

THE RECEPTION OF REFUGEES BY LOCAL ASSOCIATIONS IN ATHENS : THE CASE OF KHORA



Context

Due to its strategic position, Greece represents a major gateway for migrants seeking to reach Europe. This flow has intensified since the 2015 Syrian crisis. Asylum seekers come from conflict zones such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, but since the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip, the number of Palestinians has intensified.

The arrival of migrants in Athens

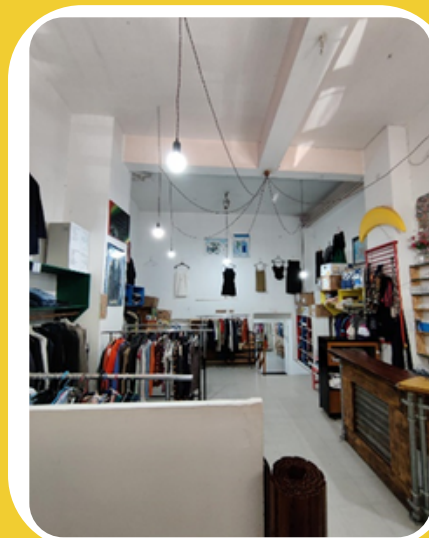
After a long journey, followed by days, months or years spent in inhumane living conditions in camps, refugees are ready to settle in Greece. Under the Dublin Regulation, they must remain in the country where they obtained their status and are not authorized to reside in another EU country. They must therefore start to build their lives in Greece and integrate into the host community. Once the refugees have reached the capital, they need help with administration, housing, food, work and social integration. NGOs and local associations play a vital role in the integration of migrants.

Khora's promotion of inclusion and interculturality

Khora, is one of these associations, based in Athens, in which I volunteered for four months. It is an association that helps anyone in need, regardless of their legal status, nationality or age. Nonetheless, in Athens, it's mainly migrants who are in this situation. The association provides a legal support, cooked meals, clothes and hygienic products, language classes, help for employment and social activities.



Ethel Secalot
Canteen



Ethel Secalot
Free shop



Ethel Secalot
Yoga workshop

Khora favors exchanges between individuals, as the association's volunteers can be Greeks, foreigners or even refugees. The inclusivity is reflected on inscriptions on the premises and on flyers that are written in seven languages: English, Arabic, French, Greek, German, Persian and Sorani (a Kurdish dialect). With its participative organization, Khora enables refugees to regain their dignity and a sense of usefulness by taking part in its smooth running. Indeed, there is no hierarchical relationship between migrants and others. There is a mutual respect between them, which enables refugees to regain recognition, lost in the camps where they were reduced to a bare life. This notion is mentioned by Giorgio Agamben (1998) and refers to a human existence devoid of rights, reduced to biological survival without any political or legal recognition.

Cultural identity preserved during the acculturation process

Acculturation is “the set of phenomena resulting from [...] contact between groups of individuals belonging to different cultures and leading to transformations which affect the original cultural patterns of one or both groups” (Redfield, 1936). During this process, Khora encourages the preservation of their culture of origin. By organizing numerous events (ex : board games night, pic-nic), this association enables individuals belonging to the same origin community -or not- to get together and exchange their memories, traditions, in their original language. In addition, music from different countries is played to share a moment with convivial dancing. Acculturation into the Greek community is therefore smoother through Khora, which supports refugees in their integration via language courses and encounter events, without destroying their identity by allowing them to retain their culture of origin. These activities are comforting for the refugees, who develop a sense of belonging to this group.



Ethel Secalot

Music Night

Its limited reception capacity

While Khora is an effective association for the reception of migrants, there are limits. First, since the volunteers are largely international and temporary, this hampers the continuity and quality of the integration process and that sense of closeness. To counter this, the association's director does not allow volunteers staying for less than 6 months to provide administrative support. Second, by responding to immediate needs, Khora runs the risk of creating dependency among refugees without providing them the tools to be autonomous. Third, the association has limited resources because it is funded by donations. For example, around 300 portions are prepared for each meal. But there are not only 300 refugees in need in Athens. In 2023, 48 721 migrants arrived in Greece and around 192 000 refugees were there in total. This number is increasing every is increasing every year.

A non-representative example of the real situation in Greece

But the process is not as simple as taking a plane to Athens and be welcomed by local associations with food and new houses. Migrants first have to travel illegally. Between 2014 and 2023, 63 000 people around the world died during their migration and around 60% of them died in the sea. The ones that managed to reach Greece can be send back to Türkiye because of the EU-Turkey Deal that provides the return to Turkey of all migrants arriving illegally on the Greek islands, in exchange for benefits. If they are still in Greece, they have to apply for asylum, and while waiting for a reply, they are locked up in camps. Between July and September 2023, 17 500 asylum seekers arrived on the Greek islands of the Aegean Sea. They are living in bad conditions: almost no running water, many power cuts, not enough food, light tents even in Winter, insecurity, and the worst thing is that the camps are overcrowded. During the month of December in 2019, the camp of Moria in Lesbos hosted around 16 800 people even though its capacity was 3 000. Some people were locked up for five years and as an act of despair, migrants set fire to the camp. All these people had to be evacuated and some died inside.



Khora, a model to follow

There's therefore a big difference between the way migrants are received in the camps and in Khora. By meeting the primary, social and cultural needs of immigrants, Khora enables them to integrate more serenely into a new society. This unique approach promotes well-being and helps reduce tensions between these communities in Greece. Projects of this type are increasingly developing in Athens, notably Yoga and Sport with Refugees association and Urban Lights. In view of the increasing number of migrant arrivals, Greece should follow this example and encourage the multiplication of these initiatives which are still too rare.



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