



## Summary :

The family in the Pontus was complex and patrilinear, a fact clearly reflected in the marital practices, customs and kinship terminology, as well as in the hierarchical relations within the household. However, abstract descriptions run the risk of being stereotyped.

## Date

18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century

## Geographical Location

Pontus, north-eastern Black Sea coast of Asia Minor

## 1. The patriarchal family

The form and the evolution of the family in the [Pontus](#) has been a focus point for many articles published in the specialized in the area journals. These articles usually focus in the marital customs and the internal organization of the households, subjects on which they offer many details. Thanks to these descriptions we have today a rather large and thorough image for the family in the Pontus, which is characterized unanimously as **complex**, patriarchal, and structured according to a strict hierarchy.

Thus, we are dealing with a pattern rather diffused until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in south-eastern Europe, according to which men remained in their father's house even after their wedding, whereas the brides would settle in the house of their father-in-law. An exception to this was made only in case there were no sons in the family; then the groom would come as a "sogambros" and then he had to take the surname of his wife, which is the surname of the household whose reproduction and continuation he was called to secure. This choice of course presupposed an analogous interest from the side of the family of the groom, which meant he had to insure with this choice a higher social position or prestige.

A result of this **viripatrilocal settlement** was the creation of great households whose members would work, eat and sleep together under the same (or adjacent) roof. The members of the household were in other words connected through the common possession of land, the common house and the same blood, as the male-parental relationship is often characterized.

All three elements were and had to remain unbreakable in order to ensure the perpetuation of the household. The fact that the division of the property was avoided means that in fact the transfer of the inheritance was not made in equal terms: the property remained in the hands of the leader of the household, who was usually the first-born son. But that does not mean he could do with it whatever he wanted: he had to take care of its preservation and augmentation so that he could transfer it to his first-born son and so on. Property was therefore not personal. In general, the notion of individual-personal had a minimum functional meaning in this context, even in cases such as the choice of a husband.

## 2. The household in the Pontus

The household in the Pontus was approximately comprised of 15 to 20 members.<sup>1</sup> The number of the members of a



family was calculated in “spoons” (*chulara*) and the number of married couples inside a family in “wreaths” (*stefana*). The household itself, i.e. the enlarged family in its totality, was described with the term “fireplace” (*otzakin*), a reference to the common hearth around which its members would gather. The house was comprised of a large house or more adjacent ones, but there was always a common treasury (*kese*), held by the eldest man (grandfather, father or elder brother), in other words the leader of the family, who made the transactions with the outer world, arranged farming work and administrated the whole property. Inside the house the eldest woman (mother-in-law) directed the other women until her death, when she was replaced by the older sister-in-law.

Thus, the hierarchy of kinship, which was translated into strict rules of behaviour, was connected to the division of labour inside and outside the house. “With a living father the son was dead”.<sup>2</sup> This phrase, documented by [X. Akoglou](#) from his fellow countrymen, by that time settled in Greece, gives a clear image of the hierarchal relations inside the household. This hierarchy is reflected in the terminology of kinship we have for this region and appears to have been the rule, at least for the rural Pontus.

### 3. Terminology of kinship

It should be noticed that in the Pontus hardly ever did they use the personal name when referring to relatives, and that the terminology of kinship was also the terminology of mentioning and addressing the relatives. This terminology, while marking the separation between a relationship by blood and a relationship by marriage, it also defined the generation of the relatives in connection to the speaking relative (ego).

Thus, for ego, the father is called “afetz” or “kyrts” (master), the mother “manna”, the aunt “theitza” or “theia”, the uncle from the side of the father “theios” and the uncle from the side of the mother again “theios” or “taes”, a loan from the Turkish language (*dayı*). This loan, as all are, is not neutral. It suggests a clear differentiation between patrilinear and matrilinear kinship, that is, between the relatives from the father's and the ones from the mother's side, and it could also mark a negative distinction concerning the second one, a fact verified by the proverb “My son's child is my soul and heart, my son's-in-law child is the puppy of the dog”. Nevertheless, the fact that this loan was not extended towards the cousins - the terms used for all other cousins being “exaelfos” (male) and “exaelfi” (female) - confirms that, although an emphasis is given to the relatives from the father's side due to the **patrilinear origin**, the relationship is counted on both sides. It should be noted that in the Pontus the “syggenote” (kinship) covered up to “seven heads”, which means that the marriage of any relative up to the 7<sup>th</sup> degree was prohibited.

The special importance given by the terminology of the Pontus in the generation is apparent in the different title which corresponds to the elder siblings (“passias” and “patsi”), but also in the special terms concerning the elders. Thus we have the grandfather and the grandmother (“pappos” or “tetes”<sup>3</sup> and “kalomanna” or “tranessa mana”), but also the “lykopappos” and the “lyko(kalo)mana” (great-grandfather, great-grandmother) and finally the “arkopappos” and the “arkomanna” (great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother). These last terms, concerning relatives usually dead, are a peculiarity of the Pontus in the sense that they are not to be found in any other place where there are or used to be Greek-Orthodox populations. Their existence makes clear how important ancestors were for the complex patriarchal family and suggests that every generation (the descendants of a *lykopappos* or an *arkopappos*) must preserve their memory alive, especially through narrations and references to them.

Much poorer in details is the terminology for kinship by marriage, which only underlines the lower position of the



bride inside the household but also the hierarchy among the sisters-in-law. The bride would call her mother-in-law, the sister of her husband and any of his female relatives, but also her older sister-in-law, "kyra" (lady). In contrast there was no distinction towards the bride, which was called by all relatives of her husband, of all generations, with the same term. This lower position of the bride is not so much connected with the simple fact that she is a woman (since the lady of the house is also a woman), but, once again, with an ideology of kinship and with the concentration on kinship by blood. The woman-bride, at least until she gave birth to her first child, is considered to be an external element in the relationship circle of the family in the Pontus.

#### 4. The marriage

Was the bride a "necessary evil"? Maybe, if one judges from the descriptions of marital customs we have from this area. The marriage, peak of any kinship system and central event in the social life of the Pontus,<sup>4</sup> was completed in 9 stages, starting from the "psalafeman", the request for the bride, which was made either through a matchmaker,<sup>5</sup> through relatives or in feasts of the week after Easter.<sup>6</sup> The request was made without the presence of the groom by his parents towards the parents of the bride.

The "logoparman" would follow, i.e. the final deal, and only after its conclusion, with the payment of the "ganonia" towards the father of the bride,<sup>7</sup> the former would appear, escorted by a sister or a sister-in-law or her mother, and would treat her father-in-law with raki or coffee. During the "logoparman" they would also arrange the "soumadia", the engagement, which was usually celebrated on Saturday or Sunday. Then the groom, his parents, the best man, the close relatives and friends, the matchmaker, the priest and the musicians would go to the house of the bride where they offered the "soumada" (rings) and the engagement bread, distributed by the priest as holy bread after the exchange of the rings. The relatives of the bride were also present, offering her gifts (clothes or money) after the feast. From that day until the wedding the groom would rarely visit the bride and that only after an invitation of his parents-in-law.

Seven or three days before the wedding the "logokopsimon" would take place, i.e. the final confirmation that everything was ready for the celebration of the wedding ceremony, during which the groom would give or send to the relatives of the bride the "sout parasi"<sup>8</sup> and the "giolloukia",<sup>9</sup> the expenses of the departure.

The "lalema", the invitation to the wedding, was made by both parts with "psathyria" (pies), escorted with a candle. The invitation of the best man was official and was usually made with a procession with music and an adorned ram ("kots kriar").<sup>10</sup> The dressing of the bride would start after the groom sent her a tray with scented soaps, perfumes, clothes and shoes and took place on Saturday evening or on Sunday. Meanwhile, after the shaving of the groom, the "char" would start, where the relatives and the guests would offer gifts, as a kind of support for the couple: material objects but animals too.

Finally the "nyfeparman" started. After the groom was adorned, the "gamostolos", the wedding procession, would go and get the bride. Here a ritualized resistance on behalf of the relatives of the bride would take place, which ceased with tips from the best man. Then the father would give his daughter to the groom, saying "I give you my girl",<sup>11</sup> and they would go to the church where the wedding ceremony would take place (it could also take place at the house though). After the ceremony the procession would lead the couple to the house of the groom, where a feast would take place and the "char" of the bride would follow: gifts, mostly money, which usually belonged to the bride and was the only property she would have. The bride would bring her dowry, a chest with clothes for her and the groom, and



rarely an amount of money or a house.

The chest would be opened at the end of the celebrations, on the night of Monday to Tuesday, when the newly wed were getting ready for the "parakoimisman". Before the "parakoimisman" the bride would wash the feet either of her parents-in-law or of the elders or even of every relative of the groom (in some places that was repeated for a longer period). "On the next day the elder women of the family of the groom and some respectable women of the neighbourhood would examine the wedding bed, to make sure that the bride was chaste by the marks on the sheet [...]".<sup>12</sup>

Finally, a custom which is often reported is the "machokrateman". The bride avoided talking to her father-in-law, mother-in-law and in some places to some of the elder relatives of her husband for whole years. They would communicate via gestures and whispers until she was allowed to talk. With the mother-in-law this happened sooner, because of the necessary collaboration in the household, usually after the first birth. Then the mother-in-law untied the "mach" (silence) and was followed by the brothers of the husband. But the father-in-law could never allow her to speak to him at all.

## 5. In retrospective

From the analysis of the customs it is clear that, from the beginning until the end, the marriage was not a personal but a family issue. When the time came for a young man to get married, the family would choose the bride. After all, children in the Pontus would marry when they reached the proper age, independently of their sex. Many times the bride happened to be older than the groom. How little a choice of their own marriage was can be observed from a research which took place around 1980 in 30 people of Pontic descent who were born there and then settled in the USA.<sup>13</sup> Seven of them had married at the Pontus and the researcher asked them to talk about their marriage. Five of them "avoided the question every time it occurred in the interview".<sup>14</sup> The other two were very brief: "They played a lot of music in my wedding, as in every other wedding. They would come and take the bride from her house, they would go to the church and then to the groom's house".<sup>15</sup> Even these brief observations are precious, since the people interviewed were unable to talk of their wedding on a personal level and immediately referred to it as to a general issue.

A second result that occurs from the customs is related to the redemption of the bride. The bride in the Pontus was not dowered with money or houses. She would receive a chest, the "sandouch" with the necessary clothing and was redeemed with the payment of the "ganonia" and the "sout parasi". By this way it was declared that her parents had no longer any right upon her and that she would pass under the authority of her parents-in-law. Her function was now to work and to bear children for her husband's household. The bride was, in a certain way, an object of transaction and as such she could have no word, something which was confirmed by the "machokrateman".

These two dimensions, underlined in every description of the family and the wedding of the Pontus, tend to prove the dominance of the female-based relationship and of the family team against the individual, something that can be explained by a retrospective in the distant past, as the one attempted by E. Alexakis,<sup>16</sup> who explored the existence of patrilinear family groups (clans).

He commenced his study by the analysis of the habit, diffused all around the Pontus, of naming the settlements



(villages, neighbourhoods, parishes...) after the names of the families living there. These patrilinear placenames are formed in the Pontus with the adding of the ending *-andon*.<sup>17</sup> An example is the settlement Maroulandon deriving its name from the clan name Maroulant'. The diffusion of these names around the whole Pontus indicates that this system was general to the whole region.

Another element which, according to Alexakis, verifies that these placenames derive from names of clans is the habit of using nicknames, a habit well-diffused in the Pontus, which is a way to distinguish the branches (generations) of a family. These names are maintained by the descendants and many times, later, are turned into surnames.

Finally, the existence of foundation myths for the founders of the families and the first settlers, as well as the bellicose character observed in most of the cultural manifestations of the Pontic element, especially in their dances, strengthen Alexakis' view, since similar customs are often connected with bellicose clans or "armed clans".

This explanation, however, faultless in relation to the descriptions on which it is based, overlooks in our opinion the fact that the descriptions are not neutral. They belong to the tradition of the so-called "preservation of [living monuments](#)", which had began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was continued after the forced migration of the Pontic Greek-Orthodox in Greece, this time strengthened by the loss of the native land. Within the framework of this preservation, it is natural that contradictions and changes, in other words the dynamics of social formation, was often laid aside, while a special emphasis was given to the concept of structure, presented as something static, eternal and immovable.

## 6. Beyond stereotypes

Every available account is thus a part of a specific reading of the family in the Pontus, which has more to do with the (re)formation of pastoral stereotypes that with an analytical approach. "The affection of the mother and the respect of the daughter is one of the main characteristics of the family tradition of the Pontus"<sup>18</sup> and "the armament of the gallant man is his secret sorrow and his pride":<sup>19</sup> such are the terms of these stereotypes which want the family of the Pontus perfectly organized, without conflicts, with the wife silently and lovingly taking care of the household, i.e. feeding, dressing and generally preserving humans and beasts, and the man wandering in black attire with two bandoliers crossing over his chest and a sabre in his belt.

This is, however, a family that has more to do with a pattern out of time and place than with reality. Reality in its vitality in its contradictions can be glimpsed in the available descriptions only "by mistake", through some hastily stated observations like this one: "In the last years [the fiancé] has more courage and would go out with his fiancée". Popular music followed this development: "Nowadays' girls don't even ask their mother. They take their fiancé and go out."<sup>20</sup> Another example: "This custom [the parakoimisma] with the years has almost disappeared everywhere".<sup>21</sup> The time would pass bringing change, due either to migration or to the development of urban centres. "The terminology of the relationship in the cities is simpler. There the wider family has less members and is more unstable than that of the countryside".<sup>22</sup>

We thus see that the place (city/village) with its economic infrastructure is an important factor concerning the matter of the family structure in the Pontus. The time and the place should not, however, be seen as an external factor, irrelative to the subjects acting within their framework. The subjects, as human beings, work, eat, cry, laugh, ache, hate... in the Pontus, as everywhere else. Their life can be represented on the basis of stereotypical images.



Especially the image of the woman as of an object lacking initiative and energy is too “perfect” to believe. Even in the same collections that underline the relevant stereotypes, there are some details that contradict it. Some women like the “molyvoudes” are thus described: “garrulous, prattling, they always drag their inflated and diabolic imagination with them. They search for foreign secrets, they accuse with a satanic ability, they make and destroy matches [...]”. The “katakefalos” appears as “a hypocrite and a fake puritan. With her calculating look and her infernal brain she always has right on her side [...]”. The “tzatzou” is “mean, mysterious, a real witch who brings dissention, misunderstandings and enmities with a conscious, skilful calumny”.<sup>23</sup>

These rich descriptions show certainly that women had a field of word and action in the Pontus, even though a negative one, and that this word and action had a result. Even this dichotomy between woman-house (private sphere) and man-outside (public sphere), which is so strongly emphasised in traditions, can be overturned if we take into consideration some relocations, seasonal or not, like the tannual visits to the “[parcharia](#)”, in which women would often go by themselves, and migration, which often left a village with very few men, creating thus an open field even for illegal relations, such as the one indirectly but clearly described by the metropolitan Agathangelos in his fairytale “Ο Xenitas” (The migrant”).

We are already far from the standardized image of stereotypical descriptions. This does not undermine the analysis of family structure, marital customs or kin ship terminology, which have been collected with great labour, but places them in a new framework with new reading and interpretation possibilities.

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1. In cases the division of the initial (paternal) household was delayed, the number of the members could reach up to 40-50.
  2. Ακογλου, Ξ., *Λαογραφικά Κοτυώρων* (Athens 1939), p. 50.
  3. *Dede* in Turkish.
  4. From the study of Κ.Δ. Κονταξής *Η ανταλλαγή δώρων στην παραδοσιακή κοινωνία του Πόντου* (PhD thesis, Ioannina 1986), it results that out of 584 cases of gift exchange he located in the Pontus, which he divided in three categories (social formation, circle of life, religious feasts), 413 belonged to the circle of life, from which 344 were related to marriage.
  5. For Kotyora (Ordu) see Ακογλου, Ξ., *Λαογραφικά Κοτυώρων* (Αθήνα 1939), p. 186.
  6. For Sourmena (Sürmene) see Οικονομίδης, Δ.Η., «Γαμήλια έθιμα», *Αρχείον Πόντου* 1 (1928), p. 131.
  7. The “ganonia” could reach up to 10 Ottoman lira.
  8. From the Turkish *süt parası*, which means literally “money for the milk”. It is a compensation to the mother of the bride for the milk she gave to her daughter during breastfeeding. The payment was symbolic and amount of money varied: 33, 40 or 45 pieces of silver. Sometimes it was given during the “psalafeman”.
  9. From the Turkish word *yol* (road).
  10. A Greek-Turkish pleonasm. *Kriari* (in Greek) and *κοζ* (in Turkish) mean “ram”.



11. Κονταξής, Κ.Δ., *Η ανταλλαγή δώρων στην παραδοσιακή κοινωνία του Πόντου* (PhD thesis, Ioannina 1986), p. 82.
12. Οικονομίδης, Δ.Η., «Γαμήλια έθιμα», *Αρχείον Πόντου* 1 (1928), p. 178.
13. See Papadopoulos, S., *Events and Cultural Characteristics Regarding the Pontian-Greeks and their Descendants* (Ann Arbor 1984).
14. See Papadopoulos, S., *Events and Cultural Characteristics Regarding the Pontian-Greeks and their Descendants* (Ann Arbor 1984), p.122.
15. See Papadopoulos, S., *Events and Cultural Characteristics Regarding the Pontian-Greeks and their Descendants* (Ann Arbor 1984), p.122.
16. See Αλεξάκης, Ε., «Παρατηρήσεις στην οικογενειακή και συγγενειακή οργάνωση των Ελλήνων του Πόντου», *Αρχείον Πόντου* 38 (1984), p. 227-240.
17. The genitive of plural of collective family names ending in –ant(oi).
18. Καπνάς, Ν.Ι. – Δημάρχου, Χ.Γ., *Ο Ελληνικός Πόντος. Μορφές και εικόνες ζωής* (s.l. 1947), p.36.
19. Καπνάς, Ν.Ι. – Δημάρχου, Χ.Γ., *Ο Ελληνικός Πόντος. Μορφές και εικόνες ζωής* (s.l. 1947), p.61.
20. Κονταξής, Κ.Δ., *Η ανταλλαγή δώρων στην παραδοσιακή κοινωνία του Πόντου* (PhD thesis, Ioannina 1986), p. 58.
21. Οικονομίδης, Δ.Η., «Γαμήλια έθιμα», *Αρχείον Πόντου* 1 (1928), p. 176.
22. Αλεξάκης, Ε., «Παρατηρήσεις στην οικογενειακή και συγγενειακή οργάνωση των Ελλήνων του Πόντου», *Αρχείον Πόντου* 38 (1984), p. 235.
23. Καπνάς, Ν.Ι. – Δημάρχου, Χ.Γ., *Ο Ελληνικός Πόντος. Μορφές και εικόνες ζωής* (s.l. 1947), p.55.

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	<b>Οικονομίδης Δ.Η.</b> , "Γαμήλια Έθιμα", <i>Αρχείον Πόντου</i> , 1, 1928, 121-180
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## Glossary :

	<b>complex household</b>
A household that consists of more than one nuclear families connected to one another through kinship relations (parents, children, siblings)	



etc).

 [patrilinear origin](#)

A kinship system according to which a person belongs to his/her father group of relatives, from which it inherits his/her name, social status and property.

 [viripatrilocal settlement](#)

The settlement of the newly married couple at the house of the groom's father.

## Sources

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