THE ROLE OF PERSONAL NAMES
ON NAXOS, GREECE

Visitors to Greece are often struck by the small number of personal
names in currency. Even tourists lured there on package holidays,
which insulate them from local culture, have been heard to remark
that 'most men are called either Nikos or Kostas'. This hyperbole
may, in itself, serve as evidence for the attitude of mild dispar-
agement with which (European) foreigners view the redundancy of
names in Greece. It is as if the Greeks were trapped in a state of
undifferentiatedness from which we ourselves have escaped.[1]
Similar critical remarks are addressed to Greek cuisine which is
said to be quite all right, so far as it goes: Max Headroom does
not stand alone in spoofing the daily fare of Greek salad and
moussaka. In these instances lack of variety alone signals the
'lack of fit' (Ardener 1971: xvii) between our culture and Greek
culture. It is the peculiar enaction of familiar practices that
attracts interest. Such is often the case in the anthropological
study of European societies which lack impressively exotic and
anomalous customs (Just 1973).

In point of fact, the pool of Greek personal names is roughly
the same size as in most other European countries. The difference
rests in the frequency with which certain names are bestowed. The
question thus becomes not, 'Don't the Greeks have a larger selec-
tion of names?', but rather, 'Why, given a wide range of names, do

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they repeatedly select the same names?' This question has been
dealt with numerous times in the ethnographic literature on Greece
(e.g. Hardie 1923; Bialor 1967; Herzfeld 1982; and see Just's art-
icle elsewhere in this issue) and it will be touched upon only
briefly in the following discussion of naming practices on the
Cycladic island of Naxos.[2] The main objective here will be to con-
sider a broader variety of names and means of reference than just
baptismal names. These will be studied in the order in which they
are applied to individuals during the course of life. This enables
us to see how Christian names are juxtaposed with other sorts of
names in an overall naming system which is many-tiered. This part-
icular approach also reveals how all these different names, both in
themselves and in their use, provide a commentary on the individ-
ual's development.

Infants on Naxos, as in most parts of Greece, are not baptized
immediately after birth. Parents may wait two to three years or
even longer before allowing a godparent to bestow a Christian name
upon them in the elaborate church ceremony. In almost all of these
cases the eventual name of the child is known to both parents and
the community at large because the first four children are named
after their grandparents in a specified order. This custom direct-
ly accounts for the repetition of personal names. According to the
view of the Church, which is echoed by most villagers, it is the
godparent's prerogative to select a name for the child. In prac-
tice this option is rarely exercised toward unexpected ends, and
children emerge from the ceremony of baptism with the name which
everyone anticipated but refrained from uttering until that moment.
     Baptismal names are sacred and for the most part shared in
common with a saint or holy figure of the Orthodox tradition. With
the exception of a few names taken from illustrious ancient fore-
runners (e.g. Perikles) people receive the names of those whose
images may be depicted on icons. Just as the ineffable formless-
ness of Divinity makes Him an unsuitable subject for iconographic
representation, so there are no humans named after God. The Bible
indeed states that humans were created 'in the image of God'
(*kat'eikona Theou*) but this iconicity is generally understood as
only a partial and refracted resemblance. In names, the light of
Heaven filters down to the human community through the prism of the
saints, who are viewed as closer and more similar to Divinity.
     In the period before baptism villagers do not call infants by
any proper name. This is not necessarily the practice in Athens,
where I have heard unbaptized children addressed by their eventual
name. On Naxos an infant is called simply *moro* ('baby'), a neuter

noun, or else *bebe* in the case of boys and *beba* in the case of girls. These names represent the new-born child as barely incorporated into humanity. They are either neuter beings or else distinguished only by gender, male-being or female-being. In the case of *bebe/beba* the foreign provenance of the terms perhaps underscores this conviction that the child does not yet belong to the Greek Orthodox community. In a society where baptismal names evince both a sacralizing and humanizing dimension these circumlocutions train attention on the value and importance of the avoided forms.

In this early stage the child may also be called a *drakos* ('snake, dragon'), a designation associating it with animals, the supernatural or even the Devil, instead of humanity (cf. Alexakis 1985). People say that this ensures the strength and good health of the infant.[3] In general, parents do not fear the consequences of postponing baptism. This is surprising given the importance of baptism in establishing the child's chances for salvation, not to mention simple membership in the Christian community. Should an infant fall ill or suffer serious injury, effort is made to baptize it before it dies. In these cases it is usually possible to call a priest, but in emergencies there exists a practice of *aerovaptisma* or air baptism, where the child is held in the air by a lay person and consecrated in the name of the Holy Trinity. Children who die without the sacrament of baptism are thought to go neither to heaven nor hell, but to wander about in the space between heaven and earth. In some parts of Greece they are said to manifest themselves to parents and other close relatives or else to torment the priest who neglected to baptize them.[4]

The forms of reference used for infants may be seen to express the marginal and unindividuated state which such young children occupy in contrast to the Christian community which so names them. They are variously animals/spirits, neuter beings, or at most

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[3] This expression could be called apotropaic, but that seems rather a general and worn-out term. A locution such as *drakos* is precisely the opposite of a euphemism; instead of calling something awful by a pleasant name, it calls something good by an awful name. A new term, 'cacophemism' (from Ancient Greek *kakophemia*), might usefully be introduced into English.

[4] In former times, but less so today, the belief in *teloneia* was widespread in Greece. This word means literally 'toll houses' but was strongly associated with the souls of unbaptized children. Theologians, beginning with Origen, held that after death the soul encounters a number (sometimes twenty-two) of customs houses at which the person's 'moral baggage' was scrutinized. Some situated these toll houses in the seven heavens leading to paradise (Every 1976; Dieterich 1926: 4). More generally, *teloneia* were thought to be astral phenomena such as falling stars. The idea that unbaptized infants also hovered between heaven and earth may explain the conflation of these two seemingly unrelated ideas (cf. Politis 1904: 1236; Dieterich 1925: 19).

gender-specified beings. It is not until baptism that the child
becomes a proper human being, a *Khristianos*. At this rite, which
is preceded by up to four exorcisms, the child is forcibly separa-
ted from the realm of the demonic and then 'sealed' in the ceremony
of chrismation as an inviolable container filled with Holy Spirit.
It is perhaps worth noting that this corps of demons, which lurks
just beyond humanity, opposes the Christian community by its very
namelessness (Detienne 1978). In numerous exorcism texts (for
possessed adults) the priest is enjoined foremost of all to dis-
cover the *name* of the demon causing the damage. One such sixteenth-
century text records the following directions to the officiating
cleric:

> Instructions for those possessed by demons: How to ask so that
> the demon will tell you its name. At this point seek to find
> out the name of the evil spirit. Seek to make him tell you:
> how many are with him, and to which class he belongs, and what
> the name of his leader is; under which power and authority he
> is; in which place he dwells; to whom he is subordinate; when
> he comes out; and what sign does he make when he comes out of
> the person? Be mindful when you are enquiring. Say, 'In the
> name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; see and give.'[5]

It is precisely the power of holy names which causes the otherwise
nameless demons to identify themselves and surrender. In Orthodoxy
the tendency of names is toward implosion; all beings incline to-
ward one name. This trajectory is evident, for example, in the
term 'Holy Trinity' where, according to the theology of the Ortho-
dox Church, three persons (*prosopa*) share only one essence (*ousia*) -
and one name. This tendency toward onomastic singularity (which
parallels the spiritual quest of humanity to merge with God) also
appears in the practice of naming a vast populace after a limited
number of saints. Demons, on the other hand, tend toward entropy
and indistinguishability. To succeed in naming them at all is to
exercise control over them.

At baptism only a personal name is bestowed, and this name,
never the family name, will be used in church to refer to the
individual. The Christian name allows the child to be recorded in
the Book of Life; it founds the possibility of salvation. In
Greece, at least up until recently, a certificate of baptism was
the equivalent of a birth certificate. Before the state every per-
son has three names: their baptismal name, the name of their father
in the genitive form, and the name of their family. For men the
family name takes the nominative case while for women it is placed
in the genitive form indicating that females are 'of' a particular
family in contradistinction to the men who 'are' the family. The
Church insists on the personal name in its proper form, the one
stating connection to a saint. Someone commonly known as Manolis
or Manos becomes Emmanouil in church; a Mitsos or Dimitris becomes

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[5] The full text of this exorcism is transcribed and translated in
my doctoral thesis (Stewart 1987: Appendix II).

Dimitrios. In keeping with this saintly orientation, individual birthdays are not observed. One celebrates on the feast day of one's saint, usually by receiving visitors at home who drink to one's health and long life.

In Apeiranthos the first son ideally takes the name of the paternal grandfather, the second son that of the maternal grandfather. The first daughter is named after the maternal grandmother and the second after the paternal grandmother. Subsequent children (a rarity nowadays) may be named after a grandparent's sibling or a selected saint. This naming system differs slightly from the pattern found primarily, but not exclusively in northern Greece. There, the first daughter receives her father's mother's name. Only with the birth of a second son or daughter does the mother's side gain recognition. The naming pattern on Naxos, which may be found on most of the Aegean islands, corresponds to the dowry practice whereby the bride provides the house in which the newly-wed couple will live. In northern Greece the groom traditionally provides the house. Women on Naxos thus occupy a distinctive role which is recognized in the naming system. The first daughter inherits the family house which in many cases was the house built for her homonymous grandmother. Below it will be seen that property and possessions are not the only inheritance of grandchildren.

Kinship is reckoned bilaterally, but with a slight bias toward the patriline. Second cousins with different last names (i.e. with a uterine link) are allowed to marry much more easily than if they share the same surname. When asked to define the term *soï* people agreed that this referred to one's ascending relatives, both through the father and through the mother - one's cognatic kindred. In common usage, however, the term *soï* refers mainly to the father's side. If one wishes to refer to the mother's side, one says specifically 'the mother's kindred' (*to soï tis manas*). The father's kindred is, in terms coined by the Prague School of linguistics, unmarked and generalized while the mother's side is marked and must be referred to explicitly. In the widest unmarked sense, *soï* may refer not just to relatives ascendant through the father, but to all those sharing the same surname. As it excludes the mother's side this is a narrower definition, but it may be a much wider designation if a great many villagers happen to share that last name. In other contexts, when asked if all people named Glezos (a common family name) were related to each other, villagers answered flatly 'No'. No one can remember back far enough to establish an apical ancestor and in some cases they seem to be quite certain there never was one. Generally speaking, people know very little about ancestors more than two generations ascendant. The advent of photography may change that.

Legal and ecclesiastical names both operate indexically (Herzfeld 1982: 290). They align a person with groups and classes of beings determined by governmental and cosmic orders well beyond the village. Such names say little about the qualities of individual persons; they are low on connotative content. At the village level formal names are hardly ever used for the indirect referential purpose for which bureaucracies seem to have designed them. Asking

for someone by their proper name (Christian + family name) baffles
villagers unless they have some contextualizing knowledge to draw
on (such as having seen you together with that person the day be-
fore). They know and refer to each other by distinctive diminutive
forms of the Christian name (there was only one Mitsakas, from the
Christian name Dimitrios) or else by a variety of nicknames. Form-
al names are known, but they do not have the referential force and
accuracy of informal names. Knowledge of the wide variety of nick-
names, indeed the possession of one or more sobriquets oneself,
forms a part of village identity. Foreigners are not expected to
possess any mastery of local nicknames, just as they are not expect-
ed to understand the distinctive village dialect. Nicknames operate
on a village-internal level and state autonomy from broader church
and state organizations.

As the villagers all know each other from birth, no ritual of
introduction has come into being in the village. Contact with
foreigners has always been sporadic in this central mountain village,
and those outsiders who did visit the village usually did so in the
company of a local resident. This villager would then be respons-
ible for explaining to co-villagers who the stranger was. Rarely
do people approach the stranger directly to ask questions. The
foreigner's identity thus passes immediately into the custody of
the village community in a process similar to that involved in the
creation of the villagers' own idiosyncratic nicknames. In both
cases, identity is apportioned according to collective opinion and
may be considered a statement of village control (cf. Pina-Cabral
1984).

Where baptismal names work according to a principle of index-
icality, nicknames (*paratsouklia*)[6] metaphorically convey a greater
degree of descriptive information about their bearers; they are
'individualizing rather than classificatory' (McDowell 1981: 16).
Usually these names are ironic, if not insulting, and people are
not meant to be aware of their own nicknames. Use of the nickname
in direct address is a form of affront. They are used mainly to
refer to a person not present. Exceptions to this rule are those
nicknames which simply append the surname to the Christian name, a
paractice also found on Crete: Phlorios Glezos becomes Glezophlórios
and Iannis Galanis, Galanoiánnis. The more insulting nicknames may
exploit personality or physical peculiarities in an ironic fashion.
One man with a megalomaniacal bent was called Onassis, while a
young man who wore stylish clothes was called Markas ('brand new').
The carpenter with whom I lived drank and tended to quarrel violent-
ly. He was called 'Little Saint'. A tall, thin man was given the

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[6] According to Bernard (1968-69: 66) the word *paratsoukli* comes
from a combination of Greek and Turkish formants and means 'pot-
handle'. As he points out, this is reminiscent of the American
frontier usage of the word 'handle' to mean nickname. CB radio
jargon has recently revived this sense of 'handle'. The retention
of a Turkish word here correlates with Herzfeld's (1987: 116) ob-
servation that self-knowledge is often encoded and negotiated in a
linguistic register marked by Turkish lexemes.

name 'Two-Drachma Piece' (Diphrangos) because he switched from wear-
ing the traditional costume of breeches to European-style clothing
(called *phrangika* 'Frankish'). He was so tall that he did not just
amount to a Frank, but to a double Frank (*di-phrangos*).

    At death the progressive individuation discernible in the var-
ious naming conventions is gradually reversed. That grandchildren
carry on the names of members of the older generation when these
latter go to the grave is one source of contentment for the elderly.
Grandchildren inherit houses and property which, ideally, they will
keep up and earn a living from, just as their grandparents did. Of
course, with the younger generation emigrating to Athens in pursuit
of higher education and civil service jobs, this ideal is increas-
ingly going unrealized. As yet, however, these economic and demo-
graphic changes have not weakened the conviction that descending
alternate generations perpetually resurrect each other (Hardie 1923;
Kenna 1976: 31).[7] The father of a young man who died while in the
army bitterly lamented the fact that his son had not married and
had bequeathed nothing (*den aphise tipota*). He pointed to the
son's photograph and to his uniform which he kept hanging in his
coffee-house and said, 'If you don't leave anything, you don't
count.'

    No one denies that the child inherits much from its parents,
but this is little remarked. In discussions of personality traits
and family resemblances the primary point of comparison is with the
homonymous grandparent. Even if there is no great physical similar-
ity, subtle traits such as one's gait or laugh are singled out as
specific inheritances. In order to illustrate this principle of
generational alternation one woman recited the following proverb:
'From the thorn comes the rose, and from the rose comes the thorn.'
This perceived connection between alternate generations may also
help us to understand why houses and landholdings are so infrequent-
ly sold. At any given moment in time these objects are suspended

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[7] It is interesting to note, without insisting upon any historical
connection, Benveniste's observations arising from his study of the
words for grandson and grandfather in various Indo-European
languages (1973: 190ff.). He found that the term for grandson means
'little grandfather' in Old High German, Old Slavonic and Old
French. According to him: 'In many societies we find the belief
that a newly born child is always the reincarnation of an ancestor
going back a certain number of generations. They even believe
that, strictly speaking, there is no birth, because the ancestor
has not disappeared, he has only been hidden away. In general,
the process of reappearance is from grandfather to grandson. When
a son is born to somebody, it is the grandfather of the child who
"reappears", and this is why they have the same name. The young
child is, as it were, a diminuitive representation of the ancestor
which it incarnates; it is a "little grandfather", who is born
again after an interval of a generation' (ibid. : 191). Following
Benveniste's lead, Szemerényi has proposed for the Indo-European
word for 'grandson', *nepōs*, an original meaning '(little) master
grandfather' (1978: 51).

between past and future generations; those holding them at present
are, in a sense, only tending them and it is not their right, or
rather, it is just not right to sell them off.

A grandchild is said to 'hear' a particular grandparent's name.
Maria[2] hears Maria[1]'s name all her life, even after Maria[1] has gone
to the grave - which, assuredly, will be before Maria[3] is born. By
then, Maria[1], the original bearer of the name, will be forgotten.
The same naming system which resurrects one also, in time, consigns
one to oblivion (Herzfeld 1982: 292). It is true that names may be
used to remember a person after their death and even to assist their
soul on its journey to heaven (Danforth 1982). A surviving spouse
or a child may take to church a loaf of bread (called *prosphora*
'offerings') over which the priest will say blessings reciting the
names of family memebrs, those living as well as deceased. Morsels
of this bread may be used by the priest in preparing the Eucharist.
Likewise, during the year on a number of occasions called Soul
Saturdays, the relatives may ask the priest to read a prayer for
their deceased by the family tomb, but they usually concentrate
only on those who have died fairly recently; the others are con-
sidered 'gone'. They have come to rest in a place near to God.
Among the living they are no longer referred to by name, just as
'the forgiven' (*synkhoremenos/i*).

The role of names on Naxos can best be summarized by reference to
an Apeiranthos proverb: 'Everyone has their own [traits] as well as
those they inherit' ('*O kathaenas ekhei to diko dou kai to patroo
patrooniko dou*' [Zevgoli-Glezou 1963: 98]). This much is conceded
although most individuals would prefer to consider themselves as
unique. In one male villager's view everyone has their own tastes
(*gousta*), their own good humour (*kephi*) and their own character
(*khoui*). These are gained and demonstrated in the course of matur-
ation and they determine a person even more strongly than inherited
traits. This conviction points up the strong admiration for indiv-
iduality and uniqueness present in village thought. When a person
dies, it is said, their soul departs with the first exhalation but
their idiosyncratic 'character' not until the third and final gasp.

Consistent with the broad outline I have given, personal names
on Naxos can be said to express a commentary on the phases through
which an individual passes in the course of a lifetime. In so
doing they embody a tension between the individual and the social
which is similar to that recognized by villagers in relation to
their own lives. It might be said that, in this last regard, the
role of names on Naxos is not far different from what it is in any
number of societies. Be this as it may, the study of Naxiote nam-
ing practices does afford some very real insights at the level of
local cultural expectations concerning ontogeny and eschatology,
the processes of coming into being and then finally coming to rest
in the world beyond.

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