Rural Tradition and Cultural Identity of the Ionian Islands

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Abstract: In recent years, people are more and more exhorted to “go back to tradition”. This tendency testifies every thinking person’s reflection on how tradition affects the cultural identity of the place where he lives.

The subject of this study is the rural tradition of the four Ionian Islands, Kefalonia, Corfu, Zante and Lefkada, as well as its contribution to the shaping of their common cultural identity. At a time when there is high economic, political and social instability, it is important to recognize the cultural identity of a specific area of Greece, the Ionian Islands, located in the Ionian and the Adriatic Sea, a region of great geopolitical significance.

Since the Ionians’ economy was based on agriculture (olive cultivation, viticulture), livestock farming (cheese making), fishing and bee-keeping, these activities formed an integral part of the culture and the history of each place and its residents. The eating habits of the traditional farming societies are benchmarks of their cultural level. The products of the Ionian Islands are closely linked to several social events as well. In that way, they show the connection that exists between a place’s cuisine and culture. Many rural customs and eating habits of the Ionian Islands originate from their centuries-old traditions. They are linked to the farmers’ concern on the land’s fruitage. Nowadays, due to the technological evolution, some Ionian traditions are extinct. They may still exist in remote mountain areas, but in that case they fulfill the purpose they traditionally had.

Key words: Rural Tradition, Cultural Identity, Ionian Islands.

INTRODUCTION

Tradition is a transfer- usually oral- of customs, practices and beliefs within the persons that share a common culture. It is the procedure thanks to which these customs are maintained and perpetrated. The cultural values of the past that defined and created the distinctive elements of the Greek people constitute the Greek tradition. These values even today irrigate our culture and enrich our cultural identity with elements of our national roots.

Tradition is the chain that connects the different generations of a culture. Through tradition, our generation is linked not only to the past, but also to the future. At the same time, it is a requirement for the existence of a culture. There are different types of tradition:

- Linguistic, spiritual tradition (related to a place’s customs, folk songs, myths, sayings etc.)
- Housing tradition (individual buildings and whole villages) and Folk tradition (local crafts, clothes, dances, celebrations etc.)
- Rural tradition (activities, products etc.)

Its scope includes all the aspects of life, from happiness to death. In that way, it reflects how each nation passes its everyday life.

The culture of the Ionian Islands evolved since the ancient times until today and for many centuries, it varied from the ones in the rest parts of Greece. It holds a specific cultural identity, different than the one existing in the rest of the country. All islands of Ionian Sea are characterized by rich vegetation, countless natural sights and great cultural tradition. These islands attract a lot of Greek and foreign tourists all the year round.

Our country needs to protect and maintain its culture, as well as introduce it responsibly to other nations. Cultural societies are the ones that strongly support Greek tradition.

THE CULTURE OF THE IONIAN ISLANDS

The Ionian Islands located in the Ionian and the Adriatic Sea. The complex of islands called Eptanisa, is a distinct historic region they date to the centuries-long Venetian rule, which preserved them from becoming part of the Ottoman Empire, and created a distinct cultural identity with many Italian influences. The Ionian Islands became part of the modern Greek state in 1864. These islands are Corfu, Paxi, Lefkada, Ithaca, Kefalonia, Zakynthos, Kythira and their neighboring islets. Ionian Islands don’t constitute geographically a united group, because Kythira is between south Peloponnese and Crete, but they had had a common historical course for a long time. The various depredations of occupation, piracy, earthquakes and time, have all taken their toll on the Ionian Islands, but you can get an idea of the islands’ ancient culture by visiting the small but impressive archaeological museums in Corfu, Lefkada and Zakynthos. Mycenaean tombs have been found on Kefallonia, Lefkada and Zakynthos, and it’s believed there was a Mycenaean colony on Kythira. Evidence from the Corinthian period includes geometrically patterned Corinth pottery, Doric temples and the famous Gorgon Medusa frieze displayed in Corfu’s archaeological museum (Σκλαβοβισντς, 2014).

Following the Ottoman conquest of mainland Greece, the islands were inundated by religious painters who developed a significantly western style of iconography (dubbed the Ionian school).
The main sources of goods in the Ionian Islands are:
1. Agriculture (olive cultivation, viticulture)
2. Livestock farming (cheese making)
3. Fishing
4. Bee-keeping

Ionian Islands’ economy is mainly based on agriculture that is different from island to island. Their principal agricultural products are oil, grapes, wine, greens, garden produce, currant, citrus fruits, melons, watermelons, fruits and dried fruits (Anogiatis, 2004). During the Venetian occupation, there was a great interest on the cultivation of olive trees, whereas the bacchanal emblems on the coins once existing in Corfu, Zante and Lefkada testify to the residents’ occupation with viticulture. Agricultural activities form an integral part of the culture and the history of each place and its residents (Belia, 1986 & Μοσχόπολος, 1988).

The rural landscape of Kerkrya with its olive groves on the slopes of the hills is alternated with the shores and the beaches forming an unparallel landscape with a unique infinite beauty.

The cultivated olive types are “Asprolia”, “Corfu”, “Mavrolia” and “Lianolia”. Specifically, the local cultivar “Lianolia” (or “Korfolia” or “Ladolia Corfu”) has been traditionally cultivated on the island of Corfu for centuries and it is a cultivar adapted to the particular soil and climate conditions of Corfu. This is the reason why the “Lianola” cultivar is a valuable genetic resource that deserves to be protected and be exploited because it can produce high quality olive oil, such as “St. Matthew’s Corfu olive oil”, which has been certified as PGI olive oil.

The Zakynthian olive groves are renowned for the cultivation of olive oil which has been an integral part of the island’s economy since the age of Homer. The long tradition of the olive oil cultivation in conjunction with the particular weather conditions (sunshine, soil moisture during the critical periods of fruiting and ripening, as well as the relatively high humidity of the atmosphere have a positive effect on the growth of the olive fruit trees), and favour the production of the prestigious olive oil with features that are not found in any other region.

The Zakynthian olive oil is produced from the olive types of the “Koroneiki” and “Local Lianolia”. It has excellent quality and it has been registered as a PGI product since 1998 (Arvanitakis, 2000)

An excellent quality olive oil produced from Kefalonia’s olive groves. The composition of Kefallinian land soil and with its specific climatic conditions create suitable conditions for the growth of olives. The olive oil stands out for its quality and taste which is considered unique.

The Olive oil production in Kefalonia is transferred from generation to generation and the cultivation of the olive tree, the olive collection and the fruit processing for the production of olive oil are still harvested in a traditional way known only by the Kefallinians. Thereby, the outcome of this delicious olive oil is of exceptional quality, such as the certified PGI olive oil “Kefalonia”.

The cultivated olives grown on the island of Kefalonia are: “Thiako” (mainly in Ithaki), “Koroneiki” and “Lianolia” (or “Korfolia”).

At the same time, the Ionians share common characteristics as regards livestock farming. The main characteristics of livestock farming in the Ionian Islands are:
- Free agricultural holding
- Animal housing (folds, sheep pens) and places for producing and storing cheese products
- Sheep-shearing during May

A farmer faces everyday problems and difficulties that mainly have to do with animal diseases. The most important works he has to do is watching the herd, milking, shearing and cheese making. The starting points of the pastoral life are the feast days of St. Demetrius (when farmers come down from the mountain to the pasture) and of St. George (when they go up to the mountain pastures). Feta, Kefalotyri and Mizythra are the main types of cheese produced in Kefalonia. Graviera, Mizythra and Ladotyri are made in Zante, Salami, Feta, Ladotyri and Cave Aged Graviera in Lefkada, while Corfu is characterized by its butter, Salado and Noumboulo (types of salami).

The honey produced in the Ionian Islands is a natural organic product that tastes great and has an ideal density, without being at all processed. Thyme honey, which is their commodity product, has an intense aroma and is harvested in late July and early August.

Fishing is until today developing in the Ionian Islands. Fishermen either own a boat or a trawl or work on another fishing vessel. In the past, fishermen used to sell their own fish, by putting them inside baskets and carrying them around. Some fish, like cods, herrings, sardines, octopuses and bonitos, were salted, in order not to get rotten.

Traditional livestock products, like milk, cheese and meat (pork, ovine, goat and poultry meat) have been priceless nutritional treasures, mostly thanks to their quality, their nutritional value and their culinary supremacy. Hunting has also been a way of finding food in harsh times. Thanks to the rich fauna of the Ionian Islands, which consists mainly of poultry, hares and rabbits, residents were able to experiment and create new recipes for these types of food.

The food of the Ionian Islands is strongly linked to each island’s particular history. Corfu, for example, was never occupied by the Turks, and retains traditional Italian, Spanish and Greek recipes. Pasta is a common specialty there, as are Italian-inspired lasagne-like concoctions. The need for food storage led people devise another cooking method, called Savoro. Savoro (it. Pesce in saor) refers to the storage of fish and vegetables using vinegar, olive oil or salt with caper and rosemary. Bread is also a basic food here: There are different types of bread, depending on the type of wheat used for making it. A great number of customs, superstitions and sayings are related to bread and its preparation: rural housewives were always doing their best to make tasty Christmas cakes and loafs, using wheat flour and adding herbs and sugar in the dough, before giving
it various shapes and sprinkling it with sesame seeds (Arvanitakis, 2002).

For example, broccoli marks the ending of Advent Fast, fish is eaten on Palm Sunday and lentil soup at St. Donatos fair in Lefkada (August 6th). In St. Spiridon day in Corfu (December 26th) people offer traditional Greek doughnuts to visitors, while they also offer sponge cake when a baby is born, aliada (mashed potatoes with garlic) on Holy Cross Day and soup with egg and lemon sauce on Christmas day. Fitoura (fried thick cream made of semolina and water) as well as pasteli (sweet made of sesame seeds and honey) are offered at fairs, whereas madolato (sweet made of honey, baked nuts and egg whites) is eaten on Carnival. Moreover, cooking accompanies significant moments of a person’s life: in Corfu, people cook octopus with rice at engagements, so that the couple endures like rice and the family grows like the octopus tentacles. In addition, in Zante, the locals offer soumada (almond milk) in marriages (Arvanitakis, 2002)

Various products of the countryside of Lefkada are used in its cuisine. Different types of pies are made: pies with sweet-smelling herbs, with rice, pasta pies (with milk, eggs, oil and cheese) and Briyani, which is made of zucchini. Traditional dishes of Lefkada: Braised rooster with spaghetti, Frygadelli (barbequed liver), Octopus cooked in flower-pot, Cod in Bianko etc.

Kefallonia is the islands’ culinary capital, known for its cheeses and meat pie (kreatopita) - a delicious combination of lamb, onions, rice, potatoes, carrots and tomatoes covered in filo. Skordalia is a delicious mezedes mainstay - it’s the origin of that familiar item on many a ’90s menu, garlic mash. Kefallonia is also an important producer of wine - the Robola de Cephalonie dry white is well worth searching out - while the sole-remaining legacy of the much-maligned British culinary palate is Corfu Town’s tsin tsn birra - ginger beer (lashings of).

**TODAY**

Over the centuries, weaving and embroidery have been important cottage industries throughout the Ionians, and today the town of Karya on Lefkada is still noted for its embroidered linens and lace work. Ceramic tableware is another local industry, particularly on Zakynthos. Other popular cultural expressions include dances performed on saints days and at weddings, again particularly in Zakynthos Island.

Religion is still integral to life in the Ionians, and the year remains centered on the festivals of the Church calendar; name days, weddings and funerals make up the other important events. The islands are dotted with hundreds of tiny churches, most of them built by individual families in the name of their selected patron saint. Traditions die hardest in the inland mountain villages, and remote Kythira remains the most unspoiled and most traditional of the islands. Tourism has made obvious inroads into traditional cultures, but high-rise resorts and yachting harbors apart, every island has religious and secular festivities that have been celebrated for hundreds of years. Today, all the islands are part of the Greek region of the Ionian Islands (Ioniioi Nisoai), except Kythera, which is part of the region of Attica.

Kerkyra has a population of 103,300 (including Paxoi), Zakynthos 40,650, Kefallonia 39,579 (including Ithaca), Lefkada 22,536, Ithaki 3,052, Kythera 3,000 and Paxi 2,438 (Hirst & Sammon 2014).

In recent decades, the islands have lost much of their population through emigration and the decline of their traditional industries, fishing and marginal agriculture. Today, their major industry is tourism. Specifically Kerkyra, with its harbor, scenery and wealth of ruins and castles, is a favorite stopping place for cruise liners. British tourists in particular are attracted through having read Gerald Durrell's evocative book *My Family and Other Animals* (1956), which describes his childhood on Kerkyra in the 1930s. The novel and movie *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* are set in Kefallonia, in which Captain Corelli is part of the Italian occupation force during the Second World War.

Cuisine of the Ionian islands in Greece is the cuisine of the region of Ionian islands. It has influences, more than any other part of Greece, from the Italian cuisine due to the long-time Venetian domination. The cuisine of the Ionian Islands offers great specialties, such as Pastitsada and the veil Sofrito of Corfu, the rooster ragu and custard pie of Lefkada, the fig pie of Ithaca and the meat pie of Kefalonia.

**CONCLUSION**

The history of the Ionian Islands has been one of foreign occupations and this is reflected in the architecture and the culture of the Islands. Corfu is a perfect example of where East meets West with aspects of both ancient and modern, classical and exotic. “The city was Venetian until 1780… nearest the sea there is the most beautiful esplanade in the world”, wrote Edward Lear in 1848.

Many rural customs and eating habits of the Ionian Islands originate from their centuries-old traditions. They are linked to the farmers’ concern on the land’s fruitage. Nowadays, due to the technological evolution, some Ionian traditions are extinct. They may still exist in remote mountain areas, but in that case they fulfill the purpose they traditionally had.

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