

“We do it for health (*za zdrave*).” Sensational Forms Related to the Cult of Healing Springs (*ayazma*) in Orthodox Christian Shrines in South-Western Bulgaria

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Abstract

The article describes *sensational forms* connected with the cult of healing waters, as found in Orthodox Christian religious communities of southwestern Bulgaria. Referring to the concept of the *porous self*, I analyze how and why Orthodox Christian devotees in Bulgaria attribute a life-giving force (*zhivonosna/zhivotvorna*) to the healing springs (*ayazma*) found in the monastery, and how they use those for ablutions and drinking, thereby hoping to increase their personal vitality. The data is discussed from synchronic and diachronic perspectives. This is done to draw distinct cultural parallels between current practices at the healing springs at the monastery, the iconography of Bogoroditsa the Life-Giving Spring, and the cult established at the monastery of the Mother of God of the Spring (*Zoodohos Pege*) in Constantinople, attested since the medieval period. Rooted in an emic Orthodox Christian understanding of the concept of life-giving forces, this analysis is anthropologically significant in its demonstration that life-giving force is viewed as an underlying concept that manifests itself as divine power, grace or energy, all of which are key terms in the Orthodox Christian religious lexicon.

Key words: life-giving force/*zhivotvornost*, *sensational forms*, healing springs/*ayazma*, *porous self*, Christianity, Bulgaria

Introduction

The findings in this article are based on intermittent ethnographic research among Orthodox Christian communities in southwestern Bulgaria between 2002 and 2015. Being partially of Bulgarian-Macedonian origin myself, I had spent a lot of time in Bulgaria even previous to my professional involvement with ethnography. In fact, this is where my impulse came from to start ethnographic fieldwork in the area as a student in 2002, and later led me to complete several research projects focusing on the religious life of mixed Muslim-Orthodox Christian communities in southwestern Bulgaria (Lubanska 2005; 2015). In this sense, my conclusions are based on long-term observation rather than isolated incidents. Beginning in 2002, when I visited monasteries and asked devotees why they engaged in a particular form of religious behaviour, a conspicuous pattern emerged, as they invariably explained that their actions were intended “for health” (*za zdrave*).

My recent research project¹ on healing practices seen in Orthodox Christian shrines led me to conclude that the phrase is used as a closing formula in a number of rituals, such as the sharing of holy bread (*pitka*) intended to bring healing to specific individuals, the kissing of icons or relics, the blessing of the *kurban*, sleeping in churches (incubation), and the anointing of the sick or *porūsvane* (the sprinkling of people with holy water). By using those words in a church context, devotees also encourage those less competent in matters of religion (children or young people) to engage in certain practices.

Based on the years of field research, I have come to the conclusion that “health” is in this case taken to mean well-being, a state of balance in body and spirit attainable through contact with sacred objects available in the monastery, such as holy icons, relics, healing springs, or other items unique to a given location, such as the set of chains found in the

monastery of Ss. Kosmas and Damian in Kuklen, formerly used to bind people suffering from demonic possession (*besnovati*).²

Healing, as understood by Orthodox Christian devotees, is not merely a matter of recovering from a physical ailment. It also entails an opening up to life-giving forces (*zhivotvorni, zhivonosni*) operating through energies present in physical objects and verbal formulas. This insight came in particular from my observation of ablutions performed by Orthodox devotees at healing springs located next to monasteries, and from listening to their narratives about the experience. Some used the word *zhivotvorni* (“life-giving” or “life-producing”) to describe the unique properties of healing springs, holy relics and miracle-working icons kept in the monastery. Clearly, to engage in a particular behaviour “for health” means to perform a practice that leads to a life that is in some sense bigger, fuller and more vigorous. Even people who are not suffering from disease or physical ailments can experience this sense of increased health, energy, and physical vigour. Thus, a word that I initially took for granted turned out to be an emic category highlighting a key aspect of the local religious habitus, and a rare example of a liturgical term adopted by devotees for regular use.

The belief that the human body is exposed to positive and negative energies also chimes with another element of Bulgaria’s Orthodox Christian culture, namely the tendency whereby Orthodox Christian devotees perceive themselves as “porous” selves, a term I borrow from Charles Taylor to mean a self that “feels itself vulnerable or ‘healable’ to benevolence or malevolence which is more than human, which resides in (the) cosmos or even beyond it” (Taylor 2007: 36).

In this sense, the self is constantly open to external influence, good or malign, and can be hurt by negative actions/energies produced by people or locations (actions which may or may not be intentional). This influence can be contained by an “antidote” which shields the self from negative energies, and replenishes the self with positive energies.

In this text, I describe the *sensational forms*³ found in Orthodox Christian religious culture in connection with the cult of healing waters, to which Orthodox Christian devotees in Bulgaria attribute a life-giving force, and which they use for ablutions and drinking, thereby hoping to increase their personal vitality. I hope the text also contributes to anthropology of Orthodox Christianity, a sub-discipline that continues to be overlooked and underrepresented in anthropological research⁴ (see: Hann, Goltz 2010; Lubanska 2007; Lubanska, Ładykowska 2013).

I use the term *sensational forms* as proposed by Brigit Meyer: “Sensational forms can best be understood as a condensation of practices, attitudes, and ideas that structure religious experiences and hence “ask” to be approached in a particular manner” (Meyer 2009: 13). Such forms operate within the context of certain special traditions which are part of “longstanding processes of socialization into particular religious traditions” (Meyer 2008: 129), and which induce sensations by activating certain dispositions and practices (2009: 13). Brigit Meyer does not define *sensational forms* as an opposition between content and meaning, or between ethical norms and values, but rather as necessary preconditions without which the latter cannot be achieved (2009:13). The process through which these get formed connects items that share certain ideas, and which then become embodied through physical aesthetic objects (2009: 7). “It is exactly by working on the body and the senses that *sensational forms* are naturalized as conveyors of truth and embodied by the religious subjects” (2008: 129).

According to Meyer, sensational forms are “relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendental⁵, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations. Sensational forms are transmitted and shared, they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and play a central role in forming religious subjects” (Meyer 2006: 9). They shape both religious content (beliefs, doctrines, sets of symbols) and norms (2009: 13).

Accordingly, I treat the Orthodox Christian religious culture as broadly defined⁶ media and mediation practices⁷ focused on distinctive *sensational forms* which make the transcendent “sense-able” (Meyer 2006: 9). At the same time, the transcendent cannot be treated as a “self-revealing entity,” but rather a “form by mediation processes” (Meyer 2006: 14). In this article, I describe those *sensational forms* which relate to healing springs. I shall start by placing those practices within the context of a certain Christian Orthodox tradition which makes possible the practice of specific *sensational forms*, and then move on to describing modern manifestations of such sensational forms.

The spring of Zoodohos Pege in Constantinople and *vodosvet* rites as the historical and cultural context accounting for the enduring popularity of the *sensational forms* connected with the cult of healing springs in the Orthodox Christian religious culture in south-western Bulgaria

There are two words for “spring” in Bulgarian: *ayazmo* and *izvor*. The word *ayazmo* is only used to describe healing springs located in sacred places of Orthodox Christianity. The word has a clear connection to the Greek *hagiasma* and Turkish *ayazma*, meaning “holy water.” The word *izvor* is usually used to refer to mountain springs, although those too can be described as “healing” springs (*lechitelen izvor*). Other than some limited interest from Byzantium scholars (but not from social science researchers), it is a curious omission from the literature of the subject that ablutions performed in *ayazmo* have in recent years attracted scant interest from researchers despite being one of the more frequent practices found in monasteries. This is particularly baffling in view of the fact the cult of healing springs appears to be a key and very obvious *sensational form* in Orthodox Christian religious culture. I also get the impression that this particular form is especially prevalent in the eparchy of Plovdiv, which for centuries had maintained close ties with Constantinople, and adapted some of its *sensational forms*.

Often encountered in this region of Bulgaria is a certain distinctive visual motif connected with the imagery of the cult of healing water as a *sensational form*, namely the icon of the Mother of God of the Life-Giving Spring (abbreviated here as LGS, Bulgarian: *Bogoroditsa Zhivonosen Iztochnik*), containing depictions of miraculous healings reportedly taking place at a spring located in Constantinople a few miles from a former temple in Blachernae.

I have discussed the image itself in a different article (2017, in press). It is sufficient for my purposes here to point out that both the origins of this depiction of the Mother of God of LGS and the practice of taking healing ablutions in her spring go back to Constantinople. The monastery of the Mother of God of the Spring (Zoodohos Pege) was built in Constantinople as early as the fifth century, so named on account of the nearby healing spring whose miraculous effects were attributed to the Mother of God. It was a “place of worship most favoured by the Byzantines” (Etzeoglou 2005: 239), and its cult endured for centuries,⁸ even after the shrine itself was destroyed in the mid-sixteenth century⁹ (Talbot 2012: xviii).

One of the factors that contributed to the fame of the healing spring were the writings of the Byzantine chronicler Nicephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, probably composed in connection with renovation work in the shrine in the first half of the fourteenth century. In *Logos*, Xanthopoulos provided a description of the image, and actually initiated a holiday in honour of the Mother of God of the Life-Giving Spring, to whom he dedicated a church which had formerly been known simply as the church of the Virgin of the Spring (Etzeoglou 2005: 240). At first the epithet, “Life-Giving Spring” only appeared in hymns to the Mother of God,¹⁰ but Xanthopoulos applied it to the name of the church (2005: 240). In other words, the life-giving spring is a traditional appellation of the Virgin Mary, also appearing in the name of a

feast dedicated to the Virgin on the first Friday after Easter (*Svetli Petŭk*/Bright Friday¹¹), where the liturgy focuses on the miracle of resurrection, i.e. glorifies life.

It appears that the popularity of the icon of the Mother of God of the LGS was partially influenced by two icon painters of the Samokov Art School¹² in the period of Bulgarian national revival: Hristo Dimitrov (who included the motif in frescoes at the monastery of Bachkov) and Zahari Zograf (1810–1853), both of whom painted four icons of the Mother of God LGS known in the region of Plovdiv¹³ (Brisby 2003: 40; Moskova 2002: 20). These include the icon from the old Church of St. Petka¹⁴ in Plovdiv (1837), an 1836 icon from the monastery of St. Petka of Moldova near Asenovgrad, an 1838 icon from the church of Ss. Kirik and Yulita and St. Paraskeva at Gorni Voden, and an icon from the chapel of John the Baptist in the church of the Annunciation in Asenovgrad (Brisby 2003: 40-41).

In this set of icons, the Mother of God is depicted as the source of water springing from the fount: her figure fills the bowl of the fountain, from which water flows into a wide pool surrounded by devotees. The devotees collect water from the pool and drink it or use it for ablutions. The crowd appears to include representatives of different social classes, from people of high social status to beggars. Seven fish are swimming in the pool, a detail I will return to when discussing the *sensational form* involving the use of the *ayazmo* in the chapel of St John the Baptist at the Church of the Annunciation in Asenovgrad, but for the time let us discuss further the spring of the Mother of God in Constantinople, which appears to be a paradigmatic exemplar for the cult of healing springs and the related *sensational forms* in Bulgarian monasteries.

According to apocryphal sources alluded to in the Synaxarion for Bright Friday, the spring in Constantinople devoted to the Mother of God and known as Zoodochos Pege (gr. Ζωοδόχος Πηγή), was revealed by the Virgin to the future emperor Leo I,¹⁵ who was an ordinary soldier at that time, when Leo was looking for water to give a thirsty blind man he encountered on the road. According to legend, the Mother of God pointed Leo to a healing spring covered in mud. Leo collected water from the spring and gave it to the blind man. He also put mud from the spring on the eyes of the blind man, who miraculously regained sight. The Virgin requested that a church should be built in that place, promising healing to all comers. Leo built a house of prayer in the location, a small shrine called Kataphyge or Refuge (Etzeoglou 2005: 239; Talbot 2012: xiv), which in the following century was converted into a crypt within a larger church and monastery erected by Emperor Justinian.

Emperor Justinian, too, was healed with water from Zoodochos Pege, which cured the emperor of a urinary ailment. According to the day's Synaxarion passage, water from the spring also cured the infertility afflicting Empress Zoe¹⁶, the wife of Emperor Leo VI ("the Philosopher"), and helped other members of the imperial family as well as various monks, nuns and ordinary people. Healings were granted when people drank from the spring water or took ablutions, but also when they rubbed themselves with mud from the pool or drank oil from a lamp suspended in front of the icon of the Virgin (Talbot 2012: xv). A total of 47 miracles were collected in a tenth-century manuscript¹⁷ entitled "Anonymus miracles at the Pege," written in a plain style and, according to Alice Marie Talbot, targeted at the working classes (Talbot 2012: lxv; Etzeoglou 2005: 239). Xanthopolous later supplemented that source with fifteen more miracles from his own time, as described in his "Logos" (Lubanska 2017).

Some of those miracles filtered into Bulgarian devotional literature from the period of national revival,¹⁸ in some cases still circulating today as "The Miracles of the Mother of God" – I have personally encountered an Asenovgrad edition of that work published in the research area in 1995. Notably, three of the miracles relate to the healing properties of the spring in Constantinople. The first is the account of "the miracle of a certain blind man who regained sight thanks to the miraculous water of the Mother of God" (mentioned above). Another is the story of "The wise Emperor Leo," where Emperor Leo is cured on his deathbed after a nun from

the shrine of the Mother of God brings him water from the Pege, the emperor's wife praying fervently for his recovery. The third miracle, which is particularly relevant in the context of this article, tells the story of "A man who was brought back to life by the miraculous water of Balakliya."¹⁹



Photograph 1. The *ayazmo* in the church of the Mother of God Zoodochos Pege in Istanbul (By Alessandro57 - Own work, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11878406>)

The man brought back to life in that story was a "Thessalian" (probably an inhabitant of Thessalonica) who made the journey to Constantinople hoping to "enlighten his soul" by drinking of the healing water. His plans came to naught as he fell gravely ill during his boat journey. Realising that death was imminent, the man asked one of the sailors not to throw his dead body overboard, but rather to wash it three times with water from the spring, and then to bury him nearby. The sailor granted his wish, but as soon the man was washed three times with water from the spring, he came back to life. He became a monk and lived for twenty more years praising the Virgin (Chudesata 1995: 18-19). Among others, this particular miracle was the reason Nicephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos chose to describe the spring as "life-bearing"²⁰: "The Second Lazarus" is often painted in icons of the Mother of God of the LGS, shown springing back to life after being washed in the healing water. The miracle is also depicted in the icon painted by Zahari Zogaf in the old church of St. Petka, as mentioned above. It should also be noted that Kataphyge also comprised special bathing rooms for immersions in the *hagiasma*; I came across analogous rooms in south-eastern Bulgaria in the *cheshma* of Ss. Kosmas and Damian at the monastery in Kuklen (though it is not clear to me to what extent those were related in architectural terms). Thus, the ritual of healing immersions survives in that monastery in a rudimentary form.

I believe that the icon of the Mother of God of the LGS as well as the miracles recorded at Zoodochos Pege can be considered part of a long-term cultural context which explains the enduring popularity of immersions and ablutions in healing springs as a *sensational form*.

Nonetheless, neither the icon nor the narratives about the healing spring in Constantinople provide the full cultural context leading to the emergence of *sensational forms* related to the cult of healing water. Those were powerfully strengthened by rituals of *vodosvet* (blessing of water), which are remarkably popular in Bulgaria. In the Orthodox Christian tradition there is a distinction between the so-called Major Vodosvet, held on the feast of Epiphany (which in the Eastern tradition commemorates Jesus' baptism in the Jordan), and various minor *vodosvets*, where water is blessed during major Orthodox Christian holidays

devoted to various saints. The formulas are spoken aloud by a priest during those rites, a fact which undoubtedly reinforces the perception that the water has healing properties. This is a subject to which I will come back when describing the *vodosvet* rituals in which I participated in 2013 and 2014 at the monastery of Ss. Kosmas and Damian in Kuklen.

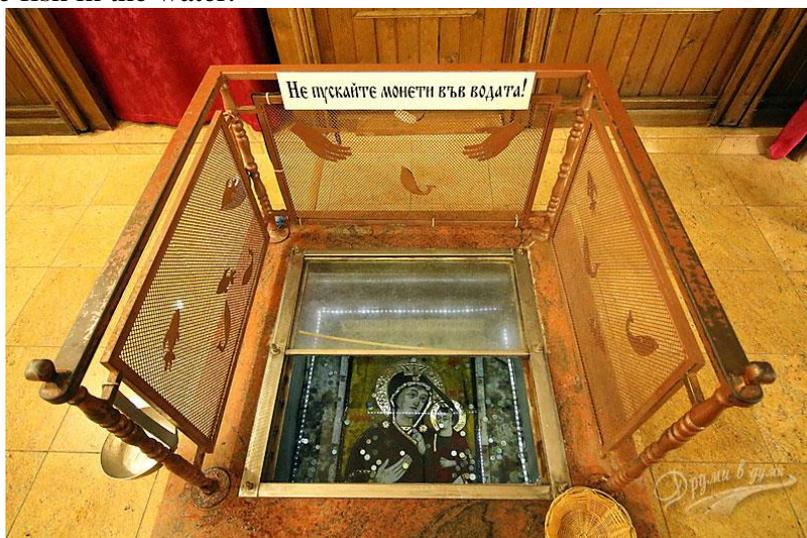
What follows is an account of the modern day *sensational forms* connected with the cult of *ayazmo* in the church of the Mother of God of the Fishes in Asenovgrad and at the monastery of Ss. Kosmas and Damian in Kuklen.

Examples of Modern Day Sensational Forms related to the Cult of Healing Springs (*ayazma*)

The healing *ayazmo* at the church of the Mother of God of the Fishes

One example of a clear relationship between the icon of the Mother of God of the LGS is the *ayazmo* in the chapel of St. John the Baptist adjacent to the church of the Annunciation, generally viewed as being the most important of all Asenovgrad churches famed for healings (Baeva 2013: 67). The *ayazmo* in question shows intriguing parallels with what I consider to be its prototype in Constantinople.

I learned about the *ayazmo* from a respondent who emphasised that there were live fish swimming in the *ayazmo*, placed in the pool by the local clergy in keeping with an old tradition (2014.06.25). The spring²¹ is not open to the public: it is locked away in a separate room, but it can be viewed after obtaining the key from an elderly woman. Placed at the bottom (at the depth of about one metre) is a miracle-working glass icon of the Mother of God. Stories of healings achieved thanks to the icon circulate in Asenovgrad, and people seek healing by performing ablutions or drinking water from the *ayazmo*. The water is considered to be particularly potent against nervous disorders.²² I heard the opinion that wishes get granted to those people who spot the fish in the water.



Photograph 2. *Ayazmo* in the chapel of St. John the Baptist, the Church of Annunciation also known as the Mother of God of the Fishes in Asenovgrad (<http://drumivdumi.com/рибната-църква-асеновград/>)

The fish in the *ayazmo* are one reason why the church of the Annunciation is also known as the church of the Mother of God of the Fishes or Balükliyska. The name of the church has already drawn the attention of Vihra Baeva, a Bulgarian folklorist and ethnographer who conducted field research in the area in the 1990's. However, Baeva and her respondents connected the name only with the local context²³ – they realized the Turkish etymology of the word *balık* but associated it with the scaled dome of the church in which the spring is located (the only such architectural feature in the area), and the fish swimming in the pool. However,

nobody (Baeva included) drew the connection between the *ayazmo* in Asenovgrad on the one hand, and the oldest healing *ayazmo* associated with the Mother of God located in Istanbul, which also has the appellation “*balıikli*” on account of its fish. Baeva proposed the following four hypotheses to explain the origins of the name: Fish is traditionally shared on the Feast of Annunciation, a custom observed by the local devotees; the Christian symbolism of fish as a symbol of Christ; the symbolism of the fish as regards the various aspects of the Mother of God and of the lunar deities; the symbolism of the fish is female origins, fertility and birth (Baeva 2013: 68, cited in Lubanska 2017: 17). In doing so, Baeva overlooks²⁴ those cultural traces which are closer to home, namely the Pege spring in Constantinople, and the icon of the Mother of God of the LGS which illustrates it (Lubanska 2017: 17); this is particularly surprising given the fact that another such icon, also by Zahari Zograf, is displayed in the same chapel. Baeva mentions the icon, and then notes that the icon is carried in a solemn procession on Bright Friday to the nearby Chapel of St. Petka, after which it is returned to the chapel for a *vodosvet* rite (blessing of water) (Baeva 2013: 67). Nonetheless, Baeva has not made the connection between the scenery of the *ayazmo* and the prototypical scene depicted in the icon.

The chapel also includes what seems to be another significant element, namely a fresco on the dome of the church by Zahari Zograf depicting the Mother of God of the Sign. This may have been an intentional allusion to the Pege spring on Zograf’s part, since we know from Xanthopoulos that the Pege church also had a fresco of the Mother of God of the Sign painted on its dome,²⁵ where it was placed directly over the spring to cast a reflection in its waters (cited in Teteriatinikov 2005: 226). The fresco in the chapel of St. John the Baptist is not reflected directly in the spring, however the effect is present (indeed augmented) by the glass icon placed at the bottom of the *ayazmo*. This suggests clear connections between the two springs, which are manifest at a number of levels and cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, even if Zograf’s inspiration was not direct.²⁶ Zograf need not have had first-hand knowledge of the Pege spring and need not have drawn direct inspiration from it, however the source appears to have been the prototype of that iconographic motif, complete with the fishes swimming in the water, and whoever placed the glass icon of the Mother of God at the bottom of the *ayazmo* may have been familiar with the famous reflection in the waters of the Pege as described by Xanthopoulos.

In terms of the Constantinople sources, the first person to mention the fish in the spring was likely “the Russian Anonymous who visited Pege between 1389 and 1391” (Talbot 2012: xvii; Anonymous 2012: 148). Given the fact that the account of the Russian Anonymous goes back to 1390, George Majeska speculates that the tradition may have been Byzantine in origin (Majeska 1984: 326).

Although accounts of fish swimming in the Pege date back to the fourteenth century, the name “*Balikli*” appears to come from a later period; Majeska supposes it “could be a calque of a popular name of the area in the Late Byzantine Times” (Majeska 1984: 326).²⁷ The fish swimming in the pool are also mentioned in *hermeneia*, icon painting manuals. A *hermeneia* written by Dionysius of Fourni in the second half of the eighteenth century mentions three fishes (2003: 187); the Bulgarian icon painter Dicho Zograf, more relevant in the context of this article, mentions seven fishes²⁸ (Zograf 1976: 94).

The healing *ayazmo* in the Kuklen monastery

Located only about ten miles away in the mountains between Asenovgrad and Plovdiv, there is another healing *ayazmo* at the monastery of Ss. Kosmas and Damian in Kuklen.²⁹ The spring is located perhaps 250 meters outside of the monastery walls, opposite the south entrance, and it is famed for healings of nervous disorders.³⁰ It is not clear when the monastery, famous for miraculous healings, began but without a doubt, the existence of the healing spring

influenced the original decision to construct an old pagan temple in Thracian-Roman times and later the monastery itself in that location.

All pilgrims coming to the monastery begin their visit by coming to the spring where they would wash their heads and faces (particularly the eyes, the forehead, and the hair), and drink from the spring. Father S., who used to work at the monastery, told me that:

The water in the ayazmo has healing properties. It has a kind of anti-stress effect on you. When you pour cold water over someone they experience stress, and those people who suffer from anxiety neurosis recover. Also, the water is good for blood circulation. Some people told me about a man whose feet were always cold because of bad circulation. Nothing [helped]. He took a bath in the water two or three times, and he got better (Father S., Krūstova Gora, 29.06.2014)

Most people collect water from the *ayazmo* into plastic bottles to take home. They also take home water that has been blessed at the spring during the *vodosvet* rite that concludes the celebrations during the feast of Ss. Kosmas and Damian (1st and 11th of November). After the water has been blessed, it gets sprinkled over the icons of Ss. Kosmas and Damian (removed from the church for the occasion), and over the devotees. The devotees bring their own bottles of water (which they mark with their names), and after the water has been blessed, they take the bottles home to use it for ablutions in medical emergencies or when they are not feeling well.

Interestingly, this Orthodox Christian practice in which spring water is taken home following a *vodosvet* rite is attested already in the writings of St. John Chrysostom, in the homily *De Baptismo Christi* preached in Antioch in 387 (cited in Denysenko 2012: 17). Although it would not be warranted to claim in this case any sort of uninterrupted *longue durée* spanning cultural connections between the *sensational forms* of Orthodox Christian religious culture in Plovdiv and Constantinople, I agree with Aleksandra Sulikowska that there is a certain “continuity of Orthodox Christian tradition in all periods and geographical areas in which it was present” (Sulikowska 2012: 20, personal translation).



Photograph 3. Ayazmo at St. Kosmas and Damian Monastery in Kuklen 1th of July 2013 (Magdalena Lubanska)

Today, the water springs from a *cheshma*³¹ located at the head of a small courtyard surrounded by a wall, with a concrete floor and no roof comprising two somewhat rundown rooms for men and women. Father Ivan Shtütov told me that the rooms used to contain bathtubs and showers,³² which were still in use when he worked in the cemetery in 1998-2008:

Those were in use, people used them for baths (immersions). Even the ihumen from the Holy Mountain, an old man [dyado]³³ used to come here too and take a bath. After all, the water has healing properties, this is general knowledge, it's not just something you and I know. The fact that the monastery has healing properties is known in almost all of Bulgaria. (Kuklen, Father Ivan S., 27.06.2014)

Some devotees recommend sprinkling and drinking water from all three of the taps, a practice they associate with veneration of the Holy Trinity. Placed over the spring is an icon of Ss. Kosmas and Damian and plaques from various historical periods: the most recent ones date back to 1830,³⁴ and were placed there on the initiative of Arhimandrite Nikodim, who erected the building. The inscriptions are in Greek and promise that the water “brings health to those who come to drink it seeking healing” (Gergova 2015: 263).

Earlier inscriptions from 1795³⁵ are likewise in Greek.³⁶ Importantly, for the purposes of this article, they describe the spring water as a “life-giving” or “life-bearing” (Greek: *zoodochos*, Bulgarian: *zhivotvorna*), promising to bring strength and healing to those who come to the spring with faith, hoping to be healed, and stating that the water purifies the impurity of all disease (cf. Shtütov 2004:17). I saw that plaque displayed in the narthex of the church of Ss.

Kosmas and Damian. In addition to the inscriptions, the plaque depicts a cross symbol with sun symbols on either side. Unfortunately, the nuns did not allow me to take a photograph.

Some of the devotees who visit the spring use the concept of “life-giving” properties *zhivotvorno/zhivonosno*. This fact is probably unrelated to the inscription, since most pilgrims do not understand it anyway. Accordingly, I treat this concept as an emic category which indicates the key importance of the local religious culture. Incidentally, it is also a rare example of devotees adopting a concept derived from the language of the liturgy for their own purposes.

At the same time it appears that the water is perceived as a kind of medium which can transmit a life-giving force to other objects or neutralise noxious effects – which can be variously described as bad energies, disease, the evil eye, or demonic possession. It is this effect to which some of my respondents attributed the healing properties of a set of chains kept in the narthex of the church of Ss. Kosmas and Damian, used in the past to bind the *besnovati* or demoniacs brought into the church:

People would sprinkle holy water on those chains. And when they did that, he says, that chain has a life-giving power [zhivotvorna sila], that's what he (the priest) said. And that person [a sufferer visiting the monastery] felt so good thanks to those chains that he insisted that he was feeling no pain when he was leaving (former klisarka, ³⁷ Kuklen, 2014.06.27).

This is a reference to a practice whereby water from the *ayazmo* was sprinkled over devotees coming to the monastery, described to me here by a woman who wished to remain anonymous:

It's caused by devils, that's right, that's right. I mean, they used to make up to 40 attempts. Father S. may have told you about that, I mean, they used to bring them by force to the water from the ayazmo, they would pour a bucket of water over them next of those chains. They would try to wear that spirit out until it could take no more and leave, the people would cry out and scream. That other spirit, because that's what it is, another spirit, be it a devil or bad energies, all kinds of magic, all that finally leaves you, and you get well and recover. That's the mechanism (Plovdiv, 30.06.2014).

Today, people tend to discuss the water as an effective remedy for nervous disorders, and consider demonic possession as a thing belonging to a bygone era.

One of the respondents regularly uses the water to perform ablutions on her husband, who is suffering from a neurological disorder:

The fact that he drinks water from Kuklen, the fact that I say my prayers over that water, perhaps that's the reason why we've given all those neurologists such a big surprise. According to them he should be bound to his wheelchair, and yet he's still walking. (woman, Plovdiv, 30.06.2014)

Another female respondent boasted about her success:

I took a bath in the ayazmo three times. I poured the water all over myself, and spent the whole day sitting here, and I took the water home feeling thankful. Thanks be to God! (woman, Kuklen, 01.07.2013)

When I visited the monastery in 2014, I saw a boy from a Muslim family undergoing ritual ablution – he had been baptised specifically for that purpose. One of my respondents was the boy's godmother. She was a *klisarka*, and she wanted the boy to be able to undergo the healing

rituals (incubation³⁸ in the monastery and ablutions in the *ayazmo*). She repeatedly tried to obtain the ihumenia's consent for the boy's incubation, and was ultimately successful. The rituals ended with the boy's godmother pouring water from the spring over the boy. No members of the clergy participated in the ritual.

The same respondent once told me how a female friend and herself once spent the whole summer coming and pouring water from the spring over each other, hoping to gain better health. The women walked several kilometres to the monastery and back every day. According to my respondent, they never had any health problems since, even though the water was cold and they were both over 75 years of age.

On one hand my respondent seemed convinced that water from the *ayazmo* could have nothing but salutary effects, a belief she justified by her own heroic bathing experiences. On the other hand she expressed concern that the rite might produce negative health effects at her age, so now she only uses the water for washing her head and feet

Notably, the women did not dry off their bodies after the ablution, but rather put their clothes on immediately over wet skin:

K: Yes, that's to make sure you get soaked in the water. The water comes in. You receive the water's power. That water gives off energy. You don't dry yourself off, that energy enters you. You dry yourself off, and the energy is gone.

M.L.: But where does the energy in the water come from? How do you explain that?

K: Well, listen to me. That energy comes out from that place. (woman, Kuklen, 01.07.2013)

The former klisarka also shared several stories with me, talking about the healings she had witnessed at the *ayazmo*. The earliest was experienced by her own son, who used to suffer from severe migraines. In a dream vision, the Mother of God told the mother and son that water from the spring would bring healing to the son. Both had to walk through snowdrifts to reach the spring. The woman gave me a detailed account of the specific *sensational form* of the healing rite they performed at the *ayazmo*:

We both woke up at the same time. At one a.m. he told me he'd had a dream. I'd had a dream as well, I told him. He told me to get up and bake some bread, and hopefully we could take a bath in the ayazmo. I got up at one in the morning. I baked bread. I did not sleep that night, but I had the bread. My son and I got up in the morning – Come on, Dancho, let's go to the monastery. We're not going to say a word to anyone. – The snow was this deep! And no vehicles going up. He would take steps [through the snow], and I followed him to the ayazmo. I stopped at the entrance, and he took off his shirt and took... there are three taps there... He took water from the first tap, from the second, and when he took water from the third and poured it over himself he said, Gee, the pain has left me, it left through the heels of my feet. My head is not aching anymore! – he said. – The pain left me through here. – And he spun on his heels to have a look. That thing is invisible. It's something like a ghost. That's how the pain left him. You see, he's since been married these 30 years, he's got three children, great-grandchildren (...) He hasn't had a headache since. He hasn't had any health problems (former klisarka, 27.06.2016).

The respondent was able to come up with more examples. She told me another story of a girl named Ivanka, formerly a model student, who was the same age as herself. On one occasion Ivanka suffered a nervous breakdown (and lost her memory) when she failed to earn a top grade in school. As a child, my respondent witnessed how Ivanka's father made his daughter undergo

the kind of treatment that was formerly used on people suffering from demonic possession: he bound his daughter and forcibly immersed her in a basin filled with water from the spring (250 cm wide and some 120 cm deep). The respondent did not see anything traumatic about the experience, but rather took it for granted as the natural *sensational form* to use in the case of a nervous disorder.

The incident took place in the communist era, and therefore no members of the clergy were involved. The only witnesses were eight-year-old children who wanted the procedure and embodied the *sensational form* of bathing an afflicted individual in the water of the spring. My respondent remained in touch with Ivanka. The girl is apparently an old woman now, has grandchildren, and the healing procedure at the *ayazmo* was effective.

Another case involved a male friend of my respondent's husband, who was suffering from brain cancer, and asked her for help when she was working as a *klisarka* at the monastery. My respondent made it possible for the man to spend a night at the monastery, and in the morning she took him to the *ayazmo* to pour water over his head three times, using each of the three taps. She told him not to dry his head, and claims that the man recovered and has been well for the past 25 years.

My respondent's final story about the efficacy of bathing in a healing spring as a *sensational form* was witnessed by many people in Kuklen. The case involved a six-year-old boy from Chaskov who couldn't walk or speak:

- His mother and father were working, a grandmother was taking care of the boy, and she decided to bring the boy here to our monastery. She brought him here. And in the evening during a vodosvet rite,³⁹ the child was sitting next to it. They placed something on the ground for the child to sit on. When the vodosvet rite was over the grandmother made the boy bow his head, and the priest poured water over the boy's head.

- M.L.; You mean, the sick are the first to receive ablutions at the ayazmo?

- K: Yes. They do that at the ayazmo. He poured water over his head, and the boy started looking around and crying "Grandma, grandma," and we began to weep for joy. Everybody saw that. The boy kept coming back for something like 20 years afterwards, to bring a lamb as a gift of thanksgiving for Kosmas and Damian (former klisarka, 27.06.2016).

That last account discusses a healing that took place in special circumstances during an official ritual connected to the *sensational form*, i.e. the rite of vodosvet or blessing of water. Before the nuns came to manage the monastery, the rite used to be held at midnight, and the devotees were sprinkled with the water after it was blessed, starting with the particularly afflicted individuals. Today, *vodosvet* rites on the feast of Kosmas and Damian are held at the *ayazmo* during the day as the culmination of the celebrations.⁴⁰ Special songs are sung in solemn procession led by church hierarchs carrying the miracle working icon of the saints and a reliquary containing their relics,⁴¹ which on that occasion is taken out of the church (located outside of the monastery) and taken to the healing spring. Some of the devotees join the procession while others are waiting at the *ayazmo*. During the rite that I personally witnessed in 2013 and 2014, the priest performing the rite prayed with the devotees using the following words:⁴²

Priest: May this water be blessed by the power, action and ingress of the divine Holy Spirit, let us pray.

People: God have mercy!

Priest: May the purifying force of the supernatural Trinity descend onto that water, let us pray to God!

- People: God have mercy!
Priest: May the water gain healing properties for bodies and souls, and drive away every evil force, let us pray to God!
People: God have mercy!
Priest: May the blessings and salvation and blessing of the Jordan descend on us, let us pray to God!
People: God have mercy!
Priest: For all those who need God's help and assistance, let us pray!
People: God have mercy!
Priest: May they be enlightened by the light of reason and the One True Trinity, let us pray!
People: God have mercy!
Priest: May God make us heirs of his kingdom when we are sprinkled with this water, let us pray!
People: God have mercy!
Priest: Preserve us and save us, o God, with your *blagodat'*.

These words are strongly performative – the formulas are used to ask the Holy Spirit to descend onto the water and to hover over them. Perhaps for that reason one of the priests celebrating the ritual in 2014 associated it with the concept of the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters on the day of creation.⁴³

It should also be pointed out that the prototype for the *vodosvet* rite is the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The earliest rites involving the blessing of water attested in Christianity are connected to baptismal waters. St. Basil the Great identified the blessing of water as the earliest oral tradition of the Orthodox Church⁴⁴ (cited in Sienczukowa, <http://www.pravmir.ru/10-voprosov-o-kreshhenskoj-svyatoj-vode/>). Accordingly, the text read out during the rite is the passage from the Gospel about the baptism in the Jordan. The *sensational form* as described in the Gospel in its earliest shape is recounted during the rite to impress its importance on the devotees.

Another paradigmatic interpretation of the source of that rite is the story about the healing of the lame man at the pool (J 5, 1-4⁴⁵ which occasionally appears as a motif in Orthodox Christian monumental painting (Photograph 2), and which may serve as one of the prototypes for the motif of the Mother of God of the LGS.

The gospel narrative in J 5, 1-4 explains that the pool was located near the Sheep Gate (Hebrew: Bethesda⁴⁶¹ בית הכסדא) and was surrounded by five covered colonnades in which a great number of disabled people waited, suffering from various ailments including blindness, diseases or paralysis. The people were waiting for the “moving of the waters” of the pool caused by angelic visitation, since the first person to “enter the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease” (5,3, NKJV, footnote b - <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+5&version=NIV>). The hero in the Gospel narrative is one of the unlucky ones – a man unable to make it into the water before the others, who turns to Jesus to complain. In the end, the man in the story is healed by Jesus himself rather than by the healing waters – a conclusion which has been suppressed by the devotees and does not feature in their imaginaries.

Conclusions

The *sensational form* involving ablutions with water from the healing spring is presumably as important to modern day Orthodox Christian deputies as it once was to the people who crowded the colonnades at Bethesda. In this sense, the icon of the Mother of God

of the LGS is closer to their religious imagery than the Gospel itself, where Jesus does not need water to produce a miraculous healing. In the icon, the healing waters are touching Mary's body the whole time,⁴⁷ resulting in constant metanoia. Because Mary is immersed in the water, the Mother of God, as it were, turns it into a different kind of substance: no longer ordinary water, but rather life-giving water endowed with different physical properties. This shows that the connection between *ayazma* and holy water is still actively reaffirmed in Orthodox Christian theology and tradition. On the one hand, the rite involves a reading about the pool of Bethesda; on the other hand, every *ayazmo* is blessed at least once a year during one of those rites, reinforcing and renewing the healing properties of the spring.

Water blessed during a *vodosvet* rite or water from a healing spring is therefore endowed with special properties. It is the water over which the Holy Spirit hovered, the water that was changed by the Holy Spirit when Jesus was baptised in the Jordan, the water in which Jesus immersed himself in the river. Incidentally, a crucial element in the blessing of water involves immersing a cross and a sprig of basil in the water. By immersing a cross in the water, the priest reminds the devotees of Jesus' immersion in the waters of the Jordan, and the devotees experience the sprinkling and drinking of the holy water as a metanoia, which they describe in their own terms as being filled with the life-giving forces of water, which permanently cure disease.

In other words, the miraculous and life-giving properties of water are legitimised in ritual terms often enough to reinforce the devotees in the belief that the water has a supernatural power. In this sense, the life-giving properties of the water are as it were secondary, obtained only after the water comes into contact with the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit or Christ, of whom the cross is a physical and visual manifestation that imbues the water with new properties. At the same time the water becomes a channel for the life-giving force which can spread to physical objects or human bodies by immersion or soaking.

When experienced by devotees, an icon of the Mother of God of the LGS or an *ayazmo* become a *sensational form* that gives physical shape to the religious imaginaries, embodied by the devotees (Meyer 2009: 7) – as a form of naturalising transcendence, which can be accessed through this *sensational form*.

Rooted in the emic Orthodox Christian understanding of the concept of life-giving forces, this analysis is important in anthropological terms in that it demonstrates that the life-giving force is the underlying concept that manifests itself as divine power, grace or energy. And, by way of analogy, those objects which are considered to have miracle-working properties in Bulgaria's Orthodox Christian religious culture are, in practical terms, viewed as life-giving objects, a concept expressed in everyday parlance as "health."

Translated from Polish by Piotr Szymczak

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Notes

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² The monastery of Sts. Kosmas and Damian, two physicians famous for their healing powers and also known as St Vrach ('sveti Vrachove') is one among the most popular in Bulgaria. It is sometimes described as "the first psychiatric clinic in the Balkans" because it is famed for its healings of so-called *besnovaty*, or individuals suffering from demonic possession. Today visits in the monastery are particularly recommended to people suffering from mental problems and anxiety disorders. On the feast of the monastery's patron saints crowds of pilgrims arrived from the nearby towns and villages to perform ablutions in the water of the healing spring (*ayazmo*) of Ss. Kosmas and Damian located about 250 m outside the monastery's wall. The pilgrims worship at the saints' relics and miracle working icon, and to seek healing by handling a set of chains (Lubanska 2016).

³ I borrow this category from Brigit Meyer, who was inspired by the thought of Hent de Vries, a Dutch philosopher (2001, cited in Meyer 2009: 11).

⁴ To change this, in 2012-2015 I led the National Science Centre research project DEC-2011/03/D/HS3/0162 (see footnote 1)

⁵ Although this need not involve access to transcendence. My research revealed that in the case of some people coming to the monastery, the *sensational forms* available to them are not so much a way to experience the sacred, but rather a way to gain exposure to an impersonal force of nature (cf. Lubanska 2016).

⁶ As collective rituals. However "the notion of 'sensational form' can also be applied to the ways in which material religious objects – such as images, books, or buildings – address and involve beholders" (Meyer 2006:9).

⁷ Where religion is understood as "practice of mediation, to which media, technologies of representation employed by human beings are intrinsic" (Meyer 2009: 11-12).

⁸ There is some disagreement about this, and the process may have involved periods of waning as well. According to Claire Brisby, this relates particularly to the 15th-18th centuries. A period of revival was initiated in

1727, when the “Ottomans again authorised worship at the site and the cult was revived by Metropolitan Nikodim (Brisby 2003:30). In 1833, a small shrine was erected in the location, which survives today.

⁹ http://www.antiochian.org/life_giving_spring. Following the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century the building was dismantled, and the building materials were used to erect the mosque of Sultan Beyazit. Only a chapel remained, which was later destroyed in 1821. In the 1830’s the sultan’s consent was obtained to launch a reconstruction effort; a new church was erected in 1833, and still survives (Talbot 2012:xviii).

¹⁰ A similar appellation (the fountain/river of life) was used to describe the Mother of God in the hymns of Proclus, a fifth-century writer from Constantinople. The epithet appears to be one of the early and popular appellations current in medieval Byzantium, introduced shortly after the Council of Ephesus recognized Mary as the Mother of God.

¹¹ As noted by Svetla Moskova (2002:21). The feast was created in the fourteenth century (Teteriatnikov 2005:225).

¹² More information about the iconography and the related cultural influences can be found Claire Brisby (2003) and Ivanka Gergova (2012, 67). Gergova claims that the motif became popular in Bulgaria after the eighteenth century.

¹³ The other icons include an 1836 icon from the monastery of St Petka of Moldova near Asenovgrad, an 1838 icon from the church of St. Kirik and Yulit and St. Paraskeva in Gorni Voden, and an icon from the chapel of St. John the Baptist at the church of Annunciation in Asenovgrad (Moskova, Brisby 2003:40-41).

¹⁴ Icons of the Mother of God of the LSG are found in churches devoted to the saint because the feast of the Mother of God is celebrated on a Friday, often associated with St. Petka (whose name sounds like Friday in Bulgarian).

¹⁵ He reportedly erected the house of prayer, a small shrine called Kataphyge or Refuge (Etzeoglou 2005: 239, Talbot 2012:xiv).

¹⁶ The reference is to Zoe, whose name meaning *life* (Greek: Ζωη [zóē]) have contributed this story.

¹⁷ Preserved in the Vatican (Vat, gr.822, fols, 180v-270v) (Talbot 2012:lxv)

¹⁸ The first Bulgarian edition by Joahim Krchovski appeared in Belgrade in 1817 during the period of Bulgarian national revival.

¹⁹ The name of the place is of Turkish origin, derived from the word *balık* (fish), literally meaning “a place with fish”, “a place where there are fishes”. This is related to a different legend discussed later in the article. I suspect the word was introduced by Joahim Krchovski, presumably because pilgrims in his day used it in reference to the Pege spring. In Bulgaria, the Mother of God of the Life-Giving Spring and her local counterparts came to be referred to using the appellation “Balükliyska”, or the Mother of God of the Fishes, as in the case of the church of Annunciation in Asenovgrad.

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life-giving_Spring - however the liturgical interpretation connects this name to the fact that Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is the source of life.

²¹ Located outside of the shrine is a *cheshma* where the water flows from four fish-shaped taps into a basin below.

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWZ3Ig7UIq4> (latest access 07.11.2017)

²³ Baeva notes that the term *balükliyska* comes from the Turkish word for “fish”, however her text makes no reference to the prototype in Constantinople. It is not clear when or how the name appeared in the area. This might be connected to Asenovgrad’s large Greek community, which may be autochthonous or immigrant in origin (Baeva 2013, 64).

²⁴ She notes, however, the pervasive fish symbolism in the shrine.

²⁵ In a praying gesture, with the Jesus Child, “with life-bearing source, who bubbles from her bosom the most beautiful and eternal infant in the likeness of transparent and drinkable water which is alive and leaping” (Xhanthopoulos, after Teteriatinikov 2005:225). That fresco may have served as the prototype for later depictions of that kind (cf. Janocha 2010: 132), and according to research in Byzantine studies was itself modelled on the depiction of the Mother of God in Prayer in a church in Blachernae, which also had a healing spring (Lubanska 2017).

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²⁷ For more information about the fish in the pool of the Mother of God the LGS see Lubanska 2017)

²⁸ For more information about the fish in the pool of the Mother of God the LGS see Lubanska 2017)

²⁹ Historians are not certain whether the monastery was built in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries (Doichinov 2005, 111). According to one hypothesis the monastery was built on the initiative of two Georgian brothers, Grigoriy and Abasiy Bakouriany, who later erected the famous monastery at Bachkov, and the church was built later, at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries (Sztytow 2004). The narthex was probably added in 1812 to replace a *chardak* (a verandah with walls).

³⁰ The place was once famous for healings of individuals suffering from demonic possession, which earned the monastery the appellation of the first psychiatric clinic in the Balkans. I will discuss this in a separate article (in preparation).

³¹ The building probably dates back to the seventeenth century, and may have been built in 1696 on the initiative of Hieromonach Stefan and several other hierarchs, as suggested by a plaque in Old Church Slavonic found in 1906 (Gergova 2015:220, Szhtütov 2004:8, Doichinov 2005:110).

³² Those have disappeared without a trace.

³³ A colloquial word for a higher ranking clergyman in Bulgaria; literally, “grandfather.”

³⁴ Although the healing practices of Christian pilgrims at the spring probably date back to at least the seventeenth century, according to a 1696 plaque in Old Church Slavonic found near the spring.

³⁵ According to the inscriptions the *ayasm* was erected by Igumen Ignatij.

³⁶ The monastery was at one point controlled by Greek Orthodox clergy.

³⁷ A female helper in a church.

³⁸ This is a reference to the practice of incubation, still practised in many Orthodox Christian monasteries, where devotees sleep in the monastery hoping to be healed during the night by a saint. The saint may also provide the believer with suggestions as to the recommended healing rites.

³⁹ For the past several years the *vodosvet* at the monastery has been celebrated at noon the following day rather than at midnight.

⁴⁰ The ritual ends with pilgrims eating *kurban* and other food, which is either brought from home or purchased at a stall.

⁴¹ The relic is a fragment of St Kosmas’ hand, which is still extant (Shtütov 2004:39).

⁴² I recoded the formulas with a voice recorder when taking part in the ritual.

⁴³ Father Emil, who worked at the Old Church of St. Petka in Plovdiv, who suggested this connection in a conversation with me. Father Emil was one of the priests celebrating the rites in 2014 at the Kuklen monastery. He seems to have viewed it as a model *sensational form* that shaped his interpretation of all holy healing waters as waters “transsubstantiated” by the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁴ <http://cerkiew.info/pl/biblioteka/artykuly/f/1/303,0>

⁴⁵ This is also a reminder that healing springs are not a Christian invention, but rather a long-standing element of Mediterranean religious culture, which was later adapted and reinterpreted by the monotheistic religions originating from the area, namely Judaism and Islam.

⁴⁶ “House of mercy” or “house of grace”

⁴⁷ Not coincidentally, this can be also associated with the Western iconographic motif of Christ and the Mystical Winepress, though in that case there is no doubt that the juice is the blood of Christ.