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## **Constructing Holy Spaces in a Multicultural Milieu: The Case of the Zajde Bašće Shrine in Niš (Serbia)**

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*The culture of neighborhood with all its details that makes up the cultural mosaic of the Balkans is manifested at the level of popular religiosity, in particular, in the cases of mixed pilgrimages and popular shrines with shared practices. Such interaction between communities belonging to different cultural and religious traditions assumes various forms and patterns. This paper focuses on one such example, a holy site of joint devotion by Muslims and Christians, the Zajde Bašće shrine in Niš, which maintains the traditional practice of ziyārāt within a changing social and cultural environment. The main role in maintaining this tradition is played by the local Roma minority. Recently the shrine went through certain changes: the common old narrative about the Muslim nature of the cult was complemented by another one, with a clear multicultural emphasis. The study of narratives, the site's architectonics, and the co-practices of visitors help us to understand the correlation between competing discourses and to identify patterns of interreligious interaction.*

**Keywords:** shared shrines, pilgrimage, Christianity, Islam, popular religiosity, Balkans, Roma.

**R**ELIGIOUS culture in the Balkans is notable for its pluralism on the formal (confessional) level as well as on the popular (extra-confessional) level. The religious situation in the Balkans can be likened to a multi-colored mosaic made up of elements of various proportions and forms. This image of religious daily life is related to the region's historically conditioned ethno-confessional diversity. As a logical consequence of this, a developed culture of neighborhood has

obtained, which is itself worthy of study, considering its importance to contemporary sociopolitical processes in the region. The culture of neighborhood as a “*modus vivendi* of everyday cohabitation” (Valtchinova 2012) includes phenomena on several levels; here, the focus is on everyday religiosity.

Researchers at the beginning of the twentieth century turned their attention to the phenomenon of “mixed pilgrimages” in the Balkans (Hasluck 1929; see also Đorđević 1984a; Đorđević 1984b; Filipović 1939; Vražinovski 1999; Popović 1996). In recent decades, the phenomenon of “joint veneration” has been once again at specialists’ center of attention (e.g., Dujizingz 2000; Hayden 2002; Albera and Couroucli 2012; Belaj 2012; Radishević-Ćiparizović 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Over the last five years, I have studied the characteristics of the religious culture of Roma (Gypsies) as one of the most significant ethno-cultural minorities in the Balkans, bringing out the specific contents of their popular religious traditions and how they have changed. The object of research has been the ideas and practices of Roma (Arlia, Gurbets) in border regions of southern Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo, which historically comprise an area of residence and internal migration for various Muslim and Christian Roma groups. This provisionally delimited cultural region is also interesting, because numerous Sufi spiritual centers, which determine the specific religious mapping of the area, are concentrated within its limits (Biegman 2009; Norris 1993; Popović 2002; Popović 1994; Zheliazkova and Nielsen 2001). The inclusion of Sufi traditions in the representations and rituals of local communities of Muslim Gypsies can be observed on the level of local forms (*‘ādāt*).

Romani Islamic culture includes a layer of popular beliefs and practices that are organically intertwined with Islamic elements that are “traditional” in these areas. With this in mind, I turned my attention to the widespread practice of visiting the tombs of Islamic saints (*türbe*)<sup>2</sup> and the veneration of these places as sacred (*tekia*).<sup>3</sup>

1. See also the articles by Bowman (2014) and Dragana Radisavljević-Ćiparizović (2014).
2. *Türbe* (in Turkish), *turbet* — a shrine-mausoleum characteristic of Ottoman grave site architecture. The construction of a *türbe* on the burial site was commonly done to honor eminent citizens, as well as spiritual leaders, those revered as *awliyā* (“saints,” or in singular form *walī*), and shahids (in the narrow sense of fighters who died on the field of battle, innocents who were killed, or those who died in exceptional circumstances such as during a pilgrimage or in childbirth). In addition to graves in the classic sense, cenotaphs (as symbolic *türbes*) could be erected in locations where it is believed the saint is “present,” and which thus have special properties.
3. *Tekia* (*tekija*) — a lexeme denoting a holy space. In modern times, this term is found more often in regions that have a multiethnic and multicultural structure. Sufi *zaviyas*,

These tombs were frequently unique local centers of religious activity. Taking into account their significance in the past, I was interested in examining how the status of these places and the practices associated with them have been preserved and transformed within a changing sociocultural context, especially within the framework of the religious culture of an ethnic and cultural minority, in this case the Roma.

The Zajde Bašće shrine, which is connected to an eponymous saint, is an example of such a *tekia* (in this case, a symbolic *türbe*). This example is interesting both in its own right and in the context of the questions mentioned above.<sup>4</sup> Located in the southern Serbian city of Niš,<sup>5</sup> Zajde Bašće is one of numerous loci in the sacred geography of cultural space in the Balkans, where regular rituals such as venerating *türbe* and saint figures have been preserved (Trofimova 2015).<sup>6</sup> This particular *tekia* appeared in Niš, a city that was a military and administrative center with developed religious (Islamic) institutions under Ottoman rule. The *tekia* is now an active shrine within a predominantly Orthodox environment and is visited by both Muslims and Christians. Local Romani communities currently play the main role in maintaining these traditions.

The first in-depth study of the cult of Zajde Bašće the “saint”<sup>7</sup> was carried out in 2001 by the sociologists Dragoljub B. Đorđević and Dragan Todorović. Over the course of their research, they revealed ar-

*mazars (türbe)*, natural loci, as well as churches and monasteries are all generally denoted in the popular religious lexicon with the term *tekia/techa (tekija* in Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian, or *teqeja* in Albanian). Regardless of the fact that the concept of *tekia* can also denote monasteries of Sufi brotherhoods (*tekke* in Turkish), in the present article I consciously separate out these two designations.

4. Zajde Bašće and Zajde Badža are the two variants of the shrine’s name that are in general use.
5. Materials that form the basis for this article were gathered during ethnographic expeditions in Serbia (Niš and Leskovac), Macedonia (Skopje), and Kosovo (Prizren) on urban public and private shrines and cult objects in 2011–14. In the course of this work, I used the following methods: observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and photography. In this article, I also use data from observation and in-depth interviews with informants from border areas, as well as from Kumanovo (Macedonia), Gjakova (Kosovo), and Gjiilan (Kosovo).
6. It is worth noting that the Zajde Bašće *tekia* is not the only shrine in the region. In recent decades, numerous public and private (home) shrines have appeared within Roma settlements, which localize the tradition of *ziyārāt* (pilgrimage) and that reproduced associated practices as an element of the everyday religious culture of Roma Muslims.
7. Zajde Bašće is respected and worshiped as an Islamic walī by local Muslims and as a personage similar to a Christian saint by non-Muslims, thus the use of “saint” as a descriptor here and hereafter.

chival and folkloric materials that told the story of the *tekia* and also carried out empirical research on the cult (Đorđević and Todorović 2001).<sup>8</sup> I, in turn, approached a study of this specific place ten years later in a socially and culturally altered context, which was due to many factors. As a result of military conflicts in the Balkans, which continued through the 1990s, and the subsequent economic crisis and other circumstances, Roma settlements within the city grew or were built in connection with the arrival of displaced persons from Kosovo and Macedonia. From another angle, the “Islamic Community of Serbia” (*Islamska zajednica Srbije*) was strengthening its policies of religious education among the Muslim population (this mainly affected Roma communities); of the transformation or creation of local religious institutions (*jamaats*); and of the training of religious leaders within the Romani milieu. At the same time, the cult of Zajde Bašće itself was developing, which was connected in no small part with a change of the shrine’s caretaker.

The shrine is interesting as an example of a popular and non-institutionalized site of religious worship. In the wider context, studying Zajde Bašće is important to the project of describing the mosaic of religious culture in the Balkans, where identifying the general and specific features of certain elements allows one to explain the specifics of their mutual positioning and proximity.

## Tekia

The Zajde Bašće shrine is located in the central, historic part of Niš and abuts one of the external walls of the city fortress (I will discuss the figure of the saint in more detail below). In the narratives of visitors, it figures as the *türbe* of Zajde Bašće the saint, whose legend continues to be preserved in local folklore. According to the legend, the origins of the saint’s burial site date to approximately the sixteenth century (Interview with Romani caretaker of shrine, 2011; Interview with thirty-year-old Romani male, 2011).<sup>9</sup> The physical space of the *tekia* takes the form of an irregular polygon with an

8. I am grateful to Professors Đorđević and Todorović for sharing their materials and valuable comments with me.

9. In the thirty-year-old Romani male’s telling, the time of the *tekia*’s appearance is compared to the activities of other confessions: “It happened even 500 years ago. Many years ago, perhaps, older than many churches.” By church, this visitor meant Christian churches, including neo-Protestant churches, which carried out active missionary work among the Roma.

area of 20–25 square meters. It does not have a mausoleum, which is otherwise characteristic of such loci. There are various ritual objects in close proximity: the “burial site,” an altar, trees and a part of the wall, painted white, all enclosed by fencing. The trees and the fence delimit the borders of the shrine. The most significant part of the *tekia* is placed in a bend in the fortress wall in such a way that the central section, including the burial site and the altar, is located in a corner. The grave (a cenotaph, from all appearances) is visually marked with a slightly raised piece of concrete, in the middle of which is carved an irregular polygon, through which the ground is revealed. It is assumed that earlier the saint’s mausoleum stood above this fragment.

On Thursdays – visiting days – the shrine is modestly decorated. The caretakers hang three images on the wall above the burial site: an image of Zajde Bašće the saint in the center, a photograph of a Virgin Mary statue on the left, and on the right a photograph of the Black Madonna of Letnica (named after the village in Kosovo).<sup>10</sup> In the corner itself, vases with fresh flowers are placed on a special recessed plinth. On the opposite side of the shrine, the central zone of the *tekia* is symbolically delimited by jugs of water, an altar (usually a small carpet, on which people leave their offerings intended for the saint: water, food, money), and candle stands that are used in local church services. Occasionally gifts (towels, clothing, and rarely food) are left directly in the corner section, avoiding the open ground. A bit farther away, in the extreme left corner of the shrine there is a fountain (a *chesma*) built in 2012, which is intended for drinking and ablutions (at the time of observations in 2012–14, the fountain was not working). In the center of the grounds, there is also a recently constructed flowerbed with roses, flanked by benches so that visitors can spend time within the shrine. Every Thursday the *tekia* hosts pilgrims: these are mostly local residents, believers who follow Islam and Christianity. Among the ethnically diverse visitors, the majority are from local Romani communities. The shrine’s caretakers are also Roma.

10. In everyday language, one often hears an abbreviated name: simply “Letnica” or the “Letnica Mother of God” (*Letnička Gospa*). Located in the southwestern part of Kosovo, the predominantly Croat-inhabited village of Letnica is the location of the Catholic Church of the Letnica Mother of God.



The Zajde Bašće shrine on the day of my visit. June 9, 2011. Photograph by Ksenia Trofimova.

Believers come individually or as entire families and perform a common sequence of rituals. Approaching the shrine, they touch the wall or nearby trees with the palms of their hands or with their lips, which symbolizes crossing the boundary of a sacred space. These activities open the central phase of the ritual (Vražinovski 1999).<sup>11</sup> This is followed by the presentation of offerings, the lighting of candles, and the recitation of personal prayers. The ritual ends with a reverent departure from the shrine, facing the “burial site,” with closing rituals identical to those that accompanied the visitor’s entrance. Late in the evening the territory of the *tekia* closes, and candles left prior to that moment continue to burn, lighting the footpath to the shrine.

The structure of the ritual is straightforward and its fundamental script did not change substantially over the course of my observations. The ritual is performed by each participant individually, regardless of whether he or she came alone or with a group of believers. We should note that within the shrine certain religious practices are not

11. The local perspective in examining practices characteristic of popular traditions of venerating saints and holy places is given in Vražinovski (1999).

performed, such as prayers, ritual processions, and collective activities such as ritual healing, collectively recited *dikr*, the verbalizing of formulas, healing practices with the participation of ritual specialists, and so on. The pragmatics of visiting the shrine are universal: seeking protection, help in solving various problems, or health and happiness, as well as expressing gratitude to Zajde Bašće for her assistance, establishing ties with the saint or sustaining existing ones: “among the majority of Roma, let’s say, there is a certain faith that she [Zajde Bašće — K.T.] fulfills desires, gives you what you want, so that your health improves, your material situation improves, whatever it is, then, it helps, especially with health” (Interview with thirty-five-year-old Romani male, 2011). Certain actions considered “magical” or against the “instructions” for visiting the tomb of an Islamic saint (*mazar*) are prohibited within the shrine. The boundaries of what is acceptable here are quite flexible, although the set of prohibited activities includes anything that is not directly connected with communication between believer and saint or believer and God. This includes activities that introduce an additional level of communication (for example, between humans and Jinns or characters from popular mythology through the recitation of incantations), or that demonstrate worship of the site through physical manipulation of bodies or objects such as tying ribbons to trees, spending the night on the slab above the symbolic burial site, and so on. Over the course of my observations, I never heard audible recitations of incantations, though I acknowledge, of course, that the ritual is private.

After the completion of the ritual, believers remain on the territory of the *tekia* for some time, sitting on benches, discussing “sanctioned” topics (Interview with Romani female, 2012)<sup>12</sup> or sinking into silent contemplation. They also hope to see the saint’s image in one of the trees or on the wall, which would indicate her presence and strengthen the existing connection between the saint and believers. In the course of research, I often encountered witnesses of theophany or hierophany as primary communication, the script of which contained a number of consistently repeated motifs: the saint appears in dreams or in visions, showing herself in the image of a beautiful young girl, or communicating her desires through familiar images and stories. Believers

12. On the territory of the shrine, it is recommended that visitors avoid discussing “ugly” topics in conversations and using profanity. Informants justify such restrictions by saying that “dirty” language, but also thoughts and intentions potentially defile the “clean” space, which can provoke the saint’s wrath and subsequent punishments.

noted how, after the rain, an image of the face of a woman appeared on the trees or walls of the shrine.

The current caretaker of the shrine, a Sunni Muslim, interacts with visitors, initiates them into the legend of Zajde Bašće the saint, and tells the story of the *tekia*. Without interfering in the course of the ritual itself, he observes and when necessary carefully directs the actions of believers, showing them where to light candles and place their offerings. For locals, visiting the *tekia* is in most cases a regular practice, reinforced by the “intention” or “vow” to perform the ritual and witness hierophany, which creates a “discourse of the miraculous.”

Attracting believers from various religious traditions, Zajde Bašće the saint, the shrine itself, and its existing traditions of veneration are firmly connected to Islamic and historically Turkish tradition in the narratives of visitors. At the same time, the space of the shrine is described by individual visitors and by the caretaker himself as “multi-ethnic”: “And the Orthodox, the Orthodox lighted candles here. Muslims come, as do Catholics. So it is a place of all religions, not only for Muslims. In this way it is a multiethnic [multicultural — K.T.] space” (Interview with Romani caretaker of shrine, 2011).

Thus, Zajde Bašće represents a popular shrine, which is “open” to followers of various religious traditions for the performance of shared practices. It is, in this way, an individual example of the more general Balkan tradition of “mixed” pilgrimages. The shrine in the city of Niš is notable for several details. First, it is interesting for its current decoration, which includes Christian or quasi-Christian elements, which, as I suggest, demonstrates the transformation of the shrine’s image.<sup>13</sup> Second, I note the unvarying script of the ritual for Muslim and Christian believers within a space, which, according to the widely accepted “traditional” narrative, is understood as Islamic. Third, on top of the original Islamic discourse, Zajde Bašće adds a multicultural one, which creates two demonstrative discourses about the religious identity of the place. Along with this, another specificity of this site is that the ritual is reproduced and the tradition is supported thanks in large part to the participation of an ethnic, cultural and religious minority — the Roma, who appear as both participants and ritual specialists

13. Though it is a space of shared practice for Muslims and Christians, it is notable that Zajde Bašće is not a “dual” shrine, endowed by various groups with a dual identity (Islamic and Christian), nor is it a shrine with a vague identity that mixes elements associated with various traditions in its own peculiar way. A similar mixture can be observed in many other private shrines.



(Đorđević 2010).<sup>14</sup> It is remarkable that residents of Niš who are not involved in this religious practice view the shrine as a Roma space, although the Roma themselves, while acknowledging that a significant portion of pilgrims are Roma, do not understand the site as “theirs” in an ethnic sense.

In connection with this, I propose the following question: what is the correlation between the two discourses mentioned above? What allows us to speak of the given shrine as Islamic and multicultural, and in particular — through which discursive practices are the religious boundaries of this cultic space demarcated? In this context, I identify the grounds for a possible approach to the phenomenon of jointly venerated sacred spaces. As the anthropologist Dionigi Albera rightly notes, religious practices of this sort represent a “relatively unstructured phenomenon,” in connection with which the character of its appearances is “changeable and sometimes unpredictable” (Albera 2012, 223). It is obvious that, depending on the concrete historical, social and cultural context, this material suggests multiple readings. The observation of various examples of shared practices and the reconstruction of their respective contexts allows one to draw a more accurate picture each time of the interrelations that obtain in the culturally heterogeneous space of the Balkans. As Doreen Massey argues, the space of joint action, in its heterogeneity, is “alive,” filled by a multiplicity of simultaneously constructed stories, which continually succeed one another (Massey 2005, 12). It is constituted through its relations, in continuous interaction (in joining and separation, creating various combinations), and these relations form boundaries, around which places are formed. A place is always “a meeting place,” which is appropriate for cultural frontiers (Massey 2005, 67–68).

For its part, the place itself reflects these differences, as it is filled with discourses generated by actors involved in interaction. The interrelations of these discourses create the complicated meaning of this or that place. The place emerges and it is filled with meaning(s) generated by the narratives “told” about a place, which tie the place to popular social practices. The process of “narrating place” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 16–17) allows a place to serve as a significant factor in the construction, change in content, and sustaining of the historical and cultural memory of this or that social group. In this sense, cer-

14. Muslim Roma are a large proportion of visitors to the shrine. In southern Serbia and especially in Niš, they constitute a religious minority in a predominantly Orthodox Christian area. At the same time, among local Roma, those that identify as Muslims constitute a large community.

tain places, including, of course, sacred loci can be seen as “heterotopias” (*hétérotopies*) to use Michel Foucault’s concept (Foucault 1984). Sites of pilgrimage, as with other ritual spaces, also vary in their content. They are distinguished by their ability to “absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses” (Eade and Sallnow 1991, 15). At the same time, research focused on finding the specific features of the shared use of ritual spaces underscores that the existing multiplicity of discourses tends toward regulation by the existing dominant system of ideas and practices, which are under the control of formal or informal religious and social institutions. This certainly applies to popular shrines, which are also implicated in the complex system of social relations.

Thus, on the basis of the theoretical framework set out above, and coming back to an analysis of the Zajde Bašće shrine within the context of mixed pilgrimages in the Balkans, the next step is an analysis of the narratives emerging around the shrine and their variability; the architectonics of this sacred locus; and actions and joint activities of visitors.

## Legend

The first mention of the Zajde Bašće (Zahide-baci)<sup>15</sup> came in the second half of the seventeenth century (Čelebi 1967, 63), although it does not contain a description of the shrine and does not provide detailed information about the person of Zahide-baci, who, it can be inferred, occupied a special place in society and was honored by local residents. The tomb of Zahide-baci is mentioned in historical chronicles (*sal-name*) that refer to the final years of Ottoman rule in Southern Serbia (Sajtović-Lukin, et al. 2005, 47–53).

At the same time, local folklore contains a legend about a certain Turkish girl, who was honored as a saint, whose *türbe* was located in a moat near the old Belgrade gate of the Niš fortress. One might surmise that over time the images of Zahide-baci and the saintly Turkish girl combined into a single saintly image, whose shrine developed along the walls of the fortress.

The legend of Zajde Bašće was first written down by the Serbian historian Milan Đakov Milićević in 1878 in Niš according to the testimonies of representatives of the Turkish community. Subsequent-

15. *Baci* (Turkish) — lexeme used in relation to a woman with the literal meaning of “sister.”

ly, variations of the legend were produced by Dušanka Bojanić, Đorđe Stamenković, Iva Traiković, Nenad Jašić, and Dragoljub Đorđević (Đorđević and Todorović 2001, 251–60).<sup>16</sup> The current study also takes into account different versions of the legend as I recorded them in the process of interviewing the current caretaker of the shrine and its visitors. The motifs and images expressed through the legends play an essential role in the formation of the particular character of local practices and the character of the shrine. In narrating its “origins,” the legends about the *türbe* and the saints become part of a narrative about tradition, cultural heritage, and continuity. They become an instrument for establishing the dominant religious discourse, alternately Christianizing or Islamizing the figure of the saint as well as the shrine itself.

According to the unvarying plot of the legend, Zajde (Zahide) Bašće (Badzha) was a young, unmarried girl who lived in Niš. She was characterized by piety, good manners and compassion, and spent a great deal of time in prayer. The central event of the legendary narrative in all instances is the departure of the master of the house in which Zajde Bašće was living (the Turkish aga) for the Hajj, her intention to bring him halva in Mecca, a miraculous transposition in space, and the subsequent disappearance of the girl. At the end of the unvarying legend, an area near the fortress wall and the moat that surrounds the city is identified as the spot where Zajde Bašće’s shoes are found after her disappearance.

Several motifs in the legend vary, some of which provide the key to an analysis of the content of the contemporary cult. These relate to the girl’s name, her ethnic and religious identity, the reason for her decision to pass along the food items, as well as the means by which she traversed distances and disappeared. Thus, the current caretaker of the holy shrine tells the story about a Muslim girl, a Turk, who was adopted by the Turkish aga. She was pious and helped people a great deal. All in all, this version is similar to the earliest narrative recorded by Milićević at the end of the nineteenth century and that described by Stamenković. Incidentally, in the latter case the motif of the miraculous apparition appears: while in Niš, the girl hears the voice of her adoptive father, who asks her to bring him food in Mecca as soon as possible. In other narratives,

16. Excerpts from the works of these authors have been collected in Saitović-Lukin, et al., 2005. See also Jašić 2001.

one finds the motif of a visionary experience: the aga comes to Zajde Bašće in a dream.

In another important version of the legend, as retold by the researcher Nenad Jašić on the basis of the folklore of longtime Romani residents of Niš, Zajde Bašće was not a Muslim and she was not allowed to pray in the home. Because of this, she was forced to pray to “her God” in the lavatory. The plot device about the pious non-Muslim was also found in the version of the legend told to us by an elderly resident of one of the Roma *mahalas*<sup>17</sup> of Niš, who over the last twenty years has engaged in preparatory burial practices among Muslim Roma. In her version, Zajde Bašće was a pious Serbian Orthodox maidservant to a wealthy Turkish townsperson. She fell in love with Islam and began to pray to God as is customary in her chosen religion. The spouse of the master prepared halva, put it in a basket, and ordered the girl to take the basket to the aga. The girl put on her shoes, left the house, and disappeared. Her shoes fell into the moat around the city walls, while the girl “went to God, departed with him, and now she is theirs [the saints’ and angels’ — K.T.], and God’s. Her shoes fell here, and here she (. . .) appears to some, and to others she does not appear” (Interview with sixty-year-old Romani female, 2011).

All of the cited versions of the legend are reproduced in contemporary folklore. In addition, according to the versions of the last two caretakers of the shrine, Zajde Bašće appears as a Turkish Muslim. Nevertheless, representations of her as a pious Serbian Orthodox girl also appear in the assertions of visitors, including Muslims. The saint’s religious identification, including the above-mentioned plot device of her conversion to Islam, is one of the signs that marks the shrine as an Islamic place (*korakhano than* in Romani). At the same time, one might surmise that the image of a non-Muslim saint, from one perspective, supports specifically Islamic ideas about the mercy of Allah, which, as it appears in the legend, can spread not only to Muslims, but to God-fearing followers of other religions. From another perspective, this motif can support and legitimize the visiting of the *türbe* by Christians and their performance of those practices that are usually followed within the boundaries of their own confessional tradition. This relates most of all to the individual recitation of prayers, in so far as this is mentioned in those versions of the legend in which Zajde Bašće appears as a non-Muslim.

17. *Mahala* — word meaning an urban area settled compactly by an ethnic or religious community. Currently, this term is often used to denote a neighborhood compactly settled by Roma.

Other motifs as well as the details of the account — toponyms, holidays and foods (the miraculous transposition to Mecca, the ability to fly and the possession of wings as an example of *karāma*;<sup>18</sup> the celebration of Kurban Bayram and the preparation of halva, which in local Muslim tradition is a ritual food) — also form a narrative of Muslim sources for traditions of venerating the *tekia* of Zajde Bašće. Some informants also read the saint's appearance in the same way — she is a young, beautiful girl dressed in white clothing, an image that she adopts while appearing to believers in their dreams.<sup>19</sup>

There are also other narratives connected with the legend of the girl Zajde Bašće that directly chronicle the appearance of the religious space dedicated to her. These include the luminescence of the site and other miracles: “Exactly on this spot she disappeared, exactly there she disappeared, and her shoes remained. All who lived in the fortress came to look to see what it was, why it happened, and there was a great glow, a great glow” (Interview with fifty-year-old Romani male, 2011). Certain sources of oral folklore indicate witnessing a glow, which was lit “not by the hand of man” (Đorđević and Todorović 2001, 253). This widespread motif creates meaning in beliefs about the tombs of shahids and *awliyā'* in various local Islamic traditions (beliefs about analogous miracles in the Balkan context can be found in Đorđević 1984b; Đorđević 1984a). At the same time, the interpretation of discrete visions can have Islamic and also Christian connotations. The face of the woman who appears in the shade of a tree or on the wall of the shrine can be interpreted as Zajde Bašće the saint or the Virgin Mary (Sajtović-Lukin, et al. 2005, 55).

### The Construction of a Mixed Shrine

The Zajde Bašće shrine can be considered an example of the so-called “uncovered” *türbe*.<sup>20</sup> According to the legend, a mausoleum on the site of the symbolic burial was erected several times, but in each case

18. *Karāma* — a miraculous occurrence. See Lozanova (2001) for characteristic features associated with this in the portrayal of female saints represented in the folk tradition of Bulgarian Muslims.

19. Youth and beauty are motifs encountered in descriptions of female saints in the popular imagination of Muslim-Alevi in Bulgaria, such as Kiz Ana, Zekia Baba, and so on.

20. The “uncovered” *türbe* is a gravesite that is surrounded by fencing as a rule, but which is not marked by a mausoleum. It is one of the types of Islamic gravesite architecture that belongs to the traditions of the Bektashi order, Qizilbash-Alevi (see Mikov 2001, 180–220).

the construction crumbled of its own accord, which indicated that the girl's gravesite ought to be left "open."<sup>21</sup> Believers routinely cite the motif of the collapsing mausoleum to prove the presence of the sacred in this place and its continuing power. Thus, according to these beliefs, every act of refurbishment of this shrine must be approved by the saint herself.

The general architectonics of this sacred space appear to us in a traditional form characteristic of popular Islamic traditions of decorating similar shrines. The decoration of the *tekia* is distinguished by several elements that can possess Islamic connotations. These elements include the recently constructed fountain (*chesma*) meant for ablutions. Muslim visitors to the shrine bring with them jugs of fresh water for the saint, so that she can perform ablutions prior to her prayer (*namaz*). The second element, a rose,<sup>22</sup> is one of the abiding attributes of the Islamic *türbe*. In ritual activities, participants light only white (that is, Islamic) candles,<sup>23</sup> which are sold by the shrine's caretaker. The Islamic character of the cult is also indicated by the offerings brought to the Zajde Bašće *tekia* by pilgrims. Among the gifts, one often sees ritual foods, such as sherbet and halva, which are connected to the everyday religious life of local Muslim communities.

Looking beyond the Islamic discourse, however, what remains remarkable is the absence of explicit visual and verbal markers associated with other similar sites. Thus, in constructing the appearance of Zajde Bašće's place of worship, the color green is not used, images of the Kaaba or of Islamic spiritual leaders are not presented; neither are there special tiles decorated with Qur'ānic verses (*shamail*), the Qur'ān itself, prayer beads, or prayer rugs.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, during pilgrimage days, symbols with explicitly Christian connotations are used. The ritual center of the *tekia* over the cenotaph is marked by three images. In the center of the composition is an original repre-

21. In general, the motif of the construction and collapse of structures as part of a specific semantic field (religious buildings, bridges, fountains) is frequent in Balkan folklore (see Đorđević 1984b, 132; Mikov 2001, 198).

22. The rose is semantically linked with the images of shahids and saints. According to the legends, roses grow where the blood of innocent victims (or the blood of shahids) is shed (Đorđević 1984a, 125, 126, 134).

23. According to local beliefs, the color of candles used in rituals marks the religious belonging of the participant and the ritual itself: white are associated with Islam and yellow with Orthodoxy.

24. One should note that the listed Islamic objects do appear in other public and private shrines in Romani settlements in Niš and Leskovac. Moreover, other *tekias* do not feature objects that would have strong associations with Christian traditions.

sentation of Zajde Bašće the saint as a stylized version of the Catholic image of the Virgin Mary. To the right and to the left, there are photographs of sculptures of the Virgin Mary and the “Black Madonna” of Letnica, respectively.



Images of the “Black Madonna” of Letnica (left), Zajde Bašće, and the Mother of God (right). June 9, 2011. Photograph by Ksenia Trofimova.

In my view, the key image is that of the “Black Madonna” of Letnica. Veneration of the Virgin Mary, which exists in different forms in Muslim cultures, was practiced by Roma until the end of the 1990s in annual pilgrimages to the Church of “the Letnica Mother of God” in the village of Letnica (a Croatian settlement in Kosovo), which is well known for its venerated statue of the “Black Madonna.” These pilgrimages were timed to coincide with the celebration of the Dormition of the Mother of God (August 14–15) (Dujzings 2000, 38–45; Vukanović 1983, 291–92).

The celebration of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Letnica organically combined within itself discourses of various communities of believers, each of which symbolically outlined and demonstrated its own cultural boundaries through conceptualizations, ongoing practices, and interpretations. Rituals, demonstrated by groups of Romani

Muslims, are structurally similar to actions taken to venerate saints (*awliyā*) in Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia, and included sacrifice (*kurban*) and offering bloodless gifts to the “Black Madonna.” This set of rituals had “sanctioned” status in this “multicultural” space, which is also indicated by liturgical services carried out in the Romani language. In this way, the church in Letnica during the holiday was understood by Roma as “their” space within the boundaries of the “foreign,” the dominant discourse of which after all remained Catholic, and the integrated cultural space displayed a discrete character. In reminiscences of visits to Letnica and other shrines in Kosovo, informants explained that within and around the church (within the borders of markets and tent encampments) one could perform various rituals. This was not prohibited but rather permitted. “This was our visitation” (Interview with Romani female, 2012; Interview with seventy-year-old Romani male, 2014; Interview with Romani female, 2014).

The national conflicts of the 1990s in the Balkans had their effect on cultural interactions. During that time, observers noted a weakening and suspension of “mixed” pilgrimages to monasteries and churches (Dujzings 2000, 65–75). The church in Letnica was no exception. In circumstances of the alienation of Roma from their traditional pilgrimage sites, it should come as no surprise that one can often see an aspiration to reproduce familiar forms of ritual in new surroundings within Roma communities, especially those made up of the forcibly displaced. These often take place in typologically similar religious loci while preserving the overall conceptual context and structure of the ritual. Thus, in recent years, one observes the growth in the number of pilgrims and visitors during times of religious holidays to Catholic churches, known as local pilgrimage sites, that are located along migration routes for Roma communities (for example, Niš, Serbia; Skopje, Macedonia; and Novi Sad, Serbia, among others).

Research on annual visits to the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Niš on the holiday of the Dormition of the Mother of God shows the growth and revitalization of visitors (caused for the most part by the growth of the Roma population), who are attempting to recreate their familiar ritual forms associated with Letnica. As a consequence, insofar as the physical space of the worship site in Niš does not allow for mass events, access to the church’s courtyard and its sculpture of the Mother of God and child is restricted on designated dates and the offering of sacrifices is forbidden (Saitović-Lukin, et al. 2005, 61–62). I suggest that the forcible alienation from the central cult object, and the departure beyond borders already delimited in the ritual have dis-



rupted the ritual structure, have lowered its functional significance, and have forced a transformation of the ritual complex, in particular by moving it into more appropriate loci (for example, into private domestic or public shrines).

Thus, the appearance within the Zajde Bašće *tekia* of the images of Letnica and the Mother of God, as well as the stylized image of the saint herself, are perfectly logical and understandable. While their juxtaposition might at first glance appear confusing, it can be explained by examining the objects' origins. According to information offered by the current caretaker of the *tekia*, the three images were brought to him in 2010 by an ethnically Serbian Christian woman, who stated that she was moved to do so by a dream in which she saw herself bringing the images into the *tekia*.

In this way, the veneration of the Mother of God was partially included in an active religious space, the latter of which, in its turn, acquires an additional meaning and is marked through the presence of the given image. The act of giving the images had an individual character, but it was legitimated by tradition and integrated into the holistic cult. Taking into account the role of dreams in various cultures (see Vražinovski 1998, 143–48; Đorđević 1984b, 376; Jovanović 2011; Mikov 1999, 220; on experiences of visions in Muslim/Islamic traditions, see Felek and Knysh 2012), the introduction of the images can serve as an example of a traditional mechanism of legitimation for the constructed confessional hybridity of space (Berger 1980; Boyer 1990).

I suggest that one of the determinants in the choice of place as well as of the inclusion into the cult was the fact that the Zajde Bašće shrine, which attracts believers mostly from Roma communities, is understood by Roma as a space of ethnocultural unity. In other words, it is not about the transference of the cult, but the partial reproduction of it within their “own” space. At the same time, it is important to underscore that the figure of the Mother of God has not squeezed out the figure of Zajde Bašće, and the latter remains the dominant personality, and it is through her that Islamic rhetoric is preserved.

In this way, as in the example of the legend narratives, the organization of the space of the shrine reveals a special hybridization or combination of Islamic and Christian elements. It is worth singling out the multiple differences that mark the Zajde Bašće as separate from numerous other phenomena in the Balkans in relation to mixed pilgrimages. As a rule, in confessionally unique sites (for example, in monastery or mosque, etc.) or ambiguous shrines (areas related to figures of saints equally venerated in popular Christian as well as popular Islam-

ic traditions as in the example of Saint Nikola/Haydar Baba) (Bowman 2014), the organization of space is either subordinated to the dominant confessional discourse or it is reorganized each time according to the needs of a concrete group of pilgrims depending on their religious identification. Zajde Bašće, however, is a space that organically minimizes or smoothes over religious differences, which allows for the co-existence of symbols of various faiths.<sup>25</sup>

The final brush stroke in completing a portrait of the Zajde Bašće *tekia* is to return to the ritual behaviors of visitors. Based on observations of believers and interviews, it is possible to note the existence of instructions for the cultic aspect of visiting the shrine. Ritual activities and the behavior of people within the boundaries of the given site are regulated by a complex set of prohibitions and regulations that correspond to ideas about ritual purity/impurity, some of which are determined by the Islamic context. Among the purifying activities to be completed while preparing for the ritual (roughly within twenty-four hours of a visit) are: thorough bathing, a prohibition on sexual contact, and a refusal of “forbidden” food (pork and alcohol). Smoking is allowed, including within the boundaries of the shrine. It is recommended that women wear modest clothing and refrain from applying cosmetics. The hijab is also not required.<sup>26</sup>

The most important areas of ritual activity are the individual act of making a vow or declaring intentions and unmediated communication between supplicant and saint. In this way, the ritual activities carried out within the shrine consist for the most part of individual activities (personal prayers addressed to the saint, lighting of candles, making of offerings). Insofar as there are no collective ritual activities within the shrine, this can also be seen as a feature that permits the minimization of external (visible) confessional differences among pilgrims and creates space for religious combinations. It is remarkable that the system of regulations and prohibitions, which sets rigid limits to what can be allowed in ritual, at the same time preserves the flexibility of confessional boundaries: on the external level, all visitors to the shrine are performing the same acts, without being explicitly attached

25. As noted earlier, the architectonics of space of the shrine do not include confessional symbols of the first order, which could serve as an obvious and explicit marker defining the confessional boundaries of the sacred space.

26. A possible explanation for this is the fact that, in contrast to other ethnic communities that follow Islam in the Balkans such as Albanians, wearing a hijab has not become an everyday practice among local Romani communities, with the exception of visits to mosques and other religious sites (Sufi *tekias* or *semanas*).

to a single confession — they do not raise their hands for the traditional Islamic *dua* nor do they cross themselves.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the existing system of injunctions does not regulate internal prayer to the saint and allows believers to appeal to her in a way appropriate for their own confession or simply in their own way.

In this way, the religious status of participants is differentiated within the boundaries of general religious practices on the level of injunctions and prohibitions. At the same time, the integrated discourse of the cult is simultaneously a product as well as the creator of the cultural identity of the given space, delimiting the boundaries of the personal discourses it includes (multicultural against the background of Islamic, the latter of which is dominant in this case).

### **Concluding Remarks**

In its current form, the Zajde Bašće shrine is constructed on the basis of various narratives. The uniqueness of this *tekia* is determined by the specifics of its foundational narratives, the organization of its internal space and ritual practices; it consists of a combination of traditional Islamic, Christian and popular elements. Their interrelations show, on the one hand, the tendency toward regulation on the basis of the dominant “traditional” Islamic discourse, and on the other, the leveling of confessional difference, which ensures the flexibility of confessional limits on the level of representation and practices. As I have already noted, the formation of this religious space and its hybrid character depend on cohesive mechanisms of legitimization, which are formed by local conceptualizations and rituals.

The question of the character and specifics of the recognition given to the Zajde Bašće shrine and the rituals performed there by local official religious leaders remains an interesting one. In their eyes, this *tekia* is seen, as a rule, as an illegitimate, unorthodox, or extra-confessional phenomenon, and one that is marginal. This marginalization on the one hand entails, and on the other is based on an interpretation of this cult as a specifically distinctive Romani religious phenomenon, perceived as “their” tradition. In contrast, visitors themselves and certain leaders of local Sufi brotherhoods view Zajde Bašće as a means of supporting local Islamic traditions and at the same time as a part

27. Crossing oneself is expressly forbidden, and in this fact one can see the predominance of an Islamic discourse over a multicultural one. “I am Orthodox, but here I can’t cross myself [it’s simply not done — K.T.]” (Interview with Serbian male, 2012).

of their own cultural memory, which integrates the religious culture of the Roma into the surrounding cultural space. And in this context, the Islamic discourse ascribed to “tradition” is preserved.

I would also suggest that the constructed narrative about the shrine’s multicultural character as a supplement to the “traditionalist” Islamic discourse can be understood as a direct reaction to the non-recognition of Zajde Bašće and its relegation to marginal status on the part of local religious leaders. The marginal, peripheral character of the cult, on the one hand, suggests the liminality of defined confessional boundaries, and on the other, demands self-regulation. It is likely that the appearance of this “multicultural” discourse can be explained as a manifestation of the polyphony characteristic of Balkan religiosity in general (as a facet of the culture of neighborhood) and of contemporary Romani religiosity specifically.

At the same time, the most productive way to explain the specifics of the Zajde Bašće shrine is exactly within the context of the specificities of Romani religiosity in the Balkans. In my research, I have tried to show that the characteristic features of the popular religious culture of the Roma are its syncretism and its ability to combine multiple elements (Trofimova 2013). This ability to combine disparate elements is a form of organization of everyday religiosity in which elements of different traditions do not lose their connection to a specific confession and yet unite with a general narrative, spatial or ritual complex. It is exactly this that can be seen in the example of Zajde Bašće, in which elements of popular Muslim and Christian beliefs combine, and in doing so reveal the specific presence of the religious ideas and practices of the Balkan Romani milieu. To summarize, I argue that, within conditions of non-institutionalization and marginalization and simultaneously in line with traditional forms of existence and legitimization, the Zajde Bašće *tekia* reveals certain Balkan mechanisms of everyday religiosity in the realm of different neighboring cultures.

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