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The processing and consumption of a  
natural monopoly resource:  
Cultural dimensions of the commodification  
of Chios' *mastiha*

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## **Abstract**

*Mastiha*, a resinous aromatic sap produced from an evergreen tree thriving only in the southern part of the eastern Aegean island of Chios, is a product with symbolic density from the perspective of the cultural meanings it transmits, some of which emanate from marketing practices. The distinctiveness of *mastiha* as it relates to place as well as its changing exploitation form the core of the promotional campaign of a private local firm. The latter, through a series of initiatives projected as ‘family tradition’ has facilitated *mastiha*’s entrance into global economic and cultural flows, contributing thereby to a re-articulation of the local-global, modern-traditional dimensions. The paper analyzes the production system, images and representations forging visions and identities not only of *mastiha* and its place of origin, but also of a new brand and its founders, the private Chian firm. In addition, relying on the findings of qualitative research, the paper highlights the multiple meanings—accrued from advertisements, the buying process and personal experiences—different types of consumers (mainly national tourists and local residents) attribute to *mastiha* and ‘all-natural’ *mastiha*-based body and face care products.

## **Keywords**

consumption, place identity, cultural meanings, tradition, modernity



## Introduction\*

Commodity meanings are constituted through a diverse range of consumption practices including presentation, choice of purchase, gift giving and possession. However, meanings are inscribed in commodities prior to their consumption and it is often the characteristics (symbolic aspects) of a commodity rather than its utilitarian qualities, which are consumed. Anthropological and geographical studies of consumption, underpinning different theoretical perspectives, provide insight into the construction of social relationships, the perception and experience of place, as well as processes associated with the embodiment and emplacement of identities. Research in both disciplines has been at the forefront of efforts to overcome divisions between economy and culture, as well as production and consumption. Attention to consumption has contributed to a new understanding of many subjects including leisure and tourism, branding, advertising, retailing, shopping, rural agricultural geographies, as well as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and material culture.

Textual and ethnographic approaches, the two basic perspectives adopted in research, position the 'consumer subject' differently. Textual (semiotic) readings of commodities and consumption spaces tend to over-emphasize the producers' intentions in inscribing particular meanings to both their commodities and their retailing landscapes. They have come under criticism for their limited ascription of agency to consumers and for not recognizing, from an analytical point of view, the social, cultural and material realities (context) of consumption. Ethnographic researchers, on the other hand, relying on different methods (interviews, focus groups, participant observation) have focused on how the 'consumer' (subject) produces his/her own meanings, thereby extending their work beyond the bounded retail spaces to social practices, relationships and cultural rituals through which commodities are inserted into the fabric of everyday life. In other words, they connect consumption to other domains (family, home), to particular constellations of social relations manifested in symbolic and material forms, and to the process of self-representation. Miller's work (1987) has been particularly influential with regard to ethnographic studies of consumption by emphasizing the positive and meaningful ways in which consumption can contribute to the expression of the self and relationships with others in everyday life. Furthermore, it has been at the forefront of efforts that overcome divisions between economy and culture as well as production and consumption. My work seeks to reconcile or merge the textual and ethnographic approaches, calling attention to the dynamics involved in the construction of both subjects and objects of consumption.

## From indigenous commodity to postindustrial luxury—constructing place identity

My case study concerns *mastiha*, a commodity indigenous to the Eastern Aegean island of Chios. Belonging to the botanical family *Pistacia Lentiscus*, the *mastiha* tree thrives and produces its aromatic resin in an area comprising twenty-four villages in the southern part of the island. The paradigm I examine centers on a Chian firm that manufactures and sells face and body care products containing *mastiha* in its recently established Mastic Spa stores throughout Greece and abroad. Intermittent visits to Chios over several years kindled my interest in *mastiha*, in so far as it provides an alternative paradigm to the 'placeless' production system implicit within a global trading regime. Belonging to the category of 'Products of Regional Origin' (Parrott, Wilson and Murdock 2002:242),

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*mastiha* has specific attributes and quality characteristics, which are intrinsically embedded in its place of origin. Chios is known because of its *mastiha* but, more importantly, *mastiha*, as a regionally distinctive product, has acquired its generic designation by its geographical location. Its producers have been organized since 1938 into a Union of Cooperatives, which has developed into a powerful marketing and distribution organization, being the only supplier of *mastiha* to foreign markets and private firms. Aside from manufacturing a *mastiha*-based chewing gum since 1955, under the brand name ELMA, it is only in the last decades that the Union has intensified its marketing role and moved into retailing with the establishment of a chain of stores, under the name *Mastishop* (Galani-Moutafi 2004:22-23, 31).

Like shea, the West African tropical commodity (Chalfin 2004), *mastiha*'s status in the global market has changed from a relatively inexpensive indigenous commodity in the past to a much discussed and high-priced consumer item today. A point setting *mastiha* apart from other commodities concerns the growth of the domestic/national market in the face of a history of export promotion. It is within this market, and particularly through local manufacturing and commercial initiatives, that *mastiha*'s transformation into a post-industrial luxury commodity has basically occurred. More importantly, unlike in the past, the domestic market for *mastiha* operates with its own expansive dynamic and has the capacity to initiate and even shape, to a large extent, the terms of interface with the export market. Whereas over the centuries *mastiha* entered the kitchens in many Near and Middle Eastern countries unprocessed, as a spice, in order to flavour food, sweets, milk and water, in the last several decades, it has been repositioned within the global market. Its route from a pre- to post-industrial commodity is marked by connections or continuities and disjunctures. While continuing to traverse its old trade paths, *mastiha*, since the 1980s, has moved into a wholly different economic niche. For example, it has penetrated into a quasi 'ethnic' cuisine, along the lines of a new 'tradition', following the dictates of well-known 'celebrity' chefs concerning the mixture of different gastronomic traditions. It has been incorporated into a wide array of products--perfumes, confectionary goods, delicacies, body and face-care items sold in exclusive stores--and has entered the market as a self-help medicine for a range of gastro-intestinal disorders<sup>1</sup>. These novel *mastiha*-containing products are sold primarily in specialized stores, most established on a franchise basis, throughout Greece and increasingly abroad. Indicative of this new market orientation is the establishment of the Mastic Spa firm and its first store on Chios. It is this firm's meaning producing and marketing activities that I examine in this paper.

Mastic Spa relies on lengthy narratives for the production of 'knowledge' and uses various visual cues as well as aesthetic practices, which mediate between local/national and global realities. To construct its identity and fashion its products in accordance with the interests, health and moral concerns, and sensibilities of its customers, the firm first assigns a great deal of emphasis to geographical knowledge related to the source of its products. The following passage, appearing in the English version of Mastic Spa's catalogue, is exemplary of a marketing discourse that seeks to stress *mastiha*'s unique and nature-rich place of origin.

Chios is an island of great importance, noted in antiquity for its epic poets, such as Homer...It [Chios] was the hub of commerce and shipping throughout the Mediterranean during antiquity, renowned for inhabitants who were characterized by wild entrepreneurship and sharp business acumen... Chios is known for the uniqueness of the fruits of its earth, as well as for its historic origins... The area of Campos is a magical oasis... [it] is lush-green, covered with lemon, orange and tangerine trees, giving a wonderful aroma in the Spring, thus Chios is also called 'Sweet-

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1 The pathway of the global market is neither seamless nor inevitable. As Appadurai (1986:17) notes, the circuit of any commodity is perpetually threatened by diversion—by takeoffs, spin-offs and breakdowns. Likewise, the numerous and diverse entities engaging the globalization process—states, private firms, farmers' cooperatives, households or consumers—are divided in their aims and inconsistent in their capacities. The fractured character of the globalization process is apparent in the multiple institutions, firms and agendas engaged in making *mastiha* into a new sort of global commodity.

scented, aromatic'. ... The southern region of the island is home to a verdurous landscape of Mastic trees. Mastic is a rare and precious resinous gum, an officinal substance with thousands of beneficial properties that has bestowed upon Chios a special importance... The cultivation of mastic is a difficult task, but the villagers who tend to the mastic are filled with love and pride for their pearly-white gold. ... Today, Chios is an unspoiled destination with natural wonders (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 2).

The link between place and product can be so strong that 'almost any product which has some tie to place—no matter how invented this may be—can be sold as embodying that place' (Bell and Valentine 1997:155). This may entail what Cook and Crang call a 'double commodity fetish' (1996:132), which incorporates an ignorance about production conditions with certain place constructions or types of 'knowledge' about origin. Since *mastiha* and Mastic Spa products are produced at a distance from most consumers, marketing strategies speak to and profit from consumers' imagined geographies. Geographical knowledge is deployed to re-enchant commodities as well as to differentiate them from the devalued functionality and homogeneity of standardized products, tastes and places. As it is documented in the literature, marketing strategies developing geographical knowledge and emphasizing freshness, natural monopolies, social justice and environmental 'friendliness' are becoming increasingly common (Hollander 2003:60). The above text underscores the firm's desire for capturing such coded differences as the 'rare' and 'unique' nature of Chios, which promises an extraordinary sensuous experience. As an ideological construct deployed in this marketing discourse, references to antiquity carry connotations of superiority manifested in Chios' deep historical roots and fame associated with its having been the birthplace of renowned ancient historical figures, such as Homer. Furthermore, the text provides two contrasting images--the dynamic, outward-oriented entrepreneurs of antiquity stand in sharp contrast to the present day cultivators of *mastiha* trees who carry on a 'timeless tradition'. These cultivators, whose labor is hidden, appear to struggle not to earn their livelihood but out of 'love' and 'pride' for *mastiha*. Indeed, as it will be shown in the paper, the firm utilizes a stereotypical image of a laboring village woman as an aesthetic scheme to advance its marketing agenda.

Narratives, as part of Mastic Spa's marketing strategies, not only create a regional image—linking product to place—but also construct 'quality'; this process implicates a number of actors, including initial producers, historical figures, foreign companies and research institutes, as well as familiar and non-familiar cultural (religious) traditions. The assumptions underlying these narratives suggest that Mastic Spa's marketing discourse does not construct a sense of place along the lines of traditional arguments about regions or communities: as stable, characterized by inwardness, with impenetrable boundaries and a nostalgic concern for an idealized past. Instead, conceptually, place is constituted through distinctive articulations at different levels from the past to the present, local to global, myth to science. The following passages from the firm's marketing literature reveal certain ideologies underlying its project of product 'authentication' and quality construction. This project serves the needs of branding and also produces atmosphere, symbols, images and icons associated with place.

During the Byzantine period, the commercial exploitation of mastic was a monopoly of the Greek Emperor...during this era it used to have the same value as gold. ... During the Turkish Occupation, mastic producing villages were given special privileges ... [they] had a free administration and autonomy and had only the obligation to cultivate mastic and give it to the Mastic Tax Collector

Mastic is mentioned in the Apocalypse ... [it] is also an ingredient of the Holy Unction. (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.:6).

In the Koran, Mohamed advises his followers to use mastic. The intoxicating aroma of mastic was the reason that the Muslims used mastic in their bread. (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 6).

The great explorer Christopher Columbus was ... a supplier of medical herbs. ...Columbus believed that he had identified aloe ... and also mastic, which was very expensive due to its antibacterial activity and its wide use against cholera. In one of his travels, Columbus visited the island of Chios (the house where he is believed to have stayed in can be found in [the village of] Pirgi... (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 7).

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### CHIOS MASTIC DESTROYS THE SPIRAL BACTERIA OF THE PYLORUS

A small dose of Mastic – 1 gram per day for two weeks - can heal peptic ulcers very fast. ... These results show that mastic is certain to possess an anti-bacterial activity against the spiral bacteria of pylorus. This activity could at least explain the anti-ulcer activity of mastic. (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 7).

These narratives project *mastiha* as the center of the historical and cultural definition of Chios. Hence, the notion of place refers to an economically and historically distinct--through its indigenous commodity--region. Here, an economic resource is transformed into a cultural product or part of a cultural heritage, which can reinforce a brand identity. The historical accounts and scientific reports can be conceived as a 'value added' component to marketing as well as to tourism, but also to commodity production. Chios' distinctiveness in the tourism and commercial realms is characterized by recourse to the language of 'historicity' and 'tradition' alongside innovation (breakthroughs in science). Through its journeys and commercial trajectories, *mastiha* has mediated the island's encounters with the outside world, transcended different sacred and magical realms (both at the level of practice and discourse), attracted explorers and travelers and came under the control of conquerors, in order to find its 'proper' place in the science laboratories, where its health value is being certified by the most authoritative agents. In an era of global markets, scientists and their research findings, pharmaceutical information and catalogues of specialized products and the local/national beauty industry they represent, shape and are shaped by transnational culture. Mainly urban, middle class consumers, with greater disposable incomes, adopt a reflexive attitude toward the consumption of goods in general and cosmetics in particular (Zukin 1991). Their search for differentiation and authenticity in the consumption of eatable and non-eatable goods is reflected in the growing international demand for 'natural' health foods and face and body care products. Similarly to what has been referred to as the 'gentrification' of taste, distinctive cosmetic traditions and local 'natural' substances are rediscovered and marketed by pharmacists and retailers (Bestor 2001, Terrio 2000).

### **The firm's philosophy and identity**

A striking characteristic of the texts included in Mastic Spa catalogues is the presentation of exhaustive details not only on the history of *mastiha*, as it is linked to that of Chios, but also on the history of the family firm. The latter deploys cultural ideals to construct and project both its philosophy (the values of familial entrepreneurship) as well as its corporate identity.

Ioannis Sodis was a pharmacist and chemist who grew up in Chios and came from a family of pharmacists (today 3 generations), with a rich tradition conducting pharmaceutical research since 1875, when the family opened its first pharmacy in Constantinople, named Sodis. In 1939, a new pharmacy in Egypt was opened. In 1955, great success led to the founding of our company, and the opening of our first pharmacy in Chios. Always ambitious, and with a deep and abiding loyalty to Chios, Ioannis Sodis entered public life and became a Member of Parliament from Chios from 1974 to 1981, Mayor, president of the Chian Pharmaceutical Society and President of the Naval Club of Chios. In 1978, Sodis became the sole importer of French cosmetics, and in two years, a unique model was established for the production of these cosmetics. At the same time, work was begun on our great passion for discovering the benefits of natural ingredients....Research was conducted on the recipes of our forefathers to explore the unique qualities of mastic. After decades of research, in 1985, the first therapeutic product developed was the toothpaste Masticdent, and research continued on other cosmetic benefits of mastic....Almost all of our products today are the result of the pioneering efforts of Ioannis Sodis. He left behind a valuable library of research and a tradition of deep passion and love for mastic. (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 3).

In the text, the family's connections to the world through travel and entrepreneurial endeavors produce fantasies of the reverse order of binaries—center and periphery—and oppositional representations of the world characterizing modern travel discourses (Kaplan 1995:60). The narrative

seeks to glamorize family heritage, since traveling and commercial pursuits led its ancestors from the periphery (Chios) to important world centers. Having established their 'homes' and 'businesses' in metropolitan centers of the Near East, they developed an 'international understanding' and accrued the cultural capital that served, many years later, as a link in a connecting chain with France and transnational economic systems. Interestingly, it is in Chios that 'adventure' and exploration preoccupied the firm's founder, as he sought out the 'secrets' of nature in a mode of experimentation (production) mediated by contemporary technology.

The firm's narratives create a story that blends sentiment—the founder's passion for and love of his homeland—the decoding of old, original formulas as the basis of empirical knowledge, and reliance on advanced laboratory technology. The principles that informed the performance of experimental work in the first generation have not only been sustained and reproduced inter-generationally, but have also been enhanced by the managerial competence of the second generation. Likewise, the family's lifelong commitment to the business is reinforced by a modern mode of entrepreneurship, which demands knowledge of merchandising and marketing techniques, managing employees and conducting public relations. The values of family entrepreneurship, hard work, perseverance, coupled with the story concerning the essential 'wisdom' (secrets) contained in old family recipes as well as a sense of pride of and commitment to aid the Chian economy provide some of the most condensed messages informing the firm's identity. Through these messages it imbues its products with politically and morally positive attributes and values.

## **Meaning management processes**

### ***Retail space construction: The store environment***

The Chios Mastic Spa is located on the harbor street of Chios town, a few meters away from where the ships dock. Other commercial outlets near it include travel agencies, cafes, fast food outlets, and shops selling sweets and souvenir items. An area on the sidewalk, in front of the store, is set aside as a sitting place for customers. A large green umbrella, which displays the store's logo, *Mastic Spa: Natural cosmetics with mastic*, is fastened to a large green wooden platform supporting two bamboo armchairs, a couch and a coffee table. Other pieces of furniture include two tall bar stools placed on either side of a round table. The store's logo, in both Greek and English, is also printed on the green awnings projecting from two wooden framed glass planes in the store's front and side facades. Unlike neighboring shops and travel agencies, Chios' Mastic Spa does not close during the afternoon hours or on Sundays, but opens in the morning and remains open until late at night (midnight in the summer months). What accounts for these continuous hours is the need for the store to be open during the arrival and departure of large passenger ships going to and returning from Pireaus. In the same line of thinking, the firm's store at the airport, catering to domestic and international travelers, operates according to flight arrivals and departures.

Inside, the store's modern, uncluttered, airy and well-lit space is enhanced by shades of green combined with other colors of nature. Inserted within its wooden polished floors are square boxes equipped with spot lights. The bottom surface of these boxes is covered with *mastiha* granules on which are exhibited various products. Ceramic pots with imitation plants having a likeness to the *mastiha* tree (originally natural bushes were planted but did not survive) are placed in two large window cases. Straw baskets filled with various products amid seashells, sponges and nets are placed on either side of these plants. Similar baskets are also available for customers to use during their shopping. To the right of the store's entrance stands a round table upon which is placed a small bronze scale, of a type used in the past, along with oval shaped tin boxes with a miniature old print of Chios harbor imprinted on them. The latter contain the contents of small plastic bags--previously refrigerated--of natural *mastiha* (in granules or powder), which is used for cooking or pharmaceutical purposes. Open shelves equipped with spotlights display a large array of products grouped according to categories, and at their bottom cupboards serve for storage. At eye level, near the entrance and easy

to reach are displayed the soaps, molded into large cakes and cut in smaller pieces of approximately equal size and wrapped with cellophane. The same variety of soaps is displayed in the far end of the store, directly across from the entrance and in front of the salesperson's desk. What adds to the prominence of this category of products is the combination of colors—both of pastel and more definite tones—shapes (angular, rounded and heart shaped) and their obscure or unknown (except to locals) names.

### *Textual and visual representations and advertisement*

Advertising makes an important contribution to the context of consumption in so far as it opens up an area of innovation and experimentation with which to fashion new cultural meanings and reorganize old ones. When the consumer reads a catalogue or looks at ads, he/she is searching for symbolic resources, new ideas or versions of old ones, which have meanings for him/her. However, the basic agent in the process of meaning transference is the consumer. In accordance with the prevailing notion in anthropology and consumer research, the consumer does not just draw information from ads, which he/she relies on and manipulates during the actual moment of decision, but also participates in the assignment of meaning to commodities. In my approach, I adopt McCracken's (2005:163-5) meaning-based model of consumption, which gives emphasis to the cultural context in analyzing both the project of consumption and advertising. Since the latter is a powerful meaning maker, I focus first on the various means the firm uses to invest its products with meanings and then analyze how catalogues serve as the primary means by which multiple meanings move from culture to products.

Soaps are divided into two basic categories: for the body (five different types) and for the face (another five) and are given the names of villages, locations, beaches or rivers on Chios. They comprise a product category with the highest turnover rate<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, the soaps are not directed exclusively to either men or women, with the exception of one type intended for smoothing out 'cellulite and local body fat', whose description implies it may best interest women. The product becomes the signifier of feelings through conventions such as color (light green, orange, deep red, ochre), spring water and aroma, which evoke affective responses including freshness, pleasure and softness. Unlike the bottled liquid soap whose contents are 'hidden' and its packaging is associated with convenience and neatness, the cut soaps encourage a different type of realism and evoke more intense pleasures involved in their application; they connect the viewer/customer to the process of holding them, making suds, scrubbing the body, and even making a mess in splashing water on the face to remove lather. Above all, however, the power of nature contained in spring water, herbs or botanical elements, when applied for therapeutic purposes, must be encompassed in the simplest, most pristine form. The romantic imagination and anticipated pleasures and effects of nature entail a design different from that of industrialized or post-industrialized commodities—one that encourages the fantasy of an intimacy with nature.

In the firm's catalogue, there is a two-page introduction on soaps before a short presentation of each type. The reader is also informed that Mastic Spa soaps won the *1st International Award as the Best Natural Soap at the 2006 SHECKY'S BEST OF THE BEST* international competition in New York. A copy of it is also posted in a highly visible area within the store next to the soaps. In the catalogue, under the heading *Unique, all-natural, therapeutic soaps made with mastic* appears the following text:

Soap. Perhaps the most essential part of a cosmetic regimen, and yet few pay it the attention it deserves for its power to clean. Perhaps we have to return to nature and use soap as the chief agent for cleanliness. Our ancestors used it for more practical measures, and deep down, we long to return to our traditions.

The time has come for mastic to return us to a more relaxed time and a more natural soap. The juice of fresh Chian tangerines, sage, jasmine, fresh Chian milk, natural botanicals, and olive oil

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2 I witnessed this during a two-month research period I spent in the store, and it was also confirmed by the sales personnel.

are blended harmoniously with the unique properties of mastic. Magical products from nature, prepared with no additives, for health and well-being. (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 65).

The text plays a major role in encouraging readers/customers to reconsider the use of conventional hygiene practices and return to nature and the old traditions, which contain the secrets of health and stress relief. It also seeks to stir in potential customers an awareness of the importance of an 'ordinary' daily routine associated with cleanliness and educate them about the benefits of nature as a counterpoint to the artifice of modernity. When referring to 'our ancestors' who used soap, the text does not specify their ethnic descent nor when and where they lived; it connotes, however, a pre-modern, pre-industrial past and an old fashion way of life interpreted as founded on peoples' engaging in an unmediated relationship with nature. Thus, anyone who idealizes / exoticizes this 'uncontaminated' world or past, by association, can lay claims of descent to those who 'inhabited' it. The written word is considered necessary since potential customers, accustomed to different packaging and images of soaps, may not be confident in new products lacking in visual aesthetic signs whose names do not function as sign-vehicles except only to 'insiders'. To connect the buyer with the natural world and with particular qualities of nature endemic to Chios, the text presents an inventory of nature encompassing both the wild and the tamed, domesticated realm. 'Nature' has long been drafted into service as a palliative for urbanism, commercialism, artifice, alienation and the power of technology (Price 1996: 189). In the case under study, though the forms of nature utilized cover a wide gamut, the firm's bias clearly runs towards 'unique' qualities of Chian plant life, which obtain their originality when mixed with *mastiha*.

Each bar of soap, besides its name, contains information about its 'natural' ingredients and their functions or effects, about which the potential customer is educated. In the advertising catalogue, descriptions accompanying soaps are not limited to recording only the ingredients and their functions, but urge the potential buyers to accept them as a necessary and desirable commodity depending on their particular needs. What follow are descriptions in the English version of the catalogue accompanying two types of face and one type of body soap respectively:

*VROULIDIA* (named after a beach area).

Natural soap for oily skin, made with mastic, sage and water from the therapeutic spring of Agiasmata Keramou'. 'Now is the time to forget about oily skin and acne. You don't have to do more than trust the natural brew of mastic and the therapeutic waters of the spring. The unique softness of sage and extract from natural botanicals will soothe the skin (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 66).

*KOUROUNIA* (named after a village).

All natural facial soap.

A union of mastic and wine (Ariousios.)

An all-natural and unique blend of mastic and wine. The moisturizing properties of mastic and wine deliver a proven moisturizing solution for your skin. (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 67)

*MERIKOUNDA* (named after a location)

Unscented, all-natural soap made with mastic and sage

The stress of everyday life and exposure to pollution. You try everything and get the same results.

Maybe you need to get back to traditional recipes. A truly fresh soap, with the softening effect of sage and the unique properties of mastic. (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.: 68).

These texts contest the effectiveness of conventional mass-produced and chemically based products and urge a return to the recipes of older times. What can best combat the stress of modern living? The secret is contained in old knowledge, which combined with nature's gifts can produce wonders. In out-of-control and stress-generating everyday living, people wish to reconnect to what is 'real'. Mastic Spa's marketing strategy and brand philosophy implies that an ordinary item such as soap must

facilitate a new sense of reassurance by anchoring the consumer with old values and knowledge adapted to new times and anxieties. Above all, the firm uses *mastiha* and its scent to manage and promote brand identity. *Mastiha* and many products incorporating oil extracted from it, have taken off as it becomes increasingly known the particular substance, which is inseparable from its scent, has multiple qualities contributing towards the consumer's physical well-being. Other aromas of nature offered by wild flowers (honeysuckle, sand lily), herbs (sage and thyme) or plant and tree species (olive, grape and tangerine) summon up worlds urbanites have fallen out of touch with. Considering that scents are very evocative and appeal to peoples' emotions (Engen 1991), *mastiha*'s aroma is a vital part of the firm's branding plan.

In the past, essences were indicative of the intrinsic worth of the substances from which they emanated. A scent was proof of a material presence, which could be traced to its source. Today, synthetic scents evoke presences that are absent—for example, floral-scented perfumes do not have any extracts from flowers. These artificial aromas are signs without referents—pure olfactory images. In the age of post-modernity, it appears that scents are being reintroduced as packaged agents of fantasy, as a means of recreating a world, a pre-modern past, a body or an identity from which one has already been alienated (Classen, Howes and Synnott 2005:340-41). Undoubtedly, in the case of Mastic Spa products, the scent of *mastiha*, as a material presence, results from a mixture of substances in a laboratory and marks distinctive olfactory environments. A question that needs to be raised is how different consumers create meanings out of these new material forms (face and body care products) at various levels of experience, including the sensory one. I will turn to this question, but presently I note that shoppers purchasing Mastic Spa soaps consider primarily their aromas and secondarily or much less their practical usefulness. Though advertising techniques seek to convince the customer, through words, of the products' value, what elicit his/her emotional reactions are the toiletries'—especially the soaps'—scents. As customers go through a process of smelling bars of soap or different bath and shower gels, it is apparent they perceive scent as intrinsic to the products of their choice and therefore revelatory of their essential worth. This confirms what market research has shown—the aroma of the commodity is crucial to the consumer's perception of a product as desirable and worth buying (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994:180-81).

Nevertheless, in its Web site, catalogues and advertisements, the firm adopts a vocabulary and creates a brand personality that does not reveal any association of its products' positive attributes with their scent, something which is prevalent in aromatherapy. Nowhere is there a direct reference to the beneficial qualities of aromas, but, instead, emphasis is placed on the products' effectiveness lying in their substances' inherent 'natural', 'unique' and therapeutic qualities. The capture and exploitation of such qualities, however, requires that aspects of the local material culture and physical environment undergo a process of estrangement and de-familiarization in the laboratory before entering the market as specialized, high-priced luxuries. In this process, nature is reinvented as 'codified' history and knowledge (familial, folk and pharmaceutical). Through the process of commodification and commercialization—aided by the 'decoding' of this knowledge—nature becomes abstracted and reduced to recognizable signs, which are in turn attached to commodities. This process is best exemplified by the firm's latest line of face and body-care products based on the blending of *mastiha* and wine. A press report bulletin introducing this new line, refers to the particular wine used as that of 'the Greek Gods'.

The **Ariousios wine** was one of the most famous wines of antiquity. Its place of origin was the village of Kourounia, in northern Chios as well as the wider area of 'Ariousia'. No one would conceal his/her admiration for its quality. It was extolled by poets, who named it the 'Wine of Gods' and 'Homeric Wine'. The famous English literary figure, J. Galt, reports that Julius Cesar had a special liking for Ariousios wine. It was accepted in Roman symposia and displaced the famous Italian wines. Its price was very high and, being so expensive, it was included among luxuries. The renown doctor from Pergamus, Galinos, mentions the Ariousios wine, in the preparation of medicines for the treatment of stomach and eye ailments! (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.)

Before commenting on the text, two points need to be made. First, the generic name used for the particular line of products for face and body care is '*oinotherapy*' (wine therapy). What is encountered here is a semantic 'play', since the term *oinos* is the word for wine in the 'archaic' version of Greek, which is neither spoken nor written any longer. The term is used as a sign vehicle to denote 'authenticity', 'oldness', and roots, since archaic Greek is the chief source of today's *demotic* Greek. Second, the particular type of wine is not available for sale in the local market and is practically unknown to most locals--in fact, the island is not known as a wine producing area. As the wine is available in very small quantities in the northern part of the island, it appears that rarity is one dimension that informs the concepts of 'uniqueness' and 'authenticity' of *oinotherapy* products. In this case, history constitutes another shade of meaning attributed to the word 'natural'. What guarantees the effectiveness of the product are reports dating back to antiquity and subsequent historical times, which testify both to the quality of the wine, its fine taste and its medicinal attributes. References to accounts of renowned historical figures help reassure customers the new specialized products contain ingredients whose economic and therapeutic value was acknowledged thousands of years ago. Since much of modern science traces its origins to the observations and written words of ancient thinkers, any information provided by them is equated with undisputable truth. More importantly, in terms of meanings, the underlying message transmitted by the above text is that the 'nature' of Chios and *mastiha* constitute more of a national rather than a physical one. As a national nature, it encompasses deeply entrenched ideas about the continuity between contemporary Greece and its ancient ancestral past, which comprise the backbone of nationalist ideology.

Mastic Spa seeks to connect its customers—primarily visitors to the island—to Chian nature in a manner which gives the domination of nature a gentle, 'civilized' face. It is through commodification that nature is experienced on a visual and sensual level. In the themed environment of the store, a re-engineered nature is presented simultaneously as spectacle, educational discourse, family tradition and commodity. The firm markets 'authenticity', 'uniqueness' and 'tradition' in the setting of a store, a place of conspicuous consumption, with all the accoutrements of modernity, spectacle and artifice. It is a version of nature enjoyed by middle class individuals in the pursuit of leisure, a fetishisation of nature that only makes sense to those not involved in working the land, clearing the soil, pricking the trees and having the raw *mastiha* stick to their hands and clothes. However, nature is not absolutely 'decontextualized' through the circulated meanings, associations and representations, to the extent that it is being reinvented in its original Chios environment. Not only do the natural substances used in the products originate in Chios, but the manufacturing of such products also takes place on the island. Hence, their power as 'magical' concoctions lies in a 'real' place.

A visitor to the island has the opportunity to view and taste Chian 'raw' nature by walking through the groves and gathering the shiny *mastiha* granules from or under the trees. When this happens, despite the embodied nature of the experience, a fetishisation of nature occurs, which entails making it timeless--a site existing, according to McClintock, 'in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire...the living embodiment of the archaic 'primitive'' (1995:50). Nevertheless, this experiential mode is limited to those few tourists who choose to traverse the countryside on foot or in rented vehicles seeking to avoid staged experiences. A more common way Chios' nature is experienced is through products containing *mastiha*, as when consuming confectionary items, chewing gum, drinking liqueurs or using soaps, shampoos, body lotions and face creams. However, the common denominator running through all visitors' experiences of Chios' nature is the reference points in a previously enframed and represented nature from travel brochures, television documentaries, advertisements and oral accounts.

In the Spring of 2006, three years after opening its store in Athens and establishing twenty-two stores (most on a franchise basis) within the country and abroad, the firm sought a brand endorser, in the person of Sophia, a woman in her mid-twenties. The official announcement of Sophia's brand endorsement took place at a celebration held in Athens at a well-known entertainment venue. In a Web site, the firm comments on this agreement as follows:



A child of Anna Vissi [*a very popular Greek singer*] and Nikos Karvelas [*song composer*], Sophia, shares the family passion for creativity. At the start of her career, she has managed to stand out for her well-rounded personality and her love for innovation and pioneer ideas. ... Sophia's freshness [*youthfulness*] and enthusiasm make an absolute match with the philosophy of Mastic Spa. It concerns [*the philosophy*] a unique concept with worldwide applicability: personal attentiveness and care with pure cosmetics, which have as their base the traditional *mastiha*. ... Sophia's first encounter with Mastic Spa did not occur on Greek territory, but in Manhattan, a day before the opening there of the first store. The chemistry that developed was so good, that it led to the signing of the relevant agreement!<sup>3</sup>

The choice of Sophia as a sponsor of Mastic Spa produces several layers of meanings. Though not a celebrity herself, it is assumed she has all the potential of becoming one, given her family background. Not only is gender meaning at work here, but meanings generated by the endorser touch upon cultural ideas of family. Besides the family name constituting a source of cultural capital for marketing purposes, it also suggests certain qualities—such as artistic talent as well as a personality type—which the daughter inherits ‘naturally’ from her parents. As McCracken argues, an endorsement succeeds when an association is fashioned between the meanings of the cultural world on the one hand and the endorsed product on the other (2005:103). The association in this case is between the story of glamour and success of two individuals, which can serve as their daughter's initiation into the world of design, fashion and artistic creation, and the Mastic Spa lines. The values associated with the persona's family history are transferred to the company's products. Just as Sophia is a by-product of two renowned parents, similarly Mastic Spa products are invested with the qualities and values of history at large and the micro-history of the Chian family firm (father and sons) engaged in the production of cosmetics. Other qualities—such as those of youthfulness, worldliness, and a certain kind of femaleness—are made the qualities of Mastic Spa products. Youthfulness connotes a certain playfulness and willingness to experiment with new things (not being set in one's ways), as well as freshness both in the sense of character (subtlety) and external appearance. Thus, a woman of Sophia's age is an appropriate choice to empower the ‘purity’ of Mastic Spa's all-natural cosmetic products. Her other characteristics relating to family background and experiences of living in cosmopolitan New York City connote further symbolic properties, which make the endorser an important source of significance, in terms of adding to the products appropriate meanings both within the national market and abroad.

In the words of Mastic Spa's general manager, at the above mentioned celebration, ‘she [Sophia] is a person with confidence in her own strengths, young, experienced with life within and outside Greece, who will leave her own mark on the world of beauty’. The firm's managing director added his own praise of Sophia: ‘She is not just a daughter of famous parents..... is charismatic, has a strong personality and a mind and opinion of her own. She will enter the star system on her own terms. *Mastiha* will be travelling along with Sophia to the end of the world’. The projected similarities between the image of the endorser and the brand suggest the latter will follow the path of the former--where she goes literally and metaphorically (career-wise) the products will also go. Just as Sophia will excel and put her stamp in the world of lifestyle and fashion, Mastic Spa products, still in their youth, have all the potential (qualities akin to that of a strong personality) to become world known. Overall, the meanings the firm stands for, and those it creates for its products, are about purity, youthfulness, extroversion and vision.

A poster with an enlarged photo of Sophia on a swing, amid large trees in the background, is placed on the far end of the wall opposite the entrance of Chios' Mastic Spa store (behind the salespersons' desk). The visitor/customer may not know who the poster depicts, but he/she gazes at a close up shot of a carefree, smiling young woman. The emphasis here on a smooth, beautiful, shiny face suggests an internal and external metamorphosis to which *mastiha* can contribute. In the store there is another poster on a sidewall, but not very visible, which also depicts a woman. However, in contrast to the

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3 <http://www.fe-mail.gr/2006/03/fashion.agora.masticshops.php>

former, which speaks of modernity, this image adds different values to the meaning transfer processes. The woman on the second poster is old, heavy-set and wears a black robe, a black headscarf and rough socks. She is cleaning *mastiha* granules in a round tin tray, which rests on a cloth checkered table napkin on her lap. The photo reproduces a stereotypical (archetype) image of the 'peasant woman', who dutifully carries out domestic tasks; she could have been occupied with multiple other activities related to food preparation and the procurement of household necessities. In this scene, the raw and soiled (natural) *mastiha* is being 'domesticated' and purified in order to enter the laboratories and the cosmetics industry. Interestingly, in the firm's catalogue, the same photo appears in the first few pages that cover the subject of '*Mastiha & History*' under the caption *Antiquity: Mastic was worshipped as a goddess* (Mastic Spa Sodis Laboratories n.d.:6). The old woman personifies a distant past, which extends from early Christianity, through Byzantine times and the period of the Ottoman occupation. Other symbolic meanings the two posters generate can be summed up by the dualities old age/youth, work/leisure, inside/outside, tradition/modernity, invisible/visible (conspicuous) and stability/mobility.

### Consumers' meanings: space, place and the senses<sup>4</sup>

In social science research, within the complex debates about postmodernism, the rediscovery of the body (Lyotard 1971; Deleuze and Guattari 1984; Butler 1990) and the reassertion of 'space' in social thought (Bakhtin 1986; Foucault 1970, 1972, 1973, 1979, 1967/1986; Shields 1991) have broken new ground for the meaningful investigation of the intimate sensual experiences of space and place (Rodaway 1999). Lash (1988) argues that (in the cultural domain) modernism is discursive and textual, whereas postmodernism is figural and sensory; the first concerns meaning, the second experience. From the viewpoint of the phenomenological approach to perception, there is a unity of experience and meaning—senses are both sensation and meaning. Anthropological research has documented that in different cultural contexts certain sensory registers are elaborated while others are relatively dormant. It acknowledges, for example, the cognitive aspects of sensory memory, but asserts that cognitive potentials cannot be considered outside the cultural context (Sutton 2005). In other words, perception is not just sensation plus cognition, since each individual has a personal history and is socially and culturally situated.

Many of the Greek visitors to Mastic Spa in Chios narrated various accounts from their life histories, which demonstrate that their perception of the store and/or its commodities was mediated by previous experiences. A truck driver, in his mid-forties, who had traveled on two occasions to the island, gave the following account, upon buying bath and shower products at the store:

Chios to me is *mastiha* and mandarins [*tangerines*]. I did my army service here over twenty years ago and every time I visit, I buy these products. I have good memories of my army service. It was different then, good years. ... Around the corner from the store there was a small café/tavern and we would gather, remove our uniforms in the toilet, eat, drink and before leaving we would change back to our uniforms.

His words here testify to the power of taste and smell. What is stored in memory determines what is perceived and how it is encoded, and what is stored determines what retrieval cues are effective in providing access to it (McGlone, cited in Sutton 2005:313). As for the use of metonymy, it is not uncommon, since *mastiha*, as an emblematic product, stands for Chios at large. Chian tangerines are well-known for their taste and sought after in vegetable stores or supermarkets throughout the country; indeed, some seek to plant the specific variety of citrus tree on their land. The informant also

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4 I do not seek to construct a 'representative' sample of consumers nor delineate various statistically based 'profiles' or categories of consumers. Instead, my aim is to present and analyze data derived from qualitative research; therefore, I incorporate in the text the narrative accounts of several informants: both users and non-users of Mastic Spa products as well as residents of and travelers to the island. These accounts highlight important themes--experiences, practices, memories and notions of the self related to place identification—which underlie meaning producing processes from the consumers' perspective and guide their choices of purchase.

associates the aromas of *mastiha* and Chian tangerines with a particular stage in his life cycle—a liminal state of military duty—marked by sentiments and actions of lasting significance. Among Greek men, memories associated with serving in the army are prevalent in conversations. They mark boundaries and distinctions between past and present, older and younger generations, serving as a means to construct images of the self informed by a discourse about discipline and evasion of rules, the negotiation of power relationships, sociality, sharing and comradeship.

Another customer, a forty year old woman, visiting Chios on holiday with her family, claimed that walking into the store and smelling the aroma of *mastiha*, brought to mind scenes of her recently deceased mother preparing the Easter bread, *tsoureki*, into which she would add *mastiha*. In this case, the power of scent returned the individual to the world of home, family, and ritual. Not only did the scent trigger an emotional overload of the loss of her mother but it also served as a reminder of a sense of disjunction from a past linking her to her natal family. This example suggests it is the synesthetic nature of the domains of home/family, cooking and ritual, which leads to *mastiha*'s prominence in memory processes. The term synesthesia is used by Sutton (2005:312) and refers to the union of different senses—the notion that senses feed on each other, hence sensory experiences cannot be considered separate domains. The informant, when commenting on the design of the store, was intrigued with the floor embodied boxes that display products—an innovation that captured her gaze—and characterized the store as distinct and different from other stores in Chios but similar to the Body Shop. Here are encountered meanings and symbolic associations connoting tradition and modernity. *Mastiha*, in its natural form, denotes local (female) knowledge connected to the preparation of a sweetbread, which is consumed at Easter. However, the re-engineering of *mastiha* in the world of cosmetics denotes a 'disjunction' with the past both spatially and temporally. Hence, the store in its set-up reminds the informant of the Body Shop, a retail landscape and a concept foreign to any familiar prototype—a design, which by association denotes modernity.

Another non-Chian informant, in her late sixties, who lives in Athens but has ties to Chios through marriage (her husband comes from one of the leading *mastiha* producing villages, in which he maintains a summer home), after making her purchases at the store, addressed the saleswoman, saying:

Last time you gave me a face soap and a facial cream with *mastiha*. I don't care about wrinkles, but it makes me feel good [*mou ftiahnei ti diathesi*] every evening ... and this scent of *mastiha*. Wonderful!

Then, engaging me in conversation, she continued:

I remember when I first came to Chios. My sister-in-law, stored underneath the bed these diamonds, the *mastiha* spread out. In those years, the older people would say to us: 'chew *mastiha* for your teeth and your stomach'.

The same informant, however, expressed a strong objection to the use of the term mastic in the name of both the brand and the shop:

Young people today don't even know *mastiha*. They may chew it, but they don't really know it. The word mastic means nothing. I will call Mrs. Aliko [the mother of the firm's owners] and I will tell her. She is a Chian, I am a Cephalonian [native of the Ioanian island of Cephalonia].

Especially revealing in this case is the way the senses are intertwined with memory and life history. The woman's experience of moving to the village as an in-coming bride and her capacity to narrate this part of her personal story is tied to the taste/smell of *mastiha*. The latter constitutes a 'storage' of strong personal memories with a definite spatial dimension, since she remembers her husband's village and home as a rich smell-scape. Of course, *mastiha*, embedded in the local culture of production, was to her 'exotic' and, by analogy, 'foreign' as she was a non-local bride. Perhaps for this reason she used the word 'diamonds' as a metaphor for *mastiha*'s granules, something a native producer would perhaps not do. In her attempt to historicize sensory experience, she also commented on the present. In her view, the old times were marked by different sensibilities as well as practices associated with local knowledge, but for young people today, *mastiha* evokes a different sensibility--

the new mastic gum they chew is emptied of cultural content and local knowledge. A question arises concerning what sensory connection this woman makes with *mastiha* through the commodities available in Mastic Spa's modern retail landscape. She adopts the new instrumental practices associated with the consumption of *mastiha*-based cosmetic products not necessarily for what the rationalizing advertising and marketing narratives promise, but because, in her sensory-based perception, their distinct aroma has a positive, pleasing effect on her state of mind. She is not estranged from *mastiha* but adopts its new applications in ways that involve a sensory-based (and bodily mediated) stimulation of mind and emotions. As for the informant's objection to the use of the term mastic, she reacts against its 'empty' (foreign) semantic meaning because through it a native product is given a foreign identity. Loosing its linkage to locality and, linguistically, its national signification, it is depleted of symbolism and becomes a 'homeless' universal, rationalized commodity.

Two informants, a local male resident and a foreign woman visiting the island, both of whom emphasized their not relating to the new commodities, provided different stories highlighting the experience-based meanings they ascribed to and inscribe on *mastiha*. The male Chian informant, forty-seven years of age, spoke about the new *mastiha*-based commodities in the following way:

Last time I bought a pistachio preserve [*sweet of the spoon as it is referred to in Greek*], without noticing that it contained *mastiha*. I did not like it, because of the *mastiha*, and left it unconsumed.... In other words, it changed the traditional taste I had for pistachio. Also, the taste of *mastiha* was not that which I was familiar with. And I tell you, I have not touched it ever since. ... Also, at my sister's house, I washed my hands with a soap that contained *mastiha*. Again, I did not like it. Because it's not *mastiha* but something else, a hybrid, transformed ... I did not like it as a scent, as a product it did not touch me at all in relation with the past. Now, the *mastiha*, by itself, if you take it from the tree and chew it, it's very bitter. When I was a child we chewed *mastiha* to cure a stomach problem. We chewed it if we did not have chewing gum. If you talk to the producers you'll find they do not chew it. It's not chewable because it's hard ... your jaws hurt. ... We did not have a lived experience with *mastiha* beyond that connected to labor and our livelihood. In other words, *mastiha* was the product that supported us economically. The entrance of *mastiha* into other things, beyond its traditional uses, is foreign to the producer.

This informant grew up in a family of *mastiha* producers and as a young child labored with his father in the groves for several months in the summer and early fall, until the age of 15, when the family immigrated to the United States. What marked the earlier experience for the rest of his life was the early awakening habit he adopted. As he remarked, 'that early rise, between four and five in the morning, follows me up until now. My cycle of sleep has been adjusted to that schedule'. These words provide a good example of how certain life experiences can mediate between the subject and his/her self-disciplined body. More specifically, the quotation reveals how work routines entrenched in practices associated with the pooling of family labor can become part of one's somatic *habitus*. The body, as a physical entity that undergoes a certain discipline, has a history (it is embedded in a particular biography) and is situated in a given culture. Here, the individual does not express a romantic sentimentality, but recounts an experience, which functions as an apparatus for self-reflexivity. A dynamic relationship is established with history via reflexivity, especially since the past has a transformative impact, which is inscribed in the body. The informant's comments also suggest that familiarity with *mastiha*'s scent-taste, as it lingers in memory, dulls or has negative effects on one's sensitivity to the present encounter with the new 'hybrid' commodities. Furthermore, the new commodities offer a scent, which is not tangible to the informant, does not have a presence, cannot 'touch' him or offer him a time-space geography. Indeed, we can speak of the effacement of sensory memory in modernity, in the sense that the new commodities do not bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation; defamiliarization and estrangement translate into an experience of tastelessness. As Seremetakis remarks: 'Each episode of consumption is relatively absolute ... because it never lingers long enough in the senses as social memory to be stitched into a historical fabric with the others it has displaced' (1994:9-10).

The account of a sixty-year old English artist, on the other hand, testifies how the smell of unprocessed *mastiha* can evoke memories and enhance one's ability to recognize—and locate oneself—in place. This informant had childhood connections with Chios during the 1940s, when her family lived for a few years in Athens and in the summers rented a house on the island. As she was a child at the time, she had no visual memories of Chios to help her recognize the place and locate herself in it, while holidaying there. However, one day, during a walk from one of the main *mastiha* producing villages to the coast and back, she had an intimate sensuous experience, which she described in the following words:

On the road, I stopped, crushed some leaves from a mastic tree. My God, I have not smelled that smell since childhood. The only memory I could locate in my subconscious. What an experience. It resonated all the channels in my memory. The smell was the trigger.

The informant's olfactory experience is first and foremost an evocation of a childhood place (Engen 1991). It is also evident that her personal, intimate and unmediated experience enables her to talk about nature in visual and olfactory terms (fresh air, smells, open spaces), capturing, in this way, the associative power of a sensuous experience of place/space. She walked into Mastic Spa but did not make any purchases, explaining material things are not important in her life. Instead, she treasures '*nature, fresh air, open spaces, smells, clean air*'. An experience that fascinated her, which she related as indicative of her appreciation of nature, was seeing three old women, whom she referred to as 'attractive', dressed in black and sitting outside their door steps in a village. From her encounter both with nature and the old women she constructs something archetypal, an association or a metaphor. The old village women dressed in black are also placed within nature as an emblem of a pristine environment, standing as the exactly opposite image of beauty from that constructed by the cosmetics industry in a graphically visual sense. However, whereas the informant's 'crushing and smelling *mastiha* leaves' is an active, unmediated encounter, her perception of the three motionless old women is of a different quality; the women, as objects observed at a distance, comprise an image informed by tourist discourse representing an aestheticized 'other'.

### ***Mastiha* and the new commodities in gift giving practices**

For my Greek informants, mainly visitors to the island, Mastic Spa products are often intended for gift giving. Those who consider such commodities as luxury items, too expensive to afford themselves, believe *mastiha*-based cosmetics are good quality products and make appropriate gifts. A twenty-five year old woman from Athens who completed her higher education studies in Chios and found employment on the island, explained:

I believe ... cosmetics are an excellent idea for gift. Especially for someone who comes to the island for a few days, and wishes to purchase something associated with and a reminder of Chios. All those to whom I have given Mastic Spa products are amazed by their packaging and quality and have difficulty believing that something so good is produced on an island.

Through her gifts, this informant makes a statement she is living in a distinct place, where modern luxury commodities are produced. The objects are suited to what she wants them to mean and be, since they have a sign value (symbols of modernity and lifestyle) and also bear a place identity, which mass-produced commodities, generally, do not bear. The point of commodity fetishism developed by Taussig (1977), that objects are seen as active, and the position taken by Veblen (1975 [1899]) and Baudrillard (1981), that objects are status markers, suggest material things have social significance. According to these positions, however, commodities are impersonal and do not bespeak of a relationship between a particular object (as distinct among others) and a particular, distinct, person. The case under consideration illuminates the tension or contrast between objects as commodities and as gifts. Produced on the island and containing Chian natural substances, Mastic Spa cosmetics, as gifts bought by this informant, contain part of her biography, which relates to her living on Chios first as a university student and then as a working adult. Using the notions developed by Mauss (1967 [1925]) and Carrier (1990), commodities purchased as gifts constitute 'possessions' since they denote

a relationship of identity between possessors and objects. The possessions offered as gifts acquire their meanings not solely in terms of their use, sign or exchange value, but through their identification with the giver. By choosing the particular commodities, which bear a Chian stamp, the informant engages in strategies of appropriation, which help transform items purchased in anonymous cash transactions into possessions and hence make them more suited as gifts.

The ideological understanding of the nature of unprocessed *mastiha* and/or *mastiha*-based cosmetics as gifts relates to cultural conceptions of persons, objects and social relations: what people are, how they interact with each other and how objects are part of those interactions. If commodities are 'good for thinking', as Douglas argues (1979:41), how do *mastiha* producers make sense of these modern luxuries? As many *mastiha* producers state, their crop is intended for sale and its exchange in the market is what creates value. So important is the exchange (monetary) value of *mastiha*, one female producer claimed to 'feel sorrow when she has to give even very small quantities of it away'. Producers keep only a very small portion of *mastiha* for household use, to send a son or daughter living away or, on rare occasions, to give as a 'gift' to a doctor for his/her medical services. The gifting of unprocessed *mastiha* to doctors unravels an area where gift and commodity exchange overlap. Away from the core of family relationships, gifts, offered in addition to monetary compensation, become instrumental, serve self-interest and denote hierarchical relations. The recipient exercises his/her positional power or provides resources, which are under his/her control. The instrumental gift is transformed into a quasi-commodity because it is transacted for personal interests in the context of a relationship which reflects the dependent, subordinate position of the giver. In the giving of these gifts, strong marks of class—dress codes, language, formal titles and generally demeanor—and social inequalities are reproduced. Overall, unprocessed *mastiha* given by its producer as a gift, partakes of two different regimes of value—gift (inalienable) and commodity exchange. It is a good illustration of Appadurai's thesis that 'it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (1986:5) and it confirms his observation that objects go in and out of commodity status.

However, the producers' giving of unprocessed *mastiha* to close family members marks a very close interconnection between persons and things as well as between persons and persons. Here, gifting falls into the realm of spontaneous social acts, is sufficiently scaled to the emotional value of relationships, and expresses the affective relations existing in the household and forming the foundations of *mastiha*'s production. This type of gift-giving is predictable and socially regulated within everyday practices. Moreover, both giver and receiver, aside from their subjectively constituted notions of value, are aware at all times of *mastiha*'s commodity status and its material (market) value (Carrier 1990, Cheal 1988). On the other hand, in shopping for 'appropriate' gifts for friends or distant relatives, producers often turn to the type of commodities offered by Mastic Spa or other stores selling mass-produced *mastiha*-based products. For Chian residents with past experience of working in the family's *mastiha* groves or those currently engaged in the cultivation and production of *mastiha*, the newly emergent commodities in the realm of cosmetics or various eatable products are not goods they often chose for themselves, since they cannot create personal meanings out of them. Instead, they purchase these items as gifts for outsiders in order to convey something about themselves and their locality to the recipients. Through the latter's remarks concerning these gifted items, Chians in a self-reflexive manner, become cognizant of their place identity.

### **Issues of identity and consumption**

My discussions and interviews mostly with women shoppers at Chios' Mastic Spa has led me to conclude that the store and its commodities inhabit in a sense a symbolic bridge between Chios, as a place of birth that informs one's social identity, and a project of life-style and status building, through consumption, associated with urban living. A forty-five year old woman of Chian descent, who resides in Athens, claimed that she has been using a range of Mastic Spa products for the past two years. She decided there is no reason to continue using well-known brands her husband, a seaman, purchased for

her at reduced prices on his voyages. Her reasoning was that Mastic Spa cosmetics are as good as foreign ones in terms of quality, their pricing is about at the same level, but more importantly, in her words:

... I feel that by purchasing them [Mastic Spa products] I can assist the economy of my native homeland. I don't see why my money should go to multinational companies. ... It gives me moral satisfaction because I contribute towards the strengthening of the Chian economy. ... I should add that I have grown up with *mastiha* and by habit I always carry in my purse a package of ELMA. When I have a stomach discomfort, I chew *mastiha* and, after a while, it goes away. Recently, I also purchased mastic oil because I heard that it has surprisingly good therapeutic qualities.

Moreover, the same woman referred to the Athens Mastic Spa, located in the upscale area of Kolonaki, as small and miserable in contrast to that of Chios. Though the two stores are very similar in their set-up, she would have preferred the Athens one to be larger and more visible in order to fit-in with its surroundings and reflect a lifestyle suitable to that of its clientele. Indeed, she chose to make her purchases at the Chios store during her visits to the island, not only because the spatial setting was not 'out of place' but because she could better project her sense of place and identity onto the specific retail space. Perhaps in ways both imagined and real, the emplacement of her identity was in this sense reinforced.

Another user of Mastic Spa products, a forty-three year old woman of Chian descent who also lives in Athens, remarked:

...they have exploited *mastiha* in order to promote the island, by creating something absolutely natural and pure ... and this makes me feel very proud. ... Even I who have grown up with *mastiha* could never imagine that it would be so widely used. I still remember my grandmother using *mastiha* in sweets and consider myself lucky to have kept some of her favorite recipes. ... Also, I would never forget when my brother and I were children, she would give us grounded *mastiha* to cure our stomach aches if we had eaten something heavy or did not feel generally well ... Now with the variety of *mastiha*'s uses, I am increasingly more conscious of how blessed the product is.

Both of these women seek to recreate a sense of 'locality' and 'belonging' through material and discursive practices related to *mastiha* and the place where it originates or is *situated*. But the meaning(s) ascribed to and inscribed onto *mastiha* are multiple and changing, since the particular commodity is in a state of continuous 'becoming' and transcending boundaries. The two informants' accounts suggest the highly emotive attributes with which the women imbue *mastiha* enable them to project certain images of themselves and their place of birth. *Mastiha*-based products appear to serve as a conduit for the expression of emotions and feelings, such as pride for and loyalty to one's place of birth, while also being instrumental in enabling one to position his or herself in a wider, extra-local world. Furthermore, in view of current economic conditions of globalization, consumer items employed in the present evoke memories and experiences of the past, which serve as mediating elements in the recreation of the self - place identification. Practically all of the informants who had connections to Chios through birth or marriage but lived away from the island narrated stories that featured the past in association with the use and/or cultivation of *mastiha*. These stories make explicit certain commonalities of past experiences centering on social relationships and practices, and reinforce present connections to place. The informants indicated the authority with which they spoke by stressing their connectedness to Chios and their having indigenous knowledge passed on to them about the use(s) of *mastiha*, especially for therapeutic purposes. But, references to the past and to identification with Chios through *mastiha* are also often used by individuals to place themselves in a wider world associated with extra-Chios links. The latter derive from living and working in the city and having access to modern and prestigious facilities or having husbands who, working as seamen, mediate global connections through shopping.

## **Conclusion: consumers and *mastiha*-based luxury commodities**

Spanning countries and continents, the commodity regime in which *mastiha* is embedded is becoming increasingly more global geographically, especially as the natural resource itself is experiencing shifts in its identity. One innovation behind this global expansion relates to the consumption of *mastiha*, whether as a named ingredient in a wide range of eatable products or as a substance incorporated into hygienic and luxury, cosmetic items. Yet, despite this expanding trajectory in the realm of circulation and consumption, *mastiha*'s manufacturing and refinement continue to be restricted largely to Chios. Firms, like Mastic Spa, which sell and formulate products made with *mastiha* stress their connections--in sentimental, genealogical, social and spatial terms--to Chios, as the only source of the natural product. This is part of the allure of the commodities they market. In addition, they project a system of knowledge, which, on the one hand is informed by a 'local' and historically derived real and imagined discourse and, on the other, endorses or is adapted to modern sensibilities and concerns about purity. All along, such firms direct their commodities to consumers who are global in their own geography and self-awareness. The outlook of these consumers is attuned to lifestyles of a middle class, whose consumption, especially of luxuries, is part of a project of status marking, and is cognizant to some degree of the existence of a global market niche oriented to notions of purity and the preservation of natural quality.

The basic foundations upon which the increasing popularity of *mastiha* within the cosmetics industry lies are a broader set of trends where mass goods become restricted--reversing the trajectory Mintz (1985) describes for sugar-- and the mass market becoming crowded with a large variety of products capable of marking class and status-specific aspirations and identities (Roseberry 1996). Within Greece, the consumption of *mastiha*-based cosmetic products engages a consumer sensibility built not only upon a sense of pleasure or status, but on ties to place and/or the product, mediated by family relationships, sensory experiences, ritual and gift practices, beliefs regarding health as well as loyalty to and pride of one's place of birth. However, it is defamiliarization with or 'distance' (temporal, spatial and social) from Chios and/or its distinct natural resource that enhances the possibilities of accepting and identifying with the new luxury commodities. Within the consumer's conceptual framework, this 'distancing' allows a link to be achieved between the 'traditional' confectionary sector (where *mastiha* was used mainly as a spice) and the new cosmetics industry. In contrast, the new move of *mastiha* towards a naturalized luxury niche occurring in the cosmetics market does not stretch its reach to Chian residents in general and to *mastiha*'s cultivators in particular. The latter endorse all innovations contributing to *mastiha*'s increasing visibility, especially since it translates into a considerable increase in the incomes they accrue from its sale, but cannot bridge the gap between the product's new commercial identity and their own experience-based meaning producing projects of their lives and identities.

*Mastiha* does not just move from here (Chios) to there (supermarkets, bakeries, pharmacies, souvenir stores and specialty shops in Chios, throughout Greece, and abroad) in just a linear form. Although its geographic transposition largely follows this direction, the factors and forces making this course possible are complex, diffuse and globalized. Deterritorialized ideals of cosmopolitan lifestyles and identities, marketing networks, information processing, and destination promotion in tourism, as well as domestic and international travelers and business people moving to and from Chios—all engage in a constant process of *mastiha*'s meaning making and negotiation. The newness of *mastiha* is located in a distinct duality—in the fact that it appears in what seem to be two very different markets. As is the case of shea, *mastiha*'s status as a new commodity is intimately tied to the process of economic 'multiplication'—the capacity to operate in different markets carrying several seemingly disparate but highly interconnected identities (Chalfin 2004:183). The fact that *mastiha*'s current entrance into the beauty industry obscures its past while, at the same time, is predicated on it, is what actually makes it new. While the consumption of a wide range of eatable products enhanced by *mastiha*'s aroma and other qualities makes possible the realization of internalized bodily pleasures and health, in cosmetology, *mastiha* fosters the realization of similar capacities through its application on



the exterior of the body. It appears that individuals engaged directly with *mastiha* (its cultivation in the past or present) adopt a more ‘traditional’—based on local knowledge--approach to its consumption associated with its functioning as medicine for curing internal bodily ailments. When it comes to external bodily applications, where *mastiha* is combined with other natural ingredients and is promoted as the ideal self-care product catering to specific rather than generic customer needs, individuals with intimate links to the raw product approach the newly emergent, *mastiha*-based luxury items as alien, ‘denatured’, out of reach for them in terms of their prices, but good for popularizing Chios to outsiders.

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