

## THE STUDY OF SACRED STONE SITES: FIELD RESEARCH EXPERIENCES

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**Key words:** fieldwork, research experiences, questionnaires, interviews, culture

**Summary:** This paper aims to present the approaches to the study of sacred stones (in Republic of Macedonia) and to contribute toward discussions of different field research experiences. Particular emphasis is given to fieldwork techniques and research practice, as a primary resource of providing evidence and giving insight into explored cultures.

**Клучни зборови:** теренска работа, истражувачки искуства, прашалници, интервјуа, култура

**Резиме:** Овој труд има за цел да ги претстави пристапите за изучување на светите камења (во Република Македонија) и да даде придонес во дискусиите за различни теренски истражувачки искуства. Посебен акцент е ставен на теренската работа и истражувачката практика, како примарен извор за обезбедување податоци и давање увид во културите кои се истражуваат.

Beliefs and ritual practices associated with the stone and the symbiosis of religions in which it manifests itself is a complex topic that requires an extended period of research. In this sense my own field research of the sacred stones in the Republic of Macedonia was carried out in the period from 2000 to 2010, although it occasionally continued in the following years, by expanding the field of interest in various types of sacred places. This research resulted in three books and numerous scientific papers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I will name only books: Dragica Popovska. 2009. *Svetite kamenja vo makedonskata narodna religija i obredna praksa / Holy stones and rituals of Macedonian folk religion*. Skopje:

Some of them deal with method of research in a larger or smaller amount, but do not deal with field work experiences. So, I would like to present some of them in this paper, which aims to contribute towards discussions of different field research experiences and methods.

Experience has always been a central term in cultural studies, recognized dimension of research practice itself (Pickering, 2008: 17), but it is noticeable “the lack of formal discussion and awareness of methods and methodological issues and problems” (Pickering, 2008: 2). The purpose of this paper is to indicate to the some problems and difficulties which can be rises, and how they can be covered, within the field research process.

My interest in studying this subject came from my friend's narrative of her experience during visit a cult stone related to a long-awaited pregnancy. The woman who is intellectual, over many years visited clinics, where doctors told her, "everything is fine" with her and her husband's health. On somebody's suggestion, she visited the stone called Dupen Kamen (the stone with opening) in the village Drzhilovo, near Skopje, after which she became pregnant. When I asked if she thought she got pregnant because she visited the stone, she said: "I don't know, what is important is that I got pregnant". It was an interesting situation to research especially because we live in a modern society where such considerations are unusual.

The goal-orientated investigation into the social and cultural phenomena is qualitative research which was developed mostly in anthropology and sociology, “as a tool for accessing the specific data among the particular population” (Žikić 2007: 123-124). The study was designed to examine the sacred stones as a set with their different features. The task was to take a data and organize the knowledge on the goal to understand all of the features of the sacred stones that were discovered and the special features that are specific to each. It was important to uncover the meaning of the cult/sacred stone in the eyes of the population as a set of ideas related to its sacredness.

The biggest problem initially was to determine the locations of these cult places. Some of them were identified with the help of available literature where on same occasions cult stones were mentioned. My research continued with questioning people who gave recommendations

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Selektor; D. Popovska. 2012. *Mistikata na kamenot / The mystique of the stone*. Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija; D. Popovska. 2017. *Sveti mesta vo Republika Makedonija: spodelena vrednost na različni etnički zaednici i religiozni tradicii / Sacred places in Republic of Macedonia: shared value of different ethnic communities and religious traditions*. Skopje: Komisija za odnosi so verskite zaednici i religiozni grupi.

and directions to some locations. There were also useful informations on the internet where some cult places were offered as tourist attractions. However, the most data I collected on the field, where I did not only got information about potential cult places, but also was able to continuously conduct and improve the research. It was a surprise to me how many stones are perceived as sacred within the Macedonian traditional beliefs.

Ethnographic fieldwork research can be organized in two approaches. The first one is the “extended stay” which involves spending an extended amount of time, in one location (loosely defined as Anglo-Saxon), and the second one is an ethnographic approach, call “back and forth”, whereby researchers make repeated short visits to a field site for a month or so at a time, often over many years (loosely defined as Balkan/Eastern European) (Brković, Hodges 2015: 108).<sup>2</sup>

I opted for the model, loosely defined as "Balkan/Eastern European" which involves a short stay in the area of research, with practice of repeating the research and compared with the previous findings.

In doing so, I didn't ignored the significance of the stationary method, which as some researchers say “means the deepest penetration into the feelings and thoughts of the population, understanding the real causes of that condition or such behavior” (Drljača, 1987: 25). However I believe the stationary method will encompass many issues that have secondary importance to (the subject of research) and in turn, the studying of the sacred stones and beliefs associated with them. It is not enough to just 'be there'.

The circumstances of collecting the data in 'natural conditions', which are not adapted to research purposes, also gives a characteristic feature of ethnographic work. (Hamersli, Atkinson, 2009: 4)

The method I opted for is particularly effective in explorin this subject, because most of the research is focused on the region which is dictated by the location of the stone. This usually covers one or two villages,<sup>3</sup> where I stay about few days and then move to another location. The knowledge produced through repeated short visits to the sites of

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<sup>2</sup> On the basis of an anthropological conference: *Anthropology Otherwise: Rethinking Approaches to Fieldwork in Different Anthropological Traditions*, organised in 2011 at the Petnica Science Centre near Valjevo, Serbia. One of the participants of the workshops was the author of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Cult/sacred stones are usually located on high periferal, bordering places between two neighboring villages.

research is no different from the knowledge obtained by the stationary method, especially considering that I am researching in my home country whose culture I know well.

The study of beliefs and behaviors of people towards cult/sacred stones was not confined to the rural environment. It also included the urban environment, where under the influence of village-city migrations, such beliefs, though rare, still exist. Research in urban areas was conducted through informal conversations.

Given that my research was related to the informant who would take me to the place of 'the event' of the ritual and thus spending a few hours of time with me, I made practice of entering into the informant's house, bringing some gifts such as coffee, juice, or cookies. Sometimes in the return for the given information I offered them money, which was rarely accepted.

Having in mind the distinctiveness of the topic with which I work,<sup>4</sup> I practice individual field work. I think that self-ethnographical research is much better, although it last longer. I didn't have any problems regarding my status during the research, because people accepted me well. Individual work on the field site made it easier for me to overcome problems as they emerged during the research. However, the physical presence is not a problem in itself, but the appropriate activity of the researcher can be. Most often, the ceremony on the stone sites takes place on an individual level and with the reduced number of observers: husband, mother-in-law and etc., and the presence of the researcher is less desirable or completely undesirable. From the other side, the ritual practice can easily be monitored when the ceremony is collective (sometimes whole village takes part in the ritual). This means that, according to the conditions, I was chose a way of approaching the field.

In terms of data collection, most often I talked openly about the subject of the research and built a friendly relationship with the informants. Sometimes, I secretly got involved in a ritual. When I realize that I couldn't get some information and that the informant wasn't willing to leave his work because he will lost three to four hours, I become a part of the ritual

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<sup>4</sup> The population is reluctant to talk about the problems that it has as a 'family without children.' Although we live in a modern society having children still remains one of the main purposes of marriage, both in rural and in urban environments. Women who can't have children are faced with stigmatization.

without hesitation - that is posing as the person who needed assistance from the stone in terms of providing offspring. In such moments of crucial importance I used my husband who was my accompany in the research. So that was the reason enough for man to leave his work and to go with me to the stone. This included not only walking up to the high location of the stone, but also passing through very narrow openings, performing the ritual practice and even eating the insects with a small piece of bread. In the beginning, this was an unpleasant situation for me (to eat spiders, ants), but the thought that I had to play the role of a participant left little space for maneuvering. It was a bit harder for my husband to pass through the narrow openings, thinking he would get stuck in them (on some sacred stones it was desirable the husband pass through the opening). His initial opposition did not have any consequences for the research because people said: "Leave it. We (the men) are like that". So I had a full observation of the ritual, and I was playing the role of direct consumer of the powers which stone possessed according to the belief.

Getting access to the field means making strategies, discovering potential obstacles to access and possible ways to overcome them. It was necessary to have previous information about the stone's time functioning, to provide 'opened' site for study. Because, if there are no any ritual practice at that moment, and no people who communicate with the stone, it means that site is 'closed' for getting research data.

In this context, I will mention one situation during the data collection in the village of Ilovica, near Strumica. The time to visit the stone was not appropriate, and the whole population was busy with agricultural work. I walked from person to person and I could not provide access to the stone site, anyway. After a long time, when I found the men who will take us (me and my husband) to the stone, climbed on a wooden car pulls from a horse, it starts to rain heavily. Adapting to the field conditions culminated when wet to the bare skin, and all in mud, on the raining, we waited for a mare Maya to drink water from the stream through which we passed. When we finally reached the stone site, a mare did not want to cross the meadow, where the stone was lonely located. Later we saw that there were many small snakes through which we had to pass to reach the stone. The previously show that field role is not always under the complete control of the researcher. Establishing field links can be a stressful, but also exciting experience, and the researcher needs to learn how to deal with her/his own feelings in order to successfully complete her/his task.

The preparation of the questionnaires that would help in the process of research took a long time and they were supplemented with each visit to the fill. I didn't focus only on the stone as a material phenomenon, but also on the ideas and images formed by it. I viewed them also as "an ideational cognitive system, as a system of knowledge, beliefs and values that exist in the minds of its representatives". (Žikić, 2006: 11)

The questionnaires were created to answer the question of how people 'see' the cult, what are the reasons for it to be accepted in modern life and through the stories associated with these stones to reach the essence of the explanation of the origin and thus the importance of cult stones to people. I not going to present all the ideas mentioned in this project, but here are some key questions used in the questionnaire:

What's the name of the Stone? Why is it called by that name? Is there another epithet for the stone?...What does it remind you of? What is its shape?...How did it come to be? Can you tell a legend about its genesis? ...Is there any force in the stone, a spirit, a saint and so on? Who?...What illness does it treat? Does it always have the same function? Does it help you? Does it harm you? When? How is it helpful? How is it harmful? Who is the visitor of the stone? Women, men, children, Christians, Muslims ..? Healthy or sick people? Who is the recipient of it powers -good or bad person? Is there a mediator? Does the stone affect animals? Which animals? Can the stone affect on the weather, including causing disasters?... Is there a certain day to visit the stone? In which period of day or night? Is it possible to visit the stone another day? Is there a time when is advantageous to visit the stone?...Does the visitor need to prepare to visit the stone? In what way? Does he need to bring something with him? What? When he comes to the stone how does he address it? With requests....Is there any spoken formula? Does the visitor promised something to the stone? What? Spoken formula? What is the ritual of stone? (I personally follow the rituals regularly, but I want to hear the interpretation of the informants) Are there any additional things needed for the proper performance of rituals? Which? Where to purchase them? After the ritual, does the visitor take anything from a stone? What? Is there an obligation to return back to the stone? When do the people bring what they promised to the stone? Is there any point in time when the promise must be made? What does one usually bring?...Is there a blood sacrifice? What animal is sacrificed? Young or old? Male or female?...Who, where and when perform the slaughter? What is done with the blood of the sacrificed animal? What is done with the meat of the sacrificed animal? What will happen if you don't bring what you promise to

the stone?...What happens if your visit to the stone has not given results in healing...? (Popovska, 2009: 143-6)

However most often I did not use the questionnaire during the interview, because people usually do not want an interviewer who reads and then asks questions. It served as my research agenda that I followed to have control over the interview. I tried to record spontaneous statements or conversations among several informants who took to chatter trading to find out what had happened during a certain period.

The survey covered approximately seventy stones located throughout the country that manifest cultic and magical power. Most often the research involved one or two villages where the stone is located. In the most cases we had to walk to reach the stone. So the research was conducted not only around the ritual connected with the stone, but also in the wider rural community, where I followed the statements which show how the people shape their behavior toward the stone.

In most cases, beliefs and manifestations of those beliefs were recorded at the place and of the time of occurrence. The time of the activity and the visit by people with their folk understanding is very important for the full realization of the desired outcome of the stone. It happened many times that in the same day I visited two or three cult/sacred places, especially on St.George's Day when it is most common to communicate with the stone. I usually stay from two to three hours in order to register the practice at the time of occurrence.<sup>5</sup>

The surveys were repeated in the following years due to the necessity of monitoring the changes in the domain of traditional culture, considering that it is not a static, but a dynamic category.

Having in mine that Macedonia is a multiethnic environment, the survey includes more ethnic groups: Macedonians, Albanians, Roma, Vlachs, Serbs and others living on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia. These people are of two main religious confessions: Christians and Muslims. Their age structure varies from young to old. They belong to different educational levels - from intellectuals to the uneducated, living in rural, but also in urban environments. However, a particularly important

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<sup>5</sup> St. George's Day is celebrated on May 06th. The connection with St. George's Day holiday is symbolic, considering that this holiday in many parts of Macedonia was considered the beginning of the 'new year'. This day according to folk perceptions is a day of renewal of life and vegetation and people have created associations with human reproduction. (Popovska, 2009: 92)

role in the interviews was the woman who emerges as the main bearer of the ritual.

I not only interviewed the participants in the ritual, but also older people who tell their own views of the stone, as tradition transmitted from previous generations. Older people who live in patriarchal environments near a place of existence of stone, often unconsciously present their vision for the stone, which is characteristic for the corresponding culture.

My observations during the research were written down on paper in the form of field notes immediately after 'the event', most often in the vehicle and the data from my informants was recorded. I think that it is particularly important to record because they say things that seem unimportant at the moment, but during further elaboration of the data they can be of great help in the reconstruction of events.

Usually after every trip to the field I immediately transcribe the recorded event in order not to gather a lot of audio material and at the same time to help me to get better visibility of the data. This process requires a lot of time. I put on paper the entire interview and do not do any selection of it, especially since I try to keep my conversation with the informants within the set task. This transcription process in many instances proves to be useful, because a lot of the data can be used in further research and the domain of the information associated with the cult was wide. Certainly the data selection was done later in the course of the analysis. The cult of the stone is not a static category, but a changeable category. I think each statement formal and informal should be noted because it give much guidance on how the cult developed through history, that is to follow the contamination by the elements of 'modern' religions - Christianity and Islam. Analytical notes and ideas emerging as a strategy for further research, were written in the margin of the transcription or attached to it.

After leaving the environment in which I researched most often I remained in contact with some of the informants who were well acquainted with folk culture in their place of living. Until today I still keep to be in contact with many of them.

During the collection of the data, I also recorded folk interpretations and names for the elements examined. This is particularly important because such folk vocabulary shows us the way, in which people organize their own views of the surrounding nature, including the stone as part of nature. When presenting the findings in books produced from the research, I regularlee used quoted statements by informants (folk language). I think that's the best way to show how true a certain belief really is. At the end of



the paper I regularly give data that clarifies the folk terminology included in the analysis.

On the field I also used the method of photography, to create sources materials of the subject of research. This is especially important because in this way the semiotic analysis of photography is included in case you forget the appearance of the stone. This visual presentation of the cult stones research is particularly important, not only because its appearance is crucial in selecting the stone as 'sacred' but also to compare the stone's appearance in different periods of research.<sup>6</sup> Because "photos fix our situation, and on the other hand, they always give us the opportunity to get a new look, to refresh the memories in a new way and giving new meaning and dimension of the "Story" (Stojanović, 2012: 304).

The attitude that "the anthropologist should not be concerned with the truth or falsity of certain data, but that it should be interpreted as a range of ideas that represents a culture of living" (Pritchard, 1972: 17) was my motto during the survey which was conducted without any prejudice. However, narratives "are not simple reflections of a set of 'facts': rather, they are organising devices" through which the individuals or groups interpret and constitute their world (Lawler, 2008: 32).

The analysis of the obtained data was treated in two stages. Initially it was important to uncover the meaning of the cult/sacred stone in the eyes of the population as a set of ideas related to its sacredness. For this purpose first it was made description of customs and beliefs associated with about thirty cult stones, as specific examples.

In processing the material, the synkretetic method was used which is based on material from the Slavic and Balkan traditions (Vinogradova, 1989) through compatible elements from the descriptive, functional and structural - semiological methods. Although this pattern of research refers to mythological creatures, I adapted it to my focus of interest – sacred stones. Certain elements of this scheme were excluded as unsuitable and I introduced new elements that I thought would give a more accurate picture of the sacred stones. So with this method I managed to examine the sacred stones as a set with their different features. They were analyzed at different levels: linguistic, morphological and functional, with the goal to understand

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<sup>6</sup> Often the exterior of the stone is expose to changes that results from ritual practices: the scraping of the stone and drinking it with water, taking of small bits of the stone and carrying them as a kind of amulet or taken a small bit of stone and brought at home with the belief that the stone will bring luck to the one that owns it.

all of the features of the sacred stones that were discovered and the special features that are specific to each (Popovska, 2012a: 96).

In addition, an attempt was made to define the term ‘sacred stone’ in Macedonian folk religion<sup>7</sup>, based on the results of my research. The analysis reveals the coded semiotic values of the sacred stones, clearly show how a seemingly ordinary stone in nature, through its external appearance, location, color, naturally built symbols, is transformed into a sacred stone. According to the folk-religion these sacred stones have healing powers.

The comparative analysis of sacred stones in Macedonia contributed to highlighting their typological match and simultaneously revealed the special features that are specific to each sacred stone. Such comparisons in some cases, as seen in the second phase of the research also highlight the ethnic relationships, contacts and mutual influences of different ethnic traditions.

Using the previous results as a starting point, the next phase was to move to the field of study of religions in Macedonia observed through the prism of the magic and cult function of the stone. I focused on the stone as a form of belief rooted in archaic religious stratum, which in the course of its existence also contaminated other elements of the existing ‘modern’ religions. The analysis included about twenty cult stones.

Religion and mythology as forms of culture are not static categories, but a process that is prone to change, a process that lasts for centuries. Hence the historical method was used to analyze these beliefs from the first available data on religion until Christianization or Islamization of the population contributed to the transformation of some of these beliefs.

A comparative study of beliefs and rituals associated with the stone, involved describing the customs and beliefs of the population to determine their significance in human life. This was not only a description of what is visible from the outside, but instead the emphasis was primarily on how people see the cult from the stance of their own faith. The influence of religion shows how certain elements possessed by the stone are adjustable to the appropriate religion and to contemporary life. I registered many

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<sup>7</sup> Mutual influence of non-Christianity and Christianity contributed to the appearance of a ‘new’ religion, which in the Balkan area is called ‘folk religion’. It includes a set of beliefs, traditions and customs that are part of the folk tradition and not directly connected with certain religious teachings. Given that folk religion is a variable category it requires study in more contexts.

interesting statements which showed the opinion on the individual level and then I compared them with other participants in the group. When the statements were more or less repeated, "we can say that there is cultural reception and perception" (Žikić, 2010: 22).

The links between mythology associated with the stone and the environment were also examined. Stories are embedded in our daily lives and in our understanding of the world that surrounds us, but often remain 'invisible' against the main trends of cultural and social processes. (Stark, 2005: 44)

For a more precise analysis of beliefs associated with sacred stone in the population of the two religious confessions in Macedonia, it was necessary to use the Bible and the Kuran as sources. This was in order to come to an understanding of the whole system of ideas under which falls to the belief in the cult stone. These ideas can not be considered independently of the beliefs to which the population belongs.

An anthropological approach to religion means looking at how symbols, myths, rituals and experiences of "the sacred" function within society and how they are created. (Bouvi, 2009: 35) Special attention has been devoted to this method. Within the symbolic classification statements are used by various interviewers saying that they are trying to create a network of meanings associated with the cult of the stone. Then followed an exchange of cultural ideas between Christians and Muslims. Through beliefs, thought processes were analyzed which show the worldview of different cultural backgrounds. Special attention was given to the 'right side' and to 'number three' as part of the ritual practice. The negative functions of the stone are also covered in the research. Registered statements reveal how the population perceives morality and describes the consequences for the individual and the community for immorality.

Thus, the cult of the stone is analyzed as a system of symbols through which it expresses its cult and magical power. The understanding of the symbols, as cultural constructs, which in itself brings stone into archiasm, gives "new" meaning in modern religion. Studies have shown that the stone has a rich symbolic meaning, which is adjustable within the contemporary culture of life. Values and associations that were ascribed, to the stone also find meaning today.

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Having in mind that methods are more or less a missing dimension in cultural studies, the material above refers to some of the approaches to the

study of sacred stone sites (in Republic of Macedonia) with aims to contribute toward discussions of different field research experiences. Fieldwork techniques and research practice is a primary resource of providing evidence and giving insight into traditional cultures. Getting access to the field means making strategies, discovering potential obstacles to access and possible ways to overcome them. What is important is how the researcher will going to be involved in a particular set of relations associated to the case study. Regardless of the ethnographic research mode/design, immersion is necessary to any fieldwork. Researcher engage with the selected topic, which means participant observation and documenting the actual processes, and skillfully perform them, contributes to overcoming all challenges and difficulties that arise towards the goal: to provide useful knowledge of explored cultures, in past and present.

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