in Modern Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 250.

^{14[14]} Guatieri.

person's socialization—more important than schooling, mass media, and even the Church. 15[15]
For this reason, the majority of Greece's businesses are small and family-run.

Pride in one's family is an essential Greek trait that ties in closely with a deep pride in one's culture and history. Doctor Michael Bakakaoukas is a professor at the University of Piraeus. In his essay "The Origin of European Nationalism: Modern Greek National Identity," he writes: "The modern Greek nation is not an entirely modern formation, for [unlike other countries that are similarly governed] it is based on much older cultural groups. 16[16] The Greek national identity remains especially strong due to its homogenous population, ninety-eight percent of which are of Greek descent. 17[17] There are other aspects of Greek culture that contribute substantially to the Greek identity, not the least of which is the Church of Greece, or the Greek Orthodox Church. Today, ninety-seven percent of Greeks are Greek Orthodox, including Anna and her children. 18[18] Her boys are altar servers at the church down the road from her house in Keene, New Hampshire. She commented that families are less strict about church attendance than they were when she was young, but affirmed nonetheless that Greeks are serious about their religion—in many cases even as devout as their Muslim neighbors. 19[19]

15[15] Legg, 250.

16[16] Michael Bakakaoukas. "The Origin of European Nationalism: Modern Greek National Identity." Julia Rogers

Library. <http://radicalacademy.com/studentrefpolitics22mb.htm>.

17[17] Library of Congress Country Studies. "Greece: Ethnic Minorities." Julia Rogers Library. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>.

18[18] "Greece: Chapter 2"

19[19] Guatieri.

Ironically, it was the nature of Ottoman rule in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that allowed the Greek Orthodox Church to form. The millet system in the Ottoman Empire gave the Greek Patriarchate administrative authority over Christian subjects (of the Eastern Orthodox Church) in the Balkans.²⁰[20] The fact that Church leaders have always been Greek gave a sense of “common ancestry” to the Greek population during that time.²¹[21] The Church of Greece was established in 1833 when the Bavarian regency declared its independence from the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which the authorities of the Byzantine Church did not recognize until 1850.²²[22] The circumstances of the split are important since Greece gained formal recognition as an independent nation in 1832. The establishment of the Greek Church after Greece’s departure from the Ottoman Empire implies that a nation should have a church of its own.²³[23] In that regard, the Greek government stepped up to meet the Church’s independence with subsequent subservience to the state.

Despite its independence from the Orthodox authority in Constantinople, the head of the Church of Greece now had to answer to the Minister of Education and Creeds.²⁴[24] The two institutions operated hand in hand without any considerable objections until the 1970’s, when the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) pushed for full separation of church and state.²⁵[25]

²⁰[20] Efterpe Fokas. “Greek Orthodoxy and European Identity: Church and State,” in *Contemporary Greece and Europe*, eds. Achilleas Mitsos and Elias Mossialos (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 285.

²¹[21] Ibid.

²²[22] Koliopoulos, 141.

²³[23] Fokas, 245.

²⁴[24] Koliopoulos, 142.

²⁵[25] Ibid, 150.

The ruling party, the more conservative New Democracy party, instead conceded to renaming the church an “established church” rather than a state institution, and Orthodox doctrine was changed from the official religion to the “creed of the majority.”^{26[26]} Regardless of the nominal change, the bond between church and state is still commonly perceived as a unique element of the national cultural identity that keeps the traditions of the church, and therefore the traditions of the country, alive.^{27[27]}

When Anna was asked in her interview whether she felt her heritage was more closely tied to that of Europe or that of the Middle East, she responded firmly that her ties are with Europe: “I mean, of course there’s high number in Athens with Middle East people live there. But they are not like us. Maybe they try to be like us, but they’re definitely different.”^{28[28]} Interestingly, Samuel Huntington, Director of the Olin Institute for Strategic Studies and Harvard professor contributed to a book published in 1993 called *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In this book he distinguishes Greek heritage as foreign to the course of European history, citing feudalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution as experiences not common to the Greeks.^{29[29]} Here Orthodoxy is qualified as “un-Western” and “un-European.”^{30[30]} Efterpe Fokas, author of the chapter “Greek Orthodoxy and European Identity” in the book *Contemporary Greece and*

^{26[26]} Ibid.

^{27[27]} Fokas, 284.

^{28[28]} Guatieri.

^{29[29]} Fokas, 281.

^{30[30]} Ibid.

Europe does not agree with clumping together such culturally diverse and vaguely defined groups as Slavs, Balkans, and Byzantines to represent a collective “other” for Western Europe. Neither does he pretend that any kind of allegiance exists between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic or Protestant Churches of the West.^{31[31]} Anna, on the other hand, did not mention any estrangement between Greece and Europe, and in fact seemed mildly insulted to have been asked whether she might have considered herself Middle Eastern.

Anna went on to recount the myth of the Turks, who were vilified as the ‘boogiemens’ that would whisk away small children who did not mind their parents. Anna said that parents would tell their children: “Eat your dinner or else the Turks will get you!”^{32[32]} She then added that of course she does not believe in those kinds of stories, since she’s been to Turkey three times. “But that was the way they grew up—[being told] that you’ve got an enemy out there.”^{33[33]} Although the ‘boogieman’ myth might seem harmless enough, the tensions between Greece and Turkey are real and reach back as far as the Ottoman Empire. While under Ottoman rule, the culture of Greece prevailed. The Greeks never truly recognized the Sultan as their ruler, since, as Christian subjects, they had no political rights.^{34[34]} The Greeks generally disliked the Turks because it was commonly believed that Turkey had no real wealth of its own and thrived only on the wealth of its subject peoples.^{35[35]}

^{31[31]} Ibid.

^{32[32]} Guatieri.

^{33[33]} Ibid.

^{34[34]} Koliopoulos, 228.

^{35[35]} Koliopoulos, 260.

Once independent from Ottoman rule, the distaste for Turkey and its people manifested itself in the realm of common belief. The estrangement between Greece and Turkey grew in the nineteenth century as the new nation established itself. The countries would not become enemies, however, until the Greco-Turkish war of 1919-1922 when Turkish forces put the ‘Great Idea’ of Greek Balkan expansion to an end in Ankara.^{36[36]} With the support of Europe, Greece has gained leverage over Turkey as the sole Balkan member of the EU, which Greece joined in 1981 when it was known as the European Community. Today, the conflict between Greece and Turkey over the island of Cyprus is the focal point of Greco-Turkish misgivings. The island has been split into Greek and Turkish parts since 1974 when Turkey invaded in response to a Greek Cypriot coup attempt.^{37[37]} As recently as 2001, Rauf Denktash, the Turkish Cypriot leader, believed that once Greeks possessed Cyprus they would be imposing a “Christian fortress around Turkey.”^{38[38]} For Greeks, Turks fulfilled the role of principal ‘others,’ and their images were villainized to suit Greek ideological and political needs.^{39[39]} The Greek perception of Turkey is now part of Greek identity and ideology, due in part to the reinforcement of stereotypes in the media and in the school system. The Turkish represent the barbaric, backward, and corrupt East from which Greece freed itself in 1830.^{40[40]}

^{36[36]} Ibid.

^{37[37]} “Island of Troubles; Cyprus.” *The Economist*, January 3, 2003, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>

^{38[38]} Ibid.

^{39[39]} Koliopoulos, 259.

^{40[40]} Ibid, 260.

Adding to Greece's alienation from its Balkan neighbors was the establishment of communist regimes in Albania, Romania, and Bulgaria while Greece remained a constitutional monarchy in the 1940's.⁴¹[41] Greece was isolated ideologically among nations that it neither understood nor cared to understand. Consequently, when Greece decided to augment its population in the face of a declining birthrate, they welcomed the immigration of non-Balkan Greeks from Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.⁴²[42] Bakakaoukas explains that genealogically based nations like Greece seek to expand the nation to include "ethnically kin populations that are beyond the current borders of the ethnic nation."⁴³[43] Some years later, when the Communist Block of Southeast Europe crumbled, hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants—half of whom came from Albania—emigrated to Greece seeking economic and political asylum. The attitude towards these new inhabitants would be very different from that towards the Greek emigrants who had been invited to return.

Anna expressed her concern about the number of refugees and illegal immigrants coming to Greece in recent years. She believes it is a big problem that needs to be curbed because of the rapid construction of poorly-built housing as well as the influx of a labor force that is much cheaper to employ than the native population. Other citizens share different concerns. Martha Floratou, a teacher in Athens, has noticed a decline in Greek students because parents are afraid that if they send their children to school with immigrants, their learning will be held back.⁴⁴[44]

⁴¹[41] Jelavich, 333.

⁴²[42] Koliopoulos, 208.

⁴³[43] Bakakaoukas.

⁴⁴[44] Karin Hope. "Survey-Greece: Swelling Numbers Change Attitudes: Immigration by Karin Hope: Parents are Becoming Concerned that the Rising Tide of Non-Greek Immigrants will Hold

The Eurobarometer survey of public opinion revealed in 2000 that thirty-eight percent of Greeks found the presence of foreigners “disturbing.”⁴⁵[45] The Greeks’ wariness of new refugees and immigrants is not unfounded. In previous decades, Greece could afford to help most of the refugees that arrived, and did so with the help of the U.N. High Commission for Refugees. Today, the number of refugees is simply more than the Greek government can support. Yet refugees and immigrants continue to flow into the country, not only due to its location, but also because of its attractiveness as an economically stable member of the European Union.

Although participation in the European Union has been beneficial for Greece, its membership creates a paradox: the people of Greece are among the EU’s strongest supporters, yet their government is wary of certain aspects of membership involving integration.⁴⁶[46] Despite feeling closely tied to Europe, the EU’s decisions sometimes come across as impositions. The EU would benefit more from Greece if its financial sector were maximized more efficiently at the rural level, and yet the autonomy of Greece’s economic policy is guaranteed by the Union. And there is also the matter of Turkey and its interest in the EU, which Greece opposes adamantly.⁴⁷[47] Anna recognizes the benefits of membership in the EU, as well as the paradox that it presents for Greece as well as for Europe. She said that if it were not for Greece’s involvement in a larger political-economic group, their country would eventually disappear. That

Back their Children’s Education.” *Financial Times*, December 13, 2000. <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>.

⁴⁵[45] Ibid.

⁴⁶[46] Achilleas Mitsos. “Maximising Contribution to the European Integration Process as a Prerequisite for the Maximisation of Gain,” in *Contemporary Greece and Europe*, eds. Achilleas Mitsos and Elias Mossialos (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 53.

⁴⁷[47] Ibid, 54.

is not to say that Greece had no support system prior to joining the EU, but as John Koliopolis, author of *Greece: The Modern Sequel*, points out, Greece could not have refused EU membership given its circumstances.⁴⁸[48] During the post war period, Greece had depended upon America for economic and military aid, but as a result had become an unwilling participant in the Soviet-US Cold War.⁴⁹[49] As early as 1960, moderate and centrist Greeks began to express a need for independence from foreign affairs without shunning its western supporters, i.e. the US.⁵⁰[50] Anna knows that it would be a futile struggle for a country like Greece to try to compete economically with nations such as the US and Japan. She assessed: “In most ways, [membership in the EU] was good, but it created other problems, because there are countries like Germany, France, and Britain that are rich countries. What do we have [to offer]? We have a lot of Greeks.... [Greeks are] taking more than they give, but at least they give something. And the Greeks, they have somewhere to lean on. They’re not just out there by themselves.”⁵¹[51] On the other hand, Anna also lamented the cultural changes that have occurred in Greek society—people today are more European and modernized. She said that they are paying less attention to issues of culture, and are slowly forgetting what it is that makes Greece unique and different. She

48[48] 179.

49[49] Library of Congress Country Studies. “Greece: Greece and the European Community.” Julia Rogers Library. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>.

50[50] Library of Congress Country Studies. “Greece: Historical Background.” Julia Rogers Library. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov>.

51[51] Guatieri.

concluded her thoughts on the EU with the following words: “To me, if the Greeks could do it by themselves, it’d be better not to go in. But they can’t.”⁵²[52]

Anna is most certainly an honest representation of her Greek heritage. Aside from speaking Greek with her children and attending services every Sunday at the Greek Orthodox Church down the road from her home, she displays a certain self-determination that is unique in the United States. She is at once European and Balkan; proud and exposed; engaging and stubborn. Although she benefited from the rapid modernization that she has experienced, she laments the loss of a rich and personal culture and identity—her Greek identity.

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⁵²[52] Ibid.

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