

“Our Γερόντισσα?”¹: Fieldwork experiences from Turkey to Northern Greece

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Abstract

I conduct a research titled “The Invisible Labor of the Church: Orthodox and Catholic Nuns in Turkey” for a long time. In this article, I am going to be sharing some of my fieldwork experiences in an Orthodox women’s monastery in Northern Greece, which I visit regarding to the ethnographic study I am conducting. Since it has become part of my life both for my study and because of staying in the monastery with the nuns from time to time, my visits are still continuing. The fieldwork conducted within the scope of this doctoral thesis actually began in August 2019. Since July 2023, I have been regularly visiting the monastery in Northern Greece. However, over the past nine months, I have visited the monastery four times—in July, September, December 2023, and March 2024—and stayed there with the nuns for about over a month in total. Language was a significant factor in my fieldwork because I had no knowledge of Greek, which made communication challenging. However, with the help of acquaintances who spoke English and Turkish, the use of Google Translate, the ability of the nuns to speak Turkish and English, and their efforts to teach me Greek, we gradually began to overcome this issue. Each of my visits to the monastery has, of course, created many unique experiences that cannot be fit in this small space this article has. In addition, what I am going to evaluating as a field grade is also, for sure, quite variable. That’s why, I am going to describe my travels from the day I was invited to the monastery until now, trying to focus on the most prominent ones. As someone who has been to a women’s monastery to stay before, I will try to talk about what I felt when I went there, what I could and/or could not tell others about how it made me feel, what topics I think have changed and the emotional bond that has developed between me and the nuns over time. With that, I am going to share how I started to get used to the monastery as

¹ Γερόντισσα means old woman in Greek.

I continued visiting, which I left almost fleeing because of the claustrophobic feelings I felt the first time I visited. Thus, with a feminist, anti-positivist approach, it needs to be accepted that it is inevitable for an anthropologist conducting fieldwork 'from the bottom up' to change during the research process.

“I feel like a real anthropologist right now”

With the other nuns I met in Turkey, I was commiserating with them as much as I could, especially about the developments related to my study, so to speak, and share with them what was/was not or would happen in this process. This information change between us helped me learn about the other nuns before I met them. In addition, at this time, I was reading books that I thought were related to my Ph.D. thesis, which were in the library of patriarchy in Istanbul. I went to this library for about four months to read the books we listed on the first day with one of the library staffs. As such, I had seen Greek *αδελφές* (*adelfés* means in sisters or nuns in Greek) in the patriarchy several times during this time, but I had not met them yet. While I was looking forward to the day I would meet them, during this exciting wait, as I mentioned before, I was learning about them from other nuns I already knew. I mean, I heard and knew beforehand more or less what they were doing. At this point, I can add the following from a conversation between me and one of the nuns in Turkey: “Greek nuns come and go on a quarterly basis. You will never see the same nun again. Residence permit and visa are so much. They do not leave the monastery unless necessary”. (Merve Çeltikci, January 1, 2023, field notes).

Before I went to the monastery in Northern Greece, I had heard of the monastery's reputation on many subjects, especially from those who had been there before. Even a monastery employee who once worked as my Greek-Turkish translator so that I could communicate with the Greek nuns in the monastery in Turkey, who may have been the same age as the nuns, but he referred to them as “Sisters” (“Ablalar” in Turkish) when talking about them, probably out of respect, conveyed his impressions of the monastery in Northern Greece. In patriarchal cultures, another pattern beyond respect might be as follows: The patriarchal understanding of sexuality portrays men as sexually powerful beings while presenting women as lacking in sexual desire among other things (for further details see Byers, 1996). The first thing he said to me when he heard that I was going to this monastery in Northern Greece while he was translating simultaneously was this: “That monastery is very clean. Women's hands. Would it ever be the same as mine? There are 45 nuns, everywhere is very clean. There was a despot (or clergyman, called metropolitan and/or bishop) here [in Istanbul], I went to the monastery [in Greece] when he died, so I know. The despot in Istanbul, who died before he was buried there in the monastery in Northern Greece, because we are cooperating” (An employee of an Orthodox Monastery in Istanbul, Merve Çeltikci, May 12, 2023, field notes).

In fact, I had somehow heard about the Greek nuns and while I was waiting for the day when I would meet them, there is (was) the first and only person who told me about this women's monastery that I went to by saying, “[Greek nuns] have a monastery in Greece, you should go there.” The first day I met him, over lunch in the Patriarchy's dining room, he told me, “In Greece they are more active, there are even doctors among them. There are nuns who grow olives in the villages. Here [in Turkey] they are not active, there are mostly Catholics [nuns] here [Turkey]” (Merve Çeltikci, December 1, 2022, field notes). This may be the subject for another article, but there is one thing I cannot leave out here. He never admitted it, but I think he was mediator in my going to the monastery. Even though it sounded like a great idea, it was a distant possibility for me at that moment. At least that's what I thought. Who would have thought that soon this monastery in Greece would become my home in Greece, a place I would visit constantly.

Who would have thought that I would be able to come and go a women's monastery established in Northern Greece in 1980 as I please. The meeting I was looking forward to took place in the fifth month (Çeltikci, 2023:268) and during this meeting the Greek nuns invited me to their monastery in Greece. Staying with 45 nuns in the monastery and spending time with them there was very exciting for me. Every trip back and forth is a different experience for me and it is still as exciting as the first day.

Yes, this invitation was incredible for me. Without thinking, I told them, "Yes, of course I will come," but at the same time, questions kept haunting me about how this invitation had come about, or whether something like this had ever happened before. I immediately asked the abbot of the monastery in Istanbul about it. And he told me, "Merve, they told you to come. So you went" (Merve Çeltikci, August 10, 2023, field notes). Of course, it seems that this is exactly what happened, but as I mentioned above, I couldn't (can't) help thinking that the director of the archives at the patriarchate, who first and only told me that I should go to this monastery in Greece, was mediator in this. As time passed, he told me in one of our conversations that I was the 'first Turkish and Muslim woman' to visit this monastery, which proved that I am (was) right in my suspicions. Whether he admitted it or not, I was sure that he had secretly helped me to be invited to the monastery in Northern Greece. Because as far as I can see—since he is also a Ph.D. graduate—he is someone who helps a lot of people in general, especially with research and things like that. But as I said, he has not yet admitted that he was mediator in something like this for me.

Undoubtedly, the sense of curiosity was not only for me. Because as far as I understood from the most frequent questions asked during our conversations, they were also curious about why I was going there. Immediately after inviting me to the monastery, the nuns also asked me why I wanted to go there. Why do (did) I go to the monastery? Do (did) I go because I feel like it, because I am curious about their lives, or because of my research? I want(ed) to go for both, since I am already doing my work because I feel like it. To put it bluntly, I am (was) curious about the lives of nuns and the place where they live. Therefore, my answers to their questions have always been in this direction. They told me that this was already evident in my behavior and demeanor and that they were very pleased with my interest in nuns (Greek Orthodox Nuns, Merve Çeltikci, May 12, 2023, field notes).

"I will be staying with 45 nuns in a women's monastery in Greece. I feel like a real anthropologist right now." Ultimately, like early anthropologists, I was planning to conduct fieldwork abroad, a tradition upheld by many anthropologists today. Of course, as an anthropologist, I don't think it is necessary to go to other lands, but I must have been influenced by this method because going to a monastery led me to such thought. I was going to the women's monastery in Northern Greece, but this aspect of my fieldwork was far from the format of a field research that is expected to be conducted in the discipline of anthropology for at least 6 months, 1 year or more, due to the duration of my visa. In other words, since the tourist visas I was given were for short-term stays, my fieldwork was different from the 'classic Malinowski image,'² at least in terms of my commuting to and from Northern Greece, even though I was going back and forth to a different country. However, just to remind what Malinowski stated in *Argonauts*, "imagine yourself suddenly set down ... alone on a tropical beach close to a native village ..." will be very helpful to here (Malinowski 1932:4). I cannot (could not) come and go as I please. Moreover, these trips back and forth were not only dependent on the duration of the visa I was granted. The nuns also had to be available for me to stay there, especially in terms of time. I would travel back and forth depending on the duration of my visa, the availability of the nuns at

² Date of access: January 21, 2024; <https://catlakzemin.com/sahanin-arka-plani-feminist-bir-antropolog-olarak-turkiyede-guneydogu-asyali-kadinlar-uzerine-arastirma-yapmak/>

the monastery, and the availability of the nuns for whom I would say, “I can’t not be there. I can’t miss it,” and special religious days and holidays for them.

I was going to go to a monastery in Northern Greece and I was going to stay with the nuns there. This was something I hadn’t planned when I set out to do the research, but it was an incredible development, for sure. It was very exciting for me. When my relatives heard that I was going to the monastery, they asked me, “How long are you staying for?” When I told them, “I will stay for a week,” almost all of them said, “What are you going to do there for a week, you would get bored”; “Just stay for a few days, it’d be enough” (Merve Çeltikci, May 16, 2023, field notes) and it made me feel suspicious. As a result of these reactions, I started to worry, “What if it would be as they say and I would not be able to stay in the monastery.” However, I dismissed what my acquaintances told me by saying, “Oh, no” until I felt a claustrophobic anxiety as soon as I stepped into the monastery. Days later, I entered a monastery built on the foothills of the mountains in Northern Greece, far from the city, dominated by light brown. My favorite color, brown, and other shades of brown became the colors that I had suddenly distanced myself from. Because, especially on my first visit, not only the walls of the monastery, but also the walls of the building called ξενώνας (*xenónas*), which was built on a large part of the monastery, were painted with light brown and was almost depressing me. Apparently I would have to get used to the brown color of the monastery. As the words of my acquaintances echoed in my ears, I realized with a sudden sense of dread that the most important thing I had read about nuns up to that point was that “the confinement of nuns within the walls of the monastery.” What led to a claustrophobic reaction on my part was revealed when I arrived at the monastery? The high anxiety caused by the idea of suddenly entering a large institution that is open to visitors at certain times of the day, but generally closed to the outside world, and then not being able to communicate with my family because I don’t have access to the Internet, and not being aware of the outside world. Although there was a grain of truth in this, I realized at that moment that this was one of the things that had settled in my subconscious about the study. The great outer walls of monasteries are a common knowledge almost everywhere. But as I traveled back and forth to the monastery, I could say that those walls didn’t seem as big as they did on the first day. The scorching heat of the summer also affected me a lot, but the main reason why I couldn’t stay there was that I was afraid of it, even though I couldn’t even tell at first. I couldn’t say it because it took me a while to admit to myself that it was claustrophobia. When I first realized this, I struggled a bit with myself. It took me a while to accept that I wasn’t just running away from the extreme heat.

From “There are 43 nuns. You can be the 44th” to “I might as well become a nun while I’m in the monastery”

My acquaintances, including priests and nuns, who knew I was going to a monastery, would say things like “Don’t let them make you a nun, too,” “Merve is going to the monastery, she will become a nun,” and make jokes.³ This was an idea that I picked up during the research process and as I traveled to and from the monastery. Although I cannot clearly remember how and when I was transformed, I remember my Ph.D. thesis advisor ... telling me in our last phone call before my first visit to the monastery, “Merve who leaves and Merve who returns will not be the same, you will definitely change.” At this point, I would like to include Tayfun Atay’s comment on the change in a previous article he wrote:

³ For more information on how I was expected to become a nun, see the following article: Çeltikci M. (2023) “Sen de mi rahibe olacaksın?": Sahanın Yansıması. Fe Dergi, 15(1):258-278.

It was also clear that field research, ethnography, changed the anthropologist. No anthropologist arrives to the end of field research in the same intellectual, cognitive and emotional position as before he or she began it. Throughout his or her ethnographic research, an anthropologist experiences profound personal learning, both about life and the world outside himself or herself and, in parallel, and even more importantly, about himself or herself. It was an attempt to “become other to oneself” on the one hand and to find oneself in the “other” on the other. And it can be said that one of the most characteristic definitions of anthropology, “the science of other,” acquires its true meaning through the anthropologist’s experience of “othering” in the process of ethnographic research. Ultimately, it can be said that field research opens up the possibility for the anthropologist to become much more human than before (Atay, 2018:12-13).

Of course, I was aware that I would not return the same, but at that moment I had no idea how this would change for me. For example, on my first visit, I left the monastery almost as if I was running away and as soon as I arrived at my hotel in Thessaloniki that night, I put nail polish on my nails. On my second visit, I stayed for a longer period of time (about 15 days) than on my first visit. When I arrived in the city, completely removed from the monastery environment, I felt as if I had just been “released from prison” even though I had never been in prison before, and what was even more interesting was that I realized that I had lost interest in many things that one could do outside (like shopping, for example). Another example of this change could be the “nuns with moustaches” or about nuns not removing their moustaches. Some of my acquaintances would often talk about this and joke about it. I took my tweezer with me from the first to the third time I went to the monastery to remove my moustache when it grew. But on the fourth time I deliberately didn’t take the tweezer with me, thinking that I wouldn’t care about the growing hairs. But in the end I did care and there were times when I tried to remove it with my fingernails because I didn’t have my tweezer with me. Another example I can give in this regard is that since my third visit, I have mostly taken leg-length dresses and/or skirts to wear in the monastery, in order to fit in and show respect, even though it is not forbidden or restricted to me in any way. Because I have heard that some monasteries are quite strict about this and similar things, but I was always told that this women’s monastery, which I visit often, is very different—in a positive way—from others in many ways.

By the fourth time I went, we were incredibly comfortable with each other. I realized that in the monastery, where I couldn’t sleep at night before—I couldn’t even turn off the lampshade in my room at night out of fear—I started to sleep soundly on my fourth visit. It is important to keep in mind that these words are an acknowledgment of the transformation that is an essential part of the research process of an anthropologist conducting field research with a feminist, anti-positivist approach. The best example I can give is when I questioned whether I would become a nun or not. In fact, throughout the study—and it is hard to predict what will happen next—we could not stop ourselves from thinking about my potential to become a nun. Even though I have no idea how we got here, we all shared a common curiosity and/or thought about this potential in me. When I first entered the monastery, I was even given a name in case I became a nun: “Maria-veroniki.” This questioning manifested itself more clearly on my third visit to the monastery when I said things like “I might as well become a nun while I’m at the monastery so that I don’t waste time” (Merve Çeltikci, December 23, 2023, field notes). I have not yet made such an attempt, but as I visited the monastery more and more often, a very clear field(s) of questioning about me opened up from both sides. The interesting thing is that after a while I started to ask those I saw that ‘potential’ in, “Are you going to become a nun too?” I even started to ask, “Is he going to be a priest too?” and my predictions about prospective priests started to come true. Of course, this closeness was perceived differently by my family or my close circle.

My family joked, “We will baptize you and give you to a Greek” (Merve Çeltikci, March 19, 2023, field notes). My close circle and friends interpreted the situation differently. For example, my friends, who clearly understood my experiences of the monastery and my admiration for nuns from what I had told them, even started to say, “You will be a prophet” (From a feminist camp in Ayvacık, Çanakkale, Merve Çeltikci, September 5, 2023, field notes).

The first time I went to the monastery in Northern Greece, the nuns picked me up at the bus station in Thessaloniki called OSE. Because I had traveled from Istanbul to Thessaloniki by bus, they knew the time I would arrive at the bus station. They were even tracking my location live on WhatsApp. When we arrived at the Thessaloniki bus station, I saw the nun as the bus pulled up to the bus stop. She was waiting for me. I got off, greeted her and got into the car. There were two of them. It made me feel safe and important that the nuns had waited for me at the bus stop before I arrived. The nun was driving the car; she was the driver. We left the bus station and went to the center of Thessaloniki to pick up the other nuns. It was a very hot day. I realized how hot that day was when I got off the bus. And in that heat I put my jacket on out of respect for the nuns because I was wearing a blouse with an open waist. Sweat was pouring down my back from the heat. It was that hot and humid. I don’t remember ever feeling so hot and sweating before in my life. The nun understood my state and said to me, “You can take off your jacket.” I said, “You have one on, too.” She said, “I am a nun.” She said the word nun in Turkish, pronounced as “*rahibe*.” We laughed. After picking up the other nuns, we arrived at the monastery an hour and a half later. It was around 9 pm when we arrived at the monastery and it was still very hot. When we got further away from the city and approached the monastery, I felt like I was far away from Istanbul. I hadn’t been able to inform my family and I thought that there was Internet in the monastery and that I would be able to inform them easily when I got there. But there was no Internet in the monastery. I remember the nun saying something like “No technology” with her broken English, and when I heard that it was like boiling water pouring over my head. While I was trying to familiarize myself with this idea, I had already entered the guesthouse, the section where I would be staying, called *ξενώνας* (*xenónas*) in Greek. First, I ate quickly and then I took a shower. I showered with cold water. Even though I turned on the cold water, it was hot even then. In the meantime, they introduced me to a girl. She had come to the monastery for the first time with her sisters. I used her mobile data and used the internet at certain times of the day. By asking “When are you going to leave the monastery, can you also drop me off in Thessaloniki?”, I had decided on the day I would leave the monastery right at that moment (Merve Çeltikci, July 20, 2023, field notes).

“Who did you do the fieldwork with? With insects...”

Ethnography is a research process in which the anthropologist closely observes, records and participates in the daily life of another culture—this experience is called fieldwork—and then reports details about this culture in a descriptive narrative (Marcus and Fischer, 1986:18). As I mentioned earlier, the first day I went to the monastery, it was incredibly hot and humid. After showering and trying to eat the food that had been prepared for me, I was told that we would gather in the garden under a large tree, which I later learned was a mulberry tree (*μουριά* in Greek). It was the name day of one of the nuns. We were going to gather under the tree to celebrate the nun’s name day and eat sweets together. As we sat under the mulberry tree in the pitch darkness, the conversation suddenly turned to the possibility that there might be snakes around. I remember saying “funny” sentences mixed with fear like: “Snakes? Where are they? Oh no, I wish you hadn’t told me, how am I going to stay here in the monastery?” and we laughed. As I mentioned earlier, I was already claustrophobic, and the situation became even more frightening for me. Fortunately, there were no snakes around at that moment. When my

companions told me that the monastery and its surroundings were regularly sprayed, I was relieved. But this momentary relief did not change the fact that we were living right in nature. It was necessary to be prepared for any type of insect that might appear at any moment. Fieldwork in the midst of nature has its own specific conditions. And as social scientists have previously stated, ethnography has a "... fiction that blends the voice of the author with the voice of the field" (Ergül, 2013:2).

Merve: Are there any other nuns in your family?

Αδελφή: I am the only one in my family ..." (Merve Çeltikci, September 10-23, 2023, field notes).

As I was sitting in the garden of the small chapel inside the monastery during our daily conversations with one of the nuns, a medium-sized lizard fell on my right shoulder with a snap, hovered above me for a while, and then, with a brave move by the nun, fell on the back of my left leg and quickly moved away. When I saw that it was a lizard that had fallen on me, I couldn't contain myself and let out a huge scream in the middle of the monastery. Then I sat back down and continued to listen to the nun with the feeling that the lizard was still on me. Of course, this was not the only example I could give. Because the monastery was at the foot of the mountains and right in the middle of nature. The second time I went there, I was with my most intimate monastic companion and we encountered other insects such as wasps, grasshopper, centipedes and other insects entering the guesthouse called *ξενώνας*, and we tried to throw them out in our own way and even had laughing fits. We were alone in the guesthouse while we were looking for solutions to get them out. There was no one around and we were having laughing fits while wondering how we could get help from the nuns. Here's what I wrote down about that moment:

A blind fly came out of my breast. While we were trying to get the huge grasshopper out, a wasp came in. We closed the outer door so that no other insects could get in, and to protect ourselves from the wasp, we rushed into the living room and closed that door too. Butterflies were flying inside. Then I said to my friend, "They told me there were 45 nuns here. Where are they?" I remember joking and laughing. We were trapped in the room for a while until the nuns came. I think they heard us laughing, and soon a few nuns came to visit us. They took the wasp outside. We sat and chatted together. After seeing them off, we opened the outer door, checked the grasshopper we were trying to throw out with the kitchen container and took the container from outside. Before we knew it, a new grasshopper had entered the kitchen. It was like a joke. We said, "No, we can't deal with this anymore" and went to sleep in our rooms that night. Who did you do your fieldwork with? With insects (Merve Çeltikci, September 14, 2023, field notes).

For example, there was a lizard that would come out from behind the painting on the wall near the toilets, especially at night, and one night, after our first encounter with it, I was afraid to go to pee at night. I usually encountered them when I was alone, sometimes when there were friends staying at the guesthouse and/or when the nuns were around. In any case, if we couldn't deal with them, the nuns came to our rescue.

The division of labor of the nuns in the monastery

When writing about the monastery, it would be impossible not to mention the division of labor there. Because when we talk about monastic life, we are actually talking about a division of labor in which the nuns, who are very compatible with each other, work together in a smooth and seamless manner. In other words, there is a highly developed and established system based on cooperation between the working areas of the nuns in the monastery. This was already

confirmed by what I was told about the monastery when I had never been there: “This is how they meet the needs of the monastery. They live a brotherly and communal life. There is nothing separating them from each other. They have no income, no salary. They have everything when they have nothing.” (An Orthodox priest, Merve Çeltikci, March 30, 2023, field notes).

I will never forget the second time I visited the monastery, one of the nuns said to me, “We are one family here” (An *Αδελφή* from the Monastery in Northern Greece, Merve Çeltikci, September 13, 2023, field notes). A conversation one day with one of the nuns, with whom I talked and chatted the most since English was our common language, reinforced this thought. Here is an excerpt from that conversation:

Merve: How does it make you feel living in a monastery? Was there anything you had difficulty with when you started living here?

Αδελφή: When you decide to become a nun there are always difficulties. If you skip all these difficulties it is ok. After 1-2 months it is ok they are not difficulties anymore. We are like a family. We may think differently, there may be disagreements or arguing between us about anything. But we are a family, after all, this does not separate us (Merve Çeltikci, September 18, 2023, field notes).

In the women’s monastery I visited in Northern Greece, the division of labor among the nuns changes every year in many areas, but not in some. For example, some nuns only sing hymns, while others only work in art workshops such as hagiography or weaving (*αργαλειός*), sewing, embroidery, *χρυσοκέντημα* (chrisokentima) or gardening. It is clear that this division of labor is also related to the age and experience of the nuns in the monastery. Especially the nuns who are interested in hagiography, iconography, have paint stains on their clothes and for some reason I like it when I see them. Some jobs change every week. The nun who cooks or the nun who works in the kitchen changes every week. In the midst of all this busyness, I soon wonder when the delicious meals for at least 50 people, three meals a day, are prepared and I ask the nun:

Merve: When are all these dishes and desserts prepared? What are the working hours of the nuns in the kitchen?

Αδελφή: Every week we change the cook. They just cook. They don’t have to do anything. They have the blessing of the *Γερόντισσα* to cook they don’t have to come all these prayers. So, they don’t come (Merve Çeltikci, September 14, 2023, field notes).⁴

Based on my own curiosity, there were many things that I asked and even experienced myself, and each time I visited, experiences were added to my experiences. As an anthropologist once said: “Ethnography has ceased to be a text in which an anthropologist says, ‘This is how these people live’, but has become a text in which he starts to say, ‘This is how these people and I lived’” (Atay, 2018:12). Although there are seasonal changes in the hours, I share the following information for those who are curious about monastic life in the summer and fall months so that they can at least get an idea:

Merve: When do you eat? What are your meal times? What time do you wake up? And what do you do all day?

Αδελφή: We get up at 4 am in the morning and go to bed around 7-8 pm in the evening. There is no breakfast in the morning, it is eaten collectively, but if anyone gets hungry or wants to have a snack, they go to the kitchen and eat. At 12.30 pm we have lunch after Paraklisis (*Παράκλησις* in Greek). Whenever the Gerondissa bell rings, it is over and we go back to the chapel. Dinner is usually eaten in 10 minutes and after Vespers (*Εσπερινός* in

⁴ *Gerondissa* means the elder. We can also call her the abbess or *ηγουμένη* (igoumeni) in Greek.

Greek) we have a quick snack and come back (Merve Çeltikci, September 14, 2023, field notes).

Until I went to the monastery in Northern Greece, I had been in and out of churches and monasteries in Turkey and other countries I had visited. But I had a lot to learn. Perhaps one of the simplest of these was how to sit in the monastery chairs. I understood when one of the nuns showed me how to sit differently, thinking I would sit more comfortably. I had never realized until that day that the carved liturgical wooden seats in the Orthodox churches that I had sat in countless times had another part where I could put my feet. At the end of the legs of the seat, there were two protrusions that protruded inward from the bottom (see Fig. 1). By the way, instead of sharing a picture of a chair I took in the monastery, I would like to support my example with a picture of a similar liturgical chair I found on the internet. The reason for sharing this is that I was surprised when the nun, in a very motherly way, showed me how else I could sit on the chairs. It showed me that I still had a lot to discover, a lot to learn from them, and it made me even more curious.



Figure 1: <http://johnhazakisbros.gr>

The nuns who worked almost non-stop in the monastery had, of course, too many tasks to list here. Everything was done by division of labor. For example, some nuns would use the traditional Byzantine wooden plate of the *semantron*, called *σήμαντρον* in Greek, to call people to prayer in the church, while others would light and extinguish candles and sing hymns during the liturgy, or these tasks might involve driving a car, making liquor, producing hot water with a wood-fired thermo-boiler heating system, and so on (Fig. 2). And while we're talking a bit about the division of labor in the monastery, let's talk about the darkness. Because most of the time they are in darkness and there is almost no eye contact. This gives us another important insight into monastic life. The issue of darkness can also be associated with worldliness. The nun's narrative emphasizes the spiritual aspect of the monastery and the importance of maintaining this role, but at the same time, it also highlights a worldly preference with her emphasis on the electricity bill:

Merve: Well it is usually dark here. How do you feel? How does darkness make you feel? How does it feel to live in the dark? How do they read?

Αδελφή: There are no lights in the church, only candles. Candles are symbolic for the Orthodox Church. Using candle is a traditional thing in the monasteries. Maybe you will see the monastery who don't follow the tradition. There is light, a lamp, only where we chant. The light of the candle symbolize the light of a prayer person. We don't light the lamps outside because of the economy. It is dark outside so that the electricity bill is not too high. We only turn on a few lights (Merve Çeltikci, September 18, 2023, field notes).

I gave the example of the darkness because I was afraid of it at first. As I went to the monastery, I got used to the darkness and it was no longer something to be afraid of. Like the nuns, most of the time I knew where I stepped, whether there was light or not. I am sharing some of the notes I took on my third visit:

At first it seemed impossible, but in the end I got used to walking in the dark, just like them. Somehow I knew where my next step would be because I learnt in time. Only the time was needed (Merve Çeltikci, Northern Greece, December 25, 2023, field notes).

I realized the magnitude of my initial fear on my third visit, or rather when I realized that it had diminished over time. For me, there was a big difference. And this also showed me how much better my next visits would be. *Hooray!* Thanks god. I couldn't have done this without them, for sure (Merve Çeltikci, December 27, 2023, Northern Greece, field notes).

Although the article focuses on methodology, this section also encompasses an analysis of the findings related to the monastery where the research was conducted, including the division of labor, the position of the nuns, and analysis of hierarchy among them. This situation directs us to another literature: how monasteries are managed, their economic resources, and the position of women, especially in Orthodox contexts (such as Orthodox monasteries in Greece). As for what I can say about the monastery I visited is this: the monastery sustains itself through donations from benefactors and the nuns' own efforts by selling its own products they make themselves (such as hand cream, liqueur, sewing, and embroidery, etc.) in the monastery's a shopping center called *έκθεση (ékthesi)* in Greek (exhibition in English). They do not have a fixed income and there is also no funding from the Greek government. As far as I know, this is a general situation in Greece. In addition to what I mentioned above, sometimes only certain monasteries may have properties and rental incomes, but this is not the case for the monastery I visited.

From Merve to Μερνούλα / Mervula

As a continuation of my ethnographic field research, I went to a place I had never seen before, that is, a place I was unfamiliar with in many respects such as language, culture and lifestyle, and stayed with nuns there. This was an extremely exciting development for me in many ways that I could never have predicted at the beginning. Because in this way, I was going to be caught up in the idea of "distant" that began with Malinowski (Yazıcı Yakın, 2019:22). I should point out that I did not go to the women's monastery in Northern Greece on my own accord. I was invited through nuns I knew in Istanbul, and that is how I went. As we grew to love and respect each other, the bond between us began to grow, and my visits increased over time. "The first time I went I said 'Our Γερόντισσα?' to confirm which Gerondissa it was and we were all very surprised" (Merve Çeltikci, July 22, 2023, field notes).

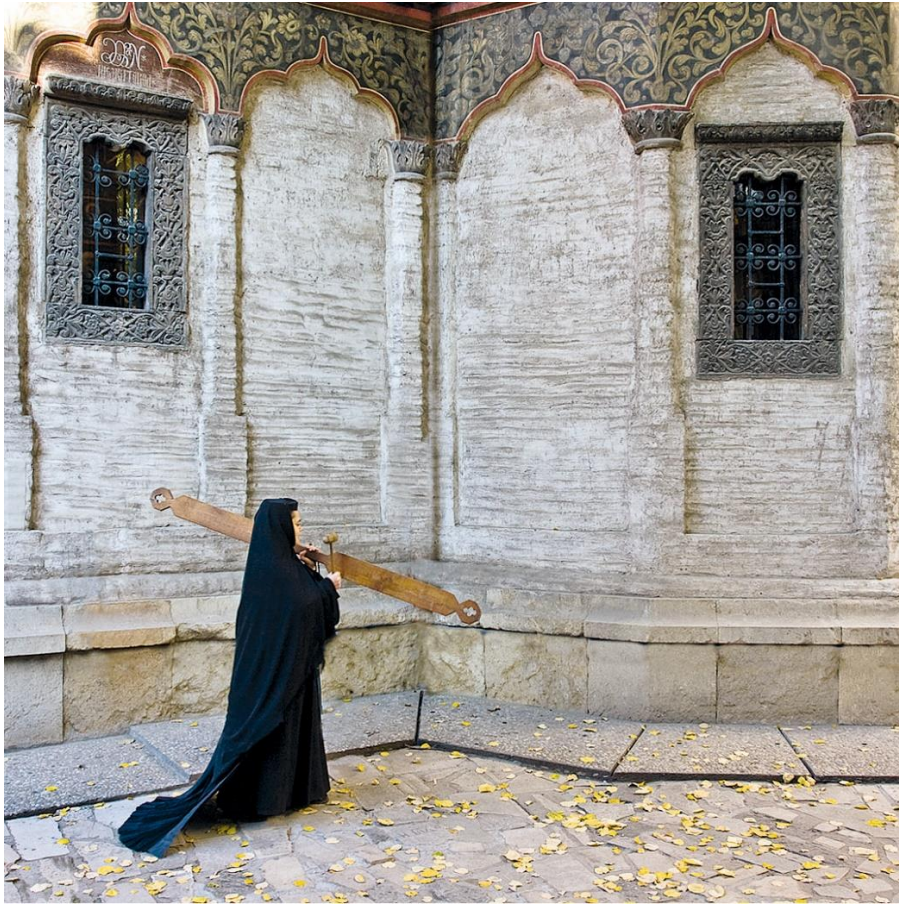


Figure 2: A nun calling people to prayer with the semantron (this photo was taken from another monastery's website to support the narrative visually). <https://www.stavropoleos.ro>

The Greek nuns in Turkey invited me one day to make a Greek Christmas dessert called *Melomakarona*. Since I was working at another job at the same time, I arrived at the end of the dessert making and helped with little things like taking the finished desserts from the tray and putting them in boxes. We spent a couple of hours with the nuns and again they fed me to the brim. As if that wasn't enough, as usual, they prepared a package for me to take home with me, either the food they baked or some ready-made food like chocolates and cookies. By the way, I used to joke about the weight I had gained because of the nuns feeding me in this way: "I call it 'Sister belly' instead of 'beer belly'." At the same time, while she was writing a note on a card for someone she was going to send from *Melomakarona*, she handed me a blank little note card. Since I knew Greek only in bits and pieces, our communication was mostly through Google Translate, body language or mutual acquaintances helping us. Language was a huge barrier between us, but certainly not an insurmountable one. We overcame it, albeit slowly, by learning new things in Turkish, Greek and English. I remember very well that on my third visit to the monastery, when I met a nun who speaks 7 languages and witnessed that other nuns I had known both in the monastery in Greece and in Turkey also spoke more than one language, I said the following during the conversation: "I have never met a nun who has difficulties in learning foreign languages" (Merve Çeltikci, December 24, 2023, field notes). I felt embarrassed since I didn't speak Greek, so I was trying to learn Greek and also trying to adapt to the language by practicing the most common Greek words: "In Greek, the words *καλά* (kala), *καλό* (kalo), *καλή* (kali) are always used. I use these words and other expressions I know in order to appear like I know Greek. Whatever anyone says, I respond with *καλά* (kala), *όλα καλά* (ola kala), *πολύ καλά* (poly kala),

πολύ καλό (poly kalo), ναι (nai), πολύ ωραία (poly oraia), etc.” (Merve Çeltikci, December 25, 2023, field notes). I told this to the nuns several times and we laughed together. Language is a very controversial issue in fieldwork, but what I want to emphasize and share here is different from that. I want to talk about the note the nun wrote to me that day, because it shows that language is not a barrier between us and it is also a great sign of how we have bonded over time:

Αγαπημένη μας Μερβέ

Ο Θεός σε οδήγησε κοντά μας! Σε νιώθουμε αδελφή μας και σε αγαπάμε πολύ. Προσευχόμαστε για σένα πάντοτε, ώστε να σε ευλογεί και να σε προστατεύει ο Θεός από κάθε κακό!

Αδ. Χ

Our dearest Merve,

God brought you to us! We feel you like our sister and we love you very much. We pray for you to be blessed and protected from any/every bad thing!”

(An Αδελφή from the Monastery in Northern Greece in Istanbul, Merve Çeltikci, November 27, 2023, field notes).

The second time I went, I had accustomed myself to monastic life and often told myself not to be afraid. I couldn't sleep at night because of fear and I couldn't adapt to the darkness and silence. I came from a large family and I was used to noise at home. The monastery was very quiet and no one spoke unless necessary. Especially in the evenings, after dinner, silence would prevail. If there was no one staying in the guesthouse, the silence was unbearable for me. Some evenings, of course, the young nuns would come to the guesthouse, usually in groups. We would sit together and chat, they would make me sing because I had a beautiful voice and they also had a beautiful voice and they would sing hymns for me. Sometimes there were nuns accompanying us for dinner, as those who stayed in the guesthouse, and we would chat. One of the nuns said to me on my second visit, “You came twice, this time you stayed longer, and we got used to you, we liked you.” It was only on my fourth visit that I was able to overcome this fear of darkness and silence. When darkness fell in the monastery, I tried to walk without turning on the lights, just like the nuns often did.

In fact, when I first visited them in Istanbul on March 30, 2023 for my Ph.D. thesis, when the abbot of the monastery told them that I was coming for my research, they thought I was an old woman, but when they saw that I was not as old as they expected, they were very happy. Because when they asked me my age when I was in the monastery and I told them I was 34, they said, “We thought you were 23. You look so young.” Also of the 45 nuns in the monastery, the youngest is 27 and the oldest is 85, since the majority of them are older than me, they tell me, “We are grandmothers, you are grandchildren.” One of the nuns in particular started calling me “Mervoula (Greek version) and Mervula (Latin version)” which means “Mervecik” in Turkish and I added the suffix “ούλα -oula / ula” to the end of her name even though she was almost 60 years old and I started calling her that way ever since. Including this sister many of them also call me “canım Mervoula” now. From the first day I went, our key word was mutual “love”; they would often tell me, “We are so happy you are here” and I would tell them, “I am so happy you have accepted me.” Regarding love “For the Sake of God: Unconditional Labor of the Nuns” was familiar (which exactly is the main topic of my thesis) for me, but it was the first time I had experienced it so closely. The only difference was that this bond of love between us became more evident on my fourth visit. And I also would like to add this little information here, on my third visit I met a middle-aged woman who is still in the process of becoming a nun and I have named her “Sister Coffee” because she drinks at least seven cups of coffee a day due to the Finnish culture. When

she becomes a nun, her name will change, of course, but I and many of us who know this will probably continue to call her “Sister Coffee” with her permission.

For me, on my third and fourth visits, this transformation was not like staying in a guesthouse but in different nun cells called *Κελλί*⁵ in Greek. I was transferred from what in Greek is called *ξενώνας* to *Κελλί* (cell) and, for example, on my third visit I stayed in the cell where my favorite nun—the one who first called me *Μερνούλα*—had stayed for 10 years. I was told then that the next time we would also go to her village, which we’re still planning. I also had the chance to meet the nuns’ families and close relatives on my third and fourth visits. In fact, I still keep in touch with the mother of one of the nuns, the niece of another, and many other friends I made there via phone and social media. For example, on my fourth visit, the nun’s mother picked me up from the bus stop in a village close to the monastery and we drove together. At this point I should add that on my second visit to the monastery, the nuns gave me a mini painting of the place called *ξενώνας*, which they had taken just a corner of and framed, and it is still on the TV unit in the living room of the house where I live with my family in Istanbul. Or the framed photograph of the nuns walking through the snow towards the great church in the monastery, which I bought from the shopping center in the monastery, called *έκθεση* (*ékthesi*) in Greek, on the table in my room. Also I took what the nuns gave me from here to there for the other nuns and from there I brought it here.

So I don’t want you to think that all these experiences have happened and are over, because as my visits to and from the monastery continue, new ones will be added and the existing ones will change and transform to a great extent. Because for example, while I am writing this article, we have already organized my fourth visit, and even that has already created an experience of its own. Additionally, for various reasons, I may not be able to go into detail at the moment, but I would like mention that we are also organizing my fifth visit. As a matter of fact, this departure plan was not for the monastery but just to visit Thessaloniki. In other words, my original plan was to go from Istanbul to Thessaloniki just for sightseeing. I was going to go all the way to Thessaloniki and come back without visiting the monastery. But this idea didn’t convince me or the nuns and the sincerest friend I made in the monastery, who has helped me a lot so far, so in the end, our plan resulted in going to the monastery with my friend again—on the occasion of the name day of the abbot of the Greek monastery for men called *Γέροντας* (Gerondas), with which they cooperate. On the way back from the monastery, Gerondas and Gerondisa dropped me off at in their car in the center of Thessaloniki. From my point of view, it would not be wrong to say that Thessaloniki and Greece have become the same (or have the same meaning) synonymous with monasteries and nuns. The monastery in Northern Greece, the nuns and the friends I made there have an important place in my saddlebag. I also witness my closest friend’s process of becoming a nun, whom I met there and whom I also asked “Are you going to be a nun, too?” Consequently, there are many experiences that I cannot include here and will save for another time. The most important of these is women’s labor, which is also the main topic of my thesis. At this point, I should mention that many issues such as what the nuns do in the convent, what I did with them and for them when I went there with feminist, anti-positivist, anthropology from below and participatory-observation techniques will be the subject of another article.

Conclusion

Here I have given a general sketch of the experiences I have made a point of and of the transformational development between us. The potential transformation of the researcher through fieldwork is explained in terms of the tension experienced in religious identities. This

⁵ The term for a place where people stay in prison is also used for the rooms where monks and nuns stay in Orthodox monasteries.

study can also be interpreted as a sharing of experience regarding how the researcher's positioning, along with their ethnic and religious identities, influences their perspective on the field. Additionally, the study provides data on how the researcher and their body are affected by the field experience. For instance, the need felt by the researcher to cover their body, discussions about body and beauty standards, etc. In summary, the impact of the field on the researcher can also be considered through the lens of the body. Although today we look at this critically or think that we do, the fact that early (and contemporary) anthropologists travelled to places they were unfamiliar with in order to conduct fieldwork is still a criterion for being an anthropologist or not. When we take a look at the experiences I shared here, we see that this method has spread to me as well.

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