

Aya Yorgi of Büyükada: A shared pilgrimage-shrine in modern Turkey

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ABSTRACT

A Greek Orthodox Monastery, Aya Yorgi (St George), which is located on the biggest island of Princes' Islands chain in Istanbul, receives a substantial number of devout pilgrims every year – mainly on the feast of St. George (23rd April). Though at first sight, it seems to be a Christian space and a shrine, it is deemed to be a “shared sacred site” and an iconic symbol of multi religious coexistence in Turkey. It also needs to be emphasized that the vast majority of pilgrims consists of Muslim women. This paper describes the collective pilgrimage to Aya Yorgi and aims to contribute to the understandings of shared pilgrimages (with a participant observation) in the field.

Keywords: Aya Yorgi, Turkey, Büyükada shared pilgrimage.

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of shared saints and pilgrimages in the context of modern Western academia seems to have been most clearly highlighted by a British archaeologist living at the turn of the last century and carrying on research at the British School in Athens, where he came to focus on ambiguous sanctuaries in former or current Ottoman lands, mainly the Balkans and Anatolia with an additional interest in Syria and Palestine. F. W. Hasluck (1878 to 1920) surveyed his locations with a distinct eye for Turkish popular religion and the transference of sanctuaries from one religious tradition's custody to another, in addition to the cases of more constant ongoing and fluid multi-religious patronage, as in this study (Hasluck, 1929). His work *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* is the most comprehensive in this genre. From the last decades of the twentieth century to the present day, the interest in shared pilgrimage has increased, as seen particularly in the new anthropological theory of Antagonistic Tolerance put forward by Robert Hayden and *Religions Traversées: Lieux saints partagés entre chrétiens, musulmans et juifs en Méditerranée* under the direction of Maria Couroucli and Dionigi Albera

from the University of Aix-en-Provence. This work covers the practice of shared sacred places around the Mediterranean basin, from the Balkans to Egypt and North Africa with diverse forms of spatial practice, holding a multiplicity of peoples, religions, motivations, opinion, rituals, gestures, narratives, aspirations, and therefore, inevitably, a range of intentions and communal dynamics.

In this paper, I will first give conceptual information about landscape of Büyükada in Istanbul and the sanctuary of Aya Yorgi (St George) and then try to depict the general panorama of shared rituals and interreligious coexistence in and around the shrine. Then I will sketch out the main characteristics and the drastic changes in Aya Yorgi pilgrimage during the modern period, particularly as part of the transformation in Turkish society. Finally I will expand the issue of “shared shrines” by bringing to bear a “gendered” understanding on the subject of religiosity, taking into consideration the terms such as female spirituality, laïcité (secularism), religion, migration and tourism, which have essential roles in the study of new religiosities that come to surface during the pilgrimage of Aya Yorgi.

ISLAND AS SACRED LANDSCAPE

Certain natural environments have figured prominently in humanity's dreams of the ideal world: they are the forest, the seashore, the valley and the island (Tuan, 1990:247). Islands as sacred landscapes have ritual or societal advantages; access is restricted and land use can be controlled. The land may also be free of proprietorial, familial, or other claims but still part of a socially constructed image of nature. Islands easily fulfill the definition of liminal spaces and marginalization. Due to its geographical and commercial characteristics, Buyukada (Grand Island) has been also a destination for travel, leisure and relaxation. In modern times it functions like a museum in which the layers of history and tradition are preserved in physical evidences (buildings, places) and in its spiritual aura. This resulted in a considerable increase of population number which skyrocketed after the 2000s. Modern times demonstrate that Buyukada is a more desired place than it was in the past. Things are presented and explained in the old times by the use of the supernatural sustaining thus the aura of sacrality. This aura has not faded away completely in the contemporary times although the Christian population decreased in number. Modern days brought modern changes: development of transportation, commerce, and tourism. As a touristic spot in Istanbul with its beautiful nature, splendid civil architecture and romantic atmosphere, Büyükada welcomes both local and foreign visitors for the weekends and daily excursions, A beautiful natural place, preferred destination for travel and relaxation, but also as a place for pilgrimage with spiritual-religious motivations and a place where the feast of Saint George is celebrated. The relatively small island hosts tens thousands of people these days.

A HISTORY CHALLENGED BY A LEGEND: AYA YORGI KOUDUNAS OF BÜYÜKADA. THEN AND NOW

Aya Yorgi Monastery situated on the highest hill of Büyükada, with its 202 meters altitude gives the impression of bringing the earth closer to the skies as an *axis mundi*. According to the tradition, the Monastery is a little over a thousand years old, built in 963 AD, at a time when the glorious and most devout Nicephorus Phokas reigned over the Byzantine Empire. The monastery was deserted either in 1204, due to the pillage of the Christian crusaders, which left Istanbul and its surrounding region devastated; or 1302, during the pirate attack against the island led by the Venetian admiral Giustinianni, who burnt down its buildings and plundered the treasures of the monasteries. According to local tradition, during the plunder, the monks took the holy icon of St George with its innumerable offerings and buried it into the ground, covering it with the holy Altar of the monastery's church, in an attempt to avoid its robbing and desecration by the invaders. The holy icon of St George remained unharmed

for many years until its miraculous discovery. After many years of this tragic event, Aya Yorgi (St George) appeared in one shepherd's dream¹ and told him to climb way up the hill and dig in the soil where he heard bells ringing. Although the shepherd did not take this dream seriously, after dreaming the same dream three nights in a row, and climbed up to the church barefoot and in silence. What he saw in his dream became reality. As he reached closer to the top, he could hear the church bells ringing. He began to dig in that exact spot and found those buried icon adorned with a "string of bells and holy objects. Astonished, he found them as new as the day they were buried and reestablished the monastery. Ever since those bells have been given out as a blessing from the saint and performed miracles" (Millas, 2013; Akpınar, 2014).

Legend aside, by testimony of a marble epigraph over the backdoor of its sanctuary, the church was built in 1906 and was consecrated in all stateliness on September 10, 1908. The following year the belfry was built, thus concluding the set of buildings as found today (Millas, 2013). A great fire in the summer of 1986 burned down four storey cell complex that once stood on the large terrace which remains today. Nine years later the abbot house was also destroyed by fire. In 1997, the Patriarch Barthalomeos⁷ claimed that the abbot house was restored, while the church of St George, along with all the chapels and surrounding grounds, were all embellished to the state we see today (Akpınar, 2014).

(SHARED) PILGRIMAGES TO AYA YORGI AND RITUAL PRACTICES

According to the locals of Büyükada, with the participation of the Muslims in few numbers into the feast day, pilgrimage is basically started as regular visits to the church due to the beneficial and healing powers of the ayazma (sacred water) of Aya Yorgi. These visits were mostly paid by mothers and their daughters, assisted by their Christian neighbors. They used to climb the hill barefoot and ask the priest to read prayers on them just like their Christian neighbors did. It was also believed that young single girls would see the reflection of their future husbands on the water surface of the sacred well which is a cross-cultural phenomenon. However, things started to change with the dislocation of the population in the island. As the Greeks (Rums) gradually abandoned the

¹ British anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner, in their thought-provoking book *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978)¹ give structural analysis about the foundations of holy shrines and puts forward the term 'The shepherds cycle' (el ciclo de los pastores). It refers to a body of legends, current between the ninth and tenth centuries which describe the miraculous discovery of images of the Virgin Mary, mainly by shepherds, cowherds and farmers. Numerous local traditions are recorded varying in detail, but all of them exhibited a strikingly uniform thematic structure. The holy images are found in the ground by knocking a dirt clod aside, in caves while fetching a lost sheep, in ponds, in streams on islands and in trees (de la Fuente cited in Turners, 1978 p. 47)¹

island, the number of Greek pilgrims on the feast day decreased, but the pilgrimage never disappeared and towards the end of 80s and early 90s the morphology of the pilgrimage began to transform. The numbers increased again but with, interestingly, the majority of the Muslim participants that were strangers to Büyükada. Pilgrims, mainly mothers and daughters from different secular neighborhoods of Istanbul, started to replace the former Rum pilgrims.

The timing of the pilgrimage is a bit controversial. St. George's Day falls between the two configurations: it is celebrated on 23 April unless that date falls during Lent or Holy Week, in which case it is moved to Easter Monday. The specificity of the calendar gives rise to three possible configurations. According to the Church calendar, St. George's Day is celebrated on 23 April, and the pilgrims who visit the island belong, at least in theory, to both the Christian and the Muslim communities. But when St. George's Day falls before Easter, the saint's feast is not celebrated on 23 April by the Christian congregation, yet tens of thousands of pilgrims still visit the monastery because they have no knowledge of the Christian calendar. (Couroucli, 2012 in Albera and Couroucli, 2012:127).

At Aya Yorgi, though not officially defined, the pilgrims determine a starting point where the pilgrimage starts. It is the beginning of the 1 km-long challengingly steep path that combines the circus (Lunapark Meydanı) and the monastery up on the hill. This path (Aya Yorgi yokuşu) functions as a real threshold between profane (circus) and sacred (Aya Yorgi church). It is the path which the shepherd in the legend of Aya Yorgi is believed to have climbed in order to excavate the soil to bring up the holy icon of St George. This is where I believe the beginning of the threshold is and obviously liminality is manifested.

Most of the devoted pilgrims refuse to speak and they remain silent all along the path which might be a reference to the legend of Aya Yorgi, as the shepherd climbed the path silently; by listening to the sounds of the bells, they try to determine the exact place where the icon was buried. However, only the local Rums are precisely aware of the legend and link with it. Others, on the other hand, carry out this ritual unknowingly, without questioning, only accepting and obeying as it is believed to be a part of the pilgrimage. Despite the crowd, a striking silence prevails all along the way. Telling from the moves of their lips, they silently utter vows and make wishes. There is also a common belief that a true pilgrim must never look back while walking up. Otherwise, the prayers wouldn't be granted if they turn or look back. This symbolic prohibition not to look back while going up is frequently featured in the Old Testament, Sumerian, Babylonian and Greek myths. This type of prohibition on looking back is typical for the moment of separation: as with the wife of Lot² from Sodom, and in Modern Greek

folklore the bride when leaving the parents. The person who is looking back still has a tie with what is lying behind him; the prohibition therefore is a radical cut with all connections with the past. It is, to use the terminology of Van Genep, a typical rite of separation. By not looking back, the person has definitely cut through all connections with their past. It seems that this prohibition serves as a very meaningful way for total segregation and separation from previous selfness. Going forward with the aim of transition from their present status into a new one requires symbolic abandon of everything behind without looking back again, hoping to turn into a new being.

Silence is important from different perspectives, according to the pilgrims of Aya Yorgi. Apart from intensifying the awareness of the surroundings, it locks other participants out and gives a space for own reflections. For example: "I was more receptive," one pilgrim said. The shared silence makes it legitimate not to talk, but to have this time for them with the divine and be able to reflect and to go through what they need. It is fascinating to see how the pilgrims manage to stay quiet. The silence is often, but not always, preceded by a short reflection or some words of meditation. Many pilgrims do not focus on the words; instead, they see the silence as a moment to reflect on their own existential questions. Silence is also required in other church and mosque activities. The pilgrims themselves mention three reasons for their liking of silence: it gives them the opportunity to experience nature, time to think and a chance to be non-social.

Tying rags to holy objects or trees is 'a very old' custom which is still to be found all over the near and Middle East. Rags are fastened on trees, on the iron bars of windows of sanctuaries, on the door-handles of the tomb. These rags are sometimes so numerous that every inch of the iron bars of the windows and every twig of a sacred tree which can easily be reached are filled with them. They are generally fastened by visitors with one of the following intentions: 1. As a sign of having visited the maqam and fulfilled the religious duties. 2. The piece of rag acts as a reminder to the well not to forget, the visitor and his wishes.

Pilgrims at Aya Yorgi in the liminal stage, apart from the rags, tie strings from their hair or even plastic sheets on the bushes on the way up to the church. The vast majority of the pilgrims tie threads on bushes and trees at the bottom of the hill and they unreel them as they climb the path. Threads symbolize the destiny of a person. It is

was breaking, Lot's visiting angels urged him to get his family and flee, so as to avoid being caught in the impending disaster for the iniquity of the city. Lot delayed, so the angels took hold of his hand, his wife's hand, and his daughters and brought them out of the city. The command was given, "Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away." [1]:465 Lot objected to the idea of fleeing to the hills and requested safe haven at a little town nearby. The request was granted and the town became known as Zoar. Traveling behind her husband, Lot's wife looked back, and became a pillar of salt

²The narrative of Lot's wife begins in Genesis 19 after two angels arrived in Sodom, at eventide, and were invited to spend the night at Lot's home. As dawn

believed that the destiny might be strapped like a bobbin of thread, and symbolically it is possible to undo the blockage in the faith by unreeling the thread, which is a type of magical practice that aims to combat the problem by using the principle of contrast to produce effects different from the problem.

In the ongoing liminal stage, pilgrims wait in the line between the metal barricades set up by the police³ one day before in order to enter the church. The visitors are expected to watch the modesty in their dressings. Sleeveless tops or miniskirts or shorts are not allowed. After the candle lighting in the narthex with the assistance of the wardens, they proceed in the church. The gestures give away the religion of the pilgrims. Christians cross themselves or kneel in front the icons reciting prayers. Muslims on the other hand, after having a quick glance at the icons and the interiors walls of the church, sit on the narrow pews and mostly pray silently. It is also clear from the moves of their lips that they recite memorized verses from Quran (*fatihah*⁴ and so on). Then they take out pieces of papers and pens from their handbags in order to write their wishes and put in the “wish box” specially designated for it. This wish box is relatively small for such number of wishes; therefore, the wardens empty it out several times during the feast day in order open a space for these endless wish papers⁵.

“My Allah!! I am again in front of your gate. Till today you have never sent me back empty handed. Thank you my Allah. Please show the proper way to my husband (Can-his name). Keep him away from the women, alcohol and drugs. Send me a miracle. May my husband never desire to see Gülcan’s face or hear her voice again. (Gülcan the name of the woman). May he hate that woman. Turn my husband’s mind, heart and face to me. And may this Gülcan disappear.

On the pilgrimage day, food and eating behaviors turn out to be a major means of pilgrims’ segregating themselves from the others. This segregation is mostly related with their taste and capabilities to afford but it hinders the possible construction of *communitas*.⁶ Here, I

would like to refer to the distinction model of Pierre Bourdieu. With his outstanding book “*Distinction*,” published in 1979, Bourdieu set out to show the social logic of taste: how admiration for art, appreciation of music, even taste in food, came about for different groups. Bourdieu rejects the traditional notion that “tastes” (that is, consumer preferences) are the result of innate, individualistic choices of the human intellect (Bourdieu, 1984). He argues that tastes are socially conditioned and that the objects of consumer choice reflect a symbolic hierarchy that is determined and maintained by the socially dominant in order to enforce their distance or distinction from other classes of society. Thus, for Bourdieu, taste becomes a “social weapon” that defines and marks off the high from the low, the sacred from the profane, and the “legitimate” from the “illegitimate”. Bourdieu’s distinction model contradicts the notion of *communitas* in pilgrim’s process put forward by Victor and Edith Turner (1978:50). For the Turners, pilgrimages are spaces where people exist without the usual constraints imposed by modern social structures. Indeed, for them pilgrimage is a space which allows people to step out of normal everyday ruled and regulated existence. Büyükada is well known for its gastronomical richness: from a wide range of expensive fish restaurants to relatively affordable kebab houses. However, within the limits of ritual space—Lunapark square and Aya Yorgi church, the options for food decrease. There are basically two food corners: one on Lunapark square, which is less chic, and even can be counted as shabby, and the other is the acclaimed *Yüce-tepe Kır Gazinosu* located on the summit behind the church which has been servicing for over half a century. The prices are quite high, but it offers its clients a matchless sea view and a rich menu. However, a long side with these two options, only temporarily for the feast day, numerous quick food stalls help the pilgrims assuage their hunger: meatball grill sandwiches, simits, toasts, fruit salads and so on. However, many pilgrims bring their own food that they prepare one day before. They sit on the rocks around the church; they have a kind of potluck, sharing their lunch with their friends. I was also invited by some of them to join in. The pilgrims who can afford to have a “proper meal” with non-soft drinks (wine, beer and raki) eat in *Yüce-tepe Kır Gazinosu* behind the church after waiting in the long queues paying sometimes more than 200 liras for two persons; that is counted as quite expensive (50 euros in 2016).

Büyükada has manifold economic benefits where high level of economic activity is taking place during pilgrimage day. The church (from donations), local residents, shops, coffee houses, restaurants, transportation companies, hotels, pensions, people who provide.

³Aya Yorgi church officials call for police assistance for security reasons which may result from congestion. Tens of male and female police are shifting throughout the day around the church.

⁴ **Fatihah**, also called **Fatihah Al-kitab**, the “opening” or first chapter (*sūrah*) of the Muslim book of divine revelation, the Qur’ān. In contrast to the other *sūrahs*, which are usually narratives or exhortations delivered by God, the seven verses of the *fatihah* form a short devotional prayer addressed to God, and in oral recitation are ended with the word *amīn* (“amen”). The *fatihah* has acquired broad ceremonial usage in Islām: it introduces each ritual bowing (*rak’ah*) in the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*); it is recited at all Muslim sanctuaries; validates important resolutions; appears frequently on amulets, and is recited for the dead. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fatihah>

⁵ At Aya Yorgi the aim of the prayers are generally to fulfill material needs such as money, house and so on. Marriage and finding a spouse is another frequent demand of the female pilgrims. They not only pray for their own good but also for the sake of others thus prayers consists both petitionary and intercessory motifs

⁶ **Communitas** is a Latin noun commonly referring either to an unstructured community in which people are equal, or to the very spirit of community. It also has special significance as a loanword in cultural anthropology and the

social sciences. It is Victor Turner, who **defined** the anthropological usage of **communitas**.

A GENDERED PILGRIMAGE, SECULAR SPIRITUALITY?

It is essential to examine and deconstruct the broad notion of “shared shrine” and the background of pilgrims at Aya Yorgi. This is a crucial question for at least to see if it is possible to link of the pilgrimage with gender, certain groups or ideologies. Thus, in the following part, I will also deconstruct the term “Muslim or Islam or Christian” as it is too broad to be analyzed as a category; instead, I will try to scrutinize it by looking for (or rather noticing) the potentially powerful or efficacious elements that I gathered during my fieldwork in Istanbul.

Lighting candles, making offerings or collecting holy water for personal use... Such religious practices have been condemned by religious officials as ‘folk religion’, ‘superstition’ or even ‘sin’. The rejection of popular forms of religious observance has a strong gendered dimension, as it is mostly women who partake in the activities discouraged by the Church and the Islamic scripturalists, and therefore women’s religious practices that are deprecated. Tapper reported how men in the Turkish town she studied viewed the visits of women to saintly shrines ‘as verging on heresy’ (Tapper, 1990:247). Women, by contrast, give different interpretations of their behavior and resist the male-controlled, interpretation of what constitutes a proper religious act. Other scholars, too, have noted that pilgrimage should be seen as a gendered practice. In general, more women than men visit religious shrines (Dubisch, 1995). Feminist scholars like Mernissi (1977:15) have also argued that saint or shrine visitation and pilgrimage can both reinforce dominant gender patterns, by upholding ideals of femininity, and also provide opportunities for women to improve their power position and to change structural gender inequalities. It is therefore important to understand how gender is enacted and changed during such religious observances.

It would not be wrong if it is asserted that Aya Yorgi feast day hosts the afflux of “secular women”. Turkish way of secularism has always had particular reflections on female body. And especially, according to Nilüfer Göle after 1980s, with the rise of political Islam and its visibility in the public sphere, headscarf (türban) continues to carry a symbolism that is more complicated than the dichotomy of modern/non-modern. In the last two decades, Turkey witnessed the rise of Islamist movements and politics, influence in economics, parallel with a distinct Islamist female identity. Increase in the veiled women in the public sphere has been pointed out as the indicator of the rise of political Islam and Islamist groups in Turkey (Göle, 1993). However, the ways in which Islamic dress codes of modesty are understood has changed in Turkey over time. Still, the headscarf became the most visible symbol and indicator of Islamization of politics, gender relations, urban spaces and daily practices (Göle, 1997:69).

Two anecdotes from two women at Aya Yorgi imply the same point of view:

I like churches and the island itself. It is very clean really. Even the air... Some Muslims shrines however are stowed out and dirty except for Yahya Efendi on the Bosporus... The women are like bogies with their headscarves. (Sezen, female, 48)

I am a Muslim but I don’t wear headscarf. I don’t believe that it is an obligation. I don’t often go to the mosques or other shrines but when I do, I just cover up my hair with capuchin. That’s why I feel very comfortable here. (Feyza, female, 32)

Muslim seculars in Turkey mostly reject Islamic law (sharia), together with Islam. Modern Muslims consider that Islamic sharia is a nightmare. They do not want to follow any of them. They do not respect any clergy. They admit they are Muslims by origin, ethnicity by history that they have Islamic roots, but by no means has it been implied that they have to follow Islamic tradition and clergy. The only solutions to the modern world are modern international education, human rights rule of law in a secular framework, equality of men and women, unifying the global culture, a secular interpretation of the words, rational thinking, modernization of society, sexual freedom, freedom of journalism, and personal freedom. Such Muslims consider that a symbolic move towards Christians and Jews or symbolic participation to Jewish and Christian ceremonies is a message to the West that they reject Muslim fundamentalism and they have no barrier between people of different religion. And the real agenda is to embrace modernity, so they have top priorities well beyond returning to the past. In the Muslim world, regardless of its being fundamentalist or secular, there is a conflict which can become very violent between seculars who have their own vision of the modern country and Islamists who want to revive Islamic traditions.

“Let me tell you something my boy!! I am a secular women and I personally don’t feel comfortable in a mosque. The sheiks and all others poke their noses in the length of my skirt and visible hair. Ahh.. by the way.. Thank God (elhamdillah) I am a Muslim but I feel more peaceful in a church. I can pray in my own language and no one cares if I wear headscarf or not..” (Canan, female, 57)

In the world all over, we have the internet, a very free movement of ideas of faith continuously changing the mosaic of ideas and beliefs. An ordinary person in the world can be influenced by anything he sees on the internet, instantly, and people do not mind moving around, taking pictures of a Buddhist temple etc, as it is a kind of tourism. They adopt a legend, have fun, and learn new things. They do not ask what is good or what is right. He or she does not care about the contradictions. Most of the people want to enjoy life, and learn new things. They would not mind believing in Christianity for two days or Islam. The global citizen does not feel threatened. A global citizen is proud to have a multi-cultural experience.

Modernity in Turkey is implicitly associated with Christian-European values or phenomenon although almost never overtly articulated. However, once and still inside Anatolia and Istanbul, the women who wears fancy stylish clothes or rejecting the headscarf or the mean with used to be accused of being degenerated Muslims by conservatives. I believe that this perception has been accepted by the seculars (laiks) as well. Apart from bodily issues, I assume that we can hear the echoes of such a mindset related with the interpretation of certain spheres as well. Churches, for example, are the most prominent places which the modern Western lifestyles are considered to be manifested. The young Muslim warden of Aya Yorgi told me that many people asked him to show them where the confessional was because they had seen the images of confessionals in the Western movies and they want to have a picture in front of it.

The shared shrines in Turkey have the function of representing history within a modern context. The shrine helps to the deconstruction of the very idea of 'historical time', and the mothers' and grandmothers' memories come into light. A woman, who becomes an 'ideal' part of modern life, remembers her mother visiting the Aya Yorgi, for example. Many women in Turkey have cut off some of their ties with Islam due to the changes in the application or politization (lately) of Islam by the state. Their ties with the mosque are not regular as it would "require" if they were a part of a Muslim community. That is, if they have any ties. Turkey is full of holy-visiting places for the Christians as well as for the Muslims. And Istanbul is a perfect signifier of both a cosmopolitan city and a multi-pilgrimage site.

I have faith in religion (Islam). After all, I ask things from Allah so it is not important to be in the church or in the mosque. I make wishes and I visit fortune tellers, too... However It is true that I prefer to be together with the people that I resemble... That's why I fancy Büyükada. I like the elitist air of the islands... People are more modern and open-minded. For example I prefer living on the coastline of Turkey to living inside Anatolia. The people of water culture are more open-minded... Drinking and hanging out with friends or your outfit. They do not problematize such things... Liberty... And similarly I feel more comfortable at Aya Yorgi than Ulucami⁷ for example. (Duygu, female, 29)

The internal unity of the women that I had interviewed was fascinating in combining Islam and laicism in different ways. Oral history proved that these internal processes are closely related to national processes where the political regulations concerning religion directly affect peoples' lives. For example, in my interview Duygu narrated her inner processes were interwoven with her

experiences as a devote Muslim and a laicist.

ANOTHER WAY OF SHARING: SYRIACS, ARMANIANS, GREEKS AND OTHER CHRISTIANS AT AYA YORGI

At Aya Yorgi, it is possible to see different pilgrims who belong to the different Christian minority groups, especially on the pilgrimage day. This coexistence and sharing of the sacred might be due to their belonging to a certain social group which is the umbrella term "Christians" as minorities. This involves certain feelings towards, intergroup identity and to outer groups. Via their religious identity, we can understand bonds of individuals with other groups. It is namely through this coexistence that individuals give meaning to their own personal identity. Religious identity in that sense is an element of self-conception, through association with certain groups. Factors influencing their identity are among some of the things based particularly on religious and cultural practices. For the Syriacs, Armenians and Greeks (Rums) of Istanbul it is often the case that they have a strong identification with their social group specified for example by religion. Besides this, individuals make comparisons with other groups, in order to define the positive identity of their own group.

In the twenty years since its emergence, the migrant domestic workers' market in Turkey has become an intrinsic element of the urban (upper) middle class experience. While the domestic work sector was formerly a realm that attracted Turkish women of the urban poor, it has become a true labour market with the arrival of migrants originating from post-socialist countries in proximity to Turkey. As the demand for migrant labour has increased, the country has received flows from a range of places into the market, including the former socialist countries of Southeastern Europe, such as Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine and later from the countries of the Caucuses and Central Asia, such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

In ordinary days, other than the feast day, the vast majority of the Christian visitors of Aya Yorgi consist of above mentioned migrant workers (mostly Orthodox) living in Istanbul. On the day off the ones who visit Büyükada almost never return to their homes without paying votive visits for the patron saints of their homelands (As St George is the patron saint of Moldova, Georgia and Ethiopia). When the feast day falls after Easter, the ones who are actively following the liturgical calendar, also flood into the island to attend the pilgrimage as 23rd of April is a national official holiday and a matchless time to spend their day off around a saint who is familiar and reminds them of their countries. Besides venerating the saints and fulfilling their needs of a prayer, they swiftly join in and adapt to local traditions of the feast day the basic rituals of the pilgrimage,

⁷ Ulucami, the "great mosque" of Bursa. Built in early Ottoman period, in 1399

although some seem vague and strange to them.

In Moldova, we don't tie threads on the tress or tucking sugar cubes in to the hollows of the wall. That's the tradition of the Turks. But I did the sugar cube thing and walked all the way up the slope without stopping. I recited prayers dedicated to Saint George silently during this hard walk.

Some of them come to the church to ask for a divine assistance for their desperate problems. A Georgian mother states:

My son is in jail in Tbilisi... They claim that he was arrested from the crime of drug dealing. I don't know... I do not want to believe in it. I ask Aya Yorgi to bring him back to me.

The exact number of the community of Iraqi Christian refugees in Turkey is unknown, but it is estimated to be 40,000. Despite recent efforts by the EU to improve refugee employment and services, Turkey is overwhelmed by the largest refugee population in the world, and unable to provide sufficient protection services according to the Refugee Convention, including the rights to work, health care, and education, says Human Rights Watch. It is largely an urban refugee problem: 90 percent of refugees live outside of border camps, and are cut off from basic services including access to nutritious food. Outside of the 2.7 million Syrians living under a protective status in Turkey, Iraqis make up half of all asylum applications in the country, and they receive almost no support from the Turkish government.

We have been living in Turkey for two years. I work in a small unlicensed production company with my two other brothers. Today my brother and I have come here to pray Mar Gewargios (St George) to help us. We have a temporary residence permit as refugees in Turkey. We applied for Australian visa two years ago and we are still waiting. I beg Mar Gewargios to speed up our visa process therefore I made ndr (vow). I walked up the slope barefoot. We have such a tradition in Iraq too... when you ask for something from God you must make him believe in your sincerity so you must show him your faith with some challenging vows like I have done... walking the path barefoot under the rain.

Aya Yorgi serves as settings of manifestation for these female migrants' religion in their transnational migration process, providing them a significant space to live their spirituality, get together via their networks and socialize away from their homelands in the host countries. These women, mostly Orthodox Christians, often have certain expectations from Saint George, a heroic rescuer who is also the patron of the countries of almost all of them.

CONCLUSIONS

Aya Yorgi has become a site where 'power and resistance find expression'. I found out that through Aya Yorgi visits and pilgrimages, secular women resist the power of the authorities determining how to practice

Islam. Although informants were from different confessions of Christianity and expressed their diverse and sometimes contradictory views and rituals, Aya Yorgi offers a space where their worlds can converge. Against the disciplining presence of the Diyanet⁸ or 'official' Islam at the shrines and mosques by saying what is acceptable and what is not, women appeared to enjoy the greater sense of freedom of expression and the possibilities inherent in conducting their 'internal' worship or prayer in an environment free from the somewhat 'threatening' presence of males and the often judgmental male gaze. My fieldwork confirms that 'whatever the vagaries of official positions, women's worlds of custom and ritual have a vitality and resilience that continues to be fueled by their participants' search for self-expression and autonomy' (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004:344). Aya Yorgi also turned into a 'sacred' space through rituals carried out by people who separate themselves from daily routine tasks albeit briefly. Given women's manifold approaches and expectations from shrines and the variety and range of rationalizations that emerged from their accounts of Aya Yorgi, it was useful in this study to regard shrines as places of 'social memory' constructed not through hagiographic texts but more importantly by oral narratives circulating about the marvels of the saint or the space (Louw, 2007). In positing their own visits in contrast to men's mosque attendance, many Muslim women seemed to suggest that shrines are 'female' spaces, thus bringing to bear a gendered understanding on the subject of religiosity while allowing women to express their personal understanding of Islam. From group discussions and observations of women during the Aya Yorgi pilgrimage, it was possible to learn about the impact of shrine on other aspects of women's lives. How women channelize their experiences at shrines to open up spaces for greater spiritual and personal growth was evident in the accounts of women. Deriving from the rich personal narratives of some selected women, through Aya Yorgi pilgrimage women imparted greater self-confidence, while also inducing a rethinking of gender relations, connectivity with other women with similar interests and a striving for greater fulfillment in their roles as mothers, daughters, wives and professionals. I also found altered consciousness and deeper engagement spilling over into every domain of the women's lives, defying all stereotypes of women as passive recipients of religious discourses instead of being its creators.

During the pilgrimage, at Aya Yorgi as well, different groups (seculars, Muslims, Christians and new participants) do not mix with others and deliberately distance themselves from other groups and this led to factionalism though not competition. In sum, "the concept of *communitas* is of little value in explaining the essentially divisive quality of Aya Yorgi pilgrimage and I suggest that in such circumstances it is better to see *community*, not *communitas*, as the hallmark of

⁸ Directorate of Religious Affairs.

pilgrimage. I certainly do not deny that some people communicate with each other, call one another; brother or sister, but these are minor, even exceptional.

Massive Christian pilgrimage sites in Europe such as Lourdes in France, all pilgrimage is under the control of the ecclesiastic authority and there is no sharing of authority with non-Christian powers, with merchants, or with authorities of other religions. For that, pilgrims, their schedule, their gestures, the objects they take with them, are under control without a real contestation, in a context of cooperation between the Church and the civil authorities. The merchants are strictly squared out of the perimeter of the pilgrimage, in the city. However at Aya Yorgi the pilgrimage, the souvenir economy, exvoto market etc are usually less controlled entities compared to other institution driven pilgrimages Lourdes, Fatima (Portugal) or even Muslim hajj to Saudi Arabia. The relation of the shrine to the local parish and diocese is not very strict and disputes are not common.

To draw final conclusions, concerning the syncretism, at Aya Yorgi a Muslim woman's reciting prayers form Quran in a muted way can be considered a subtle form of syncretism for a temporal time. Elements of Islam (Surats) and Christianity (the church) meet for a short period of time, but they do not mingle or melt enough into each other in order to create a new form of religiosity. One of the wardens of the shrine reported that he witnessed, though very rarely, veiled Muslim women doing "namaz" in the church as they had no time to go to the mosque which is located downtown which might be a proof for a certain syncretic behavior. However the fact he ignores is that Islam permits the believers to do "namaz" in any setting⁹ even without ablution if the conditions do not permit. When the time for the obligatory prayer is too short and one cannot fulfill the conditions, then doing the prayer on time takes precedence over the conditions: whether it is a desert or a top of a mountain or a church. Another point to take into consideration is the votive offerings like strings and rags which are thought to have Islamic connotation. These offerings are mistakenly considered as Islamic by others because in textual official Islam such objects do not carry any value and rather they are perceived as superstitions. Therefore, Muslims do not unreel the threads as it is an ordered Islamic ritual but more precisely magical. They do not justify it being a religious act but a type of magic that they are even unconscious of.

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⁹Islam- conservative former president of Turkish Republic Abdullah Gül reported that he did namaz in a church when he was a student in London <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kiliseye-girip-namaz-kildim-4717734>

APPENDIX

