

Article

From Religious to Cultural and Back Again: Tourism Development, Heritage Revitalization, and Religious Transnationalizations among the Samaritans

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Abstract: The Samaritans form a community of about 810 people split between Mount Gerizim (West Bank) and Holon (Israel). Through tourism of holy sites and cultural heritage promotion, this article examines different ways in which religion can be used as a cultural resource. How do these phenomena contribute to the emergence of a transnationalization of religion in the globalized context?

Keywords: Samaritanism; cultural heritage; tourism; transnational; ethnicity; Palestine; Israel; Brazil

Today, the Samaritans form a community of about 810 people, with some living in a district of the city of Holon, on the outskirts of Tel Aviv (Israel), and others in Kiryat Luzah, a village built on top of Mount Gerizim,¹ their holy place, located near Nablus (West Bank).² In Hebrew, they are called [h] *ha-Shômronîm*, which can be translated as “the inhabitants of Samaria”, while the Arabic expression for them is *al-Sâmiriyyûn* (or *es-Sumarâ* in dialect). Yet, according to them, their name comes not from the province of Samaria from which they originate, but from the Hebrew word *Shômrim*³, which means “the keepers” and, by extension, “the keepers of the Law.” This ethnonym, which is not widely used elsewhere, portrays them as the true descendants of the former Hebrew tribes of the North, whose holy place is Mount Gerizim, as opposed to Jerusalem for the Jews.

Despite the debate over their origins, Samaritans are now considered Jews by the Israeli state and have benefited from the law of return⁴ since 1950. Following the example of the second Israeli president and specialist in Samaritanism, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi,⁵ the Zionist leaders were projecting on the Samaritan community the re-actualization of the myth of the “ten lost tribes”⁶ and were aiming to incorporate them into national edification. However, this administrative status has been subject to pressure from the Orthodox Jews, who have been well-represented for some years in the Israeli government and

¹ The Samaritans use the name of the mountain ([a] Jabal Jarizîm, [h] Har Gerizîm) to evoke their holy place, which is located more precisely on its heights. I use their formulation in this article; thus, when I mention Mount Gerizim, I am referring essentially to its heights, including the archaeological ruins and the Samaritan village. In addition, in ancient manuscripts the words *har* ([h] “mountain”) and *Gerizîm* are attached as if they were a proper name.

² Although most of them are fluent in both languages, in everyday life, the Samaritans of Holon speak Hebrew and those of Mount Gerizim Arabic. For convenience, I will use the characters [a] for Arabic and [h] for Hebrew to indicate the transcribed language. This paper is based on the data collected in the framework of my doctoral thesis, in particular during an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2009 and 2011 (Urien-Lefranc 2019).

³ Translated into Arabic as *Mûhâfez al-dîn al-isrâ'îli* (“the guardians of the Israelite religion”).

⁴ The law of return ([h] *hôq ha-Shvût*) allows the granting of Israeli immigrant status to any Jew.

⁵ Born in 1884 in Ukraine, the young Yitzhak Ben-Zvi arrived in Palestine in 1907. He quickly met Ibrâhîm Tsedâka, a Samaritan from Nablus who had just arrived in Jaffa. After 1948, Ben-Zvi became an influential member of the Knesset and then the second Israeli president from 1952 until his death in 1963. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi studied the history and origin of the Samaritans (Ben-Zvi 1935). Settled in the Administration, he became the main interlocutor of the Samaritan leaders.

⁶ The “ten lost tribes” refer to the people of the ancient Northern Kingdom who were allegedly deported following its invasion. According to beliefs that are still widespread, there have since been Israelite groups scattered throughout the world whose existence is still to be traced.

the Great Rabbinat of Israel, who pejoratively call them *Kûtîm*, a Talmudic appellation of origin designating the descendants of the polytheistic Assyrians.⁷

The 1990s marked a turning point in Samaritan political history: in 1992, under pressure from the Shass political party,⁸ Samaritans residing in the Palestinian Territories were excluded from the Law of Return due to an amendment promulgated in 1970.⁹ Following this decision, the Samaritan committees brought a lawsuit against the Israeli Ministry of the Interior through the Supreme Court.¹⁰ Represented by a lawyer, Michael Corinaldi, the Samaritan committees presented the studies of a historian, Menahem Mor, and a biblical scholar, Shemaryahu Talmon, who both validated the thesis that they were descendants of the Hebrew tribes of the North whose population was not exiled from the Holy Land. For the Samaritans, the stake was to have their Israelite ancestry, and therefore their autochthony, scientifically and legally recognized. Their mobilization was a success: in 1994, not only did they recover the right to benefit from the law of return but those from Mount Gerizim obtained Israeli citizenship in 1996, while being allowed to keep, at their request, their Palestinian identity cards ([a] *bitâqat hawîyya*).¹¹

The Samaritans constitute an ethnoreligious minority living in both Israel and Palestine. Through religion, they are considered close to Judaism, from which they differentiate themselves, and both Palestinian and Israeli citizens, but from whom they stand out. This particular position induces constant manipulation of their identity boundaries to adjust to their environment, the theater of a decades-long conflict.

Kyriat Luza, their small village located on Mount Gerizim, attracts more and more tourists each year, particularly on the occasion of the Samaritan Passover, during which about fifty sheep are sacrificed.¹² Regarded as a folkloric festival in Palestine and described as a relic of biblical times in Israel, the ceremony brings together Palestinians, Israelis, and many foreign tourists curious to attend a ritual supposedly representing a centuries-old heritage. Mount Gerizim is furthermore confronted to competing heritage registrations, making it a disputed place. In this context, Samaritan cultural entrepreneurs¹³ are becoming more and more involved in the revitalization of the cultural heritage of Samaritanism and its artefacts.

Thus, although they have limited space to appropriate the dynamics of tourism and heritage, they make full use of this space. These heritage initiatives tend to portray Samaritans as the true indigenous people, guarantors of territorial immutability and guardians ([h] *shômrim*) of an ancient tradition. These self-designations often display “self-stereotypes” (Herzfeld 1992) as they fit in with the tourist imagination in search of authenticity. In addition, historical, philological and archaeological research

⁷ Concerning the different views on the origins and the history of the Samaritans, I refer to (Pummer 1993, pp. 9–25).

⁸ The Shass is an Israeli ultra-orthodox Sephardic religious party created in 1984. Aryeh Deri, its leader, was Israel’s Interior Minister from 1988 to 1993, under the Shamir and Rabin governments, then from 2016 to the present day.

⁹ For more details on this matter I refer to Corinaldi, 2000. It should be pointed out that as early as 1971, the Samaritans of Nablus had made a request to the Israeli Government for collective naturalization (“40 Shômronim mi-Sckhem mevaqshim ‘ezrahût yisrâ’êlî”, 1971, neither the name of the newspaper nor that of the author is given. Source: Israel State Archives, box 7341/17-Aleph). This was refused on the basis that all immigrants must reside in Israel in order to benefit from the Law of Return. Then, in 1985, a rabbinic decree ruled that Samaritans could not be considered Jews according to the Halakhah and therefore had to convert before marrying a Jewish person (Corinaldi 2000).

¹⁰ « Samaritans request immigrants status », A. B. The Samaritan News, March 13, 1992, p. 43.

¹¹ In 1995 (following the Oslo II agreement), the Palestinian Authority instituted Palestinian citizenship, allowing its officials to issue identity cards to residents of the West Bank and Gaza after validation by the Israeli Ministry of the Interior.

¹² There were between 3000 and 4000 spectators in April 2011; there were more than 10,000 in 2010 according to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz (Levinson, Chaim. April 24, 2011. “Photo-op on Mount Gerizim”. Haaretz. Available online: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/photo-op-on-mount-gerizim-1.357579>; accessed online 10 November 2019).

¹³ By “cultural entrepreneurs” I mean individuals who act as intermediaries between the community and the outside world (researchers, journalists, tourists) and reinterpret tradition through the stakes of the present by producing identity resources with reference to the past (on this subject, I refer to Ciarcia (2011)). On the competition between religious leaders and cultural entrepreneurs in the Samaritan community, which will not be discussed here, I refer to my doctoral thesis (Urien-Lefranc 2019).

constitutes a material, repeatedly spread by cultural entrepreneurs, for establishing the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch and thus legitimizing their holy place and the history of their origin.

Recently, this discursive production has been polarized by the increased influence of these Samaritan entrepreneurs who emphasize the *cultural* specificity of Samaritanism. References borrowed from supranational actors (UNESCO, UN, etc.) show that Samaritan representatives transfer symbols bound up with religious tradition and ethos into the cultural heritage terminology. Thus, this article is in line with the current situation of forms of cultural re-appropriation by ethnic groups, which is intertwined with the production of a reflexive discourse on “culture” (Carneiro Da Cunha 2010). In this case, Samaritan “culture”, as presented by the cultural entrepreneurs, differs from neighbouring ones by adding an additional degree of authenticity.

These heritage enterprises illustrate that the Samaritans are perfectly in line with the reconfiguration of globalized societies: they export their *tehina*¹⁴, amulets and liturgical chants abroad, promote the digitization of liturgical manuscripts, organize conferences on Samaritanism in the Arab world, Europe, United States and South America, and even attract believers in Brazil, Italy and Indonesia. Indeed, we will see through the example of the Brazilian Samaritans that certain cultural entrepreneurs took the decision to support “entrances into Samaritanism”, in other words, a deterritorialized network of believers susceptible of promoting the Samaritan doctrine and its interpretation of the location of the holy place.

Religious tradition and cultural heritage are thus articulated and intertwined in a general movement of deterritorialization of the holy place, symbols and references. We witness the selection and circulation of certain symbols and cult objects (manuscripts, *matsôt*¹⁵, liturgical chants, amulets, the representation of the Gerizim) as available resources that each individual, throughout the world, could seize and appropriate.

The intertwining of religion and culture is an ancient and well-studied phenomenon (Geertz 1966; Asad 1993; Woodhead 2011). While the limits of the two are far from being clearly distinct, there is a reconfiguration of the nature and role of religion in the public sphere which appears, in globalization, to be increasingly detached from its traditional territorial, ethnic and cultural roots (Roy 2008). The emergence of individuals identifying themselves as Samaritans throughout the world is characteristic of the double movement of deterritorialization and individualization of belief (Hervieu-Léger 2001, 2010), whose affiliations appear malleable, fluid and dispersed. For the Samaritans, this opening-up of the community boundaries involves a reorganization and reaffirmation of the modes of ascription and a renewed relationship to the circulation of objects, images and representations in a globalized context.

1. The Process of “Semiophorization” of Samaritans: Focus on the External Perspective

1.1. Tourists, orientalists, collectors and the Samaritans in the 19th century

Tourism is not a new phenomenon within the community since their Passover was part of the itinerary of European travelers to the Holy Land since the 19th century. The second half of the 19th century was marked by a growing interest among European scholars in the Samaritans and the production of travel stories, photographs, and scientific studies concerning them. These developments led to a better understanding of Samaritan customs and history. This growing interest is part of the West’s rediscovery of the Holy Land (Ben Arieh 1979; Laurens 1999). Objects of curiosity for tourists during the Passover, the Samaritans became iconic of this fantasized Holy Land and appeared reified as a “people of relics,” “remaining intact since biblical times”.

¹⁴ Tehina is a cream made from pressed sesame seeds mixed with water.

¹⁵ Matsâ (pl. matsôt) is an unleavened bread made only from unleavened flour and water. It is also consumed during Jewish holidays.

From the romantic and orientalist texts¹⁶ on the Samaritans reported by early explorers, we witness the production of increasingly precise descriptions of rituals, physiognomy, and lifestyles. This process has led to anthropological and genetic studies that resulted in the production of a Samaritan identity particularism¹⁷. This evolution puts the formation of the field of anthropology into perspective in an era that was sensitive to the urgency of the collection of materials from traditional societies that were thought to be on the verge of extinction (Fabre 2010). These multiple views of the Samaritans have helped to shape their essentialization, through the “semiophorization”¹⁸ (Pomian 1987; Hartog 2003) of their social image.

Simultaneously, from the second half of the 19th century, the extreme poverty in which the Samaritans found themselves pushed the priests to undertake an intensive trade of sacred objects (manuscripts¹⁹, *tallitôt*, amulets, and talismans) for the benefit of Western collectors and tourists, leaving the community with a heritage in exile. Thus, in 1863–1864, the karaite collector Abraham Firkovich managed to buy 1341 manuscripts in questionable conditions (Pummer 1993, p. 16; Harviainen and Haseeb 1994). He assembled the largest collection of Samaritan texts outside the community’s borders (today preserved in the library of the University of St. Petersburg). After him, other collectors (Moses Gaster, James Purvis, David Solomon Sassoon, David Yalin and Ytzhak Ben-Zvi), but also simple tourists also bought sacred objects, convinced of the imminent extinction of the Samaritans. Some sold the artefacts to museums or national libraries, others kept them in their personal libraries.

Hence, the sale of manuscripts quickly became the main source of income for the priestly clan. At the request of the collectors, the priests were also responsible for transcribing the texts from Samaritan Hebrew to modern Hebrew. Samaritans transcribed almost all of their holy writings, and when there were almost none left, they recreated new ones.²⁰ Thus, the Samaritans—the priests in particular—carried out at that time a work of re-reading and transcription, but they also rebuilt a cultural heritage, from which they were almost entirely deprived afterwards.

1.2. Tourism Development at Passover

Recent anthropological approaches to tourism no longer only show local populations as “victims” of a phenomenon that is beyond their control, but also as actors involved in the evolution of their societies. More and more studies are indeed observing the re-appropriation of tourism by local populations, allowing them to formulate a discourse—highlighting autochtony for example—that resists or, on the contrary, integrates into national logics and contributes to the reinforcement of local identities (Picard 1992; Boissevain 1996; Doquet and Ménéstrel 2006). Tourism is then strategically mobilized to promote “an imaginary of the place” (Debarbieux 2012; Gravari-Barbas and Graburn 2012) and allows the acquiring of both the visibility and recognition of a specificity that thwarts the relationship of domination. It thus presents different scales that need to be examined, from local to supranational.

Invested by a heterogeneous audience (interfaith, Palestinian, Israeli, and foreign), the Samaritan Passover thus appears as a space for the projection of multiple representations that transcends national

¹⁶ Orientalist literature on the Samaritans is abundant. For this period, I would refer in particular to Warren (1876), Petermann (1860) and Mills (1864).

¹⁷ Between 1900 and 1933, five physical anthropology expeditions were dedicated to the Samaritans (Cf. Huxley 1906; Weissenberg 1909; Szpidbaum 1927; Kappers 1931; Genna 1938). Then multiple genetic tests have been conducted since the 1960s on members of the community (in particular by the Israeli geneticist Batsheva Bonne Tamir). These studies particularly emphasized the phenotypic, biological and identity particularism of the Samaritans and presented them as a group isolated from any external influence. For a critical revision of these scientific expeditions, see (Urien-Lefranc 2019).

¹⁸ The “semiophore” is a neologism created by Krzysztof Pomian (1987). It refers to the objects that compose a collection isolated from their context and invested with meaning. By “semiophorization,” I mean the process of objectification of Samaritans when falsely considered as isolated from their social environment, in a perspective of “heritage making”.

¹⁹ By “manuscripts” I mean all liturgical, exegetical, and literary texts, as well as legal texts, chronicles, astronomical tables, and calendars produced by the community at different times and in different places (mostly Nablus, Damascus, and Cairo).

²⁰ As attested by the correspondence (e.g., the letter B61 from 1908) between Moses Gaster and the Samaritan priests (1906–1936), which I was able to consult in November 2012 (Moses Gaster Fonds, John Rylands Library, Manchester). See also (Ridolfo 2015, p. 40).

borders. All the speeches, both those that the Israeli and Palestinian political representatives present and those of the media, portray the Samaritans as living remains of biblical history, whose religious practices have remained unchanged.²¹ Visibilization undertakings rely particularly on the figure of Mount Gerizim. In a context characterized by the discontinuity of the territory and the instability induced by their administrative status, the holy place is a fixed landmark and is the object of a symbolic over-investment that shows the Samaritans' anchoring in the landscape. Heritage and tourism activities give rise to strategies for redefining the social image through an intensive presentation of the narrative of origins. The notion of indigeness appears as a "capital," involving symbolic resources to legitimize their status and to avoid taking a position between two registers. As a result, Samaritan leaders provide an alternative version of history that may or may not legitimize official interpretations of the Israelis or the Palestinians whether they insist on their genealogical connection with Jews or whether they refer to their role as "founders of the city" and the presence of Samaritan patronymics in Nablus. These strategies led to the development of an official heritage. In doing so, the Samaritan representatives use the terminology of interfaith dialogue ([a] *hiwâr al-adyân*),²² as well as the vocabulary of "culture."

Recently, tourism in Kiryat Luzah has been accompanied by the emergence of new practices and village redevelopments: internet, guided tours, informative leaflets, spectacularization of rituals, especially of Passover and *Sûkkôt*, development of a restaurant "The Good Samaritan" and a visitors' center, extension of the platforms from which the public attends the Easter sacrifice, etc. It has also given rise to several heritage dynamics: the staging of liturgical songs, the construction of a new museum in 2010 with the help of UNESCO and the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, a library devoted to Samaritanism, exhibitions on Samaritan culture ([a] *hifâz*) and heritage ([a] *turâth*) in Nablus, organized by the association *al-Âstûra al-Sâmiriyya*.²³

Symbolic reclassifications and reorganizations of places of worship due to tourism development processes are observed in other areas. Through the symbolic references and modes of political expression it contains, the ceremony of Passover forms an "arena" (Eade and Sallnow 2000, p. 5) in which the spectators play, by their presence, an (involuntary) role of legitimation of the ritual. The presence of people who are generally not in contact with each other provides an image of the ritual as "out of time" and "out of conflict".²⁴ Nevertheless, a contextual approach to the ceremonial device (Houseman 2012) highlights how these rearrangements also serve to establish a symbolic boundary, separating the Samaritans from outside visitors.

The establishment of a ritual site is characteristic of these developments that have taken place since the transformation of the holy place into a living place. It is positioned in the center of the village below the main street. It is surrounded by a high fence and accessible by a small ramp. The place was set up about ten years ago to receive tourists. They stand on terraces overlooking the altar ([h] *mizbeah*) from which they are separated by a fence. Although placed at a distance, the spectators have a function in the ritual. On the one hand, their presence validates the authenticity of the Samaritan Passover as conforming to the biblical sacrifice, which is attested by the titles and contents of the Passover's media coverage. On the other hand, through the sound of noises, cheers, and applause, the audience intensifies the spectacular shape of the event.

The place includes six huge ovens ([a] *zarb*) dug into the concrete that are used to cook the sacrificed animals. In the center, the altar consists of a long trench covered with grass and continued

²¹ Samaritans enjoy exceptional media coverage given the size of their community. This staging of the authenticity of the ritual dominates very widely in the press, as well as in the statements of the visitors and the Samaritans themselves.

²² Julia Droeber (2013) sheds an insightful light on the dynamics of coexistence between members of the three religions in Nablus (Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims), involving discourses on peace and the maintaining of identity boundaries.

²³ Al-Âstûra al-Sâmiriyya ("The Samaritan Legend") is an association created in 2009 by young Samaritans. Recognized by the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA), it organizes village tours and exhibitions devoted to Samaritanism in Palestinian public places. The association is also engaged in interfaith dialogue (mainly in Palestine but also in the rest of the Middle East).

²⁴ For an examination of the processes of re-semanticization of the Samaritan Passover, see (Urien-Lefranc 2014).

by a wide metal grid. At the end, a fire will be lit to burn the impure parts of the lamb that are forbidden to eat. A blue metal structure on which the animals will be hung surrounds the altar. There are posts with taps and hoses attached that are used to wash the carcasses of the animals after they have been hollowed out. Chairs are dedicated to priests and elders. In the foreground under the stands, plastic chairs are placed for Palestinian and Israeli political and military figures. During the ceremony, a special time is given for official greetings and handshakes between these personalities and the Samaritan committees. This political opening is followed by a short speech, broadcast by speakers, in which Samaritan representatives declare their aspiration to become a “bridge for peace” ([h] *gesher le-shâlôm*).

1.3. Mount Gerizim as a Disputed Place

The enhancement by cultural entrepreneurs of Mount Gerizim as an immutable identity marker is all the more significant because of the competing heritage registrations concerning the site (more particularly, the archaeological site adjacent to the village). In April 2012, the Palestinian Authority submitted a request to UNESCO²⁵ to include “Mount Gerizim and the Samaritans” on the World Heritage List.²⁶

“The Samaritans on Mount Gerizim represent the smallest, most ancient, living ethnic community in the world, bound together by a profound and rigid religious belief. Central to it is the sanctity of a particular mountain as decreed by Moses and on which, nearly four thousand years ago, Abraham may have nearly sacrificed Isaac (. . .) This sanctity and longevity, through to the present day, make this sacred mountain a place of outstanding universal value going far beyond the beliefs of a few hundred people”

The presentation text also concludes that “without its ideographic, cultural overlay, physically and topographically, Mount Gerizim would just be another mountain with just another large, basically later historic and classical archaeological site on its summit. Yet, entirely because of its long-term association with the beliefs of, and protection by, the remarkable ethnic group of people known as the Samaritans, Mount Gerizim is unique in its particular qualities and the beliefs, traditions, and history that it enshrines. So in a real sense it has no comparators.”²⁷

The selection of the Samaritan holy site by the Palestinian Authority is part of a process of safeguarding the Palestinian identity of the site, and, behind the scenes, its maintenance within the borders of the Palestinian Territories, especially since the Palestinian population already has limited access to it and is largely dependent on political changes. In addition, most of the places presented in the Palestinian inventory are, like Mount Gerizim, located in territorially disputed places.²⁸ In response to this request for Palestinian UNESCO inscription, the Israeli State opened and inaugurated in 2012 the archaeological site on the top of Mount Gerizim. The Minister of Protection and Environment Gilad Erdan stated on this occasion that the Israeli State “will not waive [its] right to commemorate the Jewish

²⁵ Although the heritage operations do not date back to UNESCO, the organization initially established an international status for heritage through the 1972 Inaugural Convention on the Protection of the Cultural and Natural Heritage. This was enriched by the texts on cultural diversity (2001) and intangible heritage (2003).

²⁶ Since Palestine’s admission to UNESCO in October 2011, sixteen sites have been submitted by the Palestinian Authority for nomination to the World Heritage List (in this Tentative List, Mount Gerizim is in fourth place). I would like to point out that the procedure for “Mount Gerizim and the Samaritans” is still ongoing and that the site has not yet been validated by ICOMOS, which is the advisory body for the evaluation and inscription of monuments and cultural sites on the World Heritage List.

²⁷ Presentation of the submission of “Mount Gerizim and the Samaritans” on the UNESCO website. Available online: <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/listesindicatives/5706/> (accessed on 18 November 2019)

²⁸ Nabi Mussa, Qumran, the Dead Sea, and Mount Gerizim are located in Zone C. Sebastia is half-located in Zone A and Zone C. The Tomb of the Patriarchs is located in H2.

heritage and to facilitate accessibility to heritage sites.”²⁹ The Israeli authority further established the site as a national park.

The dynamics of heritage development underlie political choices and are linked to the selection and appropriation of places, which provides information on the ways in which a common past is constructed and embodied. These undertakings highlight the Samaritans’ multi-millennial connection to their holy place. Following Dominique Poulot (2006, p. 4), I conceive the heritagization of the Samaritan holy place as a “scholarly reflection but also a political will, both sanctioned by public opinion within the complex interplay of sensitivities toward the past, its diverse appropriations, and the construction of identities”.

The study of the enhancement of Mount Gerizim as a national symbol sheds light on how it represents a symbolic, territorial, touristic and therefore economic resource for both Israeli and Palestinian actors. These strategies also take place in a context of tourism development in the Samaritan village, which the authorities are trying to re-appropriate.

2. Religion as a Cultural Resource

Far from being passively subjected to the touristic development of their holy place, the Samaritans are taking over its management in order to set up mechanisms enabling them to reformulate, control, and transmit their image. To enhance their narrative of origins, cultural entrepreneurs exhume the exogenous view of the Samaritans (travelers’ texts, photographs, scientific studies mentioned above) and select what they want to display. They demonstrate an agentivity with respect to the representations that are assigned to them. They have perfectly incorporated the imagery and expectations of tourists seeking an “authentic” experience. In this way, they do not hesitate to mobilize a form of “practical orientalism” (Herzfeld 1992, p. 69) or “self-exoticism” (Ciarcia 2011, p. 15) as a means of emancipation, allowing them to maintain a leeway in a context of heritage policies, as illustrated in the preceding pages. Such forms of “disemia”—the “codified tensions between self-knowledge and collective self-representation” (Herzfeld 1997)—introduce ambivalence into the ways of characterizing oneself. This mechanism can be understood within the more general framework of the concept of “cultural intimacy” developed by Michael Herzfeld. With this concept Herzfeld emphasizes that national ideologies are not imposed from the outside on local populations as if they formed a passive and intangible receptacle. On the contrary, Herzfeld highlights the discursive strategies at work to counterbalance the “from above” operations of the essentialization of fluctuating social categories. These, he argues, are realized at the intersection of daily experience and the power structures that affect it. However, while the manipulation of “self-stereotypes” (Herzfeld 1992) demonstrates the resistance to imposed narratives, it also serves (to go beyond Herzfeld’s analysis) to normalize the social group.

In fact, the forms of heritage revitalization do not escape a certain reification as evidenced by the recent development of “Samaritan certified” products: “Good Samaritan’ wine,” “the [world’s] most authentic *matsôt*”, the Tehina “Har Brâkhâ” ([h] “the blessed mountain”), the Samaritan liturgical songs choir, and a whole series of souvenir products for tourists bearing the stamp “The Good Samaritan.” In the vein of territorial marketing, these identity products represent an effort to establish a distinct “culture” known as the “Samaritan Israelite.” Fitting into this culture is not easy for a group strongly rooted in Palestinian society with a religion close to Judaism. Thus, the products essentially emphasize the claim of authenticity. With the exception of the choir, these are products that differ relatively little from the cultural specialties that could be found in Israel or Palestine, except that the actors associate them with an additional degree of authenticity.

²⁹ Mazori, Dalia. July 30, 2012. “An archaeological pearl, Mount Gerizim is opened to tourists,” Al-Monitor, translated by Sandy Bloom.

2.1. The Choir

Since the 1980s, a choir has been formed to try and spread the Samaritan musical liturgy at festivals around the world.³⁰ It is composed of 7 to 10 singers from the West Bank and Israel, sometimes accompanied by an Israeli singer. The choir has performed at international cultural events, and in 2010 it even took part in the production of an opera in Italy called *Samaritani*. The choir has further been the subject of a documentary.

Songs occupy an essential place in the Samaritan liturgy. The particularity of these liturgical songs (in Samaritan Hebrew and Aramaic) lies in their very pronounced vibrato, the use of trills, and by the addition of syllables absent from the biblical text. They are performed a cappella during religious ceremonies, as well as in non-religious performances. According to Samaritan beliefs, the practice of these songs has been perpetuated for more than 130 generations and goes back to Moses. Although the standard program offered by cultural programmers is based on biblical verses, and some songs pay tribute to Mount Gerizim, according to the Samaritan representatives, the show has “nothing of a religious ritual”, but it is part of the “Samaritan contribution to the world’s culture.”

2.2. Samaritan Cuisine

Another example is the cookbook [h] *Nifle’ôt ha-mitbah ha-Shômrôni* (“Wonders of Samaritan cuisine”), modestly subtitled: *4000 shanôt mitbah erets-yisrá’êlî* (“4000 years of Israelite cuisine”) which was published in 2011 (Tsedâka and Sassônî 2011). Written by two sisters, Batîa and Zippora, it was edited by the AB Institute of Samaritan studies with the help of the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sports. Batîa and Zippora collected 284 Samaritan recipes from other members of the community. Each recipe specifies the name of the woman (and they all come from women) who provided it, as well as where they are from (i.e., Holon or Mount Gerizim).

Furthermore, three elements of the Samaritan culinary repertoire have acquired the status of “specialities.” One is the *matsôt shômrôniot* (“Samaritan matsôt”), whose preparation is the subject of videos on *Youtube*. The second is the wine called (in English) “the Good Samaritan wine.” The label reads: “The history of its manufacture dates back to 3000 years BC on Mount Gerizim. Produced and bottled by the Good Samaritan.” The third is Tehina manufactured by members of the priestly family. The factory is located near Nablus and employs several Palestinians, and it is even visited by tourists. As evidence that the company is doing well, it was expanded in 2015. Named Har Brâkhâ in homage to the holy place, the Tehina is certified kashêr by the Israeli rabbinate and is marketed in Palestine, Israel, and the United States.

2.3. The Overlapping of Religious and Cultural Fields

As much as it testifies to the inventiveness of cultural entrepreneurs, the marketing of “Samaritan stamped” products blurs the lines between identity markers and marketable brands. This overlap is found in other ethnic groups and reflects a struggle led by associations defending indigenous cultures against forms of cultural appropriation. Australian Aborigines, Navajo Indians, and Maasai-s have engaged in legal battles and have used international intellectual property regimes to protect their ethnonym and their image from their spoliation by major advertising brands and fashion agencies. These demands are in line with recent debates on the issue of cultural appropriation, which have been increasingly frequent since the late 2000s.

As if it were a copyright, my interlocutors at Kiryat Luza were offended by the use of the image of the Good Samaritan. For example, interlocutor Ya’qûb K. once said:

³⁰ Musica Sacra International à Marktoberdorf (1992), Rotterdam (1999), Tokyo (2005), Gerone (2013).

“I go on the internet, I type the word “Samaritan” and what do I see? The “good Samaritan” association here, the “good Samaritan” brand there. But we are the Samaritans! No one asked me for my opinion on using our name and making money off it!”³¹

Thus, the Samaritans have incorporated the issues related to the promotion of their cultural diversity and have produced a reflexive discourse on their culture. Carneiro Da Cunha (Carneiro Da Cunha 2010) has designated this phenomenon as “culture” (in quotation marks), as distinguished from culture (without quotation marks), which is an analytical category that is objectified and imported from outside. According to Carneiro Da Cunha, culture has now become a weapon when used in the context of intellectual property claims over traditional knowledge (2010, p. 8). These reflections on the notion of “indigenous ownership” and the redistribution of economic benefits are well-established among indigenous groups in South America and Oceania. In some cases, they have led to legislative frameworks put in place by state bodies and international organizations.³²

Following Cyril Isnart (2014, p. 193), I observe that the concordance of several factors such as the effects of heritagization, the presence of tourists, and religious and, here, territorial competition constitutes an “ecosystem favorable to the expression of their difference that goes beyond the strictly religious framework to touch the field of cultural action and heritage”. Religious and territorial competition is indeed at the heart of this mobilization of the ethno-religious register as a cultural resource and identity.³³ In addition to the economic and political interests they provide in terms of visibilization, the heritage processes set up by Samaritans are part of an approach to preserve and legitimize their holy place through the use of scenic devices (Passover), a new vocabulary adapted to globalization and the terminology of supranational actors, and exogenous data (archaeological, historical, ethnological). Because Mount Gerizim manifests the symbolic, ritual, social, and Samaritan specificity, it is displayed as the emblem on Samaritan labels. Thus, the use of religious markers in cultural resources does not imply a transfer of sanctity but is, on the contrary, part of a process of redefinition and legitimization of the holy place (Urien-Lefranc 2018).

3. Heritage Revitalization: The awakening of the “Dead Ambassadors”

To promote their image, Samaritan cultural entrepreneurs use extensively information and communication technologies (ICT). Internet is perceived as a showcase that draws the attention of the external world beyond national borders toward the community. Also on websites created by members of the community, historical, philological, and archaeological research is used to enhance the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch and to legitimize their holy place. This quest for international visibility is reflected in the effort to research and digitize manuscripts disseminated in libraries around the world.

Since the 1980s, Samaritan representatives have been involved in the research of the 4000 Samaritan manuscripts³⁴ scattered in national libraries, museums, and private collections in Europe and North and South America. In doing so, they have traveled the world to find, copy, and photograph them. The digitization of the University of Michigan Samaritan fonds, which was integrated into the *Writing in Digital Environments* (WIDE) Research Center’s project under the name “The Samaritan Archive 2.0 project,” opened up new opportunities from 2008 onwards. For the Samaritans, digitization has allowed them to rediscover ancient liturgical texts. But above all, cultural entrepreneurs see it as a way to renew studies on Samaritanism, which have slowed down in recent years. Indeed, through the

³¹ Ya’qûb K., a Samaritan from Kiryat Luza. Interview by the author. Kiryat Luza, October 2009.

³² On the commercial uses of culture and intellectual property, I refer to the work carried out by the SOGIP research program “Scales of Governance—United Nations, States and Indigenous Peoples: Self-determination in the time of globalization” (ERC249236) under the supervision of Irene Bellier.

³³ For a recent overview of the use of the religious dimension as a cultural resource applied to the Mediterranean case, see (Boissevain and Isnart 2017).

³⁴ This figure is an estimate from Jim Appadurai (2015). The number in private collections is unknown.

manuscripts, Samaritan cultural entrepreneurs aim to revitalize the attractiveness of their doctrine and their alternative narrative to the biblical text traditionally conveyed for a non-community public.

In a book devoted to the project, Jim [Ridolfo \(2015\)](#) examines the political and discursive challenges of digitizing these manuscripts, which he refers to as a “textual diaspora.” He highlights the way in which community representatives strategically use the digitized manuscripts: they provide them with arguments legitimizing their territorial inscription and help to promote a form of religious and cultural uniqueness. Ridolfo believes the digitization projects reflect the “sophisticated ways Samaritans think about, engage, and use their textual diaspora to help them attain greater cultural sovereignty and recognition as a cultural heritage community” ([Ridolfo 2015](#), p. 9). Indeed, the digital medium is a means for manuscripts to circulate and therefore to be shared, referenced, studied, and cited.

In the comments of community leaders, one element provides an indication of their ambitions for their manuscripts: their repatriation is, in their opinion, not required, and there would even be a strong advantage if they remained scattered in libraries all over the world.³⁵ They are actively involved in the promotion of these manuscripts and perceive this heritage as a tool to disseminate and promote their historical, religious, and political particularity. That is why the expression “dead ambassadors” was used by one of the Samaritan representatives, Benyamîm Tsedâka.³⁶

4. Religious Transnationalizations

Through revitalizing their “dead ambassadors,” cultural entrepreneurs have ended up attracting “living ambassadors” eager to “convert” to Samaritanism. Attracted by the model of “authenticity” and “purity” that the virtual space portrays, groups of people who express the desire to become Samaritans have emerged abroad, especially in Brazil. This phenomenon is particularly unusual since it involves the development of transnational communities without migration. The Samaritans refuse to use the term “conversion” ([h] *giyyûr*) because the formal process that characterizes conversion has not been foreseen and does not exist in Samaritanism.³⁷

The “entrances into Samaritanism” in Brazil, which began in 2015, now number at approximately 300 people. Many of them have a strong link with Judaism. Some have previously converted to it (or identified with it, without having gone through a formal conversion). Others have inherited Judaism from their parents (in particular from Karaite Judaism, whose doctrine is close to Samaritanism because it rejects the oral tradition of the rabbis). Brazilian Judaism is characterized by great diversity, resulting in “small communities in movement rooted in very heterogeneous traditions and practices” ([Lelièvre 2013](#)). In addition, a number of these new worshippers had converted to Messianic Judaism (*messianica*)³⁸ prior to identifying as Samaritans.

Brazilian neophytes learn Samaritanism doctrinal precepts, liturgical language as much as they comply with ritual rules (circumcision for men, *niddah* rules for women related to purity during menstruation), and *kashrût*.³⁹ They are divided into nine “communities” that they refer to by the Hebrew word *qehillôt*, and each is chaired by a leader (*líder*) elected by the rest of the members. Finally, a president (*presidente da comunidade*) residing in the State of São Paulo heads all the followers.

An exploratory investigation conducted in April 2017 allowed me to better understand the emergence of these groups of Samaritans in Brazil. This survey was extended by means of social

³⁵ I rely here on [Appadurai \(2015\)](#) and the personal interviews I conducted.

³⁶ Tsedâka, Benyamim. Interview by the author. Paris, August 2016.

³⁷ I use the expressions “entrance into Samaritanism” or “Samaritan identification” rather than “conversion,” which implies a codified path validated by a religious institution. Moreover, this terminology seems to me to reflect more the ephemeral and labile aspect of this phenomenon—there are examples of some entries into Samaritanism resulting in exits only a few months later.

³⁸ Messianic Judaism, which originated in evangelical Christianity, is a missionary movement that combines Christian theology (including belief in Jesus) with partially Jewish practices.

³⁹ In Brazil, these requirements need to be adapted; for example, in the current absence of a certified butcher, compliance with the Samaritan *kashrût* is reduced to a vegetarian diet.

networks and the Internet, which allowed me to collect several individual and collective life trajectories. My conversations with Brazilian believers were strongly marked by the context of political and economic crisis that the country has been experiencing since 2016 to the point that this context systematically took precedence over individual stories. According to my interlocutors, their futures are uncertain. The future was sometimes described as a “dead end” and appears to them as inevitably dark. While a departure (temporary or permanent) to the Samaritan holy place in Palestine was perceived as a desirable horizon, it seemed unfeasible for the time being due to financial difficulties, and this project was instead integrated into an eschatological project.

The aspirations of the new Samaritan worshippers express the desire to adopt a more literalistic ritual praxis that would be closer to the original gestures as they perceive them. The adherence thus reflects a rational and neo-traditionalist choice guided by the perception of Samaritanism as an ancestral religion, supposedly preserved without innovation, and therefore more “authentic.” According to the testimonies of new worshippers, the entrance into Samaritanism came as the result of a long process of doctrinal and historical research. This long and reflective process places new followers in a form of “itinerancy” (Champion 1997), which signifies a quest for meaning that is constantly being questioned. However, these entries do not only reflect an adherence to a message and values. They also imply, as Sébastien Tank-Storper (2007) points out, an ontological framework implementing an identification process.

If this phenomenon of adopting Samaritanism persists, it is likely that the number of Samaritans outside the borders of Israel and Palestine will exceed the number of Samaritans within these borders. How can these identities and religious recompositions be qualified? When can we say that these individuals become Samaritans? In the absence of an institutionalized process of conversion, Samaritanism is easily exported in the sense that it does not require extensive learning controlled by a religious authority. But it gives way to floating loyalties and the flexibility to consider certain religious practices as optional. Combining individualization and deinstitutionalization of faith and a greater plurality of religious offers, modernity appears, according to Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2001), characterized by a mobility between various religious choices. Through the use of the symbolic resources at their disposal, the modern believer reconstitutes a subjective meaning linked to their life trajectories and their social and cultural capital. The development of communications, in particular social networks and religious forums, makes the internet a territory for the religious and contributes to this extreme fluidity of belief.

The concepts of “translocality” and “collective imagination” developed by Arjun Appadurai (2015) theorize the new reshaping of modes of religiosity, their circulation, and their connectivity. Changes in religious identification must be seen as a response to the social shifts generated by globalization. Imagination—in the sense of the ability to represent and project oneself—becomes, in my opinion, a particularly effective prism for understanding this phenomenon. Appadurai underlines the power of imagination in the manufacturing of social life brought about by the ever-increasing access to the media.

Although the deterritorialization of religions is not a new phenomenon (Bastian et al. 2001, p. 9; Capone 2010, pp. 235–36), it is intensified by the use of communications media that favour the extreme fluidity of the religion and its relocation in a new space. I have noticed that the knowledge of Samaritanism has essentially been generated through the internet.⁴⁰ Similarly, the relations among these Neo-Samaritans, and also with ethnic Samaritans, are mainly made through social networks, as well as the learning of cultural and doctrinal practices.

While the emergence of new believers is rather well received by the Middle Eastern Samaritans, halfway between curiosity and enthusiasm, they nonetheless give rise to discussions within the

⁴⁰ This includes the website Wikipedia, the Samaritan websites in English, or religious forums. There are also several videos in Portuguese on Youtube posted by Brazilians that explain the Samaritan religion. Some have reached more than 200,000 views.

community. At the heart of the controversies, the underlying question is whether Samaritanism should be based on ethnicity or whether it can be adopted by choice. For now, these “Neo-Samaritans” from Brazil and elsewhere are perceived as more valuable if they remain outside the borders of the Israeli-Palestinian territory. Their existence then contributes to legitimizing the Samaritans’ self-designation as keepers (*shômrim*) of the authentic tradition. Moreover, their active participation on social networks integrates the process already initiated by cultural entrepreneurs to increase the visibility of Samaritanism. For example, one of the steps in changing the identification of Brazilian Samaritans is to photograph oneself beside a laminated amulet containing a biblical verse in Samaritan Hebrew.⁴¹ The photograph is then published on social networks such as Facebook. In addition, the president of the Brazilian groups is involved in translating passages from the Samaritan Torah into Portuguese.

These new religious affiliations mobilize a decentralized expression of local, diffuse, and multidirectional networks and new relationships to heritage, culture, and ethnicity. Their embryonic nature enables us to examine the different stages of their formation. They are in line with current studies on new religious practices that have disseminated beyond their original ethnic or national borders (Vasquez 1999; Levitt 2004; Capone 2005). The studies focused on the formation of groups and how they build new spaces for religions that have not previously been part of the local landscape. As in the case presented here, it is current for actors to claim a return to a tradition perceived as more “authentic” that goes alongside the elaboration and revitalization of cultural elements described as traditional (cuisine, music, costumes, etc.).

Will these new religious affiliations be at the origin of new modes of religiosity? What will be collectively decided regarding the modes of integration of individuals who wish to join Samaritanism? Do they herald a Samaritanism detached from any ethnicity? Will the Israeli-Palestinian Samaritans grant them a place in the Holy Land (which would require the extension of administrative status by the Israeli authorities) or will they negotiate with these new believers to maintain a geographical and symbolic border between the ethnic community on the one hand and the transnational growth on the other? These new parameters challenge the place of the internet and social networks in the modes of confessional affiliation, and in the setup of virtual worship practices of the holy site at a distance. Beyond these few paths of reflection, the trajectories of Samaritan neophytes in Brazil, as elsewhere, require a full-fledged ethnographic study.

5. Conclusions

The tourism of the Samaritan village is a corollary of a heritage revitalization of religious objects, in particular manuscripts, and a reflexive requalification. The small Samaritan community, unanimously presented as a “vestige of the biblical past,” has managed to fully integrate itself into the globalized world by grasping its tools. In this way, they manage to give Mount Gerizim a transnational dimension that erases the ambivalence of its territorial inscription. These dynamics reveal the porosity of religion and culture for minority groups in their struggle for recognition at a political level.

As we have seen, these processes contribute to reifying the group’s social identity through the labeling of products presented as typically Samaritan (*tehina*, cooking recipes, *matsôt*, wine, choir) for which the holy place takes the form of an emblem. The deployment of these “self-stereotypes” (Herzfeld 1992) is far from being merely a form of contestation to the present situation. It also serves to bring the Samaritans’ social image into conformity with external expectations (e.g., with tourist imagery or Israeli and Palestinian national imaginations) while functioning as a structuring agent that delineates the group’s boundaries with respect to the “others.”

Simultaneously, the community is opening up to new affiliations from outside. For a community such as the Samaritans, whose identity is conceived as the sharing of a common kinship, these new

⁴¹ The amulets here take on an identification rather than a therapeutic dimension.

affiliations imply a reorganization and a reaffirmation of the modes of ascription. In all circumstances, the Samaritans' great creativity in terms of identity adjustment and their appropriation of the tools of the globalized world make the community a privileged laboratory for the study of the circulation of the religious phenomenon, its objects and images, in the field of cultural heritage.

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