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Narratives about Founding Cult Places and Forming Folkloric Biographies: Between Sacralization and Polemics

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ABSTRACT: Cult places establishing motivated by an order/vow which a person receives in a dream or vision is an international motif, well known in Serbian folkloristic and literary tradition, too. This way of establishing cult places, accompanied by appropriate ritual practices, lives on even today in the territories of southern and southeastern Serbia. An individual who can establish contact with the otherworldly through dreams and visions often merits a special status in the community – some elements of their biography narratives are interpreted in such a way that they form sacralized biographies. The main motifs of such biographies have been singled out in this paper and their functioning in the collective is examined. Some sacralized biographies of the kind are well known today throughout Serbia, and they are also accepted by the official religion representatives, while others function only within the scope of a narrower community. It is shown that the process of sacralization depends on the time distance from the events under discussion, on the role of the community and individuals, but also on the mechanisms which are formed outside the framework of the local oral tradition, through the narratives of popular and media culture.

KEYWORDS: folk religion, cult places, sacral biography, dreams, visions

Introductory Remarks: Founding or Restoring a Cult Place Initiated by a Vow Received in a Dream or Vision in Serbian Traditional Culture

The initiation of founding a cult place due to a vow/an order received in a dream, vision, or some other sort of premonition is a well-known motif in the history of culture. It is also very common in Serbian folk tradition (especially in oral epic poetry and cultural and historical legends) and in literary (especially medieval, hagiographic) legacy.

The fieldwork research conducted in the last few years in the territory of southern and southeastern Serbia shows that the practices of founding cult places wherein a special role is assigned to a particular individual thus fulfilling an order received from a metaphysical entity (most commonly persons from Christian imaginarius) are very much alive (see Djordjević Belić 2018). The continuing existence of these practices is confirmed by travel writers and ethnographers who had noted down such phenomena from the late 19th and throughout the entire 20th century (Milićević 1876: 838, 1984: 82; Stanojević 1913: 66–67, 1931: 108; Đorđević 1934: 113–116; Pantelić 1974: 223; Kanitz 1985: 363; Krstić 2006: 171–240; Radulović 2010: 43–44). Similar ritual practices and narratives related to them have been the subject of analyses related to Bulgarian and Russian traditions too (Panchenko 2002, 2012; Baeva 2013a: 138).

In traditional culture, characterized by a metaphysical model of understanding dream nature (Trunov, Vodenikova 2012), a dream is seen as a mode of contact with the otherworldly (Tolstoy 2003: 306; Gura 2012; Rabinovich 2013: 34; Safronov 2016: 5–6; cf. also Tedlock 1992; Pócs 2019; Mageo 2021). This way of understanding dreams is made possible due to the fact that the dream is “a reservoir of the semiotically undefined”, “neutral space” which can be filled with various signs – message carriers, and those signs always have the potential for multiple interpretations, individual and culturally conditioned (Lotman 2000: 126). Thus, the dreamer and/or the one who executes an order received in the dream become symbolically the materialization too, “the extended arm” of the metaphysical contractor in the reality of this world. The dreamer (or the visionary) is “marked” by the direct contact with the metaphysical, with the evident possibility of permanent symbolical existence on the rim of the two worlds, this world and the other world, because they have become someone else through their narrative about the dream/vision and founding (or restoring) a cult place – someone *different* for their community. This otherness is particularly emphasized in relation to the individuals who found, worship, visit, and take care of a number of cult places, and who are referred to as “people dedicated to a church/monastery”, “hermits” (in Serbian: *crkvvari/crkvarke*, *crkvarice*, *crkvenici*, *crkvenjaci*, *crkvenke*; Stanojević 1931: 108; *babe crkvalije*; Kostić 1998: 140; *crkvenjače/crkvenjaci*, *crkvarci*, *crkvenjaci*, *manastirke/manastirci*, *isposnici*, *bogomoljci*; Krstić 2006: 176). The ambivalent nature of such otherness is also registered on the level of vernacular religion, since such individuals evoke both respect and fear, confidence and doubt, and some of them are ascribed both healing and prophetic abilities (Stanojević 1931: 108; Krstić 2006: 235–240; cf. Panchenko 1998: 81)¹.

1 In Serbia, Lidija Radulović has focused on this phenomenon in particular in her research in the last few years, observing it also from the viewpoint of the anthropology of gender (Radulović 2010). It is interesting to notice that the domination of female characters was spotted already by Stanojević: “In their religious zeal, they are even more fanatic and zealous than their husbands. They deliver their sermons much more strongly than prophets” (Stanojević 1931: 108).

In that sense, it can be said that the biographies of such people have an obvious potential for sacralization. The aim of the analysis to follow is to observe the mechanisms of creating such sacralized (folkloric) biographies – to single out their main motifs, ways in which those motifs are modeled in the individual perspectives as well as from the perspective of the core and wider collective (from a folkloric biography which is almost part of the official religion, to the narrations which function within the boundaries of a given community, to the completely fragmentary ones with respect to which polemical polylogues are developed in local communities).

The said mechanisms will be depicted on the basis of the example of the narrative about the founding of the Orthodox Monastery of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Djunis (southeastern Serbia), and the narrations which function in its very close cultural environment, in the neighboring dwellings, where the practice of establishing local cult places is very active. For this ethnocultural area, it is typical for a cult place to be founded on the initiative of an individual who receives an order/a vow in a dream and (or) a vision; at the designated place they unearth relics (a cross, a censer, an icon, and the like), and later on, with the support of a local community (who may contribute financially and/or become a part of the workforce), they erect churches (usually initially modest, improvised buildings, some of which are later on turned into bigger sacral objects made of brick). The founding of a cult place often includes the discovery of the spring of holy (usually medicinal) water and arranging for it to be accessible – *the opening of water*².

In terms of methodology, the research is based on the principles of qualitative interview analysis and critical discourse analysis (oral, literary, and media), and it also includes the dimension of visual representations.

The Orthodox Monastery of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Sacral Biography of the Blessed Milojka of Djunis

The Orthodox Monastery of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Djunis (southeastern Serbia) is one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in Serbia nowadays. Worship in this place started in the late 19th/early 20th century. An improvised building was a shrine where local people worshipped exclusively, but relatively quickly it gained the status of a sacred place much more widely. The promotion of Djunis by the members of the God Worshipper movement (in Serbian: *Bogomoljački pokret*)³ contributed to the spread of the idea of

2 The material has been collected within the framework of the project *Fieldwork Research of the Oral Tradition of Southeastern Serbia* (since 2018; the SASA Branch in Niš, the University of Niš). The following colleagues from the research teams supported and helped me in the field: Biljana Sikimić, PhD, Prof. Danijela Popović Nikolić, PhD, Svetlana Čirković, PhD, and Danijela Petković, PhD, to whom I wish to extend my warmest thanks. Some of the photographs are the courtesy of Prof. Andrey Moroz, PhD, whom I would also like to thank.

3 The God Worshipper movement (whose official name was the Christian Folk Community), a voluntary association of the Serbian Orthodox Church believers, was formally established in 1921 in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, that is, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

sacredness and miracles. Namely, the movement initially propagated its teachings predominantly through folk preachers and brochures, and later on, with the development of the movement publishing activity also via books, and, in particular, in the newspapers, which, among other things, unfailingly featured contemporary miracle narratives as well. Moreover, the movement members attached great importance to mysticism, and the interpreting of dreams, visions, and omens was quite common at their mutual gatherings (Radić, Djurić Milovanović 2017: 143). It is significant to mention that one of the prominent members of the movement, Dionisije Milivojević, considered precisely the mass unearthing of churches and establishing cult places in southeastern Serbia after the wars of 1876–1878 to have marked the beginnings of the God Worshipper movement development. Finally, the first little log cabin church in Djunis was erected in 1934 with the blessing of the then-Bishop of Žiča, Nikolaj Velimirović, who had been designated the spiritual leader since 1921 by Patriarch Dimitrije.

The building of a great temple commenced in 1977 and was finished in 2001. The old log cabin church was torn down in 1997; a new temple of solid material was erected in the same place, and consecrated in 1998 (Stevanović 2020: 37–78). Alongside the two churches, the cult complex also includes a spring of holy water (which is believed to be medicinal) and a holy stone (to which

It sprang into being in reaction to the decline in the interest in religion, communism spreading, strengthening of the Catholic Church influence, and the increase of interest in theosophy and spiritism among the intellectuals (Subotić 1996: 13). Even though the question of the direct influences and sources of the movement has not been clarified in the scholarship to this day, scholars have agreed upon the fact that it emerged spontaneously, but that it should be regarded in the context of the existence of various sects in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the Karlovac metropolis territory in the late 19th century (Radić, Djurić Milovanović 2017: 138), and that it spread to the south and southeast of Serbia at the end of the century (Vojinović 1991: 229). At first it was popular primarily among the residents of rural areas, later on some intellectuals joined the movement, but it remains primarily the movement of peasants and middle-class members from urban areas in Serbia, Bosnia, and to a certain extent in parts of Northern Macedonia. The God Worshipper movement was not entirely monolithic, in particular in the early stages of its existence, and the greater interest of the official Church and its attitude of general approval (although the attitude of Church representatives was actually ambivalent and it remained the same for as long as the movement existed) have contributed to its stronger cohesion. Since 1919 Serbian Orthodox Church started actively involving its representatives in the overseeing and partial channeling of the God Worshipper movement activities, and since 1926 regular annual gatherings have been organized in various monasteries in Serbia and Bosnia.

The movement members fostered absolute loyalty to Orthodox Christianity, went to church regularly, followed the rules of fasting rigidly, advocated abstinence from any vice (alcohol, smoking, some even avoided meat consumption). More often than not they organized meetings in private houses or reading rooms, and the gatherings included the Bible reading and interpreting (the New Testament in particular), joint prayers, singing spiritual songs (the so-called God Worshipper prayer songs).

The movement was in crisis in the early 1930s, during the Second World War its activity was banned, and it was partially re-established in the 1950s and 1960s, although at this stage the activities took place in smaller groups, mostly in secret (for more information about the God Worshipper movement, see Vojinović 1991; Subotić 1996; Radić, Djurić Milovanović 2017).

two beliefs are connected: that the Virgin Mary had stood upon it and that it grows all the time).

The process of narrative sacralization of this cult place is related to the narratives about miraculous healings, the belief that the blessed Virgin Mary appears in the sky on the holiday the church is dedicated to, and, finally, to the narrative about its founding. The stories about healings in the monastery in Djunis can be heard all over Serbia today (during the field research a few dozens of such examples were written down), and what has contributed to their spreading in the last few years is the virtual-space-oriented lifestyle (testimonies in the forms of memorates or fabulates can be found on various internet forums, social media, and, more often than not, in the comments related to this monastery).

The monastery is visited by believers on a daily basis, and on the day dedicated to the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary (October 1 / October 14) tens of thousands of people arrive there not only from every corner of Serbia, but also from the neighboring countries (the Republic of Srpska, Bulgaria, the Republic of Northern Macedonia, Romania, etc.), more often than not as part of tours organized by religious tourism agencies⁴. The reasons for going on the pilgrimage are various: from a hope of healing (physical and/or spiritual), to the pilgrimage as a form of expressing religious (and national) sentiments and fulfilling individual religious needs, to tourist curiosity (see Radosavljević-Čiparizović 2012: 60–65, 2013: 206–276). All the people present spend a night in the churchyard awaiting the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose face, according to the belief, appears above the monastery at midnight. Ritual practices on this day include a vigil, an Akathist hymn reading by the spring at midnight, the anointing of the sick (by ointment), kissing the holy stone, and the morning liturgy happening at the place believed to be the very spot where the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to the girl Milojka.

On this occasion, research attention will focus on detailed discussion of the narrative about the founding of the monastery, which is an important part of the belief complex related to this cult place. According to the belief narrative, the church was founded in the late 19th century by Milojka Jocić, a then-thirteen-year-old girl from Djunis, after a vision in which the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to her. The circumstances of the church founding and Milojka's life have been described in the most comprehensive way in the booklet *Čudesna povest o pronalasku svetog mesta crkve Pokrova presvete Bogorodice* (A miraculous tale about the discovery of the holy place for the church of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Jocić 2018)⁵, which can be bought in the monastery shop.

The booklet represents a printed version of the manuscript which was written in 1938 based on the testimony of the son of Milojka's mother's second husband, Dragutin Jocić, who took care of the church upon Milojka's death. In

4 For more information about the development of religious tourism in Serbia in the context of retraditionalization and desecularization, see (Anđelković 2019: 424–427); the author also provides an overview of the relevant literature about this problem.

5 The booklet was first printed in 1938.



Fig. 1. The believers kiss and leave gifts next to the icon in which the scene of Milojka's encounter with the Virgin Mary is depicted; October 1/October 14, 2023 (the day dedicated to the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary). Photo: S. Djordjević Belić

the compositional sense, the narration is chronologically organized: 1) the vision of the Virgin Mary (Milojka, a thirteen-year-old girl, digs in the vineyard with her sister and neighbor; on her sister's request, she goes to fetch some water; by the spring, the Virgin Mary appears as a lady in a golden robe; the Virgin Mary takes the pitcher, throws it, and the pitcher falls down but does not break; at the thus marked place Milojka should found a church in which many will heal, as the Virgin Mary states; the Virgin Mary foresees a great storm and gives Milojka advice how to save herself; the storm is described in almost apocalyptic images, and the girls are miraculously saved hidden in a cabin, praying); 2) the confirmation of the sanctity of the place by the miracles of healing; 3) the founding of a little church; 4) punishment and curses which befall those who stand up against the church worshipping.

The booklet also contains drawings showing Milojka's encounter with the Virgin Mary, and the same motifs are depicted on one of the church walls, as well as in the icon (see Fig. 1).

Shaped as a combination of medieval literature and folklore motifs, the writing has a pronounced didactic layer; therefore, the narratives about the punishment of non-believers end with a moral that testifies to the oral transmission of the belief narrative:

This unkempt and dilapidated house [...] is a nice memorial to the force and wisdom of God our Lord, and by existing in such a shape, it reminds the older to talk to their young ones about the unconditional punishment of God over the ones who willingly devote themselves to defy the sanctity, God's force and wisdom, as well as the commands which He gives to the believing people through the ones He elects to redeem their earthly lives by their good deeds and prayers as well as by repentance for their sins (Jocić 2018: 22).

The similarity to oral culture goes beyond the level of introducing local belief narratives to the level of “the rhetoric of truth” (Oring 2008). Namely, all the narratives about the miracles are given as memorates or pseudo-fabulates, specifying the names of the actors and witnesses⁶. At the same time, Milojka Jocić's sacralized biography is also shaped through the *Tale*. Except for the contact with the otherworldly (after the first vision Milojka is said to remain in constant communication with the Virgin Mary), the girl is described as modest and God-fearing. The prison scene (where Milojka is taken by the order of the local church authorities) reminds one of the scenes from martyries – biographies of the early Christian saint martyrs:

Milojka was not scared by this [prison; added by S. D. B.] punishment, she stepped boldly before them [the chief of police and the police officers] and said: “Hear me out, mister captain, I am not afraid of your prison. I will endure in prison and I will come again to this place to pray to God and the blessed Virgin Mary, but I am afraid of your suffering, of these servants of God who have defiled this sacred place and ruined its foundation instead of protecting it. Yet, people will restore the church again and you shall find no peace, no shelter either on this earth or in heaven. Sinners, oh you sinners, oh you great sinners, what you have

6 It is interesting to mention that those people really existed. Namely, in the *Tale* published within the monograph about the Monastery of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the author, Zoran Stevanović (2020), gives precise data about the actors based on the insight into various archival sources for every mentioned name in the commentary section. An additional curious detail can be seen in the fact that this researcher drew attention to certain inconsistencies, that is – transformations of the factography, which definitely stem from the initial oral transmission of the narrative, and to a certain extent pinpoint the minimal approach to folklore topoi (for example, it is stated that Milojka died after three years of marriage, and she was actually married for a longer time; she had the first vision of the Virgin Mary at the age of fifteen, while in the *Tale*, and all the subsequent oral and media interpretations, she is said to have been a thirteen-year-old girl).

done! I hear the voice from heavens about your suffering and I already see that suffering. I can see your repentance, but it will come too late” (Jocić 2018: 19).

Other unusual abilities are also ascribed to her, e.g., her holiness is recognized by animals:

Prior to her experience and encounter with the blessed Virgin Mary, Milojka was very timid, any noise would startle her, but after her first encounter with the blessed Virgin Mary, she became very much free, so not even a beast would ever attack her and all the beings feared her. No dog would bark at her, and if she outstretched her arm, forest birds would come to it without fear (Jocić 2018: 25).

Nevertheless, Milojka's life ends tragically. Given the fact that the blessed Virgin Mary has ordered her to change her earthly garment for black clothes and devote her life only to faith after the foundation of the church, Milojka refuses to get married, but her father and stepmother marry her against her will⁷. The breaking of the prohibition results in her death occurring quite shortly after that, when Milojka is twenty-five.

In oral interpretations, in which the narrators quite often refer to the said booklet as the information source, the content is reduced and it boils down to the motif of Milojka's vision, uncongeniality and persecution, and the sin-punishment complex. The ideational coloring of interpretations depends on narrators' intentions: the story about Milojka may be presented both as part of the local/regional culture and oral tradition and as a narrative with the more pronounced didactic point. A more emphasized didactic and religious tone is present in the narratives shaped in the discourse fitting in the religious tourism framework, bordering on propaganda, while the representation of the story about Milojka Jocić and the Monastery of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Djunis in the media space sometimes has a sensationalist overtone too, e.g. “A mysterious story under the veil of secrecy! The blessed Virgin Mary appeared to Milojka and gave her the following Vow: She did not fulfill one of the given promises” (Informer 2023).

A literary interpretation has undoubtedly contributed to the popularization of the narrative about Milojka from Djunis – the motifs of Milojka's life, especially the miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary and the events related to the church founding, are the skeleton of the novel *Voda iz kamena* (Water

7 Wearing black clothes (sometimes with the sign of a cross) was the marking of a great number of the God Worshipper movement members, and some propagated celibacy too (Radić, Djurić Milovanović 2017: 143). The practice of wearing black clothes among the people particularly dedicated to church (mostly among women) can be seen even today, and it was reinstated in the 1990s in the return to tradition and faith discourse contexts.

from the stone) by the popular Serbian writer Ljiljana Habjanović Djurović⁸, published in 2009 (with a number of subsequent editions to this day). Genre hybridity, the introduction of motifs belonging to medieval literature and oral tradition are among the characteristics singled out as important for the novels belonging to the authoress's so-called "spiritual cycle" are all also typical of the novel *Water from the stone* (Bojanić Ćirković 2019: 20–33). In the book, Milojka's character is described from the perspectives of different narrators. Predominantly depicted as meek and artless, with the introduction of the folkloric motif of "a persecuted girl" (the stepmother–stepdaughter relation), Milojka finds a motherly figure in the Virgin Mary, becoming, at the same time, the proponent of her voice. The motifs the authoress takes from the *Miraculous Tale* can be interpreted in multiple symbolical keys, as proposed by Mirjana Bojanić Ćirković (2019: 62–80) e.g., the vineyard as a biblical symbol, the thirst as the yearning for love and true faith, the storm as the spiritual impurity symbol.

The TV show concerning the aforementioned novel aired in 2010⁹. A large number of frames were shot at the Monastery of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary itself, and Ljiljana Habjanović Djurović presented the belief narrative about Milojka Jocić and the founding of the monastery. She also spoke about her motivation for writing the novel, highlighting a divine inspiration of sorts, and mentioned that the first stage of working on it was marked by a miraculous omen:

All the books that I write, I write relying on the grace of the Virgin Mary and Saint Petka, so I found the courage and knowledge for writing this book, and all the books from my spiritual cycle for that matter, in my faith in the grace of the blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Petka. [...] I came to Djunis, prayed on the stone, and asked for the blessed Virgin Mary to send me a sign through someone else. It was a working day, there were no visitors. When I climbed the stairs by that Milutin's well, there was a woman standing there, she introduced herself as a doctor from Kruševac. She said that she was a reader of mine and that she thought that it had been about time I had written a novel about what had happened in Djunis. I understood that simply as yet another sign of the grace of the blessed Virgin Mary, because it is known from the testimonies of holy fathers that the messages we should receive often come through other people (Globos Aleksandrija 2020).

8 The general public and literary criticism attitude towards this authoress's opus is very much ambivalent, and it ranges from affirmative to highly disputing (with respect to its esthetic value). Ljiljana Habjanović Djurović is the winner of a number of literary awards, but she has also earned the Serbian Orthodox Church accolades.

9 The TV show was a co-production of Aleksandrija film, NTV production, and the production house YUBICA. The video is available on YouTube (Globos Aleksandrija 2020).

The TV show ends with the testimonies of the miraculous healings based on the letters the authoress received upon the publishing of her novel:

One testimony is from a police inspector, who is actually a bachelor of laws. He wrote to me that he was born because of the water from Djunis. Namely, his mother buried a child and that affected her so terribly, that great pain, that she was bedbound and one night she dreamt that she should wash her face and drink the water from the monastery in Djunis. She had never heard of the monastery in Djunis before that, but in her dream, she saw how that place looked. Since she could not get up from bed, she asked her father, and he came and brought to her some water from Djunis, she washed her face with that water, and just as it was said in the dream, after a year she bore a son, that police inspector of ours. When she went to Djunis with her child and came to this holy place, she recognized the scenery from her dream (Globos Aleksandrija 2020).

In the context of examining the narrative about Milojka Jocić, it is interesting to mention a song about her. The performance was recorded in the TV show about the monastery in Djunis as a part of the *Ethnological recordings* cycle produced by the scientific and educational program of the Radio and Television of Serbia in 2002 (the data or the recollections of the songs thematizing Milojka's seeing the Virgin Mary directly have not been collected during the fieldwork research) (RTS Obrazovno-naučni program 2020):

Kad Milojka dođe na potok vođu da zahvati,
Na kamenu sedi Presveta Boga mati. 2x

„Oj, Milojke, ti poslušaj, mene,
Na ovome mestu biće iscelenje! 2x

Na ovome mestu nek se crkva gradi,
A sad idi, dete, vinograd, pa radi. 1x

Oj, Milojke, narodu govori,
Nek se ovde narod danju i noću moli. 2x

Oj, Milojke, ti poslušaj mene,
Na ovome mestu nek se čita sveto Jevanđelje. 1x

Oj, Milojke, moje dete milo,
Ti poslušaj mene, 1x
Na ovome mestu biće iscelenje!” 1x

When Milojka came to the brook to get some water,
The blessed Virgin Mary was sitting on the stone.

“Oh, Milojka, you listen to me,
Healing shall happen here.

At this place a church should be built,
And now go, my child, work in the vineyard.

Oh, Milojka, tell the people,
May they pray here day and night.

Oh, Milojka, you listen to me,
May the Holy Gospel be read here.

Oh, Milojka, my dear child,
You listen to me,
Healing shall happen here!”

The song is performed by a group: a woman (an evidently elderly woman at the time of the video making) leads, another one joins her in a clear voice, while the others present mimic the performance rather than give vocal contributions. However, even such participation is a significant indicator of their knowing the song, that is – its functioning in oral culture (despite its probable authorial origin). Stylistically speaking, the performance is close to the traditional way of narrative text performance – the signing is unison, the melodies are simple, of small ambitus, musical expressivity is rather minimalized. The sound is used to highlight the semantic layer of the lyrics, so, for example, the agogic marking of whole sentences is emphasized by vibratos at the ends of phrases. What is atypical of tradition are the frequent departures from the metric model – the basic measures of the dodecasyllabic verse (6 + 6), that is, a line of elementary, two-part measures (which are formed in singing as $4/8 + 2/4 + 4/8 + 2/4$). It may be the result of excitement and nervousness due to television recording and/or the circumstances in which the performer may be remembering the lines, i.e., improvising the textual component¹⁰. Having in mind the described melopoetic characteristics, as well as the performance context, the said example could be brought into connection with the tradition of the God Worshipper prayer songs, which is not in collision even with the strong influence of the local musical idiom in the performance¹¹.

10 Given the fact that ethnomusicological analysis falls beyond the competence domain of the author of this paper, the analyses provided are the result of the expertise of Jelena Jovanović, PhD, and Danka Lajić Mihajlović, PhD, for which the author of this contribution would like to thank them most cordially.

11 Singing such songs was one of the important elements of the God Worshipper movement member gatherings. Beside spreading spiritual messages and morals (but also the movement ideas), joint performance was also an important folklorization form. Namely, the authors of the songs' lyrics were, beside Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, numerous anonymous individuals too. Musically speaking, the songs had relatively simple melodies, both composed and folkloric, as well as taken from foreign traditions. The same lyrics could be performed to various melodies and vice versa – the same melodies could be applied



Fig. 2. A monk is putting up a billboard with the news about the discovery of Milojka's grave. Still from the video *Priča o Milojkinom grobu* (RTV Kruševac 2019)



Fig. 3. An icon of the Blessed Milojka of Djunis; the work of the hieromonk Stefan Djordjević

An important sound element of the “festive sacral scenery” (which is particularly related to the evening time when the believers start gathering in the churchyard) is the playing of the (more or less popular) spiritual songs from loudspeakers (which some of the present people sing along to) in the contemporary celebration of the holiday dedicated to the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Djunis. Some of these songs stem directly from the legacy of the God Worshipper movement.

What gained special media attention a few years ago was the news about the discovery of Milojka Jocić’s grave, and the grave itself gained the status of a secondary cult place. It is also becoming a pilgrimage site, where miraculous healings are also supposed to happen¹².

An initiative for Milojka’s canonization was started a few years ago, with the participation of the aforementioned authoress, and some of the members of the Serbian Orthodox Church also participated; one of them was the hieromonk Stefan Djordjević of Saint Petka’s Monastery from Stubal by Kraljevo, who painted a representation of Milojka in the icon (see Fig. 3). In support of this initiative, the movie entitled *Milojka from Djunis* was filmed; it ends with the following message: “Today, a hundred and twenty years after her death, people ask it of the Church to declare Milojka a new people’s saint of Serbia” (Milojka 2022).

The Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity in the Village of Ribare.

The Founding Narrative and Dragana Marković’s Folkloric Biography

In the part to follow, research attention will be aimed at the narratives about the Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity in the village of Ribare (which is located about 20 kilometers away from the monastery in Djunis), which was

to various lyrics. The fact that the melodies were primarily in major scale made it possible to introduce backup singers, which brought God Worshipper prayer songs in performance closer to folkloric singing *na bas* (“to bass vocal accompaniment”). As Dragan Ašković concludes, it is the combination of folkloric and church music traditions (Ašković 2010: 138, 268; cf. also Ašković 2017), and a similar combination of motifs – folkloric and religious ones, and the oscillations between authorial and folkloric expression, that characterizes also the lyrics which the author of this contribution has had an insight into.

The revitalization of God Worshipper prayer songs is related to the socioeconomic and political changes taking place in the 1990s in Serbia. Although God Worshipper prayer songs (which are being created even today) have not gained the official status in the Divine Office (and they are also spoken of as paraliturgical too, Ašković 2010: 76–88), Gordana Blagojević’s research showcases their prominent popularity among the believers, and that they have also partially acquired the liturgical character (they are sang after the liturgy in some temples). Beside its closeness to folklore tradition, the aforementioned author explains the popularity of God Worshipper prayer songs also by the fact that they are in Serbian (Serbian Orthodox Church still predominantly uses Church Slavonic). Nevertheless, the opinions of the church clergy and the scholars researching church music regarding God Worshipper prayer songs and their place in church practice are still divided (Blagojević 2020: 356–358).

12 A number of TV programs have been aired about the discovery and arranging of Milojka’s grave on local TV stations (e.g. RTV Kruševac 2019), and the news appeared on numerous Web portals.



Fig. 4. The Church of the Holy Trinity in Ribare, February 2019; courtesy of Andrey Moroz



Fig. 5. Contributions (coins and fruit) at the well of medicinal water by the Church of the Holy Trinity in Ribare, February 2019; courtesy of Andrey Moroz

founded in 1936. The cult space, beside the church, comprises of a *zapis* (“a holy tree”) and a spring (whose water is believed to cure eye diseases) (see Fig. 4 and 5). The founding of the church is related to a woman from the village, Dragana Marković (born in the early 20th century, died in the 1970s). Marković is also connected to other spaces which are considered sacral in this village (the space in the hamlet of Saraj in which there is a spring of medicinal water¹³, the space surrounding the Church of Saint Petka in the hamlet of Vitača¹⁴, and the space in which the most recent cult place has been established – the cross of the blessed Virgin Mary).

The mosaic of Dragana Marković’s folkloric biography came to be revealed through the conversations about the cult places in Ribare. It goes without saying that it is a biography reduced to the elements regarded as relevant by the local community, and the narrations are grouped in particular around the following motifs: an order/vow received in a dream (to find and unearth a cross/church), a pronounced spiritual need to fulfill the command, suffering due to the lack of understanding of the family (and, partially, of the wider local community), fulfillment of the order and the connection between that woman and the cult place, symbolically maintained until her death.

The narrations about the content of the dream itself are usually quite reduced (in some interpretations, they even boil down to the information about the acquired knowledge or a vow), but more developed narratives have been documented as well. In one of them, the saint who appeared is not precisely identified: the possibility remains that it was the Blessed Virgin Mary, but Saint Petka would also fit the description:

A woman dreamt it, a woman from my neighborhood. She dreamt, a woman came to her in a dream in a black scarf, I don’t know what she was like. It may have been the Blessed Virgin Mary, who it was, and she came to her in a dream to come here and found a church. [...] She had to, she said: “I had to come and found that because every night that woman came to me: ‘You should go to that place and dig there, to unearth the church! You should go and dig’” [Ribare MG SDJ 2019; female interlocutor born in 1947]¹⁵.

She was something like that, maybe she dreamt something, I don’t know, she foresaw something and [...] and that forced her, maybe they dug

13 According to the belief narrative of the family on whose property this spring is located, a cross has also been found there, and it is believed that the Church of Saint George burnt down by the Turks stood at that place.

14 The church was built in 1996 (upon the discovery of the spring in 1994) on the property of a family according to the advice and instructions of a woman who is the local authority in the folk religion sphere.

15 The signature of the recording from the Digital Archive of the Serbian Studies Department of the Philosophy Faculty in Niš is given in square brackets, alongside the information about the sex and the age of the interlocutors. The transcripts have been made by the author of this text.

something there. A church cannot be founded until someone has dug up a censer or something. A cross should be there [Ribare SS DPN 2019; male interlocutor born in 1964].

Dragana was initially prevented from the fulfillment of the order by her husband, and the motif can be interpreted in two ways: the husband's concern for the family as an obstacle (with the emphasis on the fact that the person having the dream visions a married woman who has children) or the husband's ideological orientation (his inclination towards communism). However, both motifs can be interpreted through the lens of a conflict between the sacral and profane biography layers. Highlighting the fact that the person concerned is a family woman may be a hampering factor implies that the founding of a cult place entails a certain kind of devotedness, which, on the symbolic level, can be compared to a certain extent to the concept of *zavenčavanje* ("marrying oneself to something") in the practices related to gaining the ability to use secret magic knowledge. A similar concept operates, as it is well known, in the official religion domain practices as well (becoming ordained, for example). A number of narratives are concentrated around the motif of the punishment for "the persecutor of the holy" from the husband to those who do not recognize the "holiness" or turn a deaf ear to the warnings. Through that lens, on the one hand, the image of Dragana Marković is shaped, as a woman of godly behavior and deeds, one who warns of wrongdoing and taboo breaking, while, on the other hand, a number of local belief narratives about the punishment of individuals and family curses are developed.

Well, yes, there is a church there, a cross. And she dreamt about it, and she went to dig it up at night. Her husband caught her, and he beat her, and beat her, and beat her, and beat her, he beat her black and blue. He did not let her. And she dreamt that the blessed Virgin Mary would make him suffer a stroke. And she sure did that. She said it like that, I don't know. And their child lost eyesight, heaven forbid. "Until you build a church, you shall not lift your head up" [...] [Ribare BG SDJ 2019; female interlocutor born in 1940].

And then that woman who found the church, up there a man was building a house [...]. He was building, the builders were working on his house. And she passed by and she told him... It was a holiday, they were building the house and mixing, earlier they used to mix concrete manually, not with that, but manually, with their hands, with shovels they mixed the concrete. And she said: "Hello there, she said, do you know that it is a holiday today?", she said to them. And it was a holiday, I don't know which one. "Do you know", she said, "that it's a holiday today?" They said: "Oh, what holiday", I don't know, they swore at her, "what

[is that] holiday of yours” and something like that. And then, when they finished mixing the concrete, and it stiffened, they couldn’t work more. Yes. And to the others she said even worse, he wanted to kill her later that one. He climbed on the pole to build a haystack, and it was also a holiday. And she said: “Well why”, she said, “are you stacking it today, it is a holiday today, people should not”, she said, “work in the field!” He swore at her, she went away. The moment she left, she said, he fell off the haystack, barely survived... Because she was a saint that woman, that’s what they called her, a saint, everyone... [Ribare MG SDJ 2019; female interlocutor born in 1947].

A woman from the Ribare region used to come there, a Dragana Marković, she is from this area, who found many churches, and she asked, the father of this, the father of this woman, M., to build the church of Saint George in Saraj. However, M. used to beat that woman, what do I know, he mistreated her, chased her, and he never let her do anything. After some time, that is, after forty days, his two grandsons died, both of them. She had told him that something would happen: “In your family if you don’t allow for it to be made. You can beat me to your heart’s content and do to me whatever you want, but there was a church there, I know it for certain”. And he didn’t allow it. Some time later, two of his grandsons died, both, in very short time. I even have the data about that, officially when they, when each one of them died. I found it all in the registries, I used to work as a legal advisor, there was a local municipality office, and in that office, I had access to a lot of documentation, so I wrote it all down in detail. And I wrote down many stories listening to what they were saying, the testimonies of various people, and to her died... Later on, she [the aforementioned man’s daughter-in-law], after a few years, she got two daughters, and male children... She [Dragana] said: “You shall have no more male children, you should know that, because you have done so and so” [Ribare ZM BS 2019; male interlocutor born in 1955].

A grandfather worked around that hot spring. And Dragana is said to have come to dig there. And he threw stones at her, you know, to chase her away. And she went away. Not much later, I don’t know if his son died or was killed, I have no idea. [...] But anyway, they connect it in a certain way with the way he treated that Dragana. She was a small grandma, you know, she wore a scarf and that, just like some, how should I put it, member of the clergy. That was the impression one had looking at her. I was scared of her in a way, you know. I mean, God have mercy on my soul, but I had that kind of feeling, a strange feeling... [Ribare BS 2019; male interlocutor born in 1948].

Dragana's devotion to the church which she founded and connection to this cult place is particularly emphasized in the narrations of some interlocutors.

She would take hemp... [...]. And here, here she would sit on this stone here, on the corner... [...]. She would spin it at night, sing, sing and wake up God. And she would spin, she could see in the dark to spin. And she would shout out to my husband: "God may help you", maybe she called him son, what she called him. He said: "May God help you". I have been to my house now over there, at church, and I decided to sit down and spin a bit. It didn't happen a long time ago, maybe thirty, forty years ago. [Ribare BG SDJ 2019; female interlocutor born in 1940].

Although it is undoubtedly a real situation, this image evokes the semantic field related to spindle and spinning in traditional culture (which has a profound connection with the otherworldly), as well as meaning components related to the stone (cosmic center symbolics).

The forming of Dragana Marković's folkloric biography is accompanied by a high level of ideological unanimity of various community members' voices, whereby the development of the acquired narratives is conditioned not only by belonging to a certain generation (more developed narrations have been provided by the older interlocutors, especially the ones who live in the part of the village which is close to the church of the Holy Trinity), but also by an individual relation to tradition and religion. Indeed, the details about the founding of the church and the life of Dragana Marković are familiar to the individuals and the families who were engaged in the restoration of the church, which will be commented upon in the text to follow.

However, the narratives which somewhat challenge the verity of some segments of Dragana Marković's activity have also been written down. Thus, according to one of the interlocutors, Dragana took an already unearthed cross from elsewhere in the village and brought it herself to the very place which had supposedly appeared to her as sacred in the dream in order to prove the verity of her own visions and save herself from persecution:

And that she took away [a cross found on the other side of the village], I was told that by V. a few years ago, Ž. said that, the deceased, this one here. That Dragana took that cross, because they chased her, these, she went after those churches, maybe something urged her to do that, I don't know... They chased her, yelled at her, swore at her, did a lot of things. And, and she brought that cross and threw it into the thorns down there where the Holy Trinity is. [...] And she went to the municipality building, in Ribare there was a municipality building, you know... And, and she said to the mayor, she said to him: "I have foreseen that there is a cross there". And she went and pretended to have found the cross in the thorns. That is what V. told me, now, whether that is the truth or a lie, I don't know.

She threw it into the thorns [researcher]?

She threw it into the thorns to, to prove [her vision] [Ribare MF DPN 2019; female interlocutor born in 1940].

Narratives about the Restoration of the Church of the Holy Trinity:

Developing the Polemics

The beginning of the restoration of the Church of the Holy Trinity dates to the 1990s. The local church board was the first one to get engaged with this work, but the initiative was later taken over by a family from the village who, with the help and support of their neighbors and friends, finished the restoration in 2004, when the restored church was also consecrated.

A complex polemic polylogue concerning the restoration of the church has formed in the local community, grouped around the merits and motivation for the engagement in this job, and related, in particular, to the woman with the local authority role in the domain of folk religion today and who took part in this process. In that sense, the motivation for the restoration of the cult place is interpreted variously: from believing in the “authentic” divine inspiration, to disputing, to seeing this form of engagement as an attempt at redeeming immoral behavior. The “authenticity” of motivation is confirmed by personal narratives formed through the traditional constellation of motifs related to commanding dreams and visions, including additional details which are, in the mythological modelling key, interpreted as signs – messages of the other-worldly (a falling of a stone is interpreted as an omen):

The Trinity I also dreamt, that I was mending it [the church], Saint Ilias, at the same time, er, he appeared. And then I am, I said, how should I do that, I am a woman, I am weak. How should I restore the Trinity alone? *That you saw in the dream [researcher]?*

In the dream. And now, I went to the Trinity, both I and my sister. I sat down by that man, where he was selling candles, he was sitting, and I sat down next to him. I was hit by a stone on my back! My nephew came along, there was a hole in, in the church. He fell down! He tripped and into the hole, he fell. “Look”, I said, “Mirko, this Trinity is warning us against something”... [an intricate narrative about the restoration of the church ensues, ending with a new dream narrative, this time with a somewhat more detailed description of the vision]. And later, I dreamt. I went to sleep, and I dreamt that the Trinity lay down by me, they came close to me. The same as it is depicted in the icon, I dreamt them that way. They lay down by me, grateful, they came to thank me... [Ribare J SC 2018; female interlocutor born in 1947].

Speaking about her own and her husband’s engagement in the restoration, another female interlocutor insisted especially on the devotedness of the whole family to religion, contacts which they maintain with various clergymen and

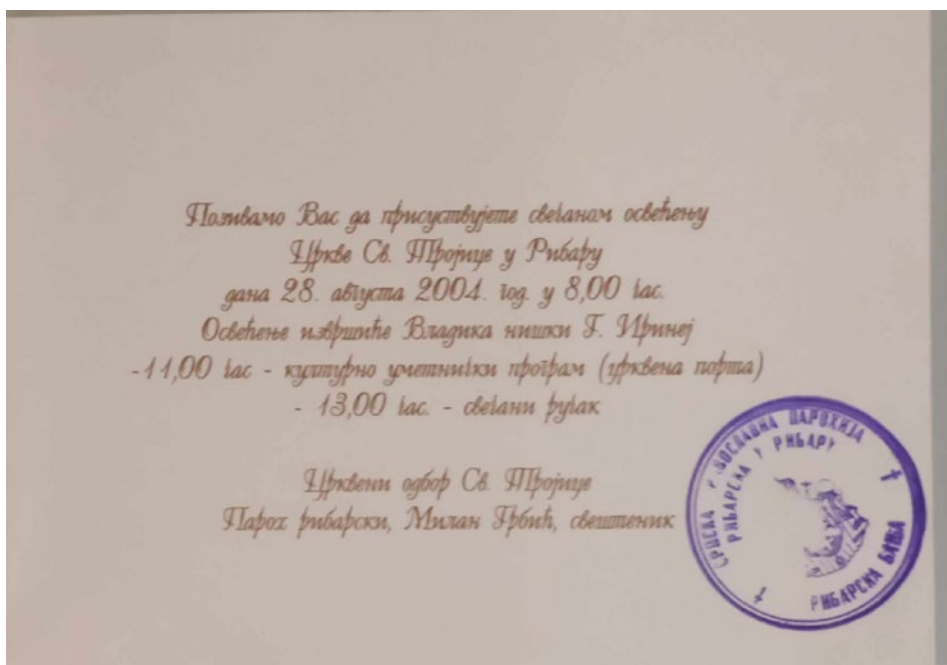


Fig. 6. An invitation to the consecration of the restored Church of the Holy Trinity with the stamp of the local church parish. Source: author's archive

the like. Even though her dreams were not related directly to the building of the church, she emphasized the contact with the otherworldly through the stories about her visions (e.g., the birth of a long-expected child was announced to her by the Blessed Virgin Mary in a vision).

A great number of inhabitants participated in the ritual actions around the church (processions)¹⁶, which were re-established in the 1990s, in the period following the restoration of the church; however, by the present day, these have become reduced to the participation of the families living close by. Some of the inhabitants connect this decline in interest with the overly emphasized engagement of the family that restored the church (which is interpreted as the “privatization” of sacral space, in accordance with which the motivation for such an engagement is under suspicion):

And they that... That church is privatized now.

In what sense privatized [researcher]?

In the sense that they are acting now as if it were theirs.

But they restored it [researcher]?

They did. They think that is going to help... And it is known what they have done. That he, to put it that way, appropriated other people's money and a lot of things... Not to talk too much... It is well known... [Ribare SM SDJ 2023; male interlocutor born in 1966].

Actions related to founding and restoring cult places in this area are usually done according to the advice given by a woman who has also has role of the local authority role – she confirms the sacrality of certain space via her ability to communicate with the otherworldly. According to the interpretations of some interlocutors, she gained this ability after her experience of clinical death (“She can see, she can sense that. She just leaned against the tree like this with her hand and said: ‘This is Blessed Virgin Mary’. She doesn’t like to speak about that, she just senses it, I guess, what do I know...” [Ribare JS SDJ 2023]). On the other hand, there also exist voices that dispute her practice, with the emphasis on the aspects of the secular layer of her biography which are seen as compromising (proclivity to alcohol consumption, overemphasized sexuality, money as the motivation for her actions). Those are also the mechanisms of shaping the ambivalent otherness, which is, precisely because of the connection with the otherworldly, perceived as dangerous and threatening.

16 Ritual actions include walking around the church in a procession, at the head of which there are men carrying a cross and standards (earlier, the procession used to cover a larger territory around the village), carving a little cross on a *zapis* (“a holy tree”) or pouring wine over it, decorating the *zapis* or the church, consecrating and breaking of ritual bread and ritual feast prepared by the *kolačar* (the host of the feast, who is elected annually for the year to come by the means of handing over a part of the ritual bread); food contributions are brought by the majority of participants.

The Mechanisms of Biography Sacralization and Collective Memory

Founding or restoring cult places is a part of mechanisms of space sacralization as a permanent process which constitutes, confirms, and revitalizes tradition segments and community identity, as well as participates in the constitution of the idea of space as one of the elements of the world image functioning in a particular collective (Adaev 2013: 300). If ritual actions are seen as a manner in which a community consecrates a certain space, then narrative manifestations of the experiences related to cult places are an important factor in the establishment of the mental image of a given sacral space, whereby, among other things, its functionality is legitimized by highlighting the connection with the metaphysical, and by a permanent confirmation of that relation in the narratives about visions and dreams, fruitfulness of healing practices and the like. In that sense, Vihra Baeva regards local cults as a dynamic system that includes: a patron saint (or another sacred entity which is the object of devotion), a sacred site, sacred time (feast), religious images, relics, specific rituals, and religious narratives (Baeva 2013b, 2013c: 90; cf. Panchenko 1998: 70–179). As a form of oral history, narratives about founding cult places represent narrative space in which the preserved memories are part of the history of a community.

When united, ritual and narrative practices make it possible for the community to perceive a given material object as sacral, constituting significant symbolic resources (Panchenko 2012: 43), and the biographies of the individuals related to the founding and restoration incorporate the symbolic potential. As it has been shown, the processes whereby such biographies become sacralized are conditioned by various factors: from the time distance from the narrated events and actors, to the role and intertwining of oral, unofficial, and institutionalized narratives.

Examining the factors which influence the shaping of the idea of a given place's sacredness, James Preston introduces the concept of "spiritual magnetism", which he uses to mark the power of a shrine to attract the devoted ones. Factors which have an impact on the power of "spiritual magnetism", as the author stipulates, are healings, prophecies, and foreseeing, sacral topography, as well as the accessibility of the place (Preston 1992: 33). Revising Preston's observations, Ian Reader (2014) pinpoints the importance of the role of various interest groups in the "production" of meaning and formation of the idea of the sacral – from local official and church representatives, to marketing activities. The narrative about the founding of the monastery in Djunis stemmed from the local oral tradition which, undoubtedly, had its central motifs already formed in its repository and perpetuated them frequently. Due to the complex intertwining of the narrations created by the actors from various spheres (the local, and then broader oral tradition, the activity of the God Worshipper movement members in the spreading of the idea of sacrality and miraculous healing power of this holy place (via oral and written channels), written tradition developed under the auspices of the church (booklets, leaflets and the like), including the media and popular culture mechanisms in the last few

decades), the weaving of the motifs about the Monastery of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Djunis, as well as the sacralized biography of Milojka Jocić have acquired the status of a great narrative. Having in mind its consistency, ideological coherence, widespread acceptance and influence, but also the directing that comes from the authority, this narrative is close to the domain of what Jan Assmann defines as “cultural memory”, in which reality is transformed into stable images and symbols, and whose role is founding (Assmann 2005: 61–65). The folkloric biography of the founder of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Ribare, Dragana Marković, gravitates towards the same model; however, as it has been shown, it also reflects the “cracks” in the voices disrupting the ideological unanimity to a certain extent, and thus, in the case of this narrative, one could speak of the process of unfinished sacralization. Such features are conditioned by the lack of the necessary time distance; moreover, the functioning of the narrative is limited to the oral culture of a smaller collective within a local community and, having in mind the relatively small number of the members of this memory community, it is up for deliberation whether this narrative will continue to live and be transmitted. Finally, the narrations formed around the actors who participated in the restoration of the Church of the Holy Trinity create a complex polemical polylogue, typical of the communicational memory contents (Assmann 2005: 59–61) reflecting the imbalance and tension between sacralization tendencies (which, in some cases, are initiated by the actors themselves, as they provide narrations about their own experiences of the contact with the otherworldly) and the secularized elements of individual biographies in the interpretation of their contemporaries.

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