

Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo – Meryem Madili

The *Lazarki* Procession in Inyevo, Radoviš: Ritual and Tradition in North Macedonia

Abstract

Lazarus Day is an important springtime tradition among Orthodox Christians in the Balkans. In the Republic of North Macedonia, many villages observe the occasion with a ritual performed by female performers, known as *lazarki*. Traditionally, the *lazarki* visit each home in the village to bless family members by singing unique songs. This ethnographic work intends to explore the tradition in Inyevo, a lowland and upland community in the Municipality of Radoviš. Compared to other villages in Macedonia, the *lazarki* in Inyevo perform two connected rituals conducted eight days before Palm Sunday. On Saturday, the *lazarki* perform the willow picking and offering in the monasteries, while the traditional home visitations take place on Sunday. A short fieldwork was conducted from 27 to 28 April 2024, coinciding with the performance of the related rituals in the village. Interviews with performers, a local family, and other villagers, along with direct observation of the *Lazarki* rituals and detailed fieldnotes, were utilized in the study. The *Lazarki* in Inyevo exhibits a cultural tradition that undergoes continuous negotiation and adaptation to contemporary times.

Keywords: Lazarus Day, *Lazarki*, Orthodox Christianity, Inyevo, Republic of North Macedonia

Introduction

The Republic of North Macedonia is one of the countries in the Balkans with Skopje as its capital. As a landlocked country, it is bordered by several countries: Kosovo and Serbia (North), Bulgaria (East), Greece (South), and Albania (West).¹ Historically, it used to be one of the constituents of the former Yugoslavia and gained its independence in 1991. North Macedonia has a multiethnic population comprised of Slavic Macedonians, Albanians, Turkish, Roma, Bosniaks, and other ethnic groups.² As of the census conducted in 2021, the

¹ Encyclopædia Britannica 2024.

² Congressional Research Service Report 2020.



total population is around 1.8 million with the majority practicing Orthodox Christianity (46.1%), Islam (32.2%), Christians without denomination (13.2%), and the rest unknown (7.2%). The country also has a Jewish population of 200 individuals; however, in the recent census, only 66 people identified themselves as having Jewish roots. Those practicing Orthodox Christianity mainly reside in central and southeastern parts of the country, while Muslims are in the northern and western regions. Moreover, ethnicity and religious affiliation correlate, given that most ethnic Macedonians, Serbs, and Vlachs practice Orthodox Christianity. On the one hand, ethnic Albanians, Roma, Turks, and Bosniaks are mostly practicing Muslims.³

For Macedonian Orthodox Christians, Lazarus Day is one of the most important springtime religious celebrations connected to Easter. The highlight of this celebration is a ritual procession performed by female participants, known as *lazarki* (the singular form is *lazarka*). The *lazarki* visit houses on Lazarus Day and sing songs of blessings to family members. Moreover, the ritual procession is rich in layers of archaic practices that can be traced back to pre-Christian Balkan society. While the ritual procession is commonly practiced in the Balkans as part of the Orthodox Christian tradition, data presented in this study is derived from a short fieldwork conducted from 27 to 28 April 2024 in the farming village of Inyevo located in the Municipality of Radovis, which is on the north-western side of Strumica-Radovis valley and 126 km away from



Pic. Nr. 1. Modern bungalows, duplex residences, and farmlands inhabit Inyevo's lowland area.
Source: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo 2024.

³ U.S. Department of State 2023.

Skopje.⁴ Inyevo occupies an area of 21.80 km² and has a population of 1,139, based on the 2021 census. Gender has an almost equal distribution in the village population, with 575 males and 564 females. Moreover, many of the villagers fall within the 50-59 age bracket. The recent census also revealed that 1,087 individuals are ethnic Macedonians.⁵ Topographically, Inyevo has both upland and lowland areas. The upland area features dirt roads, sparsely populated tree habitat, several monasteries, and smaller residences. In contrast, the lowland area features several streets lined with modern bungalows and duplex residences, paved roads, and extensive farmlands that produce tobacco, fruits, grains, and industrial crops.

Despite the passing of time and sociopolitical changes, the village has preserved its cultural traditions. Many locals who work abroad also return during festivities to witness or participate in various rituals.

Ritualization and thick description

In her book “Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice,” Catherine Bell criticizes earlier ritual theories developed by Durkheim, Turner, and Geertz, whose theories often offer Western assumptions about religion, hierarchy, and function. These scholars also associate ritual with something stable and that contains a formalized structure with inherent meaning.⁶ In contrast, Bell’s work developed “ritualization,” a way of doing that marks certain actions as special, authoritative, or transformative.⁷ More than a tradition or a mere act of repetition, ritualization is also context-dependent and highly tied to power relations.⁸ Bell furthers that rituals can be considered as strategies for constructing power, paving the way for legitimizing authority, shaping social norms, and defining who can control meaning.⁹ Rituals are also seen as embodied and negotiate social order in the community. While these are learned through bodily habits, spatial arrangement, and repetition, rituals can generate and uphold categories (i.e., sacred or profane, insiders or outsiders) that are continuously negotiated through the act of ritualizing.¹⁰

⁴ Regional Business Center n.d.

⁵ City Population 2023.

⁶ Bell 1992: 94–116.

⁷ Bell 1992: 98–117.

⁸ Bell 1992: 197–223.

⁹ Bell 1992: 200–218.

¹⁰ Bell 1992: 108–145, 220–243.

Clifford Geertz introduced a foundational idea in interpretive anthropology known as “thick description.” Compared to a thin description that merely states a factual account of behavior, a thick description aims to interpret the context and meaning behind the behavior.¹¹ Geertz proposes several notions that necessitate thick description. Since culture is a system of symbols that people interpret, an anthropologist needs to read these symbols to understand their meaning. To understand the meaning, context is essential in interpretive anthropology, given that actions cannot be understood in isolation. Their meanings then may depend on several factors (i.e., cultural background, social relations, history).¹² On the part of the anthropologist, the conduct of ethnography is necessary as it is an inscription that consists of observing actions, interpreting their meanings, and writing (inscribing) them.¹³

Drawing from Catherine Bell’s ritual theory, this study focuses on ritualization, embodiment, transformation, and power relations. The authors examine the bodily practices, symbolic gestures, and objects that the performers and the community use, as well as the spatial arrangements that contribute to the ritualized quality of the *Lazarki*. As an embodied practice, the performers’ process of learning and transmitting the dance ritual is explored. Rituals are not static and are constantly produced and reproduced through repetition; therefore, it is important to determine how the community in Inyevo negotiates continuity and innovation in the face of modernization. As a practice of power relations, the study also delves into how the *Lazarki* maintain gender, generational, and community hierarchies. These four areas are revealed in the following narratives: the willow picking and offering in the monasteries, the *Lazarki* procession in Inyevo, and the challenges that the *Lazarki* tradition currently faces. Geertz’s thick description is employed in reporting these narratives, which are reliant on the authors’ perspectives and interpretations.

The fieldwork process

The fieldwork in Inyevo under the Municipality of Radoviš in the Republic of North Macedonia was carefully planned for several months. The fieldwork team included the authors, who are doctoral students in cultural anthropology and ethnology, and several professors from Hungarian and Slovakian higher educational institutions. Overall, the team comprised seven individuals. On 26

¹¹ Geertz 1973: 6.

¹² Geertz 1973: 9–27.

¹³ Geertz 1973: 9.

April 2024, the team left Budapest, Hungary, in the late morning and arrived in Radoviš, North Macedonia, in the late evening of the same day. Before the fieldwork started the following day, a lecture on Macedonian culture with an emphasis on the traditions aligned with Lazarus Day was conducted in the morning by Prof. Rodna Velichkovska, a Macedonian ethnomusicologist from the Goce Delčev University of Štip.

By late afternoon, the team traveled to Inyevo and proceeded to a small monastery dedicated to the Virgin Mary, where the willow picking and offering rituals began. The team followed the *lazarki* performers in all the monasteries they visited until sunset. The majority of these monasteries are in the upland area of Inyevo. In the evening, the team proceeded to the lowland area of Inyevo to visit the family residence of Valentina Filipovska. Her family has participated in the village's performative traditions for generations. Members of this family (i.e., grandfather, mother, son, daughter) generously answered the team's queries regarding the Lazarus Day celebration.

On 28 April 2024, Lazarus Day, the team returned to the house of the host family and joined a group of *lazarki* by midmorning as they visited houses to sing songs of blessings. The home visitations of the *lazarki* briefly ended before lunch. During this time, the team returned to their accommodation to rest and decided to return to the village by late afternoon. The same local family hosted an informal gathering at their residence, during which the research team clarified their questions and observations, and asked for additional details about the Lazarki procession that took place earlier that day.

Methodology

The team employed qualitative research methods throughout the fieldwork, including interviews, observations, and fieldnotes. Brief interviews with monastery caretakers were conducted in the uplands after each willow offering rite. In the lowlands, most interviews were done at the host family's residence. Interviews with the latter were audio-recorded. In both interview settings, each team member had the opportunity to ask questions, as their research agendas differed. Valentina Filipovska, a former *lazarka* in Inyevo, and Rodna Velichkovska provided the English translations of various interviews. As Anna Mária Bólya is proficient in the Macedonian language, she assisted with translations, particularly in sections that previous interpreters were unable to explain. They also explained the aspects of the rituals throughout the two-day

fieldwork and helped translate what the locals in the village narrated. On Lazarus Day, as some villagers are fluent in English, the authors also conducted short, informal interviews with children and their parents.

Observation of the rituals in both upland and lowland areas was also carried out. Fieldnotes were taken throughout the observation periods to document key moments and insights. In addition, each team member used their own electronic devices (e.g., smartphones, a camcorder) to record the rituals in video and photographic formats. While team members captured individual recordings, these materials were made accessible among team members by uploading them to an online group chat and Google Drive. Following the fieldwork, the authors held regular Zoom meetings to organize the collected data and structure the writing process. The authors also contacted Filipovska online to clarify specific details, particularly regarding the songs performed by the *lazarki*. She also provided the lyrics of these songs, which will appear later in the study.

Origins of the Lazarki procession

The origins of the *Lazarki* procession in the Balkans are complicated to unravel, given the lack of surviving accounts. According to available literature, the tradition already existed in the year 601 in the Municipality of Bidjevo when Orthodox Christianity transformed many pagan practices to suit its religious context. This was a period when many Slavs populated the Balkans and converted to Christianity.¹⁴ Theologically, the commemoration identifies with Lazarus, a Biblical character from Bethany, whom Jesus Christ resurrected from the dead. Orthodox Christianity believes Bethany is “the symbol of the whole world as a home of man.”¹⁵ In other words, men are created to become a friend of God; however, this Divine friendship is destroyed by death, a power that God did not create. While Jesus Christ wept at the grave of Lazarus as a form of love for his friend, the latter’s resurrection is interpreted this way: “not a Divine ‘power in itself,’ but power of love, or rather love as power.”¹⁶ Rev. Alexander Schmemmann, professor of liturgical theology at St. Vladimir’s Seminary, adds that the commemoration of Lazarus Day signifies the Cross depicting the Supreme sacrifice of love and the Resurrection signifying the ultimate

¹⁴ Domazetovski 1974.

¹⁵ Schemann n.d.

¹⁶ Schemann n.d.

triumph of love.¹⁷ Liturgically speaking, Lazarus Day, also known as the Saturday of Lazarus among Orthodox Christians, is celebrated as a “pre-feast” before Palm Sunday. Both of them share the themes of triumph and victory. While the Cross points to death as the enemy, the Resurrection presents the triumph and victory of the Kingdom of God.¹⁸

At its surface, many people from the Balkans assume that the *Lazarki* procession during Lazarus Day solely connotes a Christian character. On the contrary, there are suppositions that the *Lazarki* procession originated from the Roman festival called *Rosalia*, a rose festival first recorded during the time of Emperor Domitian, wherein family members commemorated the dead (*dies rosationis*) by offering roses to the grave of the departed.¹⁹ Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa and Enrique Santos Marinas, authors of the book *Rituals in Slavic Pre-Christian Religion*, mention that the festival is known as *Semik* or *Rusal'naia nedelia* among East Slavs and is commonly referred to as *Rusali* among Balkan Slavs, which was first recorded between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²⁰ It was also considered an archaic fertility festival conducted in June relating to the cult of the dead and the springtime agricultural rituals.²¹ Despite the suppositions that connect the *Lazarki* procession to the *Rusali*, Álvarez-Pedrosa and Marinas note that the *Rusali* became synonymous with the Christian celebration of the Pentecost, especially between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century.²² In a short exchange on ResearchGate, Prof. Juan Antonio Álvarez-Pedrosa from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid expressed that there is a possibility for the *Rusali* to be related to the *Lazarki* procession; however, further research needs to be conducted to confirm this existing belief in the Balkans.

Other scholars specializing in Balkan rituals weigh the connection between pagan and Christian elements in the *Lazarki* procession. Anna Mária Bólya, a Hungarian dance anthropologist specializing in Macedonian dances, describes Lazarus Day in the Macedonian tradition as an “opening feast of Holy Week” celebrated eight days ahead and closely linked with the commemoration of Palm Sunday. It also relates to a procession wherein the singing and dancing of female performers called the “Lazarus Daughters” or *lazarki* are central to the feast and exude magical manifestations. In addition, singing, dancing, and

¹⁷ Schemann n.d.

¹⁸ Schemann n.d.

¹⁹ Oxford Classical Dictionary 2016.

²⁰ Álvarez-Pedrosa–Marinas 2023.

²¹ Álvarez-Pedrosa–Marinas 2023.

²² Álvarez-Pedrosa–Marinas 2023.

the text uttered by the *lažarki* ensure protection for the people in the community and all living creatures. Bólya adds that the *Lažarki* tradition is closely linked to spring agrarian rituals with pagan elements. An example is the singing of the *lažarki* in front of a willow tree and picking some of its branches, which alludes to the spirit of vegetation, fertility, and abundance. The Christian meaning behind the tradition enters the picture through “spring greening” related to the celebration of Flower Sunday (Palm Sunday), which denotes the theme of the blossoming of life and is infused with Christian meanings associating spring with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.²³ In contrast, the study of Macedonian dance anthropologist Filip Petkovski states that there were no extant records of the *Lažarki* procession before the Christianization of the Balkans. He postulates that the ritual may have had a different role in the past. The Christian character of the procession is connected to a narrative in St. John’s gospel describing how Martha and Mary, Lazarus’ sisters, visited houses in their village to spread the latter’s resurrection. For Petkovski, this narrative created a perception that binds the gospel story and the procession today.²⁴

Willow picking and offering in the monasteries

Lazarus Day in the village of Inyevo follows two important occasions in which the *lažarki* participate. On Saturday, they select a willow tree from which they will obtain branches that will be offered to several monasteries. This act serves as a prayer to bless individuals and families living in the village. By Sunday, the *lažarki* visit the houses in the uplands and lowlands to sing their blessings to each family member. These two occasions are movable feasts depending on the liturgical calendar of Orthodox Christians, which follows the Julian calendar to determine religious feasts such as Easter. This year, the Saturday event happened on April 27, while the one on Sunday was held on April 28. The *lažarki* consists of twelve female performers whose ages range between 15 and 19 years old. As a rule, the chosen *lažarka* performs from age 15 until she gets married. During the Saturday event, the twelve *lažarki* perform collectively as a group; on Sunday, they are divided into two groups with six members performing in the lowlands and the other six in the uplands. The six *lažarki* are further split into two smaller groups of three members. The smaller groups are called a *cset*, and each is assigned neighborhoods to visit throughout the day.²⁵ Valentina Filipovska shared that

²³ Bólya 2021.

²⁴ Petkovski 2018.

²⁵ Bólya 2021.

the *lazarki* in Inyevo were selected in the past based on the quality of their voices. Today, the group welcomes anyone who volunteers to perform the rituals. These female performers are not professional singers. They are, however, trained by the oldest *lazarka* in the group. Since the *lazarki* are divided into two groups during their Sunday performance, they practice separately. One of the performers shared that she only learned the songs two months ago. On the one hand, the rest had been performing for at least two years.

When the fieldwork team visited the village late afternoon on Saturday, April 27, the team met with Filipovska, who led the way towards the first monastery dedicated to the Virgin Mary where the willow picking and willow offering commenced. The monastery was in the lowlands outside the village on a football field littered with grasses and various willow trees serving as a backdrop. Like other monasteries the team visited that day, the first monastery was easily noticeable by the dome and the cross protruding above it. The domes were either quadrilateral or octagonal and adorned with plain or stained-glass window panels at each side, which provided natural lighting inside the monasteries. The monasteries had varying shapes and sizes but were usually rectangular and approximately 50 to



Pic. Nr. 2. *The willow picking and offering ceremony starts at the monastery of the Virgin Mary located on the lowland side of Inyevo.*

Source: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo 2024.

100 square meters. Moreover, the smaller monasteries could accommodate a congregation of at least 30 individuals, while the bigger ones could easily fit 50 to 100.

The exterior of these monasteries was painted white, brickwork framed window panels, and clay tiles were used as roofing. While most monasteries were made from concrete, the main monastery dedicated to St. Spas in the uplands, which was also the biggest by floor size, was predominantly erected using stone. In contrast, the interior of these monasteries was mostly painted white, featuring an *iconostasis* (i.e., carved wooden screen containing icons of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the apostles, Biblical scenes, and the Royal Doors that hid the altar from the congregation), and had a stand at the middle where an icon of the monastery's patron saint could be venerated and kissed by pilgrims. Oil lamps and candles illuminated the interior of these monasteries, aside from electrical lighting. The smell of incense also wafted in the air. Aside from the chapel complex, the monasteries also incorporate a separate building where the caretaker resides. Compared to traditional monasteries managed by monks and the religious, Filipovska remarks that monasteries in Inyevo are commissioned by private individuals and often run by caretakers. She adds that the motivations for erecting such monasteries vary. Some individuals or families built them as a form of thanksgiving, while it was also possible for someone to have dreamt of something religiously significant and decided to establish a monastery upon waking up.



Pic. Nr. 3. *The lažarki comprise twelve female performers wearing traditional Macedonian costumes called nosija.* Source: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo 2024.

The fieldwork team arrived first in the monastery, followed by two *lazarki*. Interestingly, the remaining performers came to the monastery riding a simple wooden carriage attached to a farm tractor. As the remaining *lazarki* drew nearer, the team could hear them singing. The performers wore traditional costumes called *nosija* made of linen or wool.



Pic. Nr. 4. *The lazarki sing as they pick enough willow stalks to be offered to several monasteries.* Source: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo 2024.

The costumes were composed of an inner white garment with embroidered details at the hem, sleeves and collar, an intricately woven apron-like outer garment with a black base complete with geometric flora and fauna motifs mostly in red, white and blue, a narrow vest with embroidery or appliques, thick socks usually in black or red with a hint of embroidery at the middle part, and a pair of *opanki* (i.e., traditional Balkan shoes made of leather with straps to secure the foot and ankle). The female performers had their hair neatly braided into two lengths and a red rose fastened above their right ear, and they also wore an assortment of colorful necklaces. One of the *lazarki* showed the team a unique necklace of intricate beadwork that resembled a snake. According to the host family, the matriarch of each family in yesteryears would commission a costume that would be passed on from one generation to the next. Making traditional costumes today, however, is complicated given the scarcity and costs of materials. Furthermore, the embroidery details in the costume depict the marital status of the *lazarka*, although this rule is not imposed anymore.

When the *lazarki* were finally completed, they led a short procession on a dirt road beside the building adjacent to the monastery. The procession ended briefly when the congregation arrived at a spot where several trees stood. The authors observed that the performers were having a short conversation. Filipovska explained that the *lazarki* were deciding on the tree from which they would obtain the branches. This tree should come from the willow family, as it is the first tree species to bloom in spring. As such, picking branches from a willow symbolizes new life and growth. It is imperative for the *lazarki* to collect only the living branches of the willow and enough for all the monasteries they visit. Once the *lazarki* decided on the willow, they approached the tree and sang as they picked some branches.

The *lazarki* sang this hymn to the willow tree as they gathered some of its stalks:

(Macedonian)	(English)
Ја преведи се, мила врбо	Turn to me, my sweet willow
Нешто да ти кажам, мила врбо	To tell you something, my sweet willow
Терзија ти носам, мила врбо	I'll get you a tailor
Елек да ти кројам	I'll put an obligation on you
Елек да ти кројам, мила врбо	I'll make you an apron, my sweet willow
Елек за лазара. ²⁶	An apron for the feast.

²⁶ Bólya 2021: 176.

After collecting enough branches, they formed a single file near the tree and sang another song as they held the willow stalks. This song was accompanied by slightly leaning the body back and forth. Subsequently, the congregation led by the *lazarki* had a short procession going back to the monastery. The *lazarki* started singing a hymn once they entered the monastery gates. At the main portal of the chapel, each *lazarka* attached a willow stalk to the door as they finished singing the hymn. When the authors inquired why the *lazarki* made such a gesture, Filipovska emphasized that the custom was never recorded in the village, and nobody knew its context. They just followed what the elders did in the past. The performers then moved to the lawn after attaching the willow stalks to the door. Here, they formed a semicircular formation divided into four *čst*. They repeated this formation inside the chapels they visited that afternoon. The *lazarki* then sang another hymn in an antiphonal style described as “small in pitch, in two lines, with an exclamation at the end of the lines and sometimes with a glissando starting from the bottom at the beginning of the lines.”²⁷ Furthermore, the songs are usually monophonic, emphasizing harmonization and drone, and the rhythmic organization is either 2/4 or 7/8 meter.²⁸ This antiphonal style is observable in both Saturday and Sunday rituals.

After the singing, an old woman who was the caretaker appeared, and she opened the door of the monastery. The *lazarki* led the congregation inside the chapel, replicated the same formation mentioned earlier, and started singing a hymn. Filipovska notes that the songs used by the *lazarki* in the monasteries are the same when they visit houses the following day. When the hymn ended, each *lazarka* approached the stand where the icon of the monastery’s patron saint was enthroned, and they offered a willow stalk to the icon.

This part of the ritual also signaled the end of the willow offering. When the congregation finally settled outside the chapel, the caretaker approached the *lazarki* and handed them money. Filipovska shares that the *lazarki* collect the money given to them, place it on a traditional bread called *pogača* the following day, and divide it among themselves after the home visitations. Given the conclusion of the ritual in the first monastery, the fieldwork team followed the *lazarki* in the uplands and accompanied them during the willow offering ritual in several monasteries, including that of St. Michael the Archangel, St. Spas, and St. Demeter. The same ritual process they performed in the monastery of the Virgin Mary in the lowlands was accorded to the remaining monasteries. In the upland mo-

²⁷ Bólya 2021.

²⁸ Matijashevsk 1989 (see Petkovski 2014: 121); Petkovski 2014.

nasteries, the authors observed that the caretakers would sometimes offer refreshments to the *lažarki* aside from monetary donations. As a rule, the *lažarki* were to complete the monastery visitations before sunset.



Pic. Nr. 5. *After chanting a hymn, each lažarka offers a willow stalk to the monastery's patron saint, signaling the end of the willow offering ritual.* Source: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo 2024.

Visiting houses and blessing family members

Midmorning on Sunday, 28 April, the fieldwork team headed directly to the residence of their host family. From there, the team awaited the arrival of the *lazarki*, who were performing the ritual blessing for each family member next door. Compared to the previous event, the *lazarki* performing on Sunday were in smaller groups. The one assigned to the neighborhood where the host family resided was composed of a *cset*. During their performance, the *srednik* (middle performer) would sing the melody while the two remaining *lazarki*, known as *krajnici*, sang the held note.²⁹ When the ritual blessing finished at the neighboring house, the *lazarki* had a little procession toward the host family's residence. The authors noticed that the performers were not wearing traditional socks and *opanki*; instead, they wore rubber shoes. Valentina Filipovska, the team's guide, explained that this had become an exception in modern times since the *lazarki* needed to be comfortable as they would walk all day. The number of houses the *lazarki* visit also expanded through the years – another reason comfort and practicality are prioritized these days. As they walked solemnly from one home to the next, the *lazarki* locked each other's arms.

When they arrived at the host family's residence, the matriarch was already outside the door waiting for them. She was also holding a *pogača* she baked the previous day. Traditionally, the matriarch bakes the bread, but some families buy it from the local bakery these days for practical reasons. This bread is circular, made of wheat flour, resembles and tastes like dinner rolls, and usually contains rose jams. Accordingly, all ingredients of this bread should be “vegan” as it is still Lenten season. It is also interesting that some families show creativity when presenting the *pogača*. There were breads topped with edible gold dust, and some even included colorful sugar flowers.

The bread has religious connotations and relates to the body of Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, the *lazarki* announced their arrival by singing this hymn:

(Macedonian)

Чиј са вија дворовини
На босилок меришпаат.

(English)

Whose yards are they?
They smell of basil.

²⁹ Bólya 2021.



Pic. Nr. 6. *A bread called pogača is usually baked by the family's matriarch and given to the lažarki to be distributed to the crowd after each home visitation.*
Source: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo 2024.

After the preliminary hymn, the matriarch announced each family member's name. Each family member has a unique song and as the matriarch mentioned each name, the *lažarki* began singing.



Pic. Nr. 7. Holding the *pogača*, the matriarch recites each family member's name as the *lazarki* sing a corresponding song. Source: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo 2024.

Facing the matriarch, they remained clasping each other's arms and swayed their bodies gently forward and backward as they sang. Bólya mentions that there are more than 50 songs that the *lazarki* can perform.³⁰ This means that all family members are guaranteed to be blessed during the home visitations. Filipovska is kind enough to share some songs with the authors written in Macedonian. These are loosely translated using Google Translate. The songs do not only relate to gender or hierarchy within the family, but they could also mean certain social situations that family members encounter at the time of the *lazarki* visit.

³⁰ Bólya 2021.

Song for a male named Stoian

(Macedonian)

Седел Стојан во кафана, вино
пиеа, се фалел што имал

(English)

Stoian was sitting in the tavern,
drinking wine, boasting about
what he had.

Song for the elderly hostess

(Macedonian)

Стара домаќинка, ја поканиле
кума да биде, дете да крсти.

(English)

The old hostess was invited to be a
godmother, to baptize the child.

Song for a girl enduring unrequited love

(Macedonian)

Тешко, горчливо е за оние што
Љубат, за оние што Љубат, три
девојки, три пријателки.

(English)

It's hard, it's bitter for those who
love, for those who love, three
girls, three friends.

Song for a little boy named Todor

(Macedonian)

Тодор се ниша, малечкиот се
ниша, Тодор се ниша.

(English)

Todor is swinging, the little one is
swinging, Todor is swinging.

Once the *lazarki* finished singing, the matriarch handed them *pogača* and money, which was also practiced by all families in the village. If not money, some families give them gifts or small tokens like hairpins, accessories, or socks. However, this is only done if the family has a newborn child, or someone is engaged or recently married. These gifts, like monetary donations, are collected and divided equally among the performers later. This gesture also signals the end of the blessing ritual. Every time the ritual blessing ends, the *lazarki* divide the *pogača* equally, and each *lazarka* approaches the gathered crowd outside the house to distribute the bread. It is improper to refuse the *pogača* offered by the *lazarki*. Some people eat it immediately, and others collect it in a plastic bag. As soon as the bread was distributed, the *lazarki* proceeded to the next home and repeated the same sequence. The authors observed that it was customary for the family matriarch or a family's female member to greet the *lazarki* and recite the names of family members. Moreover, the husband and other family members usually observe the ritual in the foreground. The entire proceeding per household spans five to ten minutes.



Pic. Nr. 8. Each *lazarka* carries the infant while the rest of the group sings the blessing.
Source: Jose Antonio Lorenzo Tamayo 2024.

In one of the homes visited by the *lazarki*, a baby who also participated in another ritual was present, aside from the typical blessing. If the household has a baby, six *lazarki* (two *cet*) conduct a related ritual. The first *lazarka* in the semi-circle formation carries the baby and passes it alternately to the third and then to the fifth *lazarka*. As this happens, the others in the formation sing. They also put a thin white veil on the baby's head. This is repeated starting from the second *lazarka*, the fourth, and finally the sixth before returning the baby to its mother.

In another residence, the family was in a mourning period as a family member died. Filipovska explains that when a family member dies, especially if it is a young person, the *lazarki* do not perform the blessing. Instead, the *pogača* is directly handed by the matriarch to the *lazarki* for distribution. She furthered

that it is up to the family when the mourning period ends. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the *lazarki* ritual blessing was temporarily halted, although there were reports that some families conducted it privately.

Contemporary issues in the Lazarki

Assessing the current situation of the *Lazarki* in Inyevo, the authors were able to distinguish two issues that the tradition faces in the contemporary period. The first was the lack of proper documentation. Given that the tradition primarily relies on oral and visual transmission, certain aspects of the rituals are not holistically understood and recorded. A concrete example of this problem happens in the willow offering ceremony. Nobody knows why the *lazarki* attach a willow branch to the chapel door. When asked about it, the locals explain that they observed their ancestors performing the same actions in the past and simply followed them. Presumably, there was an intended meaning for this gesture in the past, or it would not be part of the ritual.

The most significant issue, however, lies with the preservation and sustainability of the tradition. Valentina Filipovska admits that recruiting teenage girls to train as *lazarka* is difficult today. Several factors contribute to this predicament. It is not solely attributed to the changing values in the village, but it is also affected by migration patterns. Based on the interviews with the community, many families are migrating overseas, with the majority doing it for a better life. These families return to the village only during holidays and major religious festivals, leaving the older generation behind for the rest of the year. Such reality paves the way for certain processes in the selection of the *lazarka* to change. In the past, voice quality was the primary consideration in selecting a *lazarka*, given the large number of possible participants in the village. The criterion today is oversimplified: whoever volunteers can be trained.

Ritualizing the Lazarki

This ethnographic study employed Catherine Bell's ritual theory to analyze four domains of the *Lazarki* tradition: ritualization, embodiment, transformation, and power relations. In the domain of ritualization, the structuring of space, time, and action is evident in the *Lazarki*. The sacredness of the space is ritually marked and differentiated through certain actions (i.e., entry, offering, formation). In the ritual, the monasteries, willow groves, streets, and family

homes serve as ritual zones where songs, offerings, and gestures are repeated in patterned actions. The processional movement of the *Lazarki* – from the willow grove to the chapel or from one home to another – imbues everyday spaces with sacred meaning. Spatial boundaries also reinforce ritual order and community structure. These are observed in the contrasting actions performed between the uplands and lowlands and in the division of the performers into groups (*cset*). Time in the *Lazarki* ritual is also structured in multiple dimensions: liturgical time (alignment with the Orthodox calendar), seasonal time (willow tree being the first tree species to bloom in spring), and biographical time (the performers' participation being limited by age and marital status).

In her work, Bell notes:

“Essential to ritualization is the circular production of a ritualized body which in turn produces ritualized practices. Ritualization is embedded within the dynamics of the body defined within a symbolically structured environment.”³¹

In the *Lazarki*, the body becomes a vessel of tradition, memory, and authority. There are bodily techniques that differentiate the ritual from ordinary actions, such as arm-linking, semicircular formations, and grouped singing. Hallmarks of ritualization are also observed in the singing of hymns using the antiphonal style, the performers' order of movement, and shared choreography that is learned, repeated, and regulated. Some gestures convey authority through repetition rather than explanation. This is seen, for example, in the willow offering on the chapel doors. The performers conduct the gesture even without knowing the reason behind it. There is no explanation needed, but it is done eventually because this is how they observed it in the past.

The notion of embodiment can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, a concept that Bell also highlighted in her work.³² Bourdieu states, “the *habitus*, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemas engendered by history.”³³ In the *Lazarki*, the ritual is embodied and rooted in the community's collective practices. The performers learn the songs, movements, postures, and routine through an elder *lazarka* by mimetic learning and bodily imitation. The ritual is also tied to social roles and life stages. The performers start dancing by the age of 15, which corresponds to a symbolic marker of liminality. Victor

³¹ Bell 1992: 93.

³² Bell 1992: 86.

³³ Bourdieu 1977: 82.

Turner identifies liminality as a “threshold” in which participants enter a transitional state characterized by ambiguity, transformation, and potential.³⁴ Here, the *lazarka* enters a period where she can bear the responsibility of performing the ritual. The imposition of this period is accentuated by the traditional dress she wears and the gestures she enacts, which Bell calls “ritualized body,” where cultural structures are internalized through disciplined bodily movement.³⁵

Several transformations are observed in the *Lazarki* ritual. For one, the use of rubber shoes instead of the traditional *opanki* during the performers’ house visitations connotes practical adaptations. Another is the changing criterion when selecting a possible *lazarka*. In the past, voice quality was the sole criterion when selecting performers. Today, the selection criterion has become more relaxed, shifting from an emphasis on voice quality to a focus on the prospective performers’ willingness to participate. Another observation deals with the distribution of *pogača*. According to the matriarch of the host family, *pogača* was traditionally baked by the matriarch of every family in the village. Over time, a preference for store-bought *pogača* became popular. Some meanings are also lost in certain elements of the rituals, like the significance of attaching willow stalks to the chapel doors. For ordinary spectators and outsiders, these transformations may be seen as a decline in the ritual tradition. However, these are not necessarily forms of decline but negotiated acts of ritual production. These transformations highlight the ritual logic of tradition and adaptations serving as strategic responses to modernity. Bourdieu calls this “practical sense,” wherein both the performers and community members do what is “sensible” or “informed by common sense.”³⁶

Power relations can be understood in the *Lazarki* through the existing hierarchies in the ritual. Gender and generational power are important elements in the ritual. As the ritual can only be performed by unmarried girls in the village, their bodies become sites of symbolic fertility and purity. Generational power can be observed through the significance of the matriarch in the ritual, as she is the only authorized individual in the family to name each family member during the *lazarki* visitation. The matriarch is also responsible for baking or providing bread during the ritual. Power relations in the *Lazarki* also instill the idea of social cohesion and moral obligation. This is reflected in how each household participates in the ritual – even if a family is in the period of mourning – and the donations given to the *lazarki* (e.g., socks, money, bread) as a form of gratuity.

³⁴ Turner 1969: 94–95.

³⁵ Bell 1992: 93.

³⁶ Bourdieu 1990: 69.

Conclusion

The *Lazarki* in Inyevo is a unique springtime ritual in the Municipality of Radoviš, North Macedonia, distinguished by its two coordinated events held on the weekend before Palm Sunday – unlike most villages in the Balkans, where the ritual procession occurs on a single day. Highlights of the two-day ritual include willow picking and willow offerings in monasteries and the home visitations of the *lazarki* to bless each family member, a more traditional practice in the Balkans. While previous studies detailed the *Lazarki*'s associations with the *Rusalii*, agrarian fertility cult, and Orthodox Christianity,³⁷ this study provided a thick description of the *Lazarki* ritual in Inyevo. Grounded in Catherine Bell's ritual theory, this study examines how ritualization, embodiment, transformation, and power relations shape the performance and meaning of the *Lazarki* ritual in the contemporary period. Although the *Lazarki* contains elements that can be traced back several centuries, the ritual is a dynamic practice that is continuously negotiated and adapted to changing times.

Reflecting on the fieldwork and writing process, the authors determined limitations that can be addressed in future studies aligned with the *Lazarki*. The authors' limited knowledge of the Macedonian language made them highly reliant on interpreters. This may have influenced how they collected the information provided by their respondents. The limited availability of literature on the *Lazarki* tradition by Macedonian scholars, particularly in online databases, posed a challenge for the authors in reviewing relevant sources, ultimately leading them to rely on a small number of references written mostly by scholars outside Macedonia. In future studies, the authors recommend that prospective scholars concentrate on the rich material culture present in the *Lazarki*. While this study briefly addressed the material elements of the ritual, comprehensive documentation of these aspects is necessary and beneficial for a deeper understanding of the *Lazarki*'s ritualization process.³⁸

³⁷ Domazetovski 1974; Álvarez-Pedrosa–Marinas 2023; Bólya 2021; Petkovski 2014.

³⁸ The authors extend their gratitude to the following individuals who contributed to the accomplishment of the fieldwork: Anna Mária Bólya, Elek Bartha, László Koppány Csáji, and Rodna Velichkovska. We also extend our gratitude to Valentina Filipovska and her family for their hospitality.

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A cset performs the ritual singing in one of the lowland houses. Source: Meryem Madili 2024.



Willow branches are handpicked by the lazarkı and offered to several chapels. Source: Meryem Madili 2024.