

# **Step-Mothertongue: From Nationalism to Multiculturalism the Literatures of Cyprus, Greece and Turkey**

**Edited by Mehmet Yaşın  
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This is a most important publication examining the national and cultural identities of Greeks, Turks, and Cypriots through their literatures. Step-Mothertongue aims to draw attention to the cross-cultural and multicultural traditions through a comparative analysis of the literature and literary traditions of Greece, Turkey and particularly of Cyprus. Step-Mothertongue is timely because it approaches nationalism from a socio-cultural and literary-historical framework, rather than a traditional ethnic identity agenda.

The articles in this publication were originally presented at a conference at Middlesex University on 12-13 December 1997, which aimed to build a body of work around the critique of nationalisms in the literature of Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. There are eight articles, an interview of Vamik Volkan by Yael Navaro-Yaşın, and an after word by Djemal Kadir. Seven of the eight articles are separated into two sections, and a section of Cypriot poetry divides them. The first section titled “National Literatures in a Global Era” comprises four articles.

The first article, by Gregory Jusdanis, Ohio State University, questions the absence of contemporary Greek literature from the branch of Western European literature. Twenty years ago critics considered it highly, but the supremacy of Western literary discourses within global literature and the dominance of the English language, have made contemporary Greek literature (and others written in the non-English tongue) a “stranger at the feast”. Jusdanis also argues that the lack of a contemporary Greek literary intelligentsia sophisticated enough to reorient Greek society and deconstruct the mainstream nationalist identity is also to blame, but he fails to answer why such an intelligentsia does not exist. How far has Greek society actually developed, especially vis-à-vis its neighbours whose culture had a vital and undeniable influence on Modern Greek culture?

The next article by Hasan Bülent Kahraman, of Sabancı University, Istanbul, considers the transformation of Turkish literature since the 1980s, from its traditional duty of formulating the nation-state identity, to its deconstruction and the establishment of new multi “selves”. The literary change depended on the new

social, political, and cultural changes in identity formation within Turkish society, which deviated from the traditional nationalist framework. The development of an understanding of Turkish multi “selves”, Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, and Turkic, was largely due to the emergence of Turkish-Cypriot poets and their success in bringing a consciousness of “other selves” and “other identities”. The article, however, does not reveal how mainstream is the understanding of the “multi” selves syndrome. Nevertheless, the article provokes thoughts of a similar investigation of Greek society and a comparison.

The article by Vangelis Calotychos, New York University is the most ideological and political and thus the most confrontational. Calotychos chides the academics who refused invitations to the conference because they assumed, from a deterministic reading of the conference subtitle “New Interpretations of the Literatures of Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey” that it was examining three languages and three literatures. Calotychos argues that Greek literature was propelled and dominated by national identity and repressed an exotic other self – the Ottoman, Turkic, Slavic, Balkan, Romaic and other influences that were often suppressed as “not Greek”. Calotychos studies two post-modern novels, written by a Greek and a Turk, with historical themes that present the shifting nature of national identities. Calotychos emphasises the importance to identity of the hagiography, folklore, oral family traditions, and the history, culture and traditions of the village. Although there have been changes in literary focuses from national identity to multicultural, the impression is that the Turks have taken greater steps than the Greeks.

Part Two is an extraordinary compilation of poetry, which is termed “uncanonised” and of a “multicultural society”. The anthology comprises Phoenician, Assyrian, Lusignan, Venetian and Ottoman poetry of Cyprus; works hitherto suppressed from the developed and accepted Cypriot Greek national consciousness. Then poetry from the second-half of the twentieth century, written by Cypriots in Greek, Turkish, Armenian, English and French, highlights the multi-lingual and multicultural realities of Cypriot literature and society. The compilation suggests that being a Cypriot is more than simply being a Greek and a Turk from Cyprus, but a person that has a multicultural identity, touched by numerous cultural and linguistic influences of non-indigenous peoples who ruled or settled in the island.

Part Three, entitled ‘Poetries and Narratives on the “Other”’ takes the focus to Cyprus. The first article by the cultural anthropologist Moira Killoran, explores the change in Turkish-Cypriot perceptions of their identity and the “other”; the Greek Cypriots. Killoran argues that Turkish Cypriots have gone from emphasising notions of national identity to emphasising cultural and social ideas. Poetry used in the past to emphasise “Turkishness” is now used to emphasise “Cypriotness”. Poets, like

Mehmet Yaşın, first publicly questioned Turkish-Cypriot “Turkishness”, encouraging the Cypriot Turkish opposition, which had always believed in the peaceful co-existence of the Cypriot communities, to do likewise. This resulted in a battle between ideologies (Right vs. Left and Centre) and for a history and an identity. This article lacks a corresponding comparison of the Greek-Cypriot responses to the Turkish-Cypriot questioning of their identity and whether the Greek Cypriots have questioned theirs. It seems that the silence by the author on this point answers the question in the negative.

The article by the cultural historian Bekir Azkin investigates the poetry translations of the two Cypriot communities and concludes that the multilingual and multicultural traditions they share in folk literature and culture has not found expression in the “high culture” of the intellectuals. Azkin believes that the nationalism pervading the two communities prevented intellectuals from discovering the “other’s” literature and only since 1974 has there been some effort to do so, but more needs to be done. This is especially true in light of recent events which have seen the latest UN thrust for a settlement result in a “revolution” in Turkish-Cypriot political life from grass roots society rebelling against the nationalist narratives of the Rauf Denktaş regime, while in the south, the Greek-Cypriot political leadership moved to the extreme right and reasserted the nationalist paradigms that dominated society in the 1950s and 1960s.

The last article, by the conflict resolution expert, Maria Hadjipavlou-Trigeorgis, is important for its exploration of counter-nationalist narratives in their inter-lingual communication because these narratives are suppressed in official exclusionary discourses in Cyprus. Her work in conflict resolution, however, has revealed that a group identity can form once experiences are shared and the new multicultural understanding of the history of Cyprus which develops allows the participants to look forward with a new vision of Cyprus. But there are many obstacles to the conflict resolution initiatives that mirror the obstacles the UN plan faced when it was put to the Cypriot communities in April 2004; ethnocentrism; super-nationalism; chauvinism; threats to peace-builders and participants and to all who challenge the dominant nationalist narratives. Another significant problem is the failure of peace-builders to effectively use the media, which for the most part is dominated by the ideologies of the nationalist forces.

Part Three ends with the interview of Vamik Volkan the veteran psychiatrist and psychoanalyst by Yael Navaro-Yashin. Volkan discusses his work with various ethnic groups and the trans-generational narratives about history, identity, and the impact of language shifts on political psychology and culture.

This review would be incomplete without a few words about the man who made

it all possible – not simply the book but also the questioning by the Turkish Cypriots of their identity. This study owes itself to the emergence of a Turkish-Cypriot intelligentsia, spearheaded by the journalist-poet-academic Mehmet Yaşın. Born in 1958 in Neapolis, a cosmopolitan area of Nicosia, during the 1963 inter-communal violence, Greek-Cypriot extremists looted and burned his family home. He fled with his mother to Lefka, until the Turkish invasion of 1974 when they returned to their home in Nicosia. But it was not the same: there were no Greek, Armenian or Latin Cypriots left. In 1976 Mehmet enrolled at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of International Relations, at Ankara University, where he was elected vice-president of the Federation of Cypriot Students. The repressive military dictatorship and the involvement of the army in political life repulsed him. He reflected this in his poetry, published in leading Turkish literary journals. He returned to Cyprus in 1981 after another military coup in Turkey and published a literary journal that caused ripples in the chauvinistic establishment for the questions he posed to Turkish-Cypriot identity. Then between 26 April and 17 May 1982, he published four articles in the weekly magazine *Olay*. Yaşın provided the most comprehensive information to that date on the extent of the plundering, destruction and illicit trade in antiquities. With the title ‘Perishing Cyprus’, Yaşın described the policy to estrange Cyprus from its past. It took great courage. His courage allowed members of the opposition to challenge the dominant nationalist discourse, but these groups were marginalized until the prospect of a united Cyprus joining the EU became a reality and the Turkish Cypriots and many Anatolian settlers, who have also developed a complex multi-identity, united to clamour for a solution to the Cyprus problem.

One criticism of the publication is the failure to situate Cyprus within the theories of identity formation – specifically nationalism. Broadly, there are three approaches to explaining nation formation: the primordial, which believes that nations are intrinsic to human nature, necessary for humans to live and timeless, existing in every epoch (see works by Edward Shils and Steven Grosby); the perennialist, which asserts that nations and nationalism are modern phenomena with “ethnic” roots from pre-modern time (see studies by Anthony Smith and Adrian Hastings); and the modernist (see works by Elie Kedourie, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm), which argues that nations are products of the modern age and that, as Ernest Gellner stated, nationalism “engenders nations, not the other way around”.<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Bryant’s *Imagining the Modern* showed that the latter approach applies very well to Cyprus, but there is more that can be said, especially the transition from the Ottoman to the British system of rule.

*Step-Mothertongue* is both timely and ahead of its time and it is this paradox that makes it one of the most significant studies to deal with nationalism in Cyprus. Since the victory of the Turkish-Cypriot oppositional forces in the 2004

parliamentary elections and the overwhelming support they received for their “yes” campaign in the UN referendum for the reunification of Cyprus, it can finally be said that they have won the battle. On the other side, however, the battle was won by the old nationalist paradigms personified by the campaign of President Tassos Papadopoulos. In the south, those advocating a multicultural and inclusive approach to a solution were defeated. One reason why the nationalist forces won in the Greek-Cypriot south is answered by the research in this collection; the lack of a true change in Greek-Cypriot society away from nationalist and chauvinist approaches and ideologies towards a multicultural and multi-self identification.

**Andrekos Varnava**

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1. Gellner, E. (1983) *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 55.