

Maria Koumarianou

Departement of Social Anthropology
Aegean University, Lesbos
koumarianou@yahoo.com

Cursed Sites and Cursed Practices. Treasure Hunting at Haunted Places.

A Case Study from Greece

The aim of this paper is to explain why such a widespread practice as treasure hunting is related to narratives of cursed and haunted places. The reasons are many: a) the intermingling of official and folk religious elements in Orthodox Christian tradition that also serves the Greek nationalistic idea of continuity from Antiquity, b) the existence of evil spirits gives sufficient justification to despair, failure and ill health, by aligning otherness with misfortune, c) such narratives constitute patterns of behaviour, as they offer the terms for comprehensive oral dialogue between notions of good and evil, religious beliefs and scepticism .

Key words: Treasure haunting, evil spirits, devil, black men, pig, haunted discourse, narrativity.

Introduction

As an expression of artistic oral discourse, traditions constitute a large part of folk creativity. Their main interest lies in the fact that their narratives are based mostly on supernatural powers and on the way humans conceive the visible and the invisible. Nevertheless, traditions seem to embody a share of truth, as they lie between reality and unreality.

The magical thought characteristic of such stories is inexplicable, at least for the rational researcher. The issue raised is whether the elements involved are the product of the over-fertile imagination of the narrator's poetic capacity, or whether they have a basis in reality.

In most such narrations, when there is reference to a place and its past there is likely to be a ghost story lurking in the background, ready for anyone who will listen. Furthermore, tortured souls, victims of cruel crimes, mysterious black men determined to leave their mark on the living, animals, deformed creatures and evil spirits, are all components of such stories. There are also plenty of accounts of people who have been shocked into believing in the existence of evil spirits by the appearance of such things. And there are others who, although non-believers, flock to hear these tales and to share in the experience. But tales of supernatural occurrences multiply. The evidence is the plethora of related TV documentaries and books about them. Sometimes a rational explanation is enough, other times it simply cannot be found.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that some stories are strikingly similar and have become very much like the modern urban myth, perhaps because they have been passed from person to person so many times over the years. When such a story is told, it is almost always told as something that happened to a friend of a friend, or a relative of a friend, taking place in the town in which the story is being told. The same story will undoubtedly have been told by somebody connected to the storyteller.

Current scientific interest in narratives about cursed treasures does not concern their collection and compilation, but rather an interpretative approach to their construction, their means of transmission, their degree of acceptability as well as the function of new “traditions”.

The aim of this paper is to consider evil spirits in a broad social framework regarding treasure-hunting, to analyse how these reflect particular religious representations and to explain their social role in modern Greek society.

The paper is organized in three major sections, each of which approaches the problem from a different angle and with reference to a different set of data. The first part concentrates on information gathered during fieldwork and pays attention to the common competitive narrative framing devices used in stories about both treasures and evil supernatural beings. The second part presents practices of controlling demonic spirits according to culturally specific notions of time, space, gender, number, and aesthetics. The third part is an anthropological explanation of how supernatural figures mingle with Orthodoxy in religious syncretism. The fourth part constitutes an analysis based on haunted-places discourse and its social function.

The case study is of clandestine treasure hunting, a widespread practice in Eastern Macedonia, Greece. Numerous amateur hunters try to locate hidden or lost treasures, mainly gold coins concealed by Turks before they left Greece under the terms of the Compulsory Exchange of Populations, which took place after the Treaty of Lausanne, in 1923.

The place and the people

Home anthropology is a burning issue in today's ethnological studies. The main problem the researcher encounters is whether he can remain objective and keep an appropriate distance from a community of which he is a member. Many recent studies¹ have demonstrated that the researcher studying a community in his capacity as an indigene can produce excellent results.

The most efficient way to gather raw material is what is called participant observation. This means that the researcher must stay for a certain period within the community he is studying, in order to observe, to note down, to talk and to feel relations and attitudes concerning the research in question. In this way, time becomes the most significant parameter in establishing relations based on mutual trust and confidence

The specific field research covered a vast area from Thrace (borders with Turkey and Bulgaria) to Florina and Epirus (borders with former Yugoslavia and Albania) from June 2003 to December 2005. This presentation is only a part of it and concerns only the district of Paggaios.

The district of Paggaios, where this fieldwork took place, is situated in the prefecture of Kavala in Northern Greece. It lies approximately 170 km. east of Thessaloniki, the capital city of Greek Macedonia. According to the latest census, the province has about 40,000 inhabitants, a figure that swells considerably during holiday times. The population has been shrinking due to unemployment, as has the population of most rural areas in Greece. The province is divided geomorphologically into two parts; the lowlands along the coast of the Aegean Sea and the rocky highland interior defined by the mountain range of Paggaios (approx. 2,000 m. a.s.l.). The main town is Pravi (current name Eleftheroupoli) with 3,500 inhabitants.

Mount Paggaios was once famed for its gold mines. They reached the peak of their productivity, amounting to 1.000 talents, the equivalent of 3 million euros a year, during the reign of King Philip II of Macedonia, who conquered the area and exploited the mines in order to finance his military expedition against the Persian Empire. Mining still takes place on a limited scale, as there are still small deposits of gold and silver.

According to the linguists, the word Paggaios derives from the Phoenician word *PAGA*, meaning link, as the mount range constitutes a link between the highlands of Bulgaria and Mount Orvilos that ends at the Aegean Sea.

There is also the widespread belief that Paggaios is a compound word formed from *Pan* (all) and *Gaia* (land), meaning "the land of everything". This explanation is due to the precious metals that once abounded in the area. The etymol-

¹ El. Alexakis, *Identity and otherness. Symbols, relationship and community in Greece and the Balkans*, Dodoni, Athens 2001, 181-215 (in Greek). V.G. Nitsiakos, *Folklore compilation*, Odysseas, Athens 1997, 271-307 (in Greek).

ogy of the word and its history are sufficient, I think, to explain the proliferation of stories, legends and myths of lost or hidden treasures in this region.

The overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the province are involved with agriculture. Emigration, mainly to Germany during the 1960s and 1970s, was a necessity. In recent years, many emigrants have returned and introduced a mode of life that could be found only in Athens or in big cities, established with funds earned abroad.

Pravi and the surrounding villages lie off the highway linking the capital of the prefecture, Kavala, with Thessaloniki. It is a place that combines the slow pace of urbanization with an intense adherence to tradition. Development has been tardy and the social face of the district has not altered significantly over the years. Pravi is also characterized by tight community bonds based on solidarity, mutual assistance and exchange of information. These are the main reasons why oral tradition and narrations still persist. Although education has assumed an important role and higher education has increased job opportunities, people still remain traditional in their way of living and thinking.

Most of the people in this study are originally Asia Minor Greeks, a population long established in that part of the Ottoman Empire now known as Turkey. It is impossible to understand the particular circumstances of the stories without reference to the history of the region of origin.

Asia Minor Greeks were uprooted as a consequence of the conflict of Greek and Turkish interests at a time when each country was being reshaped in the aftermath of the First World War and was establishing its present political boundaries. The outcome of the war between Greece and Turkey was the compulsory exchange of populations, an unprecedented measure stipulated by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Thus, over the next two years a further 1,500,000 Christians moved from Asia Minor and Thrace to settle in Greece, and about 350,000 Muslims were compelled to leave Greece to settle in Turkey.² Hopes for a speedy return were uppermost in their minds and at this time there was little reason to suspect that repatriation would not be possible.

Conditions of field research.

Eastern Macedonia has a wealth of stories and legends of hidden Turkish treasures. Not surprisingly, it attracts a constant flow of treasure hunters from all over Greece and sometimes from the neighbouring countries. I contacted many of them, who allowed me to assist in clandestine excavations or to trace paths and marks carved on the rocks. Although these expeditions are shrouded with suspicion and secrecy, I managed to gain the confidence of many treasure hunters because I had been recommended by the administrator of the website *www.coinsmania.gr*, the

² R. Hirschon, *Heirs of the Greek catastrophe*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1989.

“official” meeting and information exchange point of the treasure hunters of Greece. The fact that I was a scientist, furthermore a woman, who carried out research and asked no questions about money they found, made many of them willing to answer my questions, although others tried to make me reveal information that they thought I was hiding.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the data used were collected by a variety of techniques: the primary method was that of focused interviews. Both fixed answers and open-ended questions were used, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, thus enriching the research.³ The paper relies heavily on the analysis of the interviewees’ qualitative answers. Following the approach of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton,⁴ I grouped responses of similar reasoning in the same category. The data confirmed the existence of the widespread belief in haunted places, cursed treasures and exorcising practices.

The sample comprises 45 persons, both men and women. Table 1 shows sample composition according to gender and age, and Table 2 according to gender and education level.

Table 1: Sample composition based on gender and age

	Men	Women	Total
Under 35	4	2	6
35 to 55	15	3	18
Over 56	17	4	21
Total	36	9	45

Table 2: Sample composition based on gender and educational level

	Men	Women	Total
Primary school	5	3	8
Obligatory education	7	3	10
High school	22	3	25
University	2	-	2
Total	36	9	45

³ J. Zeisel, *Inquiry by Design: Tools for Environment-behavior Research*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1991.

⁴ M. Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, E., *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981.

I also engaged myself in participant observation and documented visual observations with photographs. I looked at the existing bibliography and I solicited data from the Municipal Library of Pravi and the Hellenic Folklore Research Center of the Academy of Athens.

Treasures and Greek legislation

According to the *Vassilika*, the Byzantine set of laws (entry, Enc. Larousse, vol 10), a *treasure* (Gr. *θησαυρός*) is “*money put aside and neglected*”. Today, when we talk about treasures, we imply mainly a hoard of coins, regardless of metal, value and date of production.

According to the Greek legislation, coin finds dating before 1453 (the Fall of Constantinople) are considered antiquities and part of the Greek heritage, and belong entirely to the Greek State (Official Gazette, no. 153/28 June 2002/vol. 1, art. 7). Whoever tries to steal, hide or sell part of them is considered an illicit dealer in antiquities and has to face the legal consequences of his actions. This is an axiom for all treasure hunters, who avoid even telling whether they have found something ancient or not. The treasures dealt with in this study date from the period between 1800 and after the Second World War. They consist mainly of:

- a) Turkish gold coins dating from before the period of the Greek War of Independence (1821) until 1912, when northern Greece was incorporated in the Greek State. It is mainly money gathered by tax collectors on behalf of the Turks, stolen by rebels and hidden in many places. The chief rebels used to carve marks on the rocks or to draw sketches. According to legends, they slew the diggers, so that they could not reveal the secret place where the hoard was concealed. That is why most of these treasures are considered cursed, as the slain person’s blood asks for revenge.
- b) Hidden money and jewellery belonging to Turks compelled to abandon Greek territory and move to Turkey, after the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). These items are mainly hidden inside their former houses (between the beams, under the wall, in the chimney), as the owners thought they would be able to come back one day, either to retrieve their treasures or to resettle. These treasures are found quite by chance as old houses collapse, or when new occupants refurbish the houses, or because the former neighbours were acquainted with the situation and took the money before the owner or the heirs come back. The majority of them are considered spellbound with terrible curses that only entitled persons can unbind.
- c) Hidden money from the period when the Bulgarians occupied eastern Thrace and Macedonia during the First and mainly the Second World War (1941-1943), as German allies. These treasures consist mainly of looted items wittingly hidden. Bulgarian codes have not been deciphered yet.
- d) During the German Occupation, the Jewish community of Northern Greece was virtually exterminated. Before the Jews were taken to the concentration camps,

most of them managed to hide their valuables, binding them with terrible curses. These treasures are to be avoided, as they may even cause the death of the seeker.

Presented here are the results of research in the district of Paggaio in the prefecture of Kavala. The research focuses on “cursed” treasures dating from the period of the compulsory exchange of populations, that is 1923-1925.

Treasure hunting

Hunting for lost treasure has always fascinated people. Well known is the myth of Eldorado, the intriguing land of gold, which lured many into the quest for a chimaera. If treasure hunters in Greece were to choose a symbol of hope and wealth, a good-look charm, this would surely be the cornucopia, since ancient times a symbol of abundance and riches. And this because the widespread practice of seeking easy wealth is in reality an expensive and dangerous process. That is why treasure hunters try to eliminate risks of failure as much as possible. One way of achieving this is to have as much accurate information as possible.

“A serious hunter never relies on rumours or gossip. He must always be well informed and prepared. The best way to do so is by studying the history of the place where he is going to dig and by using an appropriate map. But mind not to buy all the rubbish circulating among the ignorant. There are many duplicates that have been altered in order to lead to the place where the treasure is located, but not to the exact spot. That means that the buyer has to appeal for help to the seller and consequently the seller will ask for a portion of the treasure. Real maps are very rare. They are usually stolen from monasteries or archives, or found by chance inside old books or furthermore are parts of diaries. I know people that have spent a whole fortune on a fake map, believing it was a real one.” Thanassis, 53, shop-owner

Another way to start research is to collaborate with other hunters and to crosscheck information and data. For instance, on excursions into the countryside many people come across marks carved on the rocks. Sometimes these are part of a puzzle that leads to a secret location. In order to verify their information, they exchange clues and data: in older times this was done orally, today in a more sophisticated way, such as through the treasure hunters’ “official” website www.coinsmania.gr.

Although concrete information is the best way to start investigations, numerous people told of dreams in which they were shown where a treasure, usually a hoard of gold coins, was buried.

In these dreams the person who reveals the treasure is a Black Man (Arapis).⁵ Possibly the correlation of the treasure with the Black Man is based on the latter's origin from the East, which was always considered synonymous with wealth (Cf. The Three Magi with the gifts, Aladdin's lamp, etc.). Very often Black Men are confused in traditions with Turks or Saracen pirates.⁶ The activity of the last in relation to the plundering of the islands and the coastal areas of the Mediterranean, and consequently the acquisition of riches and the dark skin ascribed to them as a basic characteristic, permitted the reciprocal borrowing of traits that make up similar types in folk imagination.

"I usually take ultra-violet photos in order to see if something wrong is going on. Have a look at this one! I think it is very obvious. The black man standing by the tree didn't exist in reality! Only with this camera was I able to capture him. He is the guardian of the treasure. A black man! ("enas arapis"). I am not supposed to tell anybody about this. But I trust you and as long as this black man stands there, I am not going to take the money. I have to find out how to unbind the spell!" Costas, 51, ex-sailor.

As we know, silence and secrecy are characteristics of communication with the divine or the devil, and often function as constraints, in order to secure the effectiveness of an act of communication with them. In the narrations the Black Man is presented as a devil, guardian or owner of the treasure, whose domain is trespassed upon by the invading treasure hunters. This entails the transcendence of boundaries, something which becomes threatening, if not hazardous, for the perpetrator. That is why certain rules must be observed, in the form of conditions whose violation is punished exemplarily. Sometimes again, revelation is part of the activity of certain malevolent spirits whose aim is to tempt and to harm men. I cite the following narration:

"I was about ten. One day I was with my elder brother and a friend in our father's workshop. My father is a shoemaker. I was squatting, listening to the old talk. Suddenly, a shadow appeared behind my brother and after a few seconds it took the form of my late grandfather, Christos. I welcomed him, although the others seemed shocked at hearing me talking to nobody. You see, I was the only one who could hear and see him. Then, my grandfather told me that under the place where I was squatting he had buried gold coins. As you can easily realize, neither my father nor my brother believed my story, but as I kept on insisting they finally decided to dig at the spot I pinpointed. Furthermore, they asked a local medium to come and assist. They promised him a high reward, in order not to reveal the secret. They dug for two hours and found nothing except a broken pot. During all this time my

⁵ N. Politis, *Traditions*, vol. 1,2 Grammata, Athens, 1904, 230 (in Greek). G.Megas, *Issues of Greek Folklore*, Athens 1975, 105 (in Greek).

⁶ St. Imellos, *On folklore*, vol A', Athens 1988, 108 (in Greek).

grandfather was present, although invisible to the rest of the people. My father, really upset, told me to ask my grandfather again about the place. But when I raised my eyes towards him, and before articulating a word, he turned into a black figure with red eyes. I screamed in terror and the medium understood that it was an evil spirit disguised as my grandfather. He started reciting incantations and the Creed. The black man made a terrible sound and disappeared. The sound was heard by everyone. It was the Devil who wanted to tempt us all.” Dimitris, 47, confectioner.

In most cases the only condition for claiming possession of this treasure was to find the exact spot and to excavate it without telling anyone. If even a word is spoken regarding these treasures, they immediately turn to ash. That no such treasures have ever been recovered may be testament in itself to the rapidity with which even only potential miracles become public knowledge.

“We were very unlucky because my wife, who insisted on coming with us, got scared, screamed, and the treasure turned into ashes. I’ll never take her with us again.” Lakis, 39, farmer.

Another condition is associated with the sacrifice of an animal or with the donation of part of the treasure for charity. Usually the treasure hunters fail to keep one of these conditions or forget a detail, and as a result they gain nothing or, as is believed, the treasure turns to ash or coal.⁷ In a traditional society based on the exchange economy, reciprocal honouring of promises and slow development, the host of conditions and restrictions makes the conquest of a new domain or change almost unfeasible.

Places where treasures are hidden and *genii loci*

Treasures, coins and so on, are usually hidden in places that remain inalterable over the years, such as chapels, crevices in rock, streams, caves, etc.⁸ These places are usually marked with signs that are sometimes transferred to paper. Very often these marks are apotropaic or warn of the danger involved if somebody attempts to trespass.

“I was looking for loot buried by the Bulgarians. I had a map with me, which indicated the right point. It was of a Bulgarian whose father was in the occupation army that had made the looting. It consisted mainly of jewels taken from executed civilians. The place was in a cave, hidden behind a small waterfall. We managed to get to the entrance of the cave. One of our trackers realized there were strange

⁷ D. Damianou, *Folklore narrations*, Society for the Cyprian Studies, 2005, 184 (in Greek).

⁸ Ch. Stewart, *Demons and the Devil*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1991, 151.

marks at the entrance. There was the depiction of a heart and of two parallel lines with a spot between them. I was not familiar with such marks, but my Bulgarian friend scared me by telling that these were marks of hidden traps and spellbound money. I didn't believe him of course. But I entered the cave second. When the tracker entered first, the roof collapsed and hurt him. He had accidentally stepped on the trap lever and activated it. We took him with us and made him swear he wouldn't say anything. A week later, the Bulgarian was run down by a car, the tracker's father died and I lost my job. Not long after, my car was seriously damaged. Although I know now the exact place of the treasure, I don't think I'll go there again." Sakis, 39, private employee.

The fact that most treasures are hidden outside the safe bounds of the community and that their discovery demands secrecy and activity in nocturnal hours, very often links these places with the existence of evil spirits.

These usually appear at, and seem to reside in, outlying places, such as caves, wells, springs, water sources and rivers where treasures are likely to be hidden. Demons and phantoms intermingle, borrowing formal features from one another, expressing or representing values and powers. Moreover, most of them involve death, either directly or by prediction, and this function seems consistent with their identity as emissaries of the Devil.

"It was about five years ago when this incident happened to me. You know that in our town (Pravi) there were many Turkish families that were obliged to abandon the place after 1922. But believing they would come back one day, they took their time to hide in secret places all those valuables they were afraid to carry. These places could be wells, walls, mills, holes in the ground, etc. Among them there was the family of Barut. My late father knew him very well, for he had been employed at Barut's mill as a worker. Ishmael Barut was powerful and quite rich, as they said. Before leaving, for they feared for their life, Ishmael Barut told my father that he would hide a hoard of gold coins somewhere in the mill, for he was afraid thieves might attack them on their way to Turkey. My father was very honest and he never mentioned the fact to us – until before he died of course. But to be frank, I think he was a bit afraid of the Turk. You know these people deal with witchcraft, their religion has to do with magic and they know many curses to bind their money. Anyway, to make the long story short, five years ago, as I've already told you, a Turk came to our town and asked about where Barut's mills used to be. He had papers with him proving that he was the owner of the mill. His family name was Barut too. He came with a band of four other persons, who didn't look so good to me. I suppose he had come to pick up the money his grandfather had hidden. The rumours spread quickly and as I already knew where the mill used to stand, I decided to go there and dig with two friends. Thank God, a friend warned us that the coins

might be “read”, that means “cursed” (spellbound). That’s why I found, the night before Barut and his gang start digging, a medium who knew about spells, and he came with his Solomoniki. The mill was at the foot of a gorge. There was nothing left but a wall and part of the roof. The whole structure had collapsed over the years. We had a rhabdomancer (dowser) with us, who pinpointed a spot near the rock. It was very dark, there was nobody else there. The medium made a circle with a knife on the ground and told us not to step out of it. We were four altogether, including the dowser and the medium. The medium was convinced that the money was cursed. That’s why he started to read the Solomoniki, to protect us from the evil. My friend had his gun with him, in case Barut and his friends might come earlier. I forgot to tell you that I had a small Bible with me and my wife had made me drink a sip of holy water. You never know, anyway!

When I started digging at the spot the dowser had indicated, something strange happened. It was a calm night, not very cold. Suddenly a cold wind started to blow, sounds like screams were heard. And then a black, barking dog attacked us. We all said “Panagia mou” (“My Virgin Mary”), while I was reciting the Creed. My friend, the one with the gun, fired a shot. The dog disappeared with no trace of blood. The medium was pale and trembling. He continued the incantations. I kept on digging while the wind was becoming colder and colder. Finally, I heard a deep sound. My shovel had struck an iron chest. It was rusty and easy to open. Inside there was nothing but coal. I knew we shouldn’t have talked while digging. That’s why the gold was transformed into coal.

An hour later, we left the place. Would you like to know what happened to the others? My friend with the gun died 3 months later of pneumonia, so they said. In fact, it was the spell that killed him. The dowser disappeared from our village. It is said that the Turks killed him for having revealed the exact spot. As for me, I’m sane, but to be honest it was the Bible and the holy water that protected me.” Vassilis, 77 years old.

Demons have a preference for uninhabited space or abandoned places. Numerous accounts express the conception that evil spirits dwell in matter or in nature. Both cases apparently rest on the common assumption that there is an elemental *genius loci*⁹ that requires a human sacrifice in recompense for allowing research. For instance, one outlying area of the village is said to contain precious lootings. Spirits are said to transport the lootings from place to place, to prevent these being found. Black Men (*Arapides*) act as servants and do most of the work.

⁹ El. Alexakis, *A strange tradition of a dragon killing from Laconia*, Laografia 33, Athens 1985, 93-104 (in Greek).

Abandoned houses are also thought to have spirits, and one should make the sign of the cross if danger is anticipated.

“My vineyard is between Ofrynio and Galipsos. Next to mine, there is a smaller one with a cottage in the middle. There’s something wrong going on there, for late at night there is light in the window and voices are heard. The cottage is inhabited. I think it must be haunted”. Marika, 57, housewife.

Apart from black men, a host of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic creatures feature in the narratives. The Devil usually assumes the guise of an animal. It has a predilection for dogs and horses (fierce dogs with red eyes and white horses), although it may take the form of a reptile or a vulture.

However, the goat is the main metamorphosis of the Devil. That is why when things go awry, in case of illness or bad luck, it is said that “the Devil stuck in his tail”, insinuating a demonic intervention. Billy goats are one of the classic forms assumed by the Devil. The representation is supported in the New Testament as well as by the iconographic convention of representing the Devil with caprine features.¹⁰ Goats are not always seen; sometimes only a bell is heard, as in the case of a young man.

“I knew something was wrong when we arrived at the place. I’d been told that it was haunted, but I didn’t believe them. Anyway, on my way there, I heard all the signs of the presence of the Devil: a dog barking and a bell ringing. Thank God I had a small Bible with me, and the most important, a cross made by the monks of Mount Athos. But I didn’t go further. I simply returned home. I’m still poor, but still safe.” Lefteris 29, farmer.

The pig is another animal associated with supernatural powers and treasures.¹¹ Symbol of fertility and uncontrolled strength, the pig has been linked with buried treasures and good luck. In particular, the linking of the sow with buried treasures should perhaps be sought in her fecundity, with large litters of piglets, combined with her significant place as a domesticated animal in farming societies. Stories about sows appearing suddenly, followed by their piglets, or about representations of the animal carved on the rocks are numerous. However, as the sow appears and disappears in a trice, it is impossible for anyone to follow her. Thus, she remains in a way a symbol of unattainable wealth.¹²

Since the pig lives in dirty conditions, it is very often associated with spiritual decadence and sin. The pig is mentioned as one of the forms the Devil takes in order to destroy man, and for this reason an encounter with it is believed to have

¹⁰ Th. Provatakis, *The Devil in the Byzantine art*, Thessaloniki 1980, 240 (in Greek). Ch. Stewart, op. cit., 104.

¹¹ N. Politis, op. cit., 514-517.

¹² D. Damianou, op. cit., 192.

catastrophic consequences. Characteristic is the narration of Babis, the 63 year-old owner of a small factory:

“The story I am going to tell is true. I swear it. It happened to my brother-in-law some twenty years ago. We had information about gold hidden in an abandoned house outside Podochori. The place was deserted and the digging would be a piece of cake. Only we didn’t know the exact spot. It was almost midnight when we arrived there. It was pitch dark. We started looking for signs when my brother-in-law saw a hog plodding. He was sure the animal had escaped from a shed and he decided to take it with us. He followed the animal into the nearest forest, trying to catch it. When he entered among the trees, the hog attacked him. He fell down trying to escape. The hog bit him several times. My brother screamed, I came to his rescue, but when I arrived there the hog disappeared. We returned home, and for fifteen days he stayed in bed and sent his wife every evening to the church to order liturgies in order for him to recover. It was the Devil. I swear it. We should never go there and try to steal the gold!”

The threat of the sow, as well as of other creatures, creates prohibited zones in certain places, as the informants themselves found out. Some people take advantage of this common fear to steal, making possible witnesses believe that they might be some sort of devils.

Apart from haunted or cursed places, attacks attributed to evil spirits sometimes occur unexpectedly elsewhere. In numerous other cases, the spirits simply strike those who are in the wrong place at the wrong time. This may in itself be regarded as a general warning to people to stay within certain socially accepted temporal and spatial boundaries.

“Our neighbour lost his voice one night, when he went out very late. We understood he stopped at a crossroad to rest, and there he was attacked by demons.” Heleni and Maria, 61 and 63, pensioners.

Another informant was beaten up by demonic forces when he went to dig for treasure. He returned in a state of shock and did not utter a word for a whole month. After he recovered he never wanted to narrate his adventure. One should not speak, he said, because the demons might steal one’s voice.

Another story is told of a man who agreed to dig in a graveyard. He said that while digging he felt that someone had grabbed hold of him by the leg. He panicked and tried to run, but he froze, unable to move.

Counter and protection measures

Talismans, symbols, incantations or sayings, amulets and guns, small Bibles and holy water are all used as apotropaic measures considered efficacious against the Devil.¹³

Sometimes apparently inoffensive places are bound with terrible curses, as a means of keeping trespassers away. It is said, for instance, that at Kipia, a small settlement of 150 inhabitants, a Turk had been murdered in order to reveal where he kept his money. When his wife came home and saw her husband's slaughtered body, she cursed the villagers and fled. The money is still buried but no one dares to approach the rather peaceful orchard in which the couple's house used to stand. The old woman in the village who narrated this event to me claimed to "remember" them, as if she had been present. Someone who knew how to read the Solomoniki (a magical text that enables one to assemble and command demons) tried many times to dig in the yard, but he was always attacked by demons.

"This site is cursed and I've no idea how to make the demons depart. Even priests are afraid to go there, and many times we listen to chains rattling or screams coming from the old house. Only a bishop who knows more can exorcise the demons with the right words and command them to leave." Eleni, 83.

Language is an absolute and powerful weapon against the evil spirits and forms an important model for incantations. Often the force of incantation is not to make the demon depart, but rather to make it reveal its name or its secret, thus surrendering itself to the control of the sorcerer.¹⁴

There are also many stories about treasures buried by rebels or plunderers in caves. Many treasure hunters look for these treasures, some of which are very valuable. But a lot of them also believe that precautions should be taken, as witnesses to the burying were murdered to prevent them revealing the place. Their blood asks for revenge and their soul prowls near the cave. In order to take the treasure without succumbing to a disaster, one must scatter ashes all around the place the night before, and the next morning one must sacrifice the creature whose footprints have been left on the ash. In this way the soul of the murder victim will be pacified.¹⁵

However gory they may sound, there are rumours about people who vanished mysteriously after a night out, as they had accidentally stepped on the ash. I have been told that in most cases cocks, cats, dogs or other domestic animals have been sacrificed instead to "the gold fever".

¹³ N. Politis, op.cit., 503.

¹⁴ Ch. Stewart, op. cit., 214.

¹⁵ I. Baïbakis, *Lost treasures in Greece*, Archetypo, Thessaloniki, 2005, 63-65 (in Greek).

Nevertheless, the best way to deal with cursed or haunted places is witchcraft. No matter how backward it may seem, witchcraft is believed to endow the individual with specific powers.

A controversial issue is the person of the sorcerer. The witch, who in most cases holds the ambivalent role of being both a member and an enemy of a given community, is represented by an image that is itself informed by various sorts of symbolic inversion. Many wizards are said to be Jews. Jews are particularly welcome when they have to deal with the supernatural. As they have not been baptized, they can be either especially vulnerable to assault by demons or in particular connivance with them.¹⁶ Thus, we must not focus only on the witch or on witchcraft, but to situate these phenomena in the wider context of moral concepts.

Demonology within a Social and Religious framework

In my capacity as an anthropologist and not as an expert on analysing theological matters, I shall attempt to make clear how the existence of devils and spirits fits into the Orthodox Christian set of beliefs.

In order to understand cursed and haunted places as well as the existence of spirits and demons, it is important to mention Greek society's notions of space and place.

In Greek cosmology, space consists of two opposed and clearly divided entities: inside and outside. The same dualistic conception governs the domain of religion. The Orthodox Christian moral world emerges as a battlefield in which Good struggles against Evil. The human position is between good and evil.¹⁷ As a reflection of this continuous struggle, space presents the same dichotomy, being divided into two distinct worlds: The well known, sanctified space of the human settlement where the presence of God is marked by the construction of a church in the middle of it. The unknown, dangerous space inhabited by evil spirits and demons, where appropriate protection is needed.

Human settlements constitute ringed entities encircled by a protective force. The circle is evidently very deeply rooted in Greek culture.¹⁸ Its apotropaic power derives from the way in which it creates two distinct spaces: the interior corresponds to inhabited, sanctified space, while the area outside is conceded to the demons that bear misfortune and disease.¹⁹ This is the reason why treasure-hunters usually etch a circle into the ground around themselves using a black-handled. In-

¹⁶ R. Blum and Blum E., *The Lore of Crisis and Mystery in Rural Greece*, Archetypo, Thessaloniki, 2005 ("*The dangerous hour*", translated from the English by Argyro Patsou-Veloudou) (in Greek).

¹⁷ J. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, Clarendon, Oxford 1964, 332.

¹⁸ Ph. Lagopoulos, *The sky over the earth*, Odysseas, Athens 2003 (in Greek).

¹⁹ Ch. Stewart, op. cit., 167.

side this circle one should carve the sign of the cross. This action effectively creates a replica of the ringed village with its central church.²⁰

Just as there is variety of spatial locations, there are variables also conveying the meaning of social outsiders²¹ to explain why the concept of Black Men is so popular with treasure hunters.

The Black Man is connected with the myth of the foreigner/stranger (Gr. *xenos*) (Turk, Saracen, Algerian). Most times this foreigner/stranger has harmful designs on the whole: well known are tales of pirates attacking and plundering coastal areas. Other “foreign” figures, such as that of the Jew or the sorcerer, play the same role. In these cases they are individuals belonging to the community, but who are regarded with suspicion and fear, particularly because they are different and have special abilities. Fear and distrust of such individuals, but at the same time respect for their powers, spatially situates these two categories of persons among those who are in an intermediate state: among “ours” who, however, are socially “from elsewhere”.

As far as the Orthodox Church’s view is concerned, the imagery of the Devil was formulated in the patristic period, before the Schism. The Greek popular traditions seem to have influenced the Church view. Apparently, the particular imagery of the Devil made perfect sense to the Greeks, after their conversion to Christianity, on the basis of existing concepts. In Classical Greek tradition there were evil spirits of the sheepfold and chthonic deities such as Pan, the Satyrs and the Sileni. This is perhaps the reason why certain diabolical features, such as goat horns and feet, were mentioned in the New Testament. Meanwhile, the satyrs that were drawn upon in the construction of the Devil continued to form part of everyday local belief throughout the Greek-speaking world. These same creatures that funded the Greek conception of the Devil similarly borrowed their characteristics to spirits and demons.²²

Furthermore, for Greek folklorists of the previous century, who tried to build up national consciousness based on the continuity of cultural tradition, both Christian and pagan elements, even though opposed, were regarded as indicators of Greek identity. Paradoxically, the existence of such spirits speaks for a cultural identity that links Greeks with their ancient ancestors but on the other hand contradicts a fully Christian identity.

But what is the meaning of the diverse forms these demons assume? Apart from the symbolic values of certain animals (goat, wolf),²³ these horrific, zoomorphic compositions characterize *monstrosity*. The monstrous is whatever the society considers to be strange, suspicious or non-aesthetic. In other words, they are

²⁰ Ph. Lagopoulos, *op.cit.*, 171

²¹ J. Campbell, *op. cit.*, 316. M. Herzfeld, *On the Ethnography of “prejudice” in an Exclusive Community*, *Ethnic Groups* 2, 1980a, 283-305.

²² Ch. Stewart, *op. cit.*, 149.

²³ K. Matzouranis, *Traditions of Kynouria*, *Laografia* 4, Athens 1913, 470 (in Greek).

representations of Otherness. The monstrous creatures are “not us”. Their images align misfortune with the misshapen. This antithetical imagery makes perfect sense once it is considered that health, successful marriage, good fortune come from God. In daily life these values are protected by the Christian holy figures, themselves representations of human ideals.²⁴

As my informants strongly insisted that these events and effects were felt in practice, in reality, the important point is that supernatural powers are experienced as real if one believes. The reason to believe or not is the way in which individuals cope with the difficulties and contradictions of everyday life. In such social environments where an individual feels omnipotent within the confines of the community, since his social environment itself supports his decisions and reduces the consequences of his mistakes, this same individual outside his social boundaries and with a limited field of influence, seeks in extraneous factors the causes of his misjudgement, his misfortune or his failure. When objectives and positive ideals are not achieved or situations of suffering and ill health occur, misfortune may be attributable to the intervention of external evil powers. If the technological advances removed the evil spirits from the surface level of daily discourse, the ideological space they have occupied for so long would suddenly cease to exist and must be replaced by something different.

On the other hand, scepticism about the effectiveness and hence the real threat of such malevolent forces began to overtake fear. While the Church authorities fulminate against sorcery or witchcraft as enemies of God, the law makers and enforcers have gradually come to the conclusion that there is no connection between misfortune and evil spirits of witchcraft, as believed in past years, and that the practice of witchcraft itself, could not cause physical harm or death.

Haunted discourse and narrativity, and its social role

The district of Paggaios combines a tardy pace of urbanization with rural, traditional structures. Thus, development is slow and the social physiognomy of the place has changed little over time.

In such a space, the social groups display more or less similar social characteristics, so that the narrations refer to common experiences. Furthermore, this space and way of life ensures a continuity through time, to the extent that it constitutes the same frame of reference for about one hundred years. This space also facilitates the development of interpersonal relations, which in their turn facilitate the gathering of information.

In the course of my research, seeking people who would tell me of their encounters with the supernatural, I ascertained a great difference in the way in which the issue was confronted by males and females, as well as differences related to educational level and age.

²⁴ Ch. Stewart, *op. cit.*, 249.

One would expect the “educated”, that is those with a university degree or even a high school certificate, to consider these tales fanciful and figments of the imagination. However, among the 27 individuals I interviewed in this category, only 4 gave a negative reply to the question: “Do you believe in the existence of spirits and cursed treasures?” My impression is that their degree or certificate was no more than a status symbol among their fellow villagers. The villagers feel the same uncertainty and lack of control over aspects of their life as their grandparents did. The existence and activities of such malevolent beings are sufficient and even necessary to justify loss and pain, despair and misfortune.

As far as gender is concerned, females had an attitude of credulity towards the content of the stories and they were more willing to speak about them. Furthermore, when present at interviews with males they accepted completely what their husbands’ recounted. On the other hand, the distance from the narrations could be detected in vague expressions, imprecise definitions of time and place, and in the female narrator’s limited affinity with the events being told: “I wasn’t there, but the man who told me is reliable” (Bennet 1996).

The men were less sceptical. Indeed, there were some who willingly told tales that included supernatural creatures, but without insisting particularly on whether their narration sounded plausible or not. In fact, many of them were convinced of the truth of the events and, as they said to me,

“If you believe in God, you believe in the Devil. God exists to fight against Evil”.

The villagers aspire to modernity and accordingly show a reverence for rational, scientific explanation. They are acutely aware that beliefs in evil spirits and demons are seen as signs of backwardness. For fear of appearing so to me, sometimes explicitly and sometimes through the narration they defined themselves and rejected part or all of their tale:

“There might have been evil spirits in the old days. Then people believed in them a lot and were afraid of them. Today there is nothing. Nor does one die because of them”.

On the other hand, when the story they were telling referred to experiences of close relatives, then they were far more willing to accept the existence of the supernatural element. It is worth noting that those who wanted to confirm the truth of the events used as evidence the behaviour of animals, usually of a dog, implying that their acute sensitivity made them recipients of supernatural stimuli.

In general, these tales were told after supper, when the family, friends and neighbours gathered around the table to exchange the day’s news. I was assured that these stories were one of the favourite subjects for narrating and listening to, especially because they concerned members of the community.

I was interested not only in the existence or not of the supernatural in everyday life, but also in how the participants had experienced it, how they assessed it today, what they reject, what they silence, in the final analysis, how they interpret it.

The analysis of the narrations characterized by conflicts or secrets underlines a common constituent quality: their dynamic character. The subject participates dynamically in their reconstruction, either in order to reject certain elements that are considered implausible, or to fill in a gap.

However, the narration does not exist without commentary. Without narration and commentary all the objects, the people, the events would remain “mute”. In the context of family meals this conversation takes place “naturally”, through the comments, the narrations, the explanations. It emanates easily from the sociability of the participating persons, in such a way that the tales are repeated.

In most of the interviews I discerned a strong disposition for personal prestige through telling such stories, because this establishes the teller as a bearer of knowledge, experiences and constant values, within a world that is in a state of flux. Also, in cases where the experiences are personal, the narration is an opportunity for emphasizing the courage, the experience, the cunning of the speaker, values that are particularly important in semi-urban space. In this sense, the subject enhances his position among the members of his family or of the community.

The presence of third parties is also an opportunity for the raconteur to project onto the communication the image of himself and the role he would like to play within the group. Then the narration serves a function of *impressing*. Some characteristic cases are of narrators who want to confirm their role as committed ones, a role of someone who knows the subject well, who is well informed, who tells a story well, etc. The narration is a pretext for self-knowledge, for self-assurance, self-promotion through evoking reactions of amazement and positive impressions. These two possible functions of memory are already placed in the life-frame of the community itself, irrespective of my intervention in it. These are indications that narrations of this kind are a field in which the conflict of generations in the present is partially projected. In this sense the encounter with the supernatural has a function of reinforcing the position of the elders and extension of the continuers of tradition vis-à-vis the younger generations. So, it serves as a support for the perspective these generations adopt in the present.

Through its continuous repetition the narrative discourse becomes independent of the dialectic of the specific events to which it refers and is transformed into mythicizing. This myth-making, this “poetic” of the narrative discourse, does not simply relate the events and the portraits of the persons involved in these, as they existed or acted, but figures or archetypes, that is persons as they could exist or act.

In most of the interviews I found a strong penchant for a didactic function in the transmission of the experience. Yorgos, aged 48, says that:

“Even though many of these stories are rumours for the naïve, I believe nevertheless that in this way some limits are set as to what should be done and what shouldn’t. For example, when someone goes to find a treasure, essentially he goes to steal, because it doesn’t be-

long to him, and that's the reason for the stories: to tell him that what he is doing is wrong and that it will weigh on his soul".

As I see it, this discourse is also very important. For most of those who believe, these stories have a deterrent effect and the insinuations are turned into clear warning about any violation of prohibition. Certainly in all cases such narrations exhort a regulatory model of behaviour. These stories avert the inhabitants from frequenting other parts outside the safety of their home, at "dangerous hours". The repetition of narrations on the misfortunes of those who consciously frequent such places cultivate the fear of danger. Despite the precautions they take, evil can smite innocent members of their families.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to explain why such a widespread practice as treasure hunting is related to narratives of cursed and haunted places. The intermingling of official and folk religious elements is to be expected in a culture such as the Greek, where Orthodox Christian tradition is the outcome of the Church Fathers' elaboration with doctrinal religion upon the substrate of centuries of pre-Christian elements. Another factor implicated is that this syncretism serves the Greek nationalistic idea of continuity from Antiquity.

The existence of evil spirits also gives sufficient justification to despair, failure and ill health, by aligning otherness with misfortune.

Last but not least, such narratives constitute patterns of behaviour, as they offer the terms for comprehensive oral dialogue between notions of good and evil, religious beliefs and scepticism.

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Мариа Кумариану

Уклета места и уклета пракса. Потрага за благом и уклета места

Студија случаја из Грчке

Кључне речи: крађа блага, зле силе, ђаво, црни човек, свиња, дискурс о уклетом, наративност

Циљ овог рада је да објасни зашто је широко распрострањена пракса потраге за благом повезана са наративима о проклетим и уклетим местима. За ово постоји неколико разлога: а) преплитање елемената званичне религије и фолклорне традиције у хришћанском православљу које често служи грчким националистима за успостављање идеје континуитета од антике до данас, б) постојање злих сила даје довољно оправдања за очај, неуспех или болест повезујући Другост са несрећом, ц) овакви наративи формирају обрасце понашања и отварају простор за успостављање дијалога између појмова као што су добро и зло, као и између религиозних веровања и скептицизма.