

## The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 8 (2011)



### Ioannis Makriyannis: From History to Anthropology

*Thanos Veremis*

doi: [10.12681/hr.277](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.277)

#### To cite this article:

Veremis, T. (2012). Ioannis Makriyannis: From History to Anthropology . *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 8, 85-94. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.277>

IOANNIS MAKRIYANNIS:  
FROM HISTORY TO ANTHROPOLOGY\*

*Thanos Veremis*

---

ABSTRACT: Ioannis Makriyannis, a self-taught author of his *Memoirs* and a warlord during the Greek War of Independence, became an icon of interwar intellectuals such as George Seferis and George Theotokas. In post-war Greece he was regarded as representative of the unadulterated values of traditional society. This paper is about the use of social anthropology in the study of Modern Greek history. Ioannis Makriyannis has been re-evaluated through the perspective of John Campbell's seminal anthropological work on the Sarakatsan herdsmen. The values and prototypes of this pre-modern community may serve to interpret the exploits of Makriyannis. Furthermore, the meaning of his language can be better understood through the use of anthropological symbolism.

---

In his *Honour, Family and Patronage*, a study of the values of a Greek mountain community, John K. Campbell compares a Sarakatsan supplicant, who asks of his saint a favour and promises him an offering in return, to Ioannis Makriyannis, recording a similar bargain in his *Memoirs*. By doing so, Campbell is probably the first scholar to have dealt with the context rather than the content of the Rumeliot warlord's celebrated work.<sup>1</sup> I shall attempt here to build on Campbell's brief effort to bring Makriyannis' actions under the scrutiny of anthropology. I intend to use Campbell's seminal work mentioned above, in order to interpret the meaning of the general's words and values, given the social context of his activities.

Why is it, however, that a semi-illiterate warlord, employed by the Greek authorities of the 1821 uprising, became such a celebrated person of letters and a symbol of the unadulterated Greek of his time? Such "illuminati" of the interwar period as Kostis Palamas, George Seferis, George Theotokas, George Katsimbalis and later Zizimos Lorentzatos elevated Makriyannis' *Memoirs* into a major work of literature and presented its author as the prototype of

---

\* Paper delivered at the conference in memory of John K. Campbell, at St Antony's College, Oxford, 29 January 2010.

<sup>1</sup> John K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, p. 345.

Greek authenticity. This search for popular authenticity as a route to national regeneration was very much the task of the champions of demotic Greek.

The paradox, however, in George Theotokas' quest was that his search for authenticity in the case of Makriyannis was in total contradiction to his own liberal, modernizing message. Makriyannis' xenophobic religiosity and parochial values have nothing in common with Theotokas' preference for a democratic regime resembling the British model. Theotokas nevertheless took a keen interest in the *Memoirs* of the general as published in 1907 by Yannis Vlachoyannis, the foremost researcher of the Greek War of Independence. He was especially intrigued by Vlachoyannis' disclosure in 1941 of yet another manuscript by Makriyannis, which, in the historian's words, was full of the "ravings of a madman".

The second manuscript was finally published by the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece, in December 1983, under the title *Οράματα και θάματα* [Visions and miracles]. It was hailed by George Savidis, Professor at the University of Thessaloniki, as a genuine testimony of Greekness. Surprisingly, Savidis, a secular-minded scholar, asked the Greek Church to confer sainthood on Makriyannis. Unlike Vlachoyannis, who had discovered all the works of the general and was dismissive of his religious ravings, subsequent generations of secular writers and scholars approached Makriyannis' works with reverence despite their content. Pilgrims of Greek authenticity came to the doorstep of a person who could serve as the subject of anthropological rather than historical studies. Makriyannis' memoirs did not convince Vlachoyannis – his historian godfather – as being an impartial source of information, but the work was nevertheless adopted by Theotokas, the novelist and author of political tracts, and Seferis, the poet, with great enthusiasm. Each discovered new attributes in the general's thoughts.

Theotokas' essay, "General Makriyannis",<sup>2</sup> first published in 1941, introduced the scarcely known hero of the War for Independence to a wider public. The absence of any literary pretentiousness from the text won Theotokas' unreserved admiration and his reading was therefore free of critical scrutiny. It became a hagiographic rendering of the general's portrait, true to Theotokas' own model of civic virtue. "He is the free citizen of a homeland which he envisages as just and well-managed, free and socially minded, conscious of his rights and the rights of its people, with self-confidence and an unbending national and personal pride."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> George Theotokas, *Πνευματική πορεία* [Intellectual itinerary], Athens: Fexis, 1961, pp. 141-170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

Theotokas takes his hero's claims at face value and assumes therefore that the general had no interest in public office,<sup>4</sup> although he in fact admits, himself, "...and I thank my country that has honoured me with the rank that befits my state and position, by making me a General...".<sup>5</sup> Theotokas' superlatives about the purity and the true qualities of Makriyannis' character ("one of the most genuine") are very difficult to prove or disprove. Theotokas and all those who subsequently heaped praise on Makriyannis did so based entirely on his own self-assessment. He goes so far as to consider Makriyannis one of "the leaders of the Revolution and the founders of the Modern Greek State".<sup>6</sup> In fact, Makriyannis was not among the prominent captains of the War of Independence, but a self-made *armatolos* (warlord) who started off as a small-time merchant and a usurer. After amassing a certain amount of capital, he invested it in buying arms and pursued his career as a small *armatolos*. Without a local power base, Makriyannis attached himself and his little band of warriors to stronger patrons such as Ismail Bey, Odysseas Androutsos and Yannis Gouras. He ended up as an employee of the revolutionary government and was sent on various missions far away from home.

In fact, Makriyannis' military career was mainly spent in civil war conflicts. His memoirs are mostly about his role in putting down the Peloponnesian opposition against the government and he has no kind word to spare for the family of Theodoros Kolokotronis, the victor of Dervenakia in August 1822. Makriyannis betrays a lack of generosity in his description of the death of Theodoros' son Panos during the civil war, as "the only blood the Kolokotronis family shed". He has also no laudatory remark for Papaflessas, who gave his life in a heroic stand against Ibrahim and his Egyptian army at Maniaki. The only thing he has to say about him is "Fallen for his country, so I'll pardon him."<sup>7</sup> He distinguished himself, however, in the battle against the Egyptians at the Mills of Lerna in June 1825 and took an active part in the siege of the Acropolis in 1826. Although an employee of Ioannis Koletis – a minister in various cabinets – he reserves most of his invective against this politician from Ioannina. He attributes the failure of Androutsos to the "spiteful intrigues" of Koletis and even to the mistakes of his patron, Gouras. A participant in most misadventures of the Greeks after 1823, he feels no remorse for his deeds but

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Ioannis Makriyannis, *The Memoirs of General Makriyannis, 1797-1864*, ed. and transl. H. A. Lidderdale, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1966, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Theotokas, *Πνευματική πορεία*, p. 168.

<sup>7</sup> Makriyannis, *Memoirs*, p. 53.

pontificates on the meaning of patriotism and honour.<sup>8</sup> Those “self-seeking who drove us to civil strife so that they may achieve their evil aims”<sup>9</sup> are never identified. Those Greek or foreign villains, who allegedly conspired against the motherland, remain nameless abstractions.

Seferis presents a different slant of the Rumeliot warrior in his essay, “A Greek-Makriyannis”. He considers him his “most humble but constant teacher”.<sup>10</sup> There is little similarity between the introvert diplomat and the extrovert man of action. Yet there is a meeting of minds when Seferis confides in his political diary his disgust for the very officials he served and his contempt for most politicians who revolved around the wartime Greek government-in-exile. As Makriyannis did in his memoirs, Seferis also appeared detached from any responsibility for what transpired in the world that provided him with his livelihood. Like Makriyannis, he divorces himself from his everyday reality and escapes into his private fantasy, which in Makriyannis’ case is a world of faith and visions. They both have no particular affection for the real world and they both indulge in constant whining and nagging over their predicament.

Seferis takes an ambiguous position on the warrior’s illiteracy. He displays his high regard for education when he says, “It is of the most noble exercises and of the highest desires of man.”,<sup>11</sup> and yet he appears convinced that Makriyannis’ talent would have been stifled by the “standard-bearers of empty words”.<sup>12</sup> He therefore arrives at the paradoxical conclusion: “I do not praise Makriyannis because he did not learn how to read and write, but I thank the merciful Lord that deprived him of the means to do so.”<sup>13</sup> What of all the educated Greek literary figures of the nineteenth century? Were they all deserving of Seferis censorious attitude? What of Pavlos Kalligas, Emmanuel Roidis, George Vizyinos, etc.? From here on Seferis, unlike Theotokas, is overwhelmed by his sentimentality and yields to a populism of the most blatant variety: “Every time our race turns to the people, seeks popular illumination, is regenerated by the people, it continues the tradition that entered the consciousness of our nation during the War of Independence.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-62.

<sup>9</sup> Theotokas, *Πνευματική πορεία*, p. 170.

<sup>10</sup> George Seferis, *Δοκιμές* [Essays], Athens: Fexis, 1965, p. 174; English transl. as *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays on Poetry and Hellenism*, Limni: Denise Harvey, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Seferis was certainly not a man of the people but an intellectual who moved in a select circle of friends. That he observed the populace from his ivory tower – with some sense of regret for having missed out on something from the raw taste of reality – does not make him a reliable judge of historical fact. His evaluations are anything but dispassionate. He makes no effort to verify Makriyannis' allegations by consulting other important eye-witness accounts, such as those of Fotakos, Kasomoulis or Tertsetis. Seferis, via Makriyannis, deplors the policies of subsequent state-builders in Greece, especially when they chose to exclude the irregulars of the Revolution from the agencies of the new state.

The Rumeliot warrior considered his services to the motherland a spiritual matter but demanded nevertheless his pay from a mercenary state. Seferis takes no notice of the primitive voracity of his hero, except when he detects it in others. Although Makriyannis appeals for justice on almost every page of his memoirs and constantly reminds his readers of his sacrifices and the bodily harm these incurred, nowhere does he reserve a word of magnanimity for his adversaries, Kolokotronis, Papaflessas, Mavromichalis, Mavrokordatos, Koletis and a host of others who, incidentally, offered much more than he ever did to the cause of freedom.

In his more reliable literary evaluations of the Rumeliot warrior, Seferis produces a strange oracle: "Makriyannis is the most significant prose writer of Modern Greek literature, if not the greatest because we have Papadiamantis."<sup>15</sup> It is because of such words of adulation that subsequent generations of the poet's admirers have not dared question Makriyannis' work as a piece of testimony, but also consider him a cult figure that encapsulates the meaning of all that is worthy in the Greek character. It is high time to demystify him with a healthy dose of anthropology. To compare the values of societies 120 years apart may appear somewhat risky, but the conditions of Campbell's pre-modern subject do not differ from Makriyannis' times.

Makriyannis actions must be measured by the standards of his time rather than our own modern, occidental values. Theotokas and Seferis failed to decipher his concepts of justice, patriotism and honour into their contemporary meaning.

The Rumeliot warrior began to write his *Memoirs* in 1829 when the state of Kapodistrias was already in place and the priorities of modernity clashed with the pre-modern heroic order that Makriyannis represented. He was very much the product of the "segmentary community" in which he lived.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

According to the founder of this term, Ernest Gellner, the segmentary community commands the primary political loyalty of its members and cuts the various strata of society vertically, thus creating a plethora of antagonistic subunits of power. Such a community has no unity, thrives on weak polities and subjects the state to its special interests as the rule of law fails to function.

In a world before the Greek State came into being, phenomena of lawlessness were even considered desirable. The societal values that permeate, especially the first part of Makriyannis' *Memoirs*, are eminently compatible with Campbell's interpretation of honour, family and patronage in a traditional community of the twentieth century. As Campbell points out: "Inhibitions against self-seeking conduct are yet more tenuous in the relations of men who do not share the common bonds of community."<sup>16</sup> Makriyannis, who often denigrates his contemporaries for their self-seeking conduct, chooses his own patrons and employers on the basis of their influence rather than their moral standing. Androutsos, Gouras and Koletis became in retrospect targets of his vitriolic comments, although he served them faithfully as a good client was expected to do. It goes without saying that in the segmentary communities, "men consider it useless to conclude their business with the state on the grounds of their general rights as citizens".<sup>17</sup> Relations between the weak and the powerful would usually become personalised between individuals who knew each other, while clients would shirk from dealing with faceless institutions. Makriyannis is dismissive of the ruling Ottomans, whereas he served some of their functionaries loyally. Concerning patron-client relationships, Campbell remarks: "The initial motive is utilitarian, protection and assistance on the side of the client, political power and social prestige on the part of the patron."<sup>18</sup> The relationship, however, may also acquire a moral dimension:

The patron feels obliged to assist and take a general interest in all the client's affairs and in doing so he is able both to sense his superiority and approve his own compassionate generosity. The client is conscious of a duty to support his patron politically without undue concern about his protector's party allegiance and to give free expression to his feeling of gratitude and indebtedness.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, p. 257.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Makriyannis' relationship with Ismail Bey of Konitsa (a cousin of Ali Pasha) is illustrative of such a set of mutual obligations. "After we had been there for some days, the poor man was taken gravely ill, and as he had been my benefactor, I looked after him better than I would my own father."<sup>20</sup>

Honour was probably the most important measuring rod of a man's worth in Makriyannis' times, even though it taxes the understanding of modern-day readers. "In Modern Greek usage, 'τιμή' is conferred as a sign of the recognition of the excellence or worth of a person."<sup>21</sup> Poverty, however, may put a strain on a brave man because his condition makes him dependent on others. The Rumeliot warrior began to gather his fortune early on with his earnings from the sale of firewood and the practice of usury. Throughout his life he was obsessed with the fear of poverty, especially during his old age. His view of human nature is on the whole negative and he therefore felt no compunction in using deceit as a weapon against his more powerful foes. Campbell also points out that a cunning person is much more admired by society than a "good" individual who will often appear to be "weak and irresolute".<sup>22</sup>

Since the nexus of relationships in a traditional context is much more complex than that of our contemporary civic culture, the observer must be careful to distinguish the rules that determine relations between people of unequal status among non-kinsmen. "Honour also reflects on the correct status relations between individuals or groups."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the antagonistic nature in all relationships outside the family sanctions lies and deception when directed against non-kinsmen. Makriyannis, according to his own testimony, was no exception to this practice. He used deception against his enemies, or even against those who did not possess a bond of any kind with him. His pride (περηφάνια) allowed him to "behave in such a way as to show that he believed himself to be superior to other persons".<sup>24</sup> Therefore he thrashed his subordinates when they misbehaved or committed crimes, but talked to his superiors as a supplicant with tears in his eyes. Status relations between different individuals were thus faithfully observed by him.

"Self-regard is a subjective sentiment...A man's self-regard leads him to conserve his honour, to strive after wealth, to act proudly and arrogantly and so on. Self-regard inhibits any conduct on which an interpretation of

---

<sup>20</sup> Makriyannis, *Memoirs*, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, p. 268.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



weakness may be placed. For instance the Sarakatsani seldom accept or give apologies...”<sup>25</sup> Makriyannis certainly never apologises for his misdeeds because he sees the evil only in others and pursues his dues from his employers with single-minded determination.<sup>26</sup> Makriyannis makes little effort to conceal some of the darker moments in his behaviour. He gives a factual account of his exploits during the sacking of Arta in 1821, while fighting on the side of Ali Pasha in his rebellion against the Sublime Porte. The Turkish-Albanians that were loyal to the sultan were besieged in the citadel of the city, and the forces (including many Greek mercenaries) that laid siege of the castle seized everything that they could carry from the hapless population. In retrospect (he began writing his memoirs in 1829) he regrets the behaviour of his compatriots who plundered the Greeks of Arta, but he never assumes the share of his own responsibility in this. It is always “others” who are to blame. “And we plundered all those wretched people and left them in misery. I swear by my country, I didn’t take one little of these things. My companions opened up one hiding-place and gave me my portion of their plunder as their leader, a double ration. I sold the two rations for 500 groschen...”<sup>27</sup> Early in 1822 Makriyannis and his men put themselves under the command of Odysseus Androutsos’ lieutenant, Ioannis Gouras. In 1823 he left Gouras in disgust and joined the civil war in the Peloponnese as a state employee.

In any traditional community, power enhances prestige and honour. Wealth, aligned with social connections and numbers of clients or family members, all constitute effective safeguards of a family’s honour. Traditional communities are therefore extremely materialistic and practical. They will not submit easily to humanitarian principles or a lineage that is not accompanied by wealth. “A name without the means to support it, is not recognized.”<sup>28</sup>

Makriyannis sides with the honourable when he notes: “Once we were poor: we have become rich.”<sup>29</sup> But he then remembers the alleged riches that Kolokotronis amassed and feels poor by comparison. Although, on all available evidence, Makriyannis was not a poor man, as was Nikitaras at the end of his life, he nevertheless sides with the underdogs because he feels that the state deprived him from a just compensation. “They [the powerful] are

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>26</sup> Makriyannis makes the “50 phoenixes which had been decided upon...” a matter of national significance; *Memoirs*, p. 218. See also p. 219 for his complaint when his salary was diminished.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, p. 301.

<sup>29</sup> Makriyannis, *Memoirs*, p. 5.

always experimenting with new laws and political parties for the good of the country. What our country has suffered from these ‘laws’ and their ideas of good!”<sup>30</sup> His hostility against the unitary state under construction, first by Kapodistrias and then by Otto, constantly appears in the latter part of his memoirs. In his *Οράματα και θάματα*, he offers the realm of God as the only credible alternative to temporal experiments.

One of Campbell’s most keen observations is the tension between religious and secular values in the Sarakatsan community. “...the value of the Christian ideal of the fellowship of all men in Christ, with universalistic values that follow from it...”<sup>31</sup> are in total contradiction with the segmented, antagonistic and honour-driven values of the secular community. Whereas the spiritual values are assigned to familial bliss, the rest of the temporal world is bedevilled by antagonism and hostility. One may argue that the contrast between secular and spiritual values is not so different in other human societies. It seems, however, that in Makriyannis’ world of devotion these two realities attained a final state of coexistence. In *Οράματα και θάματα*, the aging warrior constructed his private spiritual universe where modesty, meekness, humility and submission to God reign supreme. Although glimpses of this world appear in his *Memoirs*, what Vlachoyannis termed as the “ravings of a madman” took over in his final years and became his personal statement that defies scrutiny or rational analysis. Makriyannis assigned his past misadventures to the devil.

Our discussion of what we consider a misreading of Makriyannis’ *Memoirs*, and the attempt to suggest an anthropological look at his text, do not imply that the Rumeliot warrior can be type-cast as the mere subject of an exercise in anthropology. Every individual does possess exceptional characteristics, and Makriyannis certainly produced much that was exceptional. A new reading may help to dispel some of the mystique that literary praise has heaped on the unsuspecting author of the *Memoirs*. Furthermore, a private testimony adds a vivid dimension to the study of history, as Theodore Zeldin has already demonstrated.

In our post-modern times historical and anthropological “exceptionalism” is decried as futile and even racist. The misuse of the term “exceptional” meant to signify superiority rather than “difference” – which constitutes its true scholarly

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, p. 354.

meaning – is another straw-man invented in order to obscure the idiosyncrasies of every subject that refuses to conform to some vacuous generalisation.

A scholar's heritage is his influence on others. John Campbell taught the historians among his students how to take advantage of the tools of anthropology and the anthropologists how to respect history.

In finishing this paper for a conference dedicated to John Campbell, "Anthropology and History: Remembering John Campbell", I would like to make use of Michael Herzfeld's conclusive epigram: "He rendered as a palpable and accessible practice a transgression of the old colonial boundaries between those who were legitimate objects of anthropological concern and those who claimed immunity from such inspection."<sup>32</sup>

*University of Athens*

---

<sup>32</sup> Michael Herzfeld, "Ethnographer as a Theorist: John Campbell and the Power of Detail", in Mark Mazower (ed.), *Networks of Power in Modern Greece: Essays in Honor of John Campbell*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 165.