

A lineage in land: the transmission of Palestinian Christianity

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This article examines a Christian tradition defined by descent, but a descent that extends beyond family lineages to include relatedness with saints and sacred land. This tradition emerges from the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, one of the oldest churches in the world, composed of a Palestinian laity and a Greek monastic hierarchy. Through an ethnography of the Orthodox feast of St George and the ritual use of olive oil from Palestinian villages, the article frames discussion of indigeneity, land, and rootedness around the concept of descent. Putting Palestinian Orthodoxy in conversation with kinship theory and the critique of social structure, it argues against sequestering divine and human forms of relatedness in separate social domains. It suggests the concept of descent can be a powerful tool for integrating them when expanded to include all ‘forces that bring forth life’.

On a cloudless afternoon in 2018, I stood with a Palestinian Christian friend called Khaled¹ outside Jerusalem’s Damascus Gate. We watched as Israeli soldiers inspected Palestinian IDs at the top of the stairs.

‘You know’, he told me, ‘they used to call us the “blue-boned”’.

‘Really?’, I asked, ‘why?’

‘The Ottomans, they used to torture the Christians’, he responded. ‘And the iron chains turned their skin blue, so the Orthodox were known by this name’.

To Khaled, the Orthodox are the principal Christian community of historic Palestine, but their special status derives not from theological or textual authority or even from being the first church, but from the church’s abiding presence in Palestinian history.

At the end of my fieldwork the following spring, I was reminded again of the Orthodox blue bones. I had arranged to meet with Khaled before the Holy Fire ceremony at Easter, my last big event before returning to the United Kingdom. I lived in the Christian Quarter, from which the procession to the church begins, so all I had to do was wait. But after several hours, Khaled never appeared and the procession left without him.

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Afterwards, I was leaving the Church of the Resurrection (the Holy Sepulchre) and spotted Khaled in the crowd. He had been held up by Israeli police at the gates of the city. He had told them he was from an old Orthodox family with the right to take part in a procession for Jerusalemites inside the church. The police looked blankly back at him: he had no 'Christian' name, nothing to identify him as Orthodox.

'Where is your crucifix?', they asked.

'I am Orthodox', he replied, 'I don't need a crucifix.'

For Khaled, such comments are always slightly tongue in cheek, but they reflect something true: for him, religion is not a faith – or not only a faith. This is not to say he does not care about theology or a connection with the divine, but that for him divinity is not only experienced through texts, or icons, or even the Eucharist. It is also something one carries inside, something one inherits.

This article explores the concept of Christian descent. In many ways, the term should be nonsensical. Scholarship in the human sciences has often treated Christianity as a religion defined by its individualism, transcendence, interiority, or sense of temporal rupture. Descent is what Christianity is said to have turned away from, first in relation to Judaism and pagan Rome, and now in relation to indigenous traditions and 'the ancestor cult'.

When I began research on Palestinian Orthodoxy, I had intended to study the material forms of Orthodox faith and their influence on Palestinian political life. But every time I asked about the significance of the objects, movements, and sounds of Orthodox prayer, I was told about their history instead. What does holy fire add to the Easter feast? What makes a certain icon an effective conduit of divine presence? Often, the answer was their history, but of a special kind. It was the connection of the object to a specific moment in the past, but also to the generations of Christians who preserved that object over time and transmitted its power into the present.

Orthodox Christianity is, at least in part, a tradition of carrying the divine presence forward in time. My argument here is that this process of transmission is both a ritual and a genealogical one. In Jerusalem, the tradition is formed by the confluence of two institutions, the church and the family, through powerful idioms of descent. As a prominent Orthodox layman put it to me, 'I am Orthodox because my father was Orthodox. It is the only way'. Descent describes a relationship both to forebears and to the Orthodox tradition.

Descent is a deeply fraught concept that has often been used to define non-Western societies in terms of the past, a time governed by primordial kinship relations rather than the modern state. This article thus considers the emphasis that Orthodox Palestinians place on descent alongside the concept's theoretical history. The first section frames discussion in relation to the Israeli state, which defines its citizens in genealogical terms. Doing so highlights the fact that while Palestinian statements of genealogical relatedness are descriptions of personal experience, they are also political idioms framed by the hegemonic narrative of the state. The following section develops this point by demonstrating how the state's view of descent, as a communal identity that remains constant over time, is maintained by treating filiation as the medium of generational transmission. It is the character of the medium, in other words, which defines descent's social role, and the state's focus on filiation marginalizes experiences beyond that frame. Drawing on the work of Gillian Feeley-Harnik, I outline a more dynamic method of studying descent as an inherently mediated process in which transmission occurs through a variety of conduits. The ethnography applies this

method to the feast of St George, including the ritual collection of olive oil from the saint's tomb and domestic practices of harvesting oil which precede the feast. In the process, I argue that descent is central to Palestinian Orthodox experience but that it represents a relationship not only to ancestors but also to saints and sacred land.

This point informs the article's larger theoretical contributions. In the context of Palestine/Israel, I argue that previous scholarly attempts to overcome the genealogical frame of the state by associating Palestinian links to land with a distinct national identity require further elaboration. To avoid essentializing Palestinians as 'a people' of 'the land', I contribute a mid-range analysis of two mediating categories: the family and the church. Doing so reveals how the relationship to land changes according to the medium through which it is expressed, be it a DNA test or a religious feast, and is thus not a constant or internal characteristic of indigenous cultures. I then apply the same argument to a much more general division in anthropological theory between kinship and religion. By showing that descent is not a static model of 'natural' reproduction but a process that changes along with its material forms, I broaden the scope for understanding what the people of the past transmit to those of the present. In many contexts, including Christian ones, this process is mediated by ancestral spirits and saints, devotional objects, and sacred land, but in the anthropology of Christianity, the elements linked to descent are generally excluded from study in favour of a divine presence distinct from human relatedness. Discussions around rupture and continuity have defined this distinction in temporal terms, but here I analyse it in terms of the modern separation of religion from the social. By undermining the view of descent as immutable, I show how divine experience and human relatedness can be inherited together by one generation and transmitted to the next.

The genealogical frame

The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem is a church composed of a lay population of about 50,000-60,000 Palestinians and a hierarchy of about 100 Greek monks.² This division has been the cause of a long-standing conflict: for over a century, the laity has attempted to gain access to the church hierarchy and a greater degree of control over its vast real estate holdings. The patriarchate is one of the largest landowners in the country, and partly as a result, the lay reform movement has been unsuccessful (see Goodgame 2021; Papastathis 2014/15). Ottoman, British, Jordanian, and Israeli governments have all consistently aligned themselves with the Greek hierarchy, leaving the lay population cut off from the church's resources and administrative structure. The political frame of the article thus includes the relationship between the Palestinian laity and the Greek hierarchy and the relationship between each of these parties and the Israeli state.³ My focus here is the fact that both the church hierarchy and the state define their authority over Palestinians in genealogical terms.

Israel, of course, defines itself as a Jewish state, and this definition has long been connected to the claim that Israel is the land promised by God to the Jewish people. Since the 1990s, however, the state has articulated this claim in a very specific way. As Nadia Abu El-Haj has shown, advances in genetic testing technologies have allowed scientists to identify members of the Cohanim, or the Jewish priestly class (2012: 2). The test works because it locates a part of the human genome that remains constant over many generations. The state has used this technology as a way of establishing a biological basis for the claim that all Jewish people are descendants of the original inhabitants of Israel. It claimed, moreover, that Jews who immigrated from Arab and

African countries were ethnically closer to European Jews than they were to Arabs and Africans (Abu El-Haj 2012: 17-18; cf. Imhoff & Kaell 2017). In other words, this is a descent for which blood transcends bonds of language or land.

For our purposes, this claim is significant because it defines descent in terms of what does not change. A similar attitude can be found among the Greek Orthodox hierarchy. A senior archbishop told me: 'Our local people were once Greeks ... [but] they eventually learned Arabic and forgot their Greek heritage.' He and the higher clergy generally consider the Palestinians to be not Arabs but Greek 'arabophones' who 'forgot' their Greek identity after centuries of Arab rule in Palestine.

When I began fieldwork, I was surprised to find Greek national flags outside the central monastery, but when I spoke with the monks, they equated modern Greece with the Greekness of Byzantium as if the former were the natural extension of the latter. Again, their language was genealogical. Here is the Ecumenical Patriarch, the most powerful of the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs, speaking to a Greek audience in Istanbul:

The Romiosyne [i.e. Orthodox] of the city ... [are] a select piece of world-Romiosyne, for here beats the heart of our *genos*. It is the womb of our people ... [we] have passed these ... years serving the Mother Church ... the values common to all humanity, [but also] the particular ideals that we have as a *phyle* and as a *genos*, and thus we continue down the road of our fathers' destiny (OS 2018).⁴

The terms *genos* (patriline, offspring, people) and *phyle* (clan, tribe, race) are used instead of more general terms like community and nation.⁵ They carry a strong connotation of descent which distinguishes the Greeks from other Orthodox by claiming a unique lineage going back to the Early Church. The Greeks of the church hierarchy thus imagine themselves as part of a Christian lineage even though they are celibate and have no descendants. They are Greek like secular Greeks and Orthodox like Arab Orthodox, but only they fully represent the *genos*. That is because for them, descent is traced not only through Greek parents but also through the traditions of the Orthodox Church. *Genos* refers not only to filiation but also to the idea that the church itself is a lineage, that something vital about its identity is literally passed down through the rituals, institutions, and very bodies of each generation.⁶ There are differences between the church's view of descent and the state's, but in a crucial sense, just like the state, the hierarchy stresses the unchanging nature of Orthodox descent, the passing down of traditions that never change.

Descent and indigeneity

Palestinian Christians fit uneasily within this genealogical discourse, for while they also draw on idioms of descent, they do so in a very different way.⁷ They describe themselves in the language of indigeneity, using either the English term or cognate phrases in Arabic like '*ibn al-balad*' (son of the country), or 'the living stones [of Palestine]'. Symbols of indigenous plants, including the cactus and the olive tree, adorn office walls, homes, book covers, and conference flyers.⁸ In political contexts, Christians employ indigeneity claims to allay the perception, inside and outside the region, that Christianity is foreign to Arab society. At a recent conference I attended in Bethlehem, Palestinian Bishop Atallah Hanna opened his remarks by saying, 'Christianity in the Arab Mashriq, and particularly in Palestine, is not an import from the West, as some believe ... We [Christians] belong in this [region], historically and in our identity, roots, originality (*asala*), and spirituality.'

Expressions of belonging and ancient roots are common in many indigenous movements, but as scholars and activists have both pointed out, the concept of indigeneity is double-edged. In some cases, the term and its use in international law have helped indigenous groups to regain land rights; at the same time, it has also essentialized them and their traditions, fixing them as people of nature, and by extension a people of the past (Abu-Rabia 2015; Tatour 2019). Of course, the indigeneity concept and its political valences have been widely discussed in anthropology, so I will not revisit them in detail.⁹ What I wish to examine here is the understanding of kinship on which debates about indigenous peoples rest.

Scholarship on indigeneity has long been bound up with the critique of social structure. In the Middle East, this critique took a specific form against the concept of the tribe. There, the corporate lineage and its internal structure continue to be important factors in the discussion of indigeneity as multiple countries in the region are ruled by families that define their authority genealogically, including Jordan and Morocco. These families claim to descend from the Prophet and therefore not to originate in the national soil at all. For some such rulers, like the Sadah who once ruled Yemen, an indigenous society's rootedness is evidence of their lack of pedigree, and therefore their lack of sovereign rights (vom Bruck 2005). In other contexts, communities may claim indigeneity *through* their tribal difference. This is the case for Palestinian Bedouin, who must insist on this difference in relation to other Palestinians to claim an indigenous status unavailable to the non-Bedouin majority. In either case, genealogy is central.

The problem is not that communities affiliated with a common ancestor or supportive of marriage conventions like patrilineal endogamy do not exist – they do. It is the granting of a transhistorical status to these conventions, which concepts like ‘tribal society’ tend to do, that defines a community according to an unreasonably narrow definition of social reproduction. It does not simply distinguish a social group from others – that is, through pastoralism or cultural traditions – but ties the identity of that group to a social structure that cannot fundamentally change.¹⁰

Talal Asad's early critique of Israeli anthropologists of the 1950s is a case in point. Asad argued that these scholars falsely characterized Palestinian village life as unchanging, but that the cause was not the prejudice of the scholars themselves but their application of a model of social structure common across the discipline. In this case, their conviction that the *hamula* or patrilineal clan was the defining feature of Arab society led them to argue that while the society changed in many ways, these changes were external to its basic identity and structure. The clan as a structure thus appears unmoved (Asad 1975: 252, 258). To the contrary, as Asad and many others have since shown, the internal structure and authority of clans transform in relation to the colonial or postcolonial state, and the depiction of Arab kinship as an autonomous system disconnected from history is itself a product of colonial rule (Al-Haj 1995; Haddad 1992; Tamari 1983).

Partly as a result, anthropological study of lineage systems sharply declined in the 1990s, and by the 2000s it had all but ‘vanished’ from the literature (Deeb & Winegar 2012: 540; cf. Abu-Lughod 1989). Anthropologists of Palestinian nationalism do write about the symbolic use of land and Palestinian closeness to it: for example, through figures like the *kufiya*¹¹ and cross-stitch embroidery of wheat stalks, Bedouin tents, and cypress trees. However, in doing so, they frame the Palestinian use of such symbols in relation to the state discourse, which often denies Palestinian culture and

effaces it from the country's history (see De Cesari 2019). As Ted Swedenburg points out,

Unlike the Western ethnographer, the Palestinian intellectual's claim regarding the need for preservation [of traditional culture] is not motivated by naïve romanticism or the desire to restore a pure origin ... [but] a communal attempt to 'save' by establishing and reasserting an Arab cultural presence, in the face of the challenge of continual colonial effacement (1990: 21; cf. Latif 2011).

The symbolism of land and rootedness have thus remained important features of anthropology as vectors of nationalism and anticolonialism. Lineage links to land, however, have not.

The anthropology of Palestine has grown considerably in recent years, as Sa'ed Atshan's (2021) survey demonstrates. Khaled Furani and Daniel Rabinowitz (2011) raised the theme of indigeneity over a decade ago as a field in need of examination, and today many scholars are doing just that, for example in relation to heritage discourses (e.g. De Cesari 2019) and in studies of the Palestinian Bedouin (Abu-Rabia 2015; Tatour 2019; cf. Jamal 2011). At the same time, despite scholarly advances into many areas of social life, anthropological studies of Palestinian ritual and kinship are few and far between. This is unfortunate, especially as the larger field of Palestine studies has expanded considerably into these areas. The historian Beshara Doumani (2017), for example, has urged scholars to look beyond the frame of the nation and the state to investigate Palestinian society in all its diversity – including, in particular, family life. The point is not to forget political experience and the occupation, but to show that domestic life is just as much a part of the larger social and political context as checkpoints, prisons, and protests, and that the relationship between them should not be assumed in advance. Following this approach, I view the link between indigeneity and genealogy as an important field to explore, especially as it is so often interpreted in Orientalist terms (Atshan 2021: 7).

In anthropology, the absence of descent relationships is not unique to the Palestinian context but is characteristic of the study of kinship more broadly: though lineage links frequently appear in ethnography, they often remain untheorized or sidelined in favour of relations to space and place. This is partly the result of the way kinship theory has been formulated since the 1960s. As Asad's essay suggests, the critique of 'tribal society' was part of a much broader turn in kinship theory away from descent and filiation. At least since David Schneider argued that descent theory was based on a Western folk concept of procreation not at all universally shared, the study of kinship has transformed in important ways (Carsten 2004: 18–20; Yanagisako & Delaney 1995: 9). Feminist anthropologists further critiqued the role of procreation in the naturalization of gender inequalities, and over several decades developed a range of more dynamic theoretical tools. Descent gave way to relatedness, mutuality, sentiment, and care (e.g. Bear, Ho, Tsing & Yanagisako 2015; Sahlins 2013; Yanagisako 2002).

This turn has been incredibly productive for kinship theory, but while the post-Schneider paradigm gets us past the unchanging, 'natural' view of kinship, it leaves us instead with models that view kinship mostly from the perspective of the present. This is problematic when we consider the terms Palestinian Orthodox use to describe their relatedness to ancestors and saints. Describing Palestinian saints in terms of mutuality, for example, has a flattening effect, removing the historical element so central in Khaled's statement at the article's outset. For him, the point is not just that he has the

same blue bones as every other generation, but that previous generations passed their experience *to him*. Transmission is central, but for the Orthodox, it is not only generated through filiation.

Transmitting 'the forces that bring forth life'

While transmission is not a major feature of contemporary kinship studies, it has been central to the anthropology of religion at least since Asad began theorizing religious traditions as authorizing discourses transmitted through texts, laws, and embodied practices. More recently, anthropologists have applied this approach to the Orthodox Christian tradition: not simply as a relationship to scripture but as the enduring presence of the church as the embodiment of Christ in history (Naumescu 2011; Pop 2011).

This has been a productive turn in the study of Orthodoxy, but as in Middle East anthropology, genealogical modes of transmission have not been part of this theoretical project.¹² Though scholars have certainly pointed out that for the Orthodox, being Christian is often more a matter of birth than belief (e.g. Hann 2007; Pelkmans 2005), such observations have rarely led to an investigation of the empirical links between descent and Christianity. This is unfortunate because genealogical idioms appear in a wide variety of Orthodox contexts. In Georgia, Serbia, and Montenegro, for example, genealogical links to saints have become vectors of national belonging and contestation (Forbess 2013; Pelkmans 2005). Among Indian Syriacs, recorded genealogies linking lay Christians to an apostle or early saint inform both local family life and wider historical sensibilities (Varghese 2004; cf. Bakker Kellogg 2019). In different ways, descent relations cut across social and religious lines to inform the lives and faiths of Ethiopians (Boylston 2018), Russian Old Believers (Rogers 2009), and Egyptian Copts (Ramzy 2015).

In many of these contexts, the boundary between ancestors and saints is porous, just as it is in so many non-Christian traditions. As Webb Keane (2007), Fenella Cannell (2005), and others have argued, the idea that Christianity is unique for its strict separation of being and believing is an ideological one, and it should be examined empirically and comparatively. In practice, there is a conspicuous slippage for many Christians between believing in, and sharing substance with, the divine. This often appears in relations with the dead, as Christians treat their own ancestors in much the same way as they do 'unrelated' saints (cf. Cannell 2013*b*; Cátedra 1992 [1988]). For all the scholarly writing on Christianity's transcendence, individualism, and discontinuity with the past, genealogical expressions of faith are common among Christians, and they have been for much of Christian history. As Peter Brown (1981) has demonstrated, in its early centuries, Christianity essentially was the saint's feast, and Christian families feasted at the graveside of their own dead as they did for their saints.

I argue that the Christian experience of relatedness with saints, or of inheriting the divinity that saints carry, is not a holdover from some earlier 'traditional' past, but a vital part of the Christian tradition (see Cannell 2013*a*; Couroucli 2012). Many of the people making such claims come from Catholic and Orthodox traditions, but not exclusively. A recent study, for example, describes American evangelicals who test their DNA for traces of Jewish blood linking them to the Early Church (Imhoff & Kaell 2017). Nevertheless, for much of Western history, and for many Protestants today, Christianity is a religion of individuals seeking to break with the past. So what does it mean when Christians see themselves as descending from divinity?

I would answer that these forms of faith only appear contradictory because kinship and religion are still limited by the conceptual domains of modernity (Cannell 2013a). Their difference is thus not so much a question of contrasting models of time as it is of which forms of relatedness can be considered sacred. And while literature on links between the filial and ritual dead is growing, from a theoretical standpoint the two domains remain stubbornly separate (but see Bakker Kellogg 2019; Cannell 2013b). One important exception is the work of Gillian Feeley-Harnik. For the last twenty years, Feeley-Harnik (2004; 2019) has been developing a theory of descent beyond the limits of procreation, one which seeks both to recover the concept from the dustbin of anthropological theory and to radically reimagine its scope.¹³ Feeley-Harnik argues that functionalist theories of descent were not wrong because the concept is less universal than, say, relatedness. They were wrong because they abstracted descent from space. By conceptually separating ‘the political domain of *lineages* [from] the domestic domain of *kinship*’, anthropologists like Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard associated descent with time and kinship with space, with the consequence that domestic life appeared timeless, reproducing itself without change (Feeley-Harnik 2019: 70, emphasis in original).

As I pointed out earlier, this is precisely the problem with the indigeneity concept: it de-historicizes and de-politicizes indigenous peoples by describing their identity as something internal to their culture rather than as a relationship between a people and their political context. But in addition to framing indigeneity in political terms – that is, in relation to settler colonialism – it is necessary to view continuous presence in the land not as unchanging nature but as a form of historical perseverance that changes shape over time.

Feeley-Harnik is useful here because she suggests a broader view of how societies reproduce themselves, a view that considers a larger set of factors, both temporal and spatial, human and nonhuman. In an essay titled ‘The geography of descent’ (2004), she draws on Tim Ingold’s work demonstrating how certain societies identify generation with land as opposed simply to filiation. Human beings, or humans and other beings, can be understood as kin because they ‘derive the lineaments of their being from the same place’ (Ingold 2000: 114). Ingold emphatically contrasts this perspective with the Western ideology of descent, but Feeley-Harnik suggests the two may not be so different. ‘Linkages between people, land, and ancestral beings’, Ingold’s definition of totemism, may also characterize Western, Christian societies. They are ‘powers that bring forth life’ (Ingold 2000: 113), and treating them as such, she argues (Feeley-Harnik 2004), will allow anthropologists to think about descent in new ways.

In the Palestinian Orthodox case, this view of descent better accounts for both its religious character and the conflicting desires of Palestinians to maintain the spirit of the tradition while changing its visible forms. As we will now see, the Orthodox feast of St George and the ritual use of olive oil there demonstrate how earthy substances become a part of the deeper Christian past. Oil, it turns out, is not just good to eat. Like blood or milk, it is a vital substance.¹⁴

The feast of St George

After Easter and Mary’s Dormition, the largest event in the Orthodox calendar is the feast of St George, patron saint of Palestine.¹⁵ This is the George also claimed by Georgia, England, Ethiopia, and Greece: George the dragon slayer. According to the myth, George was a Roman soldier killed for being a Christian in the fourth century.

His tomb is in Lyd, a historically Palestinian city near contemporary Tel Aviv. Every autumn for centuries, the church has celebrated his feast day there.

In 1948, the nascent Israeli army forcibly evacuated Lyd and dispossessed its Palestinian residents. It has become an Israeli town with a Jewish majority, although a small Palestinian minority has remained. Lyd has been a pilgrimage site for centuries, but after 1948 the warrior saint took on new meaning for Palestinians. George is one of the most popular boys' names for Christians, and one can find icons of him slaying the dragon in many if not most Christian homes, as well as stone carvings of the icon on lintels and cornerstones (Fig. 1). Recently, the icon has even been reimagined in modern form, with the Israeli Separation Wall surrounding the dragon.

Thus, like many saints of the Orthodox and Catholic world, George is attributed with meanings that change over time. Today he is a symbol of resistance against the occupation, and the location of his tomb in a depopulated village provides a powerful reminder of that legacy. But the political relevance of the saint is only one part of his appeal, one that converges with the others in the annual celebration of his feast.

As with other feasts, the eve of St George's Day is marked with an *esperinos*, a Greek word for evening prayer also used in Arabic. It is a short service that provides the laity with a first chance to encounter the saint's tomb. When I entered the church the evening before the feast, the liturgy had not begun but Abuna Farah, the Jerusalem parish priest, stood by the iconostasis blessing visitors with a small brush (Fig. 2). For each person, he dabbed the instrument in a small pot of olive oil blessed from contact with the tomb, and then brushed a small cross on their forehead, cheeks, chin, and hands.

The church was quiet. A few people were sitting and chatting in the pews while others smoked outside. I noticed the stairs leading into the crypt and went down. Here everything was dark. It was a small, stone chamber with a domed ceiling illuminated by a single dim light on the far wall. Save for the tomb it was empty, the floor covered in wood shavings. In one corner, I could see a *tanaka* of olive oil (16L tin) and several large plastic Coke bottles, also full of oil. In the centre of the room was a marble tomb, raised in Orthodox fashion with a cross and an icon of the saint engraved in the cladding. In the space around where the saint was depicted astride his horse, the marble had been removed, creating a shallow basin. This was filled with cloudy, green olive oil.

Atop the tomb lay several plastic syringes. Confused, I stood stiffly by the wall until a group of women came down with empty bottles. Entering the room, they approached the tomb and unceremoniously dunked their bottles into the basin to collect the oil. The one carrying the smallest bottle picked up a syringe and started squirting oil into it. When the oil in the basin began to run low, one of the women retrieved a bottle of oil from the corner and replenished it. Once they had filled their bottles, they made their way to a second set of stairs on the far side of the room.

The following morning, the atmosphere was very different. As with any major feast, the patriarch and his retinue arrived early and performed the liturgy for several hours. The laity, along with many pilgrims and tourists and also local Muslims, arrived steadily throughout the service, and by the time it finished, the church, inside and out, was packed with people. At one point, I left to call my landlady, Abla, who asked me to bring her back some oil from the tomb.

When I returned, the road was blocked. Israeli police had set up barriers in the middle of the square with a narrow walkway for those attending the feast to pass through. Off to the side, outside the barriers, a dozen or so Orthodox Palestinians protested against a deal the patriarch had recently made to sell large tracts of church



Figure 1. Wall carving of St George in Jerusalem. (Photograph by the author.)

property to Israeli developers. They carried several large banners. One read: ‘Akka [Acre] will defend the Orthodox *awqaf* [church property endowments] and the Arabic roots of the church’. Another read: ‘The *awqaf* of our ancestors are for the grandchildren of our grandchildren’, and a third proclaimed: ‘[Our] *awqaf* [are] our past, present, and future’ (Fig. 3).

Beyond the protest there was a mass of people at the entrance of the church and a *wakeel* or lay trustee of the Lyd parish tasked with keeping order at the front door. This man had the unenviable job of physically slowing the flow of people into the



Figure 2. Icon of St George with a small drawer holding iron chains (foreground); Abuna Farah blessing visitors with olive oil (background). (Photograph by the author.)

church, which was quickly becoming full. Pilgrims in matching caps pushed their way forward and he pushed back, admonishing them to behave. He was dressed for the part, wearing trainers and a t-shirt with the phrase ‘Basketball never stops’ written across the front.

Eventually, as others exited the church, he let us through. Standing on a set of stairs watching events unfold, I noticed the crowd split into two distinct groups. The door was on the far side of the church from the altar, where the liturgy was performed. The



Figure 3. Protest outside St George's Church. (Photograph by the author.)

iconostasis ran the length of the room but was divided by a row of standing chairs typical of Orthodox churches. The chairs created an artificial wall between those seated in the pews, on the one hand, and an open space for personal devotions, on the other. I watched as pilgrims from Greece, Cyprus, Georgia, and Romania headed for the liturgy while Palestinians remained.

In this second area, Palestinians purchased candles from lay women by the back wall. They took these and proceeded to a large iron station filled with sand for planting them. Others purchased massive metre-long candles (symbolizing George's spear) and set them up in rows outside the church walls. After lighting a candle, they proceeded to the iconostasis to kiss the icons there. Some went to a small table upon which stood an icon of George and a small drawer holding a set of iron chains carrying the blessings of the saint (Fig. 2). Lay Christians, mostly women and children, passed them over their bodies, the parents showing their children how to do so and the children following suit.

Thus, for the most part, Palestinians celebrated in their own way while the liturgy carried on at the far end of the room. They chatted and greeted one another, kissed the icon and then their friends. Fathers carried their sons dressed in St George costumes and took pictures by the iconostasis. And then they went down for oil.

After securing an empty bottle, I attempted to retrieve some oil for my landlady. I joined the queue, which was backed up past the stairs. Every few minutes, we took one step forward, or one step down. It soon became clear why there were wood shavings on the floor. There was oil everywhere: on the stairs, the railings, the walls, and eventually also our bodies. Sweating and greasy all, we reached the tomb. I managed to get a few

squirts of a syringe into my bottle before another *wakeel*, stationed at the front with a tin of oil in his hands, sent me on my way.

Outside the church, all of those who had entered the crypt with me recovered by the wall with their bottles. A woman from Jerusalem stood with two 2-litre bottles filled with oil. Several young Ethiopian men rubbed the oil into their arms and hair, while a Palestinian man rubbed it into his neck. The service went on like this until the patriarch came out to serve the Eucharist. Palestinian, pilgrim, and Greek took communion together and then began to leave. The police dismantled the barriers, the protesters packed up their banners, and the feast came to an end.

The material qualities of oil

In this scene, we can see that the central feature of the feast for Palestinians is not the liturgy or the words of the patriarch, but the material objects and substances through which the presence of the saint can be felt. Foremost among these is oil.

Drawing on Webb Keane's work on the materiality of religious experience, Anne Meneley has outlined several ways in which the material characteristics of oil help to produce different kinds of intimate experience. She describes, for example, the way oil 'seals' the body in ritual contexts, protecting it from evil (Meneley 2008; cf. Keane 2007). In another article, she points out that refugee Palestinians abroad prefer not the extra virgin olive oil that is popular in the West, but the green, unfiltered oil, an index of home:

The ex-pat Palestinian community [in Kuwait] valued what Trubek calls 'the taste of place', especially as many of them had been forcibly displaced ... The thick, dark green oil which Palestinians favor evokes what David Sutton called 'xenetia' for Greek exiles, the taste of homeland (Meneley 2014: 50).

Olive oil is particularly effective as an index in part because it can be so easily 'placed'. Like wine, olive oil can be distinguished by the specific territory in which it is produced as well as how and when it is pressed, stored, and filtered. This can be discerned through its physical features, for example its colour and cloudiness, but especially its taste. Christians in Jerusalem, for example, prize the oil from Beit Jala (near Bethlehem) for its astringent kick, whereas oil from Salfit, in the northern West Bank, is very smooth and also popular. Thus, unlike other ritual substances, like water or candlewax, it carries traces of its donor. This is reflected by the fact that my interlocutors do not just send 'Palestinian' oil to their relatives in the diaspora; where possible, they send it from Bethlehem, or Lyd, or Zebabda, indexes not of land in general, but of specific homes and villages.

Moreover, while oil can be used for a variety of religious purposes, for example in a lamp or to infuse incense, it is also marked by its viscous feel. At the shrine of St George, Christians experience the presence of the saint at least in part through touch: the oil touches the tomb and then their bodies. When I brought the oil back to my landlady, she told me, 'I put just a little on the skin, if I have a bruise or a headache, it helps'. This account speaks to Meneley's material and wider scholarship on how divine presence 'sticks' to certain objects more than others as a result of their material properties (e.g. Engelke 2005). This trend in material anthropology demonstrates how sacred substances become public in their use and, as a result, drawn into social relations that extend beyond the ritual context.

Attention to the publicness of signs drives much contemporary scholarship on saints.¹⁶ Writing about Marian shrines in the Philippines, for example, Dierdre de la

Cruz (2015) shows how the media of Mary – rosary beads, rose petals, and statues – interact with media technologies like photography or television to create a powerful, even revolutionary, public role for the Virgin. Similarly, Angie Heo's work on Egyptian Copts demonstrates how Muslims and Christians alike experience the presence of Christian saints through their visible, auditory, and tactile forms. As such forms enter the public domain, however, church and state authorities circumscribe their power, which causes the boundaries between sectarian communities – defined by the state in terms of their difference – to harden (Heo 2018).

Both of these works draw productively on a theoretical perspective that highlights the mechanisms through which different scales and categories of experience come into contact and sometimes conflict. As de la Cruz and Heo show, the materiality of saints' traditions endows them with powerful political potential. Indeed, scholarship on saints often highlights this potential, particularly when a shrine is shared by two or more religious traditions, either in solidarity or in a more agonistic relationship (Bowman 1993; 2012; Stadler 2020). Scholarship on kinship with saints is also often framed in political terms, either as a claim to a powerful lineage (e.g. Bandak & Bille 2013; Forbess 2013) or as a protector: for example with Mary figured as a Palestinian mother (Stadler 2020; cf. de la Cruz 2015). At the feast of St George, we can see this political valence clearly in the mobilization of George in protest against the church's sale of Palestinian land (see Goodgame 2021). Here, however, I wish to pull away from the immediate political context as the protest also provides the impetus to look beyond the association of land and nation to see the feast's temporal dimensions and the element of transmission. After all, the protesters did not simply say George was Palestinian, or that the land was national property, but that it was an *inheritance*: from 'our ancestors ... [to] the grandchildren of our grandchildren'.

Returning to Meneley, then, the sticky substance of St George's oil does not just heal the individual who touches it, nor does it signify a general sense of belonging to a place. It bridges the gap between two kinds of sign: the index of home and the index of God. Thus, where Meneley distinguishes between religious contexts in which oil 'seals' the body and a secular longing for the homeland, here the two are intimately linked.

When I went down to the crypt, some of the oil's value seemed to derive from the fact that it was literally becoming a part of the building, the surfaces, and our bodies. Entering the feast meant, above all, becoming infused with the substance of the saint. But that substance is at the same time the substance of Palestinian trees, homes, and villages. The oil thus represents both the saint himself and the land that produced him.

Moreover, the merger of land and divine presence does more than simply extend the semiotic reach of oil in space: for example, from the secular to the sacred. It also extends the reach of the sacred substance in time. The feast is a ritually and seasonally repeated event, and as such each iteration of it reproduces the saint's power for a new generation. So as Palestinians carry oil from their homes to the shrine, they also carry it through time.

This iterative logic calls for a different analytical frame, and I suggest the material approach to saints' shrines can be usefully adapted to include a more explicit concern for processes of transmission: from the saint to the individual devotee, but also from generations of Palestinians of the past to those of the future. Of course, many scholars of Christianity and sainthood have addressed questions of temporality.¹⁷ The emphasis here, however, is not to establish an Orthodox temporality that contrasts with a Catholic

or Protestant one, but to highlight that the power of the past is transmitted to the present through a specific medium: here the objects, speech, and sensations of descent (Keane 2007: 114). The materiality of saints is thus central to the framework I am developing, but it needs to include the saint's history, and how that history is tied to the generations of families which provide him with oil. The last section turns to these family ties.

Land, descent, and 'rootedness'

When I asked Palestinians about St George, they emphasized his courage in the face of death but also his links to the land. As Khaled once told me, '[George's] father was a Roman but his mother was Palestinian, and it is through the mother that you take your culture'. Motherhood is an important feature of the Christian tradition everywhere, but here it is especially significant for the way it links the saint to the Palestinian family.

Orthodox Palestinians refer to the Orthodox Church as the original Christian tradition. They point out that whereas the Greek presence in Palestine was broken when the monks were expelled from the country by Mamluk and Ottoman rulers, the Arab laity always remained. The term I heard most often to describe this was *thabat*, or rootedness.¹⁸

The late Issa Boullata, a Palestinian Orthodox literature professor in Canada, describes this sentiment in his memoir: 'I am deeply rooted in Jerusalem. I don't mean by this to refer to my roots in the ancient Land of Canaan ... [though] Boullata was a Canaanite name ... I am personally rooted in Jerusalem' (2014: 1). Boullata describes his name as evidence of his ancestry, a line of descent connecting present Palestinians with ancient Canaanites. But what matters to him is not the lineage per se, but the experiences of his forebears in Jerusalem and the traces they left behind. These traces are marked in the land. In explaining his 'personal' rootedness, Boullata describes his great-grandmother, who became pregnant after ritually circling the tree of Abraham in Hebron; she named her son, Boullata's grandfather, Ibrahim (Boullata 2014: 3-4). Other Palestinian Orthodox describe a similar relationship to the Milk Grotto, where Mary's breastmilk fell to the ground in Bethlehem, or the tomb, house, and bath of Mary in Jerusalem, all of which are places of healing (see Stadler 2020). When Boullata's grandfather, a goldsmith, built a new house in West Jerusalem during the British Mandate, he took his best steel anvil and tossed it into the foundations as 'a treasured token ... [of] strength, with his future generations in mind' (Boullata 2014: 5). Boullata lived in Canada after 1967, but these experiences 'root[ed]' him in Jerusalem and provided a material link to his deeper, Canaanite roots.

I encountered the same relationship to land among contemporary Jerusalemites during the olive harvest. A month before I first attended the feast of St George, for example, I was invited to participate in the harvest at a friend's house in the Jerusalem suburbs. The extended family mostly lives in the Old City, but one son, Basil, lives outside. He has five small olive trees, which by rural standards is very few, but in a good year family members can each collect some oil.

I set out from the Old City in the early morning. When I arrived, Basil and his parents were there along with his sister, her husband, and their child, as well as a nun close to the family who Basil says helped raise him. They were sitting around a table as Su'ad, the grandmother, brought out breakfast: *labana*,¹⁹ hummus, a bread called *k'ak*, hard-boiled eggs, *ful*,²⁰ and lots of tea and coffee. We ate well, and then sat slumped on the porch before Su'ad sent us into the garden. We picked the olives, 'milking the branches',

as it was described to me (as one does not pick them one by one but pulls them down in clumps). Large plastic tarps had been laid out below to catch them, and when the tree was bare, we gathered up the tarp ends and poured the olives into buckets. The neighbour's kids came over and sorted them, taking out the twigs and leaves. After a few hours, we were all covered in olive dust.

At lunch, we ate a dish called *laban imo*: 'mother's yoghurt'. *Laban imo* involves straining and heating a yoghurt sauce for hours in a huge pot and then cooking large chunks of lamb in it. I rarely ate this type of dish in the Old City – it was reserved for special occasions when the whole family was present, and this is difficult to manage in the small spaces of the Quarter. The olive harvest, along with name days, baptisms, birthdays, and even average Sundays, is an opportunity to bring the family together – especially when some members live in the suburbs, as they are often reluctant to find parking and then hike down into the Christian Quarter through the tourists, pilgrims, and police.

The olive harvest also carries a special additional quality to it that other occasions do not, however. This is the physical connection to the land. Basil's family was never an agricultural one, but like many urban Palestinians – and city people anywhere – they keep gardens and produce their own fruits and vegetables. Basil is always tending to the garden, building steps or a terrace to impede erosion, and planting cucumbers, cauliflowers, or new varieties of mint and thyme.

Palestinians in the Old City often mentioned the importance of access to land. Keeping such spaces and cultivating them 'roots' them in place and, in some cases, discourages emigration. As Boullata's example highlights, roots are often described in terms of origins and ancestors. But in his memoir, the claim of ancient roots is immediately qualified by the emphasis on his family links to land. As Feeley-Harnik indicated above, scholars often describe lineages in terms of the past, and affective or 'personal' kinship in terms of the present. Here, however, the personal is also an index of the lineage. Recognizing this element of domestic life is especially important when we see its connection with the saint's feast. Throughout the year, families like Basil's visit saints' shrines around the country, each linked to a saint but also to features of the landscape. The Feast of the Cross is celebrated with pomegranates, Epiphany with rosemary. Families in Jerusalem take apples back from the Golan and eat fish after feasts by Lake Tiberias or on the coast.

This relationship between saints and land is especially apparent at the olive harvest, where the material qualities of saints are directly linked to domestic life. One example would be the milk symbolism. At the start of the section, I quoted Khaled saying that St George's mother was Palestinian and that one's culture is transmitted through the mother. At Basil's, we ate 'mother's yoghurt' and the olive picking was described as 'milking' the tree. These are explicit themes in the Christian traditions of Palestine, and they 'root' a family through the mediation of figures like Mary, whose shrines are all domestic symbols: the tomb, the bath, the birthplace, the nursery. And of course, lamb is the meat most associated with Christian feasts (Christ being the biblical 'lamb of God'). At St George's feasts in Lyd and Al-Khader, sheep are ritually slaughtered after the liturgy.

Even more than milk, however, olive oil and trees directly index the feast of St George. One month after the harvest, families bring their oil to the shrine, where it is ritually distributed to Palestinians from all over the country. Their family oil becomes a part of the saint's tomb, the earth around it, and the bodies of all its visitors. The

substances of church and home thus converge, and oil becomes the 'shared substance' of all Orthodox Palestinians.

Applying Ingold's formula that kin 'derive the lineaments of their being from the same place', the Orthodox become kin with their saint, and each other, through the land they share. But following Feeley-Harnik's framework for a spatial and temporal view of descent, we can now see that feasts also create a lineage in the land. Oil is not just a substance shared among Palestinians or between them and a timeless saint; it is transmitted by generations of Palestinians who cultivated their trees and passed down the tradition.

Conclusion: The house of Orthodoxy

At the feast of St George, Palestinians harvest olive oil at home and then offer it to the shrine. Oil facilitates the encounter with the saint, diffusing divine presence to anyone who touches it. But the affordances of oil exceed the divine-human relationship: as an index of the Palestinian harvest, oil carries the family into the shrine and diffuses its presence along with that of the saint. This process is repeated annually. At the start of the article, I described Orthodoxy as a tradition of carrying the divine presence through time, and theologians often describe how the tradition is transmitted through ritual repetition. As we have seen here, however, the tradition is transmitted not only through church rites but also through ritual substances like oil. Palestinians guarantee the feast by sharing their harvest each year, and in so doing, they carry the tradition through time just as the liturgy does. However, because the medium, oil, is also the substance of their own kinship, it transmits the presence of their families and land along with that of the saint. The family lineage is thus reproduced through the reproduction of the tradition.

As I have tried to show throughout this discussion, my approach to descent draws from scholarship on forms of kinship that extend beyond biological or filial relations, for example through sharing food or a house, and from scholarship on religious mediation through substances like oil. The intervention here, however, is to show how these processes work together to reproduce the Orthodox Christian community over time. Orthodoxy is not only a 'religious' tradition, but a way of creating kinship: between families and across generations.

The church as I have described it is an extension of the house. It holds the family, bringing its members together in a single space, as Basil's house did for his relatives. But it also holds them in time, linking one generation to the next. As Palestinians know all too well, actual houses and villages can be destroyed and families dispersed. And yet the Orthodox tradition has a remarkable ability to keep kinship links alive and to create new ones.

At the start of the article, I argued that the static view of descent espoused by the state and the Greek monastic hierarchy is the result not of the genealogical form itself but, first, of the political position of the institutions employing it and, second, of the medium through which it is expressed. Scholars have clearly demonstrated the first factor by directly linking Palestinian indigeneity to the experience of settler colonialism. Indigeneity is not something people 'have', a cultural substrate that remains constant over hundreds of years, but a public discourse conditioned by the state's attempt to obscure the identity of Palestinians as Palestinians (rather than 'Arabs' or 'tribes'). Scholars have been less quick to examine the second factor, but it is important to do so, for while indigeneity is not a feature of the 'tribe', neither is it a timeless feature of the nation. To avoid sweeping generalizations about 'natural' links to land, it is necessary

to show how such terms are mediated through historically conditioned institutions and discourses. To do this, one must highlight not only how indigeneity is deployed politically, but also how it is experienced and expressed.

For Palestinian Orthodox, sacred descent expresses a relationship to land *and* ancestors *and* saints. They articulate their ability to remain steadfast and rooted in religious and domestic terms, and these terms inform a national politics very different from that of the state. Claiming a line of descent can thus be a vehicle for change as easily as it can be a weapon of the status quo. This is visible at the feast of St George, where protesters mobilized the language of descent to challenge their patriarch, but more fundamentally it is evident in the fact of mediation itself. By highlighting the contingent nature of generational transmission, descent appears not as a timeless structure braced against the current of history but as part of a tradition that changes along with the community itself. The problem is not the existence of descent relationships but how they have been analytically limited by the frame of filiation. Scholars will be better served by viewing descent as a relationship produced not only through ancestors but also through saints and sacred land, all of which are powers that bring forth life.

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NOTES

¹ Most names provided are pseudonyms.

² This is a rough estimate as neither Palestinian nor Israeli official sources specify church denominations. The total Palestinian Christian population for Israel/Palestine is between 118,00 and 179,000 (CBS 2017; Johnson & Zurlo 2017; PCBS 2019). The World Christian Database (WCD) estimates the Eastern Orthodox total is 47,400 (Johnson & Zurlo 2017), but this may be slightly low (cf. Pew Research Center 2011; Tsimhoni 1993: 26). The patriarchate's jurisdiction also includes Jordan, for which the WCD estimates 70,000 congregants in 2015 (Johnson & Zurlo 2017; cf. Haddad 1992).

³ The patriarchate is Eastern Orthodox and administratively distinct from Oriental Orthodox churches (e.g. Armenian, Ethiopian, Coptic, and Syriac Orthodox), which do not have the same ethno-national division between their hierarchy and laity.

⁴ See Demirtzoglu (2018) for audio in Greek, and OS (2018) for an English transcript.

⁵ See Livanios (2007) on the term *genos*.

⁶ See Couroucli (2003) on the *genos* in Greek Orthodoxy. Several scholars have also written about Christian descent more recently, including Cannell (2013c) and Imhoff & Kaell (2017).

⁷ The same is true for Jews and Muslims; the contrast is not between religions but the experience of descent and statist methods of freezing it in time.

⁸ Oriental Orthodox also use the language of Orthodox descent. Even Catholics (and some Protestants) speak of descent, but as Palestinians only started converting to Catholicism in large numbers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they typically speak about their heritage as Palestinian Christians rather than as Catholics.

⁹ But see Appadurai (1988) on how the concept of 'the native' confines people to the land, or Bowen (2000) on the concept of indigeneity being used to justify violence against 'foreign' minority groups.

¹⁰ Israeli scholars have argued that the Palestinian Bedouin cannot claim exclusive rights over land partly because they are no longer truly Bedouin (Yahel, Kark & Frantzman 2012). As in Clifford's (1988) work on Mashpee land claims – refused because the court claimed the Mashpee no longer constituted a tribe – here, too, for the state to recognize its rights, the tribe can never change.

- ¹¹ A headscarf traditionally associated with peasant farming but which became a powerful national symbol.
- ¹² For a different view of Orthodox transmission, see Naumescu (2011). Naumescu views transmission in cognitive rather than kinship terms, but also highlights Orthodoxy's historical dynamics (cf. Bloch 2005).
- ¹³ Of course, anthropologists have greatly expanded the category of kinship to include many kinds of substances and relations, from Carsten (1995) on the hearth to Bear (2015) on kinship with/in the shipyard.
- ¹⁴ See Carsten (2011) on blood as a substance of relatedness.
- ¹⁵ There are two annual feasts, the other being in Al-Khader, near Bethlehem. See Marteiijn (2020) on that feast and the saint's symbolic relation to land, liberation, and martyrdom.
- ¹⁶ Other themes include syncretism, moral exemplarity, and kinship (Albera & Couroucli 2012; Bandak & Bille 2013; Bowman 2012). Sainthood is typically described in non-Christian contexts.
- ¹⁷ See Tomlinson's (2014) helpful review.
- ¹⁸ On *thabat* in Palestinian Christian writing, see Ateek (2017: 149).
- ¹⁹ A strained yoghurt eaten with bread and olive oil.
- ²⁰ Fava beans marinated with chilies, olive oil, garlic, and parsley.

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Une lignée dans la terre : la transmission du christianisme palestinien

Résumé

Le présent article examine une tradition chrétienne définie par la descendance, mais une descendance qui va au-delà des lignées familiales et inclut les liens de parenté avec les saints et avec la terre sacrée. Cette tradition est issue du Patriarcat orthodoxe de Jérusalem, l'une des plus anciennes Églises au monde, composée, d'une part, de laïcs palestiniens et, d'autre part, d'une hiérarchie monastique grecque. Par une ethnographie de la fête orthodoxe de la Saint-Georges et de l'usage rituel de l'huile d'olive provenant de villages palestiniens, le présent article discute de l'indigénéité, de la terre et de l'enracinement au prisme du concept de descendance. Faisant dialoguer l'orthodoxie palestinienne avec la théorie de la parenté et la critique de la structure sociale, l'auteur appelle à ne pas enfermer les formes divines et humaines de parenté dans des domaines sociaux séparés. Il suggère que la notion de descendance peut être un outil puissant pour les intégrer, si on l'élargit à toutes « les forces qui font jaillir la vie ».

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