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## Chthonian Spirits and Shared Shrines: The Dynamics of Place among Christians and Muslims in Anatolia

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*Χιτίρελεζ λέγανε οι Τούρκοι. Αι Γιώργη λέγαμε εμείς.  
The Turks said Hitirellez, we said Saint George!*

The coexistence of Christian and Muslim 'visitors' or 'pilgrims' to holy sites is a very old feature of the Balkan and Anatolian landscape; travellers and ethnographers have observed mixed religious practices since the early 20th century. These belong to many local traditions, some going back to the time of the Ottoman conquest and others even to late Byzantine times (Hasluck 1929; Zeggini 2001 [1996], Foss, 2002). The Balkans and Anatolia are lands where Islam and Christianity have met and co-existed, more or less peacefully, for more than a millennium, and many aspects of local customs echo different types of relations between religious communities (including conversions, business associations and intermarriages). Not surprisingly, the frontier hero, often descending from two 'races' (two genealogically distinct groups and, by extension, two separate 'peoples'), is a major figure in the epic poetry of the literary traditions of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East since the Middle Ages. These are warriors with ambiguous identities who can be claimed by more than one community. Pilgrimage is both an individual act and a collective practice and this dual character makes it complex to analyse. The vast majority of visitors to shared sacred places in the broader Byzantine and Ottoman world have always been local men and women, and their devotional activities form part of a common and widespread pattern containing elements from more than one religious traditions. Oriental 'pilgrimage' was not a specific state or activity, but a short episode in the longer pilgrimage of life. Therefore there was no need for a specific word to designate it (Dagron, 2004)<sup>2</sup>. This Oriental Christian practice is referred to as *proskynesis*, veneration of a personage in certain sacred places where its

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<sup>1</sup> The quote comes from the file for the village Ladik (near Argyroupolis/Gumushane on the Black Sea Coas) at the Centre for Asia Minor Studies, Athens (CAMS, PO 965). I wish to express my deepest thanks to the staff of the Centre for their help and encouragement during my research in their collection of ethnographic documents in 2005 and 2006.

<sup>2</sup> "Le pèlerin occidental a un nom, une iconographie, une histoire. Du chrétien d'Orient qui va faire ses dévotions dans un sanctuaire proche ou lointain, on dit simplement qu'il voyage, qu'il avait fait un vœu, qu'il a accompli un acte de piété; il n'y a ni spécificité du pèlerinage ni statut particulier du pèlerin dans cette partie de la chrétienté. .... Tout Oriental était un pèlerin virtuel, de court ou de long voyage; il n'était pas besoin d'un mot pour le dire." ["The Western pilgrim is related to a name, an iconography, a story. When the Oriental Christian visits a sanctuary, nearby or far away, to venerate the saint, it is only said that he travels, that he has made a vow, that he accomplishes an act of devotion. There is no specificity of the act of pilgrimage nor particular status attached to the pilgrim in this part of Christianity ... Every Oriental was a potential pilgrim, involving a shorter or longer journey; no specific term was needed to imply this."] (2004 : 7)

'presence' can be felt<sup>3</sup>.

Mixed or shared practices have inaccurately and anachronistically been associated with cosmopolitanism, a category that has lately come under some interesting criticism. Among other things, it has been accused of failing to incorporate an understanding of the particularity of experience and of 'subsuming under the generic category of "identity" the historical experiences and allegedly common 'cultures' of other 'groups'' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 30). Contemporary debates around identity and difference point to the 'hollowness' of categories and to the constant 're-interpretations' of and adaptations to the 'other' (Theodossopoulos 2006:24). These also reveal the tensions and passions involved in discussing such issues as 'collective representations' and national stereotypes (Kechriotis 2002; Calotychos 2003; Papagaroufali 2005; Theodossopoulos 2006). The language of identity implies the existence of an axiomatic identity while in fact 'bounded groups are a contingent, emergent property, not an axiomatic given' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 31). As I hope will become clear below, shared *sacra* do not imply a shared religious identity: shared *sacra* are primarily sacred *places*.

Mixed religious practices across the vast Byzantine and Ottoman space-time have not been the result of any top-down 'tolerant' or 'multicultural' ideology or policy; no legal dispositions or other kinds of texts emanating from official authorities seem to uphold any such hypothesis<sup>4</sup>. Instead, the 'tolerant' attitude of the Byzantine and Ottoman societies is best understood in relation to their intrinsic nature as political entities: Empires with a long tradition of cultural pluralism characterized by the coexistence of more than one symbolic systems within a relatively loosely organized society, a social order maintained for centuries over vast territories. In this context, common ritual practices are a grass-root phenomenon whose existence and perseverance can better be understood by looking into the ethnographic detail of these experiences, keeping in mind that they have not marked the memory of the 'communities' involved in identical ways.

Shared ritual practices in Anatolia are highly codified social activities involving ritual objects, gestures, and postures relating pilgrims to sacred place. Here, the important participants are laymen and laywomen; rituals and devotional practices do not necessarily involve interaction with the clergy. Ethnographic and historical material sustains the hypothesis that these practices are linked to the *chthonian* character of the objects of devotion, who are deities of the underworld in the limited sense of the word (below the surface of the earth) and who are primarily linked with the local population. I use the term chthonian (chthonios) to signify the one who comes from the land, from the territory (chthon), which is not the same as from the agricultural, nourishing earth (gaia). Chthonian spirits have a special relation with autochthonous (autochthones) men and women, the *earth-born*, those *originating from*

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<sup>3</sup> 'More than the one who travelled, the Byzantine pilgrim is a *proskynetes*, one who venerated; the critical movement was over the threshold of access to the one venerated. The space claimed was one less of distance than of presence' (Weyl Carr, 2002: 77).

<sup>4</sup> For a more extended discussion on cosmopolitanism in relation to shared shrines in the ottoman tradition, Cf. Couroucli in Chris Hann (ed), (forthcoming).

*the same land* (Détienne, 2003)<sup>5</sup>. Those Saint George's shrines that attract mixed pilgrims in the Balkans and in Anatolia are usually situated outside towns and villages, on hilltops or in the woods, next to springs and crevices. These are *liminal* places inhabited by chthonian or other spirits on the frontier between the earth and the underworld (Stewart, 1991).

My research is based on both ethnographic and historical data. The first comes from my observations of contemporary mixed ritual practices in Istanbul today and the second from archival research conducted in Athens. These findings lead me to argue that sharing *sacra* is a primarily local phenomenon, whose symbolic importance is related to a specific social group within a specific space/time.

### **St George's holy space-time**

Saint George is one of the most popular saints of Oriental Christendom, whose cult spread widely, especially after the Crusades, covering from Egypt to Georgia and from the Balkans to Anatolia. Shrines dedicated to Saint George or the Virgin Mary are the two typically syncretic holy places in the Levant and traditionally attract Muslim men and women along with Christian pilgrims (Voile 2004). One of the most important present-day 'shared' celebrations of the saint is the annual festival taking place on April 23rd on Princes Islands (*Prinkipo*) near Istanbul. My study, based on a series of observations of the pilgrimage between 1992 and 2004, has further been enlightened by documentary sources on similar 'mixed' celebrations in the Black Sea region at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>.

Saint George's day, although a 'fixed' feast, has in fact been celebrated at variable dates in both Eastern and Western Christian practice. In the Orthodox world, it is often moved to the Monday following Easter Sunday because as a major holiday it cannot be celebrated during Lent (a time of fasting and penitence). In Western Christian custom, Saint George's day also did not remain fixed. In England, the holiday disappeared from the church's official calendar during the Reformation, re-appearing later as a 'June festival' organized by guilds and companies. The Catholic Church has recently retrograded St. George's day into a simple 'commemoration', following doubts about his historical existence and martyrdom (Morgan 1990; McClendon 1999). These variations of time and place in relation to the saint's celebrations add another dimension to the 'betwixt and between' character of the personage, that seems to thrive on ambiguity and marginality.

St George as legendary figure has its Turkish parallel, *Hidrellez* (in old Turkish *Hidir İlyas*), a combination of *Hidr*, who stands for spring time and new life and *Elias*, a symbol of the sun, whose importance has been well documented in Anatolian and Balkan folklore. The earliest study of these mixed practices is Hasluck's work on Balkan popular religion; he was the first to point out similarities

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Détienne 2003 on representations of the autochthonous character of men and gods in Athens, esp. in relation to the -liminal- temple Erechtheion on the Acropolis where the contest between Athena and Poseidon took place.

<sup>6</sup> Most of the documents providing the historical context for this study come from the archives of the Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens (hereafter *CAMS*), a unique and very rich ethnographic collection on the Greek Orthodox community in Late Ottoman times, when religious minorities constituted an important segment of both urban and rural populations in Anatolia.

in popular religion between Saint George, Elias and Hidr occurring as early as the beginning of the Ottoman period<sup>7</sup>:

*'in Turkey ... Khidr seems to be a vague personality conceived of mainly as a helper in sudden need, especially of travelers. He has been identified with various figures of the Old Testament, notably with Elias, of whom he is considered a re-incarnation, and with the Orthodox St. George, whose day, together with the associations of Lydda, he has taken over; the characteristics he has borrowed from St. George include the reputation of a dragon-slayer, which St. George himself may have borrowed from a pagan predecessor....[I]t seems abundantly proved, from oriental literary sources, that the personalities of Khidr and Elias are distinguished by the learned, the former being the patron of seafarers and the latter of travelers by land. ... [H]is (Khidr's) day is regarded by seamen as the opening of their season. ... (and)... he is regarded as a patron of spring, being called the 'Verdant', partly in allusion to the greenness of that season, while his feast is the beginning of spring and, in Syria, the beginning of sowing. His discovery of the water of life may also have a reference to his connection with spring, while the physical conception of his functions has probably aided his confusion with Elias, the rainbringer of the Christians' (Hasluck 1929: 320-322)<sup>8</sup>.*

More recent ethnographic work in Anatolia has established a relationship between the widespread *Hidrellez* celebrations in early May and ancient Anatolian calendars, which also divide the year between the cold season and the good season. (Bazin 1974, Boratav 1955, Gokalp 1978 and 1980,, Tsiiridou 2000, Zegginis 2001). The first is called *Kasim*, November in Turkish, and starts on to Saint Dimitrios' day in the Christian calendar (October 26<sup>th</sup> Julian, November 8<sup>th</sup> Gregorian) marking the beginning of winter's agricultural labor, the return of the transhumant herds from mountains to lowlands, and the end of the fishing season. The second date (April 23d, or May 6<sup>th</sup> Gregorian) is called *Hidrellez* and corresponds to Saint George's day; it signals the beginning of the season for good navigation and highlands transhumance (Bazin, 1972, Gokalp, 1980). These dates correspond to the cycle of the Pleiades, a star cluster that divides the year in two, disappearing from the Mediterranean winter sky at the end of April and reappearing at the end of October. In Greek mythology, the Pleiades cycle was related to Demeter, goddess of earth and agriculture, whose daughter, Persephone, married to Hades, king of the underworld, lived part of the year with her mother above the earth and part of the year below with her husband. In winter, Demeter was sad, and therefore nothing grew until spring, when her daughter would reappear and stir the earth back to life. One of the parallels between the two couples, Saint Dimitrios/Saint George and Demeter/Persephone, is of course the names themselves;

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<sup>7</sup> Hasluck refers to the writings of Cantacusenus (14th century) on Hetir Elias and of George the Hungarian (15th century) on "the extraordinary vogue enjoyed by Khidr in his day".

<sup>8</sup> Bazin (1972: 720-727) writes that the Arabic stem *h-d-r* conveys green grass, announcing spring, and the slaying of the Dragon symbolizes victory over winter. Roasted (pefrygmena) young wheat grains (*hydra*) are mentioned as a ritual meal in 5<sup>th</sup> Century greek texts (Chantraine, 2009:1214, who quotes Aristophanes Peace, 595). In the Greek Orthodox tradition nea hidra are brought to church as part of the *protogenimata* (first harvest) offerings, a tradition parallel to the Jewish ceremony of firstfruits, the day following Passover (Leviticus 2, 14 and 23, 13-14). Nea Hidra and Heohidra are mentioned in Korae's dictionary of modern greek (1835) as fresh grain offerings. Greek orthodox hymns and prayers sang on April 23 celebrating St George relate him to spring: Aneteile to ear, deute euhithomen (Spring has dawned, let's be merry) (Synekdimos -Book of prayers- April 23d).

Saint Demetrios stands as the Christian – and male -- mirror image of Demeter, while *Georgios* (George) is homonymous with *georgos*, farmer. Analogies between Saint George and a number of mythological figures, slayers of dragons and monsters have been well established (Anagnostakis & Balta 1994:116-119). One of these is the ancient Greek god Apollo, another dragon-slayer and life/spring/water bringer and whose shrines stand on the frontier between the world of the men and the underworld. In one version of the saint's life (Ibid.), he is the offspring of a mixed marriage between an Armenian pagan and a Christian woman from Cappadocia. Here he is very much like the hero of the Byzantine epic *Digenis Akritis*, son of a Muslim father and a Christian mother. The legendary Alexander is also of 'mixed' blood; according to the popular *Romance* (Veloudis, 1977) he is not King Philip's son, but the fruit of the union of his mother and an Egyptian magician/god. The hero descending from two races is a frequent theme in oriental mythology; the Christians Digenis and Armouris and the Muslim Hasan Askari, Sayyid Battal or Melik Danishmend are all of a 'double' or 'mixed' descent (Delehay 1909; Grégoire 1942; Melikoff 1960; Anagnostakis and Balta 1994 ). The same theme is present in the legend of *Sheik Beddredin*, founder of the order of the *Semavites* in Adrinople (Edirne) in Thrace (Zeggini 2001 [1996]: 150). Even more similar is the legend associated with the figure of *SariSaltik* in Albania, who was the founder of the local *Bektashi* order and whose cave is still a pilgrimage site today, visited by large crowds on May 6<sup>th</sup>, Saint George's day. *SariSaltik* is said to be a holy man who saved the life of the young daughter of a Christian prince and killed a dragon to make water available for the population (Clayer 1996). In Greek folksong, Saint George appears to protect a mixed couple and bless their marriage by abduction (Politis 1978 [1914]: 72), the only possible exogamic union between a Muslim man and a Christian woman in the Ottoman world. From the Asia Minor archives comes a similar echo: *Our grandfathers used to say that Turks also feared and respected Saint George. They even loved him as a kinsman, because they considered him their son-in-law, having married the Turkish girl Fatme<sup>9</sup>.*

### **St George of Prinkipo**

In present-day Turkey, April 23d is a national holiday, the Day of Children and the Republic (*23 Nisan Ulusal Egemenlik ve Çocuk Bayramı*), commemorating Kemal Atatürk's coming to power in 1920. Families spend the day outdoors, picnicking in parks and woods. It is also an important feast among the *Rum* community (the Greek Orthodox of Turkey)<sup>10</sup> who traditionally celebrate it in the countryside with religious services in monasteries or country chapels followed by picnics or shared meals. The Greek Orthodox monastery of Saint George, situated at the top of the hill on Princes Island near Istanbul, attracts an impressive and constantly increasing number of visitors, estimated at 100,000 people in 2004. They come from Istanbul to the picturesque town with its beautiful old villas, seaside restaurants and souvenir shops by crossing the Bosphorus by boat. Most of the visitors are 'cultural Muslims' who belong to the Muslim majority in Turkey while Armenians and *Rum* prefer to visit the

<sup>9</sup> Cf. CAMS, Agrid, Argyroupolis/Gumushane, PO 757.

<sup>10</sup> The Orthodox Greeks of Istanbul are usually referred to as *Rum*, Romans, local inhabitants of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium). The Greeks from Greece are called *Yunanlı*, after the country's name in Turkish, *Yunanistan* (the land of Ionia).

monastery at other times -- a fact that questions the nature of the day's celebration. Is this still a shared shrine? Is this pilgrimage a shared religious phenomenon? It is difficult to claim that a kind of *communitas* comes into being while apparently different and disconnected ritual practices are being performed at this particular time and place (Hertz, 1913, Turner, Morinis). As will be shown later, Muslims visiting the shrine partake in a traditional activity made possible and culturally meaningful to them through their sharing of common social memory of Ottoman local traditions where Christian and Muslim neighbours interacted on social occasions across religious boundaries.

Sacred space and ritual time are not fixed realities. For example, while Muslim feast days follow the lunar calendar, Christian holidays are fixed by using both the lunar and the solar calendar: Christmas is always celebrated on December 25th, following the solar calendar, but Easter's date depends on both the solar and the lunar cycle. Moreover, the Oriental church considers Lent as a period of fasting and prayer; celebrations of joy cannot be held during this period. Marriages, for example, are best postponed for the period following Easter, during May and June. The same seems to hold true for St George's feast, for whenever April 23d happens during Lent, the holiday is transferred to Easter Monday. When I observed the feast in 1997 the Greek Consul was the host and the great majority of participants (around 200 people in all) arrived after mass to share the food and music. In practice, St George's shrines host different types of celebrations, depending on the specific calendar configurations: when April 23d is after Orthodox Easter, both Christian and Muslim pilgrims gather together. Thus in Princes Islands in Istanbul, when the holiday happens during Lent, Christians do not celebrate; but the tens of thousands of Muslim pilgrims, ignoring this, visit the monastery and monks and priests welcome them in the usual way. Priests are very pleased by the great numbers of Muslim pilgrims, since they are the proof of the "power" of the saint and of Christian shrines in general: *They have faith and when they come to us we welcome them ... we read them prayers*<sup>11</sup>. Christian visitors are less enthusiastic about the attractiveness of the shrine among the Muslim population; they refer to the feast as "the Muslim feast" and prefer not to go "up the hill" that day.

After setting foot on the wharf, pilgrims prepare to participate in a series of ritual activities taking place in and around the shrine. Locals dressed for the occasion sell candles and bottles of oil set out on small tables while *faytons*, one-horse carriages which take pilgrims and tourists up the hill to the clearing just below the monastery, are queued for the pilgrims. In that clearing small stalls set up overnight offer a wide selection of votive articles and other paraphernalia day-trippers can purchase and use in order to make the most of their pilgrimage. In addition to candles and bottles of oil, there are large reels of thread, different types of small, cheap *ex-votos*, including miniature icons, sugar cubes, and the inevitable blue glass 'eyes'. Pilgrims choose according to the wish to be made ('chance', 'school', 'love', 'marriage', 'house', 'money', or 'health') and the purchased *ex-votos* will be taken to the monastery to be 'blessed' and subsequently kept as souvenirs. The thread is used right away; one end is tied to a bush at the beginning of the path and the person making the vow unreels it as they walk up the path to the sanctuary. By noon, one side of the wide footpath leading to the top of the hill is covered with thousands of parallel lines of thread. Trees and bushes lining the path are used for other votive activities; hundreds of strips of cloth or paper tissue are hanging from their branches. A third votive

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<sup>11</sup> From the church's point of view, the importance of a shrine is related to the numbers of pilgrims who visit it; early accounts of shrines mention the crowds attending them at festivals (Foss, 2002).

gesture consists of 'building houses'; on one side of the path, under trees and bushes, small stones are piled one on top of the other producing unstable miniature constructions, evoking a shelter or a hearth. A few years ago people also used construction bricks, more straightforwardly suggesting housing. They would put them on the plateau, next to the monastery walls, or along the low protection walls bordering the cliffs overlooking the sea. The assumption seemed to be that the *Rum* saint could help the pilgrim achieve the stereotypical Istanbul *Rum* social status: a well-to-do craftsman or shopkeeper, owner of his house and shop.

On feast days, pilgrims may have to queue for one or two hours before they can enter the *Catholicon* (the monastery's church) where they must very quickly to do a series of things: light a candle at the narthex, proceed into the main chapel towards the *proskinitarion*, the icon-stand which holds the miraculous icon in a glass frame, and pause before it as long as the crowds allow to say a word of prayer before exiting the chapel through its rear door. In recent years, as the masses of pilgrims have continued to grow, the priests have stopped receiving individual visitors and reading them prayers inside the church as they did up through the 1990s. The clergy's presence inside the church is more about watching over the flow of pilgrims as it moves from the entrance to the exit. New restrictions of movement in and around the sanctuary are another consequence of the massive presence of pilgrims on the day of the feast. Secondary buildings are now closed to the public on feast days for security reasons; one can no longer visit the adjacent chapels (Saint Charalambos, Saint Mary and the Saint Apostles) and, most importantly, one cannot go into the *Agiasma* (Holy fountain) situated at the back of the main church to drink water<sup>12</sup>. Outside, interaction between pilgrims and the sacred place continues: candles are lit and made to stand on nearby stones or walls; coins are rubbed against slabs of stone (if they stay stuck the vow is heard); miniature keys are 'tried' in the keyhole of the church door. All around people are praying, hands spread, palms up, oblivious of the crowds. Some people sit in groups, picnicking on the grass, while others stand looking down on the sea below.

According to the priests, Muslims come to Saint George because the saint can heal: '*Even the imam sends these people to us priests, because they (the imams) cannot heal people. They also come to the (parish) churches. Saint George is famous for his power to help for a house and for business. They come to make tamata (i.e. votive offerings)*'. Greek Orthodox churchgoers in Istanbul share the same view. In 2004, at Trinity church in *Pera*, near *Taksim*, a woman in her sixties told me: '*many people go to Saint George at Prinkipo, because he grants everything that people ask from him: a house, work, good health, he gives everything. The saint has "a good reputation" and the priests are very hospitable*'. Typical pilgrims to the island are literate women from the middle classes of Istanbul who have been brought up in the secular tradition of modern Turkey. More recent migrants from Anatolian towns and villages only go to mosques. It takes deep local knowledge and local connexions for a Muslim pilgrim to penetrate a Christian sacred place. Autochthonous inhabitants of the city, those born and raised in Istanbul, whether Muslim or *Rum*, share local ways as well as a sacred map of Istanbul. Among its important reference points are the *Ayazma* (in Turkish, from the Greek *Agiasma*, 'holyful') which are the holy fountains to be found in or near Christian churches which receive pious visitors at

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<sup>12</sup> Drinking water and taking a bottle back home is one of the traditional acts of devotion practiced in the various *Agiasma* of Istanbul. Muslims not only drink water from fountains situated near mosques, but also wash, a habit Christians consider improper in relation to Christian *Agiasma*.

certain dates and which are known for their healing powers. On Fridays one can go to Saint Mary's church at Vlachernai<sup>13</sup>, on Saturdays to Saint Dimitrios at Kurucesme, and on Christmas eve, along with Istanbul's 'high society', to Saint Antoine's Catholic church at Istiklal for midnight mass. Syncretism is part of the local culture of Istanbul, where religious communities living side by side has given rise to a long tradition of coexistence. Saint George's celebrations in Prinkipo reflect the multicultural Istanbul of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when half of the city's population belonged to the *Rum*, Armenian or Jewish 'minorities' and one in five Ottoman subjects was Christian (Alexandris 1983, Berktaç 1998, Keyder 2002). This multicultural tradition of the late Ottoman period is well documented in Millas' book on Prinkipo and its history:

*At least one a year, every family goes to the sacred mountain to visit the saint, sprinkle themselves with holy water and fill bottles with it that will be kept for difficult times. Commoners would go on the saint's day, while more important families would go to Saint George for a day-trip, where they would organize open-air parties. On important occasions, a table would be set behind the monastery, the abbot hosting the feast. The Greek newspapers of Istanbul at the time often mentioned those gatherings... there were always people on Sundays at Saint George's monastery. (Millas 1988: 484)*

This was Istanbul's *Belle Époque* that resonated with the cosmopolitanism characteristic of Mediterranean port cities where well-to-do urbanites of various religious backgrounds shared a particular lifestyle (Driessen, 2005; Ors 2006). The memory of this cosmopolitan spirit seems to be the symbolic base of syncretic practices observed in Princes Islands today.

The saint has traditionally been known to heal most illnesses and particularly mental illness. Until the beginning of the twentieth century incubation was still practiced inside the *Catholikon*; the sick were brought to sleep on its slab-stoned floor, waiting for the saint to appear in dream and offer recovery (Millas 1988: 468)<sup>14</sup>. As was mentioned above, Saint George is related to agriculture and pastoralism, protecting the sheep of shepherds as well as his own flock. In the old days, the children of the island were 'dedicated' to Saint George and referred to as 'the Saint's little slaves' (*ta sklavakia tou Agiou*). They wore bells around their necks that were like the bells hanging from the saint's armour on the main icon (hence his Greek name *Ai Giorgis Koudounas*, 'Saint George with the bells'). Millas, drawing from a number of traveller's accounts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mentions that children wore the amulet until just before they married or went to the army, both considered as *rites de passage* into adulthood. When the time came to get their freedom back, the 'little slaves' would offer the saint a candle as tall as their own height during a ceremony in which the priest read the 'liberation prayer'. Being read prayers by the priest is another devotional activity that can no longer take place during the festival; people now come on a regular Sunday to meet with the priest after the service and very few Muslim pilgrims

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<sup>13</sup> In Byzantine Constantinople the "usual miracle" at Vlachernai enabled the pious to see the Holy Spirit descending on the icon (Weyr Carr, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Saint George appears as a healer of the mentally ill both in Christian and Muslim traditions. According to Glenn Bowman, Mar Elyas monastery in Palestine is related to the nearby Saint George (Khadr) monastery, "where the mad are cured" (1993: page reference). See also Brigitte Voile on practices of exorcism in Saint George's shrines among Coptic Christians in Egypt (2004: 145). Many references to this 'specialization' of the saint are to be found in the CAMS archives from Pontos area, where the surname *deli* or *zantos* (both meaning mad) is often mentioned.

Glenn Bowman 03/10/09 09:28  
Not in bibliography; page numbers? I use page numbers when I take notes from books but not articles. If the editor insists, I'll do this when in Paris, for I have to check them manually.

attempt such a transaction. Today priests give a small bell to each of those who come to the monastery to make vows, a bell they have to return, accompanied by a offering to the church, after their vows have been granted (Brown, 1981; Chelini and Branthomme 1982, Maraval 2004, Sotiriou, 1962). Priests and monks have many stories to tell about miraculous healings involving Turks: typically they will relate how a boy was brought back to health, how a Turkish woman was healed from mental illness, or how a Turkish man came and offered the church 'a very important sum' in reciprocation for a very important miracle the saint did for him or his family.

### **Shared shrines on the Black sea coast**

The calendric importance of the dates of Saint George and Saint Demetrios is well established in the Greek folklore of Asia Minor. In some localities, Saint George stands for both and is celebrated both in springtime in a chapel in the countryside and in the autumn at the parish church. The months corresponding to the feasts were both called *Agiorghita*, the time of Saint George, in local dialect. The Greek Orthodox official calendar recognises this custom by providing two occasions for celebrating Saint George: the twenty third of April for the commemoration of his martyrdom and the third of November for the transportation of his relics and the consecration of his first church in Lydda.

Early twentieth century celebrations of Saint George in the Black Sea region are of two kinds, those taking place at parish churches in villages or towns and those related to chapels or sanctuaries in the countryside. Ritual practices associated with a town or village parish church take place on the saint's day when *Rum* parishioners gather in church, sometimes joined by pilgrims from neighbouring villages. Muslim neighbours may also attend celebrations; some documents mention 'Turks' standing by as the icon is processed round the neighbourhood. The Saint's day is also an occasion for visits across communities. Muslims visit Christian houses and are offered traditional sweets as part of an exchange system linking well-to-do families in both communities (CEAM, PO 1-3, PO 757).

Legendary miracles from Byzantine times also echo mixed practices among the elite, such as a thirteenth century story concerning the wife of a Turkish emir from Sivas who was possessed by a demon and cured at Saint Phokas shrine in Trebizond after spending the night in his church (Foss, 2002: page references).

Shared practices *per se* have not been observed inside parish churches; they take place outside parishes in the countryside, in and around Christian chapels or ruins of a pre-existing chapel, or even in 'natural' sacred spots (rock, tree, etc). Muslim presence at the sanctuaries is not considered a problem by members of the Rum community. From their point of view, Turks venerate Saint George because he is strong; he can heal but also punish those who do not respect his *sacra*. Legends from the Black Sea relate how the saint manifests himself near his shrine either to punish those who have shown disrespect to his sacred place or holy day (usually Turks being struck ill or paralyzed until they 'undo' the 'wrong' they committed by going to the priest to pray and bring offerings) or to reward with a miracle those who acknowledged his power by treating the saint well or praying to him. : *one day, a Turk went to labour the saint's field. His plough got stuck and they had to bring in a priest to celebrate to set it free.* Saint George is said to be heard riding his horse at night,, the soil trembles and his horseshoe leaves marks on nearby stones. Only pure people can see him and only those who believe in him can get well.

Black Sea ethnographic material also provides local context about the equation Saint George=*Hidrellez*. As the saint punishes those showing disrespect, Turks would also call him *Deli Hidirellez* or *Zantayertz* (Mad Saint George)<sup>15</sup>.

The Asia Minor archives in Athens contain descriptions of celebrations taking place in some fifty churches dedicated to Saint George in the Black Sea area. Seven of these accounts refer to parish churches, where the clergy and the official community institutions were in charge of the feast, which include meals offered to visitors. In some towns, Turks brought candles or other offerings (including agricultural goods and animals for slaughter, *kurban*) to churches<sup>16</sup>. In five different localities, shared practices were explicitly mentioned as celebrations taking place on April 23rd in the countryside with picnics, dancing or wrestling contests. When sanctuaries were old or abandoned, they were no longer considered consecrated and Orthodox priests were not allowed to follow their parishioners in their practices<sup>17</sup>. Many of the descriptions of votive acts performed by visitors at these sites sound strikingly like those carried out at Prinkipo today. In the countryside near Ladik, for example, Saint George's chapel had become a Bektashi shrine, attracting pilgrims from both communities:

*Saint George's day was also celebrated by Turks, they called him Hittirelez ... Turks and Greeks went there, they would tear up pieces from their clothes and attach them to the trees. Then, they would ask the saint of the tekke for grace (haris). They also took small stones or coins and would try to make them stick on stones. If they did, their wishes would be fulfilled. (CAMS, PO 965).*

#### **Shared sacra, autochthony and traditional culture**

Shared practices are one of the most striking aspects of the Byzantino-Ottoman legacy and demonstrate a specific way of living that makes room for difference. Yet this tradition has nothing to do with modern narratives celebrating a 'tolerant' and multicultural society; in Ottoman society syncretism flourished within a strongly hierarchical structure, where Greek, Armenian and Jewish minorities enjoyed fewer rights and occupied a lower social status than the Muslim majority<sup>18</sup>. In Anatolia as elsewhere, Muslims visited Christian shrines within a certain system of belief where the Christian Other is both familiar and inferior and this is why entering Christian sanctuaries implies no ritual

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. CAMS files nos PO 17, PO 41, PO 106, PO 132, PO 157, PO 679, PO 965

<sup>16</sup> Cf. CAMS, files nos PO 177, PO 757

<sup>17</sup> Cf. CAMS, file PO 83.

<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Ottoman attitudes towards religious practices follow (in time, at least) earlier traditions concerning religious mixing in the mediterranean like, for example, the Venetian system in Crete. Here the local elites adopted the dominant religion (Latin christianity) in a specific way: men became catholic while women remained orthodox. These practices did not stop after Crete was conquered by the Ottomans, on the contrary, they became a specific way of living, where a "public" and a "private" religion co-existed within the same families Green, 2000: 108).

pollution (Couroucli 2003, Mayeur-Jaouen 2002)<sup>19</sup>. This phenomenon of ‘making room for difference’ died away as Christian minorities became marginalized and finally eliminated, allowing the establishment of a modern state whose national project, based on ethnic, cultural and religious homogeneity, had no place for cultural tolerance<sup>20</sup>.

The common veneration of Saint George's holy places is one of the aspects of the cohabitation of different religious communities within the same territory and one of the expressions of the ties between men and women and their locality. The Black Sea material suggests that people across religious communities venerated sacred places that were related to legends about a supernatural being with a local, chthonic nature that lived at the edge of two worlds. I have suggested elsewhere (Couroucli, 2009) that this was possible because within Ottoman society the two basic principles of social organization, kinship and territory, had remained relatively autonomous. This fundamental separation served to protect the local society from the intervention of central authorities while allowing the existence of autonomous activities at the margins: shared holy places are very characteristically also referred to as *vakf* (autonomous religious foundations) in both Balkan and Anatolian localities (Zeggini 2001 (1996); de Rapper 2007, 2009). In folk representations, the saint stands for the unity of the local community - of ‘those who share the same blood’ (the *omoemi*), despite and beyond the organization of religious groups into separate communities<sup>21</sup>. According to the Christian legend, he is there to protect all those who appeal to him, including Muslim others and marginal peoples. The iconography represents him as both chthonian (belonging to the earth and springing from the soil, yet ready to attack creatures from the underworld such as dragons and other snakes) and as a superman, a hero warrior riding his horse across frontiers and fighting malevolent forces (punishing wrongdoers and healing the sick). It is useful to remember that in Ottoman times Christians were not allowed to ride on horseback, because they were of inferior status; horsemen if not Muslims could only be supernatural beings, permanent outsiders to the quotidian world.

Inasmuch as the Anatolian local community is not a frozen social reality, shared practices are not a single, unchanging phenomenon existing from Byzantine times until the early 20th century, even though ritual elements may remain surprisingly stable over the centuries without those who carry them out recognising their historical depth. For example, my Orthodox informants always presented the significance of the threads pulled along the footpath to Saint George's monastery in Prinkipo as obscure, assuring me that these were ‘Muslim ways’. The legend about Empress Zoe, who had conceived the future Constantine VII (913-959) by wearing a string with which she had ‘measured’ the miraculous icon of the Virgin, is obviously no longer part of local lore (Weyl Carr, 2002). Shreds of

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<sup>19</sup> The reverse situation was impossible ; members of the Empire's Christian minorities were not allowed into mosques, and the sacred places of the Muslim majority only became accessible to Christian visitors when they were converted to museums after Turkey's secularization in the 1920s.

<sup>20</sup> The process of Turkish state formation was analogous to that of the establishment of Balkan states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with similar consequences.

<sup>21</sup> On the contrast between kindred (synghenis) as a social group and blood relatives (*omoemi*, from *aima*, blood) in local Anatolian mixed villages Cf. Couroucli 2009.

cloth hanging from trees near sanctuaries are also considered 'Muslim ways' although such practices are to be observed in many places in the Balkans, Greece included.

Pilgrimage to shared sacred places in the Eastern Mediterranean is a most spectacular expression of Christian and Muslim cohabitation; nevertheless, it has remained largely ignored by anthropologists, who have focused more on "normal" (rather than "marginal") traditions in the region, thus reinforcing local national discourses about the homogeneous character of the societies they are studying. After all, national folklore also tended to dismiss those practices as 'untypical' of the 'traditional society' that was the foundation of the nation. It is precisely because of their marginality and their difference, though, that the study of mixed practices around sacred places can provide valuable clues to the common experience of people who lived "together" for centuries, in or near the Holy Land, in Syria, Egypt, Anatolia or the Balkans. How did they make it? What exactly did they share? How did they avoid conflict? Did members of the different communities "cross" the boundaries and on what occasions? What were the consequences of this "crossing" for the larger society? Did people live together or did they live side-by-side?

Recent ethnographic interest in religious practices reflects the popularity and the greater visibility of these phenomena taking place in a new context where 20th century secular traditions are becoming things of the past: post-Kemalism<sup>22</sup> in Turkey, post-socialism/neo-nationalism in the Balkans, neo-orthodoxy in Greece are some of the characteristic trends. Observing these phenomena implies addressing recent issues about multiculturalism, religious tolerance and politically correct attitudes vis-à-vis minorities, at the heart of contemporary political debate. My analysis tends to the conclusion that shared sacra do not necessarily lead to a shared religious identity; I showed above how their sacred character comes from the interaction between local human communities and holy sites: shared sacra are in fact **sacred localities**.

Maria Couroucli  
avr. 10, '10, 2:40 PM  
Added Text

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<sup>22</sup> The term refers to present-day Turkish political establishment and ideology, where the ideas of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic in 1923, are less dominant. For an ethnographic analysis of modern Turkey in relation to this heritage, cf. Ozyurek, 2006).

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