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## SOME REFLEXES OF A FISH CULT IN PONTIC TRADITION

F. A. Eloeva

*Fatima Abisalovna Eloeva*

Doctor of Philology, Professor  
Saint Petersburg State University, Russia;

University of Vilnius, Lithuania  
Saint Petersburg, Russia

E-mail: fatimaeloeva@yandex.ru

The paper aims to show how certain centripetal tendencies reflected in the syncretism of the Pontic folk orthodoxy contribute to elaborating the specific Pontic identity and Pontic myth. The paper investigated some reflexes of the existence of a particular kind of a fish cult, which can be traced in the Balkans and especially in the context of Pontic tradition (Folk Orthodoxy). A legend about the miraculous revival of fish reflected in different texts with varying subject matters was reconstructed. Certain apocrypha associated with the Church of the Virgin of the Life-Giving Spring (Balykly) in Constantinople, the legend of the Lord's fish told by Alexander Kuprin in his novel "Lestrigony" and a number of other texts were analysed. Thus the paper examined a microscopic fragment of the syncretic picture of Pontic culture, trying to show the importance of this fragment for the analysis of typology of diasporic self-identity.

*Keywords:* Pontic myth, national identity, folk orthodoxy, temple pools, fish cult, resurrection, sacred source, revival of fish

# О НЕКОТОРЫХ РЕФЛЕКСАХ КУЛЬТА РЫБ В ПОНТИЙСКОЙ ТРАДИЦИИ

Ф. А. Елоева

*Фатима Абисаловна Елоева*

доктор филологических наук, профессор  
Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Россия;  
Университет Вильнюса, Литва  
Санкт-Петербург, Россия  
E-mail: fatimaeloeva@yandex.ru

В статье рассматривается фрагмент синкретической картины понтийской культуры на примере существования необычного культа рыбы, который можно проследить на Балканах и особенно в контексте понтийской традиции (народное православие). Воссоздана легенда о чудесном возрождении рыбы, отраженная в ряде источников: апокрифе, связанном с церковью Богородицы Животворящего Источника (Бальклы) в Константинополе, легенде о Господней рыбе, изложенной А. И. Куприным в рассказе «Листригоны», и др. текстах. Проанализированный материал позволяет высказать гипотезу о заимствовании понтийской традицией элементов культа рыб, засвидетельствованного в ближневосточном и закавказском ареалах. На приведенных в статье примерах можно видеть, как некоторые центробежные тенденции, отраженные в синкретизме понтийского народного православия, способствуют выработке специфической понтийской идентичности и понтийского мифа.

*Ключевые слова:* Понтийский миф, национальная идентичность, народное православие, храмовые бассейны, культ рыб, воскрешение, оживление рыб

The paper aims to show how certain centripetal tendencies reflected in the syncretism of the Pontic folk orthodoxy contribute to elaborating the specific Pontic identity and Pontic myth.

The paper will investigate some reflexes of the existence of a particular kind of a fish cult, which can be traced in the Balkans and especially in the context of Pontic tradition (Folk Orthodoxy). We aim to reconstruct the legend about the miraculous revival of fish reflected in different texts with varying subject matters. We will compare the Apocrypha associated with the Church of the Virgin of the Life-Giving Spring (Balykly) in Constantinople, the legend of the Lord's fish told by Alexander Kuprin in the story "Lestrigony" and a number of other texts.

Thus the paper will examine a microscopic fragment of the syncretic picture of Pontic culture, trying to show the importance of this fragment for the analysis of typology of diasporic self-identity.

The problem of the Pontic diaspora, the special stability of the ethnic self-consciousness of the Pontic Greeks, the archaic features of the Pontian dialect in the last decades are in the focus of attention of the researchers.

Anthropologists often talk about the “Pontic myth”, the theme of piercing longing for the lost homeland and specific emotional coloring of Pontic Orthodoxy<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, the history of Pontus can be regarded as a kind of transformation of the Greek myth about the Odyssey, but in the consciousness of the Pontians, the hypothetical Ithaca moves to mainland Greece — the Peloponnese (Morea), then again to the shores of Pontus Euxine — Constantinople, Odessa, Batumi, or Sukhumi, or even in Tiflis. It seems that for the Pontic consciousness it is essential that the motherland is in an unattainable distance, enveloped in misty haze and placed in the distant past.

My personal interest to trace the reflexes of a fish cult in Pontic tradition goes back to the end of 80s and beginning of 90s when I accomplished a field-research in the Pontic enclave in Eastern Georgia (at that time still part of the Soviet Union)<sup>2</sup>. Since then I have been constantly searching for the parts of the puzzle, and still, haven't managed to get to the end of the story.

Initially, it has been purely a linguistic research focused on the description of the Pontic Dialect of the local compact Greek population. Quite soon my interest was focused on the extremely interesting sociolinguistic situation of Turkic-speaking Orthodox Greeks of Tsalka. In Tsalka and Tetrtskaro regions of Eastern Georgia both Pontic and Turkic-speaking Orthodox Greeks are present. From the very beginning I was impressed by the syncretic character of the Pontic Orthodoxy<sup>3</sup>. Greeks had moved in the region in several waves after 1828<sup>4</sup>.

There is a striking abundance of pagan elements in the local Orthodox tradition, which under one divine umbrella shelters all that peculiar mosaics. Quite often it is quite difficult to define the source of these evidently pagan elements.

Some of these “pagan” features can be named:

1. The obvious prevalence of the cult of saints, where every saint has very specific functions while the celebration of the days of the saints is somehow more important than Christmas and Easter (the latter takes us back to polytheism).
2. The local name of Prophet Ilias is Elli Baba (translated like «The quick father» while Elli means The Wind in Turkish).
3. The cult of a magic hand (compare to the cult of hand of Fatima).
4. The sacrifice of sheep during different religious festivities.
5. Various cults of the sacred sources and ponds with sacred fish.

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<sup>1</sup> Fann 1991, 340–356; Sideri 2008, 32–47.

<sup>2</sup> Eloeva 1992, 73–84.

<sup>3</sup> Eloeva 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou 1991, 357–363.

The latter rite does not seem to be Indo-European, it occurs that it could be associated with temple basins common in the Middle East and attested in the regions of the Transcaucasia<sup>5</sup>.

The earliest Egyptian and Babylonian stories about the heavenly Fishes associate them with the Syro-Phoenician Fish cult of the great goddess Atargatis. Her temples had pools with sacred fishes which no one was allowed to touch. Meals of fish were ritually eaten in these temples, the goddess herself was sometimes portrayed in the form of a fish, and her priests wore fish skins.

The Turkic-speaking Pontic Greeks of Tsalka (Eastern Georgia) relate an apocryphal tale where Christ revives fish which was being cooked in oil in a frying pan. It is believed that these half-alive but ready-to-cook fish are partly black and should not be eaten as they are poisonous.

It appears that relics of the tradition of sacred ponds with fish are still to be found among the Pontians of Eastern Georgia. For example, in the village of Oliank with the Pontic population (Eastern Georgia) there is a pond with trouts. The pond and trouts are considered sacred. There is a belief that anyone who catches a trout will certainly fall ill (the materials from the field study carried out by the author in Tsalka of 1990).

Many years passed and I remembered the sacred and presumably poisonous trouts in the pond of the Oliank village, entering the churchyard of the famous Church of the Virgin of the Life-giving Spring in the modern Stambul — former Constantinople.

The church is also called *Μπαλουκλί ή Παναγία Μπαλουκλί* “Mother of God Balykly” (compare Turk. *balıklı* “concerning the fish”), or *Μπαλουκλιώτισσα*.

The traditional explanation of the epithet of the Mother of God — *Μπαλουκλιώτισσα* and the name of the church Balykly is associated with the abundance of fish in this area. This explanation seems to be rather strange. It is much more likely that both the church and the surrounding area are called Balykly, as the church contains a spring and a font with fish. It is unclear when exactly the area became known as “fish” area. There is quite a reliable reference to the anonymous Russian pilgrim (1389), who describes the Church of Our Lady of the Life-Giving Spring and the fish in its font<sup>6</sup>.

The Turkish name Balykly—Turk. “connected to fish” refers us to the apocrypha about the capture of Constantinople. A priest’s wife while frying fish in a pan and having heard the news of the capture of the city by the Turks, exclaimed that it is impossible. She went on saying that the fish she was cooking in oil would rather come back to life than the news about fall of the city would turn true. The half-fried fish jumped out of the frying pan and came back to life. Nowadays goldfish with dark stripes are floating in the holy spring, located

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<sup>5</sup> Toporov 1987, 440–449; Sokolov 1988, 391–393; Dölger 1922.

<sup>6</sup> Majeska 1984, 148 (“in this monastery there are holy water and fishes”); Mango 1952, 380–385.

in the side-chapel of the church. It should be noted that this legend was the first thing we heard from the church warden, a Greek from Constantinople after having entered the churchyard.

The entire courtyard of the church is paved with grave marble slabs, transported by the settlers from Cappadocia (Turkic-speaking Cappadocian Greeks) from the cemeteries of their ancestors. The language of the inscriptions is Turkish, but the graphics are Greek with a touching attempt to preserve the polytonic system of accents and aspirations.

We can assume that at some point Balykly was the translation of the old Greek name of the area where the sacred spring was located (outside the city walls, near the Golden Gate — now it is the Istanbul Balıklı district).

A font with fish placed inside a church is an unusual phenomenon in the Christian tradition. It seems that in this case, as it had been already mentioned we are dealing with the relics of the tradition of temple pools with fish which is common in the Middle East.

The history of the church is surrounded by legends connected with a wonderful source<sup>7</sup>.

The revered spring was located outside the walls of urban Constantinople, at some distance from the Golden Gate. According to legend, this sacred source was known since ancient times. Procopius (*De Aedificiis*) argues that the church was built in the VI Century and ascribes its construction to Justinian (527–565). According to legend, Justinian was hunting in a grove when suddenly he saw a small chapel, thousands of pilgrims and a priest in front of a wonderful source. Over the source, he built a church, using construction materials from St. Sophia<sup>8</sup>.

According to the legend put forward by Nicephorus Callistus, the future emperor Leo I Makella (457–474), being still a simple warrior, met the blind man at the Golden Gate, who asked him for some water. When he was looking for water, the voice of the Virgin Mary brought him to the source, he gave the blind man to drink, and, following the instructions of the Virgin, laid clay from the bottom of the source to his eyes, and the blind man recovered his sight, and predicted that he would become emperor and ordered him to build a church in that place<sup>9</sup>.

Another variant of the story of the wonderful fish we learn from George Viziniotis (Γεώργιος Βιζυηνός) (1849–1896), one of the most brilliant Greek prosaics and story-tellers. In his poem a hegumen who fasted for 40 days, while the Turks besieged Constantinople, decides to fry the fish, and being told about the fall of Constantinople does not believe the words of a man passing by who brings to him the tragic news:

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<sup>7</sup> The most complete information about the church and legends and folklore tradition associated with it can be found in the article of Alexis Politis: Politis 2010, 393–406.

<sup>8</sup> Haury, Wirth 1963, 20–21.

<sup>9</sup> Nikiforos Kallistos 1812, 6–7.

— *Stop frying the fish, old man, because it fills with its wonderful savor the entire Great city.*  
*The famous city is captured by Turks.*  
*They are cutting our heads!*  
— *In our glorious city, the foot of the infidel (the son of Hagar) will not step.*  
*You must lie.*  
*But if you're right, then let the fish leave the frying pan and return to the pond.*  
*He still spoke, and the fish had already left the frying pan,*  
*Being roasted on one side and again jumped into the pool — alive, fast.*  
*And so the fishes have been swimming there since then up to the present day*<sup>10</sup>.

Another variant of the story tells Gustave Flaubert<sup>11</sup> in his “Voyage en Orient (1849–1851)”. For the first time his Travel Diary has been edited in 1910.

Flaubert who visited the church in 1850 tells different version of the miracle. According to him a sailor died in the sea; before he died, he makes the captain of the ship swear to bring his dead body to this church and take it around for three times. The captain kept his promise, the dead resurrected and stayed in the monastery. The news of the miracle arrived to England, where someone, not believing the story, decided to go and check the story on the spot, seeing the resurrected; He found him frying fish in the pan by the source; unwilling to believe the miracle, he said: “I will not believe what you say to me, as I do not think these fried fish can swim again”. As soon as these words were pronounced, the fish jumped from the pan to the water and restarted swimming. We really see small fishes in the water that are just visible.

According to another version, rendered by Flaubert, the unbeliever was not an Englishman, but a compatriot of the resurrected one: “He showed the frying fish on his pan, and he exclaimed”. “Can these fish come back to life?” A new miracle took place in the moment. The fish jumped to the source, where they still can be seen.

In our opinion, the story outlined above has some gaps. The plot does not quite build up logically. Such ellipticity and discontinuity of the storyline is a common occurrence in the Balkan folklore. It seems that it is this lack of logic that renders the legend its special attraction. The famous, almost incomprehensible and incredibly popular in the Balkans “Song of the Return of the Dead Brother” has been literally hypnotizing listeners for centuries.

In all likelihood, lacunae and semantic failures indirectly point to the archaic nature of the narrative.

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<sup>10</sup> Published for the first time in the newspaper Νέα Εφημερίς, 2.4.1883; Kiriaki Mamoní 1963.

<sup>11</sup> Flaubert 1925, 251. The diary of Flaubert was edited for the first time in Paris in 1910.

When I have almost collected my material I read the article of Aleksis Politis, who kindly sent me it on my request — he has collected impressively rich material about the stories concerning Balykli. Politis focuses his attention on the stories concerning the Church, although he speaks about the general context of this legend and emphasizes here the role of the Turkic-speaking tradition, which I believe to be very relevant as well.

It should be noted that the story was exclusively oral, it seems that for a long time it had not been recorded deliberately — in fact the story was fixed and started acting like a written source only in fiction. Politis tries to make a reconstruction of the plot — according to his hypothesis there is something that was seldomly mentioned in the comments concerning the sacred fishes of Balykliotissa — presumably one day the fried fishes will return to their initial condition and then hopefully the city will become Greek again. The data, collected by Politis, prove that the story of the fishes was for some centuries exclusively oral, it was communicated by church services to visitors as some kind of secret information. Ultimately it appeared as a written source only in fiction.

A charming reminiscence of the legend can be found in the story told by the outstanding Russian writer Alexander Kuprin in his *Lestrigons* (1907–1911), a set of sketches on the Greek fishermen of Balaklava.

The title reminds us of Odysseus adventures (10th canto of Homer's *Odyssey*). According to the local belief Balaklava (mentioned by Strabon like under the name of Symbolon — Σύμβολον), could be one of possible locations of Lamos, the port of Laestrigons — a tribe of man-eating giants from ancient Greek mythology<sup>12</sup>.

During the Middle Ages, it was controlled by the Byzantine Empire and then by the Genoa.

In 1475 Cembalo City (the Genoese name) was conquered by Turks and they changed the name to Balykli-ava (in Crimean Tatar — weather proper for fishing, which subsequently became Balaklava. Note the striking resemblance to Balikly).

During the Russian-Turkish War, 1768–1774, the Russian troops took Crimea in 1771. Thirteen years later, Crimea was definitively annexed by the Russian Empire. After that, Crimean Tatar and Turkish population were forcefully replaced by Greek Orthodox people from the Archipelago.

One of the novels entitled *the God's Fish* tells a story that impressed an outstanding Russian writer Kuprin, who stayed for some time in Balaklava and was absolutely charmed by it. During his stay in Crimea he spent a lot of time with the local Greek fishers and was engaged in their traditional activities.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Thucydides (6. 2. 1) and Polybius (1. 2. 9) the Laestrygones inhabited southeast Sicily.

It is obvious that Kuprin, who lived in Balaklava at the beginning of the 20 century, heard more ancient version of our history. Kuprin describes a strange fish caught in his fishing net with Balaklava Greek Kostya Constandi:

But there was also one very strange fish that I had never seen before.

It was oval, flat and would fit easily on a female palm. Its entire contour was surrounded by dense, small, transparent tiny hairs. A small head, and on it eyes that did not seem to belong to a fish — these eyes were black, with gold rims, unusually mobile. Its body had an even golden colour. There were two spots of irregular shape, one at each side and extremely bright sky-blue colour, which no artist could have reproduced.

*“Look”, said Kolya, “this is the Lord’s fish. It rarely comes across”.*

*Returning home I poured some sea water into a large enameled basin and put there the Lord’s fish. It quickly swam around the basin, touching its walls, moving in one direction. When it touched the surface, it produced an audible, short, snoring sound and intensified incessant moving. Black eyes of the fish rotated, I wanted to save it, to drive it alive to Sevastopol, to the aquarium of the Biological station, but Kolya said waving his hand:*

*— It is useless. It will not survive. It’s such a fish.*

*It is enough to take it out of the sea just for a moment — and it would not survive. This is the Lord’s fish.*

*Toward evening the Lord’s fish died. And at night, sitting in the boat, far from the shore, I remembered and asked:*

*“Kolya, why do you call this fish Lord’s?”*

*“There is an explanation”, responded Kolya answered with deep faith. — The old Greeks here tell the story. When Jesus Christ our Lord resurrected on the third day after his burial, no one wanted to believe him. We saw many miracles during his lifetime, but this miracle could not be believed and seemed awesome.*

*Rejected by the disciples, the apostles and myrrh-bearing wives refused to believe in his resurrection. Then he came to his mother. At that time she stood by the oven and cooked fish in a pan, preparing dinner for herself and her folk. The Lord said to her:*

*— Here I am, your son, risen, as was said in the Scriptures.*

*Peace be with you.*

*But she trembled and exclaimed in fright:*

*— If you are truly my son Jesus, do a miracle so that I could believe it.*

*The Lord smiled that she did not believe him, and said:*

*— I’ll take the fish frying on the fire, and bring it back to life. Will you believe me then?*

*And as soon as he touched his two fingers to the fish, he picked it up the fish fluttered and revived.*

*Then the mother of God believed in a miracle and joyfully bowed to her resurrected son. And since then, there could be seen were two heavenly spots on the fish.*

*These are traces of the Lord’s fingers.*

*That was a naive old legend which a simple fisherman told me.  
After several days I learned that the Lord's fish had another name — Ze-  
us's fish. Who will give me the response: to what depth of time does the apoc-  
rypha rise?*

Obviously, this “fish revival story” is repeated many times in folklore, cf. Apocrypha that the archangel Gabriel animated a fish, fried in a frying pan and thus proved the truth of the good news of Annunciation.

It is possible that we are dealing here with some kind of fish cult (a more full version of which is preserved in the Karaman and Pontian traditions). In all stories the fish has spots, and these spots are associated with the touch of the divine hand. The revived fish, on the one hand, is sanctified by the divine touch and becomes the object of worship but at the same time turns poisonous and unfit for consumption. At the same time, it should be noted that its revitalization serves the purpose of persuading the incredulous listener.

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