



# Inviting disasters

Eleni Kotsira

May, 2021



One particularly warm morning in September 2020, I am looking at photographs and videos in the media depicting [the aftermath](#) of medicane (Mediterranean hurricane) [Ianós](#) that just rampaged across Greece: communities invaded by mud



and detritus, flooded households, bridges and roads cut off. Captions accompany these visuals: ‘destructive flooding’, ‘biblical disaster’... I would have preferred to feel shocked, overwhelmed by such visuals and descriptions; however, this all feels too familiar. I sense again my feet sinking in the moist mud and my drenched clothes sticking to my skin. Suddenly, it is not September 2020 anymore. Instead, it is 26 September 2017 and I am staring across the deluged village of Chóra on the island of Samothráki. Water is endlessly rushing down its alleys, and the rocks that have detached from the mountain above the village have altered the landscape beyond recognition. What can the struggle of a remote and underpopulated island such as Samothráki to recover from a ‘natural disaster’ expose about our handling and understanding of disasters in Greece?

Extreme weather events have been steadily increasing across Greece in the past years. To list just a few:

- 14 November 2017 on the island of Sými;
- 15 November 2017 in Mándra, West of Attica – *24 people die*;
- 26 June 2018 in Mándra (again) and the neighbouring towns Néa Péramos and Mégara;
- 11 July 2019 in Chalkidikí – *7 people die*;
- 25 November 2019 in Kinéta, West of Attica (again);
- 9 August 2020 in Evoia – *8 people die*;
- Between 18 and 20 September 2020, Ianós hit about half of mainland and island Greece – *3 people declared dead*.

In spite of the diversity of these locations, the pattern is the same: eroded or burnt mountains collapsing under the unprecedented force of pouring water and/or sprawling urban expansion altering the natural flow of rivers. But does that mean that authorities have learnt from this and are prepared to act? [The catastrophic rainfall on Samothráki](#), which I would call a deluge due to its magnitude and prolonged impact across the island, exposed critical inefficiencies of the national state of emergency plan at the time, *Xenokrátis*. Two aspects of this are of particular interest here: the material conditions that turned an adverse



weather phenomenon into a ‘natural disaster’ and the emotional impact of the disaster on the islanders. Both are related with the lack of preparedness on behalf of the state for these type of disasters.

While extreme weather phenomena may appear as a relatively new challenge for the Greek experience, elsewhere they have long been the norm. Certainly, even those response mechanisms that have been developed from substantial experience with disasters, can fall short of the circumstances at times; Hurricane Katrina being perhaps the most obvious example to mention here. It was one thing not to know how bad Katrina’s landfall would be for New Orleans in 2005 (see Remley, 2015), but it would have been completely another matter not to have known that the hurricane was coming at all. This is precisely what happened on Samothráki in September 2017. There is no meteorological station on Samothráki and, due to its mountain’s high altitude (1,611m. in a surface area of only 180km<sup>2</sup>) measurements provided by near-by stations in the mainland are not always accurate and/or not representative of all sides of the island. It is telling that the islanders talk of ‘three weathers’ on Samothráki, meaning three weather systems developing according to one’s position relative to the mountain. The deluge that took place between 25 and 26 September 2017 was essentially an unforecast one, since the weather reports for that day only signalled the occurrence of light rain.

*The morning following the stream’s overflow, many villagers commented that ‘Kamára is awoken again’ when they saw that side of the village had been literally washed off.*

The following day, as rainfall stopped at sunrise, the impression of those who could walk out of their homes was that there would definitely be casualties; and yet there were none. A key factor that attributed to this was that the second and most intense squall broke out in the first morning hours of 26 September, when there was limited traffic outdoors. But infrastructure played perhaps a more decisive role. Because Chóra is characterised as a ‘traditional settlement’, most of its buildings, even when renovated, maintain their original structure; a structure



based on thick stone walls – as thick as 1,5 metre each – almost impossible to be carried away by the force of water. Newly built premises are generally of good construction too. By contrast, anyone who drives through the towns of West Attica such as Mándra will probably notice the cheap infrastructures and the unfinished housing complexes, parts of which were either carried away by the torrents that rushed through the town on 15 November 2017 or gave in and had their interiors quickly flooded. Faulty infrastructure can intensify dramatically the impact of flooding, as a number of cases make evident. In Chóra the Town Hall – in particular the additions made to it throughout the years, not the original skeleton of the building – and the tourist alley are built over the stream of Kamára, which in the past decades was considered a dry one. The morning following the stream's overflow, many villagers commented that 'Kamára is awaken again' when they saw that side of the village had been literally washed off. The old highway running through West Attica, still used to this day to connect the local towns with each other and open to drivers travelling between central and southern Greece, is built above two riverbeds flowing from the outskirts of Mándra, blocking their way to the sea. Or, looking into what more recently happened in the Greek city of Karditsa, Thessaly, one finds out that the Health Centre of Mouzáki, a wing of which collapsed during the passing of medicane Ianós, as well as other public buildings such as – again! – the Town Hall, were also [built on top of a riverbed](#).

Yet, most built premises on Samothráki stood as a protection against the 'natural disaster' in the making, but in Mándra and Karditsa these were part of the disaster: the residents were vulnerable just by being inside their houses. Vulnerability to 'natural disasters' emerges from conditions that are far from natural but rather are the result of human activity and decision-making. Even when danger is expected 'some elements of a society still may not be in a position to take the necessary steps to mitigate or prevent the occurrence of a disaster' (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p. 42)

*Islanders were put in a vulnerable position when they had to deal with the aftermath of the deluge in absence of relevant mechanisms that could assist restoration and orientate future action.*





My research on Samothráki showed that the residents, albeit safe in the homes, were also put in a vulnerable position by the lack of meteorological instruments to forecast the deluge, combined with the island's remote location. The latter meant that technical support, advanced equipment for preliminary infrastructural restoration (such as unblocking cut off villages and roads) and additional personnel from the fire department and the army could only arrive on the island via the ferry, a mode of transport highly dependent on weather conditions. Most critically, the islanders were put in a vulnerable position when later they had to deal with the aftermath of the deluge in absence of relevant mechanisms that could assist restoration and orientate future action. The deluge was indeed caused by the intensity of the rain, but the island flooded and the disaster occurred because of decades of deficiencies in public works, lax regulations and laws regarding overbuilding, misplaced infrastructures and inadequate (or misjudged) rural planning; the Town Hall and the tourist alley being typical such examples. Similar reasons have contributed to the disasters that I referred to here for comparison, in West Attica and Karditsa.





The central sewage pipe standing broken and open between the first buildings of Chóra's downhill entrance. The force of the water on the night of the deluge forced the pipe to burst from within and the restoration of the sewerage system took a year and a half to complete. Photo was taken on 24 October 2017 by the author.

'Natural disasters' are not just becoming more frequent and stronger in Greece, but also 'habitual' (Seremetakis, 2019, p. 70), a new sensory experience invading what was previously thought of as ordinary. More than adding a burden on the national budget, buildings and infrastructure collapsing against the force of water stigmatise the ones who have lived through the disaster.

From Sunday 30 September to Monday 1 October 2018, an area of low pressure passes above Samothráki; a medicane named Zorbás. On Sunday it rains for most of the day and on Monday thick fog covers Chóra for several hours. A couple of days later, I walk into one of Chóra's cafés to be taken aback by someone's shouts: 'The other day it rained and for some of us our heart was trembling... Next time it rains, the water will come from the mountain into our buildings! We are living among the shit!' The central pipe of Chóra's sewerage (see Photo 2), lies always open just a few metres away from us. The restoration works, which have started in Spring 2018 and were supposed to be complete within 40 days, are still undergoing. I am not aware if there has been some leak earlier in the day that has fired the general tension admittedly spread in the atmosphere now, but as the shouts echo on the mountains surrounding Chóra, an odour captures our nostrils. What follows is a wave of faeces-fed flies rising from the burst pipe.

*The historic absence of mental health and wellbeing services on Samothráki as well as the island's continuous dependence on the ferry connection to access basic services in the mainland, meant that no psychological support was sent by the state in the aftermath of the disaster.*

When I completed my fieldwork, almost a year and a half after the deluge, I could still witness fear outbreaks following intense weather events; unprescribed or





homeopathic medication was still exchanging hands; and the weather forecast was always watched in absolute silence when reporting considerable rain. Sometimes these behaviours were expressed in public and were shared by several islanders being present at the particular moment, such as silence falling over the traditional cafés (*kafeneia*), being otherwise the hubs of communal life on the island, while the regulars would listen to the weatherman. Patterns of such behaviours (varying from avoidance of external reminders related to the deluge such as the very sound of running water, to a persistent negative emotional state and even flashbacks) can be found catalogued as symptoms of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), though it is very difficult to determine them as such in the case of Samothráki. And that is precisely the problem. The historic absence of mental health and wellbeing services on Samothraki as well as the island's continuous dependence on the ferry connection to access basic services in the mainland, meant that no psychological support was sent by the state in the aftermath of the disaster. Even if people were indeed experiencing PTSD symptoms, they were unable to seek any professional help, either because counselling was not embedded in their daily options and/or due to their restricted finances (to pay a return ferry ticket to the mainland as well as their therapist sessions weekly or fortnightly).

Interestingly, post-disaster psychological support was later arranged for places where flash floods had resulted in loss of life, such as in West Attica and Evoia mentioned above. This is clearly underplaying the rest of the factors that can just as well cause emotional distress: the daily sight of what has become a deserted Town Hall, its windows still broken; the odours coming from a burst sewerage; the sound of running water awakening memories of trying to escape the deluge. Depriving disaster survivors of the means and the resources required to have their trauma recognised and addressed, going as far as to deny the possibility of post-disaster trauma occurring where no casualties have been reported, is just as good as forcing them to relive the disaster day by day. It can also perpetuate the long-standing stigma associated with mental health discourse and mental illness in Greece, which is still affecting a wide spectrum ranging from personal





relationships to professional recruitment (Tzouvara et al, 2016). Essentially, it is discriminating between the ones who, given their financial ease, can afford private counselling (usually keeping their sessions secret) and those who cannot afford this but also cannot demand a public provision for it because they do not want to be associated with a mental illness or emotional distress. The divide between locations nearby or with easy access to the capital and remote places like Samothráki further deepens, confirming the islanders' complaints that 'decisions are usually made for us but without us'.

*...no recovery is possible as long as islanders still worry about or even fear the sound of rain.*

Three years on, most restoration and refurbishment works have been concluded in Samothráki. The roads are indeed fixed now and new sewage pipes have been installed. The Town Hall has been relocated. Yet, no recovery is possible as long as islanders still worry about or even fear the sound of rain. And this fear will not be adequately addressed until the socioeconomic conditions putting the island's population in a vulnerable position are tackled.

## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to my colleague at the University of St Andrews, Antonio Montañés Jiménez, for his feedback and comments on an earlier version of this article.

## **References**

American Psychiatric Association (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of*



*Mental Disorders*. [Online]. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association. Available from:

<https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>

Oliver-Smith, A. (2002) Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture. In: Hoffman, S. M. & Oliver-Smith, A. eds. *Catastrophe & Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*. Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, pp. 23-47.

Remley, Th. P., Jr. (2015) Counseling in New Orleans 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina: A Commentary on the Aftermath, Recovery and the Future. *The Professional Counselor*. 5 (4), pp. 431-441.

Seremetakis, N. C. (2019) *Sensing the everyday: dialogues from austerity Greece*. Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge.

Tzouvara, V., Papadopoulos, C. & Randhawa, G. (2016) Systematic review of the prevalence of mental illness stigma within the Greek culture. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*. 62 (3), pp. 292-305.