

# The Greek Ethnography. A critical overview

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## Abstract

This article presents an overview of Greek ethnography. It argues that ethnography in Greece cannot be seen as separate from its preceding fields of history and folklore studies, alongside Greece itself being viewed as a research field by foreign anthropologists. Because of the late introduction of anthropology in Greece it followed very quickly the main theoretical stream of postmodernism in its view of Greek society. The main argument of this article is that the introduction of postmodernism in Greek Anthropology prevented a dialogue with the pre-existing field research work that had been conducted in Greece by non Greek Ethnographers and Greek Folklorists or Historians. This fact has specific consequences at the epistemological, theoretical and methodological level of contemporary Greek Ethnography.

## Keywords

Greek Ethnography, Greek Folklore, Greek Anthropology, Greek society and history

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A review<sup>1</sup> of Greek ethnography, cannot be separated from references to the Greece as an ethnographic field, nor from the theoretical and methodological background of two sciences defined as "national". These two sciences developed in Greece from the 19th century just after the liberation from the Ottoman Occupation and the recognition of Greece as an independent state. These "national sciences" are the Folk studies and the History of Greece. The Greek Sociology developed a little in the period between the Wars<sup>2</sup> and after a gap, more systemically from the mid-1970s. During the same period,

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Sareeka Linton, student at the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge for her work on smoothing out the English of this article. The bibliographical references to ethnographies on Greek society are used just as summarised examples.

<sup>2</sup> An example of this sociological work can be seen in the research of Koustantinos Karavidas on rural Greece. This focused on the idea of superiority of community in terms of relations and social, economic and political life, in comparison to the modern, individualistic state (Komninou M., Papataxiarchis E. 1990)

one can identify critics and questions concerning the ethnocentric Greek history by historians influenced by Marxism and generally by “New History” (French Annales).

The main reason for pointing out these correlations is the fact that the first Department of Social Anthropology in Greece was founded in 1987 and consequently the Greek Social Anthropologists had to determine the methodological, theoretical and epistemological identity of the new science. In addition, the Greek anthropologists who had held positions in Greek universities had on the one hand, completed their studies in universities located abroad (namely the UK, France and to a lesser extent the USA). However, on the other hand, they had conducted their fieldwork in their "home"- largely in the local communities of Greece (Bakalaki 1997, Gefou-Madianou 2000).

## Greek Folk Studies and Greek History

Greece was liberated from the Ottoman occupation and recognized as an independent state in 1832 (Treaty of Constantinople). During the 19th century, the emergence of the modern state was occurring in the Balkans and in this context, the newborn Greek modern State attempted to form its national identity. The main characteristic of this Modern Greek identity is a “disemia” (the Greek word *δισημία*), as Herzfeld defines it. The word “disemia” refers to the identity of a nation which has two contradicting contents. On the one hand, the Greek is synonymous to *Romios* (ρωμηός) (the citizen of the Roman empire which Greece was part of from 146 B.C.). It is the word used by the Ottomans to define the people of the Greek area and also the non-Muslims of the Balkans in general. In the word *Romios* are reflected the Byzantine, that is East Roman Empire, the Christian tradition and a vernacular language, the *Romeika* (Ρωμείκα) as Greeks term it. On the other hand, the word "Greek" includes connotations of a glorious past, which is the Greek antiquity. It is this image of a past that the Western Europeans had constructed for Greece by studying the philosophical, theatrical and poetic masterpieces of this period, alongside an admiration for Greek historical monuments and artefacts. Herzfeld argues that this simultaneous and contradictory coexistence of the two contents form the definition of Greek identity – the first *Romiosini* and the other "Hellenism"- refers to a division at the ideological level. It is a division *Romiosini'*, an introverted collective conception and self-evaluation of a national identity, and Hellenism, conformity with the European expectations about our national image (Herzfeld 1982, 1987).

The folklorists and historians attempted to resolve the above contradiction constructing a continuum from antiquity to Byzantium, and from Byzantium to modernity. They were supportive of the idea that the history of the nation could be termed “Greek History” and divided in three main periods (Antiquity, Byzantium and Modernity). The Greeks, in spite of the many enemies they fought with and the conquerors of their country, have kept their collective identity, that of Hellenism, which has not changed in its essence. At the level of theory for supporting this argument, the Greek folklorists and historians adopted ideas of German romanticism and more specifically conceptions such as those of Johann Gottfried Herder. He defined the folk as a cultural entity defined

idealistically with the terms “soul of the people” (Volksseele) or “character of the people” (Volkscharakter). These became defining terms for the Greek people. In this context, the history became synonymous with an ethnocentric history and folk studies have the pedagogic duty for self-awareness about national identity. The folklorists concentrated on the people of the rural areas of Greece, conceiving their culture as having a slower evolution, making it possible to pin-point survivals of an ancient or Byzantine past and so to prove the continuity of Hellenism from antiquity until the present day. This viewpoint is based on the theory of evolutionism and more specifically on the theory concerning the existence of survivals from previous evolutionary stages, as formulated by E.B. Tylor.

Criticizing this perspective briefly, it can be argued that the first folklorists identified a social category (rural population) within a nation (Greek State). Their method was mainly literary and a-historical as they extracted the cultural phenomena from their contexts and proceeded to make comparisons of similar cultural phenomena coming from different areas of Greece. This was done by separating the “Greek authentic” from the foreign influences or “impurities”. The ethnocentrism and “patriotic sentiments” of the first folklorists are not accidental when taking into account context. The specific historical period (emergence of modern nationalism in the Balkans); the fact that the new born State of Greece is searching for her identity; and the great stream of philhellenism which existed in West Europe in the context of the ideas of neoclassicism. A further important factor was the theory supported by the Austrian Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer (1790-1861) published in 1830. He presented linguistic data mainly from the region of the Peloponnese in an attempt to prove that there were many mixtures of different populations and cultures in Greece and as a result one can assert that there is no one relationship between Greeks of antiquity and those of the modern time. Nikolaos Politis (1852-1921), considered the father of the Greek folklore, introduced the term ‘Folklore’ in 1908. He translates *Laografia* (Λαογραφία), the German term Volkskunde and defines it as the research object of traditional literature, actions and performances of psychic and social life of the folk. He concentrated on what he called “monuments of speech” as they exist in rural populations. These are the folk songs, the legends, the myths, the fables, the proverbs, etc. In the same vein of thought, were two other great folklorists: George Megas (1893-1976) and Stiponas Kyriakides (1887-1964). Among the historians, the most important were Spyridon Zampelios (1815-1881) and Konstantinos Paparigopoulos (1815-1891). ( Kyriakidou - Nestoros 1978; Ntatsi 1990; Svoronos 1992; Dimaras 1986; Damianakos 2003; Veloudis 1982).

After the Second World War, folklore began to broaden its research interests, focusing on objects such as the material culture - mainly on traditional clothing and costume, the houses and forms of agricultural technology. Moreover, because of the rapid urbanization of the Greek society and the consequences of transferring a great rural populations to the big cities, the research field was expanded to these cities. The Greek refugees from Asia Minor, who were habituated in urban areas since 1923, also became a new subject focus of research, particularly their music traditions.

In spite of the expansion in the field work of Post War folklore, there was an innovation of its theory that would release it from its nationalistic origins. The main reason for this was the Cold War and its consequences for Greek politics after the Greek civil war (1946-1949) and the defeat of communism. In the context of a nationalistic ideology whose content originated largely from anticommunism, the State supported a nationalistic Folklore and History as they supported the “Christian-Hellenic” ideology as a continuum. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that during the period of the military junta in Greece (1967-1974), the main political slogan was: “Greece of Christian Greeks”.

The first attempts for a critical analysis and self reflection on Greek folklore followed shortly after the fall of junta. Specifically, Alki Kyriakidou-Nestoros, the daughter of the important Greek folklorist Stilponas Kyriakidis, returned to Greece after her studies in Pennsylvania and Paris (where she met and worked with Levi-Strauss) and published her book: *The theory of Greek folklore. A Critical Analysis* (1978). Since then, the critical considerations of Greek folklore have increased significantly. Moreover Greek folklorists have enriched the theoretical approaches of anthropological concepts and theory of history.

This long tradition of Greek folk studies has the support of the State for research. In 1908 the Folklore Society was founded, and was incorporated into the Academy of Athens in 1918, where there are positions for folklorists researchers until the present day. The Folklore Centre of the Academy of Athens has a rich archive of thousands of manuscripts folklore material which were collected by Greek folklorists and their students (Petropoulos 1952). The rich material did not attract the research interest of Greek Anthropologists despite the openings of Greek folklorists to anthropology (Nitsiakos 2004; Alexakis 2004; Mpada 2004).

Herzfeld argues that one can consider these contradictions and ambiguities between *Romiosini* and Hellenism as a symbolical reflection of distinctions between anthropological theory and practice. It is a distinction evokes “Hellenism/*Romiosini* in the specific domain of Greek ethnography, rules/strategies in anthropological theory. The comparison, which complements that [...] between folklore/anthropology and honor/shame, brings into critical focus the relationship between the symbolism of anthropological practice and the logic of cultural stereotypes” (Herzfeld, 1987: 94).

Nonetheless Greek anthropologists have not proceeded to a creative dialogue with Folklore. Having adopted in their majority, concepts and models of cultural criticism and postmodernism, are not positive to Greek Folklorist approaches or collected material, asserting that it has not completely renounced its nationalistic past. I think this is a position of severe and excessive criticism. In contrast, the Greek anthropologists having a French anthropological theoretical tradition are more open to a dialogue with folklore, because of their specific methodological and epistemological background (historical perspective, archival research etc).

## Greece as a field of social research

Greece became a field for ethnographic research almost simultaneously with the turn of social anthropology from “exotic” societies to those of Europe. The main reasons for considering the Greek society as an “Ethnographic Eden” (Kouroukli 2007) include its marginal position between East and West and the political situation that was established after the Second World War. Specifically, after the decline of the Third Reich and the division of the world, the geopolitical position of Greece attracted the interest of England and the USA. As a result, they contributed decisively to the defeat of Communists during the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). Moreover, during the Cold War their influences on the political situation in Greece were very active in fostering an anticommunist climate for justifying the criminalization of Left political ideologies. The left political parties were illegal up until the fall of junta (1974) and many Leftists were punished by imprisonment, exiled in very small barren islands or even executed in some cases. Because of these political and social circumstances, Greece, as the only non-communist country in the Balkans and in Eastern Europe, was open to the West for doing fieldwork. Indeed it is not a coincidence that the first Anthropologists who conducted fieldwork in Greece were from the USA and Europe: the American Ernestine Friedl and an Englishman, John Campbell.

Ernestine Friedl published in 1962 her monograph *Vassilika, a village in Modern Greece*. It is a typical ethnographic study of a community in Central Greece, which focuses on the family values and kinship relations (particularly relations between gender and age groups) and on the community. J. Campbell's monograph *Honour, Family and Patronage. A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community* (1964) has as its subjects not as a spatial field research community, but a group of people the Sarakatsans. These people are nomadic shepherds in a geographical region of Greece named Epirus.

These two anthropologists – the first from the American and the second from the Anglo-Saxon school of anthropology- defined the fields that would become the subject of interest for ethnographic research in Greece: the political (patronage), the values (shame, honor, pride, etc.) and kinship relations.

In the 1960s, rural Greece became a field work area for French social scientists too. These researchers were mainly social demographers and their interest focused on social and economic transformations of specific local communities.

During the junta in Greece (1967-1974) the severe restrictions of political liberties and the violation of human rights impacted all of Europe. The Greek progressive intellectuals escaped to Europe and the fear of introspection and suspicion surrounding everyone and everything, prevented scientific research. After the fall of the junta in 1974 and the restoration of parliamentary democracy, research in Greece continued and increased. During this period, many sociological works from Greek social researchers

were conducted (almost all of these researchers had studied abroad) on the modern economical and political transformations of Greek society and their consequences<sup>3</sup>.

In summary, one can argue that from the first post-war years until the 1980s, the social research in Greece was conducted mainly by researchers from the UK and France and to a lesser degree from the USA. Their field work area was focused largely on the rural community.

At the level of theory, the Anglo-Saxon anthropologists adopted mainly social-functional models and focused on social relations and values. The focus of American anthropologists is on culture and their theoretical models derive from semiotics and hermeneutics. The French social scientists have influences from Marxism, structuralism, and also from sociolinguistics and ethno psychiatry. They adopt more historical point of views and focus on the economic life and the demographic transformations of communities, alongside the role of the state in shaping the local economic, social and political life and behaviour. In the same logic, the interests of Greek social scientists are dependent on the countries in which they have conducted their studies from the 1970s onwards.

### 1987: The establishment of the first Department of Social Anthropology in Greece and the emergence of a new social science

The first Department of Social Anthropology, founded in 1987, was also the first department of the newly established University of the Aegean, located on the island of Lesbos. Initially, it was only for postgraduate and doctoral studies, however 1990 saw the first entries of undergraduates. Due to the fact that anthropology undergraduates did not exist up until then, many of the first postgraduate students were from different departments and had no experience of anthropological studies and this proved to be a problem for them. Furthermore, the teachers were Greek Anthropologists or Social Historians who had done their field work research in Greece but their PhD studies were conducted in Universities in England, France and the USA. This meant that their theoretical models were dependent on the great anthropological Schools (English, French, and American) they had studied. Consequently, their approaches to Greek society involved an “exotic” perspective as a result of their theoretical dialogue being exclusive to their European or American experience, and not from a dialogue with native folklorists or social scientists. The local folklorists were stigmatized because of the conservative and nationalistic past of their discipline and the due to the fact that local social scientists did not exist at the time.

In 1991 the Department of Ethnology at The University of Thrace was founded. The university is located in Komotini, a city on Northern Greece, situated at the Turkish

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<sup>3</sup> For a presentation of research works on Greek society up to 1986, from the perspectives of Sociology, Social Anthropology, Demography and Human Geography see: Kovani E. 1986. In this book there is a list of all the books and articles have been written about Greece and also a more detailed presentation of the main monographs.

border. Its Programme of studies is very confusing as it includes very different and divergent disciplines: Social and Cultural Anthropology, Biological Anthropology, Folklore, Prehistory, Geography Byzantine and Modern History, Demography, Human etc. One can assert that it is a Department with a confused identity. In contrast, the Department of Social Anthropology founded in 2004 at the Panteio University of Athens, has a very clear identity in terms of its anthropological direction. Apart from these Departments of Anthropology which exist in Greece at present, Social and Cultural anthropology are included as lessons at many Departments and Schools of Social Sciences. Additionally, Social Anthropology has replaced to a high degree the Folk Studies that were “traditionally” taught at the Schools of Philosophy<sup>4</sup>.

The field research of Greek Anthropologists is confined to Greece. In the past few years there have been a few research studies conducted outside of the Greek State borders, namely in Balkans and in Russia, but these refer also to Greek speaking or Greek origin populations. The place is not only the rural area but also the cities. One can ascertain that there is a tendency of shifting from the rural areas, in which field research by folklorists is conducted, to urban areas. This is also a shift from the more holistic perspectives to more specific fields, typically gender and identity. The objects of research study are now increasingly gender relations (heterosexual or homosexual), religion (Muslims), language (Slavs) minorities, or immigrants that came to Greece from Albania and other Balkan States at the end of the 1980s<sup>5</sup>. Also, there is a direction into the research fields of oral history and social or collective memory either at a more theoretical and comparative level ( Symposium 2002, Papataxiarchis, Paradellis, 1993, Benveniste R., Paradellis Th. 1999), or more specifically in connections with the II World War and the Greek Civil War (Thanopoulou 2000; Van Bouschoten, Vervenioti et al. 2008; Van Bouschoten 1997; Demertzis, Paschaloudi, Antoniou (eds) 2013 ).

The growth of ethnographic research in Greece is very slow. As an example I will refer my PhD thesis which supported at University of Aegean at 2000. It had the number six (6), which means that from 1987 up to 2000 only six (6) PhD theses on Anthropology had produced in Greece. The main reasons can be summarized as follow: a) the nonexistence of an anthropological theoretical background in Greece led to much of the anthropologist’s scientific activity involving editing translations and introductions of classical anthropological books for Greek people. This meant that the Greek Anthropologists had to work on inventing a scientific terminology for a discipline in a society which had no scientific tradition in this discipline, b) the nonexistence of Greek State policies for supporting an expansion of fieldwork research in societies out of its borders and generally the low State interest for supporting economically the

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<sup>4</sup> The Schools of Philosophy in Greece is a term used for Schools for teachers at the High School. They will teach mainly ancient, modern or Latin philology and history.

<sup>5</sup> These findings are coming from my research in the site of the National Documentary Center of Greece ([www.ekt.gr](http://www.ekt.gr)). In that site there are the titles of the Phd theses in all the discipliners which have produced in Greece or refer to it. Also it is possible the access to a brief summary (in Greek and in English) and to the full text many of them.

anthropological fieldwork research , c) the scientific and professional profile of the Anthropologist in Greece are not clear yet.

The process of the introduction of a new discipline in Greece that of anthropology, as it presented above, had specific consequences. One can assume that a social or cultural constructivist or a semiotic postmodern anthropology are now dominant in Greece (Papataxiarchis, 2007; Tsimpiridou, 2002), as they were introduced by the first Greek anthropologists because these theoretical tendencies existed at the Universities in which they studied. Therefore, in Greek Ethnography - with the content of an Ethnography produced by Greek Anthropologists - the latest tendencies included the polyphony and pluralism of field work studies (Papataxiarchis 2007) in my opinion resulted, at the levels of theory and epistemology, to a segmentation into scientific research fields <sup>6</sup> and at the level of methodology to a self-reflection on the anthropologist as a research subject. In contrast, there is to a much lesser extent, self-reflection within Anthropology considered as a Social Science for understanding of human beings acting in accordance to reason, sentiments and moral values (see also: Georgoulas 2006, 2010). This self-reflection within Anthropology would lead into more integrated models on aspects of Greek Society and Culture as it will open the way for comparisons between ethnographic works. It is also the base for a dialogue at the theoretical, methodological, and epistemological level with research work conducted up to now in Greek society. These are the work of foreign Ethnographers (the interest of Greek anthropologists is exhausting in translations or commentations), of Sociologists, of Historians and of Folklorists. This dialogue is imposed also by the fact that many of the Greeks Ethnographers are hurrying to adopt ideas and schemes of postmodernism (or beyond it) overlooking even a small shift to modernism.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the anthropology of gender, food, ethnicity, body, sentiments etc, can be conceived as some of these scientific research fields.

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