Cultural Patterning: Ingrained Core Values in the Dress and Behaviour of Greek Cypriot Men and Women

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Introduction

This paper considers Greek Cypriot identity. The mentality with regard to traditional forms of dress and behaviour that existed among the bulk of Greek Cypriots in Cyprus at the beginning of this century is set against attitudes toward change that began at the turn of the century and progressively intensified thereafter. The objective is to identify the roots of the development and thus explain the meaning of the values.

The data for the paper comes from information collected for a thesis by research at the MA level entitled “Processes in the Development of Patterns Associated with Marriage Partner Choice of Greek Cypriots”. Though written documentation is used to gain access to information, the main component comes from oral testimony: testimony of the way of life, the ideas about life, the values, attitudes, traditions and beliefs of a people. Forty 90-minute tapes of oral history resulting from interviews with twenty Greek Cypriot South Australian senior citizens who emigrated from Cyprus between 1920 and 1974 have provided substantial background to the Cypriot experience. Conversations with many other Greek Cypriots have provided additional oral testimonies and have supplemented my own experience as a Greek Cypriot who emigrated to South Australia in 1956 at the age of eight.

Hair styles among Greek Cypriot women

According to oral testimony a series of new trends in hair fashion have appeared among Greek Cypriot adult females during this century. There are indications that from the turn of the century there was a gradual movement away from the norm of having long hair with two plaits that were secured around the head and covered by traditional scarves. The scarves were the μαντηλά (‘mantili’) and the κουρουκλα (‘kouroukla’).

A number of new hairstyles appeared and in all of them the hair was left uncovered. The timing of change varied, but basically from the turn of the century new trends came from other countries into the major Cypriot centres of commerce and then spread outward into the more remote areas of Cyprus. An exception was the appearance among city women of the hat. The wearing of a hat may be attributable to identification with the British, who took over control of
Cyprus at the turn of the century. Accordingly, it was identification with power. The traces of it that remained over time show that it was an adopted symbol of the elite.

By about 1930 there appears to have been substantial external influence in the new hair styles that appeared among the young women who lived either in the major towns or close to them. One of the trends was for young women to wear their long hair in a single plait and adorn it with ribbons and decorative combs. In another fashion, the long hair was combed upward, rolled and clipped into the scalp so that from the top of the head it looked like a wreath. Two senior Greek Cypriot women who live in Adelaide still wear their hair like this today. By the 1930s the art of perming became available and an early form left the hair in waves. Some women cut their hair and wore it in waves or ‘kappes’, as the fashion was known in Cyprus.¹

By the middle of the century change was in full swing among the young women. Propulsion for change in mature women was connected with post-war emigration for many women cut their hair just before emigrating whereas, in the rural regions at least, women aged 30 or more, (i.e., born roughly before 1920), still kept to the traditional form. The conservatism of the latter is obvious for they still wear their hair in the traditional form.²

Underlying the changes that did and did not occur is the factor of appropriateness: for whom was it important to change and for whom was it practicable. With reference to practicality, it is essential to point out that the traditional ways in which the hair of Greek Cypriot females was dressed were very functional in the busy agricultural life that dominated Cypriot society until just past the middle of this century. Plaiting the hair, tying it around the head and covering it appropriately with a scarf kept it neat, clean and tidy. It also gave protection from the heat and the cold, depending on how the scarf was worn, and

¹ The conclusions about hair have been made by assessing a number of testimonies and by careful examination of photographs of Cypriot society as found in Ioannidis and in the historical encyclopaedia edited by Papadimitris.

 Ioannidis, 1986
 Γ. Κ. Ιωαννίδης, (Επιμελητής εκδόσεως), Κυπριακά 1878–1955, Λευκωσία, Διαλέξεις Λαϊκού Πανεπιστημίου, αρ. 2, Έκδοση Δήμου Λευκωσίας, Χορηγία Λαϊκής Τράπεζας Λτδ.

 Papadimitris, 1979-80
 Π. Παπαδημίτης, (Επιμέλεια Έλης), Ιστορική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια της Κύπρου 1878–1978. Πρώτη έκδοση, Λονδίνο, Λευκωσία, Ζενο (The Greek Bookshop),

Conclusions have been drawn from oral testimony and participant observation in South Australia and in various parts of Cyprus during holiday periods in 1983 and again in 1995-96.


According to Maria, when in about 1956-57 it became the fashion for ladies in their thirties and forties to cut their plaits and perm their hair, especially because they were going to emigrate, she saw the economic viability of having hair dressing skills. She paid twenty pounds to learn the trade and subsequently practised, but felt that she scissored at her heart every time she cut a woman’s plaits.
Dhora Moustrides

Cultural Patterning

Dress

Dress is another very obvious example that has undergone change. The traditional αλατζίες ("alatzies") that had been worn by the bulk of the Greek Cypriot women at the turn of the century were replaced by more modern wear. Interviewee Maria Frangeskou, who was born in 1913 and grew up in Lefkosa, referred to the appearance of long fine silk dresses - "Georgettes" - but she also said that the Cypriot women did not dress up very much. Interviewee Angelika Pavlou, who came from the village of Lageia in the area of Larnaka and was born in 1917, recalled changes. Nicer and finer clothes suitable for Sunday wear became available, but parents resisted children’s requests for such clothes. Parents saw nothing wrong with what their generation had been wearing, but there was also the factor of cost: the new materials were more expensive.

As in the case of hair, the function of clothes again provides explanation. The tougher clothes could be worn in the rural environment. By all indications most people at the time had only minimal sets of clothes. The new were worn on special occasions and the old one or two sets were worn for everyday purposes. The tradition of wearing boots (τσανγαροπόιες - "tsangaropinoes") exemplifies the functionality: they were hardy and gave protection against the elements.

The acceptance of shorter dresses that gradually replaced the long dress and the pantaloons worn beneath is also a recognition of practicality. It is symbolic of a greater sense of freedom - of the liberalism of more modern times. The essence of the change is inherent in what the traditional song Η Βράκα (The ‘Vraka’) implies about the change men made from wearing the ‘vraka’ to wearing trousers.

5 The name refers to a combination of garments worn by the women. They were made of locally produced material such as cotton and linen and were ornately embroidered. The dresses were almost ankle length and were worn with various styled overcoats and/or aprons. The styles worn tended to be area specific. In some areas the dress was cut off a little shorter to show the undergarment - long pantaloons with matching embroidery at the bottom. The slightly shorter length would have made them more functional. It would have allowed freer movement.

6 While interviewing Costas Marangos from Karavas in the region of Keryneia in his home in Adelaide in 1993, I was shown a thick silk man’s suit that was in fashion in the forties. In the interviews conducted with the Greek Cypriot migrants there are references suggesting that silk was produced in Cyprus, but the data also points to the impact of the British textile industry.

7 The vraka is black in colour and is equivalent to knee-length baggy pants. At the waistline is a cord which is used to pull and gather in the pants. A waist sash is then tied on top.

The ‘vraka’ is presented (satirically) as tedious to produce and maintain, and an obstacle to freedom of movement in physical and sexual activity:

Καλέτερα πανταλονάν πο να φτιάξε την στράτα.
Better a trousered man that will speed the road.

Discussion of etiquette through gender roles

Though the above forms of expression - the way the hair and the body were dressed - reflected idealism about gender, they made no overt statements because gender roles were assumed. Careful consideration shows however that both the traditional dress and the etiquette of Greek Cypriots reflect a guardedness expressed through the boundaries of gender roles originating from the development of protective mechanisms of the group over centuries of a fairly consistent way of life under a string of conquerors and channelled into the Christian Orthodox Greek Cypriot tradition. The older generation certainly had to cover themselves as protection against the elements, but they covered up according to the implications of their sexuality. The element of respect represented by the appropriateness of wearing long sleeves in church (in the case of both men and women) takes on an elevated position, an association with ultimate authority, but it is also evidence of appropriate ethics since there is the same expectation in ordinary public life. With advancing liberalism, today this tradition is less adhered to by the young, especially the females.

In dress, gender expectations become more visible when the focus is turned to the adoption of trousers by females. Resistance to the symbolic crossing of roles is visible in the resistance and conservatism of the older generation, especially with reference to the etiquette expected of women in church. The effect of a changing world and of the impact of liberalism is evident in the fact that in Cyprus today some women go to church in trousers.

Smoking has been broadly perceived as something only men engage in. Greek Cypriot women who have adopted the practice have generally done so to the disapproval of their society in general, especially of the older generation. Again, despite resistance, there are women who have taken up the habit. It is rarely seen among the current older generation. I have not seen any elderly Greek Cypriot females smoking.

8 The information has come from cousins who came for a holiday here from Malounda at the beginning of 1999. Comparison was made with the greater conservatism here in Australia, where the Greek women have refrained from wearing trousers in church.
The wearing of make-up and ways of sitting not only exhibit male/female territory but within female territory distinctly define status and expectations about sexuality. Traditionally it has been considered inappropriate for females to sit with one leg crossed over the other at the knee, whereas men have been permitted to do this. Why this has been solely the male domain is not easily explainable. I would suggest that as a reflection of the female domain, the taboo of sitting cross-legged reflects the stance on appropriate sexual activity when a female has entered the married state. The deduction is made on the basis that to sit with one leg crossed over the other also represents a very relaxed and carefree pose. The relevance is that it is not that expectations of males were less stringent, but that the possibility of pregnancy had greater implications for females. Although the reason why women should not sit with their legs open is obvious, the case made by Greek Cypriot advisers is often camouflaged:

Εν εν καλά!
It isn't good!

The taboo on sexual exhibitionism also appears as disapproval of make-up, which in the past has been associated with prostitution.

The village as a stereotype

In Cyprus, villagers have been stereotyped as backward and hard-headed. There is a saying associated with the mentality:

Το σιωπίν του χωρκάτη μονόν δεν η φτάνει, μα διπλόν φτάνει.
The rope of the villager laid in a single strand does not reach, but laid doubled reaches.

The capacity for discrimination in the assessment of individuals is obvious especially in view of the identification processes described above, and the information given so far in this paper shows that the mentality of villagers was different in function to any others. The function of both contact and appropriateness has already been demonstrated. Certainly there was tenacity in maintaining traditional ways, but the actions of villagers were relative to their experience. Why they dressed the way they did has been explained, as has their stance on acceptable behaviour. From another perspective, the stereotype of villagers as uneducated, stubborn and hard-headed points to the reduced opportunities they had to receive an education, and highlights the greater need the peasants had to cope with the family workload. Not only were the demands of peasant life immense but the major education centres at the turn of the century were established only in the larger townships.

Cyprus traditionally had a rural economy so this tendency to discriminate against country folk is a relatively new phenomenon and probably originated during this century when the large increase in the Cypriot population and the policies of the British overlords resulted in mass exodus from the rural sector to the cities and to other countries through emigration.

The data as overall perception of manhood/womanhood

All the aspects referred to above convey the perception of a person first and foremost as a man or a woman. It reflects the identification process, of how someone might be seen as a grander/lesser man or woman and as a person either to associate with or to shun. I suggest that the perception of the womanhood or manhood of a person was a construct of a composite of gender images.

In view of the changing society, the perception of womanhood/manhood varied according to time and place, and so it was not strange or out of place that the ideals of Greek Cypriot women of earlier times were regarded as almost sacred. It was not strange that some female Greek Cypriot emigrants living in South Australia cut their hair upon emigration to be modern, yet later criticised younger incoming females for wearing make-up. Make-up was seen in a different light because of the cultural reality and it took time and change in who used make-up to bring about change in what it symbolised.

The changing attitudes of villagers can be seen in another way: the same Cypriot women who in conversation with one another criticised the incoming migrants for wearing make-up discriminated against the young women in another way. They saw them as uneducated and not suitable partners for their sons who had acquired some education in their new land of South Australia. By all indications, the villagers would have received primary education, whereas the young men had attended high school. The criticism was unfair however, for at the time the young men went to high school - in the early sixties - in Adelaide, some Greek Cypriots in Cyprus were insisting on providing greater educational opportunities for their sons.

Summary

This paper has examined the process by which aspects of dress and behaviour that directly reflect manhood/womanhood have developed among Greek Cypriots of the period from the turn of the century to the present. It has traced the changes

9 According to Attalides, until 1921, 81% of the population lived in villages. In this rural area, the population rose from 150 000 in 1881 to 250 000 in 1921. (Attalides, 1979:52),
and the relevance of the accompanying attitudes. The attitudes to change of those who had lived fully the traditional modes of life show an initial tension and an expression of conservatism. However, beneath each form that took shape - the old and the new - can be seen the function of adaptability. Tradition and the associated mental constructs did not just haphazardly come into existence but, rather, did so because of the perceived function. The changes that occurred show how the spreading of ideas is a key factor not only in the adaptation of traditions, hairstyles, etc., but also in the perception of stereotypes, which as generalisations create distortion.

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