

DRAGICA POPOVSKA

Institute of National History, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia

A FLOW OF IDEAS THROUGH SYMBOLIC IMAGES OF THE SACRED STONES IN MACEDONIAN FOLK TRADITION

This contribution will focus on the external image of the stone, including people's "experiences" and "creating of ideas". Through people's statements we can follow the ideas developed within contemporary culture, which in turn represent the symbolic image of the stone in traditional Macedonian society. Without intending to exhaust all aspects of this issue we will try to show the external form of the stone as a symbol subject to change, a symbol that flows into different religious visions. The subject of this analysis will be several sacred stones named Dupen Kamen (Open Stone) located in the villages Držilovo (near Skopje), Košino (near Prilep), Gorno Oreovo (near Bitola), then Sproviračka in the village of Kamen Dol (Rosoman) etc. They are mostly big and usually have some hollow parts, located on a very high, lonely place. Their function, according to beliefs is to provide fertility and health for recipients of the stone's power.

Key words: flow of ideas, sacred stone, symbols, religion

Macedonian folk tradition preserves many beliefs and practices relating to sacred stones. The term *sacred stone* in Macedonian folk tradition refers to every ordinary stone that, through its form, location, origin and naturally incorporated symbols, reflects a supernatural power. In this way it is transformed into a "sacred" stone and as such, according to the folk traditional concept it is perceived as an effective tool against human infertility and prevention of various diseases (Popovska 2009:8).

The building system of the cultic and magical function of the stone has successfully survived through the centuries. All changes and innovations which have been added to the cult have previously undergone adaptation, so that they can connect with an already established system of beliefs. In this way the cult has been gradually altered over the centuries and has more or less received elements of "modern" religions.

About the flow of ideas associated with the sacred stones, we can speak about all aspects of the manifest content: folk terminology, external form, traditions, features, prayers and promises, sacrifices and so on. This contribution will focus on the external image of the stone, including people's "experiences" and "creating of ideas". Through people's statements we can follow the ideas developed within contemporary culture, which in turn represent the symbolic image of the stone in traditional Macedonian society. Without intending to exhaust all aspects of this issue, we will try to show the external form of the stone as a symbol subject to change, a symbol that flows into different religious visions.¹

In interpreting information collected through my field research during the period 2000 to 2010 the syncretistic method was used which is based on material from the Slavic and Balkan traditions (Vinogradova 1989) relating compatible elements from the descriptive, functional and structural – semiological methods.²

The External Appearance (Material, Symbols, Colour, Immediate Sacred Vicinity)

The external appearance of the stone was crucial in receiving the "sacred" epithet. Form is an essential and determining feature which is implied in the folk terminology of these stones. This is clear when we consider that the unusual shape and mysterious form of the stone was associated with a connection to supernatural powers (Popovska 2009:34).³

An anthropological approach to religion means looking at how symbols, myths, rituals and experiences of "the sacred" function within society and how they are

¹ The material presented is drawn from my own research while preparing my PhD thesis titled "The Cultic and Magical Function of the Stone in the Religions of Macedonia", defended at the Institute of National History, University St. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, 2010.

² Although this pattern of research refers to mythological beings, I have adapted it to my focus of interest – cult stones. Certain elements of this scheme were excluded as unsuitable and I have introduced new elements that I thought would give a more accurate picture of the sacred stone. So with this method I have managed to examine the sacred stones as a set with their different features. They have been analysed at different levels: linguistic, morphological and functional, with the goal to understand all of the features of the sacred stones that have been discovered and the special features that are specific to each one.

³ The creation of such beliefs is motivated by existential human needs, such as fertility, birth, wealth, security, etc., which man endeavours to visually materialise in certain subjects in nature. Experiencing the external impression, primitive man created a symbolic picture. He equated the appearance of the stone with the appearance of something with similar characteristics, i.e. equating it with certain parts of the human body: phallic symbols, openings which allow him to transcend, etc. (Popovska 2010:81).

created (Bowie 2009:35). Therefore, using the example of a few sacred stones we will follow the flow of ideas, associated with their external appearance.⁴ In nature, stones are characterised by excellent longevity, resistance to wind and drought. Such properties of the stone express the power of supernatural forces, and its indestructibility symbolises permanence and eternal existence.⁵ Materialisation of the term “creation” regarding the stone as an object in nature which is characterised by durability and resistance to external influences is a result of its relationship with a symbol “Mother – Earth”, that is characteristic of the culture of almost all archaic populations (Eliade 2004:128-134).

“The stone continues to be what it is, it has not been altered and although man has adorned it, it remains inviolable and absolute” (Eliade 2004:180). These connotations have led archaic man to experience the stone as a subject in which he could materialise his need for fertility and prosperity.⁶ The symbol of fertility, which the stone itself manifests, as such, is ingrained in the community where the stone exists. Along with the image of the stone, in the community there are mythical stories that convey the “content” of the stone as a medium (Popovska 2012:17).⁷ Through the history of mankind, when the mental image of the stone is already embedded in the consciousness of every member of the community, the stone is not a symbolic object that arouses free associations, but it is an object that indicates what the viewer has learned in his youth (Popovska 2010:84). Therefore, the stone is evidence of the development and existence of the cult and as such it has “acquired” special significance and purpose in the beliefs of the people. However, the stone as a symbol of fertility continues to exist in the beliefs of people, giving emphasis to Christian and Islamic faiths, despite the different understandings of the stone in official religions.⁸ Namely, it is experienced as an external symbol of faith in God, as we will see in the upcoming material.⁹

⁴ The survey covered approximately seventy stones located throughout Macedonia that manifest cult and magical power.

⁵ The fear of various supernatural beings that were mainly conceived in various material objects and phenomena is characteristic of the relationship between mankind and nature in the most primitive forms of religion (Erdeljanović 1938:56).

⁶ Past research findings suggest that the answer to all questions is related to the creation of things, man initially found it in women and their basic biological function – birth (Čausidis 1994:155). The act of birth, viewed through the prism of archaic man is the only way of creating, in which something is “created from nothing” (Pavlović 1987:14).

⁷ A remnant of this is still a part of living traditional culture, as we see in the following material.

⁸ Beliefs and practices related to the stone are opposing in the Christian and Muslim holy books. In the *New Testament*, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, it says: “And so, because we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the Divine is like gold or silver or stone – an image created by the human mind and skill” (17, 29, all emphases D. P.). On the other hand, the worship of stones in Islam is seen as a “belief in unbelief” (*Qur’an, Sura al-Baqara*, verse 109).

The Stones with Unusual Forms (Including Openings)

Most sacred stones situated within the territory of Macedonia have got an opening through them, as the main feature of their external form, which is implied in the folk terminology of those stones, for example, *Dupen Kamen* (Open Stone) for sacred stones located in the following villages: Držilovo (near Skopje), Košino (near Prilep), then Gorno Oreovo (near Bitola). There are also names derived from ritual activity carried out on the stone, namely the passing through of them e.g. *Sproviračka*. This stone, which has also got an opening, is located in the village of Kamen Dol (Rosoman).¹⁰

The opening is one of the identification marks of the sacred stone.¹¹ The openings vary in terms of size, some are smaller and some larger, and they are placed differently in relation to the overall picture of what the stone offers. Some are emerging as a central open space on the stone that serves as an input threshold into it. There are others with two related openings that contain meaningful dimensions: input-output. There are also forms, where the openings appear on the top of the stones, which in a symbolic way correspond to the “upper world”.

The openings in the stones sometimes refer to the biological function of women – birth and the general abstract notion of “beginning” and “creating new life”, even today. Using the example of *Dupen Kamen* situated in Košino village, we will support this conclusion.¹² The characteristic shape of this stone’s appearance are two italic and very narrow openings, so passing through into them is very difficult.

While climbing to the stone, I asked my informant: “What shape is it? What does it remind you of? Can you describe it?” I received the following response: “One of the openings is male and the other is female. The male stone, you will forgive me, since you are a female, is like the human part: long and with a hole...”

⁹ The description of the external appearance of the stones may be divided into: stones with unusual forms, stones with the forms of certain items (such as rings, as stairs, as caps etc.), the stones with an anthropomorphic and zoomorphic appearance, tombstones, stones that are remnants of former religious objects. Because of space limitation we will follow only a few of them.

¹⁰ About folk terminology of sacred stones in Macedonia, their names and epithets, see Popovska 2009b.

¹¹ Passing through the opening encourages the idea of “breaking the continuity of the space”. It is a way to communicate with the stone. Passing through the opening is hard, meaning the difficulty of the transition from profane to sacred “reality” should be noted, because a human, afterwards, becomes “purified” from all magic and sins. My fieldwork shows that from most sacred stones, after the performance of ritual practices, the visitor returns “home” by another route, different from the one by which he came (Popovska 2012:1-262)

¹² This *Dupen Kamen* is located at a very high elevation level. Access to the stone is very difficult and its distance is about a two hour hard walk from the village. The immediate area abounds with trees with branches which have pieces of clothing hung on them (Popovska 2009:35).

And the female part of the stone has its own form. In the middle one, it has a little...”¹³ As we see, through the openings, the stone receives a specific fertility, which is in line with the vital symbols of the woman. Although this symbolisation is characteristic of archaic religious systems, it is reminiscent and still remains a view of mankind today. The previous statement supports this conclusion. Through such symbolisation of the stone’s opening, the merger of the female principle with the male element in the process of creating is evident as potential that evokes creative power.

The external impression, as a symbol, is prone to change depending on changes in culture, meaning the symbol is changing or getting new content. For example, Dupen Kamen in the village of Držilovo (near Skopje) represents a big stone with an opening in the middle, extending vertically through it. As part of the stone there is a small stone that is situated next to the larger one. Characteristic of the immediate space there are numerous irises.¹⁴

In discussing the opening of this stone, the informant has identified it with a mosque, stating: “I can’t explain it. It’s like the minaret of a mosque and in the middle it has got an opening.”¹⁵ Influenced by today’s religious content, which is part of the informant’s life – Islam, he looks at the stone as an object that connects people with God.¹⁶ In this way, the informant passed his own knowledge on and his relationship to God to the stone. Observation of the stone as a religious object, gives its form a special energy. If we assume that the unclear shape is giving a picture of the original chaos (Shevalie 2005:937), this perception of the shape of the stone marks the end of the chaos and establishes an organised picture of its existence. In any case, the statement speaks of a symbiosis of the archaic beliefs with the Islamic culture.¹⁷

On the other hand, there are numerous examples that indicate the identification of the stone with the church, of course narrated by Christian-believers.¹⁸ An

¹³ Aleksandar Spirkoski was born in 1926 in the village of Košino. He is a Macedonian Christian and he lives in Košino. His above cited statement shows the anthro-visual equalisation of the stone.

¹⁴ More about this stone: prayers, promises, sacrifices etc. see in Popovska 2009a.

¹⁵ Ramadan Eminovski, born in 1958 in the village of Držilovo, is a Macedonian Muslim and he lives in Držilovo.

¹⁶ Requests of the visitors are directed to God. They are almost always accompanied by leaving coins and promises of sacrifice. This is not specific only for this stone (Dupen Kamen), but this practice is linked with almost all sacred stones where rituals are practised. See more in Popovska 2012:99.

¹⁷ Regarding my question: “Can you tell us the legend about its genesis?” Ramadan Eminovski says: “The stone exists as created by nature. Once, when mankind had no children, they went to the stone and it has remained so”.

¹⁸ Most of the informants identified sacred stones with the church or their occurrence to be associated with “divine action”. Very often, during my fieldwork, I heard the statements: “The stone is from God”, or “The stone is God’s creation” (Čašine-in Lazaropole, Sv. Atanisij-Miravci etc. See more in Popovska 2012).

interesting example is the statement collected about Dupen Kamen in the village of Gorno Oreovo (near Bitola). It is a big stone with an opening appearing at the top of the stone, which is located in a meadow, near the village. The characteristic feature of its appearance is “the footstep of King Marko and his horse”.¹⁹ According to the informant, it is a place where the spirit of St. George resides. “On the stone is the spirit of St. George” – the informant says, thereby connecting it with an external form: “You will see there are two spaces like rooms, one is above, one below, God’s work”.²⁰

It is interesting that the person tells us about one more opening on the stone, which was closed by God. The informant made this statement: “The stone had two openings... Some Turkish woman entered there; everybody says that she was dirty, she went from man to man. I don’t know how, but she remained in the stone, she was petrified. And then the stone got another opening.”²¹ Apparently, the informant looks at the stone as something that is knowledge she received in an earlier period (probably in her childhood). It is interesting that her daughter, who also attended the interview, affirmed her mother’s story. I received similar statements from other older informants in the village, also.

Comparing the stone with the church or a mosque probably comes as a synthesis of symbols: the stone is a symbol of the sky and of the earth (with one part that is on the earth, and the other part that rises to the sky). It is the object where visitors direct their prayers, and they bring their sacrifices and offerings.²² For the people, the stone is a way to provide fertility. Because of all of these specifics the sacred stone is identified with the church or a mosque and it appears as a mediator in communication with God.

On giving a Muslim or Christian dimension to the symbols, the population perceives the stone as a religious object.²³ Its external form is the image of human conception, of “divinity”, of a place of “divine action”.²⁴

¹⁹ According to Menka Jankuloska, born 1930 in the village of Gorno Oreovo. She is a Macedonian Christian. Interview was conducted on June 3, 2000 in Gorno Oreovo.

²⁰ Menka Jankuloska

²¹ Menka Jankuloska

²² About prayers, pleading and blood sacrifices see more in Popovska 2012.

²³ Besides the identification with religious objects, beliefs and ritual practices on the cultic stone, the great cosmic structure is shown, which is incorporated in the Christians and Muslims forms of religiosity. Analysis of materials that were collected during the research show that beliefs and ritual practices that are carried out on the stone are contained primarily in animist beliefs – especially concerning stones whose origins are associated with metamorphosis of a human or an animal into stone. There is a connection between soul and stone (Čajkanović 1924:69; Popovska 2012).

²⁴ The term divine in the text is used only conditionally, as a term for human belief in things and phenomena in the universe. In fact, under this term we mean all levels of the belief that man can have in different constellations, from animism to beliefs in the highest stages of human religiosity.

The openings are characteristic of caves also: *Peštera* (Cave) in Jegunovce village (near Tetovo), then *Špela* (Cave in Albanian) in Vrtekica village (Skopje), *Peštera* in Kožle etc.

Caves,²⁵ according to folk beliefs, are places that merged the divine with the human. In this sense, the cave appears to have an initiatory function, where the “unbelievers” have turned into “believers”.²⁶ The story, collected among the locals, supports this.²⁷ The cave is believed to be a gathering place for energy, because it preserves the memories of the beginning of faith, a “true second birth of mankind” (Shevalie 2005:776). The following example supports that through its energy a connection is established between man and the forces that reside in its interior. In this regard, the cave has a cult function as a condenser of magical power.²⁸

In Pešter’s initiatory narration, the cave represents the transition from paganism to Christianity. The story speaks of the efforts of the church in the suppression of archaic beliefs that among other things refer to the cave. The cave was significant for archaic man, and was also significant for the Christian believer, thanks to the narrated story. In this story, the narrator’s view is like the “living reality which took place sometime in primitive times” (Bowie 2009:271) and which has since been retold. Unable to suppress the belief in a cave, Christianity was putting in its own elements of archaic belief and now it continues to exist as a symbiosis of old and new beliefs in the stone.

As we saw, belief in the stone in its deepest sense carries on thanks to its mark of identification – the opening, which evokes different associations in people’s culture, but, in any case, manifests contents that cause respect. The opening is a symbol that flows into different religious visions.

²⁵ For equalisation of the cave with the womb as a closed and defined space, bold, with almost unchanging temperature and humidity see in Čausidis 1994:201.

²⁶ They are identified with the feminine principle, with the womb of the Mother – Earth (Cooper 1986:128).

²⁷ This is the story about the genesis of Pešter cave in the village of Jegunovce (near Tetovo): “St. Elias was an ordinary man, but very clever. The people believed, just as we believe at the moment, that the cave is ‘God’ ... But Elias said to the people: ‘No, the cave is not God. God, exists in another way’. Ancient people thought that he was against them. To prove this to each other, who is right and who isn’t, they decided to slaughter a calf and roast it. Elias urged the people to pray to their own God (through the cave), to light the wood. If the wood burns, I will believe that God is with you (that is the rightful God) – Elias said. If you fail, I will pray in my own way. If I succeed, you will stand with me. The people agreed. The people prayed... The fire did not light. Then Elias started to pray: Come, God, show yourself with burning wood. And suddenly out of the blue.... krr... t and God lit the sky. And the people followed him. They believed in the God that Elias suggested.” People in this village collectively used phrase: “Elias has created thunder.” Gjorgji Jančevski, born in 1943 in the village of Rotinci, Tetovo.

²⁸ Drops of water coming from the upper walls of Pešter cave have special significance for locals. Namely, people believed that if they succeed to catch three drops with their mouth, the individual’s desire would be fulfilled (Popovska 2012:177).

The Stones with Anthropomorphic and Zoomorphic Appearance

These stones remind people of human figures, animals or groups of people. They are situated throughout the whole territory of the Republic of Macedonia: *Govedarov Kamen* (Stockman's Stone) in the village of Peširovo (Ovče Pole), *Kukuli* in Nov Istvenik (near Delčevo), *Baba so Kozi* (The Grandmother with Goats), and others.²⁹

According to Čausidis (1996:73), the identification of humans seen in the stones, as objects in nature, is the result of “interference between the human body and the universe”, which as such is found in the myths of the many cultures around the world. Although it is characteristic of the archaic cultures, this symbolic expression continues to exist until today, of course, with the merger of theological ideas embedded in the tales of these forms. According to documented statements, these stones are forms in which the souls of petrified people live. Within these narratives there are connotations of moral norms that are actually based on Christian teaching.

The analysis of field material, which I collected previously, indicates that most of the petrification was incurred as a result of mistakes committed. There are many stories which confirm that. I will present only a few.

In the village of Nov Istvenik, in the area so-called Pupeska Maala, there is a stone with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features. It is called *Kukuli*. The informant tells us about a wedding guest who brought the bride from the village of Robovo to Nov Istvenik. But, the godfather began to touch the bride. Then thunder appeared in the sky and everyone was petrified. “God caused them to collapse and left them there. All of them are standing there with their horses.”³⁰

Also, there is an interesting story about the metamorphosis of a brother and sister into stone.³¹ The folk interpretation links the time of occurrence as “during the Turkish period” when the brother as a small child was taken by the soldiers of the Ottoman Army, and because of it, he lived apart from his sister. After many years when the two children had grown up, without knowing that they were brother and sister, they had an affair. Therefore, “as they went along, one step at a time,

²⁹ Some of these stones really look like anthropomorphic figures, but most of them are underdetermined forms. This is a result of the ritual activity carried out on the stone: taking off small bits of the stone and carrying them as a kind of amulet or the scraping of the stone and drinking it with water etc. However, people still identify these stones with human beings (Popovska 2012:111-114).

³⁰ Desa Zaševska was born in 1931 in the village of Nov Istvenik. She lives in the village of Zvegor near Delčevo. The interview was conducted in September 2000.

³¹ The stone is not specifically named and it is located not far from the village of Matka, near Skopje.

God punished them by petrification.”³² The concepts of sin and salvation occurred as a later form of religious behaviour (Donini 1964:28).

In the *Bible*, the emphasis is on God being eternal, but also on his righteousness and the possibility of punishment. The narrations of the people from villages where the stones are situated show that they believe that God’s will and power affect the lives of people and nature.³³ The fieldwork confirms that pleas and promises of the visitors are directed to God. Through calling out to God in prayers, people can see his “real” presence. The stone shows the creative and destructive power of the “divine”. The previously mentioned example about Dupen Kamen in the village of Gorno Oreovo is just one of many examples which confirm this. Such ideas are found in expressions of the legends that are told about the origins of the stone’s forms.³⁴ In this way we are coming to the sublimation of the pre-Christian and new religious meanings, which speaks of the flow of different ideas within the external perception of the stone by the viewer.³⁵

In terms of anthropomorphic signs on the stone, it is interesting to mention the stone called *Špela* (Cave in Albanian language) in the village of Vrtekica (near the City of Skopje).³⁶ On this stone, there is an imprint of five fingers – like a hand.

³² Ljubica Stojanovska was born in 1962 in Kičevo. She lives in Skopje. The statement was taken in May 2010.

³³ This conclusion is based on many stories which tell us about sacred stones. The stone is a symbol which according to belief is the place where “supernatural” forces exist that are “superior” over humans. This idea, influenced by Christianity, associates the stone with God. The ritual practice of the stone is a means of achieving a particular goal and that requires accuracy in the procedures, “justice” and sharing values with the forces that reside in the stone. This symbolic importance and interdependence as such is understood by individuals and by collectives. Here is one example: The practice using water as a natural element fusion of *Crn Kamen* (Black Stone) near Veles, shows that only the wishes of the “righteous” are being realised. If the visitor does not splash water, if it “escapes” from him, the visitor’s desire is not to be fulfilled. According to belief it is about prohibiting entry to those who are not “worthy” of communication with the stone. Sure, there are notes of Christian emphases in communication with the stone (Popovska 2012).

³⁴ During the rise of Christianity, the church conducted a moral transformation from the very free life of the Roman community (Milaš 1926:669).

³⁵ Such legends probably evolved as protection against contact with the customs and beliefs of people from pre-Christianity in terms of protecting the unity of the family. This kind of identification of humans with the stone was trying to make an impression in order to cause fear and was certainly astounding. As such, the stone would be a picture of “the divine force” that would reject dependence on nature as its creator. Removing the “sin”, the human will become a believer and would fear God, which appears to be the target in the Christian and the Muslim religions (see more in Popovska 2012).

³⁶ *Špela* represents a cave through which water flows in the period from early May to late June. In one part of the cave is an opening where the woman passes through. This opening, according to my informant is capable to show, with contractions, if the woman will give birth or not. The cave also has a nursing function to preserve the health of visitors. The stone is closely connected with the grave of the *šejh* (sheikh), located in the village (because the stone is fifteen minutes away from the village, but in the same area). Nearby trees are full of the “sight” of thread from clothing.

According to the narratives of my informants, people believed that these are angel fingers.³⁷ People put their hand on the print and say: “To be strong as a stone, to be healthy as a stone.”³⁸

The presence of fingerprints on the stone, according to belief, means that the stone is a place which is under the direct protection of God. To have the imprint of a hand which is divine, simply means to accept the power of God, because the stone is under his protection.³⁹ Albeit the hand as an amulet is very popular in the Islamic world (Gjorgjević 1934:21).⁴⁰ The human hand is a specific element and the number five, among Muslims it is a favourable number. To avoid any danger, it is enough to provide five fingers from the right hand. The number five “indirectly symbolises the shape of the word Allah written in Arabic script” (Bejzat 2001:480). Clearly influenced by Islam, Špela cave has kept a different divine dimension, especially given the importance which the cave has had in the lives of people in the archaic period.

Also an interesting example is the stone called Pehamber located in Debarska Župa. It has a footprint of a horse, which is believed to belong to the horse of an angel. Here is the statement from the informant: “Pehamber⁴¹ – is named according to God’s assistants, angels, who stepped with the horse on this place. He was stepping on the stone and where he stepped there is a hole, like a fireplace.”⁴² This footprint of the horse has spiritual significance because it carries the markings of his rider. His features, through the horse’s foot are transmitted to the stone, because according to belief, horse and rider are associated to each other. The horse is privileged with all the divine secrets of its owner (Shevalie 2005:496). On the other hand, for the people this print is the symbolisation of a fireplace. That means that through the holiness of the fireplace, as a fruit of divine power, it is believed that God works.⁴³ Such forms of the stone have kept the attention of today’s man. Under the influence of later cultural inputs, myths have been developed about these forms, their occurrences being connected with persons who have had some significance in the life of the population.

³⁷ The location of this stone is in a village where the religious affiliation of the people is Muslim.

³⁸ It is about beliefs that the stone’s strength will be transmitted to the people (a contact magic). See more in Popovska 2012.

³⁹ This conclusion is a result of wide research on the stone’s features and rituals practised on it.

⁴⁰ The author states that the hand with five fingers in the Muslim population in the City of Ohrid protects against evil eyes.

⁴¹ Isa Pejgamber in the Muslim religion is identified with Jesus in Christianity (Tanović 1934:33).

⁴² Kadrija Jašaroska was born in 1951 in the village of Golem Papradnik. She is a Macedonian Muslim and lives in the village of Golem Papradnik in the Reka area.

⁴³ For fireplace see Čausidis 1994:131. Author says that the oldest domestic fireplace is actually a hole in the floor-like body of the Mother – Earth. This hole takes on the importance of the opening in her womb.

Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms of some stones are in close relationship with *Krale Marko* (King Marko).⁴⁴ Because of that, they have obtained cult significance in humans. These stones usually carry the epithet of *Markovi* (Marko's) or they are not specifically named. We think that the identification of the stone with the heroism of a "supernatural" creature such as King Marko, leads to the ritual repetition, and that magic happens creating a new beginning on a new basis.⁴⁵ He is one of the most popular characters in Macedonian oral folklore. There are many stories about Marko's stones which show that the character that has been created has eclipsed the historical figure. Epic *Krale Marko*, among the people, is seen as a hero, with supernatural attributes (Popovska 2010a:279). Very often descriptions of people about these stones are: "from above it has a hand, like a giant's hand", or "from above it has arrows and prints from *Krale Marko's* horse, a child". Here is a description of *Markova Stopalka* (Marko's Footstep): "One footstep of *Krale Marko* is here in *Galičnik* and the other is on *Krcin* mountain, away from the village. Near the footstep is the print of *Krale Marko's* horse."⁴⁶

We consider that the stones, which have had these and other similar impressions, thanks to the flow of different cultural ideas, have received mythic dimensions which has increased the belief in their curative properties.⁴⁷

Tombstones, Colour of the Stones and the Immediate Space of the Sacred Stones

Tombstones are places in which there is expression of holiness. They are viewed as cultic stones and are very popular in the Islamic world. Special sanctity is attributed to the graves of the dervishes. They are older graves, those which have cult significance, as exemplified by *Tekija* stone in the eponymous village.⁴⁸ It

⁴⁴ King Marko is known in history as a Turkish vassal, who perished fighting against Christians in Romania. Later he is celebrated as the protector of the Christian population. The name King Marko is associated with the construction of several churches and monasteries in Macedonia and because of that he is perceived as a defender of Christians from converting to the Muslim religion (Simitčiev 1981:19-22).

⁴⁵ In the existing folk material, according to *Vražinovski*, there are mythical elements that indicate the appropriate links between the character of King Marko with some old images of pagan gods or Christian saints (*Vražinovski* 1998:257).

⁴⁶ *Sofronie Muratovski*, born 1926 in *Galičnik*. The interview was conducted in August 2000 in *Galičnik*.

⁴⁷ This conclusion is the result of wider research of sacred stones in Macedonia. For more information see *Popovska* 2012.

⁴⁸ The stone is called *Tekija*, from Turkish *Tekke* – dervish's house. It is located in the centre of the village of *Tekija* (near *Skopje*). Its form is a long, rectangular vertically mounted stone. This stone is closely connected with the stone which actually represents the tombstone, located in the old Turkish cemetery near the village. On the right side of this tombstone is a plate with forty pebbles

is fenced in and represents a central tombstone. The fence is associated with the desire to define a space or place of residence of the deceased, and later his soul. It is a place where the living will contact the dead (Čausidis 1994:204).⁴⁹ My informant relates a very short story about the genesis of Tekija: “Somewhere in Kumanovo, there was a man named St. George. There was a whirlwind, a wind which threw his head here and his body there.”⁵⁰ If we compare this story with a story written by Filipović in 1932, we will see that the external form of this stone is a symbol prone to change, a symbol that flows into different religious versions.⁵¹

Part of the external appearance of the stone is its colourful features. Although the dominant colour is a natural grey, there are stones with black, red and yellow colour that correspond with the terms of their naming – for example *Crn Kamen* (Black Stone), *Zolt Kamen* (Yellow Stone) and others.

It should be emphasised that colours had their meaning in the life of archaic man, as they have in the life of today’s man. Because of space limitations we will speak only about the meaning of the black colour of the stone. The black colour represented the colour of the earth, the colour of fertility. Great Goddesses – mothers often wore black because of their chthonic origin (Shevalie 2005:1099).

This feature of the stones was also interesting for people of a later period, when Christianity accepted the colour black as the colour of the “renunciation of this world”, so the Christian faith has been announced in the black mantle (Shevalie 2005:1099). According to Gospel readings, black symbolises the land where dead people are, who are preparing for their rebirth (Shevalie 2005:1101).

Black, in Christianity, is also associated with death or grief. On *Crn Kamen* in *Veles*, it has symbolic value and occurs as a sign of eternal preservation of blood on the stone. Here, the colour received religious value, and the stone divine power. The following legend confirms this conclusion. Black Stone’s⁵² occurrence

on it. According to beliefs, the pebbles can show if the visitor’s wishes will be fulfilled or not. Both stones (in the centre of the village and the tombstone in the Turkish cemetery near the village) play a part in ritual activity performed on them. Today residents in the village are Christians.

⁴⁹ There is a ritual activity that is performed on the stone. Time function of the stone is the Thursday (usually evening before Friday). The communication with Tekija is with the mediator who is an actual female from the village.

⁵⁰ Roksanda Nikolovska, born 1930 in Kriva Palanka, she lives in Tekija. The interview was conducted in July 2000 in Tekija.

⁵¹ Filipović (1932:410) presented the story about their origin which is associated with the death of the martyr. According to the story, one of the stones is his head, another one is the martyr’s body.

⁵² The stone is situated on a very high, isolated spot. The only way to reach it is on foot. It is a rock which rises high and waters run down it like a waterfall. The immediate area is comprised of trees, mainly figs where people attach parts of their clothing in the belief that they are going to be healed this way.

is associated with the death of twelve priests who were killed by Turks.⁵³ Their bloodshed, according to legend, is the reason for the black colour of the stone and marks its holiness. If we pay attention to its appointment, we will see that the colour of this stone is distinct from others in the immediate vicinity, which probably attracted the attention of archaic man. The story shows that under Christianity the stone has different religious values.⁵⁴

Finally, another prominent part of the external impression of the sacred stone is its immediate area which also exudes holiness. The space is very important for creating the cult toward stone because it is the basis upon which the cult of the stone was built. The other symbols that are part of that space give additional meaning that is specific depending on where the stone is situated. Moreover, the inter-relationship of these symbols is very important.⁵⁵

Cultic stones are characterised by difficult access and very often require long walks to reach them. The rising of the stones, high on the hills or mountains, is interpreted as a symbol of their connection to the sky. With one part down on the earth, and with the other above in the sky, the stone is a manifestation of power, eternity and holiness for visitors – believers and also for the majority of people in the community where the stone is situated.⁵⁶ Just pointing up, in a religious sense, is to be filled with holiness (Shevalie 2005:682). In fact, climbing to reach the stone marks the way to get in touch with the “divine” which is hard, this means the difficulty in reaching the stone should be noted. According to collected material, there is the belief that reaching the stone is an expression of human effort to get closer to the “divine”, closer to desire. The pagan cults are often celebrated

⁵³ Zdravkov Ljube was born in 1934 in Veles. He lives in Veles. The interview was conducted in May 2000.

⁵⁴ Along with the image of the stone, in the community there are adequate mythical stories that convey the “content” of the stone as a medium. My research has shown that Christianity inserted their own “adjectives” in these stories. See more examples about this in Popovska 2012.

⁵⁵ Characteristic of mythic consciousness is the fact that a certain phenomenon or object, is almost never represented in isolation, but always treated as part of a more general environment (Čausidis 1994:56). Thus, the stone usually does not act as a separate subject in nature, but very often is fused together with objects or phenomena that have a fruitful function. Hence, the stone exists in correlation to the cult of water, cult of plants, and the cult of the Sun, Moon and Earth. Edmund Leach said that the symbols do not have meanings in isolation, but only in relation to other symbols in the environment that determine their meaning (in Žikić 1997:25).

⁵⁶ The visitors can be divided into two groups: visitors who firmly believe in the healing properties of the stone, and who have a problem of any kind, and others who represent themselves as free from any form of “religiosity” and yet in the moment of facing a problem that they are not able to resolve they visit the sacred stone. Their age ranges from young to old. They have different educational levels – from intellectuals to the uneducated, living in rural but also in urban environments. The spread of ideas in the city is a result of frequent migrations from village to town. The visitors are people from different ethnic groups: Macedonians, Albanians, Vlachs, Roma, Serbs and others living in the territory of the Republic of Macedonia (Popovska 2012).

on the soaring places (Judges 5,5).⁵⁷ On the other hand, the *Psalms* emphasise climbing up to the highest, which means that high places that were held by cults in paganism have been adapted to the “new” religion. Anyway, the whole spiritual life in Christianity contains the idea of ascension.

Sacred Stones, Folk Tradition and Religion(s)

It should be noted that under the influence of Christianity the cultic stones that exist in areas where the Christian population lives have experienced a change in terms of their external appearance, in terms of setting crosses on the stones or putting icons on them, or in their immediate vicinity.⁵⁸

Indeed, Christian influence can be seen in the fact that churches have been built near the stone where pagan traditions were probably held initially, so it is clear that after efforts are made, the cult of the stone is absorbed into Christianity (Popovska 2012:150). There’s an interesting example which I noted in the village of Novo Selo near Strumica. *Kameniot Krst* (The Stone’s Cross) is located within a small monastery, built by some Kiro, five years ago. According to my informants, it was the tomb of a girl whose name was Velika, who had lost her life very young.⁵⁹ The grave was surrounded with stones and it was located about fifteen metres from today’s location.⁶⁰ It is integrated into Christianity, not only through its transfer to the constructed object with Christian symbols, but through its connection with St. George’s Monastery, located in the village.⁶¹ The characteristics of the stone provide the believer with impressions of a connection with Christianity. In this

⁵⁷ Early Christianity were expecting the disappearance of the mountains (*Isaiah* 40.4 reads – “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill shall be made low”) when God would lead his people into exile, and lower slopes. Meanwhile, God appears on the top of the mountain.

⁵⁸ This conclusion is a result of observation during my fieldwork research.

⁵⁹ Miropa Andonova, born in 1950 in the village of Novo Selo near Strumica. The interview was conducted in May 2010.

⁶⁰ At the time of my research absolutely nothing alluded to it being a grave, although, many informants confirmed it was. They say that even the nearby place was surrounded by large stones. The population calls the object *Veliinska Crkva* (Easter Church), but in the past they called it (only the stone’s cross) – *Veliinsko Grobče* (Easter Tomb). Each family “had their own stone” (taken from the larger stones that surrounded the whole place), where each left their braid of red and white woollen thread, that each one had splashed with holy water at home, and then left on “their stone” praying for health. People gather at this place for the second day of Easter and crack eggs open there. According to Gjorgji Kostovski, born in 1948 in Novo Selo, living in Skopje. The interview was conducted in May 2010.

⁶¹ Today’s ritual practice is reduced to burning candles in objects where the Stone Crosses are located and leave T-shirts, towels, etc... on the Cross, as well as money. As gratitude for “the help” from the Cross, the people bring lambs that are auctioned by the St. George monastery. Money collected is used for the monastery’s needs (Vučetić Mirjana was born in 1945 in Novo Selo, she lives in Novo Selo. The interview was conducted in May 2010). For more see Popovska 2012.

way Christianity is emphasised in the presence of the stone. There are lots of examples which confirm this (see Popovska 2012).

On the other hand, in Islam there is very often fusion of the stone (in ritual activity) with the tombs of Šehs,⁶² which is not surprising considering that it was believed that they possess healing powers. In the Muslim tradition there is an especially popular belief in the sanctity of graves, especially those of the dervishes. In connection with these tombs, within this population there are beliefs, manifested as rituals in the context of seeking help from the forces that reside in them.

Therefore, we concluded that the external form of the stone in Macedonian folk tradition, has had a crucial role in obtaining the “sacred” epithet. The unusual form of the stones and its perception by the population shows how ideas have been flowing until now. Influenced by today’s religious content, Christianity and Islam, which are part of the informants’ lives today, they look at the stone as an object that connects people with God.

Through their statements we can follow the ideas developed within contemporary culture, which in turn represent the symbolic image of the stone in traditional Macedonian society.

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⁶² A Šeh, according to Islam, is one who acts as a teacher of others for everything related to Islam and the holy book – the Koran and the one who manages the temple – Tekke. The practice of visiting the graves located in Tekke today is still current, although Islam is opposed to it. According to the Koran it is forbidden to make monuments and build mausoleums on graves because over time they will become a place of worship for those who “do not know anything” (*Qur'an, Sura Nuh*, verse 21-25).

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