

# Creating Greek Ethnic Place in Miami, Florida

Mary Caravelis

Associate Professor, Geography and Political Science

Barry University, Department of History and Political Science, 11300 N.E 2nd Avenue, Miami Shore, FL 33161, USA

Telephone: 305-899-4570, E-mail: [mcaravelis@mail.barry.edu](mailto:mcaravelis@mail.barry.edu)

**ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ:** Έχει αποδειχθεί ότι οι εθνοτικές κοινότητες παίζουν πολύ σημαντικό ρόλο στην προστασία της πολιτιστικής κληρονομιάς των μελών τους και παρόλο τις σημαντικές έρευνες από γεωγράφους σε πολλές εθνοτικές κοινότητες στις Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες, οι Ελληνικές κοινότητες προσέλκυαν πολύ λίγο ενδιαφέρον. Επιπλέον, η πλειοψηφία της γεωγραφικής έρευνας ασχολείται κυρίως με κοινότητες που είναι γνωστές ως εθνοτικοί γεωγραφικοί θύλακες, το οποίο δεν συμβαίνει με την Ελληνική Κοινότητα στο Μαϊάμι. Πρόσφατες έρευνες όμως έχουν αρχίσει να ασχολούνται με κοινότητες που δεν είναι γεωγραφικά συνδεδεμένες και διαπιστώνεται ότι η γεωγραφική σύνδεση δεν είναι πλέον απαραίτητη για τη συνοχή της εθνοτικής ομάδας. Εθνοτικά θεσμικά όργανα, όπως οι εκκλησίες, ενεργούν ως κέντρα κοινωνικής αλληλεπίδρασης, όπου τα μέλη που ζουν σε διάσπαρτες περιοχές μπορούν να συγκεντρώνονται για κοινές δραστηριότητες. Ο σκοπός αυτής της εργασίας είναι διπλός: πρώτα να μελετήσει την προέλευση, ανάπτυξη και εξέλιξη της Ελληνικής Κοινότητας του Μαϊάμι και δεύτερον, να περιγράψει με ποιον τρόπο οι ομογενείς αποτυπώνουν την παρουσία τους στην δεσπόζουσα κοινωνία.

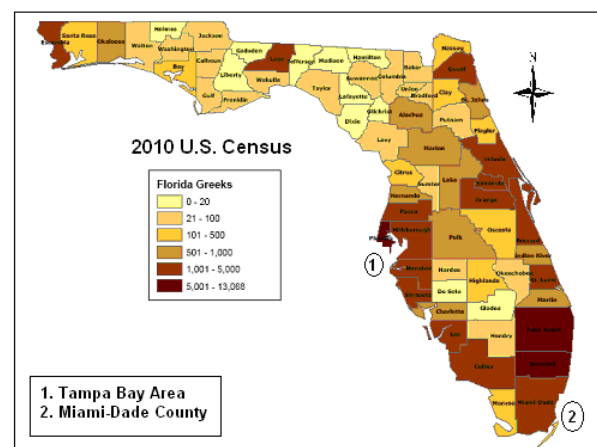
**Λέξεις Κλειδιά:** Εθνικός χώρος, εθνοτική κοινότητα, ατοπικό και ετεροτοπικό, Ελληνες, πολιτιστικό τοπίο

**ABSTRACT:** It is widely accepted that ethnic communities play an important role to the maintenance and preservation of the ethnic group's ethnocultural continuation and despite considerable geographic research on many ethnic communities in the United States the Greek communities attracted little attention. Furthermore, the majority of past research focused on spatially connected communities, known as ethnic enclaves, not the case with the Greek community in Miami. Recently however, ethnic communities that are not spatially connected became the focus of attention and research findings support that geographic propinquity no longer is necessary for the cohesion of the ethnic group. Ethnic institutions, such as churches, act as centers of social interaction where persons living in scattered locations can gather for common ethnocultural activities. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first to examine the origin, growth and evolution of the Greek community in Miami and second to document how the Greeks are imprinting their presence within the dominant society.

**Keywords:** Ethnic place, ethnic community, heterolocalism, Greek American

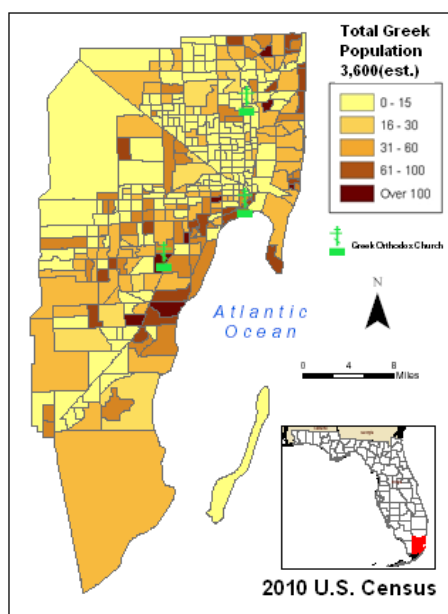
## I. INTRODUCTION

'Place' is considered one of geography's defining central concept and together with "landscape, area, region, environment, and territory, place is essential to the geographer's craft"[1]. Place is more than a geographic concept more specifically as "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" [2]. Indeed, the 'value' that individuals 'endow' to a certain location makes it different than any other area. When a specific place is endowed with ethnic values it becomes then an "ethnic place". An ethnic place is inextricably connected with the ethnic group that occupies it because it allows the creation of a bounded space within which the preservation of ethnic cultures and in many cases the continuation of native religious institutions can be achieved [3], [25]. In our globalized world the creation of ethnic places are becoming ever more important because they encourage the interaction of the ethnic group members and reinforces what is unique and distinguished of that ethnic group from any other in the area. In addition, the creation of an ethnic place allows the dominant group in each area to become familiar and understand the different cultures. As many agree in a multicultural environment understanding of other cultures is the beginning of the acceptance of the 'other' [4]. Thus, the creation of an ethnic place not only allows ethnic groups to reaffirm their ethnic identity, preserves their distinct cultural values and connects with other co-ethnics but also, to facilitate acceptance and recognition from the dominant community at large.



**Map 1** - Spatial concentration of self identified Greek population in Florida

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, almost 1.4 million persons self identify themselves as Greek in the United States. About 100,000 of them reside permanently in Florida, the fourth largest concentration of Greek population in the country (see map 1). The Tampa Bay area has the largest number with about 30,000. The second largest concentration of almost 21,000 is in southeast Florida. The same census figures (2010) show about 3,600 persons reside in the Miami area. (see map 2). Miami is the largest city of Miami-Dade County, the most populous in Florida, located in the southeastern tip of the United States. The county is home to more than 2.5 million people who reside in 35 incorporated cities (municipalities) in the midst of large unincorporated area [5].



Map 2 – 2010 Greek spatial residential preference

The Greeks in Miami have been active in creating their own Greek ethnic place since the 1920s. Greeks refer to persons of Greek descent, regardless of generation who self identify themselves as Greek. In Miami Greek ethnic presence has been a small but loud component of the ethnic landscape since that time. For the past 90 years the area's Greek Orthodox Churches have been the anchors of the koinotita (community). The use of koinotita rather than enoria (parish) is very significant because it affirms that the church is more than a place of worship [6], [7], [8], [9]. The Greek community in Miami has evolved since its establishment reflecting the unprecedented demographic, social and economic changes that took place in the area. Today, Miami is called the most internationalized American city because of its extraordinary ethnic diverse population and more specifically the ongoing influx of immigrants from the Caribbean and Central and South America. [22]. The same Census figures show that 65% of the area's residents classify themselves as Hispanic, about 20% as Black and 15% as Non-Hispanic Whites. The Greek-Americans are about one percent of the last category. Even though the self identified Greek population is not

large in numbers they have been able to create a very visible ethnic community partially due to their very visible Orthodox Church and adjacent community facilities that act as landmarks. In addition, their lively annual Greek festivals and the continuing expansion of Greek cuisine restaurants and other Greek businesses is a constant reminder of the Greek presence.

## II MIAMI GROWTH

Miami was incorporated as a city in 1896 with just 300 permanent residents. Miami became an important city only when the trains connected it to the rest of the United States. Henry M. Flagler, the multimillionaire, partnered with John D. Rockefeller to extend his railroad south to Miami in 1896. Flagler recognized Miami's superior winter climate as an ideal place for the wealthy to spend their winters. Miami was slow to grow in the beginning, but when the state of Florida embarked on an ambitious program to drain the Everglades, the swampy wilderness which covered about 15,000 km in southern Florida, led to a land buying frenzy. Thousands of speculators bought millions of acres of reclaimed land from the state of Florida. The land boom was a boost to Miami's economy as thousands rode the Flagler railroad to buy affordable land (photo 1). During that time Miami began to be referred as "Magic City" because it appeared that Miami became a city overnight. Paul George writes: *Speculation brought people from all parts of the nation to Florida in quest of quick wealth in the overheated Florida real estate market and Miami was its storm center. In the late summer of 1925, as the boom neared its zenith, nearly 1,000 subdivisions were under construction in Miami and its environs* [10].



Photograph 1 - Miami Growth 1913-1997 (Source: Miami History Museum)

## III. GREEK PRESENCE

Miami's explosive growth in the 1920's attracted enough Greeks who by 1925 were able to organize a Greek

community. By 1928, they were able to collect enough funds and purchase an existing small church of a different Christian denomination in downtown Miami. The new Orthodox Church was given the name of St. Sophia and this ethnic place became their religious and social home for the next 20 years. The practicality of purchasing an existing building and using it as a church was the most common way for the Greeks to establish a church at that time [14].

The 1930 US Census recorded 180 Greek born residents, a sufficient number to sustain the Greek Church [5]. The community started a Greek School, organized a Ladies Philoptochos chapter ("Friends of the Poor"), initiated several Greek regional associations (topica somatia) and most important they were successful at establishing an American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA) chapter. AHEPA was the largest and most important ethnic national organization in the United States. This ethnic organization was founded in Atlanta, Georgia in the 1920s in order to curb the activities of the Ku Klux Klan against the Greek immigrants in the southern states. During the first part of the twentieth century in the South the Greeks, along with other ethnic groups, were not always welcome. There were many incidents of discrimination, reflecting the dominant anti-ethnic attitudes of the xenophobic southern residents. One of the main missions of AHEPA was to help Greek immigrants assimilate into American society. Membership to this ethnic organization flourished among the Greeks who were "interested in climbing the proverbial ladder of success and they were committed to raising their families in America" [11]. By 1930 the AHEPA organization was expanded to include the Sons of Pericles in 1926, the Daughters of Penelope, it's ladies auxiliary founded in San Francisco in 1929 and in 1930 the Maids of Athena [11].

The AHEPA chapter in Miami was established in 1931 and it was the fourteenth chapter organized in the United States. Most of the Greeks in Miami were self employed had a very good command of the English language and were financially comfortable. At the same time they retained their Greek identity. Based on the oral histories of the Greeks in Miami not only they were proud of their Greek heritage but they were free from local cultural prejudices to declare with pride their Hellenic origin [12]. The Greeks made their ethnic presence visible because first, they were concentrated within the urban Miami area and the majority of the Greeks were small businessmen who had day-to-day contact with the dominant American community and second, they established their church in the center of the Miami business district that was growing at a frenetic pace.

By 1940 Miami developed into a magnet for tourists from the north. Miami's mild winter climate and easy transportation access made it the most favored winter destination for northerners. As Raymond Mohl, a noted Miami historian, wrote "the area was serving about two million vacationers each year - putting them up in hotels,

motels, and apartments, serving them in restaurants and retail establishments" [13]. Many of the Greeks who lived in Miami at that same period either owned a restaurant or they were working in the restaurant support businesses, such as food suppliers. A few of the restaurants became city landmarks and were favored for their excellent cuisine [12].

By 1941 the Greek community continued to grow in numbers and economic strength that they were able to secure substantial funds for the purchase of property to a new more upscale area with enough space to accommodate the growing needs of the community. Based on the community's accomplishments, it is apparent that they had enough financial resources to buy land so they could build a larger church and community center. The land was purchased at the edge of Coral Gables one of the most prestigious areas in Miami at that time [14].



Photograph 2 - St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Church Miami FL

The president of the new church building committee was John Colozoff founder and owner of the Florida Fuel Oil Co and two other prominent Miami businessmen Peter Vamvaks and George Karnezis. According to St. Sophia historical documents Mr. Colozoff Mr. Vamvaks, Mr. Karnezis and others, "jointly and severally assumed this responsibility and did in fact purchase the land where the beautiful Cathedral now stands" [14].



Photograph 3 - Dedication plaque located in the entrance of St. Sophia

Miami's population and service economy boomed during WWII as thousands of U.S. soldiers came to the area for training before they were shipped to Europe and the Pacific [19]. As the local economy was growing more Greeks were moving south in search of better opportunities. The building of the new church was on



hold because just after one month of the purchase of the lot the United States entered WWII [14]. During the war years however, the members of the Greek community and especially the Ladies of Philoptohos and the members of AHEPA undertook the responsibility of soliciting contributions from all Miamians so they could aid the people in Greece who were going through many hardships.

Thousands of packages with clothing and provisions were shipped to people in Greece through the Red Cross for the next 10 years. The Greek community also organized public events where all the proceeds were sent to the Greek War Relief. The Miami News, the local newspaper, has many stories between 1941 and 1944 on the efforts of the Miami Greek community to help their fellow Greeks in their homeland. As one of St. Sophia's member recalled she published her life story to the other local paper the Miami Herald, *"I raised funds for Greek War Relief by performing Greek Dances at the Bayfront Park band shell. On Saturday I went to the movies at the Olympia Theater Flagler Street and after the movie we would eat at the Paramount Restaurant, or we would gather at the downtown Walgreen's in the basement restaurant"* [15]. In 1946 the community bought the house adjacent to the church as the residence for their young and newly assigned priest, Fr. Mekras and his family [14].

The local newspaper devoted an entire page devoted to the official opening of the completed St. Sophia. According to that article the church and the adjacent property had cost the community more than \$500,000, an enormous sum of money for that time [16]. This is another example of the community member's wealth and their need to prove within their American community that they were not only financially successful but they were also proud of their Greek Orthodox religion and heritage.

St. Sophia (photograph 2, 3) was built in the Byzantine architectural style and was designed by the Greek Architect Christoforos P. Kantianis, who also designed the Greek churches in Charlotte, North Carolina and Worcester, Massachusetts. According to the history of the church *"marble for the church entrance, the chanter stand, the Bishop's throne and the altar was brought from Pentele, Greece which is famous for its quarries. Later, the iconostasi was completed in Italy. The mosaic icons as well as the iconography were the creation of the well known iconographer Stelios Maris"*. Within a few years a social hall, education facilities and even a large athletic gym were built attached to the church.

By the end of WWII the Greek population in Miami almost doubled. The 1950 US Census recorder 639 Greeks residing in the county, the second most concentration in the state after Tarpon Springs. The decade of the 1950's according to Fr. Mekras were the 'golden years' of the Greek community as he said in 1994 *"at one time, we served some 10,000 people. I have married them, performed the baptism of their children and*

*later married them. We even had visits from Prince Peter of Greece and King Simeon of Bulgaria"* [17]. Saint Sophia was the only Greek Orthodox Church in South Florida and thus many Greeks were driving over 50 miles (80 km) to attend church services and see their other Greek friends.

The majority of the Greeks lived scattered throughout the Miami area and St. Sophia with its adjacent buildings became the center of all religious and ethnic celebrations. Zelinsky and Lee [18] labeled this dispersal residential preference of many ethnic groups as 'heterolocalism'. The authors argue that modern communications and transportation allows frequent interaction with co-ethnics as long as they have a permanent place where they can meet. The heterolocal sociospatial behavior suggests that the members of the ethnic community must have the opportunities present as well as the desire to be connected with their co-ethnics.

#### IV CHANGING MIAMI DEMOGRAPHICS

In the early 1960s Miami's ethnic landscape changed dramatically with the successive waves of Cubans migrating to the area fleeing the political turmoil with the rise of Fidel Castro in their country. From 1960 until the mid 1980s, more than 600,000 Cubans came to America and the great majority settled in Miami. The original point of entry for most Cubans became a central neighborhood just north of St. Sophia, which overnight was renamed Calle Ocho and the area became known as Little Havana. In a span of very few years, Miami was radically transformed into a Latin America city. Furthermore, political and economic conditions in Latin America propelled hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans, Colombians, Venezuelans and others who quickly altered the city's ethnic composition [22].

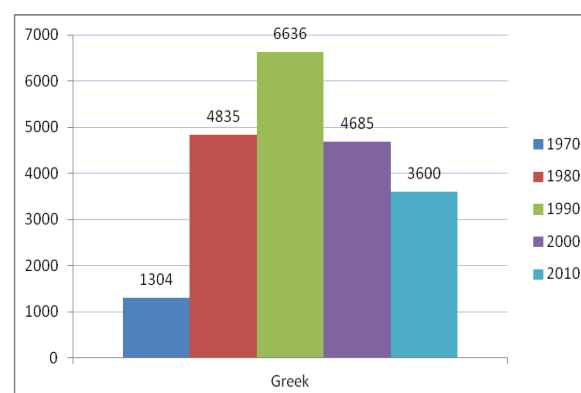
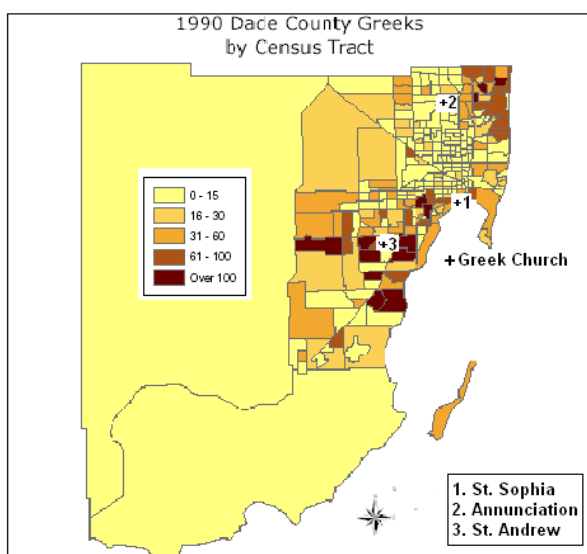


Figure 1 – Growth of the Greek population in Miami

As the Latin population grew, the Greek population grew as well (see figure 1). As more and more Greeks were moving to the area they began to live further and further away from St. Sophia. Many chose the new suburbs of North Miami and the southern suburbs of the Kendall area. Additionally, more of the newcomers had young children and they did not want to commute that far. Based on the author's interviews with Fr. Payiatas, the longtime priest of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox

Church in North Miami, the church site was purchased in 1963 and the church building was completed in 1965. Father Payiatis said that the 'best years for this church were from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s' [20]. In 1975 he was asked by the Archdiocese to serve as the koinitia priest because the community "was in dire need of leadership" [21]. The need for a charismatic priest was critical because the changing demographics of the area adjacent to the church and the building of another church to a neighboring county had a severe adverse impact to the membership [19],[20].

Political changes and bad economic conditions on the island of Haiti, the poorest nation of the western hemisphere, pushed large number of Haitian to come to Miami. The majority came aboard small boats, labeled 'boat people' and most of those refugees settled into Lemon City, a neighborhood to the North section of the city, just a few miles away from the Annunciation Church, transforming it into a vibrant black Caribbean enclave.



Map 3 - 1990 Greek spatial residential preference

Eventually, the neighborhood came to be known as Little Haiti. Based on the 2010 Census report, there are more than 360,000 Haitians in Florida and 118,000 of them live in the Miami area [5]. In the 1980s when large number of Haitians began to move to the surrounding areas the white English speaking population began to abandon the city in huge numbers. The white population plummeted to just one-third of Dade County's total numbers. The White population went from an absolute majority in the 1960s to now comprising just 18% of the population [22].

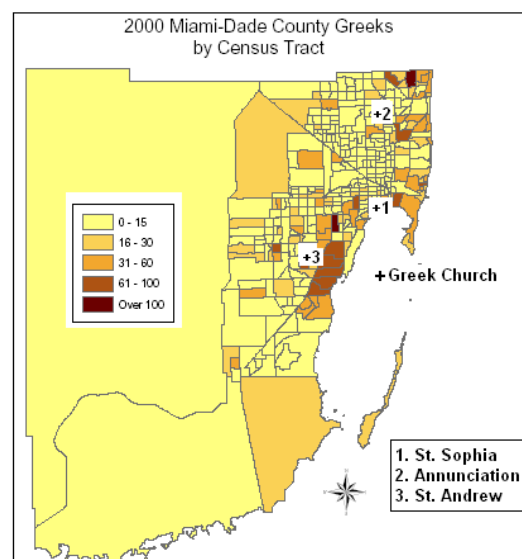
By the mid 1990s most of the Greek families left the area around the Annunciation church and moved north to neighboring counties (see map 3 and 4). Today the church has no permanent priest and according to one Greek ex-parishioner there are 'no more than 10 people' attending whenever there is a service [24]. Photograph 4 was taken during Holy Friday in 2009 and based on the author's observations there were about 40 people in

attendance and many of them were not even Greek Orthodox they were Russian or Serbian Orthodox. There is a large Russian community very close to the Annunciation and because the closest Russian Orthodox Church is not as close many Russians prefer to attend the Annunciation especially during Easter.



Photograph 4 - Annunciation Easter Friday services 2009

Based on U.S. Census figures from 1970 to 1980 there was a 270% increase of Greeks moving to Miami. By 1990 the Greek population grew even more with a 37% increase in 10 years [5]. This dramatic increase was partly due to the influx of Greek-Canadians who took advantage of US favorable immigration policies towards Canadian citizens, great economic opportunities and perceived better quality of life conditions. Miami, with its abundant sunshine and warm ocean breezes, became a magnet that attracted many Greek-Canadians to the 'Magic City' (see map 3 and 4).



Map 4 - 2000 Greek spatial residential preference

The same reasons that precipitated the creation of a second Greek Orthodox Church were in place for the establishment of a third Greek Orthodox Church in the Miami area (see photograph 5). In 1977 due to the increasing Greek population in the southern suburbs another Greek orthodox church, St. Andrew, was established this time in the suburb of Kendall.

The suburb of Kendall offered newer and more affordable housing than areas closer to St. Sophia thus attracting more of the newcomers to settle there. By 1977 there were enough members to finance a new church closer to home. Ten Greeks organized "The Greek Orthodox Community of Kendall" [23]. Initially, they purchased an existing small house which they used for services and all other ethnic activities.



Photograph 5 - St. Andrew Orthodox Church Kendall

According to the Orthodox Observer "Parish Profile" within three years they sold the first property and they bought a "non-denominational church with drive-in facilities such as speaker boxes for the cars parked in the parking area; a drive-in church!" [21]. In the early 1950s drive-in churches were becoming popular in the United States. Parishioners would drive to a large parking lot, park next to a speaker boxes the height of the car window and they could listen to the liturgy as they were sitting in their vehicles. The church was named St. Andrew and after extensive renovations it resembles a more traditional Orthodox Church, at least the interior space. The membership in St. Andrew reflects the increasing demographics of the area and it is the only church that offers a special Orthodox service in Spanish! Members of this koinotita boast that they were the first who organized a Greek festival in Miami in 1979 [21].

It has been widely documented that all ethnic communities are affected by the dominant social and technological structures within which they form and continually evolve due to the two way cultural adjustment process between the ethnic group and the dominant resident culture of the area [25]. In the case of the Greeks in Miami the arrival of large number of immigrants from the Caribbean and Central and South America had a major impact to their ethnic community. The Greeks found it necessary not only to create their own ethnic place but also in many ways to share it with all the other ethnic groups in the area. What a better way than to organize an annual Greek festival.

Festivals have been a religious and cultural tradition of Greek society since ancient times. In Greece the annual panegyri continues to be an annual celebration associated with the local Orthodox Church commemorating the local saint's name day, or other special religious event. In the United States when the first Greek immigrants established their first churches one way to raise funds for the building and the salary of the priest was to organize a panegyri which eventually was renamed Greek Festival and was advertized to the community at large. Since the 1970s Greek festivals became the window to Greek culture and at the same time the most important fundraising event for the year. Besides helping with community finances Greek festivals provide the best opportunities for the ethnic community members to reaffirm their ethnic identity by expressing it to others who are in attendance. No other event provides the Greeks the opportunity to express their ethnicity in such a spatial manner. As Dawson explains "For members of ethnic groups, their festivals are seen to bring them together in a common meeting place and through a set of common experiences which can then be used as cultural reference points throughout the year. In this sense, the festival creates experience, and once it is over it becomes a new text itself, providing a current reading of an ongoing ethnic culture." [28].

Greek festivals are probably the most popular ethnic activities that are successful to draw in some cases more than 30,000 persons in one weekend. The Greek festival in St. Sophia (see photograph 6) is usually in February and the Greek festival in Kendall is in November (see photograph 5 and 7).



Photograph 6 - St. Sophia Greek Festival Flyer 2009

The Greek festivals are held in the church grounds and are long awaited events by Greeks and non-Greeks alike. The planning takes months of preparation and organization and most of the active members of the community volunteer to help with many tasks. The volunteers get together and cook traditional Greek foods many weeks prior to the festivals.





Photograph 7 – St. Andrew Greek festival 2011

Demonstrations of traditional Greek folk dances are performed by the young Greek school dance students (see photograph 6). The dancers wear traditional Greek costumes from many different parts of Greece. There is always a band that plays loud Greek music. Greek festivals, besides offering Greek food, sell Greek artifacts imported from Greece, such as souvenirs, jewelry, pottery, music, and other touristy items. Greek wine, ouzo and beer (mostly beer “Mythos”) are everywhere and all are encouraged to be Greek for a day (see photograph 7). Alba has pointed out, that ethnic activities, such as food and language, “foster a solidarity that transcends conventional ethnic confines and is based on a mutual appreciation of ethnic heritage” [27]. Without a doubt, the Greek festivals in the Miami area appear to be very important vehicles for the maintenance of the Greek ethnic identity of members of this community.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The creation of a Greek ethnic place in Miami within the confines of the local Greek Orthodox Churches appears to provide the arena where Greeks can connect with other Greeks, be able to celebrate their ancestral heritage and practice their Greek culture and customs. In our modern globalized society when immigrants live in multi-ethnic areas, the need for creating an ethnic place seems to be a declaration of one's uniqueness. The Greeks in Miami have structured their ethnic community in a way that is not spatially connected, yet provides the essential ethnic connections needed in order to pursue their goal of maintaining their Greek culture and identity. Member of this ethnic community, place a high value to their ethnic place because as K.C Ryden observed “place has become a shaping partner in our lives, we partially define ourselves in its terms, and it carries the emotional charge of a family member or any other influential human agent.” [28].

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## ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΕΑ

**Mary Caravelis**

Associate Professor, Geography and Political Science  
Barry University  
Department of History and Political Science  
11300 N.E 2nd Avenue  
Miami Shore, FL 33161

Telephone: 305-899-4570,

E-mail [mcaravelis@mail.barry](mailto:mcaravelis@mail.barry)

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