Expression of Greek Ethnic Identity Through Jewelry and Adornments of Students and Faculty at Indiana University Bloomington in 2018

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Self-expression is an integral part of the human experience. Even though billions of people have traversed our planet, no two are exactly the same, and that individuality is most often intentionally expressed by each person. One facet of self-expression is material culture, specifically jewelry and adornments. These items are often worn as an expression of an identity, acting to single a person out or join them to a larger community. My brief study of the expression of Greek ethnic identity through jewelry and adornments among faculty and staff at Indiana University Bloomington (IU) in 2018 demonstrates that many Greeks in America wear certain elements of material culture in order to connect to the heritage of their ancestors and to their Greek community. In addition to possessing Greek jewelry and adornments, those pieces shared common traits such as Mati, materials, and baptismal and matrimonial jewelry and adornments. Further, each had been exposed to several Greek influences and had memories which accompanied the jewelry and adornments they had acquired. Following the study, I was able to draw conclusions from my research which illustrated the similarities and differences among Greek people on campus.

To acquire participants for my survey, I spoke to Dr. Frank Hess, the senior lecturer and coordinator of the Modern Greek Program on the Bloomington campus. He referred me to numerous faculty members of Greek heritage and provided me with the opportunity to explain my research to two of his classes which garnered student participants. After obtaining contact information, I was able to interview seven women (in person or on the phone) and received survey responses from three others. While I did contact ethnically Greek male students, they did not follow through with an interview or survey. I transcribed significant quotations from
recordings of the interviews, compared and contrasted them with the survey responses, and drew
conclusions based on the data which I received.

The first objective was to determine whether these ethnically Greek students and faculty
members owned any Greek jewelry and/or adornments, and whether they wore these while on
campus. The response was overwhelming: nine of the ten participants do own and wear Greek
jewelry, and several wear various other Greek adornments. One of my interviewees, Dr. Olga
Kalentzidou, noted that there is “a lot of jewelry making in Greece to this day,” that Greece has
many famous jewelers, and that it is a “tradition that has been going on for a long time.” While
nearly everyone had Greek bracelets and necklaces, another common piece found in conjunction
with the Greek Orthodox Church was the comboschinis, or prayer ropes. Freshman Georgia
Papakirk described different kinds of comboschinis, stating that “the popular ones are the thinner
ones,” while she has “wooden ones [and] larger ones,” and she “thinks that’s really cool because
pretty much any Greek person you know is always wearing one.” IU student Christina Adams
mentioned that her brother has adorned himself in a special way with a tattoo of “a big cross on
his shoulder, and then in Greek writing” underneath are words that translate to “‘Liberty or
Death’ […] in English.” Another participant, Victoria Martine, spoke about a shirt her mother
made with “a block of feta cheese on it which said ‘Feta’ in Greek underneath,” as well as
traditional Greek dancing costumes from church functions and kombolois, a string of beads
which is spun around the finger which she described as being “like a fidget-spinner but worse
because it makes more noise.” Victoria also raised an interesting point that she often enjoys
“wearing Greek colors” more than “wearing things that say ‘Greece!’ on them,” whereas her
sister “has the flag hanging in her room at home” adorning her wall. Like Victoria, Dr. Artemis
Brod feels a more conceptual connection to Greece. In addition to her plentiful collection of
Greek jewelry, she claims her overall style is “louder and more colorful than maybe is the
standard U.S. fashion,” which she believes “might have a relationship to a more dramatic Greek
style.”

Among all of these elements of material culture, one common symbol which was
extremely well represented was the *Mati*, or evil eye. *Mati* are traditionally for “warding off bad
spirits” according to Christina Adams, and she believes that it “adds an element of protection,
just something to keep [her] and [her] family safe” from the evil eye. The *Mati* is her favorite
Greek symbol. Dr. Olga Kalentzidou added that the evil eye is “very important for Greeks, and
other people around the world, especially around the Mediterranean.” Growing up, the one thing
that she and her family members “all had as children on [their] crib was a little gold pin with the
evil eye.” However, there is some controversy within the Greek Orthodox Church regarding
*Mati*; the symbol can be seen as “almost heretical because the cross is supposed to protect you to
the point where you don’t need any other protection” says Victoria Martine, who views the
symbol as an aspect of her culture as opposed to her religion, and who wears *Mati* ear rings.
Perhaps the most enthusiastic about *Mati* in the expression of her Greek ethnicity is Tatiana
Kolovou, who owns upwards of fifty evil eye pieces in different forms.

Another commonality of the pieces was the list of materials from which the participants’
Greek jewelry was crafted and the patterns they contained. When Greek jewelry is made from
metal, it is almost exclusively gold or silver. Georgia Papakirk posits that “a big part of having
Greek jewelry is that it’s not normally fake; it’s always gold or silver, and it’s really beautiful.”
Additionally, Georgia spoke about the Greek key, sharing that her grandmother told her “it
symbolizes the ever-flowing river because if you look at a Greek key, it never ends […] it’s to
show longevity in your life.” Dr. Olga Kalentzidou mentioned that Greek jewelry also frequently
contains “a combination of precious stones such as lapis lazuli, or garnet, or amethyst with intricate designs in silver especially but also in gold.” Many interviewees described the brilliant blue of lapis lazuli but where unaware of its name. Tatiana Kolovou added that important figures can be found patterned on Greek jewelry, as she herself has “a pair of Alexander the Great gold ear rings that [she] loves.” A few others mentioned charm bracelets, which Dr. Artemis Brod described as having “to do with a medley of things, maybe a horoscope,” or possibly *Mati* and other symbols.

While some Greek jewelry and adornments can be tied to ancient traditions, others can be closely related to the Greek Orthodox Church in the celebration of Baptism. Dr. Olga Kalentzidou stated that when a Greek child is born, the child gets “a cross through Baptism from [their] godparents [and] the parents also bestow gifts to their children.” Her children, for example, “got gifts of gold jewelry, especially crosses, from [her] parents,” as is traditional Greek Orthodox practice. Christina Adams said that when she “baptized [her] cousin last summer, [she] had to buy him a cross.” Christina acknowledged that “there were other things that [she] could have gotten him as well,” but she decided on a cross only. Kristina Strafford, another IU student, has found that her “baptismal cross is the cross [she] usually wear[s],” whereas Georgia Papakirk said that she has “about five gold crosses, […] so many.” Tatiana Kolovou added that a Greek Orthodox person is “always supposed to wear that cross when you go to church.” In addition to the strong tradition of the gift of a cross, another gift of jewelry which can accompany Baptism is the detautotita, so named in relation to a Greek I.D. Tatiana explained this by saying that “in Greece you can only be baptized in the Greek church, so you get your identity in a way, you either get a necklace with your name or you get a bracelet that has your name on it […] and a lot of people do that, a lot of people wear their name.” This struck a
cord with me because I wear a baptismal name necklace given to me when I was two years old by my great uncle, my closest living Greek relative, but I never knew what it was. This is particularly interesting because I was not baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church but in the Roman Catholic Church. One other baptismal adornment was mentioned by Victoria Martine, who stated that she was sure her family “still [has] the gowns [she and her siblings] wore for Baptism.”

Another celebration within the Greek Orthodox Church which is closely tied to jewelry and adornments is the celebration of marriage. In addition to traditional ceremonial wedding rings, Greeks may receive watches (Brod), wreathes for their heads (Papakirk), a necklace, a bracelet, and/or an additional ring (Kalentzidou). Jewelry and adornments can be purchased new or passed down in the family; Georgia Papakirk’s “grandmother has all these gold coins, and she said ‘For your wedding day, I’m going to give them all to you in a bracelet form,’” which was very meaningful and special for Georgia because it enhanced her connection to her grandmother.

It should be noted that Kristina Strafford, Tatiana Kolovou, and Victoria Martine all stated that Greeks wear their wedding bands on their right hand instead of the conventional American left-hand practice. Tatiana expanded on this, explaining that when the couple gets engaged, “the priest comes to the house to bless the couple, and you always get together at the bride’s house, and the groom’s family comes, and there is a huge jewelry exchange [at which] the wedding bands get blessed by the priest and you wear them on your left hand, and then when you go to the church to get married, you take them off, the priest blesses them again, and then you officially wear them on your right hand, and that means you’re married.” In this scenario, there is no diamond engagement ring like the American custom. That said, the concept of a jewelry exchange is affirmed by Dr. Olga Kalentzidou who acknowledged that she “got a lot of jewelry
because again it’s part of [their] tradition when [they] get married to receive jewelry from both sides of the family.” However, not all Greeks wear their wedding rings on their right hand, nor do they all reject the American tradition of an engagement ring for the woman; the results vary from family to family.

In conjunction with my questions directed at the participants themselves, I also asked them about the people who influenced their Greek heritage the most, and whether that impacted their habits with Greek jewelry and adornments. Dr. Artemis Brod said that her “mom on a day to day basis and [her] extended family [when she] spent a lot of time with [her] cousins and aunts” most affected and encouraged the development of her Greek ethnic identity. Christina Adams cited her parents and her grandparents on her mother’s side. Maria Koulogeorgas stated that her “father taught [her] the most about [her] Greek heritage.” Dr. Olga Kalentzidou claimed a “combination of immediate family and distant family and extended family” because she “grew up with her relatives,” while Kristina Strafford and Taylor Shimp each credited their yai yai (grandma). Georgia Papakirk took this a step further, naming her grandparents and stating that her “grandma raised [her], [they] only spoke Greek in the household,” and while her parents did influence her, she “stayed at her [grandmother’s] house while [her] parents worked.” Victoria Martine replied that her “mother largely” impacted her, “but then [she] think[s] [her] yai yai would be a close second” with “the people at church third.” Ellie Ioannides included her Greek school teachers as others who strongly impacted her Greek heritage. The participants’ family and community who influenced their Greek identity held a direct correlation to the participant’s jewelry and adornment habits because the source of the majority of the Greek jewelry and adornments which the participants own and wear was their family and greater community.
Due to the fact that these ethnic items were uniquely related to important people in the lives of the interviewees, I inquired whether they had any memories which were tied to these pieces. Christina Adams shared that when she wears “the bracelets [she] [has] gotten in Greece,” she thinks “of [her] time, of [her] summers spent in Greece.” Dr. Artemis Brod’s pieces “were all gifts from [her] aunts, so” she reflects on the “kind of closeness that [they] developed at that period,” describing gifts of gold jewelry as a “symbol of intimacy [because] they didn’t have a lot of money.” Victoria Martine says that when she sees “a piece of jewelry, [she] recall[s] instances in which [she] wore it or in which [she] noticed [she] was wearing it.” One specific memory which came to her mind was that “whenever [she] see[s] her baptismal cross, eventually [she] remember[s] [her] brother swallowing his cross one day […] after [they] had dinner, and his throat hurt because he had swallowed a cross.” In response, her mother told her brother to eat some bread “to get it through your digestive system, make sure it’s not stuck,” and Victoria and her sister responded that they wanted to eat bread too because he got to eat bread, so all three of them sat eating bread. Dr. Olga Kalentzidou held a strong correlation between pieces of jewelry and the special occasions on which she had received them. She mentioned that she “hope[s] that one day [she] can give” her charm bracelets, that she “can pass them on to other people in [her] family” who will then have memories associated with them. Kristina Strafford was reminded of her grandparents; “the evil eye, now that [her] papou (grandfather) has passed away, always reminds [her] of him […] and then [her] yai yai’s Greek key [jewelry] looks very old, and both remind [her] of [her] grandparents.” Another emotional memory connected to Greek adornments was Tatiana Kolovou’s memory of her late father. Her “dad died when [she] was seven, so anything of his that [she] has is very precious” to her, and she has “a keychain with Poseidon on it that was his keychain.” When she was young, Tatiana “had a fusion in [her] lower back […]
because of a slipped vertebrae, and [she] was told [she] could never run a marathon.” This did not stop her from training and eventually she “ran one marathon, and that was the Athens marathon,” something which she recommends to all Greeks “because it’s the original, and [she] had [her father’s keychain] with [her] the whole time,” making this “very sentimental [and] symbolic.” These memories demonstrate the deeper meaning and value that jewelry and adornments can have, particularly for American Greeks.

Greek students and faculty at Indiana University Bloomington do express their ethnic identity through jewelry and adornments, not necessarily to demonstrate that they are Greek, but because jewelry and adornments are an essential part of Greek ethnic identity. Because they accompany nearly every special event and occasion in a Greek’s life, these pieces are inextricable from Greek culture and tradition. The Mati remains an important symbol for Greeks and is extremely common in their jewelry. Other commonalities are that Greek jewelry is almost exclusively made of silver and gold, much of it contains the Greek key, and lapis lazuli among other gemstones are frequently included in designs. Baptismal jewelry is an essential part of the Greek Orthodox Church with the gift of a baptismal cross to be worn to masses, but it can also include an identifier with the child’s name or even a Mati pin for their crib. Marriage jewelry, while always involving rings, varied between participants, but was not dependent on length of stay. Of the participants who stated that wedding bands were worn on the right hand, one was an academic immigrant, one was a combination of second and third generation American-born citizens, and one was a third generation American-born citizen. There was however a correlation between the people who most actively encouraged the Greek identity of the participants, and those who provided the participants with their Greek jewelry and adornments. The same immediate and extended family, and greater community, which guided the interviewees through
their Greek development were also the sources for the Greek jewelry and adornments tied so closely to their culture and ethnic identity. This allowed for my participants to have memories of these loved ones who are tied to the jewelry and adornments which were given to them, providing an effective link to both uncommon occurrences and familiar feelings of nostalgia. Greek jewelry and adornments are worn on campus by ethnically Greek students and faculty as an expression of identity, a fact which is not likely to change any time in the near future.

Martine, Victoria. *Victoria Martine Wearing a Traditional Greek Dance Costume and Greek Flag Ear Rings.*

Heller, Sophia. *Greek Baptismal Name Necklace.*

Vosdoganes, Therése Barrett. *Stamotis Vosdoganes (Sophia Heller’s grandfather) at His Home in Toledo, Ohio.*
Sources Cited

Adams, Christina. Personal Interview. 23 March 2018.

Brod, Artemis. Personal Interview. 5 March 2018.

Ioannides, Ellie. Survey Responses. 5 April 2018.

Kalentzidou, Olga. Personal Interview. 7 March 2018.


Koulogeorgas, Maria. Survey Responses. 23 March 2018.


Papakirk, Georgia. Personal Interview. 8 March 2018.

Shimp, Taylor. Survey Responses. 5 April 2018.