

“Celebrating St. Paraskeva Day in Two Villages in Prespa, Macedonia”

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Beverly Stoeltje defines a festival as a public cultural performance that occurs at calendrically regulated intervals. It is public in nature, it is spatially bounded, it is programmed, and is multiple in purpose. Festivals are collective phenomena and serve purposes rooted in a community's group life. Systems of reciprocity and shared responsibility ensure the continuity of and participation in the festival. (Stoeltje, 216).

A festival performance serves the purpose of articulating the group's heritage; it presents a combination of participation and performance in a public context. Motivation for participation in festivals includes social interaction that allows for the exploration and negotiation of many kinds of relationships. A typical festival actively engages the participant; the audience is not merely a passive receiver of messages.

Ritual and festival are closely related communal events. Ritual usually concerns the practice of religion, but in certain contexts calendrical religious rights are programmed in such a way as to integrate the sacred ritual with a profane festival. The mobilizing mechanism for many festivals that take place during the summer months in contemporary Macedonia is the celebration of saints days. Saints days festivals commemorate the name of the saint after whom the village church is named, or the saint after whom a particular monastery is named. In the case of church saints days, the religious ritual is performed in the church, while the festival may, or may not, and most often does not take place on the church grounds, but rather somewhere in a larger open space, such as in the middle of the village. In the celebration of a monastery saint's day, both the religious ritual and the festival take place on the same grounds.

This presentation describes two saint's day festivals that took place on August 7th and 8th in 2006 on St. Paraskeva day at two monasteries in the Prespa region of Macedonia, one near the village of Lavci, and the other near the village of Podmochani.

In the Orthodox Church menology there are three saints by the name of Paraskeva. A second-century martyr of Rome, especially venerated among the Greeks, who is celebrated on August 8th. A third-century martyr from Iconium, a favorite of Russians, who consider her the patron saint of traders and guardian of family values, and who is celebrated on November 10th. And the eleventh-century Serbian ascetic, beloved by Serbs, Romanians and Moldavians. She is celebrated on October 27th. In the Macedonian calendar their holidays are listed as:

August 8th. † **Света преподобна маченица Параскева – Св. Петка**

October 27th. **Преподобна Параскева (ПЕТКОВДЕН)**

November 10th. **Света велемаченица Параскева**

The hagiographer of the Martyr Paraskeva of Rome tells us that she was the daughter of a devout Christian couple, who prayed fervently for a child and God finally blessed them with a one. They gave great honor to Friday, the day of Christ's suffering. When their daughter was born on that day, they named her Paraskeva, from the Greek word for "Friday." In addition to a good education, she received a thorough religious training. When her parents died, she gave away her goods to the poor and, following the example of the holy apostles, began walking about the countryside preaching the Gospel and converting many people to Christ.

With her learning and strong faith, Paraskeva spoke persuasively and brought many people to forsake their pagan idols and commit themselves to the true God. Emperor Antonius Pius summoned Paraskeva to the palace, and when, in spite of various threats and coaxing, she refused to denounce her faith in Jesus Christ, she was put to the cruelest tortures. Finally she was

thrown into a vat of boiling oil and pitch. Seeing her standing in the vat as though it were a bath of fresh water, the Emperor asked if she had employed some magic to cool the oil. In response, Paraskeva scooped up some of the boiling oil and tossed it towards the Emperor, telling him to test it himself. Some of the burning liquid splashed into his eyes and blinded them. Screaming out in pain, the Emperor begged the servant of God to heal him. Paraskeva called aloud upon the name of the Lord, and instantly the Emperor regained his sight. This miracle moved Antoninus to put a stop to the persecution of Christians throughout the empire, and Paraskeva resumed her preaching unhindered. After the death of Antoninus, Paraskeva was heedless of any danger and continued her missionary labors, everywhere spreading the holy Gospel. In one city, she was brought to trial before the ruler, Tarasios, who subjected her to various tortures, but when he saw that nothing would persuade her to deny Christ, he ordered that the saint's head be cut off with a sword. She received her martyr's wreath in about the year 180. The martyr's holy remains were later taken to Constantinople, where they were venerated by the faithful. Saint Paraskeva is venerated as a healer of the blind.

St. Paraskeva (Περκα) of Rome is one of the most revered saints among Macedonian Orthodox believers. In her importance she is in the same company as the Mother of God (Богородица), St. George, St. Demitrius, and Sts. Peter and Paul. There are more monasteries in Macedonia named after her than after any other non-Biblical saint. Among the faithful she also stands equal to the Mother of God in the number of visions that people claim to have encountered of her, and the number of healings that people have attribute to her. Nonetheless, typical Macedonian Orthodox believers have no knowledge of who Paraskeva was, or anything about her life.

Many of the monasteries in Macedonia that are dedicated to her are centuries old, and very little is known about their builders, the reason why they were built, or why they were built at those specific locations. In the past fifteen years there has been a resurgence of monastery building throughout Macedonia, and the impetus for undertaking such constructions varies with each monastery. Macedonian news media report regularly and extensively on such projects, so that the history of the building of a new monastery is more accessible for research. The two monasteries discussed here are relatively new. The one near the village of Lavci was built about 14 years ago, and the one near the village of Podmochani was built and consecrated in 2005.

The folk history of the building of a monastery usually points to a belief that it was built on sacred ground, a place where some miracle took place, and is usually marked by a spring from which healing water flows. The history and motivation for building the two monasteries described here is quite similar to that in the folk histories of more ancient monasteries. The building of the monastery near the village of Lavci was initiated by a gentleman in his fifties from the nearby village of Drmeni. [slide, First man on right]



In an interview that I conducted with him at the monastery in August 2006 he narrated his story of how the monastery came about:

“A woman appeared to me in a dream, dressed in black, like a nun. She had a cross on her forehead and one on her chest. She said to me: ‘You will go to such and such a place, you will find a tree there that has been cut down, and by the stump you will find white stones. You will build a church on that spot.’ I asked her: ‘How can a man build a church all by himself?’ She replied: ‘You start building, and if you can’t build a large one, build a small one.’ I had a conversation with her, just like I am talking with you now. ‘If you can’t build a small church, then you will place the rocks on this spot so that people will know where to light candles.’ She, the woman, said ‘I am St. Paraskeva (Petka), and I will not appear to you again.’ I woke up at around 1:00 am. I didn’t pay any more attention to what happened. In a conversation at home

with the women, I told them about my dream. They felt uneasy, and they told me I needed to go to the spot. I knew generally where the place was, and when I came to it I saw exactly what I had seen in my dream. The place was on Ilija's property (an apple orchard belonging to a local farmer). I told him about my dream. He replied, 'Yes, there was a plum tree there that my father had cut down. It was right here where the stones are.' I told him about my dream and what St. Paraskeva asked me to do. He replied: 'If that is so, I can't tell you not to build a monastery. May God bless your work. I'll help you in any way I can.' So, we cut down several apple trees to make room and we built this small chapel. The small chapel was built in 1992."

Today the monastery complex consists of the first small chapel, [slide]



a newer and larger monastery that has not yet been consecrated, [slide]



a small, two-story building for lodging and cooking, and a small, one room structure built by the owner of the property. The property is located about three miles outside of the village of Lavci. The new monastery is built about thirty meters away from the old chapel on property that is owned by the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The builder of the monastery is assured that the structure is built on sacred ground and relies on the local folk history of the area, as well as on historical documents that point to the possibility that this was the location of the Medieval city of Devol, and the location of a monastery built by St. Naum of Ohrid, who was a student of Sts. Cyril and Methodius. He suggests that the name of the nearby village of Lavci most probably comes from the word “lavri”. The original monastery apparently was constructed before St. Naum built the now more famous monastery near the city of Ohrid. The two monasteries are separated by Mt. Galichica, and a mountain path connecting them is still visible today.

According to local beliefs, the presence of a nearby small spring points to the location of the original Trinity Monastery built by St. Naum. In the nearby village of Stipona there is an old, wooden granary (with two small rooms on top), that the locals believe was originally built by the residents of the medieval monastery.

The impetus for building a monastery dedicated to St. Paraskeva in the village of Podmochani is in some ways similar to that for the one in Lavci. In 1977 a man from the village, [slide]



who at the time lived in Vienna, had a vision in a dream to go back to his village and build a monastery at a location called "Healing Water" [slide],



which is located about two kilometers from the village. His 77-year old sister had a similar dream. St. Paraskeva appeared to her and told her exactly where and how to build the monastery.

The man came back to Podmochani the following summer and together with his father began digging at the designated location for the monastery. The location is near a small spring,



and the local population for generations believed that the water has miraculous and had healing properties. As they were digging they found a pile of large rocks and some old Turkish and Bulgarian coins. The very next year, 1978, the man came back to his village, where he had yet another dream. According to his story, some strange force woke him up in the middle of the night and a voice told him to go to the spot where the monastery was to be built and to extinguish a fire that had engulfed an old willow tree standing above the spring. He could see the fire burning as he walked toward the location in the dead of night. As he approached the tree, the fire miraculously extinguished itself and the tree leaves reappeared. (About two years before the monastery was built, a lightning did strike and burn the tree [slides]).



The fire had also burned a path from that spot leading to the 13th century St. Elijah monastery located near the neighboring village, about 5 kilometers away. At that moment he again made a commitment to build a monastery at that spot. The construction of the monastery was started in 2004, and it was completed and consecrated in 2005.

In both instances the catalysts for building the monasteries were visions of St. Paraskeva in a dream in which individuals were commanded to build a monastery in a specific spot that both the sponsors and the local population believe are sacred. In the case of the monastery in Lavci, the sacredness of the location is confirmed by inconclusive historical documents and by local beliefs. In the case of the monastery in Podmochani, the sacredness of the location is attested only by the belief of the local population that the nearby spring has healing properties.

The church normally does not object to building new monasteries, nor does it question the reason why a monastery is built. But it's interesting to note that the Macedonian Orthodox Church is of two opinions regarding acting upon visions in dreams. One opinion is that "good dreams and visions come from God, who through them he opens His will to us, but only to those who are totally perfect and holy and who follow His commandments...". But, "it is a sin to believe in dreams and visions, because the devil can easily trick us with them and throw us into horrible sin and pride." („Добротољубие", том IX, Слово 3).

Both individuals who sponsored the building of the monasteries in Lavci and in Podmocani had in mind that the monasteries were to have a dual function – the sacred and the profane: as a place for enacting a yearly religious ritual commemorating the saint's day, and as a place where the community gathers on the saint's day and participates in activities whose primary function is to re-enforce community bonds through communal eating, dancing and singing. Thus, the boundaries of the two monasteries extend to include structures and locations designated for conducting these non-religious activities. Included in both monastery complexes are a small building for cooking, temporary sleeping quarters, a large outdoor covered area for eating, and a large space for dancing.

[slides]





Preparation for the festival at both monasteries involves coordinating activities for the enactment of the liturgical order, which by definition is a relatively invariant sequence of acts and utterances encoded by religious authorities, and activities that focus on social interaction among participants, which are fluid and may vary from year to year and from one monastery to another. The preparations for the festival actually start during the previous year's festival, when a festival sponsor, or sponsors are chosen for the following year. The sponsors are responsible for covering all of the expenses for the meals, and are the only festival participants who are required to be present and participate during the entire religious processions.

Although there is no official opening of the festival, the participants consider the beginning of the liturgical service as the opening, as no other celebratory activity may start until

after the liturgy has ended. The liturgical procession combines both religious and ancient folk rituals, which is typical for many other orthodox celebrations. The festival activities at the monastery start on the eve of the holiday. The priest conducts a liturgy at around 6 o'clock in the evening. As the chapel is quite small, very few people attend the entire service. For the parishioners, the most important part in their participation is the lighting of candles, which they light in great numbers, but never in even numbers. [slides]



The sponsors prepare a large loaf of bread that is baked specially for such occasions, a large plate of boiled wheat that is covered with sugar in the shape of a cross, and a bottle of red wine.

[slides]



At the end of the service, when the bread, wheat and wine are blessed, the bread is broken into small pieces and is distributed to the guests by the sponsors. Once the service in the chapel is concluded, another short service is held outside of the chapel, where the priest blesses bread that is brought by participants other than the sponsors. The priest blesses each bread, pours wine on it, cuts a shape of a cross on the bottom, and as he sings a special prayer, the bread is raised and turned several times in unison by the owner, the priest, and by other participants.

[slides]



Finally, the bread is broken into small pieces and is distributed to the guests. At the end of this service the priest walks over to the eating area, he blesses the meal, which signals the end of the liturgical order and the beginning of the celebration with food, drink, music, and dancing.

Food plays a very important role in festivals. Traditional meals or blessed foods are one of the most frequent and typical features of festivals, since they are a very eloquent way to represent and enjoy abundance, fertility, and prosperity. Some festivals contextualize food in a feast event, scheduled and set aside in a special place where large groups can eat together. Especially relevant is the nature of festival food. It will embody the identity of the group and represent the occasion, so festival foods are always specific. Thus, what food is served, who serves it, how it is prepared, all communicate about the tradition of the particular monastery.

By tradition, at the monastery in Lavci only meatless meals (пoчнo) are served, and nothing made with eggs or milk byproducts. This decision was originally made by the person responsible for building the monastery, and he has not encountered any objections from his community. His justification is that this is the type of food that is served in monasteries that are occupied by monks, and this is a monastery. Fish and bean soup are always the main meals served at this monastery. According to the teachings of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, slaughtering of animals for a celebration at a place of worship can be something good or something bad. If the meat is used to feed guests who often come from distant places, meaning, if the primary aim is “бpaтoљyбиe, гoстoљyбиe,” then it is ok, as long it is not served on a Wednesday or Friday. But it is forbidden to serve it in a monastery. I think the distinction here is between meals that can be consumed by guests, as opposed to those consumed by residents of a monastery. On this particular day the monastery in Podmocani did serve meat; in fact, meat is served at most monastery festivals, unless the holiday falls on a Wednesday or Friday.

The eating area at the monastery in Lavci has seating for approximately 100 people, and they serve meals in three sessions both in the evening and on the following morning. Each year the food is paid for by one or two festival sponsors. Traditionally the sponsors pay for 100 kilos of fish, 40 kilos of beans, as well as bread and vegetables for salads. All meals are free to festival participants. The same individual is responsible each year for cooking and for supervising the meal preparation. He has helpers who will be responsible for preparing the ingredients and for serving the meal to the guests. Meals are prepared in large pots in open fires outside. [slides]



The cook, and the festival, gain their reputation based on the type and quality of the meals they serve. It's not unusual for guests to come to a festival from distant parts of the country solely due to the reputation of the meals. For example, a monastery near the city of Ohrid attracts over four thousand participants each year on day of the Dormition of the Mother of God on August 28th due to the popularity of their lamb stew.

When the monastery in Podmochani was being consecrated in 2005, two families volunteered to be the sponsors for the following year (2006) [slides].



However, several months later a family from another village asked that they be the sponsors for this year. Apparently, the wife had had a dream in which St. Paraskeva appeared to her, dressed all in white, and told her that there was going to be a gathering at the monastery and that she should go there and feed the people. In the mind of the community, a promise made to a saint must be kept at all costs, but in this case fulfilling the request of a saint in a dream is of higher importance. This system of negotiation, of reciprocity and of shared responsibility ensures participation of the entire community and the continuity of the festival from year to year through the distribution of prestige and production.

As the monastery and the festival in Podmochani are rather new, much of the organization of the festival and the distribution of responsibilities have yet to be worked out. It will probably take five to ten years for the festival there to gain a reputation as unique among

other St. Paraskeva festivals. The monastery is located at the bottom of a mountain; the road leading to it is unpaved and is used regularly by foresters who haul firewood in large trucks.



It is quite difficult to get there by car. As this was the first year of festivals, it was difficult to find out the schedule of the activities, when the priest would conduct the morning service, and when the rest of the festivities would begin. These are normally not announced in the media. The consensus among the people from the village was that the priest would probably arrive for the morning service at 8 o'clock. I arrived there at 8, and the meals were already being prepared. The size of the crowd was nowhere near that in Lavci, and the participants were mainly from the local village of Podmochani. The priest did not arrive until about 10 am. At the conclusion of the religious rights that were conducted inside the monastery, here the priest also blessed a large bucket of water in front of the monastery, and at the end of the ceremony people lined up to fill

small bottles with the water [slides].



Holy water was also available from the nearby healing spring.

After the conclusion of the religious ritual the mobilizing mechanism permeating these festivals and coordinating the emotions of the participants is mostly singing, dance and music, performed here as part of folk tradition and as a social act. Like food, dance involves the individual in action that is performed within a group, most of whose members are engaged in the same action. [slide]



Popular bands are hired to provide the music. Wealthy sponsors of festivals often hire nationally popular bands and singers, which adds to the popularity and reputation of the sponsor and of the festival. One tradition that has developed rather recently is to for a sponsor to commission a song that is dedicated to the monastery and the festival. The musical entertainment usually starts with a circle dance that is lead by the festival sponsor, or kum. The evening musical entertainment usually lasts until around 1 or 2 am, and the morning entertainment until about noon.

Characteristic of these festivals is that while a considerable number of events are intentionally organized and audience orientated, nevertheless the festival activities serve purposes of group life: there occurs constant in-group communication and social interaction inside the audience. In recent years there has been a tendency to coordinate such festivals with Macedonian immigrant organizations; immigrants often time a trip to Macedonia to coincide

with a local festival celebration. Eventually many of these immigrants end up being the financial sponsors for building or expanding monasteries, and for renovating older monasteries. Such is the case with a well-known immigrant from Chicago, who thus far has financed the building of two churches in his village, and has contributed large sums of money toward the building of other monasteries, including the new monastery in Lavci.

In community-based festivals, such as the ones described here, individuals have many alternatives for participation, and not everyone attends the same activities. They strive for participation and integration. Both women and men will have roles, the young and the old attend, outsiders and insiders alike have spaces accorded to them, and the rich and the poor walk on the same ground. They cover a constellation of very different events, sacred and profane, private and public, sanctioning tradition and introducing innovation, proposing nostalgic revivals, providing the expressive means for the survival of the most archaic folk customs.