

The Social Onslaught of Economic Austerity in Rural Greece

By [Chris Jones](#)

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Ambelos is just one of a number of 'mountain' villages on Samos Island . It is where I have lived full time for the past 5 years. The last 2 censuses have recorded a village population in excess of 300 persons, which is a gross exaggeration as the resident all year population is little more than 120. The additional numbers are made up by those who own property in the village but are resident elsewhere and opt for Ambelos as their place of residency both for voting and for the census. Although there are few resources channeled directly into the village by either the regional or central government, the size of the population does have some bearing on allocations, including political representation. Without 300 inhabitants for example, the village cannot have a mayor.

There is no reason to think that Ambelos is exceptional in Greece . But if all the small villages are as intent as Ambelos in ensuring that the registered population does not fall below 300, then like most other key state statistics in Greece, population data drawn from the census is unlikely to be accurate.

But no amount of statistical massaging can hide the reality that villages like Ambelos are trapped in a long process of decay which stretches back over decades. The combination of economic reliance on small scale, essentially peasant farming and summer specific tourism has never been sufficient for the needs of the population. Emigration for both short and long spells is historically embedded as islanders have sought employment, higher wages and better working conditions than could be found on Samos .

Back to the Land?

The process of decay which has been episodic and gradual is now accelerating as austerity deepens.

For a time, I and others wondered whether growing austerity might rejuvenate dying villages such as Ambelos. 2 years ago there was much talk in both the Greek and international media about a migration away from the stark brutalities of Athens in particular. It was reported that thousands were now making their way to back to the rural villages of Greece where either their parents or their grandparents had land and property. It seemed that with no work, no income and no prospects and with the accompanying degradation of social relationships within Athens a return to the land was now an attractive reality.

I am sure that there are many stories of inspiring returns to the land but from the perspective of Ambelos and other similar villages on Samos , there has been no significant evidence of any return to the land and the villages. This is despite many of the occasional

homes in the village being owned by families living in Athens . As far as I am aware only one new family has moved into the village during the past year and they are from a small town in the north of Greece which has been devastated by the recession. It is their intention to build up a herd of goats and move into cheese and yogurt production.

They are the exception. In the summer I asked Georgios whether he would consider moving back to the village from Athens . He is in his mid 20s and loves being back in the village where he grew up and went to primary school. "No way". Impossible he said for the very simple reason there is no work for a postgraduate librarian either in the village or on Samos . For him it was a nightmare scenario to be stranded in a village with no income and no job, which had no bus service, no school and had become no place to raise a family. Vassilis who spent the summer in Athens recently recounted the experiences of some of his friends who did leave Athens to return to their family villages. Deep depression and disillusionment sadly characterise their experiences as they found themselves isolated, impoverished and in places which were simply eroding under recession and austerity. According to Vassilis, some of his friends were devastated that what they thought was going to be a positive step forward to a new more fulfilled life was turning out to be so disastrous.

Move to the City

Back in Ambelos we have no new influx of people looking to settle here permanently which would do so much to rejuvenate the village, especially if they included young families which would mean a chance to re-open the primary school which closed 3 years ago. But unless we can create jobs here there is little chance of this happening. This week I spoke with Vangelis who in his early thirties is one of the few people to have created a small successful business and workshop in the heart of the village. He was bemused that I was surprised when he told me that there was no state support at all for taking such an initiative. Vangelis was certain that the state had no interest in sustaining small villages such as Ambelos and that it would be happy to see them drift off to the oblivion of abandonment or settlements of holiday homes. It is, he said, and has been the policy of successive governments, to encourage migration from the countryside to the main urban areas, which in effect has meant Athens .

Time to Go?

In the meantime the process of decay accelerates. The majority of the permanent residents are over 70 years old. The small graveyard in the village is now full and for the past 2 years the initial free tenure of the graves for a 4/5 year period can no longer be renewed. So graves are now regularly emptied with the bones removed to the ossary to make room. But it is also noteworthy that as the welfare system crumbles, family incomes shrink, pensions curbed and movement restricted by the lack of buses and the price of petrol, we are seeing an increasing movement of single older people leaving the village for either the whole year or just the winter to stay with their families either in Athens or in Samos town and Karlovassi. It is becoming increasingly impossible for single people, of whatever age to survive alone hence the shifting composition of households which is now so widespread. Even in this village households are now absorbing those returning from university who can no longer fund their studies to completion. I know of households where the small pension of an elderly relative is the only regular source of income. Kostas a never employed graduate metallurgist living with his family in Samos town told me how his household now includes 5 working age adults and the only income comes from his father. This is commonplace now.

All the younger people under 35 years of age who have graduated from university have already left both village and the island, but one who works in a family finance business. Of the younger people remaining - around 10 - this past year has been incredibly difficult as their labour market of construction and bar work drained away. Even for the 3 in the village who were taken on an EU funded work scheme for the unemployed have had a miserable time. Already hard pressed, the hundreds of workers on this scheme have not been paid for weeks at a time and the managers have both lied to and treated the workers shamefully.

Throughout the summer months it was commonplace to see groups of up to 15 mixed groups of workers cleaning the roads, cutting back the vegetation and clearing the litter. Because of being on the roads they were all issued with orange fluorescent waistcoats. In so many ways they looked like bunches of prisoners on some form of community punishment as they worked throughout the hot summer days in their orange jackets. All this for 500 euros a month and then not to be regularly. It is a disgrace.

Almost without exception the talk amongst the younger people in the village is now of leaving Samos and Greece and without a doubt many will leave as soon as they can. There is no shred of light on the horizon which suggests that things will change for the better. Much of the talk in the village is about the difficulties which grow as the poverty deepens. Families who thought they could fund their children's university expenses 2 years ago are now on the verge of having to call them home; the filling station that another family started 4 years ago following the death of the father is on the brink of closure. These are the everyday stories. No wonder the younger adults are keen to hear any news about job opportunities and about who is the latest to leave. This week the news is that Miko the builder who moved from the village to Karlovassi with his 2 young children and wife when the village school closed is off to work on tourist construction somewhere in West Africa. And when I sit back and think it is incredible that out of my small circle of friends and acquaintances 2 have returned to their families in North Africa, 1 has made it to London, another is making his way on foot from Greece to Italy and is now in a camp in Romania, another is due to leave for Paris in 3 weeks, another leaves this week for Munich, 2 more are planning to be in Poland by Christmas, and all this in the past six months. We are witnessing an exodus of the desperate leaving often in sadness knowing all too well that their departure will often leave their families more vulnerable. Certainly villages such as Ambelos cannot afford to lose any more of its younger population.

A 2 Season Village

Ambelos is now 2 villages; the summer village where the place is alive, houses are occupied, the central platia is noisy with young children playing while their parents and friends sit by in the 2 village tavernas which stay open late. From June through to September there are around 5 music and dance events which last through the night. It is difficult to find a parking place! Then there is the winter village. The population shrinks to around 120 people. There are now sections of the village where there are no permanent residents and so are deserted and devoid of life in the winter. The tavernas struggle by with a few regulars but sell little in the way of food and invariably close earlier. Unlike the summer the village in winter is quiet. Parking is no longer a problem. It is a completely different place.

There is a strong commitment to the village by the Greeks who visit in the summer many of whom were born and raised in the village. They spend money on the upkeep of their homes; they publish and distribute a monthly 6 page newsletter/paper to the entire village covering

both news from the diaspora and the village; they organize a village fiesta/dance and they fund various projects such as restoring village spring points and installation of benches at viewpoints. Ironically despite their importance to the village they are also one of the clearest manifestations of what has become a 2 season village.

The 2 season village is probably the increasing norm for many similar places on Samos . Manolates a neighbouring mountain village is much more developed touristically than Ambelos and has many summer residents and day visitors. In the winter the contrast could not be greater with the deserted streets and shuttered up craft, jewelry shops and holiday homes. The resident population is tiny and disproportionately elderly. The winter and summer villages are so stunningly different.

As the villages become 2 seasonal so do important aspects of the island as a whole. Air and ferry links are reduced and the charter flights cease between mid October and early May. Some of the holiday hot spots on the island such as Kokari take on the atmosphere of an abandoned town with whole streets of tourist shops, bars, cocktail lounges all closed up and battened down. This is not new for Samos but the impact of austerity has somehow enhanced the sense of its isolation and vulnerability and I suspect in large measure this is due to the shrinkage of the tourism season from April through to October to today's season of mid May to the end of August.

Winter Villages

There is no village strategy with respect to property in Ambelos. Those who are trying to sell small plots of lands and buildings in and around the village hope that they can attract affluent buyers from northern Europe who will pay a decent price. There is no consideration given to the need for a permanent resident population and all that entails in terms of collective planning for jobs and opportunities. Instead, the few houses which have been sold here recently have all gone to people who intend to use them only as summer holiday homes. This will do nothing to overcome the summer/winter divide and the stark reality is that Ambelos can be a lonely and isolated place for many during the winter months.

Never before have I seen so much wood collection going on as this autumn. It is common now to see piles of logs piled up outside houses, either bought or self-collected from the island's forests or people's lands. The only new shop to have opened in Karlovassi - this week - in recent memory is a stove shop. Unlike England , where stove shops tend to be middle class specific and trendy places, here it is not about chic additions to the home but a matter of staying warm as they can no longer afford the central heating oil. It is not a fashion statement but a survival strategy.

All of this and more - such as the decision this winter to impose a 50 cent charge on top of the current levies for every litre of olive oil you get pressed at the mill - conspires against the village. We now hear stories that the government is going to impose a kind of land tax on both olive groves and vinyards. If this is implemented it will be a vicious blow. Many of the villagers simply don't have the cash income to pay such additional taxes.

It does not take any form of insight to see that austerity and recession are deepening the divide between the summer and winter village. There are no longer 2 equal sides to Ambelos. The winter village gets ever smaller and less sustainable like a small child wearing clothes many times too large. It can't be many years in the future when there will be thousands of rural villages in Greece with a rump of a small and vulnerable resident

population and a swollen summer population of visitors and tourists.

Next?

Of course there are alternatives for Ambelos and countless other similar rural villages in Greece which could make them wonderful places for people to flourish. But these alternatives seem far away and rarely discussed. There is too much bewilderment at what is going on and what is to come; people still seemed too stunned and disturbed by the damage to their well being to do much more than get by, day to day. But who knows what is to come? The mix seems to grow more and more toxic by the month and all that people hear is that it is going to get worse. But it is still difficult to predict what will happen. A social explosion of some kind of course must be highly possible but even then not certain. The austerity measures have already crossed many red lines which many commentators predicted would bring about such events but in truth they have not occurred, or at least not on the scale and influence predicted. I hate the notion that for some their only interest in Greece seems to be that of seeing how much pressure a society and its people can take before some thing kicks off. As we are all supposed to know, too much pressure leads to explosions.

But maybe we should take more note of what the refugees from strife torn societies who now live in Greece are saying and doing. My friends from such places have either left or are planning to leave as soon as possible. They are increasingly fearful and insecure as a result of a deeply hostile state and the inter-linked growth of the fascist Golden Dawn party. They talk of decent social relations collapsing and distorting as austerity bites deeper leading to the very frightening and chaotically violent societies that they had fled. The decent into chaos rather than explosions of resistance and protest are what they see happening and what they predict in Greece and that is what they fear most. Many of the refugees, as Tariq told me had survived through the solidarity and support of Greeks but that did not disguise his view, echoed strongly by his friends, that what they experienced here was a general lack of solidarity between the people exemplified by the petty jealousies and backbiting that went on amongst the men who they met in the tavernas and cafes. Left politics was no better they said characterised by division and hostility. They told me how they saw so little trust between the Greek people, they said some of which stretched back over generations of unresolved hostility and rivalries. For these refugees, this was the gravest of issues for without some level of mutual trust how could there be any meaningful resistance?

Chris Jones. *Now living on Samos Island Greece after leaving England 5 years ago. His Samos Diary is published on ZNet: <http://www.zcommunications.org/zspace/Chris%20Jones>. With Michael Lavalette he wrote 'Voices from the West Bank' published by Bookmarks, London , September 2011.*

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Articles by: **Chris Jones**

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