Folklore in Utah

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Published by Utah State University Press

Stanley, David.
Folklore in Utah: A History and Guide to Resources.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9243.

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https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9243
Helen Papanikolas, Folklorist of Ethnicity

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As an ethnohistorian and folklorist, Helen Zeese Papanikolas focused much of her professional energy on documenting the early twentieth-century immigrant and labor cultures of Utah, with a specific focus on the Greek case. For more than fifty years, she researched, wrote, and published scores of essays and books on Utah’s diverse ethnic groups, their histories and cultures. In An Amulet of Greek Earth: Generations of Immigrant Folk Culture (2002), she extended her research beyond Utah and chronicled the cultural history of Greek America.

In the 1990s, Papanikolas also sustained her unremitting dedication to the writer’s trade by turning to fiction. This literary turn was necessary, according to her, as a response to aging. She wrote in her short story “Father Constantine and Mrs. Tsangoglou,” “When my vision precluded my using the microfilm machine to survey old newspapers and documents, I turned to fiction to show the emotional life of the Greek immigrants and their progeny” (p. 7). In this way, literature could serve as an alternative to scholarship, exploring imaginatively the affective components and inner dynamic of Greek America, particularly of women.

Yet it would be inaccurate to characterize Papanikolas’s interest in fiction as simply a literary turn. Rather, it was a return after an almost fifty-year hiatus, for her first published piece, “The Fortress and the Prison” (1947), was an excerpt from a novel never published in its entirety. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to approach Papanikolas’s ethnohistoric research independent of her literary work. Elements of immigrant folklore abound in her fiction. In her novel, The Time of the Little Black Bird (2001), she fictionalized a folk healer and midwife based on a real person about whom she wrote extensively in her folkloric and historic works. Moreover, the literary quality of her scholarly work has drawn particular attention. Her writing has been praised as “lucid and graceful” by Charles S. Peterson and as an “elegant prose which reaches beyond conventional history in the intimacy of the view it presents, but it still retains the precision of statement so essential to good historical writing.”

With the authority of an eyewitness, a Utah native, a Greek community insider, an ethnic historian, and a folklorist, Papanikolas has maintained that
the advent of the post-World War II period marked the waning of Greek immigrant folklife in America. She calls this historical moment “The End of the Great Immigrant Era” and associates the abandonment of folk culture with postwar prosperity and assimilation. Throughout her work, she consistently emphasizes this theme of cultural loss. In her 1984 essay “Wrestling with Death: Greek Immigrant Funeral Customs in Utah,” for instance, she observes that “laments [common among early twentieth-century immigrants] have not been sung since the early 1940s” (p. 40). Postwar America signaled a dramatic shift
when “the transplanted culture of the Greeks lost much of its color” (p. 49), and “[t]he richness of Greek folk life in America was radically diminished” (p. 40). Papanikolas set out to document the traditions of her parents’ generation in her capacity as an ethnohistorian of labor. Her mining of the past relied on oral interviews recorded from Greek immigrant pioneers as well as painstaking archival research and detailed ethnographic observation. The importance of folklore in the lives of early Greek immigrants became evident to her during interview sessions about labor strife, when, as she said in 2002, “the respondents’ answers . . . veered off into Greek customs and lore.” As a result, the systematic documentation of traditional beliefs and customs became an integral component of her historical research. “Although folklore may be considered by some to be beyond the scope of history,” she said in “The Greek Immigrant in Utah,” “I always ask women about customs and folklore, much of which they have not used for a long time and have almost forgotten” (pp. 48–49).

Along with Dorothy Demetракopoulos Lee, Richard Dorson, Robert Georges, and Gregory Gizelis, Papanikolas has been a pioneer folklorist of Greek America. She recognized the value of including the cultures of minorities in the history of a region before it was fashionable to do so. In this endeavor, she was encouraged by the inclusive policies of the Utah State Historical Society and its publication, the Utah Historical Quarterly, which regularly featured her early work. She also embraced (and defended) interviewing as a method of documenting the past long before the community project in oral history became a legitimate and popular research method. Tracing her career as an interviewer is like witnessing the great changes that took place in the technologies of recording oral accounts. In the early 1950s, while researching “The Greeks of Carbon County” (1954), her scholarly debut, she “interviewed many Greek men and women, writing quickly on yellow pads, the words often almost illegible.” In the early 1970s, in preparation for the seminal The Peoples of Utah (1976), which she edited, she “used a heavy, bulky tape recording machine until small models became available.” Her pioneering work anticipated the ethnic revival that followed the Civil Rights Movement and the reappraisal of the value of folk culture in Greek America.

Although Papanikolas did not specialize in folklore (she received a degree in bacteriology from the University of Utah in 1939) and did not generally participate in theoretical debates within the folklore discipline, she brought to her research the invaluable sensibility of a fieldworker. The social conditions of her upbringing as a simultaneous insider (through her family’s Greek immigrant background) and an outsider (through participation in social life beyond the confines of the immigrant community) enabled her to experience, early on, the anthropological method of participant observation. The paradoxical state of observing while participating in social situations, a staple of formal training in anthropology, has been an important part of Papanikolas’s research from the start.

The child of Greek immigrants, Papanikolas was raised in an environment steeped in immigrant traditions which she documented as an adult. In her own autobiographical writings, like “Growing Up Greek” (1980, rpt. 1995),
Papanikolas emphasized the formative role of the sensory experiences of immigrant culture upon her social identity. Her early exposure to Greek folklore was inextricably interwoven with her witnessing of economic and social activities interspersed with smells, sounds, and visual cues associated with immigrant life:

How joyous when the warm yeasty scent of baking bread filled the air and mothers called us to eat slices of warm bread slathered with butter. . . . The beginning of schools and the ritual making of wine and tomato paste in Greek Town would for years mean autumn to me. . . . Mothers carried out buckets full of tomato skins, which were immediately pounced on by a mass of droning, iridescent blue-green flies. All the while the mothers called to each other over wire fences, mostly about the children. Folk cures for fevers, for the dread pounta—pneumonia—and croup, judicious advice on who was best for dispelling the evil eye. (p. 9, 1995 ed.)

With the dissolution of Greek towns and the immigrant way of life long gone, this sensory aesthetic, still preserved in the rituals of the Greek Orthodox Church, also found a place in her fiction, as in “Father Constantine”: “The red votive lights suspended over the icons glowed. Basil plants at the foot of the icon screen gave off a sweet scent that mingled with the acrid blue of incense” (p. 10).
An intimate knowledge of everyday sociability and a sensitivity to the sensory dimensions of a culture, which might take years for an outsider to develop, were an integral component of Papanikolas’s upbringing.

Yet Papanikolas did not grow up insulated within the confines of Greek immigrant culture. Her bicultural upbringing began very early within her family surroundings, and she credited especially the formative influence of a family friend, Sarah “Killarney” Reynolds. The Irish neighbor, “her mother’s mentor in all things American” (“Growing Up Greek,” p. 5) introduced American cooking to the Zeese family, convinced the mother to anglicize the name of Helen’s sister from Panaghiota to Jo, and advised her to send the children to the YMCA Sunday School. In the latter, Helen was taught, in Miriam Murphy’s words, about a “blond, blue-eyed ‘American Jesus’” whom she contrasted with the “‘dark, grieving Christ’ of Orthodoxy” (p. 247). Papanikolas’s memories of growing up in Helper in eastern Utah are replete with contrasts between “American” and Greek Orthodox culture, exhibiting a heightened appreciation of difference. Beginning early, she developed a consciousness of cultural alternatives, so that the reflexive awareness of cultural differences—the staple of a folklorist’s sensibility—became an integral part of Papanikolas’s socialization between two cultures.

Papanikolas’s propensity to detach herself from Greek immigrant culture may have been enhanced by her family’s middle-class status. Her father’s financial success enabled the family to reside away from Helper’s Greek Town, an arrangement which situated her as an outsider to the immigrant community. In her autobiographical writings, she frequently refers to the feelings of alienation and distance she experienced from her ethnic peers. An insider conversant with immigrant networks, she was at the same time a sympathetic but, at times, critical outsider. A sense of ambivalence rather than total identification characterizes her connection with immigrant culture, as she said in Emily-George: “Although visiting Greek Town was usually satisfying, I did not want to live there in the houses with their lean-tos, sheds, washhouses, and where mothers wrung the necks of the chickens . . .” (p. 21). The early experience of cultural between-ness, in other words, nurtured Papanikolas’s ethnographic sensibility.

An outsider’s professional detachment can also be discerned in Papanikolas’s early folkloristic writings. In her “Greek Folklore of Carbon County” (1971), she surveyed a gamut of immigrant folk beliefs and practices—the telling of folk tales, beliefs in the evil eye, behaviors surrounding rites of passage such as weddings and funerals, folk cures, traditional celebrations, divination rituals—and reported their social significance. Folk tales, for instance, offered moral lessons, teaching “the children the necessity of faith through folklore” (p. 69). In another example, the traditional practice of the wearing of amulets as a protection from the dangers of the Evil Eye acquired new significance in response to the pervasiveness of a new threat, racist nativism: “During the Ku Klux Klan attacks against the Mediterranean immigrants and Catholics in 1923 and 1924, children wore amulets around their necks and slept with them under their pillows to keep away nightmares” (p. 68). In addition to serving as an economic and social
“survival kit,” in Steve Siporin’s phrase (“Folklife and Survival,” p. 81), traditional knowledge for Utah’s immigrants was also useful to ease psychological terror.

In her detailed documentation of Greek funerary customs in “Wrestling with Death,” Papanikolas approached folklore as a total way of life and the immigrants as subjects who “[f]ollow the profound command of culture” (p. 30). According to Papanikolas, tradition determines behavior as the immigrants unquestioningly submit to its dictates. Her contrast between the attitudes of American and Cretan mine laborers in response to death premonitions is telling: “American” miners “stayed away from the mines when they had premonitions and bad dreams. . . . The Cretans were not so encumbered. Whether they had bad dreams or not and even if the sense of doom was inside them, they reported to their shifts because Fate could not be cheated; one’s fate was determined at birth” (“Greek Folklore,” p. 73). In this view, immigrants are granted no agency but are seen as shackled by tradition.

In the same essay, immigrant folklore stands for intractable difference: “If the natives had known the elements of this folklore, they would have had the ultimate proof of what they already expounded: ‘Like oil and water. They don’t mix’” (pp. 63–64). Folklore here works as a cultural divide, setting the natives and the immigrants apart. It represents transplanted Old World culture, which stands in opposition to American modernity. In Papanikolas’s writings, folklore often represents provincialism and backwardness even for immigrants themselves as they assimilate modernity’s scorn for their own traditions: “Most of this folklore is no longer practiced. The children of the immigrants are now [in 1971] in their forties and fifties. They scoff at the Evil Eye; they long ago rebelled at the keening of the mirologia. The immigrants themselves began to see the impropriety of it all, and shamed the later immigrants who came after the Second World War. These outwardly dropped what they could still secretly believe” (p. 76).

Here, then, the immigrants reject wholesale what was earlier a total way of life for them. Often, it is the men who rebuff tradition. The women’s expressive culture of ritual lamentation, communicated through “eerie wails . . . pierc[ing] the air” (p. 74), is sacrificed in conformity to modernity’s demand for discipline and emotional control: “With the passing of the old-country folklore, other changes have come. A grief-wounded patriarch commanded his children as they left for the funeral of his wife of fifty-five years, ‘Now watch. Control yourselves. We mustn’t make a spectacle of ourselves’” (p. 76). Folklore in this instance is made a badge of shame, a stigma that can be rejected at will, replaced by an appropriate decorum dictated by the mainstream.

In yet another early work, Papanikolas adopted an alternative method to document Greek traditions and in doing so offered a nuanced view of the significance of folklore for early immigrant life. In “Magerou, the Greek Midwife” (1970, rpt. 1996), Papanikolas examines a culture-bearer, an individual renowned for her profound folk knowledge and skills within the social environment in which she is enmeshed. This approach results in a view of tradition as a dynamic cultural
resource, the significance of which depends on specific contexts. In this account, folklore emerges as a valuable heritage, often serving as an enduring alternative to modern practices.

For this essay, Papanikolas collected oral testimonies to piece together a biography of Georgia Latherou Magerou (1867–1950), an immigrant woman legendary for her skills as a folk healer, midwife, and matchmaker. Attentive to the social contexts in which Magerou applied her folk expertise, Papanikolas portrays Magerou as a complex individual. In doing so, she challenges a number of assumptions about immigrant folklore. First, the fact that Magerou’s household observed two religious traditions, Greek Orthodox and Catholic (Magerou’s husband was Croatian), illustrates that different traditions can coexist and accommodate each other. This example complicates the view of tradition as a total way of life. Secondly, we learn that Magerou gradually adopted a number of modern medical practices to supplement her traditional curing methods, showing that individuals do not blindly follow tradition but venture outside of it to adopt selectively alternative practices that work well for their purposes. Furthermore, the essay demonstrates that the abandonment of tradition does not necessarily mean its total rejection. Specific social and political circumstances can lead individuals to revitalize a tradition they had previously renounced. For example, many immigrant women returned to their traditional midwife, Magerou, when they were confronted with the fearful possibility that their doctors were members of the Ku Klux Klan. Here, the return to tradition ensures some measure of confidence among members of an ethnic group despised by others.

Early in the twentieth century, scholars and laypersons alike, including assimilated immigrants, saw tradition as the opposite of modernity. The latter stood for progress, order, and ultimately national belonging. The former represented backwardness and undesirable ties to the Old World. The essay on Magerou invites us to go beyond these simplistic dichotomies and to rethink the relationship between tradition and modernity. In an era when company doctors in industrial labor camps were all too quick to amputate the legs of injured laborers, Magerou’s folk medical practices offered a humane alternative. She was credited with saving the legs of two individuals from amputation when modern medicine seemingly offered no other hope for treatment. In other words, tradition could at times offer a more compassionate approach to human problems than modern “scientific” medicine. Leg amputation meant the economic and social ruin of the immigrants and their families, yet it was often the method of choice for doctors because it was time-saving and cost-effective.

Says Papanikolas, “Amputations were hastily performed” and immigrants “felt they were coldly treated, like animals, not human beings” (p. 163, 1996 ed.). In an era of unregulated capitalism sanctioning quick and inexpensive medical “solutions” in response to industrial accidents, the immigrants were subjected to a violent aspect of modernity. In this instance, traditions that were disparaged by modernity offered a caring, often superior alternative.
Papanikolas makes Magerou the symbol “of the color and uniqueness of Greek immigrant life” (p. 169). This representation of Magerou humanizes immigrants as complex and multidimensional human beings, and challenges misconceptions about the folk. Disparaged as backward, hated as inferior, and scorned as disposable in the labor market, immigrants nevertheless possessed human qualities that were not recognized by nonimmigrants at the time. The portrait of Magerou helps restore the humanity of immigrants, particularly women, by emphasizing their profound capacity for empathy toward other human beings.

Magerou’s compassion for others extended beyond her professional dedication as a committed folk healer. Once, “she spent four months with one Nevada family whose mother had died” (p. 167). Greek culture sanctions this kind of behavior and even has a specific term for it, *psychika*, “acts of mercy that were good for one’s soul. Her [Magerou’s] life was a litany of *psychika*” (“Greek Immigrant Women,” p. 22). Magerou was not the only one demonstrating such uncompromising humanity. In Carbon County, where there was no midwife, Mrs. Haralambos (Angheliki) Koulouris, “selflessly and without pay cared for newborn babies and their mothers” (“Greek Folklore,” p. 77).

The same generosity was extended to outsiders in the community as well. In “Growing Up Greek,” Papanikolas recalled that her own house was a popular target for booksellers and transients alike. Her own mother, an avid reader, “bought from every bookseller who came to the door” and never turned down a transient’s request for a handout: “Both transients and booksellers knocked on our doors, the booksellers at the front, the transients at the back. To be hungry was the worst of calamities for my mother and transients begged her to hurry as freight trains chugged out of the railyards” (p. 5). Still another immigrant woman, Yiannina, also stands out in Papanikolas’s folkloric writings for her profound capacity to help others:

> No child went without shoes or food if she knew about it and it did not matter if they were the children of immigrants or Americans. People remembered that she could set out with Uncle John’s bootleg money in her purse to buy her son’s clothing; it was gone by the time she reached town. On the way she saw a child with worn-out overalls, another with ripped-off shoe soles. When Christ Jouflas, future mayor of Helper, was orphaned, she raised him along with her eight children until his father married again (“Women in the Mining Communities,” p. 86).

Although one of Papanikolas’s major contributions is documenting the humane qualities of immigrants, she has not idealized the immigrant past. Though she has professed her profound connection with aspects of immigrant culture, her fiction and scholarly work do not fail to cast a critical perspective on certain Greek immigrant customs. Nor has she adopted an unreflective approach to ethnicity. As a public person, she has not hesitated to speak out
against exploitation and racism, not sparing hyphenated Americans when they acquiesce to discriminatory ideologies against new immigrants and minorities.

Papanikolas had this to say about her drive to document the early Greek immigrant experience: “When an article was published about an important event and did not include the Greeks, I immediately researched the subject and wrote an essay to show their participation” (“The Time,” p. 20). Through this relentless commitment to inclusion, Papanikolas has contributed to an expanded understanding of Utah; along with other scholars, she has been instrumental in reconceptualizing Utah from a homogeneous to a diverse place. The uniform culture of Utah canonized by traditional historiography has been defamiliarized, becoming a world of the past.

As we anticipate the contributions of a new generation of historians whom she directly nurtured, we also envision a young generation of folklorists to build on her legacy. Although the immigrant folklore of the early twentieth century may not be centrally relevant to third- and fourth-generation Greek Americans, there remains a wealth of lore about immigration that merits documentation and analysis. Furthermore, the exposure of immigrants to American popular culture has resulted in fascinating new cultural forms in which elements of Greek folk culture and American popular culture often coexist. In view of the dynamic nature of Greek ethnic folklore, the questions awaiting answers are intriguing. What are the current views of Greek Americans towards immigrant folklore? What narratives about immigration do Greek Americans tell, and to what end? What is the place of tradition in assimilated Greek America? In what manner is the Greek immigrant past useful to Greek Americans today? The folk traditions of contemporary ethnic Greek America, far removed from, yet still connected to, the immigrant experience, await their researchers, thanks to Helen Papanikolas’s pioneering efforts.