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FEMALE SPACES IN ETHNICALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY MIXED SHRINES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: CASES IN MONTENEGRO AND KOSOVO

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Abstract: This paper discusses female spaces and rituals in two sacred sites in the Albanian-Slavonic borderlands that are shared by Christian and Muslim communities. Based on fieldwork material, the article first gives an overview of the infrastructure, various functions and female interrelations of the 'Ladies' Beach' in the city of Ulcinj, Montenegro, which brings together stable local and spontaneously emerging female communities from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The second part explores an example of a mixed pilgrimage in the village of Letnica in Kosovo, paying special attention to female ritual practices related to fertility and childbirth as an integral context for the different scenarios in which the shrine is visited. By examining rituals experienced by women, the paper shows that female practices aimed at reproductive well-being play a specific role in inter-group contacts in shared shrines and have an impact on the process of sharing by different ethnic and confessional communities.

Key words: Female rituals, fertility, mixed shrines, shared shrines, religion, Western Balkans, Albanian-Slavonic contacts

Introduction

The first time I visited the city of Ulcinj in Montenegro was in 2014, when with a group of colleagues I made a stop there on the way to an expedition in Albania. The head of our expedition suddenly remembered the women-only beach located in the city and offered my female colleague and myself a chance to see it. At the entrance to the beach we were greeted by an elderly woman dressed only in a topless bikini. Access to the beach was fee-based, and the woman sold us some tickets. The tickets showed the silhouette of a nude female body, which echoed the image on the main beach banner featuring the perfect figure of a naked woman, walking away from the viewer into the depths of the sea (Figure 1). In a similar way, the images echoed the real women who were practically all resting on the beach naked. Having received these tickets, there was a feeling that we had not just paid for our stay on the beach, but had won tickets to some 'women's club' or 'women's paradise', to quote enthusiastic impressions that can often be heard from visitors, as I later explored on the Internet. The considerable fame of the resort in Ulcinj, in the far south of Montenegro, which is not the most popular tourist destination, seemed unusual and amazing.

Figure 1. The main banner of the Ladies' Beach. Ulcinj, Montenegro. 2018. Photograph by the author.

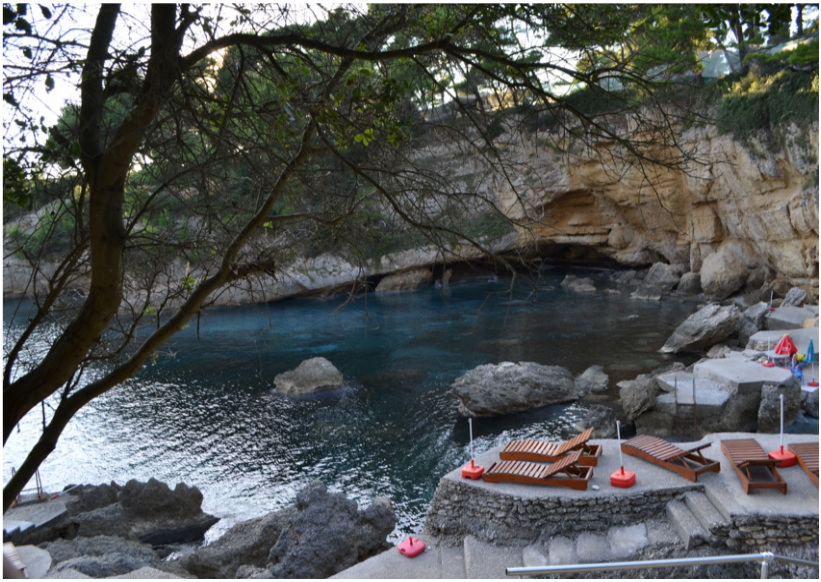

Figure 2. The Ladies' Beach (Ženska plaža / Plazhi i femrave). Ulcinj, Montenegro. 2018. Photograph by the author.

Four years later, I went back to the beach with the intention of observing it in detail and met the same elderly topless woman at the entrance. She was a custodian of the beach who dealt with tickets, first aid and the maintenance of order. She comes from Kosovo each summer season and has been doing this job for more than forty years. In addition to organizational activities, she also tells guests about the fertility rituals that are practised on the beach. Besides rest and relaxation suitable for an urban female community and a touristic female audience, the 'Ladies Beach' was originally known as a place of ritual healing from infertility due to the specific natural environment of pine-tree air, seawater, a mineral spring and miraculous stones. Thus, the location of the beach attracts specific groups of women who seek healing from reproductive problems. The female rituals, imaginaries, popular beliefs and narratives that occur in the place have much in common with those practised in sacred locations all over the Balkans: religious shrines and places of worship are integrated with the mineral and vegetal world and are noted for their sacredness and healing powers (Krstić 2010). Located in the Albanian-Slavonic borderland, the Ladies' Beach in Ulcinj turns into a space for various ethnic and religious

contacts: a female clientele from Albanian, Slavonic, Orthodox, Muslim and Catholic communities represented in Ulcinj and beyond meets here for leisure or healing purposes and experiences a special situation of inter-ethnic and inter-religious contact. Is this the same sort of contact that takes place in the mixed or shared shrines that are widespread in the Balkans as inter-faith phenomena? Does such contact, based on the idea of reproductive well-being, construct women's interrelations and thereby transcend ethnic and religious boundaries?

I used these questions as my point of departure for comparative study of the Ladies' Beach as a religious sanctuary attracting female visitors for 'fertile' rituals, because the sacred specifics of the beach related to the miraculous healing of infertility made this possible. The mixed nature of this exclusively female site in Ulcinj suggested supporting such a comparison with a study of a sanctuary visited by heterogeneous female communities from different ethnic and religious traditions. Following the general configurations, including ethnically (Albanians and Slavs) and religiously (Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam) mixed zones, I extended the case study in Montenegro to the border area of southeast Kosovo, to an example of mixed pilgrimage to the Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the village of Letnica. Although the Catholic sanctuary belongs to an official religious institution, it could hardly be considered monotheistic because the community of worshippers is not confined to any official religion. The Catholic Marian shrine is visited by Croat and Albanian Catholics, Orthodox Serbs and Macedonians, Muslim Albanians, Roma and other groups. From a gender perspective, the two cases discussed in the paper overlap with the same 'consumer' audience: the two places are closely associated with healing from reproductive problems and represent exclusive female spaces and rituals.

In addressing these female sacred places, my aim was to demonstrate different scenarios of contact situations applicable to ethnically and religiously mixed shrines in the Western Balkans, and more specifically in Albanian-Slavonic border areas. How such contact is experienced in female interrelations at these shrines? Does the idea of reproductive well-being serve as a condition for contact for representatives of different ethno-confessional groups? How do female practices aimed at fertility create a special female space at these sacred sites?

After offering some reflections on theory and methods, this article is divided into two main parts based on previous literature and my own fieldwork held in 2018 and 2019. The first part provides an overview of infrastructure, vari-

ous functions and female interrelations on the Ladies' Beach in Ulcinj, which brings women together as a stable and spontaneously emerging community of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The second part describes mixed pilgrimage in the village of Letnica in Kosovo and embraces different motifs of veneration at the shrine, as well as female ritual scenarios and the inter-group contact situation. My primary sources are observations of both sites and interviews with visitors, pilgrims, keepers and religious servants of Albanian, Montenegrin, Serbian and Croatian origin.

Theoretical and methodological backgrounds

Various examples of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional relations are widely represented elsewhere in the Balkans and the Mediterranean, especially in the framework of sacred sites (Albera 2008; Couroucli 2012). The mosaic-like religious landscape in the Balkans reveals the complex history of co-existence, such as rebuilding or recreating shrines at the same sites,[1] and conditions when persons are forced to 'mediate or negotiate their otherness' (Barkey 2014: 33). In the Balkans, religion remains an important factor of group identity, both ethnic and national, though as the papers just mentioned show, the post-socialist 'open market for religiosity' (Elbasani and Roy 2015) makes this experience of religiosity more mobile, more individual and less institutionally controlled (Darieva, and et al. 2017).

Studies of sacred places shared by members of more than one religious or ethnic community have developed a specific anthropological concentration on pilgrimage and on crossing the frontiers between religions over the last years. Provoked by a paper by Robert M. Hayden (2002), several volumes and collections on joint worship and shared shrines in various regions all over the world have been published (Albera and Couroucli 2012; Bowman 2012b; Katić and Eade 2014; Barkey and Barkan 2014; Hayden et al. 2016). Hayden suggested there was a scenario of 'antagonistic tolerance' in respect of the concept of the competitive sharing of sacred sites when real and symbolic contest for dominance of the site exists among different religious communities (Hayden 2002). Hayden argues that sharing often implies using tolerance as a pragmatic strategy of passive non-interference in the form of 'temporal manifestation of relations between social groups' until conflict occurs (ibid.: 205–7). This suggests that syncretism is based on power relations between communities, and that the avoidance of confrontations over shared religious spaces makes the

costs of intolerance too high for the dominated group (Ibid.: 218). Although antagonism, competition and conflictual situations take place at shrines venerated by heterogeneous communities, many scholars found Hayden's approach too processual and monochromatic and claimed that further research had proved him wrong (Albera 2008, Bowman 2010, Barkey 2014, Katić 2013). Albera argued that sharing and destruction, tolerance and antagonism, should be investigated as a minor instance of interplay by paying specific attention to intercommunal interactions in the *longue durée* (Albera 2008: 40). This historical and comparative approach, notes Barkey as well, helps to understand the phenomena of surviving spaces of sharing throughout periods of violence, such as religious, ethnic and national conflicts (Barkey 2014: 35).

For Bowman, intercommunal relations in and around holy places are the essential context for studying sharing: 'there are multiple ways in which individuals and groups approach and relate to the sacred objects' (Bowman 2012a: 4). Bowman stresses that social fields surrounding sacred places include spontaneous and traditionally regulated activities, the character of religions, the nature of communities and the different identities that influence the process of sharing. It is evident that military, political and interethnic conflicts destroy the relations of local groups, as well as scenarios played out in sacred places. Exploring the spaces of sharing may lead to the obvious forces that damage ties being neglected in order to focus on the ethnographic contexts of action and belief that contribute to dialogue and cooperation between cultures (Bowman 2014: 117).

Such a context of coexistence is key, for instance, for Georgieva, who examines the shared female networks and rituals of Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria as one of the mechanisms of tolerant neighbourliness that are embedded in everyday life (Georgieva 1999). As may be supposed, female practices and the way women relate to the rituals could also occupy a separate niche in ethno-confessional interrelations in mixed or shared sacred places. Thus, besides the universal search for miracles, health and happiness by people, a concern for reproductive well-being in respect of pregnancy, childbirth and healing from infertility may act as an important reason for convergence and sharing a sacred space by women from different communities. Female rituals related to fertility closely correspond with the general social and traditional attitudes to the basic aspects of female life. In the case of Balkan cultures, although extensively transformed in socialist and post-socialist circumstances, until today

woman's work has basically seemed reproductive according to traditional gender hierarchies (Spahić–Šiljak and Kosović 2012: 129–42; Schubert 2016). Besides changing status, the position of a mother in traditional society offered rather more benefits in respect of her customary, kinship, economic and personal well–being. Such female social spaces in which women acquire power after becoming mothers and are therefore able to find hidden possibilities of having their needs fulfilled was determined to be an example of a female subculture in the dominant patriarchal family organization by Rihtman–Auguštin (1982). Behind the images of modernity, reproductive potential, family and kinship are still of the greatest importance in life, and as Blagojević claims (2004), many women voluntarily choose this traditional role. In that sense it is not surprising to find Radulović explaining the continued importance of visiting sacred locations for women with reference to the fact that women thereby resume their traditional roles by establishing themselves as mothers (Radulović 2010).

While it is difficult to determine exactly whether female ritual spaces in sacred places represent special 'female subculture', as they include multiple variations, in this paper I will consider female rituals and contacts as a separate context for the process of sharing. Addressing two examples of mixed sacred sites in Montenegro and Kosovo in which female practices are an integral part of the ritual activities, I will elaborate my argument that the idea of reproductive well-being constructs women's interrelations and has an impact on their overcoming ethnic and confessional boundaries.

The Ladies' Beach in Ulcinj

The Ladies' Beach (Montenegrin '*Ženska plaža*' or Albanian '*Plazhi i femrave*') is located in the city of Ulcinj, in the far south of Montenegro, in the borderland with Albania. The beach is located in a small rocky bay surrounded by a dense pine forest. Women can get to the beach only from the spiral mountain road by going down to the coast along a narrow path. Since 1999 the beach area has been private and has become highly commercialized, with an entrance fee, sun umbrella and sun-bed rentals, massage, blue claying treatment, coffee and other café facilities.

Ulcinj is inhabited mostly by Albanian Muslims (more than 70%), but the ethnic and religious city landscape is also made up of Albanian Catholics, Orthodox Serbs and Montenegrins, Montenegrin Muslims and others minorities, making Ulcinj a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional urban centre. This resort

location on the Adriatic Sea explains the availability and relative popularity of the Ladies' Beach for different groups of tourists, especially regionally. The official bilingualism in Ulcinj, Montenegrin and Albanian, creates a comfortable linguistic environment for different Albanian- and Slavonic-speaking groups of tourists from Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia. Touristic portals recommend having a rest on this beach to women seeking a nudist vacation far away from men. In practically all the advertising annotations, it is stated that the main advantage of the beach, among others, is that women traditionally go about without clothes here: '*women have been swimming here without clothes for centuries, and men are forbidden to visit it*'.[2] Actually, the entrance is controlled by security, which is the only constant male presence

Figure 3. Miraculous stone with votives on the Ladies' Beach. Ulcinj, Montenegro. 2018. Photograph by the author.

in the area. Since the women are mostly naked, photographing the beach is strictly prohibited.

As the Ladies' Beach is the only beach on the Adriatic coast that is considered as safe from the prying eyes of men, it is regarded as an acceptable rest and recreation locale for Muslim women from the Western Balkan region, that is, from Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Albania. For the Muslim community, the idea of appropriateness is also supported by the image of halal leisure on the beach due to its medicinal waters and pure nature. Moreover, these feelings are enhanced by the impression that Ulcinj has the atmosphere of a Muslim city. In one Bosnian female internet-blog I found a special group discussing why it is worth taking a vacation in Ulcinj: 'I constantly hear that Muslim women (and those with a covered head) go to Ulcinj ...'. 'I heard from Muslims that it is good in Ulcinj, that there is a feeling that you are in a Muslim city. There are mosques, azans ... And this beach was used and is used till today to treat female diseases with the help of the sea, mud ....'[3]

Besides the aspect of the women's-only vacation, the Ladies' Beach seems to be the very definition of a gender-marked urban social space. Townswomen like to spend their spare time on the beach for health and recreational purposes, swimming, talking and having coffee there – in other words, supporting their neighbourhood networks. It is worth noting that, except for the strong ban on taking photos, nudist leisure is welcomed on the beach, and body behaviour is extremely liberal and basically free of any regulations.

Taking into account the wide range of facilities and vectors of visitors' interests mentioned above, the Ladies' Beach, especially during the summer season, brings together geographically, ethnically and confessionally mixed groups: Slavic and Albanian, Muslim and Christian townswomen, as well as women from neighbouring regions and countries. In so far as the atmosphere of female-female interrelations is quite peaceful and tolerant, it raises the question of what makes the space of the beach the only female location except the absence of male visitors? What is the context that creates a space shared by various religious and ethnic communities and that regulates the social and cultural mechanisms of women's sharing?

The issue is that, according to local narratives, the Ladies' Beach was originally known as a place of ritual healing from infertility. It is popularly believed that seawater, enriched with a sulphur-mineral spring coming up on the shore, as well as the sun and pine flora, have a therapeutic effect on the female re-

productive system. The ritual of healing from infertility finds its connections with local folklore referring to the beach. The motif of 'desired' and 'suffered' mothering is often used in symbolic interpretations of the beach's ambient and natural features. For example, multiple caves and flat stones surrounding the beach are interpreted as the stony tears of women seeking to become pregnant. Local women visit the beach to improve their health and maintain the youthful appearance of their bodies: the water spring is considered to provide benefits to the skin, teeth and hair, as well as helping with gynaecological disorders and digestion problems. Besides the idea of natural resources curing infertility, the beach also has a miraculous stone (*Kamen želja*) that is used ritually by women in order to become pregnant.

A general overview of the beach space shows that there are two main ritual arenas, one around the spring, the other around the stone, regulated by special prescriptions and rules of interactions among women. Willing or not, every woman visiting the beach both either leisure or healing adheres to the 'ritual' rules transmitted orally by the beachkeepers or visible in written form on numerous billboards (e.g. 'do not spread black sand in order to protect the environment. The beach is special for barren woman and it is therapeutically' [4]). I will focus here on some specific features of ritual behaviour I observed during my field research. One of the essential rules is the way women use the spring. Swilling the water from the spring should be practiced on the naked body, starting with the head, but also focused on the reproductive organs. For better affect women are advised to take some water home with them in a bottle and to avoid using ordinary water (from the shower, for example). There are some important concepts involved in the washing ritual: women have to use special scoops that are placed around the spring and to fill the scoops with the sacred water when they have finished washing. It is important to keep a distance from one another and to swill the water away from the spring. Here the idea of sharing the spring as well as the tools is closely interrelated with the idea of maintaining the healing place in 'ritual purity' since such purity is associated with the holiness of pregnancy. Despite the total accessibility of the spring and the non-stop spouting of the water, this ritually marked handling connotes the notion of the 'holy water' to be found in sacred locations. In this sense, washing and swilling the spring water are close to the experience of ablution performed by pilgrims at the water reservoirs in Christian shrines. As Kormina states in her monograph, ritual bathing is often understood as provid-

ing direct contact with 'grace', imagined by worshippers. The body turns out to be an instrument for experiencing the sacred, and bodily sensations become a convincing argument for the authenticity of this experience (Kormina 2019: 93–99). Since the temperature of the spring is relatively cold, +14 degrees, for women such ablutions could be understood as a sort of extreme experience of healing in order to find a new self.

Another important ritual object is a stone (*Kamen želja / Shpella e Qelbët*) which is located in a bay inside a cave. The ritual instructions suggest an early-morning dip around the stone on the last day of staying on the beach. The associated belief is that a woman should swim around it three times repeating her wish or prayer, then find a red spot on the stone and touch it. Finally some personal object should be placed on the stone, mostly panties, hairpins, hair-binders, bracelets, wristlets, earrings, necklaces, etc. These things and accessories no doubt have certain gender semantics associated with them, as they are used as healing votives in a ritual framework. One version I noted is that women should come for the ritual hungry, and that after leaving the cave they need to eat boiled eggs they have brought with them, suggesting folk semantics of reproduction and fertility as well.

The ritual around the stone requires more awareness and 'knowledge' on the part of the women, more ritual instructions that underlie the crucial aspect of inner female interactions on the beach. Traditionally the ritual was guided by an 'experienced' old woman who was 'a dab hand at something' ('*mora imati dobru ruku*'). Now this mediating role is performed by an elderly lady from Kosovo, the same custodian of the beach, who dealt with tickets, first aid and the maintenance of order. During my observations on the beach, I saw how she was instructing women about the 'script' of the ritual and telling folk tales about the site. Sometimes she herself assisted women in performing the ritual. For her the form of the miraculous 'stone' is seen as the head of a man with a cap, which some women called 'Sultan kamen' or 'Kapetan', a reference to Captain Ali, the legendary medieval pirate whose wife managed to get pregnant only after swimming around the stone. In the context of the gender connotations of various objects located on the beach, this stone is obviously a manifestation of male involvement in these ritual practices. In addition, mutual help among women is also specific to relations among the beach visitors. If somebody needs instructions, the 'sacred knowledge' is easily transmitted to the newcomers by local women or by women who have had experience of healing, even in cases

when instructions are needed for women who don't speak South Slavonic or Albanian languages. In such situations translation performed both orally or by body language attracts more women to help and to share their competence.

Generally, the Ladies's Beach in Ulcinj represents a specific female space that creates stable local and spontaneously emerging female communities, especially in the summer season. This coming together of traditional practices and tourist female-only recreation makes the beach open, accessible and flexible to a vast range of demands, including tourist economics. Functioning as a commercial tourist site offering a women-only nudist vacation, as an urban social space for local women's leisure, as an acceptable site of rest and recreation for Balkan Muslim women and as a place for ritual healing, the beach attracts women from the region and beyond for tourism and 'ritual recreation'. The assumptions of nudity, bodily freedom and women's reproductive well-being creates a specific environment for the consolidation of different female communities, while the idea of fertility, ritual rules and knowledge being shared by women create female interrelations that go beyond all ethnic and confessional frameworks.

The sanctuary of Letnica in Kosovo

Letnica is a small village located in the county of Vitina (Serb.) / Vitia (Alb.)[5] in southeast Kosovo on the border with the Republic of North Macedonia. The county has an ethnically and confessionally mixed landscape representing a Slavonic-Albanian contact zone. Before the collapse of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s, the village was one of the centres of the Croatian Catholic community (about 4,000 people), whose members have almost entirely migrated outside Kosovo. Letnica and the surrounding villages are also inhabited by Albanian Catholics and Albanian Muslims, with small enclaves of Serbs, Orthodox Roma and Muslim Roma, but most of them, like the Croats, left Kosovo in the late 1990s (Duijzings 2000: 37–58). For several centuries, Letnica was the administrative, economic and religious centre of a Catholic parish due to the high status of the Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and the miraculous statue of Madonna placed above the main altar. Between the end of the Second World War and the 1990s this sanctuary was the main Catholic Marian shrine in southern Serbia, being visited by a heterogeneity of worshippers. The church, locally known as the 'Church of Our Lady of Letnica' (Serb., Croat. *Crkva Letničke Gospe / Alb. Kisha e Zojës së Letnicës*) is not only a famous centre of pilgrimage for the Catholic communi-

ties of the region, but also a place of worship for Muslims (Albanians, Roma), Orthodox (Serbs, Roma, Macedonians) and other ethno-confessional groups from various regions of the former Yugoslavia (Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, etc.) (Zefi: 169–175; Urošević 1934). Despite the global changes that affected ethnic and state borders during the period of military conflicts, and even after the sudden interruption of pilgrimages in 1999, Letnica and the sanctuary of Our Lady (Serb.–Croat. *Svetište Gospe Letničke / Alb. Shenjtërorja e Zojës në Letnicë*) is still attracting a large number of pilgrims from different local traditions annually on 15 August the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (Sikimić 2017a, 2017b).

Figure 4. Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Letnica. Kosovo, 2018. Photograph by the author.

The phenomenon of a mixed pilgrimage in Letnica has been understood as a 'laboratory of identity' (Duijzings 2000) or as an example of 'overcoming religious boundaries' (Zlatanović 2008), comprising both tolerance and conflict between local communities. Trofimova has examined the process of creating a poly-confessional pilgrimage in Letnica as a social and cultural project of the Catholic diocese that was designed to unite various communities in what is an ethnically and confessionally mixed region (Trofimova 2020). For heterogeneous groups of pilgrims, visiting the sanctuary is mostly motivated by its miraculous healing of physical and psychological diseases through the power of the statue of Our Lady of Letnica, especially by pieces of her dress and the healing water. For some ethnic groups – Serbs from South Kosovo, Roma and especially for displaced Kosovo Croats – visits to the shrine became part of a special 'memory' voyage to see their motherland and abandoned houses again (Zlatanović 2008: 183–4). Besides, Letnica is also closely intertwined with the image of Mother Theresa, a world-famous Catholic nun who is believed to have miraculously felt called to her religious vocation during a pilgrimage to Letnica church when she was seventeen (Aikman 2003: 199–203). Thanks to Mother's Theresa Albanian roots and her image currently being promoted as the 'Mother of Albanians' all over Albania and Kosovo (Endresen 2015), the sanctuary in Letnica is quite often venerated by all religious Albanian communities.

For whatever reason, the main object of veneration by pilgrims in Letnica is the statue of the Virgin Mary (Croat. *Letnička Gospa, Gospa, Majka Božja Crnagorska; Serb. Мајка Божја, Слатка Мајка; Alb. Zoja Cërnagore, Zoja e Letnicës, Zoja e Bekuar, Nëna e Letnicës, Zoja e Madhe;* Rom. *Virgyuni Mari*). In the narratives recorded from pilgrimage participants by missionaries and researchers in different years (Zefi: 169–181; Zlatanović 2018: 279–80; Sikimić 2014), as well as in my field data collected in 2018–2019, the image of Madonna is closely associated with healing of reproductive problems.[6] Analysing the gender-related nuances of members of the Serb community visiting Letnica, Sikimić suggests that the veneration of 'miraculous' places like Letnica has created a special autonomous female culture based on solving problems with fertility and children's health (Sikimić 2014: 24). Interestingly, present-day parish representatives in Letnica, that is, local Catholic Albanian priest and nuns, interpret revitalization of pilgrimages after military conflicts by ethnic groups that have left Kosovo as an expression of gratitude for the children they have born: 'They come mainly to thank the Virgin Mary for giving them heavenly

gifts, in other words, children they could not give birth to' (Interlocutor A., male, Albanian, church priest in Letnica, recorded in 2018, translated from Albanian). In other words, in Letnica female ritual practices related to fertility and childbirth are an integral context for the different scenarios in which the shrine is visited, and they seem to play an important role in the process of sharing the shrine and of peaceful intergroup interaction.

Figure 5. Statue of the Virgin Mary above the main altar. Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Letnica. Kosovo, 2019. Photograph by the author.

Rituals aimed at solving reproductive problems are both canonical (like participation in the service, night prayers and vigils, touching and kissing the statue), and vernacular in respect of various practices. Women touch the statue with personal items (underwear, T-shirts, swaddling clothes) or with photographs belonging to the person for whom they are seeking healing, or they write names and prayers on the walls behind the altar. Once a year, on the feast of the Assumption, the Virgin Mary's clothing (Croat. *košulja, plašt* / Alb. *teshat e Zojës, veshjet e Zojës, fustan e Zojës*) is changed. The church's officials cut the wide cloak made of embroidered white silk up into small pieces (Croat. *košuljica, krpica* / Alb. *petk*), which are shared among the pilgrims. The latter take these fragments of clothing as talismans and as evidence of sacred contact with the statue of the Madonna (Alb. *Marrin si një shenjt* '[people] take it as something sacred': Interlocutor T., a nun of the parish in Letnica, Albanian, recorded in 2018, translated from Albanian). These pieces of the Virgin's clothing are used in ritual practices back home: for instance, women placed them in water during bathing to heal a sick child (Zlatanović 2018: 279).

A nun of the parish I talked to dismissed these 'magical' rituals in the sanctuary as the practice of those who do not know how to pray in a Christian way. For example, the ritual of wrapping a building of the church with red woollen thread, a reference to traditional ideas about the 'Virgin Mary's belt' in almost all Slavonic traditions in the Balkans (Baeva 2012), is often interpreted as a typical way of praying by Roma pilgrims (Trofimova 2018: 171). However, in this perception of the diversity of pilgrims' ritual practices, ethnic and religious identities are not contrasted. It is rather a matter of the interpretation of cultural differences, and of 'manners' that do not lead to group conflicts:

> *'From time to time we are asked: "How can I pray? I'm a Muslim". We answer them: "Pray as your heart tells you to. Pray this way because you have already come with faith". We don't say: "Pray like this", because they don't know it. Let's take a prayer to the Blessed Mary. You don't know our prayer, pray as your heart tells you. This is the best prayer you heart tells you' (Interlocutor T., a nun of the parish in Letnica, Albanian, recorded in 2018, translated from Albanian).*

Nevertheless, ritual freedom and a lack of control by the parish over the pilgrim's ritual behaviour apply not only to Muslims, but also to Christians. This pattern is especially notable at the grave of the martyr Antun Marojević, which is located

within the sanctuary that women visit, regardless of their confessional or ethnic identities. There is a popular belief that any prayer at or lying on the tombstone will help one to become pregnant. The grave of Antun Marojević is not widely known to pilgrims compared with the statue of the Virgin Mary and the various healing practices associated with her. The grave is accompanied by a plaque with bilingual information in Croatian and Albanian about the name and dates of life of the martyr: *At. Svećenik Mučenik – Meshtar Martir,* 1803–1856. The tombstone was installed in 1994 by the parish priest Nikola Dučkić with the support of the parishioners.[7] Memoirs and research devoted to pilgrimages in Letnica hardly mention the grave of the holy martyr as a separate sacred place within the sanctuary. Therefore, it is not clear when the priest's grave became a locus of female veneration, nor how that veneration is related to Marojević's life story. The narratives I recorded in Letnica, as well as a brief biographical reference provided by F. Zefi (Zefi: 70–71, 77), state that Marojević was born in Dalmatia (Hvar) and began his missionary work in Albania, then served in Prizren, and from 1938 was a parish priest in Letnica. This individual is often mentioned in the context of the tragic story of Albanian Crypto-Catholics from the villages Stubla / Stublla, Binač /Binça and Letnica (Turk 1973: 33–47; Duijzings 2000: 86–105). Inspired by Marojević's religious activities, many families openly declared themselves Catholic and were sent into exile to Anatolia by the Ottoman authorities in 1846. Kept in difficult conditions, Marojević and other families that had managed to survive only came back to Letnica in 1848 with the help of the Austrian consul at the Ottoman Porte. The martyred priest lived in Letnica until the end of his life.

The rituals practised at the grave vary considerably. According to the nun of the parish whom women mostly ask for ritual 'instructions', one could spend a little time lying on the tombstone, or an hour or even a whole night to be cured of infertility: 'Women lie there, maybe someone all night, maybe someone for one hour, praying, resting. And many miracles happened: someone got pregnant, [and] a year later gave birth' (Interlocutor T., a nun of the parish in Letnica, Albanian, recorded in 2018, translated from Albanian).

Another version is that the woman should lie on the grave until she hears a certain sound or noise from inside the grave: 'You need to hear something, some kind of noise' (Interlocuter, female, Albanian, pilgrim in Letnica, recorded in 2019); 'When you lie on it, if you hear a sound, then this woman will give birth, if she hears a sound. If she does not hear the sound, she will never give

birth' (Interlocuter, female, Kosovo Croat, pilgrim in Letnica, recorded in 2019). Women believe that this sound should be similar to the rhythmic thump of the cradle's runners against the floor while a baby is being rocked. Along with the bodily contact, women usually tend to leave small votives on the tombstone (personal things, bracelets, hairpins and so on) which are considered to be tokens of thanks (*Alb. shënj falenderime, dhuratë* 'gratitude', 'gift'). Some things left on the grave are closely related to items with reproductive semantics: clothes for babies, child binkies, or the apron from a traditional female costume. This practice of leaving personal things in a sacred space traces its origins back to traditional practices of making a covenant, when asking for help from the saint binds the person concerned to return in order to fulfil the promise of reciprocity (Kormina 2019: 115–120). For example, 'One Croat came back today. She had no children for eight years, and two years ago she came to Letnica and now she is pregnant; she says "I need to give thanks"' (Interlocuter – female, Albanian, pilgrim in Letnica, recorded in 2019).

Figure 6. The grave of the martyr Antun Marojević with a woman lying on it. Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Letnica, Kosovo, 2019. Photograph by the author.

It is essential to understand that quite often women who have come to the grave of the holy martyr have relatively vague ideas about what this holy place is and what needs to be done there: but above all they come inspired by numerous imaginations about divine intervention. The situation of 'not knowing' turns out to be a space of contact and interaction: women share their ritual knowledge and offer mutual help and experience in association with the healing. As I observed, the idea of the desired motherhood serves as a condition for the emergence of solidarity among women, when language, ethnic or confessional differences are easily overcome, resulting in spontaneous ritual mentoring. Since this process includes different participants, anyone could act as a mentor – pilgrims from far away, locals, church servants, volunteers, etc. In conditions when ritual behaviour is not specifically regulated by the representatives of the parish, as they state themselves 'All this is absolutely spontaneous, not organized, there is nothing organized here' (Interlocutor T., a nun of the parish in Letnica, Albanian, recorded in 2018, translated from Albanian), so that , the ritual is also spontaneous and created literally 'in situ'. Thus, the sacred space of the grave represents a special female space within the Letnica sanctuary, one that engages different ethno-confessional groups in numerous ritual scenarios and intergroup contacts. Perhaps such practices, which are naturally integrated into the pilgrimage tradition of seeking miracles and well-being, make it possible for the mixed pilgrimages to Letnica to remain continuously relevant.

Conclusion

By examining two sacred sites in the Albanian-Slavonic borderlands that are shared by Christian and Muslim communities in Montenegro and Kosovo, this paper has shown that female ritual spaces within these holy places play specific roles in inter-group contact and interrelations. The Ladies' Beach in Ulcinj represents a specific case of a female space combining a commercial tourist destination offering women-only nudist vacations with a sacred location attracting woman for purposes of their ritual healing from infertility. Every summer the beach becomes a space which joins geographically, ethnically and confessionally mixed female groups. Sacralization of the beach as a place of ritual healing, as well as the presumption of nudity and bodily freedom, ultimately create a specific environment for female interrelations in which the idea of fertility and practices of mutual assistance and mediation serve as a condition of contact for the members of different ethnic and religious groups.

The phenomenon of the Catholic sanctuary in Letnica as a place of ethnically and confessionally mixed pilgrimages is closely linked to the cult of Our Lady of Letnica, which, due to the various historical and social processes that have occurred in southeast Kosovo, has become an object of veneration for Christians and Muslims, Slavs, Roma and Albanians alike. Despite the global post-conflict transformations of ethnic relations, state borders and identities, the pilgrims coming to Letnica share a belief in the miraculous help of the statue of the Virgin Mary to obtain health, happiness and well-being. One currently important reason for visiting Letnica is to seek a miraculous healing from problems associated with childbearing. Women's ritual practices performed within the sanctuary occupy a special place in both the general scenario of pilgrimage and the process of interfaith and interethnic dialogue between pilgrims. Female interrelations based on the idea of desired motherhood turn out to be a space of spontaneously emerging contacts overcoming ethnic and confessional identities. Despite the obvious situational character of such contacts, female experiences in Letnica go beyond the local boundaries of the sanctuary. Numerous personal imaginaries interpreting motherhood have found favour in Letnica, creating a special narrative tradition that embraces wider networks of women's communications.

In both locations, female spaces are framed with ritual scenarios and engage women in different interrelations. As could be seen, to a large extent these interrelations are supported by the presence or absence of specific 'rules'. Relatively free from generally accepted social rules of bodily behaviour, the Ladies' Beach in Ulcinj creates its own rules regulating the way women relate to the sacred on the beach. In Letnica the contact situation is supported by a lack of control by religious specialists over the ritual behaviour that takes place there. Ritual freedom and 'not knowing' turn out to be reasons for sharing the ritual knowledge and experience associated with the healing. Despite the fact that obvious group barriers are maintain in all respects outside the sacred space at different discursive levels, the idea of reproductive well-being provides a 'lived' background for inter-faith and inter-ethnic relations. In this scenario, solidarity between women resulting from their common intentions plays an important role in situations of contact, while gender identity becomes more essential than ethnic or confessional identities.

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Notes

[1] This is similar to Christian churches and monasteries being transformed into mosques and tekke during the Ottoman period (Sobolev 2013: 135–139). See, for example, the mosque of Husamedin-Paša (the Husamedin-Pašina Džamija) outside the town of Štip in North Macedonia, which is also venerated as the Church of Saint Ilija (Crkva Sveti Ilija) by the Orthodox community (Koneska 2013).

[2] Karamanaga 2012. From http://www.visit–ulcinj.com/blog/2012/07/22/legenda–o–zenskoj–plazi/

[3] Ljetovanje na Jadranu 2010. From http://www.islambosna.ba.

[4] The translation in English and orthography is original.

[5] The following abbreviations are used to denote the languages mentioned in the text: Serb. – Serbian; Alb. – Albanian; Rom. – Romanes; Croat. – Croatian. Issues of dialectology remain outside the scope of the study.

[6] For example, even the tourist guide to Catholic Kosovo (Kott 2015: 34–39) called the statue of the Virgin Mary in Letnica a 'true treasure' in Kosovo for helping childless couples conceive.

[7] Nikola Dučkić comes from the Kosovo Croat village of Janevo, having served as a parish priest in Letnica from 1990 to 2000.

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