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SAINT JOVAN BIGORSKI – A MACEDONIAN ORTHODOX CULTIC

PLACE

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Abstract

The subject matter of this paper is the socio-historical analysis of the cult¹ life of the Saint Jovan (John) Bigorski Monastery. This subject matter will be elaborated by developing a historical frame wherewith the sociological research element will be merged; this element will specifically emphasize the impact of the miraculous icon on the promotion and cultic life of the Saint Jovan Bigorski Monastery.

Key words: Saint Jovan Bigorski Monastery; cult place; miraculous icon.

Introduction

Saint Jovan Bigorski Monastery is located in the close vicinity of the village of Rostushe, standing on the slopes of Bistra Mountain, above the left bank of the river Radika,

¹ The term “cult”, which has numerous meanings, is used in this paper as a sociological term to describe “a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object,” anthropologically as “a particular system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies,” “a set of rites centering around their sacred symbols,” namely, in a wider sense, the ritual and liturgical worship and adoration practices of a religious community.

and opposite to the villages of Trebenishta and Velebrdo, in the colorful forest ambience of the National Park Mavrovo and on the rocky limestone massif, on 740 meters height above sea level. The monastery is dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. The monastery complex is considered to be one of the most important cultural-historical monuments and spiritual treasures in the Republic of Macedonia. The monastery is located within the border municipality of Mavrovo and Rostusha (bordered by Albania to the west, and Kosovo to the northwest).

Inheriting the spiritual values of the ancient cult place of the 11th century, and built over the foundations of older, medieval buildings, the monastery that was renewed in the period from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, represents a compact architectural whole which together with its constructional and artistic qualities is a true representative of the cultural identity of this region.²

The central place of the monastery complex belongs to the church dedicated to St. John the Baptist. The charnel house is next to it, followed by the seimenian defense tower, the library, the old monastic dormitory, and the fountains. Special value to the monastery is added by the unique masterly wood-carved iconostasis, relics and of course, the famous miraculous icon of Saint Jovan. This paper will specifically emphasize the impact that the believers report of this miraculous icon on the promotion and cult life in the Saint Jovan Bigorski Monastery.

1. Theoretical–Methodological Frame of the Paper

Together with its saints, the Saint Jovan Bigorski Monastery, as a cult place has a great importance for the people (who may or may not be believers, and at the same time, may or may not belong to the Orthodox religion) as they have influenced their lives in different ways.³ That is the reason why the people try to establish a special relationship with the

² National Park of Mavrovo, Cultural-historical monuments, <http://nprmavrovo.org.mk/?id=161>.

³ Dušan Bandić. “Tabua vezani za radjanje”, *Tabu u tradicionalnoj kulturi Srba* (“Taboo Regulations Connected to Birth” in *Taboo in the Traditional Culture of Serbs*). Beograd: BIGZ, 1980.

monastery; at the same time, a series of norms are prescribed, dictating the manner for behavior of the people both in that place and in certain given situations, in order to be favored or to obtain the help which they seek. Some of these norms are written down, while others are not. In that context, the cult researched here is described as a “total of religious beliefs and practices related to a particular saint”⁴ which have led and influenced the course of the believers’ lives and all those who have turned to it. During the establishment of the standards of behavior at the cult place, the role of the monastery management was very important.

Another special feature of the Saint Jovan Bigorski Monastery as a cult place is the fact that although it originated in Orthodoxy, it is also accepted by members of other religions, especially Muslims, who also build their “own specific relationship” toward it.

The basic subject matter of this paper is the sociological-historical analysis of the cult life in the monastery, focused on the miraculous icon of Saint John the Baptist. In that context, two research questions will be defined, as will be the relevant methodological procedures for collecting the empirical material.

The fundamental research questions of this paper are based on the following:

- I. When, how and from whom did they get the knowledge about the healing power of the miraculous icon of Saint John?
- II. How frequently is the monastery visited due to the healing power of the miraculous icon of Saint John?

For the preparation of this paper, besides the use of sources such as historical records, articles published in the media as a text, and video material, blogs and forums, eleven unstructured interviews were conducted, predominantly with believers and visitors of the monastery. Besides these eleven interviews, another interview was carried out by email with

⁴H.W. Swatos. (Web Version), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, Altamira Press, part PRACTICE (<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ENCY/Practice.htm>).

the management of the Saint Jovan Bigorski Monastery. The sample of the research is defined as a "snowball"⁵ sample and the interviewees were selected among the persons who were already known to us who later proposed other persons for interviewing. The sample included persons who acknowledged during our first conversation that they have visited the monastery and that they have had direct or indirect experience related to or concerned with the "miraculous icon." These features were determined as the basic criterion for selection of the sample in order to see how information on the miraculous icon is spread and how the icon finds its way to those who need help, creating the "rich" cult life of the monastery. Some of the interviewees were inhabitants who live in that municipality or in the vicinity of the monastery, and some of them were from Skopje who have stayed in the monastery at different time intervals. One common feature for all respondents was the fact that they all knew the history of the monastery very well.

The sample of the research included seven female interviewees between 37 and 52 years of age and four males between 38 and 44 years of age. Eight of the interviewees had completed higher education, two of them had completed high school and one person had a master's degree. Two interviews were conducted by phone, three interviews by email, and six interviews were conducted face to face (8).

During the elaboration of the answers, the authors of the paper made efforts to transmit the experiences of the respondents as much as possible in their own style of expression; they also tried not to group the answers by themes, but to present them as overall attitudes.

⁵A. Bryman., *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 424.

2. Historical grounds

According to the legend, during the rule of the Byzantine Emperor Basilius II (976-1025) in that area, the monk Jovan had noticed a wonderful light. When the monk approached the light, he noticed the icon of John the Baptist, which hung in the air close to the spring. In honor of that light, he built a church which soon became a monastic and spiritual-religious center. It is believed that later this monk was appointed the head of the Ohrid Archdiocese.

During its history, the monastery experienced ups and downs, especially in the 16th century, during the time of Sultan Selim II, when the monastery became almost completely ruined. There is an interesting legend that during those turbulent times, the icon disappeared and was later returned to the church in a mysterious way. The historical data shows that in 1743, Illarion, a monk and later the prior of Bigorski Monastery, restored both the monastery and the monastic brotherhood.⁶

In 1814, during the time when Archimandrite Arsenius was the prior of the monastery, the construction of the large dormitory began, followed by the construction of the dining room a few years later. The prior, Arsenius, compiled the monastery commemorative book (*pomenik*), and he was also responsible for manufacturing the big coffin wherein the relics of a large number of saints are kept that are considered priceless for the spiritual life in the monastery.

The present architectural facade of the monastery is dated between the end and beginning of the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, besides the monastery church, the monastery complex consists of the charnel house, the defense tower, and the old monastic dormitories.

⁶Ѓ. Иванов, *Български старини изъ Македония* [Bulgarian antiques from Macedonia] (Sofia, 1931), 84; D. Zajkovski, *Churches and Monasteries in Macedonia*, Trimaks 2013, 150-151.

In the context of the woodcarving activities in the monastery, the impressive iconostasis should also be noted, which was a work of the Miyak wood-carvers Petre Fylipov-Garkata, his brother Marko, Makarij Frchkovski, and Avram Dichov with his sons Vasil and Filip. They are also the same people who manufactured the carvings in the church, St. Spas, in Skopje.⁷ The iconostasis was made of walnut wood and having extraordinary artistic value, was manufactured in the period between 1829 and 1835. Many scenes from the Old and New Testaments were engraved, and the beauty of the iconostasis is enriched with many animals and birds interwoven with floral ornaments.

During its time, the monastery also represented a spiritual center where the choir service was cherished and a significant scriptorium,⁸ where a large number of translations of literary works with a religious content, as well as works with authentic articulation, were created. There is one belief that the well-known church singer, Jovan Kukuzel, who lived in the period between the end and beginning of the 13th and 14th centuries⁹ stayed at the monastery, from where he drew his spiritual inspiration. It is also believed that the famous Macedonian leaders of the national revival, Joakim Krchovski, Kiril Pejcinović and Partenius Zografski, resided and worked in the monastery.

The educational tendencies, irrespective of the liturgical obligations, are also the compound part of the contemporary monkhood, and in light of it, we should certainly mention the rich publication activity, as well as the realization of the exhibition of approximately 70 icons dating from the 12th, 13th and 19th centuries.

During the period of communism, the monastery was largely neglected due to the dominant influence of atheistic tendencies, but after Macedonia became independent, this

⁷Г. Траичевъ, Манастиритъ въ Македония [Monasteries in Macedonia].(Sofia: 1933), 129.

⁸I. Velev, *Review of the Middle Age Churches and Monasteries in Macedonia*. (Skopje: Naša Kniga 1990), 32.

⁹More on the life and activity of Jovan Kukuzel, see: Бранко Панов, *Македонија низ историјата* (B. Panov, *Macedonia through History*), Skopje: Menora, 1999), 118-130.

was drastically changed. Significant contribution to the process of rehabilitation of the monkhood and restoration of the monastic life was provided by Archimandrite Parthenius, whose initiatives had significant impact on the religious life in Macedonia.¹⁰

3. The Miraculous Icon of Saint John the Baptist as a Pillar of the Cult Life of the Bigorski Monastery

Bigorski Monastery is located in a place, which according to the data of the 2002 Census, has a mixed ethnic composition. Half of the population are Macedonians, and the rest are Albanians, Turks, Roma, Serbs, and Bosniacs,¹¹ and accordingly, the religious affiliation of the population is different (Orthodoxy and Islam). However, despite these different religions, the population in this part of the country has mainly experienced a joint peaceful religious life.

The Bigorski Monastery was a cult place not only for the Christians, but also for members of other religions because of the belief in the healing power of the miraculous icon of St. John the Baptist.¹² The legends say that one Albanian *bey* experienced the healing power of the icon; afterwards, he had a vision of Saint John the Baptist, and then came to the monastery and with the help of the icon, cured his ill child. As a sign of gratitude, he bestowed the monastery a property planted with olive trees as a gift.

¹⁰ More information on the activities of the monastic brotherhood visit the official site of the Bigorski monastery at: <http://www.bigorski.org.mk/index.php>

¹¹ The Municipality of Rostusha has a total of 8618 inhabitants, out of which 4349 are Macedonians, 1483 Albanians, 2680 Turks, 10 Roma, 6 Serbs, 31 Bosniacs, 593 others (Source: State Statistical Bureau of Republic of Macedonia, 2002, Volume X).

¹² In this part of the country it is not unusual for the inhabitants to visit the religious sites and to ask for help not only for their own religions, but also from the religion of their neighbors, co-villagers. For example, in the village of Broshtica, populated by Macedonians – Muslims, the inhabitants go to the mosque and also light candles and leave money beside the icons. They say that if they cannot find a solution to a particular problem in the mosque, then they turn for help to the church. “There are no prejudices for these matters, and there should not be,” said the 62-year old attendant in the Broshtica church, Dzevat Limanovski . Biljana Stoyanovska, *Во Броштица муслиманите палат свеќи за свое здравје во Православната црква*, (In Broshtica, the Muslims light candles for their health also in the Orthodox Church), *Nova Makedonija*, online edition, No. 22556, 14.04.2012.

There are written materials indicating that the miraculous icon of Saint John the Forerunner arrived at the place where the very church was built. As it is written in the chronicles of this monastery, the icon was miraculous and on two occasions when there was risk of the monastery being burnt down, the icon simply disappeared and was later returned to the monastery.¹³ The natives usually say that the healing powers of the icon have been and still are felt by ill persons and childless couples, who soon after directing their prayers to the icon, gained children. The monastery manuscripts also mention that the icon was not protected, that is, coated with silver armor, until 1885.¹⁴

The miraculous icon of Saint John is placed next to the entrance of the church and it is believed that it was found exactly there in 1020. The tradition says that the icon found its place by itself, hanging over the water spring. In the 19th century, the monks from this monastery "added a third hand to the armor of the icon, to witness the miracles that the Baptist makes with its help."¹⁵ On the icon, John the Baptist is depicted as a saint having three hands, symbolizing his power for treating the childless parents.¹⁶

According to official records about the icon that are available at the monastery's website, the icon "brings a simple, peaceful, and colorful message which descends from the Divine Jerusalem. It emanates the unchangeable and eternal Truth which resurrects something deeply in the human. The miraculous feature of the icon comes from the very icon, from the face of the saint represented on the icon, it floods as a blessing and gift from the

¹³ Special stamp to the monastery is given by the relics of the saints which are exhibited there. There are the relics of St. John the Forerunner, St. Apostle Peter, St. Apostle Yakov, St. Marina..."As it is the case with the miraculous icon, the relics of the saints are also kissed!" is written in the chronicles of the monastery.

¹⁴ Orthodox practice is that only miraculous icons are covered by gold or silver.

¹⁵This is the sole icon where St. Jovan is depicted with three hands.

¹⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZNQDLG8do0> (Video titled Healing - Iscelenie – To restore St. John Bigorski, Uploaded on Nov 24, 2009, *(No description available)*).

✚ Exploring Macedonia, Mavrovo, <http://www.istracijamakedonija.com.mk/storii.aspx?id=5>

✚ Macedonier, Reportage on Macedonian Monastery of Saint Jovan Bigorski (1/5), Uploaded on May 27, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4i2gpw4tqA>, (Accessed on 08.05.2014)

Holy Spirit, one uncreated and not ever lasting light which brings peace, tranquility and joy." About the icon, the chroniclers of the monastic life have written that it is "blessed" and it "fulfills everybody with consolation." Both the Orthodox and Muslims have found solutions to their problems when in front of the icon. Monks read the prayers to the believers and visitors, who then pass under the icon and apply olive oil from the icon onto their faces.¹⁷ The prayers are different depending on the religion (one prayer is intended for the Orthodox, and the other for Muslims).

In an interview with the management of the monastery, the very act of praying in front of the miraculous icon is described as follows:

Usually, when a prayer is read in front of the miraculous icon of St. John the Baptist, the believer stands in front of the icon, kneels or bows, and the monk puts the end of the *epitrachelion* over his head, while the prayer is being read. When a prayer is read to a married couple who due to whatever reasons cannot have children, usually both of them hold each other's hands, and the *epitrachelion* is wound around their hands. After the prayer is finished, the believers kiss the *epitrachelion*, the priest's hand and the icon, and the priest-monk anoints their foreheads with the oil from the icon candle in front of the icon.

Because of their gratitude for the "numerous miracles" experienced by the believers and visitors of the monastery, the icon is usually "over-decorated with gifts." Silver baby-shaped medallions are gifts by numerous parents for whom this icon bestowed miracles by "gifting them children." According to one of the inhabitants of Rostusha, "The number of the Macedonians Muslims who had find consolation here is also not small." This inhabitant stated he has told the story about his older sister to all he had met; she prayed before this icon several times and soon, she gave birth to a child. As a sign of her gratitude, she left on the icon gold and whenever she comes to the monastery, she prays to the same icon and leaves other gifts. According to an interview with the management of the monastery, "some bestow

¹⁷ *Miraculous Icon of the Saint helps the people for 200years*, author Ljubica Grozdanovska, Dnevnik No. 1858, 18 March 2006.

St. John with jewelry, others gold coin, money, or various things which the monastery needs. However, some show their gratitude by coming and helping in some monastery jobs.“

Many unexpected guests come to pray to this icon for many different problems and their testimonies are posted on the website of the monastery. As they talk about it, they simultaneously confirm the miraculous feature of the icon. The silver case, which covers the icon, also at the same time, covers many of the miracles of Saint John, “leaving only a part, which the new brotherhood made efforts to record and keep, as a testimony for the icon’s sanctity.” However, miraculous grace is considered “wonder making”¹⁸ from the miraculous icon and as the natives from the neighboring villages say, “it is not a secret that from now on we will hear about many miracles.”

4. Empirical results from the sociological research

The character of the empirical results of the qualitative research on the cult life in the monastery of John Bigorski, as well as the analysis of a part of the materials available both from media and various internet domains, compose the database which provides a possibility for profound analysis. According to the draft research in this paper, the data obtained are elaborated by the research questions, on the same basis as the actual research was conducted. In principle, during the presentation of the results, we as authors, considered it important to recapture the experiences, attitudes, considerations, and the points of the interviewees as close as possible and that is the reason why in the larger part of the paper, the answers are recorded in the form of citations.

Research Question No.1:

¹⁸The text (Ljubica Grozdanovska, *Miraculous Icon of the SaintHelpsPeople for 200 years*, *Dnevnik*, No. 1858, 18 March 2006) contains a citation that the restorers from the Institute for Protection of Monuments opened the silver case only once when they had to retouch it. “They were astonished when they saw that it was completely undamaged. Only the year (1021) which the restorers had put in the lower right corner of the icon is confusing because it is in opposition to the year of its finding.”

When, how and from whom you have been informed on the healing power of the miraculous icon of Saint Jovan?

The monastery complex of Saint John Bigorski is well-known and for a long period of time, it has been an important part of the tourist offering for Macedonia. In the media, in the tourist literature and in the Orthodox circles, it is famous and treated as a pearl for Orthodoxy. The proactive tourist promotion, as well as the current activities, contacts, and certainly the active monastic communities contribute to it becoming a very “popular destination.” The Saint John Bigorski Monastery gained and continued its popularity through the dynamic managing of monastery activities in accordance with the requirements and standards of the new age: its rich history, the actual events and the spectrum of the rich cultural heritage represented by the monastery complex, including the timeless iconostasis, fresco, the many relics, and, of course, the widely famous miraculous icon dedicated to Saint Jovan.

Regarding the question as to how they were informed about the healing power of the icon, some of the interviewees indicated they were informed by the media and from reading the website of the monastery. Some of them indicated that soon after they were informed of it or after someone recommended the monastery to them, they came to visit the monastery. Some of them came because they had a particular problem that they thought they could solve there. Some interviewees pointed out that they were familiar with the information delivered to them by their ancestors; one interviewee wrote: “My grandmother talked to me so much and so often about the icon that I think I knew about the icon ever since I know about myself.” One female interviewee interviewed by phone emphasized that she heard about the icon while she was in the hospital (she was being treated for sterility), and another female interviewee stated she was informed by her neighbors who originated from that part of the country. In a face-to-face interview with one male respondent, he noted that although he came from a non-religious family, when he was faced with his particular problem, he went and asked the icon for help by his own initiative (while having almost no information). One of the interviewed women said that she heard a voice while sleeping for a long period, which told her to come and pray to the icon: “I didn’t know anything about the icon; it appeared in my dream for the first time.”

One male interviewee stated: “I expected that the social media will report much more on the icon, but I couldn’t find much information there. I think that something like a forum, a

discussion should be organized... There are lots of people that should know about the icon and maybe somebody will find a solution of his or her problem as well.” He also noted that today, we all spend a great amount of time in front of our computers and share various experiences. He stated: "Those could be framed and could create the possibility for an increased number of people to get acquainted with Bigorski and especially with the miraculous icon." One native noted: “It is important to inform people, and everybody will act by his own will.” Another male interviewee shared a similar opinion, writing: “I think that it is most important to much more and openly talk about the icon and its healing power. I was informed about the icon unintentionally by a colleague and I often pass by the monastery. The leadership of the monastery is of the opinion that it would be good apart from its artistic value and old age, to emphasize its miraculous feature.”

Research Question No. 2:

How often is the monastery being visited because of the healing power of the miraculous icon of Saint Jovan?

In answer to this question, we tried to get indicators of how important was the experience of the icon’s healing power to becoming famous or for this monastery to be revived more intensively as a cult place. Regarding this indicator, more interviewees emphasized the power of the icon and how the shared experience related to the icon's contribution to the intensification of the cult life in the Bigorski Monastery.

One female interviewee stated: “Since the miraculous icon gifted me a child, my life is completely changed.” Another female interviewee noted: "When I stood in front of the icon, I felt warmth embracing me.” The third interviewee said that when they began to pray for their relative; at that moment, without being aware of it, the relative’s health condition began to improve. One native who was interviewed said: “I have often talked that this very icon, this very place, this very monastery emanates tranquility and love.”

Most of the interviewees said that they themselves or those they knew stood in front of the icon whenever they had a problem after they have tried to solve it in other ways without success. In one sample, one interviewee said: “I have told myself, I’ll come here and if I do not have children, that will be God’s will.” Another female respondent stated: “Although I do not have children; however, I say that maybe I could have been more persistent and come earlier. But, I got the knowledge about the icon much later. That is why I think it should be talked more about the icon, in the family, on TV, and elsewhere.”

One male interviewee noted that he as a Christian (Adventist) visited the monastery several times, where he was accompanied by his fellow believers. One interviewee indicated: "I cannot say whether the miraculous power of the icon was crucial or another factor, because we were looking for a medical solution to our problem for a long time, and we visited many places, among which was the Bigorski Monastery. Maybe it is a coincidence, maybe not, but soon after the feast of the monastery and after the prayer to the icon, we got the good news. My mother used to say that the olive oil on our foreheads had not even dried when we told her the long expected news."

In a telephone interview with a woman (about 50 years old) who lived in the vicinity of the monastery, she told us that very often people asked her where the icon was, not where the monastery was located. Another male interviewee wrote through email: "I know many people who had some benefit from the icon, but I think that the monastery is often visited for the relics and other goods the monastery possesses." Another male interviewee explained to us that the icon, the iconostasis, and the relics are the three "fetishes" of the monastery and that it is hard for him to say which is the most important. Other interviewee stated: "Definitely, I advise almost everybody I know and who is childless, to come and attend the prayer to the icon. Although it is a personal matter, I know that some of those who have visited the monastery ... they told me that the icon helped them ... but, those who have still a problem, I encourage them to continue to pray persistently." One Muslim interviewee responded: "My family was always talking about my aunt who was childless and that she was coming to pray to the icon all the way from Switzerland. And she was treated for her sterility in many well-known Swiss clinics. My parents say that only the icon helped her. When she gave a birth to a baby, my mother left a golden chain on the icon."





According to the interviewees, as well as the leadership of the monastery, the very life in the monastery, including the religious services and the monkhood, "all of that is a fruit of the blessing of Saint John the Baptist" who obviously helps in a miraculous manner or simply makes these "miracles" happen.

5. Conclusion

From the start, the monastery of Saint John Bigorski, became a cult place based on its rich history. History has witnessed varying intensity of the cult life at the monastery. The cult life in Bigorski was especially revived with the restoration of the monastic life in the

monastery. An extraordinary important pillar of the cult life in the Bigorski Monastery represents the miraculous icon of Saint Jovan the Baptist. The icon's history is described in numerous traditions and enriched with contemporary "miracles" providing its own "extraordinary important specifics" of the cult life in the monastery.

Attachments (photographs from 1 to 10¹⁹)

 <p>1. The Map of Republic of Macedonia with St. John Baptist – Bigorski Monastepy</p>	 <p>2. Downloaded by https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152341611126081&set=a.497153926080.291964.47760166080&type=1&theater</p>
 <p>3. Downloaded by http://kicevo.mk/p1139/</p>	 <p>4. Downloaded by http://www.bigorski.org.mk/index.php?content_type=manastir&name=crkva</p>

¹⁹Photographs Nos. 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10, were sent by the management of the monastery for the needs of this paper.



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6.



7.



8.



9.



10.