Voices from the Closet: Male Homosexuality and Dual Identity in the Republic of Cyprus

By Tasia Jelatis-Hoke
Independent Study Project
SIT: Cyprus, Fall 2006

Acknowledgements:

```
Dear Tasia,
Being the capital, the largest city in Cyprus and the most liberal when it
comes to views on sexual relations, one would expect Nicosia to be the city
where the gay scene is thriving. Unfortunately there is no gay scene in
Nicosia. The only places you can you to are the cruising areas, but I would
not recommend that. The thing with Cyprus is that because not many gay men
and women are out, there is no such thing as a 'scene'…
Best Wishes,
John,
Gay Cyprus Online

--response to the author's solicitation of information
```

Research Question:

What is the relationship between semiotics and gay identities in the Republic of Cyprus?

I initially planned to explore the complex relationship between language, and more specifically semiotics and gay male identity in Greek Cypriots. Early in my research, however, I realized that a lot of background research was required before I would be able to do this sort of in-depth analysis. In addition, after becoming aware of the deep colonial legacy left to homosexuals in Cyprus I was reluctant to use the work of European theorists to analyze a post-colonial space. I also came across a pertinent assertion of Homi Bhabha's regarding semiotic analysis in which he says the following:

> Why return to the semiotician's daydream? Why begin with 'theory' as story, as narrative and anecdote, rather than with the history or method? Beginning with the semiotic project—enumerating all the languages within earshot—evokes memories of the seminal influence of semiotics within our contemporary critical discourse…If you seek simply the sententious or the exegetical, you will not grasp the hybrid moment outside the sentence—not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream, part analysis; neither signifier nor signified. This intermediate space between theory and practice disrupts the disciplinary semiological demand to enumerate all the languages within earshot (Bhabha 1994).

In addition to this enlightenment regarding the potential limitations of semiotics, I realized that, while my original intent was to limit the scope of my research by filtering it through a semiotic interpretation, this was too confining and unreasonable an expectation. There has not been enough written on homosexuality in Cyprus to reasonably begin a new body of research anywhere but at "square one." The question that I was able to answer, at least in general terms, was, "What is the experience of being a gay man in Cyprus?" While this may seem like too

general a question, it was necessary to understand this before looking at any one aspect of gay identity in Cyprus.

Introduction:

Cyprus is a small Mediterranean island located south of Turkey and West of Lebanon. It has made international headlines in the last thirty years due to intercommunal violence and tension between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot populations and continues to draw interest because of the unique role it plays in European Union politics. Cyprus currently boasts the only divided capital in Europe with the UN "Green Line" or buffer zone running from East to West across the country, and dividing Nicosia (the capital) in the process. The vast majority of Greek Cypriots live "south" of the green line, in the Republic of Cyprus, while the "north" is administered by Turkish Cypriots and Turks from Turkey. Officially, the "north" is under de jure sovereignty of the Republic of Cyprus though this doesn't reflect the reality on the ground. This research will focus only on the Republic of Cyprus.

Being a small island nation[1] with an influential and active church, the Republic of Cyprus is very conservative. One sector in which this conservativism is very apparent (to those who are prepared to observe it) is the gay and lesbian populations and the relevant legislation in Cyprus. It was only in 1998 that homosexuality was decriminalized and it is far from being accepted or legitimized in society. In this study I wish to explore how gay men define their identities within this highly oppressive system.

Background:

According to multiple electronic sources gay male "sexual conduct" was a crime in Cyprus from 1889 when British laws against "buggery" were transferred to its then colony, Cyprus. With pressure from the European Union to concur with international human rights standards and a pivotal court case involving a Cypriot man named Alecos Modinos, homosexuality was decriminalized in 1998. There have been subsequent court cases and movements based around the age of consent, and terminology used in legislation. According to

---

[1] I use the word "nation" to refer to the shared identities (imagined or not) of the people of the Republic of Cyprus

"The Cyprus Mail" online, "even after passing the law decriminalizing homosexuality the parliament managed to further insult gays by retaining a reference to "unnatural licentiousness", which the gay community strongly objected to. It took two years for the House to change the offending phrase to "intercourse between men" (http://www.hri.org/news/cyprus/cmnews/2002/02-07-06.cmnews.html). Lesbianism is widely unacknowledged and, in contrast to queer identity in the United States, seems to be relatively disconnected from gay male identity.

It is difficult to speak of a homosexual community in Cyprus because no clear "gay community exists." Alecos Modinos led an effort to organize a political gay community yet met with an unsustainable success. While his campaign revolutionized the laws about homosexuality in Cyprus, he, alone was not able to mobilize a gay community to action. If a movement can be spoken of at all (and I would not call it a coherent movement but a number of individual influences) it is enacted from outside of Cyprus by gay men who have studied or worked abroad and imported ideas from (mainly) Europe and North America. What I have studied, as a group is a collection of individual gay men who socialize[2] with other gay men.

Apart from the legal dimensions of the issue, there is a vast cultural influence based in Cypriot traditions such as the importance of the family, the value system of honor and shame, the traditional definition of sexuality in Cyprus, the effect of the intercommunal conflict on values and economics, and child-raising practices. Though not all of these themes imerged in my research, they were all introduced to me in my preliminary and informal research with gay men in Cyprus and are important to keep in mind as a backdrop to homosexuality in Cyprus.

Cypriot life revolves around the family. Family members will always involve and impact one another even if the impact consists only of the repercussions from isolating oneself from one's family by moving away and cutting off contact (which is practically unheard of). Many children live with their parents until they are married, and after marriage live near their parents. It is common for grandparents to care for their grandchildren while the parents are at work. It is also very common for elder parents to prepare meals for their grown-up children. These are just some examples of the basic ways in which family linkage remains important throughout a Greek Cypriot's life. In addition, families are economically tied to each other through business and

---

[2] "Socialize" refers to having social relations with other gay men. For example, going to coffee together, talking to each other on the phone, and going "cruising" (a term that will be explored later) together.

marriage customs. When a child is to be married, his or her parents pay for the wedding—a huge financial undertaking. At the wedding the couple can make (according to one informant) two years salary (from gifts of money). In addition, because the wages are relatively low to the cost of living, children depend on living with their parents until they've saved enough money to get a home of their own. Family members will always be involved in each other's private life impacting decisions and choices.

Definitions of sexuality are quite formulaic and traditional in Cyprus. They are constructed around the theme of penetration—a male is defined because he is the sexual penetrator while a female is one who is penetrated during sexual intercourse. In his article "Greek Sexual Culture, Identity and Ethnicity, Constantinos Phellas asserts that, "…the societal defintion of homosexuality in Cyprus originates around the schema of penetration, and in this conceptualisation the label of the homosexual is attributed to any individual who is benetrated or thought to be penetrated. (Phellas unknown)" In addition to this, and in part because of it, there is a paternalistic machismo about the constructed masculine identity. This complicates sexuality because it reifies the link between masculinity and maleness which begs the question of how someone can be feminine and male or homosexual and male at the same time.

Because of the level of trauma that the intercommunal conflict induced, some issues of human rights were set aside as survival took precedence. Because of this, Cyprus has much "catching-up" to do with the rest of the European Union not only in "gay liberation" but in establishing other human rights infrastructures and cultivating tolerance in arenas such as mental health, mental and physical disability, and sex-equality, and multiculturalism. In a recent study, Cyprus was ranked lowest of all the EU countries in terms of gender equality (Christou 2006).

Conceptual Framework:

I operate from an understanding of "queer" theory which stresses decentralized identities and a spectrum of sexuality (from gay to straight, though these terms are generally too modern for queer studies which is influenced by post-modernism). The term "queer" was reappropriated first by Teresa de Lauretis in a 1991 essay which elaborated upon her "Upping the anti (sic) in feminist theory." Simon During (editor of "The Cultural Studies Reader") explains her use of the

term as a way to, "point out the 'difference'—the specificity and disruptiveness—of identities embodied in sexual (and racial) minorities" (During 1999). Though de Lauretis later abandoned this theory it was taken up by many authors, academics, and activists as a way to explore sexuality in a non-essentialist, post-modern way. It strives to take into consideration issues which were neglected and peoples who were excluded in earlier versions of sexuality studies (for example the exclusion of women of color in first and second wave feminism). Queer theories allows for a range of identities and allows people to identify themselves without using concrete and fixed terms such as gay, lesbian, bi, straight, etc.

Queer theory was useful to me in approaching sexuality outside of a binary-focused gay/straight perspective. In speaking with gay men in Cyprus, it has become clear that such a perspective is much too simplistic for the complex reality at hand. An example of this is the numerous cases of men who live married lives with wives and children, yet participate in gay sex acts at night. Regardless of the reality of gay self-identification in Cyprus, it is important to be aware of this self-tendency toward post-modernist, anti-essentialist habits of analysis.

Rationale:

I chose this issue, mainly because it is of personal interest to me. As a queer woman growing up in the United States I have spent a lot of time thinking about and analyzing my own queer identity. In addition, my work at Macalester College has included exploring women's, gender, and sexuality. My studies within anthropology have focussed on studying the hardcore punk community, which like homosexuals in Cyprus, is a marginalized group (though the two obviously vary greatly). In these ways this study is a natural extension of my previous work.

The subject of gay identity in Cyprus is not very well academically covered. I hope to provide a document that will be useful to the gay community in the Republic of Cyprus as well as an interesting comparison to gay identities in the United States and other countries. It is my experience that information leads to greater understanding and even liberation. While isolated it is easy for an individual to feel that his issues are unimportant. This attitude leads to allowing oneself to be marginalized, or enforcing a sort of self-marginalization. When a body of work that reveals that there is a pattern rather than incidental cases in ideas and identities (in this case that there are many gay men in Cyprus) is introduced to a society, marginalized individuals begin to

see themselves as a centered group. I hope that this work can contribute to normalizing homosexuality in Cyprus if not for the general population, then at least for those who are self-marginalized.

There is a gross imbalance in literature on Cyprus which favors intercommunal relations between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. While this work is valuable, and while the issue is integral to almost all aspects of Cypriot life, it seems that it has had the side-effect of a neglect of scholarly work on other aspects of Cypriot life. While there is a body of work about Mediterranean sexuality in general, there is little about the unique situation of Cypriot gay identity. With the notable exception of Stavros Karayanni's work on sexuality and dance there aren't any accessible academic works that wrestle with gay Cypriot identity in Cyprus (as discussed later there is a very interesting study that was done with gay Cypriots in England). Sexuality, like religion and politics, is an integral part of every culture, and as such requires comparable attention. I would like to begin to resolve the inequity in amount of attention given to different aspects of Cypriot culture which will most certainly lead to greater understanding of every aspect of Cypriot life.

Literature Review:

In "Homosexual Life in Cyprus," Alecos Modinos provides a brief history of sexuality on the island. He includes history on the division of the island, the foundation and subsequent actions of the Gay Liberation Movement of Cyprus (in 1987), the opposition of homosexuality by the Greek Orthodox Church, and his own struggle to legalize homosexuality through the intervention of the European Council of Ministers from 1990 onward. He also covers subsequent legal campaigns focused on changing legislation and language regarding homosexuality. Modinos also provides a summation of the current situation for homosexuals in Cyprus, focusing on difficulties with families.

There are a number of news articles that detail sections of Modinos' overview. Some focus on problems with the church outlining the intense opposition to homosexuality as well as scandals about the alleged homosexuality of some Greek Orthodox monks (Helena Smith's Cyprus divided over gay rights). There are a number of short works based on interviews with gay Cypriots. These narrate day to day life, focusing on familial difficulties such as those outlined

above (Jill Campell Mackay's "It's not easy to be gay in Cyprus") and gay socializing—the different clubs which gay men frequent, the cruising areas, the difficulties of leading a double life, etc. In the latter, gay men comment of the ease of having sex and the difficulty of forming meaningful relationships (Kath Toumbourou's "When you know who you are, you don't have to make excuses to anyone"). These pieces explain the importance, and near sanctity of family to Greek Cypriots and how homosexuality is seen as a threat to this institution. Indeed, it is the only major threat to the family as things like gambling and infidelity are quite accepted, or at least tolerated in Cyprus. The articles also explain how much pressure there is on Cypriots in general to get married and have children.

In addition to the above there have been a small number of academic studies done on Greek Cypriot sexuality. One of these is "Greek Sexual Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity" by Constantinos N Phellas. This work concentrates on gay Greek Cypriot men in England. Phellas touches on the "honour and shame" value system that has been connected to the Mediterranean. He explains that males are only considered (by the general population) to be homosexual if, when having sex, they take on the passive or traditionally female role of being penetrated. Phellas, as others, also stresses the role of the family. He writes, "in the Greek-Cypriot culture the individual man in merged with the family and the community. He does not have an identity as his problems are shared with the rest of the family (Phellas. 2006: 7). All of this is used as evidence that identity can be problematic within a Greek Cypriot schema because identities are varied and shifting.

The most applicable and academic essay written on male sexuality in Cyprus is Stavros Karayanni's "Moving identity: dance in the negotiation of sexuality and ethnicity in Cyprus." In his own words Karayanni intends to do the following in his article.

> I highlight certain connections between hero worship in Cyprus, the legacy of British sexuality laws and how they directed the masculinist and heterosexual signature of the nation, and the dance tradition of the *chifteteli,* the Turkish and Greek version of belly dances (Karayanni 2006).

Karayanni traces the construction of masculinity in Cyprus from the time of the British, through the intercommunal violence and related culture of heroism, to the present, taking into account cultural aspects as well as colonialism, politics and globalization.

Operational Definitions:

While my definitions changed throughout the project based on the reality of the situation in Cyprus, the following are the definitions with which I began my research. These definitions should not be confused with the definitions used by cultural informants and should be understood as part of the framework from which I, as researcher, operate.

I define 'gay' as a man who is romantically interested in, and/or has sex with other men and is not interested in being romantically involved with or having sex with women.

Greek Cypriot refers to people who identify as such, mainly those living in the Republic of Cyprus whose families have been in the country for multiple generations and who speak Cypriot Greek as a first language.

The terms "out," "out of the closet," and "coming out" all refer to how open a person is about being gay. If a person is living openly gay he is said to be "out." A man (or woman) can also, "come out" to someone by telling that person that he is gay. "Outing" is when a third party (for example a friend of a gay man) tells or inadvertently reveals to someone else (perhaps a colleague) that a person is gay. There are degrees to which a man can be out. For example, he may be out to other gay people, but not to his family or co-workers. He may be out only to a close friend and no one else. Coming out is seen as a process, or series of events rather than a one-time event. Conversely, "in the closet" is a term used to describe someone who is perceived as gay but hasn't told anyone, or everyone.

Semiotics refers to, "the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior; the analysis of systems of communication, as language, gestures, or clothing (dictionary.com)." My understanding of it is highly influenced by the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Lacan.

Methodology:

I began my research by contacting the webmasters of "Gay Cyprus Online" an internet site I discovered from doing a general internet search. I solicited them for information on the places I could go to find gay men to interview. What I received, however, was what I believe is

traditionally called a research assistant but for me proved to be a guide, networker and cultural-translator. On our first meeting, Alex (all names have been changed for the protection of the informants) my dedicated guide took me *cruising*[3] in *the park*[4]. He and a friend of his gave me an initial understanding of gay life in Cyprus. Alex arranged interviews for me with friends of his, and lastly, one with himself. He generously dedicated his time to translate from Cypriot Greek to English and was present at all but one interview (which was initiated by myself with no intermediary). Besides the initial informal interview with Alex and his friend, I interviewed six men between the ages of twenty and forty. Five self-identified as gay and one as straight and gay-friendly. Three were students (in addition to having jobs in a coffee shop, a bar, and as a driver), one owned a café, one was an independent artist, and one worked for his family's food delivery service[5]. Four interviews were done one-on-one (two of these with Alex acting as a translator) and one interview consisted of a discussion between Alex and two other informants with myself directing the conversation.

Because of the sensitive nature of the project and hesitancy in informants, many interviews were cancelled (by the would-be informants) at the last moment. Most of the interviews were quite spontaneous with Alex calling me on my mobile and informing me that if I could be at a certain coffee shop within a half an hour then we could do an interview with some of his friends. While this proved difficult for me, it provided a very relaxed atmosphere for the interviewees. There was no time for them to become apprehensive and when I arrived all were in a good mood. (I contrast this with my first interview which was pre-scheduled and quite stiff.)

While I originally planned to have repeated interviews with the same informants, this proved logistically impossible. The reason which I wanted to do this was to develop trust with my informants. What I did not anticipate, however, was the immediat trust which followed what became the standard outing of myself (as queer) at the beginning of every interview. I believe I received information that a straight researcher probably never would have. Every interview, save the last, began with me asking my leading question, "how do you define your sexuality?" followed by an uncomfortable pause and Alex asking me to tell the interviewee/s about myself. I tended to assume that Alex had told his friends about my sexuality, but he never had, which continually surprised me.

---

[3] Walking around a park or driving around a parking lot to meet, talk to, or have sex with other men
[4] There is one park in Nicosia where men cruise on foot
[5] This is the entire population and sample used in my research

While Alex' social planning was extremely helpful, it meant that I didn't have control over who I was to meet, or when or where I would meet him. In a way, he directed the course of this research as much as, or more, than I did. Though I made multiple plans to visit the one gay club on the island (which is Larnaca, about an hour's drive from Nicosia), they all fell through due mainly to cancelled rides. Though I would have liked to go there and to other spaces, I feel that a similar effect was created by Alex inviting me into spaces already created by himself and the interviewees. I would have liked to go to the club to even power dynamics by placing myself in a place in which I was not in charge, but this happened anyway because of the way we did the interviews. I was able to encounter gay men on their own terms and which altered the power dynamics because I was out of my comfort zone and in a predetermined gay space.

I asked each of the men similar questions while also following their leads. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed though one man did not feel comfortable with this (though I was able to take notes verbatim due to translating time) and on one occasion their were technical difficulties and no recording was made. The quotations I will use most are from the interview with Alex and the group interview which I conducted with Gus, Paul and Alex. These were most helpful to me because they took place later in my research when I had a better idea of the questions I should ask. In addition, these three mostly spoke for themselves, with no translator, and so were more comfortable speaking for extended amounts of time and going into detail. There were two other interviews (with Mixalis and Gregaris) conducted with Alex translating and the final interview with Zach, regrettably, was not recorded though notes were taken.

When the interviews were over, I transcribed them and reviewed them repeatedly. I concentrated on issues which immerged in all of the interviews. To identity these I looked for repetition of words and phrases both within each interview and throughout them all.

Ethics:

It was crucial to my topic that I maintain total confidentiality with my informants. I have done this by using pseudonyms throughout this paper as well as making certain not to discuss any of my interviewees within the context of my work. I obtained consent to research, record, and use the information gathered from each interview in a report at the beginning of each

interview. I found it more practical to get spoken rather than written consent because in a number of cases my informants didn't speak English so were unable to read my consent forms. In these cases I asked Alex to translate the content of the consent form and then ask for consent. I keep the audio recordings of the interviews in a safe and private place. The transcriptions are on my personal computer and have never been opened using any other computer.

I stressed to my informants that they should not feel compelled to answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable. I also asked them if there were uses for my research that they would like to see. I plan to distribute this paper to each of my informants. I also hope to have a shorter version of it translated into Greek so that the non-English-speaking informants can read the product.

Reliability and Validity:

I believe that this study is reliable because of the precautions I have taken (outlined above) to make it so. In addition, my informants were all commited to the project—they were very interested in having a study which truthfully documented contemporary gay identites in Cyprus. For this reason I believe that they would not purposefully mislead me with false information. Even if the content of the interviews was skewed because of people wanting me to think the best of them, it still reflects how gay men wish to be portrayed. This study seeks to represent the opinions of gay men, and not emperical truths, therefore no matter the content of the interviews, each is valid. I have attempted to outline every place in which unreliability could imerge (see following section) and have constructed a way to deal with each, either by recognizing the limitation, or by striving to overcome it.

Limitations:

My information is obviously favored toward the experiences of men who self-identify as gay. This is a sensitive issue because an entire group of men who my informants would consider gay (those who are "top-active" in sex with men) were not included because they neither socialize with gay people or identify as gay. I initially predicted that my research would be

limited to interviewing English speakers. While my language was not limited in such a way language was still an issue. When men spoke to me in English they were necessarily translating from their native tongue. This phenomenon was multiplied when Alex translated for the men. In addition, my sample was hand-picked by Alex, though this wasn't as biasing as it could have been because Alex, in his own words, knows about "twenty percent of the island."

I was limited by time as my research must was began and completed within a number of weeks. This prevented me from finding more varied experiences (including closeted gay men, men in a vaster age range, and straight people) and from doing a comparative study of the homosexuality on the whole island. A full exploration of the many aspects of gay identity was not possible because of the time limit. I was also clearly limited by my lack of knowledge of either Greek or Cypriot Greek.

Another large limitation was the lack of literature available on the topic. There were three published scholarly works specifically on Cypriot homosexual identity (Karayanni, Phellas, and Modinos) which I was able to find through journal searches. The other scholarly works were given to me by individuals. In addition I used news articles and pieces on Mediterranean sexuality as well as post-colonial and sexuality studies theoretical materials. This was not only an issue in preparing for my research but also in analyzing my data. Though Phellas' study was most like mine, it was conducted in England where the culture is similar but the cultural boundaries are different—people leave Cypriot communities daily whereas on Cyprus, they clearly do not. In a way, then, I was entering uncharted territory which, for a relatively inexperienced researcher as I am, is an intimidating place to go. Though I received helpful guidance from a number of individuals, there was nothing against which to check my conclusions. This was both exciting and daunting.

Data Analysis:

Things particular and essential to understanding Cypriot homosexuality:

Nobody talks about it/Extreme oppression

Multiple times in almost every interview my informants would get mildly frustrated with my questions and answer with something like, "I told you, you don't talk about it here. It's very

narrow minded—not at all free." Though I was not surprised that people didn't talk about their sexuality with straight people, it did surprise me that even among gay people who socialize together, there exists a sort of taboo on discussing sexuality and everything surrounding it. There is one gay night club on the island. It is called Secrets Freedom Club[6]. Discussion regarding the club can be described by only half of its name—secrets. There is no freedom in discussing sexuality or even gay-related activities, like going to Secrets. When, during an interview, I told Gus, Paul and Alex that I planned on going to Secrets soon they responded with the following:

G: but if you go there people in Cyprus will, like, "you go there? Oh my god" and things like that. You don't really talk about it here. About going there. Or things like that. Really? Or am I wrong?
A: no, you never talk about it. We usually say we're like gonna to go to Larnaca or something. Yeah. We're going to Larnaca. You don't even say club. Cause they'll figure it out cause there's only one club.
G: (laughing) yeah, that's right.
A: you say like, "we're going to go to Larnaca for coffee" or something.
G: you know they can make you feel like you don't want to talk about it.

The fact that they are secretive to straight people about their gay socializing did not come as much of a surprise to me. Even in mentioning my research to a group of radically leftist young adults I was met with blank stares and silence. Imagine, then, discussing one's own sexuality in one's own society. It is unimaginable and it does not happen.

What did surprise me, however, is that this silence and dodging of truth extended to discussion between gay men where the danger of revealing one's homosexuality does not exist. Discussing going to Secrets once more, Alex, Gus and Paul narrated the following:

A: yeah, everyone denies it. Everyone's like, "oh I don't go to that place it's too cheap" but they still go. (translating for P): he just wants to say the same thing we're saying now. Everyone's so secretive about it and everyone's like, oh no we don't go there but they go in the end.
T: even to your gay friends?
S and G: yeah.
A: even the gay friends between each other
P: or "we don't go there" but you see them there.
A: gay friends usually act like that cause they're also complexive. I mean even gay people with other gay people they speak very secretive sometimes.
G: yeah, that's true.
A: it depends how gay your friends are. If they're too complexic gay then,
P: but we don't meet in Cyprus, don't you understand this
A: yeah, because they're not like that because they want to be they're like that because society forces them to be like that.

---

[6] This is the actual name of the club. It is an openly gay club that advertises itself as such. I use the name in order to promote the club.

While the reason for this secrecy between gay men was never explicitly revealed to me, I believe

Alex hints at it when he says, "they're not like that because they want to be. They're like that

because society forces them to be like that." I believe that the need to keep silent regarding

homosexuality is so ingrained in gay men, having felt this pressure for all of their lives, that it is

difficult to talk about it, even in a safe situation—secrecy has become a habitudinal way of life.

Being gay in Cyprus is like being an alien—not human
Alex: Alright, can I just make a small parentheses just so we all feel better here, alright. Can you just like, introduce yourself. Get into it, this way they feel better.
T: Sure. Aright. I'm Tasia. I'm from the states. I'm queer myself. So I'm interested in,
Alex: So, she's one of us, so you can be yourselves. She understands

A: no, no no. no compromization at all. It's either you're open minded or your not and it will always be like that.
G: If you're gay in Cyprus they may not consider you as a human. You know what I mean?
T: tell me
G: you know what I mean?
T: sort of maybe.
G: that's basically what it is all about
T: that you're not considered human if you're gay?
P: it's like this. If you are gay they think you are an alien

The relationship between femininity and male homosexuality is very complex and multi-faceted (penetration etc.)

Attitudes toward femininity in gay men were grossly varied. They ranged from Zach who

told me that for him being homosexual is about being more feminine—otherwise he'd be

straight, to Alex and Paul who do not understand the allure of feminine gay men. In the

following dialogue, they discuss this while Gus weighs in at the end with an interesting spin:

A: well most gay people do act feminine but it's not all of them I think there're are some who act very manly. I mean, I try not to act feminine because I don't like it. It's not my character. I see my life as I'm a gay man and I like to interact with gay men. If I for example met a guy and he was very feminine, I'd rather have sex with a regular woman than with a very effeminate guy. It just doesn't turn me on, it's not my style. I'm a man and I don't want to dress like a woman, I don't feel like a woman, I don't think like a woman, I'm a man, that's the thing.
T: you were asking me earlier about butch women and why you wouldn't just want to be with a man instead of a woman.
A: yeah, I don't know, feminine gay men just don't, I don't like it. It's just not me, it's not my character.
P: it's like if you want to have sex with this why don't you have sex with a woman?
G: but lets say I don't find it feminine to put a piercing, or I don't know.
A: that's true, I mean being feminine is something different for each person
G: lets say I have a bag with me. Okay, it's from a men's section and it's a designer bag. I don't find it feminine personally to hold a bag. But here it's going to be like "uh! This guy is gay."
A: yeah because he's holding a bag. And it's a designer bag.
G: they're going to be like "oh my god" you know what I mean?

This conversation shows that definitions of gender behaviors and roles are a bit insecure, at least among gay men. While wearing an earring, ordering a "womanly drink" (like "sex on the beach") or carrying a designer bag does not make someone feminine, the situation around traditional gender roles during gay sex—particularly that of penetrator/penetrated—is much more complicated. During each interview I recited the popular opinion that if a man is the active member in sex (also referred to as top, top-active, and "the one doing the fucking") then he is straight but the passive member (also know as the bottom or "the one being fucked") is gay and also womanly because they are taking the role of penetrator, as women traditionally have.

Though Zach tended to agree with this binary, the group interview, perhaps because the format encouraged discussion rather than narration, felt differently. When I asked what they thought about the active/passive binary they replied with the following:

P: This really makes me mad, and then we go to have sex. It's like this everywhere they're like I'm not a bottom, I'm a man, but when you go to have sex with them they're bottom.
G: I disagree with this. If he's top active, of course he's gay. Anyway, he's just top active, isn't he? It's another thing being straight and it's another thing being top active. But now they're discussing another matter here I believe (referring to S and P)
A: well it's sort of the same, it's not entirely, it's what I was saying. Here they also put it in a different perspective. They say that if a man if top, active then he's considered a man, but if a man is bottom, then he's considered very feminine. And I don't agree with that either.
G: yeah, they do that as well here. They, yeah. I don't know why they don't accept someone the way he is, anyway. You know what I mean?
T: yeah I do
G: maybe that's just the way he is, that's the way he was born and maybe, you know what I mean?

This conversation pointed to the complexity of gay identity in Cyprus. Here is an example of what Karayanni gestures toward in his article. He writes,

> That the binary of homo/heterosexuality is recognizable as distinctly Western is a widely espoused theoretical argument. In contrast, the East is regarded as more fluid in its sexual behaviour and less rigid in its control of individual preference" (Karayanni 2006: 257)

While I believe this to be true, It is apparent when looking at the passive/active myth, and the confusion surrounding it, that gay men are attempting to integrate the rigid myth with the fluctuating reality.

When discussed directly, most gay men refuted the idea that active equals male and passive equals female, but when speaking freely it became apparent to me that this way of thinking is indeed alive among gay men. This occurred when I spoke with Alex, who of all the

men interviewed was the most familiar and comfortable with me. When asked about categories

of gay men he responded by this illustration which shows that the categories are instable at best:

I mean you can see a really nice macho guy and he might turn out to be homosexual and you might never have
imagined it. And he might turn out to be passive. He could turn out to be like the biggest woman you know in bed
but when you look at him he's like "the guy" you know he's really macho and really bulky and uh everything else.
Yeah, now I think it's really difficult to tell.

*External vocabulary is sinking into the Cyprus gay scene and in turn gay people are wrestling
with integrating and making sense of this new vocabulary with the situation they have at hand.
Ex. Bisexuality*

It is a reality in Cyprus that Cypriots are constantly presented with imported ideologies

and ways of life. In the past this was clearly demarcated by colonization but today it is more

subtly being applied through media and European influence in general. I believe that in some

cases, a word, or concept (sign) in introduced in a place where there is no correlating reality

(signified). Though I cannot say for certain, it seems that this is the case with the word and

related concept of bisexuality. I believe that part of the reason for confusion over this term is the

more fluid definition of gay. While my own definition of gay (as stated above) clearly excludes

men who sleep with women, this is not at all the case in how gay men define themselves. I was

surprised to find, in an informal setting, that the gay men I had just interviewed had sleep with

women. Though my informants had told me that gay men could go with women, I didn't actually

realize that most did. It seems that bi, to the gay men I spoke to, was a word men used when they

slept with men but didn't want to call themselves gay. It was, then, only a front for

homosexuality—something that doesn't exist outside of the title. As Paul told me,

P: there isn't bisexual. There is only straight and gay. It's very simple. A straight man he can't go with a gay
because he's a straight. A gay can go with a woman. There is not bi. There is only straight and gay. It's very simple.
But because they don't accept that they are gay, "I'm bi."

Me: I've heard that in Cyprus a person can be considered straight if he is the active member—if he penetrates/fucks
rather than being fucked. What do you think about that?
Mixalis: It's true but people should just say they're gay. They're not being honest. If the active person can't say that
they're gay they should at least say that they're bi.

Alex expanded on this point in a later interview saying,

A: I don't agree with the word bisexual…But I don't know I just think that there's no such thing and that if a man
said he was gay then it would sound better cause yeah he could have sexual encounters as well as socializing with
men *and* with women because I mean it wouldn't sound that bad. I mean if you take it from one side there are so

many Cypriot men in Cyprus who are gay and they still end up having children and getting married which means that even though they're forced to do it I don't think they just do it because their parents force them to and they have children. I mean I see most of them and they all love there children really well and they socialize perfectly with their wives and everything even though they have their own little life hidden behind closed doors.

Like if you're heterosexual then you need to be going with women only. If you're bisexual you can hang out with men but you're like forced to hang out with women or like, a bisexual man usually has like a girlfriend at the same time and he's usually just up like for one night stands. It's not considered normal in Cyprus to be bisexual and have a relationship. Especially, also, it wouldn't be considered normal for a bisexual male in Cyprus to be a bottom in bed. Bisexual males in Cyprus are usually active because they're. alright it's a mix. It really depends. I mean the younger generation they usually say that the bisexual males are meant to be active but the older generation they're meant to be passive and the reason why this is, um the older males are usually married, are usually passive in bed and this, I've talked to quite a few of them, the answer they generally give is, cause I always ask them, how can you be bi and passive it just doesn't make sense. And they're usually like, "well, I usually get from a man what my wife can't give me" so in a sense they're active with women and passive with men. But still, I don't accept it because it just doesn't make sense again. I mean how can you be heterosexual or how can you be bi and be passive and active? I mean no, by the time you take it from a male you're obviously homosexual and if you think about it scientifically, a male who goes with a male, or a female who goes with a female is homosexual no matter which way you think about it. Even if you just have one encounter it means that you have the vibes for homosexuality and you have it inside you.

Almost Everyone's gay

There is an interesting belief among the gay men with whom I spoke that the majority of men in the world, but particularly Cyprus are gay but they don't know it, are in denial, or are in societies that make them act as heterosexuals. This came up time and time again, almost always more than once per interview. It was always presented as a self-evident truth rather than a theory which surprised me. As usual, Paul stated this is a very clear and succinct way:

P: In Cyprus I believe they're repressed as much. Most of them, they are gay, but they don't accept that thing.
A: that's also true.
T: (to G) do you think that's true?
G: what?
T: That most men in Cyprus are gay but they don't accept it?
G: yeah. They're married and they do whatever they want, they do everything, whatever (laughs from P and S), and then they're straight and if you say that they're…you know, things like that. I had, I know about myself, I mean for sure.
A: yeah
…
P: (A translates) he's saying that if you find for example twenty males and if you ask them who's gay that probably nineteen out of them are either gay or have had an encounter with a male and maybe one of them is straight but how many of those can you convince to actually come out and say that they're gay? Which shows that, on his view, still they're not really open about it. Yeah, they're getting more into it but still they're not really out with it.

Protecting yourself:

Someone can be very out, open and free among other gay people and be very secretive among straight people

It was only after weeks of meeting with Alex for socializing and interviews that I learned how secretive he is among straight people regarding his homosexuality. This took me by surprise because to me he had always appeared completely open, confident, and proud about his sexuality. I could never imagine him as secretive about his sexuality or masquerading as straight but this is the image he portray throughout most of his days. Somehow, even with all the information I'd received from gay men with whom I wasn't familiar, I thought that men who were confident with their sexuality, and very "out" within gay social circles would be out in general society. It is shocking how much of a double life all gay men leave in order to preserve people's respect toward them. Alex explained it in the following way:

Alex: sure I can't really live the life I wanted to live. Um, cause it's not really acceptable by society here. Um, yeah, I live a very secretive life. I don't give people a chance to find out whether I'm homosexual or heterosexual it's sort of like I'm me, they can have what ever sort of idea they want about me. Wouldn't really bother me at all. But, um, yeah, I can't really act very gay around people. Especially regarding my job because I've been working in clubs for some time and I know a lot of people in Nicosia and also it dates back to my family from my dads side. My uh dads family is a very highly respected family in Cyprus and uh, everyone knows my family and my surname as well.
T: and at school?
Alex: at college I don't really have that much of a problem because I hang around with a lot of foreigners so it's not a problem I can be my self more or less but still gotta be a bit careful because it all comes down to who you know and a lot of people on Cyprus talk because it's such a small island and at the end of the day everyone's family with everyone else so every knows everyone so you gotta be really careful how you act with some people. Quite a lot of people are open minded now, especially ones from the wealthier families because they usually go abroad to study or their parents have gone abroad so they can understand about it and their okay with it. But when it comes to Cypriot-Cypriots who have never left the island no you can't really be very open with them.

As Alex alludes to, the most open minded people in Cyprus seem to be the least Cypriot—those who have a parent who is not from Cyprus or who have studied abroad. I never actually found out what would happen if someone were out in general society. The informants mentioned that some people made jokes about them when they suspected they were homosexual—mocking them for their mannerisms, etc.

Change through time—from conservative to more liberal:

Though more people are becoming curious about having gay experiences themselves, they don't accept it in themselves or others anymore than they did.
The mentality of the people in Cyprus is very slowly becoming more open-minded as Cyprus becomes more and more integrated into Europe
Being gay in Cyprus has become in the last ten years less categorically absolute

Change is coming slowly to Cyprus. The mentality of the people is being pushed forward by pressure from Europe. While the gay men I spoke to in general were dissatisfied with the slow rate at which things were changing, they all agreed that things, indeed, were improving. It was unclear, however, which was changing faster—the mentality of gay people or the mentality of "everyone else." Overall it seems that people's self-identities are evolving faster than the mentality of the general population. This is happening through the influence of the media and of the increased flow of travel and ideas in general. This was discussed in the interviews time and time again:

A: yeah, now it's a bit more free now.
G: yeah, a bit.
T: do you think people have started acting different since it's been legalized?
A: uh, no.
G: no
A: I think people are still the same
G: yeah
A: maybe they're a bit more open minded now because the younger generation go abroad to study and uh the younger generation now they're a bit more open to Europe but still they're not one hundred percent. They're a *bit more open minded now, a *bit* very little though.
G: maybe you can find a few people that they are.
A: well you can find more now than before, that's for sure.
…
T: so you don't think it's changed the way that people act or how they see?
A: I don't know, I've found a bit of difference. I mean every year I think it gets a bit more freer, a *bit* not too much.
P: now that secrets has opened up maybe they're more, a little more open.
A: well now I see more straight people at secrets where in the past it was only gay people. But now you can see some couples there, occasionally a straight group of friends hanging out. And they won't cause any problems, they're just hanging out there. So, I don't know. I guess it's getting a bit more open minded with younger people but it's still not acceptable.
G: yeah.
A: yeah, maybe they can go to a club with gay people but I don't think they still, accept the fact "oh he's gay" or "oh she's lesbian" I don't think they accept it.
P: yes, but they go there still okay. How much (why) from that people who are not gay, they don't go to another and they go to a gay club?
A: alright true, yeah, there's also that perspective. Maybe they go yeah to the gay club but I don't think they tell there friends that they go to a gay club. Straight people. Some straight people sometimes come to Secrets and what we're saying is I'm sure they don't tell their straight friends at all, "we're going to secrets club"

Another interesting point is that gay identities are becoming more fluid. There are now different ways to be gay and the appearances between gay and heterosexual men are almost non-existent. Whether or not this was a good thing is open for debate, but, at any rate, it seems to indicate a breakage with the either/or rhetoric introduced with the British legislation.

Okay, this is a very good thing, coming from him, from a heterosexual, he's saying that, um, in the beginning there used to be a difference between masculine, between very masculine men and feminine men. The difference would

be in the external point of view which is how they dress and the way that they socialize the way they act. But now he's saying in the last year it's difficult to compare two people to figure out who's gay and who isn't. Now a lot of men in Cyprus you see them. Now you see all men basically look the same and they dress the same whereas in the past you used to be able to tell a difference. And what he's trying to say is that now you see so many men dress the same and now they do, they're all dressed the same. same features, same way of socializing that it's so difficult to find out who's gay now. Who's gay now and who isn't. You actually have to talk to that person and meet him and in the end you find out that he's probably gay when you would have never imagined it. Where in the past you would, you used to tell just by looking at someone. Especially seventeen to twenty years old he's saying it's very difficult to understand who is and who isn't anymore. Now they're all like the same more or less the same thing and you get really surprised in the end when you find out (Gregaris).

Conclusion and Recommendations:

When asked what things could help change the present situation most people said they didn't know and then began to speak of how much better it is elsewhere, such as in London or San Francisco. When they did have answers they included forming more exclusively gay spaces in Cyprus such as saunas, cafes, and exclusively gay bars/clubs. As in its history, Cyprus is being changed from external sources rather than internal. I believe that things are changing in Cyprus, but as they say here, "siga-siga" (slowly slowly).

Bibliography[7]

Anon. Gay rights in Cyprus. 2006. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_rights_in_Cyprus

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. The postcolonial and postmodern: the question of agency extracted from
The Location of Culture. Routledge.

Christou, Jean. 2006. Cyprus bottoms out in gender equality poll. In *Cyprus Mail.*

During, Simon ed. 1999. The Cultural Studies Reader: Second Edition. Routledge.

Herzfeld, Michael. 1980. Honour and Shame: Problems in the Comparative Analysis of Moral
        Systems. In Man, *New Series, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 339-351*. Royal Anthropological
        Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

Karayanni, Stavros Stavrou. 2004. Dancing Fear & Desire: Race, Sexuality & Imperialism in
        Middle Eastern Dance. Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Karayanni, Stavros Stavrou. 2006. Moving identity: dance in the negotiation of sexuality and
        ethnicity in Cyprus. In *Postcolonial Studies, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 251-266*. Routledge.

Mackay, Jill Campbell. 2006. It's not easy to be gay in Cyprus. Cyprus Mail. http://www.cyprus-
        mail.com/news/main/php?id=24058&cat_id=9

Modinos, Alecos. Homosexual Life in Cyprus. At http://www2hu-
        berlin.de/sexology/IES/cyprus.html#6

Newspapers Limited. http://www.guardian.co.uk/pring/0,,4278524-105806,00.html

Phellas, Constantinos N. Greek Sexual Culture, Identity and Ethnicity. Sent to the author without
        any additional information

Smith, Helena. 2001. Cyprus divided over gay rights. In *Guardian Unlimited*. Guardian

Thomas, Spurgeon et. al. 2004. Situations: Cyprus After History. In *Interventions, Vol. 6(2), pp.
        282-299.* Taylor & Francis Ltd.

---

[7] The number of references here is small because the body of literature available on this topic is small. There were a number of resources that were inaccessible to me because they were in Greek. I read theories related to post-colonialism and gay identity but they weren't applicable to the situation in Cyprus, so I chose not to include them in this bibliography as my paper doesn't reflect their use.

Toumbourou, Kath. 2006. 'When you know who you are, you don't have to make excuses to anyone :' Being homosexual in Cyprus. Cyprus Mail. http://www.cyprus-mail.com/news/main/php?id=26781&cat_id=9

Wikan, Unni. 1984. Shame and Honour: A Contestable Pair. In Man, *New Series, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 635-652*. Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

www.dictionary.com. 2006. Semiotics. Lexico Publishing Group, LLC.

Instrumentation

The following is a list of the main questions I asked during each interview:

- How do you generally define your sexuality (do you say "gay" "homosexual" "straight" "bi" etc.)?
- Does your sexuality influences the way you live in Cyprus? How is your life different from a straight persons? At work? At school?
- What's your relationship with your family like regarding your sexuality? Are you out to them or…?
- Have you been in a relationship in Cyprus?
- Would you like to be in a relationship in Cyprus?
- Have you noticed any changes in the last few years in the way gay people see themselves or in the way societ sees gay people?
- Are you religious?
- Do you have friends in the gay community?
- Is it hard to have good friends in the gay community?
- Are your best friends straight or homosexual?
- How do you usually meet other homosexuals?
- Can you tell me about last time you went to the park/the club? Describe it for me from the time you got there until the time you left.
- Can you tell me like your ideal trip to the park, like what it would be like?
- Are there different categories of gay men?
- Is there anything that you think is important for me to know that I haven't asked?

Activity Chart:

Oct. 2-8: Made initial contacts with informants

       Drafted Proposal

       Researched papers, books, journal articles

       Wrote up notes about meetings with informants

Oct. 9-26 Stayed in contact with informants by email

       Researched additional journal articles online

       Looked through SIT online library

Oct. 27-30 Finalized ISP Proposal

Oct. 31 Submitted Final ISP Proposal

Nov. 1-5 met with informants with whom I'd already met

Nov. 6-Dec. 3 conducted interviews

Nov. 24 started writing ISP paper

Dec. 3-7 wrote data analysis

Dec. 8 submitted final ISP paper

Dec. 9 presented ISP

Dec. 13 ISP paper resubmitted with changes