FILMING THE TRADITIONAL GREEK VILLAGE LIFE

By TASO LAGOS

Cretan villages don't come any smaller; Vizari, located 43 kilometers southeast of Rethimnon, or 77 drivable kilometers southwest of Iraklion, has a population of 80, which also could describe the average age of its population. Like most Greek villages, its youngsters have all trodled to the big cities in search of better standards of living, modernization and the illusive images seen on television. Terry Moyemont, an American artist and philosopher, has decided to document this vanishing way of life on video, and in the process enriched his own personal growth.

"This project has been in my mind for almost a decade," he claims. "During the mid-60's, I'd spent time on the island of that culture. And what's more, imposed upon its inhabitants by outside zonation; in some cases, it's actually been this vanishing way of life on video, and standards of living, modernization and the illusive images seen on television. Terry Moyemont, an American artist and philosopher, has decided to document this vanishing way of life on video, and in the process enriched his own personal growth.

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The Valley hasn't escaped modernization; in some cases, it's actually been imposed upon its inhabitants by outside sources. This rich agricultural land dip, often called "Lotus Land" by British soldiers stationed there after the Second World War, now has many street lights, thanks to Papandreou's rural development program and an ever-growing number of cars zipping through its compact, squeezed streets.

At the invitation of an architecture professor in the States -- George Vlastos, who also owns an extensive olive grove in Vizari -- Moyemont and his wife Mary took their video equipment and arrived just in time for the olive harvest in the Fall of 1989.

Sitting on the veranda of the Vlastos home, Moyemont has a chance to witness the old and the new simultaneously: "We see a Hyundai pickup roll down the Valley floor, slowing as it comes to a dirt crossroad -- still showing patches of rock work from Byzantine days -- where Dimitri, our friend and the mayor's brother, crosses with his flock of sheep. It's a misty, windy morning and occasional vineyards are now dormant... the gardens planted for the second growing season. Dimitri, dressed in jeans and a work apron and smiling so that his grey mustache turns up, is one of the twenty or so people that will lead their flocks out to pasture at dawn. Just before sunset, the sheep may follow him home again, trotting in his clip-clipping and clanging line behind his old white Toyota station wagon."

Moyemont immediately fell in love with Vizari. The village-folk reminded him of his great-grandparents, except they were a little more "laid-back." The people of Vizari are extremely hard working, but if it got too hot or had to rest, they immediately relaxed and socialized. Evidently, that's the Greek way.

In his cinema-verite style of shooting (hand-held camera, following the people in their daily routines, as opposed to formal, set-up shoots), he filmed the townfolks as they went about their business -- the olive pressing, the farming, weekly church service, the flour grounding.

As he did this, he was struck by two things: The dogged energy and determination of these villagers, often working with clearly outdated methods and simple machinery, and the lack of any young people present. There are only eight children in the whole village and not a teenager in sight.

As Moyemont wrote in a recent travelogue on the village, "The young have been leaving the Valley for cities during the last decade. Maria and Mihali's son, George, a medical technician in Athens, only returns for two or three weeks each year to help with the harvest. As Mihali puts it: "When I stop farming in seven or eight years (at 77), the fields will probably fall into decay and grow wild."

Yet the more time he spent interviewing the villagers, the more he discovered another trend. Young families are returning to the Vizari, not necessarily to live permanently, but as an escape from the pollution, crowded conditions and nauseating pressure of urban living. They usually show up during the summer or high holidays, maintaining the old family farms, which they've realized can supplement their income. Olive

Tasos Lagos, the writer of this column we inaugurate with this issue, was born in the village of Vitalo on the Greek isle of Euboia. His parents immigrated to the U.S. when he was nine, settling in Seattle. He graduated with honors from the University of Washington with a B.A. in History, later moving to Los Angeles where he began his screenwriting career. In Hollywood, he became a "script doctor," someone who repairs other writers' scripts and the producer/host of a cult cable TV show called "Making America." He returned to Seattle, where he currently teaches at a local college, just established the Screenwriters Academy, continues writing screenplays, is currently producing a video and a low-budget movie, and frequently contributes to the "Seattle Times."
oil, a commodity subsidized by the Common Market, of which Greece is a member, brings extra cash.

And it's not just young timers that are coming back. Moyemont spoke with Stephano, 82, who returned to Vizari after doing 30 years in Athens to set up his boot-making shop. "If I stayed there (any longer)," he told Moyemont, "I'd have only lived another year. I couldn't breathe (Athens') air. Here I might work until I'm 90." And well he might.

As he got to know what city slickers might call these "simpletons," Moyemont discovered something he only remembered from his childhood days. "I lived on a farm with my great-grandparents until I was six," he recalls, "and what I remember most was our self-sufficiency. It's the same thing in Vizari."

The Vizarots are a throw-back to modernity, a spit in the face of the inexorable march towards greater and greater convenience, more and more reliance on machines as opposed to human labor and the attendant problems of air and water pollution, soil destruction and the wrecking of social ties built over centuries.

It's not just that some farmers now use chemical fertilizers on their land, as opposed to manure, compost or simple fallowing; it's the attitude that automatically accepts the new over the old. It's an immense philosophical change that allows methods honed over centuries and countless generations to literally vanish overnight; in many cases, not a trace of them left behind. To the modern world, history isn't sacred.

While a bright spot remains with young families making at least a nominal return to the old hatching grounds, the pattern is not slowing down. In his travels around the Valley, Moyemont noticed how the huge influx of tourists have turned its tiny hamlets into veritable "disco joints." Imagine every tiny town with a disco. But that's the terrible picture. "The funny and really sad thing about this process," he laments, "is that their version of disco is John Travolta doing the finger-pricking-the-sky number!"

Apparently that's what the villagers think the tourists want. "It wouldn't be so bad if they kept their way of life and really showed something unique and interesting to the tourists — it's that they're trying to cater to them in the most kitschy way!"

Why has Vizari been spared of this? First, it's not on the tourist map; "It's not a pit stop on the way to the beach!" Moyemont adds. Second, it's enlightened individuals like his host George Vlastos, American born and educated, an architect who knows about urban sprawl and development, who want the old traditions — whatever is left of them -- to remain intact.

Unlike the villagers, who know little about air pollution, urbanization and mechanization, those living in hyper-industrialized areas like America or Athens know these infestations all too well. The shattering of communal life in big cities has led to rises in crime divorce rates, feelings of alienation and abandonment and bleakness and isolation.

You don't have to be a sociology professor to know this; it's evident in every big city.

Vlastos wants to go back and preserve whatever he can of Vizari. He is part of the wave of returnees who want to keep as many of the traditions of the place alive and functioning. In Moyemont's documentary, Vlastos was the host and interviewer — the gateway that the videomaker needed to enter the Vizarot's lives. A friendship developed between the two men, and upon reflection, Moyemont realizes how important that is. "Our corporate society doesn't promote that," he states. "Corporatism is more about directing people's lives, sucking our blood and taking away our self-sufficiency. What I remember most about Vizari are the deep friendships I've made."

Ultimately, this is the great benefit of village life. Although living in close proximity to the same people day-in and day-out often promotes intrusion on other people's privacy and affairs, no one can deny the presence of comradeship that develops in small hamlets like Vizari. There is an orderliness, a slow, seasonal cycle to life that is totally foreign to city dwellers whose existence is measured by weekends rather than the four seasons.

Moyemont has taped 30 hours of material and needs more shooting to complete the video, "I need to return and film these people in more social situations; like Hristougena. It'll complete the picture." Then? "Then I want to get it on PBS and schools and libraries. I want to show people that you can still be self-sufficient in an increasingly modernized world; that you can keep your traditions alive and not sell out."

To complete the documentary, he needs $25,000. He just recently completed a grant proposal to ITVS, a TV production organization funded by Congress, and is applying to other grant-donating sources. He has no illusions how long it will take to finish it; "It might take five years!"

He is taking his time, just like the folks back in Vizari.