

**“WHERE IS THE SNAKES’ HILL?” – A COMPARATIVE
ACCOUNT OF THE CULTURAL CHANGES IN ZMIJARNIK**

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Abstract: This article examines the cultural changes in the development of the so-called Zmijarnik (Snakes’ Hill), located in the village of Orman, near the City of Skopje, Republic of Macedonia. It is based on the ethnographic data collected within different periods, namely in 1937, 1971 and 2014. The ethnographic findings interpret the ways of interacting between the ‘place’ and people, through people’s perceptions, ideas and behaviours related with a given place that were common at one time and their modifications in another time, until today. Additionally, it examines the spatial changes that occurred over time in the respective place, which prompted cultural changes attributed to it. From a place associated with snakes, i.e. their cult, it had been transformed through time and gradually acquired a new form of Christian significance. A comparative account of the successive stages related to this place interprets its status and significance in the people’s perception over time.

Клучни зборови: змијарник, место, змија, црква

Апстракт: Трудот ги истражува културните промени настанати во т.н. Змијарник, лоциран во селото Орман, близу Скопје, Р. Македонија. Базиран е на етнографски податоци собрани во различни периоди и тоа 1937, 1971 и 2014. Етнографските податоци го интерпретираат начинот на интеракција помеѓу ‘местото’ и луѓето, преку човековите перцепции, идеи и однесувања поврзани со конкретниот простор што биле карактеристични за едно време и нивната модификација во друго време, се до денес. Трудот ги вклучува и просторните промени кои настанале низ времето во конкретниот простор, кои ги поттикнале и

културните промени во него. Од место поврзано со змиите, односно култот кон нив, просторот бил трансформиран со текот на времето и постепено добил форма со христијанско значење. Компаративната анализа на последователните фази поврзани со ова место го интерпретира неговиот статус и значење во перцепцијата на луѓето, низ времето.

Introduction

The field research throughout the territory of the Republic of Macedonia discloses the existence of a significant amount of cultural heritage values attributed to the natural places (Popovska, 2009; 2012). The analysis of the folk terminology, legends, traditions and beliefs embedded in these places show how particular places can promote the flow of people's ideas and perceptions through time (Popovska, 2012a). With reference to people's own values, dynamics and meanings (Curtoni and Beróni, 2001: 98), the "sense of place" in certain community develops and evolves over time, reflecting the spectrum of social-cultural values within the community, and around it.

The paper focuses on the so-called Zmijarnik (Snakes' hill), located in the village of Orman, near the City of Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, perceived as a place connected to snakes. The presence of snakes in the place has effected to its perception as a 'cult' place. Such understanding of the place in the local community has evolved and developed over time, by taking the value of the Christian tradition. It is connected with the dynamic character of the "sense of place", which adjusts "to the complex set of condition needed for cult places" to remain attractive (Jansen and Notermans, 2010).

Having in mind that 'places' "combine elements of space and time, and represent social-cultural constructs" (Leader-Elliott, Maltby and Burke, 2004), in this paper, I research the behaviors and perceptions related to this place that were common at one time and their modifications in another time, until today. Additionally, I examine spatial changes that occurred over time in the space of Zmijarnik, which prompted cultural changes attributed to it.

The basic research material is a set of historic data, and contemporary research findings in the place. Historic data is

provided from the research articles of Filipović (1937), and Spirovska (1971), which are excellent sources on which followed up the recent data collected during my own ethnographic fieldwork (during 2014).¹

The following material shows that this place is not just “a feature of the natural environment”, but it is a place where people established their own organization of time and place (Jackson, 1984: 156). The later contributed to the maintenance of a ‘collective value’ in the community, through generations. The place gained a form which is shaped and valued in changed social and cultural circumstances.

Zmijarnik as a place: Changing the cultural stages of its development

Current research and past findings show that the so-called place of Zmijarnik occupies an important place in traditional culture of the locals of the village of Orman and the wider environment. Ethnographic notes about the site, dating from different historical periods represent narratives that contain elements of collective representation, which in turn shows how Zmijarnik is shaped in a cultural context as place and how is transferred through generations as a “cultural good”. In this sense, I considered the place as a representative of the cultural values of the local community, which changed over time. From a place associated with snakes, i.e. the cult toward them, it has been transformed through time and gradually gets a new shape of Christian significance. This transformation of a place is very important because it contributed to stop the process of “withering away” of the place of Zmijarnik, which activity was low, as Spirovska noticed (1971: 142), long before the church was situated in the place (10–15 years previously). It is essential for the continuation of the tradition of visiting this place and to maintain its relevance until today. This will be discussed below.

¹ This research is a part of my research project (during 2014): “Sacred Places in the Republic of Macedonia – shared values of different cultural and religious traditions.” It is realizing through the Commission for relations with religious communities and groups, and funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia.

In particular, I want to look at the changes in Zmijarnik, because sets of symbolic meanings about place show the identification of the locals with specific values of traditional community which developed over time.

Changing the cultural stages of development of place can be followed in all aspects of manifest content: external features, folk terminology, folk accounts, time, traditions, visitors etc.

The external features and folk terminology

W. J. T. Mitchell claimed that landscape is a “physical and multisensory medium” encoded with cultural values and meaning. As a body of symbolic forms, which are *found* in place, formed “by nature” or *put* there by the material/spatial transformations of a place, landscape is capable of being invoked to express values and meanings of community (Mitchell, 2002:14).

In this context, Zmijarnik, as Filipović described in his paper from 1937 is a “hill of gray limestone, completely naked”, but in the same time it is “the largest cult feature of the village of Orman” (Filipović, 1937: 139). The term Zmijarnik (Snakes’ Hill) is the only identification mark of the space in the respective period, which actually comes from its association with snakes and cult developed to them.

As Berg and Kearns (1996) stated “place naming plays a key role in the social construction of space and the contested process of attaching meaning to places” (quoted in Alderman, 2008: 196). Process of naming involves a distinctive feature or function of the place, which is selected as a motive for its naming. In this context, the snakes emerge as a defining characteristic from which the place is recognized as specific, over a long period of time. This identified place of snakes (their appearance and contact with people) represents a locus where the snakes, according to folk belief can in full measure realize their magical powers. Namely, Zmijarnik represents a place of snakes’ shelter during the winter period, and on the particular dates of March 9th and 22nd the snakes go out of there, according to folk beliefs (Filipović, 1937: 144). People see the snakes as “special” on these days, i.e. the author states they are considered “blessed”, “do not bite” and “must not be killed by

anyone". Following this beliefs, the "activity" of the hill in the respective period is associated with the above mentioned days. Then, opposition "one's own" and "no-one's own" locus, dependent on weather parameters, as we will see in following material are shown as determining for the behavior not only for people but also for the snakes.

The perception of the magical power of the snake in the site has contributed the place to be marked with the term "Zmijarnik" while becoming "the biggest cult feature" of the village of Orman.

The ethnographic data presented by the Spirovska in 1971, illustrates the appearance of a new element, "added" in space two years earlier (1969). This element is the church, situated at the base of Zmijarnik and, dedicated to St. Forty Martyrs. "Although the church is consecrated, it increasingly assumed the role of Zmijarnik" – concludes Spirovska (1971: 142).

A comparison of previous with Spirovska's research in this place shows that the term "Zmijarnik" according to current local perceptions, refers to more than the cult place as Filipović described.

The fieldwork research in the place of Zmijarnik, which I made on March 22nd. 2014, show the significant changes in peoples' perceptions in context to the place, contributed by the long period of existence of the church at the foot of the hill. Survey has shown that the foot of Zmijarnik is enriched with two more facilities, despite the church. One of them is a grave which is placed in a separate facility, with a Christian sign, which according to villagers' narrations was made of "a woman who had trouble" and who "made the grave and facilities, as such". It is located on the right side of the entrance to the courtyard of the church. The interior of the room, beside a marble slab erected and built in the form of the tomb, consists of two beds placed around it, as well. The room is complemented by a number of icons, set within a place where candles are sold, and burn on the spot i.e. on the same facility. The other is the so-called "fairy water". Over the concreted water fountain there is a part with icons, candles and cups for water drinking or washing. In addition, there are two apple and walnut trees where visitors leave the threads of their cloths on them. Both of objects (a grave and fairy water) are situated in the church courtyard and are used in healing.

The existence of all these sanctities (a church, a grave, fairy water) in this area enables the establishment of new holiness under the auspices of the old. Such sanctities succeeded in strongly disrupting the previously established cult toward snakes related to the place.

Through long period of existence, the church located at the foot of the hill became a key part of its topography, thanks to its commitment to St. Forty Martyrs, as an analogy of the Day of snakes. Simply, Zmijarnik described by Filipović, today is embodied in the church and associated facilities in the courtyard. To my question: Where is the Zmijarnik?, locals gave answers such as: *“This is all Zmijarnik”*, referring to the church and the immediate space, or *“There is no Zmijarnik, that's it. Early, people remove snakes, younger people catch them, but now it is over”* or they simply said: *“it was a lair of snakes”*, in the sense: it no longer exists.

This clearly shows that the site is already highlighted: it is church place. There is no place for snakes, although sometimes it is allowed their formal presence, but it is controlled or it is under the “watchful eye” of the church. In this context, the words of the host, when he will see a snake in the church/monastery courtyard, he does not kill it, but he turns to the snake with the words: *“Your place is not here, here is a monastery place! I have the right here, you have no right! And it goes away”* – he said.² This speaks clearly enough that the church and associated buildings are practically a symbol of “compromise” which locals did in the context of the tradition associated with snakes, in order Zmijarnik to become again a place for visit. Such symbol simply provides legitimate religious affiliation of the space in which these buildings are situated.

Therefore, the dominant term for identifying space today is the term “Monastery / Church St. Forty Martyrs”. This term itself, sublimates the church and the other two facilities located in the churchyard: a grave and fairy water. The existence of two separate features in the place although contradictory to the Christian doctrine still commonly perceived as a set of separate characteristics, adds the Christian identity to the site. This is due to the numerous

² Ljubomir Todorovski, born 1950 in Orman. The interview was conducted in March 22, 2014 in churchyard.

Christian symbols embedded in them: a cross, candles, etc. Therefore, epithets which people used for the place are: *sveto*, *vakafsko*, *crkovno*, which mean: sacred, church place.

The folk sayings and origins of the Zmijarnik/Church of St. Forty Martyrs

A very important factor in the development of the sanctity of the place is given by folk sayings. They mediate the place meaning for locals. Unfortunately, the ethnographic notes of Filipović and Spirovska show absence of stories that explain the occurrence of the place. Besides this, the beliefs associated with the snakes in regard to the place, is enough to explore how Zmijarnik articulated in social context, in the past, which will be discussed below. It is a good base for understanding people's motivations of visiting it, as well.

Recent research provides data that reveal how the place got today's holiness and meaning. At the time when the interest for the place declined, the church was placed at the foot of the hill, which shows that people feel the need of renew place's energy and vitality.

The storytelling ensured that the sacredness of the place should continue as Christian site. The place where the church should have been built was found by a man, as a result of dream.

The narration speaks about a person from Vučji Dol³ who had a dream, in which the villagers had to dig, and to build a church 40 steps from the elm tree located in the area of Zmijarnik, because "there is a grave". The man appearing in his dream said: "this is my home, this is my grave." He notified the local people. Narratives speak that at the beginning, locals refused it, and after a while they were willing to see is it a proper place.

So, such a dream is perceived as a manifestation of a "power" that can indicate the location of a church. The discovery of the grave at the site had a powerful effect upon great numbers of people.

My informant said: *"Once we opened the grave, we found relics and bones... we collected them in a bag ... this grave is from*

³ Today this village is called Volklovo, although the locals still use the term Vučji Dol as a name for it.

Roman time...and we called a priest to requiems these relics, we did not know who they belonged to..."⁴

Having in mind that the site had archaeological significance, the villagers were unable to build the church there. My informant said: *"they (competent authorities) treated it as an archaeological site. People were forced to make a church with displacement of the location."*⁵

So, according to local narratives, the new location of the church was rediscovered in the place at 40 steps above its previous site. As we can see, the storytelling is a way to deeply understand the place. It is based in some ways on facts, i.e. according to available data an early Christian basilica dating from V–VI century was found there (Lilić, 2002: 641–645). However, the story has been embellished over time and has taken today's form.

The place has taken greater religious sense thanks to the legends which are responding to the question: Who owns the bones? So, one version of the legend says that Forty Martyrs' remains were buried there. Here is how my informant described St. Forty Martyrs: *"They were fighters for today's faith... They were persecuted by heathenism, they were martyred by them. They put them in the frozen lake... in ice water. Nearby, they put a fire, as well... to make them repent and come out from the cold water to the warm fire. But they did not repent, they endured, glory to God, they endured; they did not feel cold. Then, forty wreaths were let down from heaven"*.⁶

Another version speaks that the discovered bones are St. Kuzman and Damjan's, (so-called *Sveti Vračī*), who are considered as miraculous doctors among people.

Although the bones are collected from the site by state institutions, the uncovered place is considered sacred, and has invested with cultural/religious transformation. The grave made in the place has taken powerful emotions related to its cure and health capabilities evoked by the above mentioned narrations.

⁴ Ljubomir Todorovski, born 1950 in Orman. The interview was conducted in March 22, 2014 in churchyard.

⁵ Boge Nedelkovski, from Volkovo, interview by Dragica Popovska, March 22, 2014 in churchyard.

⁶ Older woman who came to the church "St. Forty Martyrs" from Skopje, interview by Dragica Popovska, March 22, 2014.

There are narratives about the “fairy water”, as well. They speak about water existing in the place, together with elm trees, long time ago. According to narrative content, the fairy water today shape is outcome of the work of an Albanian, who done that because fairies “ask” him to “do something” there. Story tells that he cut the branch of an elm tree which is perceived as a breach of the “prescribed” rules. Namely, concerning to folk beliefs there were bans on not cutting the elm. It is associated with the idea that elm tree is a place where supernatural beings – fairies exist.

For place’s connection with fairies speak the statements from interviewees, as well: *“I have heard it from my mother and grandmother. They told me that around midnight, there was smoke ... here in this place was felt the smoke of candles, but without incense. The Fairy usually escapes from incense, she makes lunch on candles, dinners exactly, she makes dinners, and therefore the smell is felt around. Many people have felt it, and my mom and my grandmother told me. Several people had similar experience, at night. Going from Vučji Dol towards Orman, a man was riding a bicycle; the fairy climbed on the bicycle, he could not drive, he felt weight. It happens very rarely. Only at night, there is nothing during the day. No one can see fairies, they are invisible... you can only feel them, they eject sounds, I have heard those stories... Thus, we call it fairy place.”*⁷

The fairies appearance on the place through the water is seen as a power that can influence the person’s life, regarding with heal, cure, protect etc.

All findings and narratives related to them give sacred testimony to the place.

Time activity of Zmijarnik

Space and time are two key dimensions of human existence, which along with the movement of human cultural evolution is differently perceived (Cifrić and Trako, 2010: 31). In this context, the functioning time of Zmijarnik has been matched with the rhythm of nature, in the past. The traditional time synchronized with natural, includes human practices, beliefs and activities in the specific place,

⁷ Ljubomir Todorovski.

in general, adapted to it. Although, Filipović mentioned two days of place activity in the past (March 9th and 22nd), in the following text, I will focus only on the rites and customs which refer to March 22nd, as the date which has importance in the traditional beliefs associated with Zmijarnik, even today. Namely, the date March 22nd, known among the population as *Mladenci* or St. Forty Martyrs (Cetiries mučenici), in folk beliefs is perceived as a day of the overall awakening the nature. This period is the time of positive snakes "activity", in relation to humans, as well.

Such perceptions are characteristic of traditional concepts of members' opinion of different ethnic and religious communities living in Macedonia. The natural order of time has its beginning and its end: the time when the snakes go out and their return back to the Zmijarnik, the time of snakes' "blessedness" which begins and ends etc. According to the belief, the awakening of vegetation in nature causing warming of the Earth contributes the snakes to wake up exactly at St. Forty Martyrs, and to get out of their shelters. Then, according to folk narratives in the past, the snakes are collected by their "snake king", which has a valuable stone on his head; then in the evening the "snake queen" and snakes' judges to them, depending on their work achieved during the day (Filipović, 1939: 393). In light of these views, it is interesting to note that in accordance to local beliefs, a snake which will sting someone in the summer (it is believed that snakes are staying out of Zmijarnik until September, when they withdraw again), cannot return back to Zmijarnik, because the Earth and other snakes "will not receive it". This snake remains in the field through the winter, and it cannot survive, because it is freezing (Filipović, 1937: 144). Such views very clearly determine the desire of visitors to Zmijarnik to establish interaction, with the snakes at the time of their "safety" in the concrete site. In this sense, the natural order of the time is cyclical i.e. it is repeated.

Recent studies show that the old cultural patterns related to time have been replaced with new ones. The celebration of *Mladenci* / St. Forty Martyrs which according to traditional concepts is celebrated as the beginning of spring and as the day dedicated to snakes, in today's circumstances loses its meaning. While nothing has changed in the base of the natural order of time, however the change in

understanding of time creates consequences, witnessing the trend of the “suspension” of natural time (Cifrić and Trako, 2010: 31).

Christian cultural patterns are increasingly crowding out old beliefs, thanks to the setting of the church within the space. Instead of the cult toward the snakes, people today on March 22nd celebrate the feast dedicated to the martyrs of the Christian faith.

Hereby, the Zmijarnik continues its “life”, although not in the same shape as before, yet the culture (religion) has been restored and continues to develop under other circumstances.

Visitors

According to Filipović, in 1937 visitors to the place is people from different ethnic and religious traditions (Christians and Muslims), members of the village (Orman and neighboring Vučji Dol, Novo Selo, Bardovci, Zlokukani etc.), and urban environment as well (Skopje). Author states they mainly belong to lower social status, and that there were two “highly educated” women who came from Skopje, as well (Filipović, 1937: 142).

Unfortunately, the Spirovska’s article gives no data onto ethnic, religious and social determination of visitors to the site, so in this context, we cannot do a comparison of the data presented by Filipović.

My research in the place has shown that visitors to the place of the church are mostly Christians, members of different ethnic groups: Macedonians, Serbs, Vlachs, etc. Visitors are men, women and children belonging to different social levels, who come here to seek "cure" or simply to attend the village feast organized by the village members of the church board. The Muslim population: Albanians, Turks, and Roma, visit the site, usually to require help of the fairy water. However, they rarely appear as visitors to the church. This is confirmed by information collected on the field. An interlocutor says: *“Muslim women came and asked to enter the church”. ‘We do not light candles’ (they said). They come in with ribbons, they were ladies; I did not know that they were Muslims. Then, they told me: “We are Muslims; we want to enter the church, because we had a dream.” I asked him: “What did they do in the church, how did they behave?” The interlocutor gave me this answer: “They entered the church, worshipped as they do*

(according to Muslim tradition). They started to put out their arms...I could not tell them not to do that, they do it according to Allah. They left money on the icon of St. Martyrs, and they went out". "Did they know St. Martyrs' icon?" – I asked again. He answered: "They asked about the Saints day, and which icon is dedicated to them. They came here, on this day, March 22nd".⁸

In this context, it can be seen that the church gets the marker function of the space of the Christian community, which in the same time plays an important role as boundary marker between different religious communities. As Stek says "Sanctuaries would thus define a border between "in" and "out" and they would accordingly have operated both as frontier markers and as places of exchanging between the bordering communities" (2009: 58).

This place today is seen as some kind of limit for those "others", i.e. for Muslims. Namely, the setting of the church "St. Forty Martyrs", "determine the audience to whom cultural messages might have been directed" (Stek, 2009: 53). By establishing the church legitimacy of the place, today, visitors Muslims "seek" permission to visit the church. Although it has never been forbidden to them, however, they perceive the place used to be common, as "strange".

Properties, functions and communication with the Zmijarnik

As Filipović described, ritual practices at Zmijarnik, in the respective period are performed at the rising ground and at the foot of the hill. Some visitors usually are climbing the hill to call (with songs and words) and to wait for the snakes. They lay the bits of their clothes on the ground in the hope that snakes will pass through them (Filipović, 1937: 141).

After that, the skillful locals move the snakes down from the rising ground to the foot of the hill, where people sing and dance. The snakes are put near people who dance; visitors gather around the snakes and leave clothes on the ground, so that the snakes can pass through them (Filipović, 1937: 145).

⁸ Ljubomir Todorovski. He is a host of the church of "St. Forty Martyrs". Similar experiences told me the previous church host, as well.

It was believed that the snake passing through the visitor's clothes will contribute to achieve their desires: sicknesses will be cured, single people will marry and/or create their own family, barren women will give birth etc. According to folk beliefs, snakes passing through the clothes “pulls luck”, whilst snakes avoiding the clothes mean that the snake “does not accept” the “nišan”⁹, because the clothes owner has either sinned, or made a magic spell (Filipović, 1937: 146).

In Macedonian mythology, as well as in other Slavic cultures (Conrad, 2001: 4; Vražinovski, 1998: 125–132), people have ambivalent view point toward the snake. On the one hand it is cause of fear, but on the other hand, it is the subject of a cult. As we can see, snakes in a particular space and time receive sacred properties by becoming the subject of a cult. “Safety” is a major feature of all snakes which come out of the Zmijarnik in a distinctive period, even the most poisonous ones: viper, honored viper, and grass snake. According to these beliefs, visitors to the Zmijarnik are not afraid of them; they even touched the snakes many times by hand (Filipović, 1937: 144; Spirovska, 1971: 145).

A second important feature of these snakes is their ability to “heal”, to remove spells from visitors, to provide offspring etc. Snakes are seen as “sweet goods” that “know where to go” (Filipović, 1937: 144), which practically determine the characteristics of snakes to “recognize” whom to help. The following statement confirms this: “It (a snake) knows why it does not want (to pass). The person who owns the “nišan” must have a sin, or her/his house or he/she for himself/herself must have magic spell. If such “nišan” belongs to a woman who has no children, then this behavior of the snake means that the fertility is taken away from her” (Filipović, 1937: 144).

Such understandings of the snake in the place contributed Zmijarnik to become a place with cult importance among people of the village of Orman and the wider environment. In fact, this place is seen as a link with the “supernatural” which is maintained through ritual practices that are part of the tradition associated with the site.

⁹ Items of clothes which visitors leave on the ground to be passed by the snake are denoted by the term “nišan”. “Nišan” can be: a scarf, a towel, a shirt, a hat, pants, a belt and etc.

Given that the rituals refer more to the cult toward the snake rather than the space itself, below I will give a brief analysis of some important aspects of practices performed in the period of 1937.

Ritual practice is actually a system of symbols, which are framed in time (March 22nd) and spatial context (Zmijarnik). The behavior of its participants is determined through a series of symbolic practices, as well. The aim is to ensure fertility, health and happiness in the lives of each participant separately.

Communication with Zmijarnik, and with the snakes as well, in the past, can be achieved on the individual, family and collective level. An important part of the ritual is the passing of the snake through the visitor's clothes which are left on the ground, in the front of the snakes. A person, who could not attend the ritual, would send part of his clothes by another person.

The data show that the clothes are emerging as the equivalent of the person who owns it, and practically through it, man realizes the communication with the snake, in a particular space and time. The snake's passage through the clothes is interpreted as an act of "purification" of any magical spells, but also, as an act that maintains human health. This is consistent with the belief that a disease enters into the human body through clothes (Schubert, 1984: 147). As we can see, the snake has played an important role in apotropaic and prophylactic magic, because it is able to positively influence negative staff (illness, magic spells...).

As it is known, numbers take an important role in the magic rituals. The ethnographic data show that the number three appears as a number with magical character. Namely, to achieve a desire, it was necessary a snake's passing through the clothes three times. It is an implicit understanding that success is guaranteed with three passages of the snake across the clothes, which symbolizes the full completion of the ritual practices. In fact, the magic practice in all its various forms is widespread of repeating the procedure three times mainly (Čulinović-Konstantinović, 1989: 39).

Filipović noticed that the direction from west to east of the snake's passing through the clothes is very important (Filipović, 1937: 145–146). Within the mythology it is formed double semantic oppositions, according to which the West matched with: north-autumn / winter-dark-night-death-down-left, and East with: south-spring / summer-day-light-life- up-right (Vražinovski, 2000: 409).

After all, this shows clearly enough the symbolic value of the ritual practice.

Such activity had meaning for both, the individual and community values. Namely, individual values such as health, need for family, children, etc. were consistent with the norms of the community, which should provide the same prosperity (Popovska, 2011: 122).

As a place where an important annual rite has been held, Zmijarnik provided the cohesion of the community. Therefore, its function among people is perceived as positive.

Recent data speaks about an organized fair in the church courtyard in which different products are sold. Visitors play and sing accompanied by musical instruments. The religious event is organized during holiday.

First of all, visitors enter the small building in which the grave is situated. Here, in front of the icon of Virgin Mary, people light candles and leave money. Some of the visitors lay around the grave or on the beds placed in the room. There is a belief that lying on the grave will bring them cure, and will get the desired offspring for visitors who have a problem with infertility. The cure capabilities of the grave are described by villagers: *“This is a place for disease or for women who have no children”*, *“people who could not speak before have been cured there”*.

Afterwards the visitors go to the church where they make religious practices such as baptizing, lighting candles and leaving money on the icon of St. Forty Martyrs. After visitors finish the rites in the church, they are directed to the so-called fairy water. They wash themselves three times with the water and throw coins in it. It is believed that the water has the ability to cure skin diseases. *“The fairy water is for external skin diseases”*, *“people here wash and wipes. If you have lichen, or warts ... just wash with this water, you will be cleaning, done...”* To substantiate such water curative, informant says: *“I have seen with my eyes how a lady was coming here, and how she left, after three times washing herself with water. One Saturday, another Saturday, third Saturday, she left this place cleans.”*¹⁰ Visitors who “have worries” left thread of clothes to one of the two trees, after washing with fairy water. According to my

¹⁰ Ljubomir Todorovski.

research data they frequently left parts of clothing, mostly shirts on the apple tree.

Visitors participate in the folk-dancing, playing in a wide space in front of the church. The church board members usually put a snake caught the day before in the middle of the folk-dance. The visitors put parts of clothing on the ground, hoping the snake would pass through them. No crossing over the cloth is interpreted that magic was done to the visitor. Here is the statement of my interlocutor: *“We let the snake here in this place, in the middle of the dancing circle. Here, people leave wipes and towels for the snake to cross them; they leave her money...it is a tradition left from my father, grandfather...Some people will stand here and the snake would not pass over the clothes. One woman left 150 denars and the snake did not pass through her clothes anyways; she can leave a thousand denars if she wants, but when the snake does not want to cross, does not... It means that the person has a magic spell. If the snake passes over the clothes, the person will be free of the magic spell.”*¹¹

Unfortunately, the ritual with the snake in the churchyard was absent this year. According to the information obtained through my research process the villagers could not find a snake. Here's what my interlocutor said: *“We did not catch a snake this year ... yesterday we were searching ...people from the board, but we could not... I mean really, we tried hard to find a snake. And today we will be without a snake. Otherwise each year...it is tradition. The place is Zmijarnik, the whole place is called Zmijarnik.”*¹²

However, visitors were dancing and singing along to the sounds of drums and other instruments, without the presence of the snake. Considering that St. Martyrs' day, according to Christian tradition is a fast day, church committee members were organizing the lunch – a potato stew, after which, at around 14 p.m. the guests began to leave the place.

From the previous presented we can see that the setting of the church influences the snake to lose its monopolized role of exclusive marker of the specific space. The church becomes a visible symbol

¹¹ Goran Petkovski, born 1972 in Orman. Interview was conducted in March 22, 2014 in churchyard.

¹² Goran Petkovski.

of the sacredness of the place. In this context, the presence of snakes within the ritual practice in the site is only formal. Martyrs / saints / icons now assume the role of snakes, whose function is now, overcome. This is because, the church, according to beliefs, has the same capacity as the snakes exit from Zmijarnik: helps healing, rescues sinners...

Now, older generations who once came to Zmijarnik seeking heal and expecting help of snakes require it from the church where they practically found personification incarnation of Zmijarnik.

New generations today attend the church, the grave, and fairy water. All of them became important to visitors. The grave where is believed the martyrs were buried, continues to be an essential part of the ascribed persons, although many people know that it is empty. On the other hand, the fairy water summarizes stories about fairies held in memory of senior representatives of the community and today elements attached to it. Even a candlestick which was found, stocked in an elm tree, in the vicinity of the church, participates in the process of the place's sacralisation in order to actualize cultural values that are desirable in the present.

As can be seen from the previously presented, it is about different conceptualizations of the role or function of the place Zmijarnik / St. Forty Martyrs, which is directly related to the ideas or perceptions of a particular space, shaped in respective time.

Reasons for transformation of place

Research has shown that Zmijarnik became "place" thanks to the ideas and attitudes of the population, and their relationship to a specific space. It is about, as Lothian (1996) makes much the same point, intangible factors that influence the creation of "place" through people's actions, which actually would not have existed without human perception (quoted in Dumbović Bilušić, 2014: 189).

Forms of perception of the particular place, in close, depend on social and economic change in traditional community. Change in work and educational structure of the population of the village and its surroundings, as well as changed economic conditions indirectly influenced the change in space i.e. to change the culture order of

Zmijarnik. In this context, the greatest impact has proximity to the City of Skopje.

In fact, the transformation of the village, in which surrounding the hill is located, has been noted by Spirovska, as well. According to her, once serfdom village of Orman, described by Vasiljević (1930: 186), in the relevant year counted four time greater number of houses, equipped with radio and television antennas. The author notes that “Orman and neighboring villages Vučjidol and Novo Selo can already be considered as suburbs of Skopje, where many people are employed” (Spirovska, 1971: 142).

Such processes involve daily movement of population from village to town. It has impact to change people’s perceptions which have undergone intensive contact with other tradition of living. These processes contribute to the place changes in context of the expressive dimension of heritage, which disturb its cultural stability. This is confirmed by previous data, which speaks about the absence of interest of visiting Zmijarnik, 10 to 15 years before the settlement of the church.

On the other site, the setting of religious object in a place reflects the establishment of new strategies in shaping the lives of the local population. The existence of the church contributed to the maintenance of the socio-cultural function of Zmijarnik within traditional society. It continued to serve as a “community center” and to contribute to community’s cohesion as a place where various activities are organized. After all, as Memmott and Long said, social understanding of place, originated and developed and then maintained by groups that have collective experience in the place as a part of their environment (2002: 40).

The foregoing clearly shows that we can point out two main reasons for the transformation of space of so-called Zmijarnik: contact between different traditions of living and changes in the natural unity of place.

Conclusion

The example of Zmijarnik discussed above has shown the ‘place’ as “realm of meaning and experience” (Cresswell, 2013). It results from as Canter (1977) said “relationship between actions,

conceptions and physical attributes”, as well (Gustafson, 2001; quoted in: Wang, 2008: 56).

In the past, this place occupied a privileged position in traditional communities, due to the beliefs associated with snakes’ presence in it. It had effected to its perception as a ‘cult’ place and to its naming as Zmijarnik (Snakes’ Hill). Alderman states that naming as “a noteworthy cultural practice” has “ability to create a sense of continuity over time, but also it has capacity for changing the challenging lines of identity” (Alderman, 2008: 195).

My research has shown that “discoveries” originate in a place (a grave, fairy water) including the church settlement, as well; they become the sources of cultural change of place. First of all, it represents a change in the symbolization of a given place. Having in mind that “symbols are visual representations” of the place, “identifying symbols that signify a new future is an important part of culture change” (Cameron, 2008: 20). They visualize a new interpretation of the place in people’s perception. It has resulted in the renaming of the place to “Monastery/Church of St. Forty Martyrs“. The process of renaming of a place “represents a way of creating new connections between the past and the present” (Alderman, 2008: 195), which on the other side, influences the change of the lines of previous identity of the place.

Simply, the spatial distribution of Christian elements in the place contributed to shape and reshape its form, function, and meaning of the same place. People’s sense of place and its identity change within local community, as well (Alderman, 2012: 195). The reasons for this should be sought in the development of traditional society and the various processes which follow this development.

Thus, the church becomes a visible symbol of the sacredness of the place. It involves behavior, ideas and perceptions according to Christian tradition. But, apart this, elements of traditional knowledge are still recognized, although only on formal level.

A comparative account of the successive stages related to this place emphasizes Gustafson (2001: 6) claim that “places are continually produced and reproduced in interaction of their surroundings and thus may acquire new meanings over a period of time” (quoted in Wang, 2008: 56).

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