

Migrants, Social Space and Visibility

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It appears that some of the new communities of economic migrants in Cyprus are now in a transitional phase. In spite of the general precariousness that characterises the experience of the vast majority of migrants to Cyprus, it seems that certain sections of these communities now perceive their situation to be more permanent than they originally anticipated. This, among other things, is manifested on their adoption of space, and that their presence is becoming visible on the built landscape in certain areas of Nicosia.

It is common among Cypriot liberal intellectual circles to refer to and celebrate the island's multicultural character. Nevertheless these references tend to distinguish the Republic's established ethnic communities or religious groups; notably Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Latins and Maronites. The Republic's constitution guarantees that these groups enjoy some degree, or other, of representation. Their long presence on the island means that they have well-established religious and secular institutions of their own. Such narrow definitions of the multi-cultural character of Cyprus, though, tend to exclude groups like the Gypsies or the many communities of economic migrants and migrant refugees. In the best of cases groups of economic migrants and political refugees are dismissed as non-Cypriot communities or even as non-communities at all, because of their non-permanent status.

Cyprus has a very long history of hosting refugees escaping war and disaster. During the twentieth century, for instance, it provided temporary or permanent shelter to thousands of Armenians fleeing a brutal attack launched against them by the Young-Turks; to Asia Minor Greeks escaping en-mass from blazing Smyrna, and from other towns under siege on the western coast of Turkey, and to thousands of Jews in transit from Europe to Palestine after the end of World War II. Cyprus has also provided shelter to many of Egypt's Greeks who were forced to leave after Nasser's decision to nationalise private enterprises and evacuate Europeans from Egypt as well as to thousands of Lebanese fleeing the savage civil war in Lebanon in the seventies and eighties.

During the past twenty years, the island has, nevertheless, hosted a new kind of migrant – hundreds of thousands of economic migrants and political refugees. Many belong to ethnic groups that have a sizeable presence on the island. Even so, their temporary residence status means that they make up communities whose main characteristic is transition and the continuous renewal of their

members. This fluidity means that these groups, unlike established Cypriot communities, do not have political power and representation, or any significant secular institutions of their own.

What has come into view recently, and most distinctly in and round Trikoupi Street in the old sector of Nicosia, are retail establishments aiming to cater for the particular needs of these new communities; primarily dietary and cultural needs. Filipino food stores, Halal butcher shops and Indian music CD stores are some examples. The purely visual dimension of this phenomenon is very interesting. The stores' facades render visible the communities they cater for in a novel way. The members of these communities are no more visible as mere 'bodies' in the street but are now in the process of imprinting their trace on the built landscape. What is becoming visible, then, is their aesthetic, linguistic and cultural idiosyncrasies; all contributing to the formation of the members of these groups as part of meaningful cultures rather than as individuals, cut-off, and forced to be viewed as performing supportive roles in the background or the margins of dominant Cypriot culture(s).

Another interesting aspect of this new phenomenon, which I want to explore further, is the use or even adoption of space in the process of the 'making' of a community. These unusual establishments are naturally becoming reference points for the members of such fluid communities and do reflect the transitional phase they are currently experiencing as more and more of their members manage to secure permanent status on the island. In particular, places that serve food, beverages and other products that need be consumed on the premises provide a space and the opportunity for contact with others, permitting webs of relationships to form whose impact on how the groups define themselves remains to be seen. Although I have not traced any significant signs pointing in this direction, as yet, I can propose with some confidence that these spaces will, in the future, provide a platform for political debate and organisation to migrant workers who are becoming Cyprus's new under classes, gradually replacing the local working class.

In this article I present three cases as examples of the specific functions of such spaces and the meaning and importance attached to each for the people that use them. The first case is an establishment, which I located during my ethnographic research on coffee-houses in 2006 and 2007.¹ This might be the first attempt of one migrant community to set-up a space that resembles, in its essence and functions, the Cypriot coffee-house; especially in its role of contributing to the construction of a community. The establishment I refer to is called Carla's, and it operates as a kind of *somateio* (social and cultural club) for Filipino workers in Cyprus. The consumption of Cypriot coffee is not at the centre of the commercial operation of this establishment – even though the beverage is

served on request – but it was exciting to discover that its clients provided reasons for using the space that so much resembled those of Cypriot refugees in their use of the *kafeneion* (coffee-house) in refugee estates; notably the creation of a sense of belonging to a community.

One primary function of Carla's place is that it transforms the Filipino community from a demographic one to a physical one.² The establishment operates during the weekends when its clients, who are mostly female domestic workers, take their free time. On Sunday mornings they gather for coffee after church and stay at least until lunchtime when they have the opportunity to eat Filipino food, which is offered at very low prices. The place is decorated with large posters illustrating Filipino landscapes while a karaoke machine provides the main entertainment.

When I first enquired about the place and its functions I was invited for coffee and lunch on New Year's Eve in 2007 and was told that I would have the opportunity to talk with clients. The responses I received from many of the women I talked with revolved around the sense of being part of a community and being at Carla's providing a sense of home. They talked about how the food, decorations and the karaoke machine evoked the Philippines and how meeting friends creates a feeling of belonging.

My second case may initially strike the reader as an odd one. This case involves the adoption of existing working class social space by members of the Filipino community rather than one of setting up their own. The space in question is the *somateio* of Anorthosis Famagusta in Engomi, Nicosia. Anorthosis is a refugee first division football club established in 1911 in Famagusta. The club's home-ground is now in Larnaca but because of the displacement and dispersal of its supporters throughout Cyprus it maintains *somateia* in all major towns in Cyprus. The club has nationalist roots and in the fifties was associated with EOKA. This is a place frequented by hard-core football fans – mostly men – that use the space to socialise, eat and drink and to watch Cypriot, Greek, English and European football on a number of large LCD screens installed in various rooms in the *somateio*.

Alkis, the manager of the Nicosia club, is married to Tereza, a Filipino woman. This marriage was catalytic in redefining the space. About thirteen years ago the couple decided to serve Filipino food along with the standard – mostly grilled – taverna style food. Filipino spring rolls, noodles and marinated kebabs were added to the menu. This naturally attracted the attention of Nicosia Filipinos who frequent the place and organise functions like wedding and christening parties. A karaoke machine is available and offers a form of entertainment very popular among Filipinos. Many mixed couples are also regular customers. Alkis serves all

his grills accompanied by a free bowl of salad, a small plate of pickle and onion and, of course, pitta bread; all complementing the grills very well. Interestingly the same set of free side dishes is served when a customer orders noodles or spring rolls; an odd combination, which nonetheless points towards a desire for a dietary and cultural egalitarianism!

The extra-ordinary adoption of such an establishment by migrant workers is not the only strikingly post-modern characteristic of this particular *somateio*. Despite the club's nationalist roots it is frequented by a number of Omonoia fans, the most popular leftist club in Cyprus, an English man that often watches English Premier League games wearing a CCCP inscribed t-shirt and a Turkish-Cypriot man who has a taste for grilled lamb chops and KEO and enjoys watching Anorthosis Champion League games with his Greek-Cypriot friend.

This harmonious co-existence among such – on first examination – sharply heterogeneous groups and individuals is fascinating because it points to the fact that working class social space is inclusive and that every man within it is equal. It could also be seen as a sign that the working classes are more tolerant to difference and more prepared to absorb and incorporate diverse groups, and that class status is probably considered a more important criterion for inclusion than ethnicity or, even, ideology.

My third case is Al-Zahra on Trikoupi Street. Al-Zahra is the commercial name of a Halal butcher shop and a neighbouring restaurant serving Lebanese food; both owned by the same family. The restaurant serves kebabs, falafel and some very tasty casseroles. As the meat dishes are made using Halal meat and the food in general is served at low prices, the place is very popular among Muslim migrants and others. Its location near Omeriyeh mosque contributes even further to its popularity. Al-Zahra serves the particular needs of a religious rather than an ethnic community. Its clientele consists of individuals from a variety of Arab countries and the Subcontinent. This means that we cannot discuss Al-Zahra in relation to the processes of community 'building' in the same straightforward way – and with ethnicity in mind – that Carla's place was discussed above. For instance, Al-Zahra serves nargilegh and Lebanese tea, while some of its curry style casseroles and rice dishes would obviously satisfy the taste of migrants from the Subcontinent. Similarly, while the aesthetic of the decorations that adorn the restaurant is referential to Arabic culture, a sizeable TV set occupying a prominent position within Al-Zahra's space is frequently tuned into channels from the Subcontinent.

Joseph, the owner, talked about how grateful he is to the Republic for demonstrating a sensitivity and respect towards Muslim traditions because he has been granted permission to slaughter animals according to his religion's

decrees. At the same time he expressed his frustration for negative press references to Trikoupi Street as a potentially dangerous Muslim ghetto. Interestingly, when I talked with him about the content of this article he pointed to the potential danger of misrepresenting his establishment as one that is exclusive to Muslims and as a consequence perhaps further contributing to the construction of an image of the neighbourhood as a precarious ghetto. “*We serve Cypriots here as well*”, he said; “*we do not want to be seen as different*”.

The Cypriot working classes are shrinking as increasing numbers of the older generation of blue collar workers have managed – through their hard work and trade union organisation and activity – to provide their children with opportunities for upward mobility. This vacuum has, during the last two decades, been filled by migrant workers who – as I hope I have managed to demonstrate – have begun to claim space within which they can express their cultural idiosyncrasies and at the same time have started to imprint their presence on the built landscape of Nicosia and other urban centres in Cyprus. I have hinted at the possible political implications of this. What I feel needs to be confidently vocalised is that there are tangible signs that these groups are now communities in the making and that we should begin to renegotiate and redefine the content of the term Cypriot Multiculturalism.

Notes

1. See Nicos Philippou (2007) *Coffee House Embellishments*. Nicosia, University of Nicosia Press.
2. I should not neglect to mention, of course, that the role of organised religion is also paramount in doing just that. Nevertheless, Carla’s place is probably the first secular establishment to function as such in Cyprus.