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The Other Town: How the Greeks and the Turks

perceive mythical neighbors

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Abstract:

During the filming of a documentary in two towns in Greece and Turkey the perceptions of the two people related to the “neighbor” came to the fore. Various prejudices and myths related to the “other” and the “self” are internalized in both societies and the people are unaware of their existence. In some cases people do not wish to find the “truth” about their myths; they feel more secure in believing than in facing reality. Prejudices and myths operate like a belief that secures a respectful communal identity and gives meaning to the past and prospect to the future.

Key words: Greeks, Turks, myths, prejudices, perceptions, silencing

1. Introduction

The nations create myths about themselves and about the “other”. These myths, in the last resort, praise the “self” and directly and/or indirectly belittle the real or imagined “other”. I presume this conference will bring to light cases which will verify the existence of many such

national prejudices and stereotypes. On my part, I will try to demonstrate how some national myths are reproduced but especially I will try to show why the myths are appropriated and internalized.

I recently had an opportunity to contact a number of Greeks and Turks and ask questions about the “other”. Together with the director Nefin Dinc we have just completed a documentary – *The Other Town* – about the inhabitants of two towns having asked them questions, our main interest being to look at the image of the “other”. It took us more than a year to complete the filming in Dimitsana and Birgi, in two towns, the first in Greece and the second in Turkey.

Dimitsana is a small town in the center of the Peloponnese (southern Greece) and it is known for its input in the Greek revolution of 1821 against the Ottoman rule. The town produced the gun powder that was needed during the revolt. Gun powder is still produced in this place but Dimitsana is now a winter resort area that attracts visitors and tourists. It is also known as a historically religious center. There are picturesque monasteries in the area as well as the residences of historic religious personalities. The house of Patriarch Grigorios who was hanged in Istanbul by the Ottoman authorities when the revolt started has been turned into a museum, for example. The house of bishop P.P. Germanos, who is believed to have blessed the revolt of 1821 at its start, has been lately restored, too. It is as if the place is offered for national pilgrimage.

Birgi is a town in the Western part of Turkey (Anatolia), near Ödemiş and Izmir. It is a historic town with many mosques and other monuments which attracts tourists. Up to the 14th century it had been a Byzantine town (Pyrgion, meaning small castle/tower) and in the first quarter of the 20th

century it was inhabited by Greeks, too. In the 14th

century it was the capital of Aydınoğulları, a Turkic emirate and later part of the Ottoman Empire. According to a legend the first Turkish sailor Umur Bey who had reached the Peloponnesus and fought there, was from this town. Its present proud inhabitants narrate stories about the “efes” and the “zeybeks”, the legendary Turkish warriors that fought against the Greek army that invaded and occupied the area during the years 1919-1922.

The documentary shows not only how the two parties think and feel about their past history and about the “other” but also presents the mechanisms with which these opinions are formed. The educational practices, the public ceremonies and speeches, the museums and the monuments are all means which shape this environment. The young and old people with whom we talked also showed that nations mostly believe in what they have been taught and expected

to believe.

2. Myths mean more than what they narrate

For some people and even for some academics myths look as if they are innocent; they are naïve and simplistic but at the same time harmless, the way fairy tales are. Some use the term “legend” instead, which provide myths more credibility. Myths are seen even as functioning positively, too, since they are, allegedly, nothing but an expression of collective memory in allegoric form. Some believe that they should be tolerated even if they do not convey reality as is understood by historians. I will not dispute these views, I will only claim, however, that in the case of our documentary at least, myths mean much more than what they state and they are far from being innocent and/or simple collective memories. I will give attention only to two myths, one Greek, the “secret school” and one Turkish, “the exploiter Greeks”. [1]

The Greek myth about the secret school is widely known among the Greeks and is in tune with the popular understanding of the “history of the Greek nation”. According to this view the Turks (meaning the Ottomans) [2] invaded and conquered Greek lands and imposed a tyrannical rule over the Greeks for four centuries. The secret schools were the result of the prohibition imposed by the Turks: they did not allow the Greeks to learn their language. So the children had to go to the secret schools (at night) and learn Greek by the help of the priests and monks.

Modern historians disputed this alleged prohibition and demonstrated when and how the myth of secret school started. [3] Some Greek historians have shown that banning of teaching the Greek language is simply a myth: a prohibition of this kind has never been documented. The myth came to light first at the beginning of the 19th century

with reference to an anonymous folk poem –
my tiny moon / light the way / to go to school
, etc.

[4]

Much later, in 1886, a painting of the renown Greek painter, N. Gyzis (1842-1901), depicting an old monk teaching a number of children and a “cleft” (Greek fighter) looking out for a possible Turkish threat popularized the idea. A poem by I. Polemis (1862-1924) titled *The Secret School*

[5]

inspired by this painting established the myth as a reality.

On the Turkish side, on the other hand, there is a widespread belief that the Greeks of the Ottoman State exploited the Turks by controlling many professions, the production, trade and banking. This myth – or this national prejudice – does not allow for class distinctions: all Greeks exploited all Turks. According to this belief the *Rum millet* lived a richer and more comfortable life than the average member of the “in-group”, that is, the Muslim Turks. This alleged privileged status of the Greeks, however, according to the myth, had been gained by unfair means. The Greeks had joined the foreign powers in exploit-ing the Muslim Turks.

[6]

In Birgi we heard an old woman saying that the Greeks, when they used to live in that town, i.e., before 1922, spread lies in their churches that it was a sin for the Turks to work. In consequence all trades were controlled by the Greeks causing the impoverishing of the Turks: “The Turks were the servants of the Greeks”. Presumably, this myth infers that the Turks believed in what the Greek priests said (in the churches) and hence they were turned to servants of the Greeks.

In the documentary we see and hear the inhabitants of these towns expressing themselves in front of the camera. [7] In Birgi the aged lady answered my questions as follows:

-The old Turkish lady: *They (the Greeks) had the fields and the orchards, the flour mills, the shoemaker's shops. The priest at the mosques ... no, I mean temples... They did not have mosques, right? They told Turks that it was sinful to work.*

-HM: *What did the Turks do for work?*

-The old Turkish lady: *They were servants to the Greeks.* (30:20 – 30:44) [\[8\]](#)

On the other hand a young Greek student explains what the picture of Gyzis hanged on the corridor of the state school conveys.

- The Greek student: *The priests were teaching kids there.*

-HM: *And what is this man doing?*

- The Greek student: *He is protecting children against the Turks.* (31:04 – 31:18)

We can reach some conclusions based on all the above:

1- Nations believe in myths even if the myths are not sensible and rational, they are not documented, they are full of contradictions, even if they are proven fake. The myth about the secret school, for example, is still alive even though there are a number of academic publications disproving it. In the same way the Greeks of the Ottoman State are seen deceiving the Turks in order to exploit them, even though the non-Muslims in the Ottoman lands were the unprivileged section of the country relative to the Muslim population. The Muslims were the *haki m millet*

(dominant group) and the non-Muslims the *mahkum millet*

(subjected group). In spite of the privileged status of the Muslims the question “why were the Turks so easily deceived?” never comes in mind to be asked.

2- The national myths, in the end of the day, praise “our” side and belittle the “other”. In other words, these myths preserve and reproduce national prejudices and stereotypes. For example the Greek myth of secret school gives the message that the “negative” Turks are oppressive and prohibit “our” education whereas “we” are keen in preserving our identity. In the same manner the myth of the “exploiter Greeks” implies that the “other” is not honest, is not to be trusted and he is pitiless.

3- These myths also operate as a means in legitimizing “our” decisions and actions. Both of these Greek and Turkish myths, in a sense, explain the past and the relations with the “other”. Once the “other” is portrayed negatively as above, then “our” actions and nationalist discourse are legitimized. When the “other” is belittled and disparaged then it becomes quite easy to justify even some of “our” actions that are not of the sort to be proud of, e.g., massacres, exportations, discriminations, etc.

4- Myths like the above act as supplementary to the national paradigm. The myths can be correctly evaluated and really understood only if they are seen as part of a general national narration and identity. These myths are directly or indirectly related to all other popular discourses. The national narratives may not necessarily repeat these myths, but when analyzed, they prove to repeat similar understandings and messages: “we” have been positive; the “other” was and is negative. [\[9\]](#)

5- Finally, the national myths have a dimension that is related to “our” future behavior. As mentioned above, the basic end results of national myths are the nationalist and widely spread prejudices and stereotypes. Myths are means with which nations build the images of the “other” and consequently the way the “other” should be understood and eventually be treated. That is why myths are not only simple innocent fairy tales, legends or symbolically expressed communal memories.

The image of the “other”, as this is constructed with the help of national myths incorporates the probable future moves of the “other”. The image contains and expresses the alleged character of the “other”; and the alleged character operates as a herald of the actions of the

“other”. This is the future dimension of the myths. In other words the myths are not associated only with the past; they include a projection towards the coming periods, too. National paradigm and national myths contain – mostly in an indirect way - the worries and phobias of the nations which are associated with the coming day, too. Preserved myths denote preserved worries and prejudices.

3. Being unaware of one's myths and prejudices

Nations are unaware of their myths, their prejudices, their perceptions, in short, of their inner world which shapes their sensitivities, beliefs and convictions. In other words, the members of a nation are carriers of perceptions which are experienced as knowledge and realities. This state of affairs is self understood and even a tautological inevitability: If one is conscious of his/her prejudices and myths – if one knows that what is being said is a myth and/or prejudice – he/she will discard it, will abandon it automatically. Myths, prejudices and stereotypes if they exist, they can exist only as entities which are perceived as true and as a reality. [\[10\]](#)

That is why many people react negatively when they come face to face with situations that challenge their beliefs and their myths. They are surprised when they hear that some myths, which for them are self understood facts, may not be true. They feel threatened and confused. Some feel that their identity is undermined. During our filming we experienced similar situations. The mechanisms of reacting are various: silencing, direct rejecting and denying or trying to give an explanation to contradictions.

For example the mayors of the two towns responded negatively to my question: “Don't all these military parades and ceremonies - in which the old enemy is continuously mentioned by name - promote a negative image of the “other” as if he is still the enemy?” In fact, and as it is

shown in our documentary, the “other” is systematically belittled during the national celebrations but in other spheres of public life, too. In the film we notice the picture hung on the wall behind the mayor of Dimitsana showing Patriarch Grigorios being hanged by the “Turks”, as he says that “The times have changed; we don’t say ‘the Turks hang us’, anymore!” The Turkish mayor denies similar practices, too. In the meanwhile the practices in the classrooms refute both mayors.

- The Mayor of Dimitsana: *No. Things are getting better, □ more normal, as the years go by. We don’t say the Turks killed or hanged us as we once used to. □ Being a member of the European Union is gradually changing things.*

- The Mayor of Birgi: *I don’t think so. It may be true of Greece, but I do not believe that such a thing happens in Turkey. That isn’t what our schools tell students. □ Nor is it how our people □ talk among themselves. (13:52-14:30)*

The next scenes are from the classrooms of the two towns where history was taught:

- The teacher in Birgi: *Under the Treaty of Lausanne, □ the Turks living in Greece were going to be exchanged □ with the Greeks of Anatolia. □ But the Greeks kept making problems. □ They wanted lots of Greeks to be left in Turkey. □ It was because of their Megali Idea, □ which was to create the Great Greece. □*

- The teacher in Dimitsana: *The Turkish army was big. So what did □ Kolokotronis do to make us*

look stronger? He lit fires at night on Mount Menalo and marched his men in front of the fires. From down below, the Turks thought there were hundreds of men up there. But in fact, they were just the same men marching back and forth past the fires. And the Turks thought they were facing a vast army.

- A Greek student: *There were huge numbers of Turks, but the Greeks were brave.*

- The teacher in Birgi: *The Greeks thought they faced an army of thousands, but that wasn't the case. There were only 150 men. The Greeks attacked with heavy arms.*

And that night Ödemiş was invaded.

- A Greek student: *A priest betrayed Kolokotronis and his brothers. And the Turks burned them alive in their house.*

- Another Greek student: *They burned them alive! Unbelievable! And now some Greeks want the Turks!*

- The teacher in Birgi: *The (local) Greeks rejoiced at the arrival of the Greek army. Later the war began, the (Turkish) Great Attack was launched and Anatolia was purged of the enemy. On hearing that the Turkish army was close, the Greeks burned down Birgi. They razed all the houses and killed anyone who escaped. (15:18-16:55)*

In other words, at the conscious level people are sure that there are not prejudices and myths against the "other" in their immediate environment. This is their self-image. There are two reasons for this misconception.

1) They may be in an inward need to believe that their side is better than it actually is. This belief provides a praise to the group to which the member belongs, provides self assurance and elevates it to a better ethical and social status.

2) The member of the group - this time rather more consciously - may be trying to guard its group and indirectly himself/herself by defending the reputation of the group. He/she may, therefore, use a euphemistic and/or politically correct picture of the “self”.

In both cases, however, he/she is somehow aware that the negative discourse against the “other” is not to be appreciated by the wider society. People feel embarrassed when they are reminded of their prejudices and stereotypes. In spite of all possible goodwill, myths, prejudices and stereotypes exist and even they may be reproduced by members in spite of the bearers` conscious desires. This is another unconscious aspect of behavior of the members of a nation vis-à-vis the myths.

In the documentary we see and hear what the people say about their town-dwellers and what the town-dwellers actually say about the “other”. Some “intellectuals” express themselves being absolutely sure that there are no prejudices and myths in their town. However, they apparently have a wrong self-image, they are misled by a myth about themselves. [\[11\]](#)

- The Greek “intellectual”: *“Nobody in Greece today would speak negatively about the Turks. Maybe just one or two people would say bad things about them. But not the others.”*
(37:02 – 37: 19
)

- The Turkish “intellectual”: *“There is no prejudice against the Greeks in the things we talk about here. There’s absolutely no sign of it. It’s never been the case. I can say with absolute confidence there’s no prejudice against the Greeks”* . (38:12 – 38:30)

The dwellers contradict this self-image in the most distinct way. The situation is the opposite of what the people think about themselves. I received the following answers to my questions:

- HM: *Can we ever be friends with the Greeks?*

- An old Turk: *Heavens, no! Friends with the Greeks? Impossible!*

- HM: *Could there be a war between us?*

-The old Turk: *God forbid! I pray I never see them again!*

- A Greek shepherd: *There's a dark picture left behind. We heard many things from our elders (about the Turks).*

- HM: *Have the Turks changed at all?*

- The Greek shepherd: *Some haven't, and that's a fact.*

- An old Turk: *The Greeks burned this place down.*

- Another Turk: *We have a lot of hate inside us. Aren't the Greeks just the same? They still*

can't stand us Turks.

- A Greek girl: *Once they killed us for years, for centuries. There'll never be real friendship between Greece and Turkey. It's a question of history.*

- A Turkish boy: *They invaded our country once, and now they say they're friends. I don't know. I don't see them as friends.*

- A young woman in Dimitsana: *When we Greeks talk about the Revolution, we use a capital 'R'... and we mean the holy revolution of 1821 against the Turkish invaders. Without education and freedom you have only darkness.*

- An old woman in Birgi: *So many of our children died in Cyprus. My neighbor's only son, for example. He's buried in Cyprus along with so many others. As long as the Greeks aren't crushed, they'll keep trying everything.*

- HM: *Are we in danger?*

- A 12 years old Greek boy: *Yes.*

- HM: *In what way?*

- The 12 years old Greek boy: *If the Turks invade.*

- HM: *Who?*

- The 12 years old Greek boy: *The Turks*.□

- A Turkish weaver in Birgi: *My father used to say...□ "no fleece from a pig, no friend from a Greek."*□

- A young Greek woman: *Personally, I hate them.□ That's because of the history I've read. (0:50 – 2:55)*

4. Coping with obvious contradictions

It is more interesting to see what happens when people are face to face with the obvious contradictions of their views and of their beliefs. They either deny the facts straight away or try desperately to accommodate the situation and the challenge. The desperate efforts of the mayor when he was forced to face the contradictions of the myth of the secret school is comic-tragic. Dimitsana is proud both of its secret school, which the Turks allegedly prohibited, and of its official school of the Ottoman period which the Turks apparently allowed! Then we asked the young Turkish children how the janissaries were recruited.

- HM: *How do you explain Dimitsana having□ both a secret school and an official one at the same period?*□

- Mayor of Dimitsana: *Look, maybe the thing... I expect when things started getting... When the conquerors came... To be frank, when things became more difficult... the children went to the secret school. It was an extra school maybe. (31:17 – 31:55)*

- Nefin Dinç: *The Greeks say that the Ottoman army came and took their children from the villages and made them janissaries. So the Greeks would hide their children.*

- HM: *What do you say to that?*

- The Turkish boy: *If our country took away the Greek children... Well, I don't think Turkey stole or took away their children. Because Turkey is a country that defends its flag and its people. So it wouldn't go after other people's children.*

- HM: *So you mean nothing like that happened?*

- The Turkish boy: *I think this did not happen. (33:54 – 34:28)*

5. Are myths the opposite of reality?

Myths can be seen by some as stories contradicting historical truths. Opposition to specific myths may be launched on a reality-versus-falsehood basis. However, it is interesting that current religious myths and mythology – such as the Christian myth of a son of a god, or of the Muslim myth of a prophet who receives messages from a god - and the related images of the “infidel other” which are connected to these myths are treated and classified differently and separately. They are called religion and/or belief. [\[12\]](#) This distinction between myth and religion is worth exploring.

Actually this is a taboo issue. I will not say that religious stories are myths but I will claim that myths operate as religious beliefs. Here, I would like to mention only some observations related to the above mentioned Turkish and Greek myths.

1- They operate as beliefs which are accepted in a way that reminds proselytism. They are not approached with skepticism but with a ready acceptance.

2- They use a simple wording, they have simplistic form and they are understood by the average citizen.

3- They provide an explanation of “our” past (our existence and our history).

4- They present the in-group as positive, being on the correct side and on the correct route and this has a reassuring and soothing effect.

5- This strengthens the believers’ self-esteem and self-confidence.

6- They also give a prospect for the future; especially the believers of national myths feel that

they are in possession of the knowledge about their future and their environment (the “other”).

7- The sharing of myths with other people (and not rejecting myths) also strengthens the feeling of belonging to a greater group. This feeling also provides self-assurance.

When all of the above are seen as the characteristics of myths, it becomes easier to see myths as means to evaluate the “self” and the “other”. It becomes easier to see why myths are so long-lasting. Most people are not so keen to find what the “truth” is, but they try to find a truth that will comfort them. The answer I got when I asked a Greek if he would like to search and find out the truth about the myth of the secret school is revealing.

-HM: *Would you ever look into it to see if it was true?*

-The man in gunpowder museum: *“No, I wouldn’t. If we ever dispute the truth of secret schools wouldn’t we also be denying the existence of Ancient Greece?”*

This man feels more secure when he *believes* than when he searches. In this sense, a story that may be called myth or religious narrative or fairy tale or story or history, in the last resort is received in the same sense by many persons: each chooses what suits and satisfies him best. People seem to be in a pursuit of happiness and consolation, and each chooses the stories that provide this: myths or other stories that bear other names.

A too postmodern conclusion, but, on the other hand, it does not contain contradictions.

[1] We heard of various national and rather modern myths about the “other” in these towns: In Dimitsana the myth about the Patriarch who died because he backed up the revolution of 1821 and a song whose original wording was changed to show the Turks negative; and in Birgi the stories about the numerous Greek army being unable to cope with a small number of Turks and the terrible Greeks who killed Turks without reason.

[2] Both in Turkey and in Greece often the Ottomans are called Turks. This ethnic attribution of identity is a modern construct in Turkey. In the Greek language it is much older and can be traced back many centuries. Equating Ottomans and (modern) Turks is anachronism which serves both Turkish and Greek national perceptions, paradigm and discourse.

[3] See for example: Γιάννης Κ. Κορδάτος, *Ιστορία της Νεώτερης Ελλάδας*, Εκδόσεις 20^{ος} Αιώνας, Athens, 1957, Vol. 1, p. 552. Άλκης Αγγέλου, *Το Κρυφό Σχολειό, Χρονικό Ενός Μύθου*, Εστία, Athens, 1999.

[4] Φεγγαράκι μου λαμπρό / φέγγε με να περπατώ / να πηγαίνω στο σχολειό / να μαθαίνω γράμματα / του θεού τα πράγματα.

[5] Το Κρυφό Σχολειό

The Secret School

Απ' έξω μαυροφόρ' απελπισιά,	Outside the dim despair
πικρής σκλαβιάς χειροπιαστό σκοτάδι,	the soar darkness of slavery
και μέσα στη θολόκτιστη εκκλησιά,	and inside, under the dome
στην εκκλησιά, που παίρνει κάθε βράδυ	in the church
την όψη του σχολειού, school	that is turned every night into a
το φοβισμένο φως του καντηλιού trembles	illuminated by a candlelight that
τρεμάμενο τα ονείρατα αναδεύει,	emits dreams and gathers around it
και γύρω τα σκλαβόπουλα μαζεύει... etc.	the children who are in bondage, etc...

[6] See for example: H. Millas, “Non-Muslim Minorities in the Historiography of Republican Turkey: The Greek Case” in *The Ottomans and the Balkans – A Discussion of Historiography*, (Edit) Fikret Adanır & Suraiya Faroqhi, Brill, Leiden/Boston/Köln, 2002; and *Yunan Ulusunun Doğu İletişim*, 1994, pp. 201-248. For the way the myth is expressed in Turkish literature see H. Millas, *Εικόνες Ελλήνων*

και
Τούρκων

-
σχολικά
βιβλία

,
ιστοριογραφία

,
λογοτεχνία

και
εθνικά
στερεότυπα

,
(*Images of Greeks and Turks - textbooks, historiography, literature and national stereotypes*),
Athens: Alexandria, 2001, pp. 173-191.

[7] During my presentation in the conference the related sections of the documentary were projected. Here only the transcriptions will be supplied.

[8] The time refers to the documentary.

[9] Myths are not preserved only through oral and/or written means. Monuments, performances during celebrations, songs, art like pictures and even religious ceremonies reproduce occasionally the image of the “other” and national myths.

[10] We never hear the sentence “I have a prejudice and/or a stereotype”; normally we claim that the “other” is the carrier of these shortcomings. Sometimes one may say “we are prejudiced towards X”; but in this case “we” means something quite different. This sentence actually should read like this: I belong to a group Y which is prejudiced against X; but personally I (or a small section of the group which I belong, too) follow a different route. “I” do not belong to the greater group. This is the case which excludes “I” from “we”.

[11] When I claim that “people are unaware of their prejudices, stereotypes and myths”, naturally, I include myself and you, the listeners/readers, in the category of the “people”, too. Even a specialist of myths who is aware that people are bearers of myths cannot be aware of his/her own myths. A conscious myth is a contradiction in terms.

[12] There are many researchers who treat the god mythology as “myths” (like the well-known case of Richard Dawkins, for example) but the general tendency is to deal with religion, in the best case, as a “special” myth and not as a myth.