

# **Land, Fertility Rites and the Veneration of Female Saints: Exploring Body Rituals at the Tomb of Mary in Jerusalem**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the connections between rituals, embodiment, and territorial claims by taking stock of Christian Orthodox rites at the Tomb of Mary in Jerusalem. As part of a comprehensive ethnography of this shrine, I have examined a wide array of body-based female practices that revolve around Mary's tomb. By rejuvenating embodied practices that are associated with fertility, parturition and maternity, devotees enlist the grotto's womb-like interior as a platform for kissing, touching, crawling, bending, and other physical acts of devotion that make for a powerful body-based experience. As demonstrated herein, the mimetic journey of a fetus/pilgrim through this womb-tomb expanse elicits a sense of rebirth, which is analogous to reclaiming the land and establishing a "motherly" alternative to the masculine and bellicose disposition in Israel/Palestine.

## **Keywords**

Body based rituals, territoriality, Orthodox Christianity, Tomb of Mary, embodiment, womb-tomb, Ethnography, Jerusalem

## **Introduction**

The present article focuses on the nexus between rituals, embodiment, and territorial claims through the lens of Marian worship in Jerusalem. In recent decades, Jerusalem's sacred landscape has been significantly altered by a host of ongoing political tensions, as well as the close proximity between various Christian, Muslim, and Jewish streams

that inhabit this contested city. Among the places that have been influenced by these developments are shrines dedicated to female saints.

These sites and their attendant fertility customs have long been a wellspring of religious innovation in the Land of Israel/Palestine. As part of the above-mentioned transformation, the region's female saint shrines – be they new or well-established – are going through a revival. Examples include Mary's Tomb, the shrine of Mariam Baouardy of Ibillin,<sup>1</sup> Our Lady on the Wall,<sup>2</sup> the Milk Grotto,<sup>3</sup> the Tomb of Rachel the Matriarch,<sup>4</sup> the grave of Rachel the wife of Rabbi Akiva,<sup>5</sup> and the burial site of Miriam the Laundress.<sup>6</sup> The centerpiece of this paper will be Christian Orthodox devotion at Mary's Tomb, which is also known as Gethsemane Church. The site is primarily under the control of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem (henceforth the Patriarchate) – the oldest institution of its kind in Jerusalem.

As part of my ethnography, I have examined a wide assortment of body-based female rituals at the Tomb of Mary. The findings shed light on the interplay between rituals, embodiment, and territoriality, namely the manner in which corporeal rituals tie into land, religious architecture, and cityscape. I show how devotees' emphasis on corporeal practices and symbols of fertility, rebirth, and maternity at this ancient grotto invigorates the Christian imagination with respect to land ownership and minority identity. These rituals, which I term “womb-tomb venerations,” are manifested in an exceedingly tense, multi-dimensional context: the well-documented Jewish-Muslim struggle in Israel/Palestine; the unrest therein between various Christian denominations; the freighted relations between the Orthodox Patriarchate and both the state of Israel and the Palestinian Authority; as well as the internal strife within the local Orthodox church pitting its predominately ethnic Greek clergy against its Arab-Palestinian laity.

Against this backdrop, the fertility and parturition rituals of Christian Orthodox minorities at Mary's Tomb give rise to the following questions: What is the meaning of corporeal venerations at female shrines? And how are womb-tomb sites being experienced by pilgrims? My ethnographic findings point to a rich polysemy in all that concerns the symbols and rites at the shrine under review. That said, this article will concentrate on three major elements of the devotional enterprise. First, while grounded

in ancient canonical traditions of the Virgin's Dormition (Greek: Koimesis), most of the practices that were observed at this shrine consist of body-based fertility rituals that imitate childbirth. Second, whereas the crypt itself is dedicated to the Virgin's final days on earth, devotees tend to engage in customs that pertain to rebirth, fertility, and wellbeing. Third, corporeal practices are also being used as a bullhorn for staking a claim to the land. By rejuvenating embodied practices that are associated with fertility, motherhood, and parturition, the Marian rite in Jerusalem enables worshippers to mimic birth; in parallel, these actions serve as a means for asserting ownership rights and visualizing an alternative, feminine-cum-Christian social disposition for the region. As argued throughout this paper, the embodied womb-tomb rituals that imitate childbirth mirror the political nature of this expanse. In other words, the political and the devotional (along with the thaumaturgic) are evinced at one and the same time.

### **Resistance through womb-tomb structures and body-based rituals**

The case of Mary's Tomb allows us to discuss female saint shrines from two new perspectives: embodiment and territoriality. My reading of the body-based rituals at this site leans on three schools of thought. The first camp focuses on how particular social groups, like utopian and fundamentalist communities, set themselves apart from others by fostering distinctive corporeal practices (Brown, 1988; BS Turner, 1997; Ware, 1997; Bartkowski, 2005; Davidman, 2011). Mauss (1934: 315) demonstrates how these norms and socialization techniques ratchet up members' dedication to the group and insulate them from the outside world (also see Griffith 2004). Contributing significantly to this line of thought, Douglas (1966, 1973) assays numerous metaphorical possibilities for non-verbal communication and the sense of belonging that are offered by corporeal rituals. According to Victor Turner (1967) liminal customs are analogous to the embodied variety, especially those imitating "gestation, parturition and suckling." Eliade (1973: 103) highlights the devotional importance of the notion of rebirth, pointing to the cyclical growth and wilting of plants as evidence of a non-dyadic link between death and regeneration (also see Rennie, 2006). What's more, Eliade (1958) claims that such rituals involve a "coincidentia oppositorum" (coincidence of opposites). A fitting summation of this idea is Victor Turner's observation (1967) that chance occurrences of incongruous processes within a single representation inform the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor

that, yet is both. Drawing on this corpus, I interpret the Tomb of Mary to be a center for manifesting embodied rituals and experiences in a womb-tomb setting.

Womb tombs are enclosed, dimly lit, and in many instances cave-like structures that house the tomb of a venerated figure (Stadler and Luz, 2014: 2). These sorts of venues are also characterized by small and uncommonly low entrances that force visitors to bend down and frequently brush up against the side of the door. Consistent with these shrines' cave-like properties, the front entrance often serves as both their lone portal and main (or only) source of light. For this reason, the further one gets from the point of ingress, the darker and more womb-like the interior becomes. Underscoring the differences between light and darkness, sacred and profane, and life and death, this sacred architecture invariably dictates the movement within the site (Stadler and Luz, 2014: 3). At most womb tombs, the narrow entrance leads to a small chamber or area featuring one or more sepulchers. This expanse occasionally takes the form of a long, narrow, and dimly lit passage that is reminiscent of the human birth canal. When humid, it perhaps symbolizes a uterus as well. Given the layout, visitors are indeed compelled to proceed through these spaces like a fetus emerging from its mother's inner recesses. This sort of venue also constitutes a *coincidentia oppositorum*, for its practices are tightly linked to life, birth, and rejuvenation, as well as demise.

The second body of literature explores worship through the prism of devotional landscapes and architecture. Coleman and Eade (2004) describe how the environment of a shrine or pilgrimage route – its artistic and architectural elements, the surrounding physical terrain, and even attendant legends – endows the place with sanctity and shapes its rite. Some of these realms feature venues that symbolize the human body. Anthropologists and archaeologists have shown that these types of embodied representations are scattered throughout the physical geometry of social landscapes (e.g., Tilley, 1996: 239; Scarre, 2011). In fact, womb-like caves began hosting religious ceremonies and rituals before assuming the functions of a human abode (Mumford, 1961; Heyden, 1975; Humphrey and Vitebsky, 2003; Humphrey and Laidlaw, 1994; Healy, 2007; Brady and Prufer, 2005). From as far back as 18,000 BCE, hunter-gatherers painted and sculpted figurines in caves as part of their efforts to cope with the paradoxes of fertility and barrenness, life and death (Kostof, 1985). These same ideas undergird the design of womb tombs to this day and age (Gimbutas, 2001).

A third school of thought posits that devotional landscapes reflect not only a region's physical appearance and symbolic elements, but its political and power structures as well (Kong, 2004). Scholars of this persuasion are interested in how shrines and their attendant rituals challenge the social order. Kong (2004) persuasively argues that the ideologically variegated, contested, and exceedingly politicized attributes of holy places derive from their socio-spatial nature. Similarly, Eade and Sallnow (1991: 5, 10; also see Chidester and Linenthal, 1995) contend that sacred sites entail a farrago of imported, often disputed, and radically polarizing interests, perceptions, images, and discourses regarding the object(s) of sanctification. In consequence, many of these venues, particularly those with competing ownership claims over a tangible space, are the scene of intense power struggles between groups locked in complex religious, political, national, ethnic, and territorial disputes (Bowman, 1991, 1993; Bax, 1995; Harris, 1997; Herrero, 1999; Berger et al., 2010).

Indeed, quite a few shrines in Israel/Palestine, not least those belonging to Arab minorities, find themselves on the frontlines of all-too-violent conflicts (Luz, 2008). Insofar as the Holy Land's growing "pilgrimage market" is concerned, worship at female saint tombs constitutes a unique example of how body-based rituals that derive from ancient architectural models give voice to and bolster ethno-political, feminine, and religiously-inspired territorial claims (Saltman, 2002) in a politically polarized context. In response to the Judaization of Israel/Palestine and the rising popularity of the area's Jewish sites (Wilkinson, 1990; Limor, 2007; Ben-Ami, 1998; Sered, 1986; Bilu, 2010; Reiter, 2010), local Christian and Muslim groups have placed a greater emphasis on their own consecrated space. Rabinowitz (2001) has referred to Israeli Palestinians as a "trapped minority" in an ethnocratic state.<sup>7</sup> Although minority rights are protected by Israeli law and guaranteed by the country's Declaration of Independence, this population's identity is at odds with the increasingly Jewish character of the state (also see Dumper, 2002). As part of their efforts to resist Jewish hegemony and buttress their own religious identity, these groups are turning to reconstructed shrines as outlets for defining and asserting their rights to the land.

The ensuing disquisition on rituals performed at Mary's Tomb places this article at the confluence of three bodies of literature: corporeal rituals, fertility, and devotional resurgence. In the pages ahead, I will push the limits of the above-cited theoretical

works by projecting some of their insights on shrines revolving around the reenactment of birth, which minority groups simultaneously use as part of their religious observance and in order to advance territorial claims. My ethnography of the Tomb of Mary indicates that, as opposed to text- or prayer- oriented rituals, most of the body-based varieties constitute supplications for fertility and physical well-being. Devotees employ the grotto's womb-like interior as a platform for kissing, touching, crawling, bending, and other physical acts that make for a potent corporeal experience. As we shall see, the mimetic journey of a fetus/pilgrim through this womb-tomb structure elicits a sense of rebirth, which is analogous to reclaiming the soil and establishing a "motherly" alternative to the decidedly masculine and bellicose disposition in Israel/Palestine. For the sake of elaboration, my analysis is divided into four main stages: entering a womb tomb; death and afterlife architecture; rebirth symbols and intimate body-based practices; and minority territorial claims and the imagination of a feminine status quo.

### **Rediscovering the Tomb of Mary through body-based rituals and land claiming**

For historical reasons,<sup>8</sup> the Greek Orthodox Church has custodianship over the largest number of holy sites in Israel/Palestine. According to Katz and Kark, the Patriarchate also "owns and administers" a substantial amount of temporal properties, which in aggregate constitutes "one of the largest nongovernmental pools of real estate in the State of Israel." However, this abundance rarely trickles down to the local Arab Orthodox population. "The sharp increase in the value of the real estate since the end of the 19th century," Katz and Kark aver, "has propelled and accelerated the efforts of the congregation to assert control over the properties, resulting in a collision with the patriarchate" (Katz and Kark, 2005: 510–511). The resentment felt by this populace is further exacerbated by an ecclesiastical imbalance in favor of ethnic Greek clergy.

In its own estimation, the Greek Orthodox Church is the sole authentic stream of Christianity in Jerusalem<sup>9</sup> and the "mother church" of all Christendom. Likewise, its priests and nuns see themselves as an irreplaceable link in an age-old chain dating back to the colony of monks that was established in the Judean Desert during the Byzantine era (Stadler, 2011). Against this backdrop, they consider the region's Orthodox monasteries, communities, liturgy, and ceremonies to be part of an unceasing effort to perpetuate an ancient legacy and safeguard the "purity of the Byzantine rite" (Mahieu,

2010: 80). Katz and Kark (2005) have shown that most of the Christian churches in the Holy Land (e.g., the Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran streams) have undergone a process of Arabization in recent decades, with local Arabs replacing foreign-born priests. In contrast, the Orthodox Patriarchate is the only denomination that is still tightly controlled by “outsiders,” namely ethnic Greeks, to the point where not a single Palestinian holds a key post within the church’s upper ranks.

As opposed to the majority of Christian institutions across the globe, Jerusalem’s Orthodox Church still adheres to the Julian calendar, thereby preserving what its devotees believe to be the sacred time of Christian festivals. Moreover, from the Patriarchate’s standpoint, the Jerusalem rites are performed in venues that Mary personally stepped foot in. Although the Gospels provide no details regarding the Virgin’s final days on earth, Orthodox monks explained to me that various facets of the Patriarchate’s Dormition rite are predicated on ancient interpretations of apocryphal narratives, such as the late second century *Protevangelium of James* (see Figure 1).

In my discussions with church officials, they rarely failed to claim that their rite is the most genuine representation of Mary’s passing. Inspired by this “truth,” they are determined to execute every last detail of their script each and every year. This, then, explains why at popular Marian events, clergy often station themselves among the flock and “correct” those practices that ostensibly deviate from this tradition.

#### Figure 1

With respect to the grotto itself, the layout of this ancient subterranean compound molds the religious experience therein (Stadler, 2011, 2014, 2015). Built inside a cavern, this Crusader-era site with Byzantine foundations (Pringle, 2007: 287; Schiller, 1978: 103) is administered, in part, by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. Its priests believe that the shrine’s commemorative-style cruciform structure, along with all the sanctioned rituals performed therein, is intended to embody their church’s age-old narratives of Mary’s final days on earth. According to Byzantine tradition, when Mary entered a state of dormancy, the Apostles escorted her body to this gravesite, whereupon the Theotokos ascended to heaven. The Dormition of the Theotokos Feast – the highpoint of the Marian calendar – turns up in several canonical texts, some of which are over 1,600 years old (Shoemaker, 2002: 3; Rubin, 2009; Boss, 2012). Furthermore, liturgical

accounts and archeological discoveries confirm the existence of vivid Marian ceremonies in and around Jerusalem from as early as the fourth century at, inter alia, the Church of Kathisma (Seat of the God-Bearer).<sup>10</sup> The modern-day Dormition Feast, which was the emphasis of my fieldwork, also boasts an age-old rite. Consisting of utterances and customs that are diligently preserved by the ecclesiastical hosts, this feast revolves around the Patriarchate's canonical theology and funerary symbols. As explained to me by several of the institution's representatives, the observance of these customs year in and year out is part of its effort to perpetuate this "most authentic" form of venerating the Holy Mother in Jerusalem. One of my interviewees, a Greek Orthodox priest, summarized what he considered to be his denomination's core narrative:

At the time of her death, the disciples of our Lord, who were preaching throughout the world, returned to Jerusalem to see the Theotokos. All of them, including the Apostle Paul, were gathered together at her bedside. At the moment of her death, Jesus Christ himself descended and carried her soul to heaven.... Following her repose, the body of the Theotokos was taken in procession and laid in a tomb near the Garden of Gethsemane. When the Apostle Thomas arrived three days after her repose and asked to see her body, the tomb was found to be empty. The Theotokos' bodily assumption was confirmed by the message of an angel and by her appearance before the Apostles.

The festival's organizers note that the procession to the tomb is based on several early Byzantine accounts of Mary's Dormition and Assumption. As such, the ceremony abounds with symbols of death, mystery, and rebirth. The clergy officiate over the procession in strict adherence to the Patriarchate's interpretations of ancient Jerusalem traditions surrounding the Virgin's mortal terminus. What is more, they endeavor to dictate their funerary script to the flock. That said, my findings suggest that almost all of the lay groups come with their own ideas, scriptural interpretations, and expectations of the rite, which often diverge from those espoused by their hosts. At any rate, the various devotional practices and desires of lay participants comport with the festival's terrain, not the least the crypt's structure, ambience, and womb-tomb features (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



From 2003 to 2013, I conducted fieldwork on various Orthodox feasts and ceremonies – Orthodox masses, processions, rosaries, and more – that are held throughout the year at Mary's Tomb and related sites. The nub of my research consisted of observations, note taking, photographic and video documentation, and informal discussions and full-fledged interviews with pilgrims, visitors, security personnel, and organizers in Hebrew, Arabic, English, French, and Russian. These activities were carried out by an ethnographic team comprised of the author, students, and a medley of colleagues who accompanied us to various events. Conducted under the shadow and vicissitudes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the ethnography was influenced by the turbulence and tension that encumber the region. Political controversy, terrorist attacks, and strife between groups and communities all impact the turnout of locals and pilgrims and the atmosphere at the shrine.

In addition to the ethnographic work, extensive textual research was conducted at the Tomb of Mary. Many examples cited herein are associated with the abovementioned Dormition Feast, which is held on an annual basis between 25 August and 5 September. This celebration is indeed the largest event at the Tomb of Mary, as it attracts thousands of local devotees and pilgrims from Orthodox countries the world over.

During the length of this research, I kept a detailed journal of the rituals that were observed, and spoke with a broad range of participants: lay and clerical pilgrims from abroad; Palestinian Christians; several organizers from the host Patriarchate; as well as police officers and soldiers responsible for securing the attendant processions. I introduced myself as a university lecturer conducting research about Christian and Jewish sites in the Holy Land. Most of the lay attendees were happy to talk with me, share their views and feelings, and relate stories about their personal lives. Some even inquired about my own life in Jerusalem. Conversely, the ecclesiastical hosts were much more reluctant to talk about the rite or any other subject. Even those officials that agreed to be interviewed were usually quite laconic and guarded. At the shrine itself, I occasionally felt welcomed; however, at other times, especially during periods of unrest, I sensed hostility towards the entire research team. On occasion, clergy asked me what I was doing there and why I was interested in the site. My answers aroused equal measures of curiosity and antagonism.

While concentrating on the Orthodox denomination, this paper falls under the rubric of comparative studies of the Christian faith (e.g., Stewart, 1989; Poujeau, 2010: 178). Hann and Goltz (2010: 4) have duly bemoaned the dearth of anthropological studies on Eastern religions. This observation certainly applies to the Orthodox community in the Holy Land. Despite its age-old presence and dramatic history in the region, the literature on this group is exceedingly sparse.

Out of all the Christian streams in Israel/Palestine, the Orthodox boast the largest population. Its members, who are spread throughout the land, consist primarily of Palestinians<sup>11</sup> and native Jordanians<sup>12</sup> but there are also Russians (among them immigrants to Israel), Romanians, Georgians, and Greeks. Most reside in the Galilee and greater Jerusalem area, Bethlehem and Ramallah included. Like all other local denominations, Israel/Palestine's Orthodox are a community in crisis. From a political standpoint, their lay representatives still wield some clout by virtue of their involvement in Palestinian national affairs. However, the religious leadership no longer constitutes a formidable player in Jerusalem politics (Dumper, 2002).

On a regional scale, Orthodox Christians constitute a small minority in polities with either Muslim or Jewish majorities. As Robson (2012: 2) documents, Christians saw their political fortunes plummet over the course of the British Mandate over Palestine (1917–1948). From its status as a key player in a multi-religious, middleclass nationalist discourse in the early 20th century, the community is practically excluded from the current Muslim-dominated political scene in Palestinian-administered territories and the pugnacious Jewish nationalist politics that is steadily winning hearts in Israel. With respect to Christian Arab identity, the Orthodox are a minority within a minority (Cragg, 1991).<sup>13</sup> Hann and Goltz (2010: 15) draw distinctions between theology and religion for the masses and between scriptural and popular customs. My ethnographic fieldwork covered a bevy of Orthodox scriptural passages concerning the Madonna in Jerusalem. That said, the descriptions and analysis in this paper rest largely on observations of ceremonies and rituals. While lay participants respect the Canon and the traditions of their ecclesiastical hosts, they also give expression to their own personal fantasies and proclivities. It is these popular customs that undergirded my research.<sup>14</sup>

## **Entering the womb**

For most visitors to Mary's Tomb, among the most compelling moments of their stay is walking through the compound's double-arched portal. This stage calls to mind accounts of Mayan pilgrimages to caves for ceremonies that run the gamut from rites of passage to supplications for rain (Brady and Prufer, 2005; Prufer and Brady, 2005). Believers describe the very approach to a womb tomb's entrance as a stirring moment of grace. Entering the site is akin to a journey through a female reproductive system, as the dim light and humid air create a womb-like atmosphere. Likewise, several of my interlocutors noted that leaving the sunlight for a cavernous expanse, throughout which even the faintest noise reverberates, affords them with the sensation of entering a divine-cum-maternal realm for the first time. Similar descriptions can be found in the literature on other ancient and medieval pilgrimages to sanctified caves (Morinis, 1992; Brady and Prufer, 2005; Limor, 2007; Milbrath, 1988, 1997).<sup>15</sup> Devotees at Gethsemane Church sprinkled narratives of their own arrival with references to the Virgin's sacred body and resurrection.

As soon as visitors step inside the compound, they are confronted with a monumental 48-step staircase which dates back to the Crusader era. On feast days, nuns can be found opening boxes of candles in the compound's modest vestibule, while barefooted lay women arrange and light candles on the stairs. Upon descending to the main floor of the steadily darkening crypt, visitors find themselves before a five-foot-high aedicule housing what is purported to be Mary's sepulcher. This small chapel also encases what the Patriarchate deems to be some of Mary's personal effects that were left behind in the grotto, such as her shrouds and cincture.

While walking down the steps on one of my field visits, a middle-aged Palestinian woman named Mariam told me about her long bout with cancer. According to my interlocutor, her repeated pilgrimages to this site helped her overcome the disease. Her tumor "completely disappeared" right after she vowed to make her trips to Gethsemane Church a regular life habit. She also described how the Virgin had personally and corporeally provided her succor inside the aedicule. A few months later, Mariam introduced me to Ana, an elderly Palestinian Orthodox. Ana comes to the shrine after every feast in order to fulfill the vows she took after giving birth to her

eldest son. Pursuant to her votive offering, she helps a few other women maintain the premises. Indeed, we met Ana while she was cleaning flour and candle wax off the staircase.

### **Following in the fetus's footsteps: Rituals of death and rebirth**

Another key element of womb-tomb shrines is their afterlife architecture and mood. For the purpose of imbuing religious buildings with a sense of the

transcendent and eternal, society avails itself of the finest materials and most gifted artisans. As we have seen, ceremonial structures are often modeled on the human body. Humphrey and Vitebsky (2003: 144) demonstrate how mere mortals seek to attain a measure of infinitude through the construction of tombs, which suggest that their occupants live on, either in another realm or in the minds and daily practices of those they left behind (2003: 145–146). Revered graves are thus a product of the universal belief in the hereafter and the ability of the living and dead to communicate with and support one another. Similar to Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Bowman, 1991, 1993, 2010; Bajc, 2008) and the shrine to Saint James in Compostela (Van Herwaarden, 1980: 3), a semblance of the afterlife is evoked at the Tomb of Mary via a handful of specific forms, elements, and materials. For example, the church's iconostasis<sup>16</sup> features an assortment of paintings depicting the Last Supper, the Dormition, and Mary's Assumption. Moreover, devotees I spoke with and/or observed brought up the topic of the Madonna's passing throughout their stay in the compound.

In an effort to preserve the rhythms of the Orthodox liturgy, most of the church-sanctioned events revolve around age-old traditions (both scriptural and liturgical). For instance, the Patriarchate's clergy see to it that all visitors enter the above-mentioned aedicule while facing the glass-covered sarcophagus inside. Each person is allotted but a few moments to pray, genuflect, and offer intimate vows opposite the stone tomb before being prodded out. At this juncture, participants are once again instructed to turn their face towards the sarcophagus and compress themselves by bending their knees and neck; they then slowly shuffle backwards while keeping their eyes on the grave until their bodies have squeezed through the narrow opening. This hind-first departure appears to mimic the fetus' progression out of a womb during a breech birth. It may

very well be that the hazards of this sort of delivery are akin to the tension between clergy and lay faithful at this site.

Mariam has elaborated on the moments opposite the Virgin's sarcophagus: "I really like to repeat this ritual again and again, to feel Mary in my body, [to experience her] life that ended in her Assumption and reunion with her son." Many of the devotees feel that the precious seconds inside the aedicule are the high point of their experience at the shrine. In fact, some were moved to tears and others were left shuddering. Moreover, quite a few people get back in line and reengage the sarcophagus a number of times over the course of their visit. On the basis of my own observations, this body-based ritual indeed constitutes a "coincidentia oppositorum," for it involves an iterative voyage of birth (fertility) and rebirth (death and resurrection) in an afterlife setting.

### **Rebirth and fertility: Exiting the womb**

Aside from themes of death and resurrection, many of the body-based rituals at Mary's Tomb center around fertility. Crawling before iconic images and relics, especially those associated with female saints (Dubisch, 1990, 1995), is a global phenomenon. The emotional zenith of the pilgrimage to the Icon of the Black Madonna in Poland is the act of entering the Jasna Gora Monastery. Within this framework, devotees throng to the city of Czestochowa for the sake of crawling towards, kneeling before, and praying to the sacred rendering of the Virgin, which is perched over the sanctuary's main altar (Galbraith, 2000: 71). Another icon of the Holy Mother that is purported to work miracles is housed at the Church of the Annunciation on the Cycladic Island of Tinos.<sup>17</sup> According to Dubisch (1990: 120), the main impetus behind the female-dominated pilgrimage to this site is the opportunity to supplicate before or make a vow to the Theotokos.<sup>18</sup> Believers tread to the church without shoes. Crawling long distances on bloodied knees, many pilgrims lug along offerings to the Virgin (occasionally tying the gifts to their backs). Some present body-sized candles, which are believed to herald a pregnancy (Dubisch, 1995; Haland, 2012: 94–95). These protracted exertions on all fours mimic the fetus entering the world through its mother's womb (Stadler and Luz, 2014).

As in Cze stochowa and Tinos, many pilgrims view crawling rituals to be the pinnacle of their stay at Mary's Tomb. On the opening day of the Dormition Feast, the Icon of the Theotokos – a venerated effigy of the Madonna – is transferred in procession from a monastery near the Holy Sepulcher Church, the Matoxion, to the Mount of Olives via the Old City's narrow streets. Upon its arrival, the icon is placed in the back room of the Marian shrine for the duration of the ten-day celebration. The faithful are quite eager to enter this modestly-sized chamber. Unlike the rest of the year, the effigy is out in the open and accessible to one and all.<sup>19</sup> Pilgrims stand in a long line for the sake of a private audience with the revered likeness of the Virgin. Each of these encounters is vigilantly scrutinized by the ecclesiastical hosts. More specifically, an Orthodox nun explains to all the participants how to touch the icon, scatter flowers and basil leaves, and crawl in its vicinity. For their part, the lay devotees are less than thrilled about the sister's mediation and would prefer to conduct the crawling ritual without the Patriarchate's input. At any rate, each participant is granted but a few seconds opposite the talisman, before being shoved out by clergy and other attendees. Upon receiving instructions, each visitor kisses and caresses the icon before dropping to one knee. Some women seek to punctuate their fervor by continuing to lay on the ground, near the tight and congested exit routes.

Crawling and kissing rituals are often embraced by believers seeking deliverance from sterility or illness, either for themselves or for loved ones. A couple of people at Mary's Tomb rub pictures of sick or barren children on the above-mentioned effigy in the hopes that the Virgin will intercede on their behalf. In a similar vein, Haland (2012: 96) describes how pilgrims wait in line on the steps leading to the Church of the Annunciation in Tinos for their turn to enter the main chapel and perform the proskynema, namely, the set of corporeal practices traditionally observed upon entering an Orthodox church. The most important ritual of this sort is kissing a venerated icon. Lucy, a resident of Jerusalem's Old City whom I met at the Tomb of Mary, told me that her daughter had trouble getting pregnant.

### Figure 3

As a result, the mother dedicated her life to the Madonna's sepulcher, visiting on all the festivals marking the Dormition and Assumption, inter alia. When her entreaties were

answered, Lucy decided to come more often and pray for additional grandchildren. Although the grotto is dedicated to commemorating the Mary's last days on earth, most devotees take part in rituals symbolizing rebirth that are aimed at promoting fertility and wellbeing (see Figure 3).

### **Appropriation and territoriality via the sacred**

Body-based rituals symbolizing death, rebirth, and fecundity do not tell the whole story of the Tomb of Mary. As we shall see, fertility customs at womb tombs are also infused with various political imaginations that bolster territorial claims and longings for a new disposition.

Anthropologists have long asserted that rituals, along with the politicized human body, challenge the social order (Comaroff, 1985; Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987; Butler, 1993). For example, Mahmood (2005) and Davidman (2011) discuss the veils worn by members of Cairo's feminine mosque movements and the pants donned in public by Jewish women that defect from Haredi communities. Both articles of clothing serve as alternative ritualistic vestments that master and reshape the body. As symbols of recently adopted ideas, these "fashion statements" help the women resist patriarchal social norms and provide an outlet for new beliefs and identities. By dint of my fieldwork at the Tomb of Mary, I observed how corporeal rituals performed at this site in trying times trigger imaginations concerning territorial claims and hopes for a new social order (Bandak, 2012, 2013). During the 2009 Dormition Feast, I made the acquaintance of a recently married Arab-Orthodox couple. According to Maria, the wife, this rite offers the most effective and feasible means for rebuilding her "seriously fragmented and besieged" Christian identity and body. While leaving the crypt, her husband George added that given Jerusalem's "supreme importance" to local Christians as both Arabs and minorities, it is incumbent upon them to do whatever they can to demonstrate their belonging to the Holy Land. The Arab-Israeli struggle, he said, "is a problem of power and ownership. . . . We, in our faith, prefer to show our respect to the Land by venerating Mary, at her tomb, and not by seizing the Land with blood and wars."

It is worth contrasting George's outlook on the Virgin as a protector of minority rights with the nationalist idea of the "patriotic Mary" (Wolf, 1958). A case in point is

contemporary rituals at the Jasna Gora Monastery equating the Madonna with the Polish motherland and crediting her with the defense of the country's borders (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, 2007: 40). In her work on the Guadalupe celebrations of Mexican immigrants in Rome, Napolitano (2009: 97) shows how Marian customs help them rewrite and appropriate Mexico's cultural memory of the harrowing Cristero War (1926–1929).<sup>20</sup> Orthodox pilgrims to Jerusalem also draw a correlation between their experiences at Gethsemane Church and their minority status. In times of crisis, the Virgin not only provides comfort, but avenges those who harm her devotees (Christian, 1996; Orsi, 1985). Furthermore, the rite at Mary's Tomb helps them redefine and reclaim their lands by spurring on their imagination.<sup>21</sup> Put differently, the worship takes place in what Courcoucli (2012: 1–2) refers to as a “post-Ottoman space, in which ethnoreligious minorities have been banned from national territories many times over the last hundred years” for the purpose of establishing homogeneous national territories (also see Jansen, 2009; Hermkens et al., 2009). It is in this same context that Bowman (1991, 1993, 2012) explores the adoration of the Madonna in the West Bank town of Beit Sahour, where the local municipality has organized a fair share of nonviolent resistance against the Israeli occupation. Within this framework, it built the shrine of Bi res Saiyideh over a revered well for the express use of Muslims and Christians (Bowman, 2012: 15).

Local residents of Jerusalem also regularly vent their frustration with the status quo. With so many groups and states claiming the same land (Israel/Palestine), smaller denominations inevitably feel left out of the political loop. While worshipping at Gethsemane Church, members of these communities express their sense of marginality. Perhaps more than anything else, they give voice to a sense of statelessness and to fears of ultimately losing the centuries-old struggle over the Holy Land. From the standpoint of Palestinian Orthodox Christians, this dispute entails multiple state actors – Greece, Israel, and Jordan – and numerous Muslim, Jewish, and Christian streams, each of which puts forward its own interpretation of and seeks to assert its own rights to this contested landscape. For instance, the Franciscan order and Muslim groups also harbor claims to Mary's Tomb. As noted above, the local Orthodox also find themselves in a long and complicated dispute with the upper echelons of their church. Luis, an Orthodox Arab from Bethlehem in his forties, whom I accompanied to the Mount of



Olives, lucidly articulated what many devotees consider their prime motivation for coming here: “As Arab Christian minorities, we have a strong obligation to visit the grotto of our Mother, regularly, even in hard times, because if we do not venerate these places, eventually we will lose our historical claims to the Land, to Jerusalem in particular. . . . For the Orthodox, this is especially sacred territory and it belongs to us.” George, the aforementioned newly-wed, opined that “we do not involve ourselves in the bloody struggle over land.” Instead, we resist by means of “our pious worship and devotion to the soil itself. We do this here at Her grave.” Like many of my other interviewees, then, George fuses devotional practice with political-territorial claims.

As we have seen, political imaginations of space and soil are expressed via corporeal rituals that pertain to femininity, fertility, and motherhood. Helena, an Arab Orthodox from Beit Jala, has been making an annual pilgrimage to Gethsemane Church since contracting her own illness. Despite all the obstacles thrown her way by the Israeli government, such as military checkpoints and visa requirements, she makes this effort for the following reason:

I visit Mary, Mary the Holy Mother. She is a mother; I’m not a mother. I do not even know how to be a mother. I go to visit my Mother when I’m ill. . . . When I suffer from pain, when I pray for a child – where should I go? I shall go to my Mother or to my Father. I will defiantly go to my Mother for help. . . . I will visit her in her cave [so as] to make it my own, my home, in order to protect my territory.

This excerpt indeed encapsulates the duality of the rite under review. Helena touches on many of the Marian symbols and roles that we have discussed, such as healer, motherhood, and parturition, while also staking a claim to the land.

In sum, Palestinian Orthodox devotees yearn for and imagine a new territorial and political reality through feminine body-based rituals. By giving expression to these sort of ideas, they envision an alternative public space that incorporates maternal themes and helps them challenge their present status as discriminated minorities.

## **Conclusion**

The current article takes stock of the synthesis between popular body-based Orthodox customs and territoriality at the Tomb of Mary in Jerusalem. Drawing on my conclusions from this quintessential womb-tomb shrine, I have sought to demonstrate the centrality of these practices – foremost among them, rituals imitating fetal progression – and how they trigger imaginations of reclaiming the land and changing the socio-political order. Four principal symbolizations of this kind have been discerned: the act of entering the site, which represents fertilization; tomb/fetus veneration; kissing and crawling rituals that symbolize rebirth; and lastly, territorial assertions and yearning for a new disposition. These embodied rituals, which are indeed a natural fit for the ancient structure of the Tomb of Mary, inject a set of female symbols and feminine aspirations into the contentious and often violent status quo of Israel/Palestine. From the standpoint of the Orthodox Christian populace, the struggle is being waged between different polities (above all Israel and the Palestinian Authority), religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), and denominations within the local Christian community (e.g., Armenians, Copts, and Catholics). Moreover, territorial claims also pertain to an internal dispute within the church. Due to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate's extensive real-estate holdings, it is bent on averting the Arabization of its hierarchy (Katz and Kark, 2005: 529). My ethnographic findings are best viewed through the lens of three macro-phenomena: the revival of shrine veneration by Israel/ Palestine's three major faiths; the intractable Arab-Jewish conflict; and struggles over land and native identity in general.

Unlike the Christian events under review, Jewish pilgrimage is usually supported by the Israeli state. Within this framework, age-old tombs, especially in the Galilee, have been identified as belonging to saints from different epochs in Jewish history. A case in point is the Tomb of Rachel the Matriarch, which was alluded to in the opening paragraph. Wedged between modern-day Jerusalem and Bethlehem, this womb tomb consists of two chambers: a domed room, which was built by Ottoman authorities; and an antechamber, which Moshe Montefiore (a Jewish philanthropist) erected in 1841. The shrine's popularity among Jews, both religious and secular, is on the rise. Similar to Christian traditions of Mary, Jewish lore views Rachel as the classic "suffering mother." To begin with, she had to wait 14 years before the consummation of her betrothal. Subsequently the matriarch had difficulties conceiving. Before dying while giving birth to her second child, she accompanied her kin into exile, cried for them, and

interceded with God on their behalf. In consequence, pilgrims seeking deliverance from marriage and fertility problems observe corporeal customs at her sepulcher with this objective in mind. What is more, the above-mentioned popularity of Rachel's Tomb can be interpreted as a Jewish response to Arab claims to Jerusalem and its environs.

There are also clear similarities between Mary's Tomb and Our Lady of Medjugorje Shrine in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>22</sup> Both sites are under the control of minority faiths in religiously and ethnically fractured societies. For this reason, aspects of each shrine's rites are inextricably linked to the political and territorial disputes that inform the hegemon-minority struggles in the Balkans (Zimdars- Shwartz, 1991; Herrero, 1999; Baskar, 2012: 51; Henig, 2012) and in Israel/ Palestine. Most of the rituals in Gethsemane Church evoke female symbols and womb-tomb experiences, like the simulation of childbirth. These practices also enable devotees to envision a new socio-political order that they hope will replace the old. Under these circumstances, reinforcing maternal themes at holy places is a way of coping with the travails of marginalization. This predicament is naturally tied to the subject of indigenous peoples. Ben Ze'ev and Abouraiya (2004) have discussed the politics behind the re-Palestinization of sites in Israel. According to Saltman (2002: 3), ethnicity is the most salient dimension of territorial boundaries. In consequence, identity is a major impetus and factor behind ethnic political disputes over rights to, above all, land (also see Myerhoff, 1974; Harris, 2002; LaDuke,1999; Gelder and Jacobs,1998). The findings from Mary's Tomb, Our Lady of Medjugorje, and the Tomb of Rachel suggest that the mobilization of potent womb-tomb fertility rituals and symbols on the part of groups vying over the same land merits an extensive comparative study of these sorts of venues throughout the world.

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#### Notes

1. Mariam Baouardy was a 19th-century Carmelite nun who was canonized by Pope John Paul II.
2. The Lady of the Wall is a mural of the Virgin Mary that was painted on Israel's Separation Wall in 2010 by Ian Knowles, a British iconographer.
3. According to Christian tradition, the Holy Family took shelter in the Milk Grotto during Herod's Massacre of the Innocents.
4. Also known as the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque, Rachel's Tomb is an ancient pilgrimage site on the outskirts of Bethlehem (see Sered, 1986; Limor, 2007; Selwyn, 2011). In 1996, Israel began constructing a wall around the compound, thereby converting it into an enclave.
5. This site is located in the southern Jewish cemetery of Tiberias.
6. Miriam "the Laundress" Mizrachi earned a reputation among local traditional Jews for fertility miracles. Following her death in 1965, she was laid to rest in Jerusalem's Giv'at Shaul Cemetery.

7. This definition is the gist of Yiftachel's expansive analysis (2006) on Israel's democratic regime
8. "In Palestine," according to Katz and Kark, "churches and missions, including the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, were highly active land purchasers from the second half of the 19th century onward. There ample records of these properties serving as sites for the planning and building of new institutions, businesses, and settlements (churches, monasteries, hospices, schools, hospitals, orphanages, markets, agricultural estates, etc.) illuminate the ideological intent, financial sources, and impact of church real-estate activities. Both religious and economic considerations lay behind the land acquisitions. Avraham Granott related to real-estate investments in Palestine made by the various churches from 1863 onward. The churches bought and accumulated numerous plots of land, some of which were intended as investments in profitable assets. This land acquisition had an impact on the physical and cultural landscapes of the country, both urban and rural" (Katz and Kark, 2005: 511–512).
9. The term Christian Orthodox straddles the fence between two distinct categories: Oriental Christians and Eastern Christians. Among the former are Armenian Apostolic, Syriac, Egyptian Coptic, and Ethiopian communities that are interspersed throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and even India. Conversely, most Eastern Christians reside in East European countries like Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece.
10. Literally a "seat," Kathisma refers to a monastic scheme for reading the Book of Psalms. (Shoemaker, 2002: 84). There is also evidence of such worship at the Church of Mary in the fifth century.
11. The local devotees are far and away the biggest group at the Dormition Feast. However, the community's population is dwindling, and its members are alienated from an increasingly unsympathetic Israeli body politic (see Cragg, 1991: 235, 237; Dumper, 2002: 105).
12. Jordan controlled the West Bank until June 1967.
13. In my estimation, this state of affairs warrants further research.
14. Charles Stewart (1989) describes the religious leadership's hostility to and, alternatively, co-optation of popular customs. Even when these practices derive, at least in part, from the official rite, they are regarded as "folk" elements (also see Stewart, 1994, and Herzfeld, 1990).

15. These sort of tombs, along with their body-based rituals, indeed attracted a fair share of pilgrim traffic during the Middle Ages (Limor, 2007).
16. The iconostasis is a wall or portal that separates a church's nave from its sanctuary.
17. This engraving depicts Gabriel appearing before the Virgin with news of Christ's immanent birth. It is attributed to Luke the Evangelist, and Mary herself is believed to have sat as his model.
18. While referring to Mary, Theotokos literally means "the one who gave birth to God." The word is comprised of Theos (god) and the ancient Greek tiktw – a gender-neutral verb meaning "I give birth" (Rubin, 2009: 42).
19. When venerating icons, Orthodox do not direct themselves at the physical object but its "archetype" (Hann and Goltz, 2010: 12; Herzfeld, 1990; Mahieu, 2010: 81).
20. Also see Badone (2007); Go' mes-Barris and Irazabal (2009); Stewart (2012).
21. According to Stewart (2012), villagers on the Greek island of Naxos have long reported having dreams in which saints direct them to buried objects. He interprets these dreams as existential expressions of the struggle for agency over and perception of their daily activities.
22. For more on the developments at Our Lady of Medjugorje in the wake of Yugoslavia's dismantlement, see Skrbis (2005: 444).

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