

THE FEAST OF ST. MARINA - AN EVENT THAT UNIFIES THE MACEDONIAN MINORITY IN MALA PRESIPA REGION

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Macedonian minority, inhabiting the nine villages on the Albanian side of the Big Prespa lake in the border region, known as Mala Prespa. The area is characterized by its isolation from the other parts of the country, which extends far beyond the geographical dimensions, but more up to the social ones. The research aims to examine the glorious celebration of Saint Marina's day (30th of July) as an event, that unifies the Macedonian minority from all of the villages and even from further destinations. Another aim of the article is to present the place where the feast is being organized – Saint Marina monastery near Tuminec. Evidences for its significance as a sight in the believes of local people include legends, dreams and stories about it.

The article is based primarily on fieldwork materials, collected in and near the villages of Tuminec and Zrnosko in July and October 2017. Key findings about the inhabitants of the region are:

- they feel united as a minority and find the feasting tradition as one of the ways to express this adjustment;
- they keep their religious faith strong and in the same time apply a kind of modernization by mixing the celebrations related to religion with the element of a fair.

Keywords:

Macedonia, minority, Albania, Saint Marina, monastery, unifying role, feast

Theme/s: Anthropology, Ethnology, Macedonian minorities

*Macedonians will always walk under the sun.
Everything happens because of the Divine Providence.
Only God knows who built that monastery.¹*

1. Introduction

The part of the Central Balkans where the borders of Macedonia, Albania and Greece meet, has been a question of interest not only to ethnographers from these and neighboring countries, but also from Western Europe and Russia (see for example the work of Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska and Maxim Makartsev). By the time of the preparation of this article, the situation in Mala Prespa region is being discussed in Bulgaria too. The reason is that on October 14th the committee on legal affairs of Albanian parliament officially recognized the Bulgarians living in Prespa, GoloBardo and Gora as one of the minority groups². I am obliged to say in the very beginning that this paper aims to discuss neither the consideration of research participants to a Macedonian or Bulgarian minority, nor the prevalence of one of the groups to the other. It concentrates on a concrete event, which has significant meaning for many of the dwellers living in the nine villages on the Albanian side of the Big Prespa lake. It seeks to show the way in which the day of Saint Marina is celebrated and to identify the unifying function of the feast. The study is based on fieldwork materials collected in and near Tuminec and Zrnosko in July and October 2017. The methodology includes:

- semi-structured interviews with local people inhabiting not only Tuminec and Zrnosko, but also Gorna Gorica, Korça and Prilep;
- online ethnography, focused on finding information and comments about the feast;
- visual anthropology;
- participant observation.

¹Inscription in Macedonian language, written on the door of one of the rooms in Saint Marina monastery.

²Albania has recognized the Bulgarian minority in the country // Novinite.com. 12.10.2017 [last visited 22.10.2017]. Available from:

<http://www.novinite.com/articles/184224/Albania+has+Recognized+the+Bulgarian+Minority+in+the+Country>

2. The isolated inhabitants of Mala Prespa region

The villages which are administratively included in Mala Prespa are: Pustec, Tuminec, Zrnosko, Leska, Cerie, Globocheni, Shulin, Dolna Gorica and Gorna Gorica. From 1924 until now they belong to the territory of Albania and nowadays give shelter to about 5 000 people. Their location in the Southwestern part of The Big Prespa lake isn't the only one factor for their separation from the other Albanian settlements. Additional reason is the mountainous relief – in the north rises *Prechna planina*, in the south – *Ivan Planina*, in the west – *Suva Gora* and *Galichitza* (Duma, 2007: 9). The geographical isolation is being disturbed only by the presence of the international road that connects Korçain, Albania with Resen in Macedonia via the border crossing Dolna Gorica–Stenje.

The problem with the isolation in Mala Prespa extends far beyond the physical dimensions up to the social ones. Albanians call inhabitants of this area with the exonym *shule*, which in most of the cases expresses a neglecting connotation. This fact is not kept secret by the members of this community (two of them explained it to me even though I hadn't brought the topic) and can also be found in publications about the region. According to Raki Belo, one of its figurative meanings is: *a fool, someone who is not very sly* (Belo, 2007: 136). Max Wahlström in his article "The Challenges, Faced by Three Minority Communities in Albania, Greece and Macedonia" (Wahlström, 2016: 37–56) states the same:

"However, many informants mentioned a pejorative term, *shul*, an exonym used by Albanians in reference to the Macedonians from the Prespa region. In personal communication, Maxim Makartsev reported to have encountered the term in Southern Albania, with various etymologies, proposed by the informants. For instance, it has been said that the term comes from the Albanian expression *shulgardhi* "latch of a fence gate", meaning somebody dumb and slow in the uptake, or that it would derive from the name of one of the Slavic speaking villages in the Prespa region, Shulin (previously known as Diellas).³

³<http://www.balkania.es/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/The-Challenges-Faced-by-Three-Minority-Communities-in-Albania-Greece-and-Macedonia.pdf>

By the time of socialist Albania the isolation was institutionalized (Korhonen, Makartsev, Petruševska&Spasov, 2016: 5):

In socialist Albania, two of these national minorities were institutionalized through the introduction of so-called minority zones:⁴ Macedonians (9 villages in the Prespa region) and Greeks (99 villages in the district of Gjirokastra, see Pettifer 2001, 6). Only within these zones were the cultural and educational rights of the minorities to be recognized. (...) The Lake Prespa region was also physically isolated. The only road that connects it with the rest of the country had a check-point and only people with special permission were authorized to pass it. Several villages (including Zrnosko) existed as enclaves within an enclave and they were surrounded by barbed wire and the dwellers had to obtain a special permit even to approach Lake Prespa (Makartsev et al. [forthcoming]).”

The same information appears in the interview I made in the bazaar of Korça. A man, who keeps a small pavilion states: *Prespa in the time of Enver Hoxha... We were closed. As a region it was closed. At the time of the zadruga the bus was going to Prespa twice a week. You had to show your ID. If you don't have ID, you won't be allowed. At the beginning of Prespa, there was a guard.*

Here is a brief view of Pustec and Tuminec - the two most important villages in Mala Prespa as seen nowadays. Even though the name of Pustec means literally *abandoned*, this is the biggest village in Mala Prespa and serves as a center of the whole region. Not only the municipality is there, but also the high school in which come children from the other villages. By 2007, the total number of the inhabitants was about 1000 (200 families) (Duma: 2007, 114-115). The next most populated village is Tuminec – 180 families, 800 people (Duma: 2007, 107)⁵. The position of this old settlement on the shore of The Big Prespa lake has been moved several times through the centuries. About a kilometer away in east direction by the shore there is a settlement, where old walls can be noticed. It is known as Staroselo (Old village) and villagers still honour it and exactly the place where in the past stood a church (*tsarkvishte*). Next is the monastery of Saint Marina, which should be qualified as one of the most valued sights in the whole region.

⁴ This might still be traced into the fact, that only these groups have public schools in their languages.

⁵ The total number for sure is not perfectly right not only because Duma's statistics are 10 or more years old. While working with his book Mala Prespa I came to the observation that in the introduction (p. 9) he gives different numbers of the population – 260 families in Pustec, 180 families in Tuminec.

More information about these two and the other seven villages in Mala Prespa can be found in the book I already quoted –“Mala Prespa” by Gure Duma. It gives detailed data not only about the geography and history of the area, but also about its folklore and the way people were and are living from the ethnographic point of view. As an ethnographer myself, I expected that Duma would dwell upon the significant role of Saint Marina monastery, but he mentions it only with a couple of sentences in the chapters “Celebrating religious feasts” and “Tuminec”. According to him “Heregot together and are getting together guests from all of the villages in Mala Prespa. Most active were the people from Gorna Gorica who, as they were richer than the others, all night long roasted meet, were singing and playing. All of them had pipes” (Duma: 2007, 9). This is the only passage in which he states the unifying role for the Macedonian minority. He doesn’t follow the traces of memories about the monastery in the believes of local people. Because of my conviction that the topic is important, I will develop it in the next part of the article.

3. The feast of Saint Marina and the monastery of the same name

The interviews with more than 10 research participants left me with no doubt that Saint Marina monastery (pronounced most commonly as *Marena*) is one of the biggest cultural-religious sights in the region of Mala Prespa. It is located about an hour away walking from the village of Tuminec on the western side of The Big Prespa Lake, but because of the stoned terrain by the shore, the preferred way for reaching it is by boat (*chamets*, *chunka*, *varka*). According to historical sources (Snegarov, 1935), the church was renowned in 1888, but parts of the old frescos and inscriptions in Greek were preserved. More than a century later its appearance is completely



Figure 1: The monastery complex and the church

contemporary, even with a PVC door.

North of the monastery, opposite the island of *Golemi Grad*, there is a cave church, named by the same saint, dated by the time of the XIV century. It is thought that it was also a part of the whole complex. This fact gives us the basis to think of the place as a sacred one from centuries. This statement also appears in the interviews I made with visitors, who celebrate in the monastery yard the day of Saint Marina on the 30th of July.

Very old, super old. That old that no one remembers what is there from what time. Grandfather, great grandfather were also taking care of it. In the early times our people used to sleep there, under the mulberry tree. They were shepherds.

The concrete reason for the dedication of the monastery to Saint Marina is not known. Only one of the informants (who came to the feast from the Macedonian town of Prilep in honour of Saint Marina) states: *I read that in the past part of the relics were here. But they were stolen. Miracles used to happen here. But this story was lost long, long ago.*

The memory of the villagers preserves many stories, connected to Saint Marina monastery. There are many legends about people, who did bad and sinful things in or near its territory and soon were punished. Two of the examples are the tales about men, who cut sacred trees and about another man who shot in the neck the icon of Saint Marina and 3 years later died of cancer. I am just mentioning these legends, but because of their size and the motives presented in them, their analysis should be a part of a separate article. Still I would like to focus on the most powerful among the real stories I heard about Saint Marina, which serve as an evidence for the significant meaning of this religious figure.

A local woman (born 1945) tells a dream she remembers perfectly even nowadays, even though it happened to her long ago, while her first kid was a baby. *Saint Marina was thin and blond. By this year we were already in the zadruga. She was in the church of Saint Demetrius, the other church, the one of Saint Nicolas was demolished. Saint Marina was hiding. She said to me to give her my baby. I still remember it as if I am young. She took it from me and began to breastfeed it. She was barefoot. She said to me: "I can't go outside", because everywhere it was forbidden. There was nothing – no saints, nothing. And nowadays, they made everything. It's been 3-4 years since I last went to the*

monastery. I celebrate the day of Saint Marina at home. I make dishes, bake meet. The young go to the monastery, I stay at home. A house shouldn't be left alone.

In the past, we haven't been born yet, there were houses near the monastery. People were living there. Three or four families... three brothers were there.

For the feast they go in the evening on 29th [July]. Young women play there. From everywhere, from Macedonia. It is a feast. People from all of the villages are coming.

The research participant neither gives explanation about the meaning of her dream, nor talks about the symbols, coded in it. From the ethnographer's point of view, I find important the expressions: "we were in the zadruga" and "nothing, there was nothing, no saints, nothing". There's no doubt that they are related to the policy of the socialist party against religion and the fact, that in these years the monastery was closed for prayers. Saint Marina was hiding in the church that was still surviving the antireligious spirits (in Saint Demetrius church – Saint Nicolas is already ruined). People's belief was hiding in the innermost parts that survive even in the everyday tense situation.



Figure 2: The icon of Saint Marina above the entrance of the church

The woman was not able to answer the question "Who is Saint Marina", but I listened to the version of another one, whom I talked to during the feast. According to her, *the mother and father of Marina wanted to convert her to Islam faith [poturchena⁶]. But she didn't want. She had very strong faith. She died on that day.* This short story has some things in common with the official saint's life. It is believed, that Marina lived in the end of the 3rd century. She embraced Christianity and consecrated her virginity to God and was disowned by her father – a pagan priest. A lustful Roman prefect named Olybrius caught sight of her, and attracted by her great beauty sought to make her his concubine or wife. When neither cajolery nor threats of punishment could succeed in moving her to yield to his desires, he had her brought before him in public trial at Antioch. Threatened with death

⁶ The use of term "poturchena" is important because it refers to the time of the Ottoman rule.

unless she renounced the Christian faith, the holy virgin refused to adore the gods of the empire and an attempt was made to burn her, but the flames, we are told in her Acts, left her unhurt (MacRory, 1910).

Apart from the strictly religious part, the celebration is thought as a kind of a village party and it is obvious, that enough money has been spent for its organization. One of the research participants, who is in charge with many aspects of this organization, states that all the costs couldn't be covered with 400 Euro, but there is also a good income which goes for the needs of the monastery and for repair of some of the sitting rooms and the dining room. One part of the budget is for the fee of the orchestra. On the other hand, the musicians don't play ordered music if they aren't given a tip which has happened to be up to 50 Euro. There are also products for sandwiches, kilos of meat that cost about 150 euro, many canisters full of *Skopsko*⁷ bier and ice. In the case of 2017 celebration, these supplies happened to be enough to satisfy the needs of the thousand visitors (he said *preko ilyada* which means literally *not more, than a thousand*). The same person was proud, that in the year when he organizes the event and donates money about it there were 400 people who came in the evening of 29th July for the traditional dinner. Previous years there were about 100-150 people. Related to this, I should point out that almost all of the informants whom I talked to during my two fieldworks in Mala Prespa claim to have attended the feast in the monastery in 2017.

A man from Zrnosko: *This year we were at Tuminec. But years ago there were more people.*

A man from Gorna Gorica: *They celebrate Saint Marina, they are coming from everywhere. It has remained from the old people, you should ask them who Saint Marina is. Also from Macedonia, and we, the Macedonians in Albania, and from Greece... some even*



Figure 3: People are waiting to take a boat from Tuminec to the monastery

⁷Even though the area is in Albania, most of the supplies are Macedonian and can be bought with denars.

sleep in the monastery the previous night. It has already been 15 years.

A man from the village of Konsko which is in the territory of the Republic of Macedonia:*It's not allowed to go by boat. They [the police] can make you a problem. It is the biggest, Sveta Marena. They feast it everywhere, but for us it is very important.*

An 88-years old woman from Zrnosko remembers the past: *From Tserie we went on foot, there were no cars back then. Even up to Tuminec. We were young girls – we were running along the road and laughing.*

In the end I would choose to use the resources of visual anthropology as only they can be powerful enough to show the spirit of the feast and its role to unify the people. The queue of Macedonians who wait at the improvised quay to take place in one of the boats, the never ending *horo* in front of the monastery, the way people talk to a casual visitor about the place and the belief – these are the aspects of the three videos made in three different years.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24PZ6xWMH9E>⁸ (2017)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxcNp2v6ePU> (2016)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipLw2x-liYg> (2015, which has nearly 4 000 views).

4. Conclusions

To conclude:

- Saint Marina monastery is a place of memory, that once a year unifies the Macedonian minority in Mala Prespa.
- The place related to the saint and the saint herself appear in the memories and beliefs of local people and are thought as sacred and as protectors against evil power.
- The inhabitants of the nine villages on the Albanian side of the Big Prespa lake feel united as a minority and find the feasting tradition as one of the ways to express this adjustment.
- They keep their religious faith strong and in the same time apply a kind of modernization by mixing the celebrations related to the religion with the element of a fair.

⁸In the end there are also scenes from the village of Gorna Gorica. Author of the video is Andrej Tatarchevski from the University of Skopje.

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