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Souvenirization of Religious Symbols: the Example of Knez Mihailova Street Zone²

Abstract:

Knez Mihailova Street is one of the main tourist areas in Belgrade. Most foreigners visiting the city walk through this street to grab souvenirs and other items that commemorate their stay in Belgrade there. In this paper we research the ways in which objects with various primary functions are given the properties of a souvenir. Also, with respect to that phenomenon, we elaborate relationships between the souvenir manufacturers and sellers, and sellers and customers. Different perceptions of souvenirs by domestic and foreign tourists are observed as well.

Keywords:

Knez Mihailova Street, souvenirs, religious symbols, domestic/foreign tourists, memories manufacture

The need to publicly express one's affiliation to a certain religion or religious community through various material forms is as old as human society. It is most frequently manifested in visits to holy places, religious tourism and pilgrimage practices, in the wearing of religious symbols as ornaments or jewellery, in having objects for everyday use decorated with religious images, and even in the tattooing of religious symbols on the skin. In every religion and culture, similar phenomena are manifested in specific manners and forms. Christianity is certainly not an exception.

The return to religion in Serbia in 1990s was often followed by material culture elements not authentically based on Christian tra-

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dition. In the search for forgotten – but also, frequently, made-up – tradition, Orthodox elements have sometimes lost their elementary religious function while their national, *magical*, and aesthetic properties had been emphasized (Stefanović-Banović 2012, 211).

On the other hand, souvenirs can be defined as a “remembrance of some place” or a “mnemonic device around which to tell stories” (Anderson and Littrell 1995, Hitchcock and Teague 2000, as in Timothy and Olsen 2006, 100). However, in the way souvenirs are perceived, the same properties – aesthetic, national and *magical* – can be found. This is particularly notable with the ones carrying some kind of religious symbolism. By “religious” here we have in mind primarily the Orthodox Christian symbolism, which is in the main focus of this talk, but also a broader sense of religion, not limited to the institutionalized ones, such as world churches and movements, but alternative beliefs as well – such as amulets, good luck charms, etc.

In literature it has been noted that souvenirs are given a number of different types of values: exchange value, use value, sign value and spiritual value. As brought in the overview by Paraskevaidis and Andriotis (2015, 2-3), a souvenir has *exchange value*, which is an abstract equivalent of money it’s traded for. The exchange value differs from the *use value*, the latter being a measure of how an object satisfies a person’s need. In terms of souvenirs, use value can be dual: it serves as a reminder of the experience of the trip, but also can have every-day usage. For example, a key chain with the Eiffel tower is a reminder of a trip to Paris, but also a common utility.

As argued in the literature, a *sign value* can also be assigned to an object. Sign value positions the holder in some social group or confirms their status. Applied to souvenirs, sign value would be, for example, an exotic item, brought from a trip unaffordable to many, or expensive jewellery bought on vacation.

An important type of souvenir value we’ll try to show in this talk is its *spiritual value*. The spiritual value includes beliefs in an object’s supernatural and magical powers, as well as in its holiness and sacral nature. As claimed by the authors of the referenced overview of the literature, a souvenir’s spiritual value is a research topic which has not been fully explored yet. As we see it, one difficulty is the blurred distinction between objects with religious symbolism and those which can be labelled as souvenirs. For example, while

a key-chain consisting of the Eiffel tower would be perceived as a souvenir by many, a rosary would be a lot harder to classify. For the purpose of this paper, we classified all the items sold on the stands in Knez Mihailova Street as souvenirs (Paraskevaidis and Andriotis 2015, 3-4).

During the 1990s in Serbia, religious symbols were commercialized, which contributed immensely to the emergence of the new “Orthodox” material culture. As mentioned previously, the mass return to religion has resulted in the hyper-production of artefacts with religious symbolism and iconography (Blagojević 2011, 225). The most frequent of these, and the ones most in demand, are crosses, rosaries, jewellery and icons (Stefanović-Banović 2012, 211).

Particularly curious is the phenomenon of rosaries. Unlike crosses or icons, rooted in religious practice, but also “charged” with religious symbolism, rosaries were originally “mere monastic tool for the measurement of the time of prayer”. However, in the new context of mass return to religion, they become amulets, considered to be carrying some of the supernatural power themselves as well. Sometimes decorated with precious beads, which, according to popular perception, prevent the “evil eye”, “colourful and fancy, they constitute a typical case of old wine in new bottles, i.e. objects with a particular charge, that acquire a new signification and use” (Rodosthenous and Varvounis 2016, 77).

One of the main features of this phenomenon included separating the Orthodox essence of religious symbols from their use. In extreme cases, this process has resulted in Orthodox symbols being placed on objects for everyday non-religious use such as cigarette lighters, refrigerator magnets, and bottle openers. Objects related to family patron saints (Kalezić 2000), which in fact have nothing to do with religious rites but are of a purely utilitarian nature, have become equally commonplace. This category of artefact includes glasses, bottles, napkins, plates, tablecloths, candlesticks, paper bags, and other objects meant as “appropriate” decoration for the family patron saint’s day (Stefanović-Banović 2012, 221).

Moreover, it’s an observed fact that religious symbolism or associations are worthy advertising tool. A research on a group of adults has shown that marketing approaches associated to Christian symbols are likely to increase perceived product quality and purchase intentions (Taylor, Halstead and Haynes 2010).

On the other hand, some authors see use of such elements as a resignification of objects – like amulets or ornaments for automobiles – which combine old forms and new uses, to be constituting an important part of the items of modern folk religious art (Rodosthenous and Varvounis 2016, 77).

A characteristic example of the commercialization of religious symbols is their *souvenirization*. The phenomenon of *souvenirization* is observed in the Knez Mihailova Street area, which is one of the most visited tourist areas in Serbia. Most foreigners visiting the city walk through this street to grab souvenirs and other small items to commemorate their trip there. I will try to show the way in which objects acquire the function of souvenirs, while their primary purpose is different. The attitudes of souvenir sellers and buyers are also researched, as well as different perceptions of domestic and foreign tourists.

In the zone of Knez Mihailova street, including the exhibition space, shop-gallery and the part of Kalemegdan continuing on Knez Mihailova street, there is about ten souvenir stands where religious symbols can be found.

Only one stand sells solely religious items, while the others combine them with other, non-religious souvenirs. These are mostly rosaries, to be worn as bracelets or necklaces, wooden and metal crosses, little icons in the form of key-chains, necklaces or strings to be put on car rear-view mirrors. Also, there are icon or cross decorated bottle openers, cigarette lighters, bottles and glasses. Crosses and icons can also be found on small bottle-shaped glasses and refrigerator magnets. Small metal censers and cressets can be found on one stand. For the purpose of this research, I interviewed all the sellers who were willing to participate. Their answers sometimes diverged, while their answers to some questions matched. For example, a bit surprising is the fact that their answers were quite diverse when asked who are their most common buyers (young, adult, domestic, foreign, etc.). Also, their attitudes towards national and religious symbolism of the souvenirs varied. More details will be brought later in the text.

In one of previous researches, from 2013, I dealt with a related topic – the commercialization of religious symbols. I investigated the extent to which modern religious needs and behaviour are shaped by current trends, as opposed to traditional patterns of expressing religiosity. Research for the paper included a questionnaire conducted with the aim of indicating how citizens treat the topic in their everyday lives. Part of that research was published in *Ethnologia Balkanica*, in the paper titled *Material Culture as a Source of Orthodox Christian Identity in Serbia at the End of the 20th and the Beginning of the 21st Century*. Some of the results I got back then will be included to complement the current research and get a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

That research had shown that most survey respondents said they wear some kind of religious symbol. Most frequently, these are rosaries or jewellery with a cross or an icon. A quarter of respondents, significantly, did not see any importance in whether or not these objects were consecrated. Respondents wearing crosses and rosaries, as well as jewellery with religious symbols, could be divided in two groups based on differing reasons. The first group cites motives of a religious nature, while the other comprises those whose motives are not, or not purely, religious in character (Stefanović-Banović 2012, 218).

For the purposes of this research, about souvenirs sold in the area of Knez Mihailova street, I asked stand sellers what are the best sold items with religious symbols. The answers commonly included rosaries and crosses, followed by refrigerator magnets and key-chains. An interesting observation by one seller is there is no significant difference between the number of souvenirs sold with and without religious symbols.

Asked to comment on the selection of the items they are selling, all sellers replied they were not the ones selecting the merchandise, but the business owner, and they think the only criterion is of a strict commercial nature. One seller asserted he can frequently hear passers-by commenting they would never buy objects with religious symbols on a street stands, but only in a church shop.

The research from 2013 showed the attitudes of respondents whose motives to carry personal religious items were not entirely of a religious nature, and certain *magical* properties are assigned to the same objects. These respondents believe in the power of the cross and icons by themselves, not as a mean of Christian practice. As stated, these objects give a “sense of safety”, “they have power”, “give strength”, bring luck, protect from evil, etc. (Stefanović-Banović 2012, 218).

Regarding the *magical* properties of an item, it is worthwhile mentioning that in Knez Mihailova street not only religious items which could be characterized as Christian are sold, but also ones belonging to alternative religious beliefs, such as amulets and good luck charms. One such example are buttons, sold on one stand as “Belgrade lucky button”. The little letter attached to it says it’s created after the ancient European belief that the luck comes to someone who touches a button when they see a chimney sweep. These “lucky buttons” are decorated with motives from Serbian cultural tradition. Since a Serbian proverb says “the best man is not a button”, tourists commonly buy it as a present for their best men.

„It is no secret, I poured my positive energy into the button, as well as the intention for people to feel the joy of giving and wear it (the button) symbolically, as something different from common accessories.” (Kurteš 2017, 19)

Another example of such souvenirs related to alternative beliefs comes from a chimney sweep, who walks along Knez Mihailova Street. He sells little chimney brushes, which he claims to make out of the hairs from the big brush he carries. As he advises, the little brush should be worn in a visible spot – for example on a bag – and swept by hand a few times a day to “sweep out all the negative energy”. Both of these sellers found no specificities in their buyers, except maybe the fact they are mostly female.

“And its (brushes) role is to protect from that surplus of negative energy. Luck runs away from where is the great concentration of negative energy. Luck searches for positive things, and it’s desirable to be in contact with it during the day. Look, no one has control over his own energy. Is it plus or a minus, yin and yang... So, it’s not recommended that neither prevails... For organism to accumulate, positive nor negative, and over the amulet you keep that energy balance.”

“And how do you achieve that?”

“Several times a day, when you brush it with your hand, a discharge happens. You carry it somewhere on your bag, or car key... In car too, it’s desirable (to have it) in the car, because it protects the space from that negativity. And protects from black magic.”

In general, souvenir sellers on Knez Mihailova Street say they have no clear insight into buyers’ motivation to choose a souvenir, as they rarely make conversation with customers. Also, they claim there are no particular differences between domestic and foreign tourists. The only pattern they could recognize is the one regarding souvenirs with national symbols: they are bought in majority by diaspora, or as a present for diaspora.

When souvenir sellers in Knez Mihailova Street were asked about the aesthetic value of religious items, they mostly stated rosaries as an example of ambivalence. They sell rosaries in various colours and made out of various materials. A curious fact is they are sold in variants with crosses or with beads or some other decorations instead of a cross. Rosaries with crosses are bought by persons who sellers perceive as Christians, while rosaries with a bead instead of cross are also bought, as sellers stated, by “non-Christians”. One seller stated that the rosary is used in religious practice of Muslim believers too, but are also bought by non-religious customers, as an accessory.

As mentioned earlier, the return to religion during the 1990s included the mass production of objects with religious symbols which are disposable or a one-off nature. Particularly interesting is the issue of icons and iconography. According to Christian tradition, all icons have the same spiritual value, regardless of their material value. Thus, in the case of believers who respect tradition, a particular contradiction arises from the fact that many of these objects are of a disposable or one-off nature, most frequently ending up in the trash. These disposable religious objects can be purchased in various places that sell consumer goods: supermarkets, petrol stations, markets, street stands, and fairs (Stefanović-Banović 2012, 221).

On three stands in Knez Mihailova Street various types of traditional and common glasses and bottles are sold, decorated with crosses or icons of saints. The sellers of these noticed they are mostly bought by diaspora or as a present to diaspora, by people travelling abroad.

Another important feature of the mass return to religion in Serbia at the end of 20th century is the frequent identification of national and religious identity. In general, as stated by Smith in his book *National identity*: “in the history of mankind the double circles of religious and ethnic identity were very close, if not identical”, so that “slipping” from one identity type to another was easy, and overlap was frequent (Smith 2010, 20). Nationalists, appealing to the religious sentiment of the masses, have often equated the nation with a religious community when these can be combined to determine the borders of an ethnic community (Smith 2010, 82). Still, in accordance with its secular nature, nationalism emphasizes the external and formal features of religion, with religious symbols acquiring added importance as signifiers of unity or diversity. In nationalism, religious symbols (rather than practice or belief) become the primary demonstration of religious belonging. There is a well-known observation that many people associate national identity with “small things”, such as coins, postage stamps, certain phrases and other symbols. The same pattern can be recognized in expressions of religious identity, such as, for example, in the possession of personal items bearing religious symbolism (Stefanović-Banović 2012, 210).

The 2013 survey results show that as a fifth of respondents believe in the unity of symbols of the Serbian state and Church. The state coat of arms (a cross with fire-steels) and the flag on which it also appears are the most frequently stated examples. Some number of respondents perceived this supposed unity of symbols as proof of the Serbian Orthodox Church’s capacity to serve as a “pillar of the state”, because “the Church founded the state”. However, the majority of respondents believed that religious and national symbols cannot be equated (Stefanović-Banović 2012, 217).

On the stands in the area of Knez Mihailova street, religious items are commonly presented together with various national symbols, such as flags, double headed eagle-shaped badges, national hats, etc. Therefore, it was interesting to ask the sellers about their perception of the relation between national and religious identity.

A variety of answers of souvenir sellers in Knez Mihailova street were given to this question, ranging from “they’re all the same” to “they (national and religious items) cannot be identified, and customers know that; if someone wants, they can buy a rosary in the colours of the Serbian flag”. A curious answer was given by one seller,

who claimed „they are not the same, but they are all folk (items)“.

It is worthwhile mentioning that the observed souvenir properties are in no mean of local character. For example, a research on religious tourism in Ireland (Timothy and Olsen 2006, 78-103) has shown several indicative parallels. The main categories of souvenirs sold at one of the national and religious landmarks, National Shrine at Knock, are quite comparable to the ones sold in Knez Mihailova street: national souvenirs, frequently ranging to tasteless; landmark-specific souvenirs; worship aids and other items taken as religious souvenirs and gifts.

Conclusion

In this research I tried to investigate the relation between souvenirs and objects of religious nature or symbolism. It was interesting to examine how items the primary use of which is in religious practice of believers—such as icons, crosses or rosaries—are transformed into souvenirs. As souvenir sellers answers imply, buyers attitudes towards these artefacts are somewhat polarized. While most are indifferent to their religious nature, some comments state they should not be treated as souvenirs and should be sold in churches only.

On the other hand, the various and rich offer of everyday objects decorated with Christian symbols—such as bottle openers, glasses, key-chains, etc.—provides an argument in favour of the transformation of religious meaning of these symbols to mostly aesthetic or signifying.

No clear pattern could be identified in either the way these items are represented in the souvenir stands, or in the buyers demand, in Knez Mihailova street. A more comprehensive survey, including interviewing souvenir buyers would be necessary to get a deeper insight into the phenomenon, but it was out of this research's scope.

Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the line between souvenirs and religious objects is mostly blurred.

There is not enough evidence to either confirm or negate spiritual value of the souvenirs with religious symbolism. Yet, the blurred distinction points to the conclusion that, if a spiritual value of “reli-

gious souvenirs” exists, it deviates both from the original religious sense, but also from the one attached to non-religious souvenirs. The area to look for this new, mixed sentiment towards souvenirs is somewhere in between and could be an interesting topic for further research.



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Милеса Стефановић-Бановић

Сувениризација религијских симбола: пример зоне Кнез Михаилове улице

Кнез Михаилова улица једна је од главних туристичких области Београда. Већина странаца који посете Београд прође овом улицом, да би узела сувенире и друге предмете, као успомену на боравак у овом граду. У овом раду, истражујемо начин на који предмети различитих намена добијају одлике сувенира. Такође, у односу на тај феномен разматрамо и односе између произвођача и продаваца, односно продаваца и купаца. Посматрамо и различите перцепције сувенира од стране домаћих и страних туриста.

Кључне речи: Кнез Михаилова улица, сувенири, религијски симболи, домаћи/страни туристи, производња сећања