

Greek Dancing from the Point of View of a Millennial Second Generation Greek-American

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I set out to conduct this interview to get a millennial's point of view of traditional Greek dancing. Greek dance is not something that changes much over time, so I wanted to gain insight from an individual who is familiar with modern culture as well as traditional Greek practices.

Maria, my interviewee, is a 19-year-old student studying finance at The Ohio State University on the pre-law track. Both her mother and her father are Greek, and both sets of grandparents immigrated to America to give their families a better life. Maria's maternal grandparents are from the Peloponnese, and her paternal grandparents are from Thessaloniki. It is from her father's side that she gains her Pontian heritage.

Pontic Greeks that originally lived in the region of the Black Sea have their own Greek dialect and types of dances. When the Pontic Greeks fell under Ottoman control, they suffered ethnic cleansing. Tens of thousands perished, but Maria's great grandparents were able to escape to northern Greece to start a new life for their family.

When asked about the personal significance of Pontian dance, Maria replied by saying, "It's my grandfather's history. It's important to him and it has become important to me, too." Maria shared a story about her grandmother (*yiayia*) and her great aunt (*thea*) Paraskevoula to illustrate the struggles her grandparents faced: " *Yiayia* Christina and her sister were in the kitchen getting ready for dinner and heard screams. They looked out the window and saw smoke. The Turks were on their way to the house, they had been raiding everyone's houses in the village. So, *Yiayia* and *Thea* Paraskevoula climbed up into the chimney and waited for the Turks. They came in and completely ravaged the household, taking anything valuable and destroying everything that wasn't. *Yiayia* and *Thea* stayed completely quiet, afraid to even breathe. Then, right before the Turks left, they set the house on fire. *Yiayia* and *Thea* were still in the house! They waited until the Turks left the premises and then crawled out the top of the chimney and survived."

Nothing good stemmed from these atrocities, but they introduced a new type of dance that carries substantial meaning. When Maria was young, she was confused as to why everything was so somber. She commented on the seriousness of Pontian dances compared to other Greek dancing, "There is always a loud daouli drum that is used to keep the tempo and the beat of the music. Our instructor was also very serious and I remember her telling me once to not smile as much during the performance. I thought that was weird because my Greek troupe teacher was always telling us to look up and smile." Every powerful beat of the daouli drum is representative of every heartbeat that ceased during the war. Pontian dances symbolize the hardships that the thousands of Pontian families went through during the genocide, so to honor those who have died in this time of war, dances are performed. The dances themselves are vastly different from regular Greek line dances. Dancers are considerably closer physically and use sharp head and arm movements to represent looking left and right for the enemy during war. Expressions of melancholy are used to depict the sadness and seriousness of the situation that many Pontic Greeks had to deal with during that time.

Maria found Pontian dancing not only brought her closer to her culture, it established a central connection with older generations. Maria laughed, "Oh I know he (paternal grandfather) loves it. He's 90-years-old but he won't miss a festival if it's to see us dance. It makes *Pappou* so happy to see us dancing, and I realize I don't do it for myself, I do it for him. For him, for *Thea* Paraskevoula, for *Theo* Taki—who are all watching from the stands—and for *Yiayia* Christina, watching from heaven. I think I make them proud. I think that what I'm doing is showing them that nobody will forget what they went through. Because they won't. *Yiayia* and *Pappou* didn't go through all of that just to be forgotten." I chose to concentrate on this quote because it shows that the younger generation acknowledges and appreciates the sacrifices that their families made for them to be in the position they are in today. With today's culture, there is not much that older and younger generations can both relate to. Dancing offers a way to maintain and embolden strong intergenerational relationships.

Maria not only participated in the Pontian dance troupe through her church, but she also participated in the regular Greek dance troupe. In contrast to Pontian dancing, Maria mentioned the fluidity of Greek dancing. She claimed that, "It's just, like, more relaxed. Happier, even." Plato himself wrote that, "The dance, of all the arts, is the one that most influences the soul. Dancing is divine in its nature and is the gift of the gods."¹ Folk dances were used in times of celebration and in times of war when the troops looked for confidence and motivation. Nowadays, Greek dancing can be observed at Greek festivals, parties, or large celebrations.

Festivals are a grand and lively occasion, and for ten years, Maria has participated in the Holy Trinity Greek Festival, which is held in Canton, Ohio. For three nights she performs in both the Greek and Pontian troupes for fellow Greeks and Americans alike.

When I asked Maria why she looks forward to the yearly fest, she said, "Not only Greek people attend the festival, Americans do too. The funniest part is dancing and looking into the crowd and seeing little American kids look at you like you're a movie star. Like, with such amazement. I think that is pretty cool. Also, at the end of our performance we will end with a *syрто* and we invite anyone who wants to, to dance with us. I think this is really special." This statement introduces the idea that even the non-Greek population finds enjoyment in these festivals. Fests like this provide cultural enrichment for those not involved with Greek heritage or culture. Having others join in at the end of the performance emphasizes the hospitable and inclusive behavior that Greek culture embodies.

In addition, the *syрто* is the national dance of Greece. As Cadbury states, "The first dance of a *panigyri* is always the *syрто*."² The term *panigyri* refers to a festival meant for everyone; *pan* meaning "all" and *oyr* meaning "a public place." The *syрто* is always danced in a half circle which is to never close. Seasons come and go every year; people are born and die every day. The *syрто* is representative of the bond that humans have with the earth, and similarly, with the people that surround them. Whether you love your neighbor or are irritated by their presence, during the dance you are moving to the same beat and using the same muscles to make the necessary steps. At this point, everyone comes together as one unit.

According to Maria, "In the dance troupe I met my *paréa*, my people. The *parea* consisted of people like me, a few of my girlfriends, my sister, and a few guys. We all grew very close to each other and are still really good friends now." This statement is critical to analyze because it exhibits the link that is established between people of similar backgrounds and cultures. Alison Cadbury defines *paréa* is a group of friends based on family, childhood, neighbor, and working relationships. In addition to this, *paréas* are most often formed in early social years, when nobody has yet chosen a political party. The *paréa* is meant to provide a supportive and safe environment where any member can ask for help and receive aid in return.³

Folk dance is not only a way to establish a *paréa*, but also a way to unite many different groups of people, or even different *paréas*. Dancing is essentially a way to celebrate and strengthen a community, whether it be men with men or women with men. Holding hands and stepping to the same beat not only brings a community together emotionally, but physically as well. Cadbury notes that dancers are able to come together and, "breathe the same breath."⁴ This is imperative to understand because in that moment, dancing together under the summer sky, the dancers become one entity. Regardless of political views, socioeconomic status, age, or gender, you are able to set everything aside for those few precious minutes of dance. As Maria stated in her interview, "Dance is love."

Maria did not always feel this way about her heritage; when she was younger, she rejected the culture and felt, "alienated from my American friends." Culturally, Greek dance is remarkably different than American-style dances. Maria felt uncomfortable with what

she was doing because none of her American friends had ever experienced dance as traditional and different as Greek dancing. When I asked Maria what her friends thought about Greek dance when they were young, she laughed and said, "Oh I didn't tell them that I danced. There was no way the 'weird girl' was about to get any weirder. One time, I think I was in the fifth grade, and this kid from my class came to the Greek festival and realized it was me. He went to school the next week and told everyone. It was uncomfortable." This statement shows that even some second-generation Greek-Americans had a hard time assimilating as children. This can have harsh effects on a person and how they view their own culture and heritage.

During the interview, Maria stated that in elementary school, "I just felt like I didn't belong anywhere, I didn't feel like I fit in with the Greek crowd yet, and I definitely didn't feel part of the American one." Here, Maria didn't have a sense of identity; she seemed lost. First generation Greek-Americans carry on traditions in their own households, whereas the second generation shares tradition with their parents but is also aware of the dominant culture.⁵ Being cognizant of such differences could confuse a person when trying to identify themselves. In Maria's case, she was always left out of certain activities with American friends and couldn't "find the balance between hanging with Greeks and hanging with Americans." Maria seemed to be frustrated by her culture at this point in time. Being Greek made her different from everyone else, but was this a good thing or a bad thing? Dr. Theodore Xenos tried to explain it by saying that, "It's hard to keep connected to your roots because of the school friends...and being singled out or mocked for being more cultural,"⁶ Those who have experienced the effects of being the cultural minority, such as myself, understand the struggle of creating and maintaining friendships with those different from us. It is harder to find a common ground when you are raised with morals and values different from those of another culture.

Around middle school, Maria says that, "I became really good friends with my dance troupe and that's when I stopped caring about what Americans thought about me. Take me or leave me, ya know?" Here, Maria seemed to have found herself within her culture. The art of dance drew her closer to her culture and her heritage. It helped establish an everlasting bond between her and her *paréa*, which not only provides community, but also a comfortability with who she is as a person. Having such a close-knit group that share the same passions and values really enhances a person's ability to connect socially with others and grow as an individual. When Maria says, "Take me or leave me..." she sees and acknowledges and accepts the person that she has become, even though she is different. Dancing among people like her helped when establishing her place in the world and essentially led to inner peace.

Through the interview process, I was able to draw the conclusions that the cultural practice of Greek dancing introduces the idea of *paréa*, creates a common ground for older and younger generations, and helps people establish a true identity. Maria has spent ample

time in the troupe and was familiar with modern culture, making her an ideal interviewee. She opened my eyes to the social struggles she felt being a second generation Greek-American and how connecting to her culture through dance helped her find where she belonged. For Maria, *paréa* tied her to her heritage and helped her to realize the significance of folk dance within her family as well as in a much larger sense. Folk dance is not only something that carries historical meaning and personal feelings, but it has the power to bring people of different backgrounds together regardless of their views.

¹ Kotsiris, Kenton. "A brief History of Greek Dancing." *Lemon & Lives*, Jan. 23, 1917., Page 3.

² Cadbury, Alison. "A Celebration of Life in a Greek Island Village." Plain View Press, n.d. Print 2, Page 110.

³ Ibid, Page 211.

⁴Koletas, Aliz. "Melting Pot or Tossed Salad?" Greek Americans Discuss Cultural Assimilation in *The National Herald*, April 6, 2016. Page 3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

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