Cross-border marriages and the formation of Transnational

Families: A case study of Greek-German couples in Athens

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Newly-created social links between people across national borders due to international migration and tourism are some of the most notable features of globalization. One of the consequences of easier access to other countries and increased intercultural communication is the increased incidence of bi-national marriages. Figures in Germany, for example, indicate that in 1960, every 25th marriage was "mixed" between a German and a non-German partner, whereas in 1995 one in every seven newly-married couples was bi-national (Beck-Gernsheim 1998:154).

The growing number of bi-national marriages in the European Union prompts a number of questions: how is the family unit defined, how are gender relations organized, how do family members communicate and interact across the border. The interesting point is that cross-border marriages link kin groups of different national origins to a new social unit and create affiliations and obligations across different nation states. Partners living in "mixed marriages" have to develop new strategies to cope with the dispersed family network and to organize interaction with family members (affinal and consanguinal) within and beyond the borders.

To explore the social experience of bi-national marriages and the formation of transnational families, the paper will focus on the experiences of Greek-German couples, especially on the narratives of German women married to Greeks and living in Athens. The paper looks at the opportunities and constraints faced by both partners living in mixed marriages in a gender specific way. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the German diaspora of Athens and on life stories collected among German women in Greece.

Introduction

First, some background information concerning the social context of Greek-German intermarriages in Greece will be given. At the turn of the millennium, Greece is an urbanized country with 11 million inhabitants of whom 59 percent live in urban centres (National Statistical Service of Greece 1999: 45). Compared to other Balkan states the population of Greece is characterized by homogeneity, since Greek nationals formed 95.5 percent of the country's population in 1991. This homogeneous picture is confirmed by religious affiliation: 97.5 percent of the country's inhabitants define themselves as Greek Orthodox. The overwhelming dominance of the Greek Orthodox element in the population's composition has

to be explained by historical factors, especially by the exchange of minorities in the Balkans after World War One (Clogg 1992: 101ff).

A new trend is changing the picture of a rather homogeneous population: the new immigration into Greece, which started after the fall of the Iron Curtain. After 1990 a significant population change occurred caused by the massive arrival of foreign migrants to the urban centres as well as the agricultural periphery of the country. The National Statistical Service states that in the beginning of the nineties 165,528 non-Greek foreigners were registered as holders of residence permits (National Statistical Service of Greece 1999: 90), making up 1.6 percent of the country's population. But those census figures don't reflect reality any more. According to recent evaluation of different Greek sources (Lauth Bacas 2002), the publicly known number of immigrants in Greece has increased to 1,025,100 persons (or 9.37 percent of the country's population) at the end of 2001. In other words: After the fall of the Iron Curtain the country's population has changed impressively, with about 10 percent of them now being immigrants.

Another trend is deeply affecting the Greek society: its 11 million inhabitants are faced with another 12 million tourists per year (in 2001, Greek National Statistical Service). Among the foreign visitors, who come mainly from Western European countries, Germans form a majority of 26 percent, followed by tourists from Britain (22 percent). The fact that Germans form one of the major tourist groups arriving in Greece but also a group of 60,000 foreigners living in Greece gives a first hint on the connection between tourism, transnational migration and cross-border marriage.

Bi-nationally mixed marriages in Greece

Given the fact that Greece is a major tourist destination in the Mediterranean and has changed into a host country for immigration during the last decade, the intermarriages between Greek citizens and non-Greek nationals have increased in parallel. The occurrence of bi-national mixed marriages has to be understood as a new phenomenon in the host society linked to processes of social and economic change, globalization and international migration.

The paper will provide further information on cross-border mixed marriages. The phenomenon of intermarriages can be observed in the urban centres as well as the rural regions of Greece. According to the first findings of an ongoing Ph.D. research project on the Greek island of Korfu, in the island's capital bi-national marriages formed 12 percent of all marriages during the years 1990-1999 (Papavasiliou 2000). My own data and provisional research in the wedding register of Athens shows the occurrence of two different types of cross-border marriages:

a)   Mixed marriages between (mostly female) migrants from western industrialized countries (like Germany and Britain)and Greek citizens.

b)   Mixed marriages between migrants from former socialist countries and Greek citizens (Two types occur: Albanian males marrying Greek women; Bulgarian/Romanian/Moldavian women marrying Greek men)

The position of the in-marrying partner and his/her legal status in the host society is completely different according to his/her country of origin. The difference between EU migrants and non-EU migrants is striking. The most important aspect is that EU citizens have the right to obtain a residence permit which cannot be withdrawn after divorce. Because of this secured social and legal position in the host country, EU citizens are the most privileged category of migrants in Greece. According to the new Greek immigration law (2001), migrants from former socialist countries are granted a residence permit after marriage which will expire after a separation or divorce (The offspring of a cross-border marriage have Greek citizenship, if one parent is Greek. In case of a divorce from her Greek husband, the non-EU mother of small children has a temporary residence permit granted until the Greek children come of age. Then her residence permit expires.) The different legal framework sets different basic conditions for every-day life and future risks for EU and non-EU partners in mixed marriages. Choosing a foreign partner is a question not only of love and attraction, but also of rational choice, of perceived risks and gains on both sides (Varro 2000).

Intermarriage between Greeks and non-Greeks can be understood as one of the main mechanisms of social integration of foreigners. Juridically, intermarriage works as a status passage for non-EU migrants, since formal residence rights are granted by the alien's police after marriage to a Greek citizen (In the past, until 1984, a foreign women marrying a Greek

man received Greek citizenship automatically - not vice versa - and disappeared from the alien's statistics completely. See Lauth Bacas 2002: 119).

Socially, intermarriage works as a status passage as well: It functions as a strong and effective mechanism for turning a stranger into "one of us" in the eyes of a specific kin group. Not only the Greek spouse but also the Greek in-laws social obligations and acquire responsibilities towards "our groom" or "our bride" after the establishment of a ritual bond through marriage. Thus significant differences can be observed in the attitudes and behaviour of a Greek family towards a (for example) German woman being married in church to a family member and having the offspring baptized with the name of the Greek grandfather on one hand and the social perception of a German women living together with her Greek boyfriend and denying the christening of a common child.

The problem of the integration of the foreign spouse into the Greek host society was investigated in two studies by Papageorgiou (1989) and Mey-Michas (1989). The first study (Papageorgiou 1989) underlines the differences of the "integration carriers" of a group a German women married to Greeks in Rhodes. After living on the island of Rhodes for twenty years, the least integrated speak hardly any Greek, whereas the most integrated are not only fluent in Greek but manage successfully their own tourist enterprises. The research results of Mey-Michas (1989) stressed the importance of economic status and access to resources (education, income, professional status) for the successful integration of a non-Greek spouse into the host society.

Research results argue that bi-national marriages in general experience more internal difficulties and more social sanctions and conflicts with their surroundings than other couples (Thode-Arora 1999: 244ff). The intensified social pressure and psychological stress might lead to two types of solution: either to divorce or to a deeper understanding of the other partner and his/her background and culture (Thode-Arora 1999: 315, 420). In successful mixed marriages each partner tends to perform the role of a "gatekeeper" of a foreign cultural context with different values, with different codes of conduct (Waldis 1998). In this cases, mixed marriage may eventually function as a "bridge between different cultures" (Vucinic-Nescovic 2002).

Greek-German couples in Athens

The marriage migration of German women (and men) to Greece and the formation of transnational families based in Greece is an interesting case in point. It signifies the reversal of the traditional migration movement from the Southern European periphery to the West European centres which characterized migration in Europe for decades. There have been a few cases of German women marrying in Greece in the 1960s and 1970, since a few members of the German diaspora in Athens are living in Greece for over thirty years. But a majority of them arrived after the 1980s, after tourism in Greece had developed rapidly. In 1974, the first German women's association was founded in Athens in order to provide information to other newcomers and to form German-speaking support groups in various parts of Athens and other cities of Greece.

Today, Germans in Greece form a minority of about 10,000 registered immigrants (with residence permits). Although other migration movements are predominantly male, in the German-Greek case women form a majority (56 percent) of the registered migrants (Lauth Bacas 2001: 119). Another estimated 50,000 Germans are living and working in Greece without official work permits or residence permits (Lauth Bacas 2001:119). Due to the "Schengen agreement" residents of EU countries are able to enter the country without passport control; due to the weak state control mechanisms foreigners in Greece are able to stay in the country without visa or permits; due to the well-established informal sector in the Greek economy the chances of finding housing and a job on a short-term or word-of-mouth basis are high. These features of the Greek society and economy work as an important factor in supporting immigration and marriage migration to Greece since they open up niches for action and manoeuvring between two countries, as the following example will show.

Karin, as I will name my interview partner, decided to migrate from a provincial town in northern Germany to the island of Crete in 1995. Her story shows that marriage migration and the formation of a transnational family has to be under-stood as a dynamic process based on acts of negotiation, of balancing different claims and obligations in the old and the new environment. Her story is characterized by episodes of back-and-forth-travelling, of various periods living in Germany and again in Greece until the decision of a definite settlement in Crete is taken. Here is her story of how the transnational love relationship began:

In summer 1989 I spent my holidays in Greece, on the island of Crete. I was a single then - again, after separating from a previous relationship. On the beach I noticed every afternoon the arrival of a dark tanned guy who drove with his jeep to the very end of the bay to have a swim. One of those days I met him again during dinner together with another German girlfriend and her Greek boyfriend. In the beginning, I didn't like him very much, because he was wearing old-fashioned dark glasses. But then I found his eyes very fascinating. After my girlfriend and her companion had left the restaurant, to two of us went on to another bar, had a couple of drinks and went on talking and talking. We became lovers that night, I still remember me coming back to the hotel early in the morning.

Her new boyfriend, Kostas, was a civil engineer working in one of the island's bigger companies. They dated daily until Karin's holidays finished. Back in Germany she started writing letters to Kostas, "in horrible English which was hardly understandable", as she remembers now. Two months later Kostas visited her in her hometown in Germany where she was working as a medical assistant. At that time Karin was thirty years old, with a safe job and an apartment she shared with two colleagues. She was about to start further professional training, which would improve her job prospects, when Kostas arrived on the scene and things changed. Three months after Kostas' visit in Germany they met again during a short trip to France. One month later Karin arranged unpaid leave, abandoning the training programme, and went to Athens for a period of two months, staying with Kostas and also looking for a new job. Since she couldn't find work with a satisfactory salary in Greece, she went back to her German hometown, earned money for a few months, went back to Greece again. In the next three years both partners followed this model of a cross-border relationship: visiting each other during the holidays, sharing time together whenever possible, but being economically still based in two different societies. Karin was earning money in an industrialized country with a per capita income nearly three times as high as in Greece (Lauth Bacas 2002: 42) and perceived herself as an independent professional who had moved beyond the borders of her provincial hometown. Indeed, her income was sufficient enough for extended holidays, which she spent happily with a Greek lover in a les expensive country.

Two socio-economic processes made this kind of cross-border relationship possible: First, Greece and Germany had become more interconnected in the last two decades. The

globalization of the markets, the modernized transport and communication systems together with a growing tourist industry (offering f.e. cheap air transport) offered better opportunities to realize cross-border contacts. Second, the individualization processes in Western European societies set young women like Karin free from traditional values and expectations on how to organize their life. Neither the safe haven of marriage nor ambitious career aspirations were one of her top priorities at that time.

The new social and cultural environment in Greece which Karin entered with Kostas as a "gatekeeper" (Waldis 1998) was not an obstacle to the growing love relationship. On the contrary: The new cultural environment was perceived as an exciting context which offered a variety of new experiences. Being in love functioned as a buffer to what would otherwise be a series of cultural shocks (Lauth Bacas 1994: 14) and together with the continued travelling back and forth, slowly but surely enabled Karin to become well acquainted with the different language and culture.

Things changed again when Karin became pregnant after four years. Karin and Kostas decided to become a family, a transnational family in this case. But the couple had more choices than Greek couples have concerning the social welfare and the maternity regulations. Thus Karin kept her job and her appartment in Germany until the baby was born (also in Germany). After the maternity leave she quit and moved to Crete, where Kostas had rented a little village house. She continued to rent a room of her own in her old apartment in Germany in order to keep a door to her old home open. Moving with a newborn baby to a romantic Greek island was a big step which simultaneously evoked to need for a safety anchor back in the old environment. After her second daughter was born two years later, the four-person family with only one (male) bread-winner could not afford to pay the rent in Germany any more and Karin finally settled in Greece. She is now caring for the children and has not re-entered the Greek job market. The family recently moved to a suburb of Athens. The bilingual children became enrolled in a Greek primary school because they intend to stay in Greece permanently. But she visits her family in Germany twice a year and takes part in various activities of the German diaspora in Athens.

Karin's case story is typical of many others because after her permanent settlement in Greece she kept the connections to kin and friends in Germany. The interesting point is that cross-border marriages link kin groups of different national origin to a new social unit and create

affiliations and obligations across different nation states. Partners living in "mixed marriages" have to develop new strategies to cope with the dispersed family network and to organize interaction with family members (affinal and consanguinal) within and beyond the borders.

The term "being married to two places" is used by the German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, to characterize this globalization process on the personal level. He describes the strategy of modern global players to create a feeling of being at home at several places which he calls "transnational spatial polygamy" (Beck 1997: 129). But the pretentious experience of globalizing one's biography also includes additional costs in the family budget, for example due to higher telephone bills and travel expenses. The family climate develops completely differently to those cases where the additional costs are seen as affordable or as an additional burden to everyday family life. In those cases where the Greek husband has some knowledge of German and is able to keep contacts with German affinal kin or German friends, he perceives the additional costs in connection with additional gains: vivid social contacts to Germany enable his children to improve their German, and allow them to be exposed to different cultural environments, the flow of information, presents and goods brought from visits in Germany enrich the Greek based household on the long run.

Since the social organisation of every day life in Greece is still very much based on kinship, the in-marrying foreign spouse has to cope with a new cultural reality. Given the fact that state institutions in Greece are weak and state-based social security systems are often malfunctioning, relations to kin are seen as an important part of the social network of every person in rural and urban Greece. Kin are the persons one can trust (being honest to one another is a rule in kinship relations but not outside); kin are the persons one can rely on and ask for solidarity and financial help (important in a country where the services offered by the banking system are still on an archaic level). The enlargement of the family network to affinal kin after marriage is seen as one of the major advantages and social gains by both parts, by the bride's and the groom's family.

In the case of a Greek-German transnational marriage, the Greek side—which takes kinship obligations seriously—meets with German counterparts (the bride's family) to whom kinship obligations are nearly non-existent. (No German father of the bride feels obliged to lend money to the Greek groom for a surgery or a shop. This might be the last thing he would think of after marrying his daughter to a foreigner.) The Greek side has to understand that

there are not only language barriers but also different cultural values and social norms dividing the newly established affinal unit. Conflicts are often reported between a Greek mother-in-law and a German daughter-in-law (Lauth Bacas 2001: 126). For example, daily 'phone calls by the mother-in-law to ask for the well-being of her son are implicitly understood by the Greek side, but they are perceived as disturbing by the German side. In general, Greek psychologists emphasize that in successful adaptation to a "foreign" culture and partner the development of specific psychological competences is needed such as patience, tolerance and the ability to find and live with compromises (Stavropoulos 1994, Papadopoulos 1997).

But conflicts between a Greek mother-in-law and a German daughter-in-law are not the only ones which occur after the establishment of a cross-border marriage. The analysis of problems between spouses in Greek-German intermarriage in Lauth Bacas (2000) and Lauth Bacas (2001) is focused on problems arising from different cultural codes. As a typical subject the question of the christening and naming of children is mentioned (Lauth Bacas 2000: 52f). Naming the children is a public expression of group membership and identity management. As participant observation in Athens reveals, typical German names (e.g. Gertrud, Hans) are avoided, international known names (e.g. Joanna, Anais, Lukas, Markus) or Greek names are preferred in transnational families. This shows a tendency of balancing different claims and traditions to find a mutual acceptable solution in the multicultural surroundings.

Another problem analysed in Lauth Bacas (2001) is the "culturalization" of gender conflicts. Problems between spouses in mixed marriage not only occur because of cultural differences but are sometimes expressed through insisting on cultural differences. Lauth Bacas (2001: 122) cites the example of a couple quarrelling over the right way to cook lentils, with olive oil (Greek version) or bacon (German version). In this case, cultural differences were instrumental in expressing gender differences and different power claims. In referring to intermarriage conflicts, the sociologists Collet and Varro (2000) argue that mixed marriages and bi-national families are faced with the necessity (and opportunity) of creating a common everyday family culture, not to eliminate, but to bridge cultural differences successfully

In line with the need to bridge cultural differences, another strategy developed by Greek-German mixed families is the construction of a "transcultural social space" where marriage

partners interact not just in the homogeneous home society or in the "bubble" of the ethnic diaspora of immigrants. In a creative approach to form a common social space both partners might choose to engage themselves in new social activities. First, transnational families tend to gravitate towards other transnational families since they share a "common fate" and basic social experiences. Those "private" family networks tend to meet and to overlap with others, creating a public Greek-German in-between space. Second, in recent years many bi-national social institutions have developed in Athens, offering opportunities for intercultural social contacts without crossing the borders (Lauth Bacas 2000). This newly-created transcultural social space is perceived as one of the positive aspects or experiences of transnational family life. As one of the women interviewed said: "Marrying a Greek was a risk, but I gained a lot. I gained the friendship of many people, Greeks and Germans, I would never have met in my village back home."

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