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Cooperation and Conflict 2007; 42; 247
DOI: 10.1177/0010836707079931

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http://cac.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/42/3/247

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Aporias of Identity

Bicommunalism, Hybridity and the ‘Cyprus Problem’

COSTAS M. CONSTANTINOU

ABSTRACT

This article examines the predicaments and paradoxes of identity politics in Cyprus. It looks at the historical alliance of colonial practices and nationalist rationales that brought about a static bicommunal system, establishing the basis for inter-ethnic conflict, or what became known as the ‘Cyprus problem’. The advent of modern governmentality, dividing and classifying the Cypriot population, helped, in addition, to solidify fluid and ambiguous ethno-religious boundaries, making it more difficult for individuals to use ethno-religious identities flexibly and pragmatically, including their use as a tactic to resist the policies of consecutive regimes of power. The article suggests that the ‘Cyprus problem’ provides a moral alibi for the pursuit of a range of problematic regulations and practices against individuals caught between the dominant ethnic identities, even though there also exist windows of opportunity and resistance on the ground. The article focuses on the genealogy and presence of hybrid communities and syncretistic lifestyles, which complicate and transgress the binary of Greek/Christian versus Turk/Muslim, and the existence of which became progressively abnormalized or exoticized.

Keywords: colonialism; the Cyprus problem; ethnic conflict; homogenization; hybridity; representation

Hasanpoulia, Hasanpoulia, flying like birds,
Dressed in different clothes everyday,
Greek today and Turkish tomorrow.

(Anonymous Cypriot poem)

I

In contemporary Cyprus, the ascription of ethno-religious identity is highly political and juridical. It carries a heavy burden and provides a licence for how individuals and groups are officially treated. It is worth starting with a passage from a report, submitted by the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This passage rightly pointed out the complexity faced (or created) by the drafters...
of the Cypriot ‘received constitution’, yet omitted the politicization and exceptionalization of the communal identities that followed.

The communities in Cyprus were divided according to their religious beliefs and not according to their ethnic origin, for reasons only known to the joint committee established with the duty to complete a draft constitution for the independent Republic of Cyprus, incorporating the Basic Structure agreed at the Zurich Conference. It may be true that what distinguishes the communities may not only be the factor of religion but also their ethnic origin. Whatever the description of the community may be, the fact is that we cannot change the description given by the drafters of the Constitution. Nevertheless, the gist of the difference is not how the groups are described but whether their rights are safeguarded. (CERD/C/299/Add.19, 1997, para. 68)

Contrary to the submitted report of the RoC, this article argues that the gist of the difference — and of the ‘Cyprus problem’ — lies precisely with how groups, communities and individuals are described in official and popular discourse. It is on the basis of such socio-legal representations that rights are granted or denied, duties enforced, both north and south of the Green Line. This situation is especially problematic and paradoxical where, as above, religious beliefs and ethnic origins are conflated, or religious belief is recognized but not ethnicity, something that has serious power implications on the ground. It means, crucially, that certain policies, discourses and practices are enabled in Cyprus, and others marginalized or disabled. Therefore, I argue that the dominant bicommunal framework that is the colonial legacy of the island has bequeathed an aporia to the bearer of Cypriot identity; an aporia that requires sustained critical attention and reflection.1

The most disturbing thing about being a Cypriot is that one can only be a Greek or a Turkish Cypriot. Postcolonial Cypriot identity is quintessentially and inescapably hyphenated; and hyphenated across a fixed Greek–Turkish axis. Being simply and singly Cypriot is a constitutional impossibility (RoC Constitution, Article 2). Who is Turk or Greek has been decided on the basis of religious beliefs and less, or not at all, on the basis of language or other cultural markers. Maronites, Latins and Armenians had, collectively, to choose at independence to be members of either the Greek-Cypriot or the Turkish-Cypriot community. Gypsies did not bother to choose, so ‘Muslim’ Gypsies were officially branded Turks and ‘Christian’ Gypsies Greek, despite their religious practices often being ambiguous. Naturalized Cypriots of whatever national origin also had (and have), formally, to become Turks or Greeks; to this effect, they are given up to three months following the act of naturalization to make up their mind as to their ethnicity. Cypriots who married across the Muslim-Christian divide before the advent of the civil marriage had to change their religion (almost always the women) and, in addition, were required by the state to change their ethnicity. Even today, the RoC constitution does not allow a married Cypriot woman to belong to a different ethnic community to that of her husband (it is possible for her to belong to a different nationality but not ethnicity). Citizens of the unilaterally declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) are, or are formally assumed to be, Turkish Cypriots (TRNC Constitution, Preamble). Cypriot ethno-religious
‘minorities’ in the north, such as the Maronites of Kormakiti and the Greek Cypriots of Karpassia, come under the administrative responsibility of the TRNC Ministry of Foreign Affairs; they are not Turkish-Cypriot ‘natives’ but north Cypriot ‘foreigners’ with only limited rights. All of which means that Rauf Denktash’s terrible aphorism that only the island’s donkeys are genuine Cypriot nationals caricatures, but sadly also captures, a legal reality.

What Mr Denktash and other ethno-centrics do not accept — and indeed may find most abhorrent — is the Hasanpoulia dimension of Cypriotness. That individual Cypriots can re-hyphenate their identity, transverse ethnic boundaries with the force and gusto of rural bandits, is seditious to the dominant ethno-national regimes. These regimes will readily brand such attempts as deceitful, criminal and treacherous. They will point out that ethnicities and religions are total and mutually exclusive. They will view Greekness ‘today’ and Turkishness ‘tomorrow’ as an anomaly, monstrous hybridity or false consciousness. Consequently, they will miss how such transgression may constitute a deliberate political move, an act of resistance to power regimes, a counter-performative against the forgotten performances that fix and police the boundaries of ethno-religious identity. For one does not need to romanticize Cypriot hybridity or the banditry of Hasanpoulia to appreciate that subverting the fixity of ethno-religious identity can work against the forms of domination that are being legitimated in the name of that fixity and the fixation that follows from it.

One may counter, however, that this fixity and fixation are the price to be paid for establishing consociational systems of government, where ethnic cleavages are already prevalent (Lijphart, 1977). Some fine-tuning has to take place ‘at the margins’, some small or ‘nomadic’ groups have to be boxed in the dominant groups, or sacrificed altogether, in order to keep the power balance and secure the rights of the larger groups and viability of the system. Such practices are not uncommon in countries that experimented with consociationalism; be it the assimilation of the indigenous people in Malaysia or the marginalization of Maroons and Amerindians in Surinam. Yet the paradox of consociationalism is that while it appears to make a virtue of heterogeneity at the national level, it assumes and intensifies homogeneity at the ethnic level. Its multi-ethnic vision is limited, not only in reinforcing cleavages and propagating ethnic nationalisms, but also in practically undermining ethnicities that unsettle the norm or transgress the logic of the system.

Notwithstanding the merits and demerits of consociationalism as applied to Cyprus — from its inception during the British colonial period to its collapse in 1963 — the effects of ethnic homogenization are highly disturbing. Besides the adverse legal and political effects of the bicomunal conflict on the official constitutional ‘partners’, i.e. the Greeks and Turks of Cyprus, the viability of the small ethno-religious communities has been affected and continues to be at risk. For example, the community of the Linobambakoi, the Muslim-Christian Cypriots, has virtually disappeared. They have been viewed at best as exotic anomalies or crypto-believers; at worst as traitors and crude opportunists whose ethno-religious normalization was necessary and inevitable. The Gypsies of Cyprus have no cultural rights whatsoever. In fact, quite ironically, just about the only thing that the Greek-Cypriot and
Turkish-Cypriot delegations agreed upon in the Bürgenstock talks in 2004 was the need to delete all references to a ‘Roma community’ in Cyprus as included in the UN (Annan) Plan IV, and consequently erased from Plan V that was put to the April 2004 referendum. Maronites, Armenians and Latins are registered ‘religious groups’, but constitutionally count as ethnic Greeks and are increasingly assimilated into the Greek-Cypriot community. Yet, there is often suspicion and resentment as to these groups’ perceived privileges and community allegiances (e.g. that the eligible males of these communities can opt out of military service in the south). This is especially with respect to the Maronites, who after 1974 managed to cross the Green Line on the basis of formal arrangements with the Turkish-Cypriot authorities and were recently offered TRNC citizenship in order to regain full civil and economic rights in the north. Finally, the ethno-religious ‘converts’ — who are almost always the result of mixed marriages — have been a tragic but silent problem, given that these people are often a source of shame for their parental family, and even sometimes for their new family. They generally had to repress their ethno-religious background so as to gain a degree of normality and social acceptance within their adopted communities.

I examine the effects of bicommunalism with respect to the representation and regulation of ethno-religious identity. I also examine bicommunalism’s wider human implications on the ground. The article follows from works that have challenged the idea of the nation as a perennial phenomenon (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1991; Billig, 1995) and adopts a genealogical perspective. My hypothesis is that the advent of modern governmentality and biopolitics in Cyprus has made it more difficult for individuals to use ethno-religious identities flexibly and pragmatically, including their use as a tactic to resist the policies of the ruling elite. Still, I maintain that certain groups and individuals continue to use their ethno-religious identity as a tactic and as a means of resistance to power regimes, and this is something that should be enhanced. To be sure, the discourse of Western modernity also challenged religious hierarchies and domination, and so empowered means of resistance. However, its secular and ‘rights of man’ alternatives subtly shifted politico-theological contests to ethno-national ones, and these became increasingly naturalized as the proper categories for political action and emancipation. Specifically in Cyprus, dividing and classifying the population in order to furnish it with order, progress and self-consciousness helped to solidify fluid and often ambiguous ethno-religious boundaries, rendering movement across those boundaries increasingly formal, and sometimes impossible. The British colonial governmentality, following the Ottoman millet system, conceived a bi-ethnic (primarily bi-religious) model for managing the Cypriot population. This model assisted and in turn was supported by the emerging Greek and Turkish ethno-nationalisms and their reifications and violence on the ground. The clash of these ethno-nationalisms led to the London-Zurich consociational agreements (1959), a compromise that formalized and normalized bicommunalism, and abnormalized ethno-religious syncretism, hybridity and heterogeneity. We still live today the effects of this contingent historical and colonial division; effects which are sometimes projected as, and at other times hidden behind, what became known as the ‘Cyprus problem’.
National historiographies are obsessed with the uniformity, linearity and continuity of the nation over long periods of the past, and Cyprus is no exception (Papadakis, 1993, 2005; Nevzat, 2005). Social practices unsettling this grand picture or mixing and complicating ethno-religious narratives are brushed aside or relegated to footnotes. Still, they occasionally return to bother the perplexed.

Consider the following entry in the 1943 volume of Notes and Queries. A perplexed reader sought information on the ‘Linobambakoi of Cyprus — What is the history and what are the peculiar tenets of this religious body? The Linobambakoi seem to have drawn upon both Christianity and Mohammedanism’. The reply one month later utilized an Arab fable to explain their inter-faith status and mercurial character, narrating the story of the Ostrich addressing an approaching Bedouin: ‘If you seek a camel for your load, am I not a bird? But, if you come hither a-fowling, Why, behold, Sir! I am a camel.’ The respondent suggested that the Linobambakoi ‘originated in a similar way’. They shifted religions depending on the situation and to that extent employed their identity as a tactic against the policies of the ruling elite (Sayar and Percival, 1943: 20, 115–16).

A more extensive study of the ‘Muslim-Christian sect’ of the Linobambakoi earlier in the century outlined in similar vein the tactical uses of religious identity, which led to this ‘chameleon-like sect’ being seen by most Cypriots as ‘a religion of hypocrisy, with no little contempt and distrust’ (Michell, 1908: 758, 761). For Michell, being a Linobambakos was a means through which individuals tried to avoid acts of religious persecution, or the payment of tax, or faith-based inheritance laws, or military conscription, during the Ottoman empire. Yet, in two ways, Michell also allows for a more spiritual and cosmopolitan perspective on the Linobambakoi. They could be seen as being similar to the ‘Arnaouts’, who, living among Christians and Muslims, ‘declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is the best; but, to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth, they very prudently follow both’ (p. 751). The other common title of the Linobambakoi, namely that of ‘Apostolic’ (Apostolikoi), suggests that they are also emissaries of God, or, in colloquial Cypriot, ‘trees in the wilderness’ on which John the Baptist fed (Michell, 1908: 761; cf. Dawkins, 1933: 255–7; Kyrris, 1976: 130). Thus, besides the notion of religious deceivers, it seems that the Linobambakoi were also represented as a genuinely syncretistic sect or as unique religious missionaries.

Beckingham went further, criticizing the tendency to see the Linobambakoi as originating from one or other ethnic or religious community.

In fact the phenomenon they [the Linobambakoi] present is one common in many parts of the Ottoman empire. It was due, not only to a desire to escape the attentions of ecclesiastical tax-gatherers and recruiting officers alike, but to the fundamental religious beliefs of the peasantry, who share the theological hospitality of the ancient Greeks and Romans to the gods of other nations. It is an attitude which is now vanishing rapidly, not because of religious fervour, but through nationalist feeling. To many people of the eastern Mediterranean...
where Christianity and Islam were practised in the same or in adjacent villages, these religions did not present themselves as two mutually exclusive systems of belief, but rather as two ways of conciliating supernatural forces. (Beckingham, 1957: 173)

For Beckingham, the Linobambakoi were not a sect, but rather people ‘addicted to a practice which was once widespread’ and for whom hybrid religious beliefs were the norm, not the exception. That is to say, these people participated in each other’s religious rituals and festivities, partook in the surrounding spiritual menu (see Hasluck, 1929), without necessarily or consciously becoming ‘Muslims’ or ‘Christians’, or even Linobambakoi, which in any case was rarely a self-designation. Associating religion with exclusivist ethnic identity rendered strange such theological hospitality.

To my knowledge, the above cosmopolitan and spiritual representations of the Linobambakoi are totally absent from local Cypriot historiography. Even the notion that the Linobambakoi adopted their religious identity tactically to resist the burdens of imperial rule tends to be given an ethno-nationalist spin; in other words, that this tactic displays a weaker nature than that of their co-‘nationals’ who weathered the harsh political conditions yet retained their ‘true’ identity (Papadopoulos, 2003: 5). On the whole, they are presented as either crypto-Christians or crypto-Muslims (mostly the former) who have yielded to the pressures of Ottoman authority, or nominally converted to avoid criminal or political accusations, or paying tax or military conscription. The syncretistic dimension is therefore deliberately set aside. Whereas I do not want to suggest that the Linobambakoi cannot be viewed as ‘publicly Muslims but really Christians’ or ‘publicly Christians but really Muslims’, I have a problem with the thesis that they were just that, or that all of them were just that. I think this is an oversimplification of a complex historical phenomenon, which is not, of course, peculiar to Cyprus (note, among others cases, the Donmeh, the Bektashis, the Druze and the Yezidis during and after the Ottoman empire; or across the world, the Iberian Marranos, the Russian Molokans, the Dalit converts in India and the Caribbean followers of Santeria). Such oversimplification is typically the result of historiographies that are written on the basis of ethnic purity and perennial national identity. Yet, it is not uncommon for such historiographies to have an implicit (and sometimes explicit) agenda that challenges the purity of the opposing ethnic group (such as the idea that Turkish Cypriots are really or mostly Islamicized Greeks) as a means of undermining the other group’s autonomy and collective rights.

Contra ethnocentric/nationalist historiographies, the universality and ‘normality’ of the syncretistic cannot be denied. In Cyprus, this is quite evident in a variety of different ethno-religious practices, which already precede the rule of the Ottoman Empire. For example, Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, who visited the island in the twelfth century CE, writes that besides the Orthodox Jews there were in Cyprus also a peculiar sect of ‘Epicurean Jews known as ‘kaphrosein’ [Hebrew for infidels or desecrators] or Cyprians’ (Excerpta Cypria, 1908: 5). According to Benjamin, these Cyprians ‘profane the evening of the Sabbath and keep holy that of the Sunday’, which shows that they must
have been a collage of Judaism and Christianity, with add-in ‘Epicurean’, perhaps as a derogatory epithet for their hedonistic lifestyle.

What the case of the ‘Cyprians’ illustrates is the extent to which religious syncretism may be a formalization of attempts to dissent from the law, as laid down by dominant regimes of power. Official religious authorities may seek to ridicule, or hereticize, practices that transgress the law, but history shows they cannot make them unpopular. Syncretistic transgression has been a major dogmatic problem for both the Latin and the Greek churches in Cyprus. Felix Faber, a Dominican monk who visited Cyprus on his way to the Holy Land in the late fifteenth century, reflects on the opportunism (and forbidden pleasures) of Latin–Greek hybridity.

How then can an honest man and good Catholic be a Latin and Greek curate? No one would do this except he willed to satisfy his covetousness or his fancy. For such men take on themselves what in each rite catches their fancy, but reject what is hard and burdensome in both. Many Latin priests go over to the Greek rite, and presume to take wives, but they wish at the same time to enjoy the privileges of Latin priests, in which they have no part. (Excerpta Cypria, 1908: 41)

For the Greek Orthodox Church, the problem lay with those who followed the 1260 Bulla Cypria, accepting Papal authority while retaining autonomy over the liturgy. This was a major source of controversy within the Greek Orthodox Church, and not so much because some priests and bishops changed to the Catholic faith, but because the Orthodox liturgical identity was still retained by them, which was seen as a deception and a conspiracy to subvert the Orthodox faith from within. (This is, of course, still a source of conflict with respect to the Uniate churches of Eastern Europe and the Middle East.) Even today, the syncretistic (Latin-influenced ‘renaissance’ or ‘naïve’ style) iconography in Cypriot Orthodox churches is looked down upon by the Greek Orthodox Church, which demands the purist and austere Byzantine style.

Beyond religious syncretism, there is further evidence of practices of religious simulation and dissimulation well before the Ottoman occupation of Cyprus. This seems to have specifically concerned the captives of Turkish and Arab origin who were brought to the island after the raids of Cypriot ships on Asiatic and African coasts. The status of these prisoners is interesting. Some of them were voluntarily or involuntarily baptized; others were not, so as to be kept as slaves. But as Leontios Makhairas implies, the allegiance of the ‘converts’ was always suspected, especially the possibility of apostasy and rebellion during Mameluke invasions (Makhairas, 1932: paras 652 and 657). This led authors such as Beckingham to suggest that during the Latin period some Cypriots were ‘at least nominally Christians, who were of Turkish, Arab, or Egyptian origin’ (1957: 171).

In short, religious syncretism and dissimulation existed before 1571 when the Ottoman rule was established in Cyprus. Simply to explain the hybrid practices of the Linobambakoi as an Ottoman feature and remnant is to miss this specific point as well as the fact that subaltern identity tactics and syncretistic spiritualities are characteristic of different societies and epochs.
The Ottoman rule brought forth a new system of governance: the millet. Institutionalized in the fifteenth century, the millet system divided Ottoman subjects on religious lines. The millet, or religious group, operated as a civil unit that was semi-autonomous, allowing the separate exercise of legal, fiscal and educational functions, though final authority rested with the Sultan and his government. On the whole, the system delegated considerable power to religious leaders who acted both as agents of the Sultan and as representatives of their religious community. Yet the hierarchy of the millets — with the Muslim millet at the top and the status of the other millets determined on the basis of perceived submission across time — meant that there was always an incentive for people to change millets, tactically or nominally to convert. (This opportunity was not extended to Muslims, however, because apostasy was not allowed until the Tanzimat reforms in the nineteenth century.) Living along borderlines, practising *dipistia* or being a *mezzo-kurt*, that is locating oneself in-between millets and therefore maximizing one’s options (avoiding additional tax if Muslim, or military conscription if non-Muslim, whatever was the worse at a given period) was perhaps the most privileged position to be in. Yet it is important to realize that beyond religious faith a variety of other social tactics and legal statuses were also employed to mitigate the effects of imperial policies and as a means of social mobility, e.g. practices such as *kepin* or contractual concubinage, or adoption of the dress and customs of the rulers, and so on (Sant Cassia, 1986).

This mobility across millets was prominent from the early period of Ottoman rule in Cyprus. As Kyrris points out:

The basic characteristics of that transitory age were a fluidity in ethnic, religious and administrative concepts and institutions and an oscillation between Christianity and Islam, collaboration [with] and revolt against the Ottoman regime in ‘secret’ contact with Western states. (1976: 138)

The changing status of people who converted was less a faith move and more ‘a transfer of loyalty from the Christian to the Muslim leaders’ (1976: 139), something that was well understood by the Ottoman rulers yet considered a necessity for governing the island. Local Christians also understood the rationale and practical need for the ‘temporary’ conversion of individuals, noble as well as common folk, as evidenced from the case of two prominent figures, Memi and Mustafa, who apostatized at the beginning of the Ottoman rule but were mentioned in a capitulation granted to the Cypriots by the Duke of Savoy in 1600, as people who in the case of a successful revolt would be received back to the Greek Church and be given the first vacant bishopric to a member of their family (Hill, 1952: 65–6). A plethora of examples is provided by Kyrris to underscore the symbiotic and syncretistic lifestyle during the Ottoman period, as opposed to the emphasis on the antagonism of ethno-religious groups, which is commonly glorified and exaggerated in the local ethno-nationalist historiographies.
Furthermore, the semi-autonomous character of the millets allowed Ottoman subjects to exploit and occasionally play the jurisdiction of one millet off against the other (Skendi, 1967). As shown in Jennings’ archival research, conversion to Islam was a quick and effective means through which Cypriot men and women got a divorce. If one partner freely decided to convert, the other would be given either the option to convert or accept divorce. The records show that this method of divorce was common for men as well as for women, who sometimes almost immediately married other people, sometimes reaching the decision to divorce by common agreement. (Given that the law forbade Muslims from converting until the nineteenth century, before this period the option was only available to the Zimmis, the non-Muslim or ‘protected’ people) (Jennings, 1993: 137–43). Also, publicly becoming a Muslim was a means for men to become bigamists or polygamyists. In the case of the Linobambakoi, secret or unofficial bigamy was occasionally practised, typically across religions as well as in different regions to support the individual’s double life (Christodoulou, 1972).

It has been suggested by a number of authors that conversion to Islam (and often becoming Linobambakos) or joining the Rum (Greek-Orthodox) Church was especially popular among the Latin-Christian community of Cyprus in the first years of the Ottoman rule (Michell, 1908: 752–3; Gunnis, 1936: 327; cf. Hill, 1952: 305). Given that the Latins were the previous rulers and did not immediately surrender to the Ottomans, the status of survivors was precarious. The Latins were not just fearful of the new Muslim rulers but also of the Greek-Orthodox population that suffered under their rule. Consequently, joining the millet of the new rulers was a guarantee of their safety; or joining the Rum millet, if that was possible, a less spiritually radical option for some Latins. In any case, as mentioned, converting to Islam was the most effective means of displaying allegiance to the new regime, and though mass conversion was never a policy of the Sublime Porte, it was occasionally demanded by the Ottomans if issues of insubordination were raised and in lieu of exile, imprisonment or capital punishment. Perhaps the most famous case in the Ottoman Empire is that of Sabbatai Sevi, the Jewish ‘Messiah’ of Izmir, who spectacularly converted to Islam together with many of his followers in September 1666 (Scholem, 1973). The Sabbateans, or Donmeh, can still be found in Turkey today, mainly in Istanbul. They are publicly Muslims, privately Jews, and interpret the conversion of their Messiah to Islam as apocryphal.

However, conversion to Islam was also discouraged precisely because the Ottoman subjects used it as a tactic to undermine imperial policies and assigned millet duties. Noel Dominique Hurtrel, visiting Cyprus in 1670, comments on the tribute system and its adverse economic effects on the Christian inhabitants of Cyprus:

No wonder that they are very poor, and have scarcely bread to eat the whole year through. Very many of them, unable to bear any longer this cruel tyranny, wish to turn Turk, but many are rejected, because (say their lords) in receiving them into the Moslem faith their tribute would be so much diminished. (Excerpta Cypria, 1908: 233)
Hurtrel does not elaborate on how many the ‘many’ were, or under what conditions the less than many managed to convert. But it seems clear that by at least 1670, if not before, the Ottomans began to see the liability of millet mobility tactics, probably allowing conversions only for those who were more likely genuinely (rather than nominally) to convert.

Nonetheless, other opportunities were also available to Ottoman subjects to escape the traditional millets, specifically by associating themselves with Western powers that increasingly were gaining new rights and immunities for their representatives and protégés in the Ottoman Empire. Visiting Cyprus in 1806, Ali Bey (a pseudonym for the Spaniard Domingo Badía-y-Leyblich) noticed the elevated status of certain Cypriots who managed to put themselves under the protection of a European consul: ‘These protégés enjoy all the immunities of the subjects of the nation which protects them. They are distinguished by a tall black cap of bear’s skin, called calpàc’ (Excerpta Cypria, 1908: 397). An interesting case is mentioned, namely that of Andrea Zimboulaki, who as a protégé of the British consulate was flying the British flag on the roof of his house in Yeroskipou, and ‘had adopted entirely the costume and manners of an Englishman’ (Excerpta Cypria, 1908: 405). Furthermore, as Ali Bey notes, a number of ‘Greeks who were not protégés [were also] wearing the calpàc unnoticed by the Turks’ (Excerpta Cypria, 1908: 397).

Such opportunities increased in the mid-nineteenth century, following from the Ottoman reforms, which made it legally possible for Muslims to apostate (Deringil, 1998, 2000). This also made it easier for Linobambakoi or heterodox Muslims, who were officially registered under the Muslim millet, genuinely or nominally to convert, or re-convert if they so wished, depending on their collective and individual circumstances. The Greek Consul’s Report of 1869 states that the Linobambakoi (10,000 to 15,000 according to his estimates) were given in that same year the right ‘to freely declare their will and to be registered as Christians or Turks’ (Papadopoulos, 1980: A27). For those using religious identity as a tactic this was a period of great excitement, making the most of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and its increased inability to enforce authority vis-à-vis Western powers and their consuls and protégés. During this period, consulate records contain many examples of Cypriots seeking the intervention of European consuls to nullify or reverse the decisions of the local Ottoman authorities based on religious discrimination or ‘mistaken’ religious identity (Papadopoulos, 1980: A1, A3, A4, A7 and C7; Hill, 1952: 217–21).

IV

The advent of British rule in 1878 changed the identity politics game. The British colonial authorities sought to ‘modernize’ rather than abolish the millet system. They retained the religious divisions of the Ottoman administration, and progressively recharged them as ethnic divisions on the basis of which modern governmentality could be exercised. They introduced rudimentary democracy by establishing an ‘advisory’ Legislative Council, where
representation was decided on the basis of two separate electoral rolls. Specifically, following the 1881 Cyprus Census it was decided that nine representatives were going to be elected by ‘Greeks’ (Christians) and three by ‘Turks’ (Muslims). A similar system of democratizing through segregation was replicated at the municipal level. City and village council representation was distributed proportionally, and representatives were elected through separate electoral rolls by their co-religionists. Even though in practice this was not implemented in all councils, the colonial mentality propagated the perception of a deeply divided society comprising two antagonistic groups, a division running down to all minute aspects of public life and decision-making (Pollis, 1973, Markides, 2001).

The contingency and periodic revisions of the census categories through which the Cypriot population was measured and reified provide in themselves a most fascinating narrative. The clearly religious categories of the earlier censuses (for example in the 1881 Census, ‘Mahometan’, ‘Greek Church’, ‘Roman Catholic’, ‘Maronite’, ‘Gregorian’, ‘Church of England’, etc., later on ‘Mahometan’ and ‘Non-Mahometan’) by the time of the 1946 census had changed into ethno-religious (e.g. ‘Moslem Turkish’ and ‘Greek Orthodox’), and by the time of independence into two ethnic, ‘Greek’ and ‘Turkish’, with the ‘others’ denied any ethnicity and brushed aside as religious groups, ‘Armenian’, ‘Maronite’ and ‘Latin’. Categories such as ‘free-thinker’, which measured only one person in the 1881 Census, progressively disappear when the matter becomes ethnic and therefore not something one could opt out of; that is, not at least in the way secular societies allow atheists, agnostics and freethinkers to opt out. Significantly, if secular societies allow in principle — one could even say require — the freedom of individuals to choose or change their religion, this freedom is not extended to choosing or changing one’s ethnicity, unless specific constitutional provisions allow or even demand (like mixed marriages).

What is important to note is that the British colonial authorities did not have to go down this route. In fact, as the colonial archives show, there were no specific instructions from the metropolitan centre that the religious beliefs of the population be ascertained at the 1881 Census. London — which did not include questions on religious beliefs in the Census in Britain — left it to the local colonial governors to decide whether knowledge of religious beliefs was necessary for good governance (Cyprus State Archives: SA1–5698). For example, in Barbados the local colonial authorities decided not to census the population as to the religions it practised (Cyprus State Archives: SA1–5747). That the colonial authorities in Cyprus decided to do so was probably a combination of not wishing to radically modify the existing millet system that people were used to (and some expected to continue), while also creating the necessary conditions for a strategy of divide-and-rule, when expedient. So the decision to ‘measure’ religious beliefs was of great significance, especially since, unlike the Ottomans, the British wish to know the religion of the Cypriot population was not for tax purposes or military conscription, but for developing modern and more liberal forms of governance, such as enacting education and welfare policies.
From this perspective, British colonialism approached the whole question of ethno-religious hybridity and heterogeneity through a strategy that was on the whole ambivalent. On the one hand, it officially ignored the hybrid and in-between; on the other hand, when ethnic communities increasingly put forward nationalist claims the British authorities responded by proposing that Cypriots were a highly heterogeneous group, a melange culture. Thus British policy on the matter was not monolithic but shifted according to historical circumstances.

Note, for example, that the 1881 Census, and subsequent censuses, offered only a single group for Muslims (‘Mahometan’), yet a number of subgroups for Christians, who of course also included the rulers (‘Greek Church’, ‘Roman Catholic’, ‘Maronite’, ‘Gregorian’, ‘Church of England’, ‘Protestant’, ‘Presbyterian’, ‘Wesleyan Methodist’, ‘Baptist’, ‘Plymouth Brethren’, ‘Lutheran’ and ‘Unitarian’; the last four categories returning only one person each). Thus, a number of heterodox Muslim groups, like the Behtashis and the Kizilbash, were not registered. This also concerned the Babis, who can be seen as an entirely different religion altogether; their prophet, Subh-i-Ezel, was actually resident in Cyprus, exiled there by the Ottomans, and during the British colonial period received a state pension (after his death in 1912 the pension was given to his descendants until at least the 1940s) (Lukach, 1913; Papadopoulos, 2002: 93–8). Furthermore, since the modern imaginary saw religious beliefs as mutually exclusive, the community of the Linobambakoi was practically given the possibility of selecting only one category, despite the colonial authorities recognizing their double Muslim-Christian life. A note written by the officer in charge of the 1881 Census assumes that the question of the Linobambakoi had been more or less settled through the census.

It is an interesting fact that all the members, so far as can be ascertained, of the community of the ‘Linobambaki’ [sic] (who were formerly chiefly to be found in the villages of Athiaenou and Liopetri), returned themselves as members of the Orthodox Greek Church. (Barry, 1884: 13)

But more than 20 years later, other colonial officials such as Michell, continue to find that the Linobambakoi are still an organized community and actually in regions not mentioned in the note above. As mentioned, Michell also identifies them as a ‘Muslim-Christian sect’. This begs the question why the modern (secular) imaginary could conceive ‘Freethinker’ or ‘Plymouth Brethren’ as respectable categories of ‘religious belief’, but not ‘Muslim-Christians’.

Beyond this point, it has been suggested that there was a deliberate move by the colonial authorities, especially with respect to the first census, to massage the size of the population so as to make the case for two separate sizeable/viable communities: one of Muslim/Turkish origin, the other of Greek/Christian origin. From this perspective, it was in the interests of the British to subdivide the Christian community as much as possible and not the less sizeable Muslim community, as well as present the issue of the Linobambakoi as being ‘solved’ in favour of the Christians; that is to say, not registering the fact that there were many Linobambakoi around that could further boost the size of
the Greek Orthodox community. The non-publication of village-by-village results, which were nonetheless available, but only of District results in the 1881 Census, added further suspicion to propositions that the British massaged the result in order to build an early case for bi-ethnic governance (Papadopoulos, 2002: 130–2). The fact that the Muslim community measured around 25% of the population in the 1881 Census, but later 18%, is viewed by some as evidence of British deceit by way of legitimating bicomunalism, while others qualify this claim with the proposition that the Linobambakoi were tactically beginning to shift their allegiance to Christianity. Whatever the case, the British colonial policy institutionalized bicomunalism in ways the Ottoman empire never did; namely, as part of a ‘democratic’ system of governance that assumed and enhanced the existence of separate homogeneous religious and increasingly ethnic communities with elected representatives. The establishment of two separate Boards of Education, created with the otherwise noble purpose of fighting illiteracy, imported teachers and books from the two ‘motherlands’, and as Pollis put it, ‘probably accounts more than any other single factor for the assimilation of notions of Greek versus Turkish nationality among the populace’ (1973: 589).

However, when the local population, especially the Greek Christians, used their nationality as a way of challenging the British presence on the island, British policy was to promote the idea that (Greek) Cypriots were really a melange culture, a hybrid community with only dubious connections to ancient Greek culture as well as modern Greece (Given, 1997, 1998). In other words, homogeneity was used to support the bi-ethnic model of governance, and heterogeneity was employed to undermine nationalist claims and aspirations. This had the obvious effects of creating a defensive attitude among the Cypriots, further supporting pressures of homogenization and viewing cross-ethnic hybridity as implicit betrayal, legitimating the continuation of imperial domination.

Hybrid groups came up for grabs by the two rival, and officially censused, ethno-religious communities in Cyprus. The Linobambakoi were pressured to make a final choice, either for Christianity/Greekness or Islam/Turkishness. The Orthodox Church and Islamic authorities were mobilized to gain their allegiance; the latter with successes in Lurudjina and partly in Tylliria (where itinerant imams made good use of Ottoman financial help), the former with more successes elsewhere in Cyprus where the bishoprics and monasteries exerted more social and economic power. The Holy See was also involved in trying to ‘reconvert’ them to Catholicism, though with very limited success. Even the usurers of Limassol were employed (and according to one church historian more effectively) in luring entire Linobambak villages into Orthodoxy (Egglezakis, 1996: 597).

The momentous choice of moving from the ‘hybrid’ to the ‘pure’ was often celebrated in heroi-comic ways. In the case of opting for Christianity:

It became standard practice upon a ‘conversion’ for church bells to be rung and guns fired in the middle of the night, for a baptism to take place, and for a man (for it was typically a man) to be paraded through the village eating a large chunk of pork. (Bryant, 2004: 66)
As Bryant puts it, this had important implications for the politics of identity in Cyprus:

What is significant about such incidents is that before this period [the British colonial period] the linovambakoi had not been ascribed some ‘underlying’ identity, some ‘true’ identity that was hidden behind name or outward signs of confession. Their identity was in their practice, which was both Christian and Muslim, and in their kinship networks and friendships. They were marginal and ignored. They became important only in a period in which it was considered important for them to declare their ‘true’ Greek [and I would add Turkish] identity through professing their ‘true’ faith. Hence, religion became a part of a fixed, ascribed identity. (Bryant, 2004: 66)

This is not to suggest that the formal ascribing of ethno-religious identity had the same dramatic effects for all Cypriots. For some, it would have been easier and more ‘natural’ than others. For others, it became easier and more ‘natural’ following the ‘progress’ of education, which followed strict ethno-religious lines (with the exception of the English School in Nicosia, which was a colonial institution and only a few of the local Cypriot elite sent their children there). The crucial point is that the bi-ethnic system of governance established by the British colonial authorities forced individuals to choose between religious, social and cultural aspects of their identity and repress those aspects that transgressed or contradicted the official definition of who they were or ought to have been. Typically, important syncretic sites, such as the shrine of Kirklar or Agioi Saranta, holy to both Muslims and Christians (besides the Linobambakoi), increasingly lost their religious significance for both (Luke, 1920: 38–47); as has the ‘secular’ shrine of Santa Caterina in Potamia, visited by people across communities, lighting candles and paying their respects in one of the residences of the last legendary Queen of Cyprus, the Venetian Caterina Cornaro.

The formalization of bicommunualism in the London-Zürich Agreements that led to the establishment of the RoC propagated the colonial mentality of dividing and segregating the population. By this, I do not want to suggest that the local ethno-nationalist pursuits are blameless, especially how these contributed to the hardening of ethno-religious identity and the eventual territorial division of the island. Nor do I want to suggest that a bicommunal framework for settling the Cyprus problem is impertinent and should be abolished. The symbolic value that ethno-religious identities acquired in Cyprus and the ‘security’ (however real or illusory) they continue to furnish those that feel these identities adequately and sufficiently represent them makes it extremely difficult to brush aside bicommunalism and still deliver a ‘meaningful’ and ‘just’ settlement.

This should not mean, however, that we cannot critically engage bicommunalism under the false impression that we are undermining realistic prospects for a solution. Nor does the otherwise correct perception that the anti-colonial rhetoric is nowadays employed to support maximalist positions.
and demonize foreign powers detract from the fact that the colonial structures have left a deep mark on how Cypriots think of themselves and each other. Coming to terms with the historical contingency of bicomunalism and its diverse and ambivalent effects on individual Cypriots can actually sensitize interested parties to become less fixated with promoting ‘true’ and ‘perennial’ identities on the ground. What is more, there are currently individuals and groups that transverse the bicomunal frame of reference and whose voice must be heard. The status and predicament of these groups and individuals cannot wait the settlement of the Cyprus problem.

Consider, for example, the plight of Greek Cypriots living in the north and Turkish Cypriots living in the south. Both groups lack basic liberties and both regimes, north and south of the Green Line, offer various rationales that support derogations or temporary suspension of rights. It was not until very recently that Turkish Cypriots living in the south (and officially considered as citizens of the RoC) have been given the right to vote in Presidential and Parliamentary elections. This has been agreed only after a Turkish Cypriot living in the south took the RoC to the European Court of Human Rights and won (Aziz v Cyprus, 2004). Furthermore, the Republic, through the Minister of the Interior, has recently rejected the application of Turkish Cypriots to contest the 2006 parliamentary elections on a separate electoral roll as provided by the 1960 constitution. Arguments of the kind that Turkish Cypriots have no legal standing to contest the elections as they withdrew as a community from the RoC and now live in the north run counter to the discriminating fact that this group explicitly applied to return to the RoC and that Greek Cypriots living in the north can both elect and be elected to offices in the south.

The legal status of Greek Cypriots living in the north is worse, in terms of daily discriminatory practices as well as in relation to TRNC’s constitutional provisions and Turkey’s overall responsibility as an occupying power. The European Court of Human Rights pointed out a number of violations in its ruling on Cyprus v Turkey (2001), including discrimination and degrading treatment, and violations of freedoms of movement, expression, conscience and religion, as well as the right to education. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Resolution 1333 (2003), which examined the rights of both Greek Cypriots and Maronites living in the north, stated that:

\[\text{[it was] particularly shocked by the imposed division of families, the prohibition on young people returning to their homes, the arbitrary confiscations and expropriations and the general climate of apprehension and uncertainty, even fear, to which members of these communities are deliberately subjected. (para. 8)}\]

Though the situation has improved since 2003, it still leaves a lot to be desired, and in any case it is well below the standards of the European Convention of Human Rights.⁶

The case of the Maronites is particularly interesting because they have managed to negotiate, through the intervention of the Holy See, certain rights and freedoms in the north that Greek Cypriots have not been able to enjoy (even the PACE 1333 Resolution calls for Greek Cypriots living in the north to be
granted ‘at least the same rights as those already granted to Maronites’). This has created a degree of resentment among Greek Cypriots, exacerbated recently when additional rights concerning the Maronites were announced in the north. Specifically, those Maronites who express their willingness to reside permanently in the north are to be granted the necessary TRNC papers and identity cards so that they can fully participate in the social and economic life of the TRNC. A number of Maronites have already taken up the option (Politis, 9 March 2006). This has fuelled anew the debate concerning the community allegiances of the Maronites; how ‘Greek Cypriot’ are they, and to what extent are they using the Maronite identity tactically in order to maximize their options and get the best deal from both sides; being Greek Cypriot in the south and TRNC citizens in the north? In short, their formal ethnicity (‘Greek Cypriot’), which of course has no historical basis but is only a post-colonial designation, has now become a trap and has to be negotiated away or anew, in order for the exercise of their rights in the north to become socially acceptable in the south. Still, it should also be noted that the Maronites’ peculiar status is precisely what allows them a certain freedom to manoeuvre across the bicommmunal divide, which other groups lack.

This new situation has split the Maronite community. Some of their representatives think that this is an opportunity that needs to be exploited to the full, while others feel that before anything happens the Greek-Cypriot government should fully and unequivocally endorse their taking up the offer of the Turkish-Cypriot regime. Just to complicate matters even further, there have been instances of different Maronite representatives in the north and south, some recognized by the authorities in the north, some by those in the south, so the favourite Cypriot game of recognition has been replicated within and across the Maronite community (Constantinou and Papadakis, 2001). Recently, and following the Turkish-Cypriot initiatives in the north, Maronites complained that the Greek-Cypriot government had deliberately not credited agricultural subsidies to their bank accounts, as commonly done in the past, instead giving the cheques to the Greek-Cypriot designated representative, so that those who do not accept his authority are ‘essentially made to recognise him’. Moreover, the RoC President, Tassos Papadopoulos, made an interesting, if ambiguous, statement that can be read both as a note of support and as a veiled threat. After attending mass in the Maronite cathedral in Nicosia celebrating the day of St Maron, he stated that he went to the celebrations ‘in order to reconfirm what is common knowledge, namely that the Maronite community is an inalienable part of the Greek-Cypriot community [anapospasto meros tês ellēnikupriakès koinotētas]’ (Politis, 13 February 2006).

The position of the Gypsies is more precarious and ambivalent than that of the Maronites. The Gypsies are at the margins of Cypriot society and, like elsewhere in the world, they have been the victims of discrimination for decades. The fact that they have not been organized in order to make claims in the way the Maronites and others have done, has rendered their position even more marginal. But, ironically, this very marginalization has also made it possible for them to acquire a certain critical distance from the two dominant communities in Cyprus. Thus, more than any other group in Cyprus,
their very existence and lifestyle challenges the dominant bicommmunal framework. As the Ombudswoman in the south confirmed, their legal status seems to be *sui generis* in Cyprus, given that there is no evidence of most of them having formally opted to join the Turkish-Cypriot or Greek-Cypriot communities at independence or thereafter (Report A/II 839/2003). So they find themselves literally in between; they have suffered but also, predictably, utilized their peculiar status to the full, tactically shifting ‘ethnic’ allegiance according to the circumstances. It was quite clear when we were recently conducting interviews with Turkish-Cypriot colleagues in Limassol that they were shifting position according to ‘who’ was asking the question, sometimes complaining about Greek-Cypriot attempts to ethnicize them (their children being sent to the church at school) and at other times about Turkish-Cypriot mistreatment and discrimination while in the north.8

Following the 1974 division, Gypsies found themselves either north or south of the Green Line; but with the vast majority of them actually moving to the Morphou region in the north, given the number of vacant Greek-Cypriot properties and subsequent opportunities there. From this perspective, on the ground the majority of them seemed to have identified ‘ethnically’ with the Turkish-Cypriot community. In 2000, however, when work opportunities became scarce in the north, a number of them started moving to the south. Initially, there was government confusion in the south as to whether they should be treated as ‘Turkish Cypriots’ or not, given that they themselves insisted ‘they were Gypsies and not Turkish Cypriots’ ([Cyprus Mail](http://www.cyprus-mail.com), 16 February 2000). When their numbers increased to three-digit figures, the Greek-Cypriot government tried out some rough tactics by treating those who had no identity papers (in practice, most of them) as ‘illegal immigrants’ and putting them into prison. When the Greek-Cypriot Attorney-General pointed out that this was illegal, and that the Republic would be internationally accountable for this action (especially at the time it was claiming that the Turkish-Cypriot regime was mistreating Gypsies in the north), the police claimed that they were never put into prison as ‘prisoners’ and that nobody was stopping the Gypsies from leaving ([Cyprus Mail](http://www.cyprus-mail.com), 19 and 20 April 2001). The police only put them into prison because they did not know where to accommodate them! The Greek-Cypriot Minister of Justice and Public Order also let it be known that the Gypsies were suspected of espionage for the Turkish army ([Cyprus Mail](http://www.cyprus-mail.com), 3 April 2001). When all these failed, and given the media focus home and abroad on the matter, the government decided to arrange for ‘appropriate places’ for them to stay. Given that no Greek-Cypriot village or district seemed keen to accept them in their locale, the government suggested makeshift places near Kotsiati next to the Nicosia rubbish site and Kofinou near the main Cyprus abattoir, both sites quite telling as to how the Gypsies were officially and popularly perceived ([Cyprus Mail](http://www.cyprus-mail.com), 14 April 2001 and 5 February 2002). In the end, and following protests from the Gypsies, as well as from locals, they were moved to the Turkish-Cypriot section of Limassol and the village of Makounta in Paphos ([Cyprus Mail](http://www.cyprus-mail.com), 28 September 2003 and 20 November 2003). But by this time the Greek-Cypriot government had realized the communication value of properly treating ‘our Gypsy compatriots’ who fled the ‘oppressive regime in the north’.
What is important to note in relation to the Gypsies, beyond the unacceptable though perhaps unsurprising harsh treatment they received both north and south of the Green Line, is how far their very presence and actions challenge the bicomunal framework in Cyprus. For example, it seems that a number of them have baptized their children, or some of their children, even though they themselves are not baptized. In some instances, they both baptized and circumcised the same child in typical Linobambak fashion. Those in the south appear to have consented to their children going to Greek-Cypriot schools, but the Turkish-Cypriot Teachers’ Association has taken the Greek-Cypriot government to the Supreme Court of Justice in the south, claiming that their education should be separate, as provided by the 1960 constitution.9 So both ethnic communities, even when they discriminate against the Gypsies, make claims as to the Gypsies’ formal ethnicity. This may also explain the unwillingness of both communities to accept any reference to a ‘Roma Community’ with specific cultural rights as part of a future settlement of the Cyprus problem (including rudimentary attempts to preserve Kurbetcha, the Romany dialect some, especially the older people, speak).

Beyond communities and groups, there are also isolated individuals who have managed to live lives that cut across the ethno-religious divide. Two notable cases are those of the shepherd of Androlikou (a Turkish Cypriot married to a Greek Cypriot and living in the south) and of Fatma Usta in Potamia, both of which have been celebrated in the documentary ‘Our Wall’ (Chrysanthou and Kizilyurek, 1993). The case of the latter is especially interesting, if somehow exoticized, because until her death two years ago she very consciously transversed ethno-religious boundaries and fully embraced a hybrid culture. I interviewed Usta several times, as well as a number of her co-villagers in Potamia.10 She was a Turkish Cypriot who had remained in the south after 1974. What was most notable about her was that even though she had no doubts as to her ethnicity (‘Turkish’) or religion (‘Islam’) she wore the black attire of a Greek-Orthodox widow. She had not been baptized, but she crossed herself, smoked the house in Christian fashion and occasionally joined mass. She also tried to receive communion, though this was denied to her. She still visited the mosque when she went to the north and has been buried in the Turkish cemetery of Potamia. In her single-room house, three pictures were prominent and quite revealing: Archbishop Makarios, Kemal Attaturk and King George.

In her village, Usta was liked by some, disliked by most and tolerated by all. Those who liked her saw her as an independent, even heroic figure, who stayed in the south despite almost all Turkish Cypriots moving to the north. Her presence was a reminder of the times of peaceful coexistence, and to that extent they respected and admired her flexible approach to religion and ethnicity. Those who disliked her saw her as a crude opportunist who stayed behind for the government benefits, and despite Greek-Cypriot ‘hospitality’ she was constantly ‘biting the hand that fed her’, by criticizing the nationalist policies of successive Greek-Cypriot governments. (Typically those people tended to forget her criticisms of Turkish-Cypriot nationalists.) Those who disliked her also saw her as a kind of witch, capitalizing from fortune-telling and mixing spirituality, and therefore as someone who had
no right entering and polluting the church (though at the same time acknowledging that it was not within their power to stop her).

In my interviews with her, I found her dynamic and outspoken. She clearly relished transgressing ethno-religious borders. When I took her to the Pergamos checkpoint before the opening of the barricades in 2003, she told me how much she enjoyed teasing new guards at the gate who did not know her; first talking to them in Greek dressed in her typical Greek attire, and then changing into Turkish and asking to see her son or daughter-in-law who lived a few hundred metres away. ‘I am America’, she boasted, by way of explaining her unique power to cross borders and not bothering with what other people thought or said about her. There were definitely strategic considerations for adopting particular identities in particular contexts, but there was also a cosmopolitan spirituality animating her behaviour. On the question of why she felt the need to visit the church, she explained that her father who was one of the few educated in the village had in his house both the Bible and the Qur’an. He would chant in the church and pray in the mosque, and he saw no contradiction. She claimed that she was brought up to think, like her father, that Christianity and Islam where sister religions and that both Christians and Muslims were ‘people of the book’. ‘It is not who or what you are but how you go to the church that matters’ she said, criticizing those who would go to the church unwashed, or with indecent clothing, or bad thoughts. She liked Islam because it was less formal, but she felt nice and at peace when she visited the church. ‘Why could I not go to both?’ she wondered.

VI

The bicommunal system of governance has had adverse political effects in Cyprus, not the least of which was the homogenization of ethnic groups and the rise of rival ethno-nationalisms and intercommunal violence. It has provided a necessary though not sufficient cause for what became known as the ‘Cyprus problem’. Under the pretext of the ‘problem’, consecutive regimes of power legitimated policies of dispossession, displacement and suspension or selective enforcement of human rights. Cyprus was morally divided before it was territorially divided. This bicommunal system was not inevitable, but a ruler’s device (initially Ottoman, modernized and perfected by the British) which paradoxically aimed at supporting both ‘good governance’ and ‘imperial domination’. As such, and precisely because its contingency has been framed as a necessity for human emancipation, it helped to solidify ethno-religious identities and naturalize ethno-nationalist claims, be it enosis or taksim or co-opted ‘independence’.

Bicommunalism as the dominant form of thinking about the destiny of collectivities in the island of Cyprus has been entrenched to such an extent that, realistically, it can no longer be challenged directly. In the short and medium terms, the bicommunal mentality can only be challenged tangentially (and should be challenged tangentially, not in order to deny the collective rights of non-majority communities, as some in the south hope, but
to lessen the negative and wide-ranging effects it has for individual rights and freedoms all over Cyprus). In doing so, local intelligence can be retrieved from a variety of subaltern actors subverting bicommunalism and ethnic homogenization on the ground.

I have outlined above a range of different tactics through which subaltern Cypriots historically tried to resist the policies and demands of successive regimes of power: such as, perform yet mock the public transcript, simulate identities that allow one to change jurisdiction, feign deference yet avoid complete identification with clerical, ethnic and imperial regimes, use the leverage of foreign powers where feasible, and so on.\(^\text{11}\) At a general level, what these tactics have in common is the Ostrich’s discursive mobility vis-à-vis the Bedouin that was mentioned above: namely, I can never be reduced to your definition of who or what I am; who or what I am always depends on what your policy is! It is a combination of what postcolonial authors call ‘strategic essentialism’, in other words, fully utilizing performed aspects of identity to pursue juridical and ethical claims against power (Spivak, 1993), yet quickly moving across other aspects of one’s identity, if circumstances so require, when power regimes change their policies.\(^\text{12}\)

By this I am not trying to paint an idealized picture of hybridity. The available options for individuals will always depend on socio-political structures as well as, in the end, the willingness of individuals tactically to mobilize different aspects of their identity. To that extent, it is pertinent to reinvent the Linobambakoi — the cross-religious and cross-ethnic Cypriots — who are not just a historical and now extinct community. The Linobambakos, following from how Derrida reconfigures the Marrano in \textit{Aporias}, can be:

... anyone who remains faithful to a secret that he has not chosen, in the very place where he lives, in the home of the inhabitant or of the occupant, in the home of the first or the second coming, in the very place where he stays without saying no but without identifying himself as belonging to. (Derrida, 1993: 81)

Today, the Linobambakoi are all those who live in Cyprus, yet without identifying with the monumental nationalist histories propagated by the local regimes of power. They are those who remain faithful to the secret that their identity exceeds imperial categories and limits, exceeds the conventional representations of political discourse. They are those who counterfeit the political currency, and so corrupt the purity of ethno-religious identity (Constantinou, 2004: 132–9). Under aporetic conditions, to be a Linobambakos is not a choice but a destiny. In these extreme bicommunal times, one is tempted to say that the only ‘true Cypriot’, the only genuinely postcolonial Cypriot, is the Linobambakos. But that is a figure of speech whose value is rhetorical.

The condition of Turkish Cypriots today has been suggested as in some ways akin to that of the Linobambakoi, with the designation used mostly in negative terms. Since the opening of the barricades in April 2003, tens of thousands of Turkish Cypriots have acquired (or renewed) internationally recognized RoC passports, which they currently hold together with the passports of the breakaway and unrecognized TRNC. With such documents, they can also make use of public health and social services in the south. Initial
suggestions by the Denktash regime in the north that this constituted national betrayal have been ignored since he lost power, and ignored even by his own grandchildren, as reported by the media. However, these practices have only limited impact in challenging the dominant bicommunal system. It could be said that in certain respects they also reinforce it, given that the RoC is officially bicommunal. But one could say that this kind of catachresis points in the right direction, that is, exploiting windows of opportunity to bypass official edicts that limit identity without necessarily extending ethnic allegiance to the ethnocratic regime of power that makes this possible.

In the long term, and so long as Turkey’s European Union (EU) candidacy remains on course, the European dimension (both the EU and the European Court of Human Rights) could enhance transcommunal practices both north and south of the Green Line, especially when these ‘Cypriot’ transgressions concern the basic freedoms and normal practices that Europeans already enjoy in Cyprus, let alone elsewhere in Europe. The International Crisis Group pointed out in a recent report, following the post-referendum impasse in Cyprus, that it is now high time for unilateral action (Europe Report, no. 171, 2006). Crucially, this should not only be a call and responsibility of governments, but also of individuals. Cypriots of whatever ethno-religious colour and shade that remain faithful to the secret of their identity should unilaterally call to account regimes of power that vilify and simplify their (historically constructed) identities and restrict how they can live and act across the territorial and mental divide. This is by way of saying that I strongly believe we don’t need to ‘solve’ the Cyprus problem to regain basic human rights, freedoms and decency in Cyprus. We do not need yet another strategy for a solution (of which we have plenty), but tactics in lieu of a solution. Social, legal, artistic, intellectual tactics: tactics that unsettle ethnic reification and bring forth historical insight as to the contingency of identity; tactics that expose the bias and discrimination of local ‘laws of necessity’ and embarrass local regimes before international legal, political and social forums; tactics that encourage Cypriots not to follow, without question, the contradictory and hypocritical discourses of political elites; tactics that help Cypriots learn to play one regime off against the other without having feelings of guilt about who they are or what they must be … tactics that honour and keep alive the memory of a Fatma Usta. Burdened with their aporias at the crossroads of bicommunal identity, Cypriots may thus begin to follow the pragmatic paths and shortcuts of their ancestors.

Notes

I acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust, which funded the initial research for this project, and the critical and insightful comments of participants on the ‘Cyprus Panel’ at the ECPR 2006 Joint Session of Panels in Nicosia, colleagues at PRIO Cyprus Centre and Diana Markides, Necati Polat, Oliver Richmond and two anonymous reviewers.

1. By aporia I mean a paradox and an impasse, perplexity as to which route to follow. If one opts for a particular political route, then one legitimates this because one
is already perceived as that; and that is even if one does not necessarily condone the this, nor feel the that fairly and adequately represents her. For a sustained reflection on the concept of aporia, see Derrida (1993).

2. The violence explicit and implicit in Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot claims to ‘self’-determination is a case in point and insightfully analysed by Polat (2002).

3. Following complaints of discrimination from Greek-Cypriot nationals, the ombudswoman has recently criticized the rare and only voluntary military service in the Cyprus National Guard for Maronites, Armenians and Latins and compulsory conscription for all other ‘Greek Cypriots’. See Phileleftheros, 14 March 2006.


5. It should be noted, however, that Kyrris is often also guided by political considerations in support of the post-1974 ‘peaceful coexistence thesis’ that emerged among Greek Cypriots in order to legitimize the reunification of Cyprus.


7. Politis, 26 March 2006. The Maronites living in the north have also complained that they are discriminated against both by the Turkish-Cypriot and the Greek-Cypriot governments in terms of agricultural rights and subsidies, though in relation to the Greek-Cypriot government ‘discriminatory practices’ may also be the result of EU regulations and the complexity/impossibility of implementing economic support in the north. Complaints extend to the absence of policies for the preservation of their distinctive Cypriot Arabic language, hampered by the fact that they are constitutionally recognized as a distinct ‘religious group’ but not as an ‘ethnic community’.

8. Interviews were conducted along with Mete Hatay and Ayla Gürel on 17 February 2007.

9. The TC Teachers’ Association is primarily and rightly referring to the rights of Turkish Cypriots living in Limassol, though it may not always be easy to distinguish who is ‘ethnically’ Turkish Cypriot and who is a Gypsy, which of course refers back to the question on whether the Gypsies should be ‘claimed’ by the one or the other community or none (see Cyprus Mail, 9 April 2005). For an insightful discussion of the debates and problematic policies surrounding Roma/Gypsy education in Cyprus, see Trimikliniotis and Demetriou (2006).

10. I had three long interviews with Usta (on 28 November 2002, 10 April 2003 and 16 July 2003) as well as shorter discussions with her and her co-villagers at other times.


12. In this sense, I concur with the view of moving away from a modernist ‘either/or’ mentality to a postmodern ‘and’ one, as suggested by Diez (2002). And, here, supranationalist identity and supranationalist sovereignty can be utilized to neutralize the adverse policies of the local regimes, though I would be cautious not to freely delegate contested governance spaces to international actors; see Richmond (2006).

13. But note, in practice it is mono-communal, because in 1964 it suspended, through laws of necessity, the exercise of the collective communal rights of Turkish Cypriots following their withdrawal from government, something that, ironically, was supported by Turkish-Cypriot nationalists planning the partition of the island.

References


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