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Unofficial Cults of Women in the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Example of the Nun Stefanida of Skadar, Bitola and Dečani*

This study discusses the *Service in honour of Venerable Stefanida of Skadar, Bitola and Dečani*¹ (May 4, secular name Stevka A. Đurčević) and the *Akathist in honour of Venerable Stefanida of Skadar, Bitola and Dečani* as examples of the most recent hymnography² in Serbian, constructing the still unofficial liturgical image of the venerable nun.

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¹ In the time of Stefanida's life, the city of Skadar was in Albania, city of Bitola and Visoki Dečani monastery were in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which existed from 1929 to 1941. From 1941 to 1945, the country was under the occupation of Nazi Germany. Today, Bitola is in Northern Macedonia, Visoki Dečani monastery is in northeast part of the Republic of Kosovo, managed by the Serbian Orthodox Eparchy of Raška and Prizren, currently guarded by KFOR forces.

² Apart from documents such as *imenik, svetačnik*, of great importance for the development of the SOC language policy and the collection of hymnographies were the successive editions of the *Srbljak* (1714, 1761, 1765, 1861, 1986), a set of services dedicated to Serbian saints, a version of menaion (supplementary, for feast days). The hymns included in the *Srbljaks* reflect the process of development of Serbian spirituality through the centuries. The various editions of the collection, from the earliest manuscript through the first printed ones to more recent ones, reflect the spiritual and ideological needs of the time, both in the choice of services and in the linguistic standard adopted. The most recent edition of the *Srbljak* from 2015 (1st edition, 2018 2nd edition, Dobrunska Rijeka) reflects the persistent lack of SOC guidelines as to the standard use of Serbian in liturgical texts used during services dedicated to newly canonised saints. It contains 30 services in contemporary Serbian (some are translations from Romanian) apart from those written in Church Slavonic. The idea of gathering all kinds of texts in honour of Serbian saints, espoused by editors or earlier *Srbljaks*, is continued by an online portal established by Zoran Staničević called *Novi Srbljak*, where the texts dedicated to Stefanida are also included under the date of 4th May. The virtual format of digitalised texts offers virtually unlimited possibilities for adding to them, begging questions for the contemporary framework of the canon of Serbian liturgical texts. This latter issue would call for a detailed discussion in a separate study. The pages of the "virtual" *Srbljak* contain all the hymnographic texts the author has managed to identify, irrespective of the time of origin, language, authorship, status of the saint within the SOC (canonised or not). Crucial for the website's author is the very act of collecting and cataloguing, creating a collection that is accessible to the faithful and can be easily supplemented.

The life of Stevka A. Đurčević (called *Cuba* by her dearest and nearest) is first and foremost patterned on hagiographies. According to the text, she was born in 1887 in the Montenegrin enclave in Albania, in the village of Vraka n. Skadar³. Her father Andrija was a descendant of the Kuča tribe of Montenegro. Little is known about her mother Jovana. Both parents were illiterate. Apart from Stevka, they had two sons, Stefan and Pant. At the age of seven, Stevka voluntarily stopped talking and locked herself up at home, avoiding contact with people. She never went to school. She learned to write and read on her own around 1912. Her parents initially thought it was the result of some previously unnoticed mental illness. They took the girl to the Ostrog monastery and to Dajbabe (Podgorica) to pray for her health. From then on, Stevka wanted to visit Ostrog at least twice a year. In 1915, she fed Serbian soldiers on their way to Albania. At the end of the First World War, she had a small house built for herself outside the village and lived there, leading the life of a recluse, devoting herself to prayer and fasting. Around 1933-34, her entire family moved to Peć, like 250 other Serbian families led by Bishop Viktor Mihajlović of Skadar⁴. Then, they moved to Klinčin n. Budisavac and settled down in Drenovac. She is known to have met Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović in 1941 at the Dečani monastery. The bishop suggested that she move into the Žiča monastery, which ultimately did not happen. At the request of Nada Adžić, mother superior of “Bogdaj” orphanage n. Bitola, she chose this community as her place of residence and took care of the children there. At “Bogdaj”, shortly before her death, she received minor schema from Archimandrite Grigorij and adopted the monastic name Stefanida. She died during the German occupation, most probably on 4-5 May 1945, as she disregarded the ban on turning off lights in the city, having left a burning incense on. She was buried near the Monastery of St. Christopher near Bitola (the exact burial place is unknown).

Records on the life and death of venerable mother Stefanida started to be gathered still during his studies by Risto Radović, later Archbishop of Cetinje and Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral. Amfilohije Radović (1938-2020), one of the leading figures of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro, became metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral in December 1990. He made a lasting contribution to the restoration and strengthening of the Orthodox tradition. Bishop Amfilohije was instrumental for renewing the role of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro, contributing to the reawakening of religious life and reconstruction of the monasteries and churches lost during the communist era, of crucial importance for the spiritual renewal of the country. His impact on the political and social life of Montenegro was not limited to religious activities. Bishop Amfilohije was a well-known publicist and regularly voiced his opinions on social and political issues. Amfilohije re-established the Cetinje seminary, closed by the communists in 1992; it became the spiritual centre of Montenegro and one of the foundations of the

³ According to Meta (2009: 45) Vraka was a village inhabited by Orthodox people in Shkodra area in Albania.

⁴ More about the role of Bishop Victor in the church issue of Shkodra between Albania and Yugoslavia see: Bido 2014.

spiritual revival of the area. A publishing house known as “Svetigora” and a radio station called “Radio Svetigora” were established on the bishop’s initiative. His efforts resulted in a higher number of monks, nuns, priests, and people connected with the Church and in an increase in the number of citizens of Montenegro being baptised in the Orthodox Church (Saggau 2019: 15, 17). At the suggestion of Metropolitan Amfilohije, the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church restored, among other things, the Budimlja Eparchy, established back in the time of Saint Sava (now under the name of the Budimlja-Nikšić Eparchy), as well as the first seat of the Zeta Eparchy, the monastery of Saint Archangel Michael on Prevlaka near Tivat. The culmination of the reconstruction and construction work conducted over almost two decades was the solemn consecration of the Cathedral of the Resurrection in Podgorica on 7 October 2013. The ceremony was attended by Patriarchs and representatives of all local Churches, led by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Kirill of Moscow, and Irinej of Serbia, as well as representatives of other Christian Churches, and non-Christian religious communities (Svetigora 2019). No less important was the construction of the Orthodox Church of St. Jovan Vladimir in Bar, consecrated on 25 September 2016 to mark the 2000th anniversary of the saint’s death. In addition, the bishop initiated and actively participated in the organisation of numerous religious ceremonies and celebrations aimed at strengthening social and spiritual ties in Montenegro. These centred around the veneration of saints, for example St. Basil (Ostrog Monastery) or St. Jovan Vladimir. The churches, whose construction was due to Metropolitan Amfilohije, displayed relics of martyrs who died in the Jasenovac concentration camp to remind the parishioners about the suffering of the Serbs during the Second World War. Amfilohije ran a campaign to rehabilitate Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1881-1956), a Serbian clergyman from the interwar period, incarcerated by the Axis powers during the Second World War, canonized in 2003. In 1993, after a unilateral proclamation of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Montenegro, seen as “heretic and schismatic” by the SOC, Amfilohije intensified the promotion of national, cultural, and religious ideals as aspects of the shared Serbo-Montenegrin identity, which would enhance the sense of national identity.

In creating the hagiographic image of Stefanida of greatest importance are the manuscripts, discovered in the library of the Visoki Dečani monastery in 1962, of the letters-confessions (Serb. *Ispovjesti, Ispovjedna pisma*) sent by Stefanida to her spiritual director, Bishop Viktor Mihajlović of Skadar. In 2011, their excerpts were added to a booklet about the nun titled *Hriste moj životu* (Stefanida Skadarska 2011). The publication depicts the venerable and marks the onset of her grassroots (unofficial) cult. It contains a hagiographic biography of Stefanida, a family tree of her family, a service, an akathist, a prologue life (short), and testimonies of miracles. In 2007, Svetlana Luganskaya translated the collection into Russian and published it at Novospasskij Monastery in Moscow with the blessing of Patriarch Alexy II. A second version of the akathist and the service in honour of Stefanida, in Church Slavonic, was written by the nuns of Slepčen Monastery, but the texts have not been published, yet. A monodrama piece about Stefanida, written by Jelena Srećkov, an actress from Novi Sad, was based on *Hriste moj životu*.

The text of the reverend's service, as I mentioned above, was written in modern Serbian, weaving elements of the Zeta dialect into it, by nun Stefanida (Babić) from the monastery of Miholska Prevlaka near Tivat in 1990 on the recommendation and with the blessing of Archbishop Amfilohije. The service consists of two parts: the Great Vespers and the Morning Service, together with the rubrics of the Liturgy. At the time of working on the service, Bishop Amfilohije edited the akathist⁵ and the short life of the *preopodobna*, published in the book *Jevandjelski neimar*. The entire group of texts is crowned with an icon. The series operates outside of the official circulation. The set of Serbian hymnography of the new (online) *Srbijak* contains the text of the Stefanida's service and akathist with the note:

Чини ми се да је по-тешко певати (а остати у гласу и ритму) у текст службе уметнуте делове из писама преподобне, на њеном архаичном, неграматичном (некњижевном) србском језику којим се служила; но не дајем ово као примедбу, више као запажање евентуалног проблема, јер је очигледно да се мати Стефанида поприлично (д)ви(г)нула у овом песмотворенију својој покровитељки.

Promoting the figure and unofficial cult of Stefanida was begun by Metropolitan Amfilohije shortly after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, when the materialistic worldview ceased to be binding in Yugoslavia and the policy of secularisation had taken its toll in the spiritual life of the society. He framed them in a simple image, based on the Gospel message, which highlighted the conflict between the temporal and spiritual worlds, and the benefits of choosing God's "side". He presented the nun as a contemporary epitome of the Christian pattern of life, which stood in stark contrast to the world's exploitative society. She was a heroine capable of re-Christianising the secularised times, opposing the eradication of traditional Christian culture and the promotion of a secularist, pro-Western modernisation of society. According to this model, Stefanida was also described by the Tivat hymnographer.

The subject of the service is Stevka's heroic life, which she modelled on Orthodox hermits, only to receive monastic shrines shortly before her death. Her martyrdom is highlighted to a lesser extent in the text. The service's obligatory selection of biblical readings⁶ draws on classical texts in honour of monks and hermits, such as those known from the services of St. John of Rila.

In shaping the poetic image of her heroine, the author makes use of all the biographical material interpreted by Amfilohije. She takes as an overarching matrix a spirituality in line with the assumptions of divine slavery, identified with holiness still in the early Christian period. The eminent eastern theologian St. John Damascene wrote: "I venerate saints, slaves through nature, friends through being chosen, and heirs through the grace of God"

⁵ The akathist was translated into Macedonian by Deacon Emil Atanasov (2023).

⁶ Paroemias from the Wisdom of Solomon (paroemia 1: Wisd 3:1-9, paroemia 2: Wisd 5:15-24; 6, 1-3, paroemia 3: Wisd 4:7-15), psalms (Ps 111 and Ps 115) and the Gospel (Luke 6:17-23; Matt 11:27-30).

(Damasceniški 1969: 228). The concept of spiritual slavery is rooted in the sovereignty of God as Creator and Lord of all creation and the slavish-submissive relationship of man towards Him, reflected by the oppositions: God's omnipotence – human powerlessness, He is everything – I (we) nothing, God's love – earthly evil, heaven is a home – mortality a passing dream, like "grass mowed in the sun" (canon song 1, troparia 2-3):

А заиста јесте ово чудо – да ја све говорим која сам ништа, Тебе Богу – који си све што (јесте) – задивљено Стефанида кликташе, док јој Бог тихо и нечујно небеске тајне откриваше.

Шаренило овог света, који "пропада као трава покошена на сунцу" не зароби твоје срце, јер оно удоми Небеског Госта. Њиме обасјана, ти сијаше као огањ неугасиви.

The imbalance between Creator and creation requires only an answer to the question whose slave one wants to be – of the loving Creator or of the world of delusion. Whether one wants to enjoy eternity in the loving home of the Saviour or, like a meadow, to lie under the blade of death. Stefanida is not affected by these dilemmas. Without hesitation, she chooses God, showing that in fact humans have no choice as the good God the Saviour, who willingly accepted death for humanity, is the only choice:

Радуј се, похвало Скадарска, Косовска и Битољска, преподобна мати наша новојављена Стефанидо! Ти схвати и оправда смисао живота јер хтеде само оно што је једино потребно! Одгонетну загонетку постављену даном рођења, и радујеш се у све дане свога живота вјечнога пјевајући Господу: Без Теба ништа не видим и не чујем, без Тебе ништа не зборим нити знам без Тебе немам и ... не вјерујем да имам у себи Твоје истине (Great Vespers, stikhera for *Gospodi vozvach*, tone 8, and e.g. stikhera on litya, tone 1).

The venerable mother's uniqueness is evidenced by her gift of self-denial, silence, and solitude from an early age, which amazed even those closest to her. Even as a 7-year-old child, Stevka voluntarily isolates herself from people, and consciously follows Christ along a "narrow path" (stikhera for *Gospodi vozvach*, troparion, stikhera after Ps 50). In the context of the nun's biography, these conventional hymnographic phrases about a lonely, silent existence away from others, become historical testimony:

Радосно рођеном Христу од седмог лета се сва предаде, Стефанидо презревши сласти хране и пролазну сладостсујетних разговора, у самоћу си се још као дете повлачила, на чуђење својих побожних родитеља, Јоване и Андрије⁷, и истински плод благодати и мужевне храбрости си била (Great Vespers, stikhera for *Gospodi vozvach*, tone 8).

⁷ This excerpt brings to mind the earliest monastic hagiographic tradition, since the life of St. Sava Nemanjić by Domentijan and Teodosije stressed the element of self-isolation in the stories of the young prince's escape from his family home to the monastery on Mount Athos. Self-isolation was to depreciate the secular world.

In most of the songs of the service, the historical testimony is further substantiated by quotations from Stevka's epistolography confessions, an interesting novelty for this type of work. The spiritual message of the text, written in simple language with elements of Zeta dialect (Končarević 2020: 71), is meant to appeal to any audience and to convince even the simplest. This is additionally ensured by the partial rhythm and attempts at rhyme, e.g. "Па нека се чини што хоће на овоме свијету нека се обрће-преврће мене нико (с) Христом раставити неће" (troparion, tone 8, Stevka's letter 1 p. 49) or "Само кроз мене Христос каже да ми срце блажи; у овом животу се само љубав проста и добра воља траже" (stikhera for *Gospodi Vozvach*). The others are prayerful calls to Christ: "Не стога што ја заслужујем тајни богослов Твој него се Ти сажали и смилуј и нека сиђе милост велика Твоја, Господе на мене грашну. Да познадем свети живот и Твој свети одговор и Твој свети пут" (stikhera na stikhovne, tone 2).

The nun's abandonment of the world and choice of God helps her attain true freedom, in contrast to the pseudo-freedom of the visible world, which fetters humans with an inclination towards evil and sinful senses. Referring to a quote from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans (7:18-24), the author of the service includes an embittered comment on the human plight on earth:

¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (*The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version).

When people on earth are troubled by worries, lust, carnal passions, a person of God has but one desire, namely to stand steadfastly by God and to abide by Him in constant communion and obedience. A person of God is by no means someone who is blind to everything around him and "impregnated", living in a fictitious, idealised reality. On the contrary, they live in concord with everyday life, but their consciousness is much more attentive and vigilant, and they see the dangers, the difficulties, and the weakness of their own flesh, which is exposed to temptations. That is why they do not cease in their efforts not to succumb to the world, to confine their own world to that of God and to identify God's will with their own: "Благослови све у мени и око мене да будем готова за Тебе! Да будем сва Твоја и Ти све моје, Господе! Нека се испуни воља Твоја то је Небесна жеља моја!" (stikhera na stikhovne, tone 2).

In the canon, the author adds:

Анђелски кликташе: Благословен јеси Господе! Благослови ми живот у сну и на јави, нека ми се открива красота света Твоја, Христе! Благослови тело и кости моје, који се често трују од лукаве лажне муке! Благослови душу и грешно тијело моје, нека буде чисто за љубаву Твоју! (song 7, troparion 2 and 3; song 8).

Help in the struggle against weakness, as the quotation shows, must be sought from the Most High, who always supports those in need and those who ask. The world has nothing to offer mankind apart from God, except vain fame, empty talk, and inner dilemmas. Being estranged from the world of sin and finding refuge in the Lord (cfr. “Be holy, because I am holy!” (1 Pet 1:16)) defines Stevka’s life in that she is symbolically represented by an immovable heavenly soldier on a “dead watch”⁸ and the hardness of diamond (Greek *ἀδάμας*, apart from a gem it is also a hard metal), which breaks demons’ arrows:

Адамант тврди била јеси, Стефанидо преподобна о који су се ломиле све демонске стреле и привиђења у сну и на јави којима те зли покушавао уплашити и одвојити од Христа но, ти се још чвршће поузда у Бога свога, кличући. ‘Зло искушење на сваке начине али си ме Христе мили тврдо заградио. Срце си ми у љубав(у) загрејао вељу Си ми милост насуо’ (Great Vespers, stikhera for *Gospodi vozvach*, tone 8).

Surrender to God makes one strong, raises one’s dignity, and renders one immune to misfortune, calamity, and enemies. It furthermore strengthens one’s intellectual powers in the service of God. As the hymnographer observes, Stefanida, with the help of the Holy Spirit, learned to read at the age of twenty-five (“описмени сама себе силом Светог Духа”), and the pious texts she read enhanced her spiritual experiences⁹.

Through her steadfast religious standing, nun Stefanida restores the value of asceticism at a time it was forgotten or degraded:

И у вечности, радуј се преподобна мати Стефанидо са Христом си сада, заћутавши, с Њиме си беседила; постом и бдењем тело си умртвила милостињом на небеса вазнела се јеси својим исповестима живиш и сада, нектаре свесладосни, моли се за нас, да Христос вечно живи у нама (stikhera tone 6 after psalm 50).

Patterned after medieval monks and nuns, she proves the value of the gift of prayer and the charism of tears. The saint teaches how to adore God in a variety of life situations: during adoration, amidst life’s hardships, in moments of joy, and when the Lord has to be given thanks to (stikhera 3 for *chvalite*, tone 8). For each and every one she was a role model, a teacher of life, and a safe haven during a storm (the last glory of the service, tone 8).

⁸ Serbian *mrtva straža* – a group of people or a person in a position which is the most evident to the enemy; it was placed during the break between two battles, when the army was at rest or near an enemy, to protect one’s units against a sudden attack and to ensure the optimum conditions for confronting the enemy and for the continuation of struggle (Kragić 2023).

⁹ Great Vespers, stikhera for *Gospodi vozvach*, tone 8, as well as e.g. stikhera for the litya, tone 1.

A national bias is a unique feature of Serbian spirituality¹⁰. A series of hymns in honour of Stefanida is written in this spirit, based upon respect for national values, local saints, who are included into the sacred element of royal dynasties, and Serbian shrines. It thus attests to the perseverance of individuals and the entire nation and their esteem for the religious identity developed over centuries.

Stevka's spiritual fervour and patriotism are attested to by her regular pilgrimages to holy places and monastic centres (Visoki Dečani, Žiça, Ostrog), in her veneration of the relics of great Serbs and venues of local cults, e.g. the miraculous wellspring of St. Nicholas, next to the "Bogdaj" orphanage (canon song 5, troparion 2-3):

Ишавши са братом назад кући твојој, из Жиче свете ка Косову равном, сусрете у возу две чудесне душе. Задивљена њиховом љубављу и жртвом, прихвативши њихов, од срца, позив, ти, као апостол, остави родбину по телу, и крену са њима у дрвени Битољ.

У Битољу си проводила молитвено живот у дому поред чудотворног извора Светог Николаја, што се "Богдај" зове, кога Николај Нови обнови да сирочад Божија у њему главу склоне, и пронађу љубав Христа човекољупца.

She holds in unique esteem the Ostrog monastery, one of the major spiritual centres of Montenegro, gathering until now crowds of Orthodox pilgrims. Stefanida's religious zeal is evident in the fact that she did not discontinue yearly pilgrimages, even in the face of the most violent storms on Lake Skadar, entrusting herself to God and strengthening fellow pilgrims with her trust (canon song 6, troparia 1-3):

Путници намерници, свраћаху до тебе, уморни од пута, знајући да их аврамовско гостопримство твоје чека – хлеб, вода и со, и утеха нека.

Колиба твоја – извор воде живе, за све који жедни беху, и тишина после Скадарске буре, и покој вечности након људског пира.

Анђелски си веру ближњима крепила, кад их страх обузе на Скадарском језеру, услед мрачне буре, уздајући се у Бога жива, исповедник Његов до последњег даха свог си била.

The cult of Stefanida fosters the Serbian martyrdom, perceived in sacred terms. In her hymnographic portrait, the authoress recalls the exodus of Serbian soldiers from Albania

¹⁰ Serbian Orthodox Church is therefore referred to as *Svetosavlje* (eng. Saintsavaism). Saintsavaism refers to the spiritual and cultural legacy associated with Saint Sava, the first Archbishop of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church. Svetosavlje encompasses a set of values, principles, and traditions that promote the Orthodox Christian faith, national identity, education, and cultural heritage. It is often regarded as a holistic concept that intertwines religious and national identity within the context of Serbian Orthodox Christianity. After 1990's the term gained popularity and is often related to Serbian nationalism, see: Falina 2007, Vukić 2021.

in 1915 (kondak, 5th akathist), who the nun helped as a young girl. She herself had her own share of displacement, occupation, persecution for her faith and Serbian identity (ikos, 5th akathist):

Радуј се, ти која мир твориш, јер твоје је Царство Небеско! Радуј се, јер те прогнаше осрамотише, и рекоше ружне речи на те, лажући имена Христова ради! Радуј се и весели се, јер је велика награда твоја на небу!

One of the most important aspects of the veneration of Stefanida is the cultivation of the memory of Serbia's spiritual geography. Her trials and tribulations are a symbolic indication of the unification of the Orthodox lands, which now remain outside the Serbian borders and outside Serbian jurisdiction – Christian Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo – along with what they hold as the most sacred (akathist, ikos 3):

Побуди тиме и све своје да журе Острогу свакога лета, са усрдном вером и топлим срцем, и ишту од Светог милости с Неба. А ти, кротко дете, ноћи под кивотом провођаше, и у свом срцу благослове Светитеља слагаше: Радуј се, изданче албанске земље! Радуј се, звездо скадарског неба! Радуј се, светиониче у земној бури! Радуј се, војниче увек будни! Радуј се, сидро косовске лађе! Радуј се, Дечана Светих стопле! Радуј се, плоде Косова Поља! Радуј се, светињо древног Битоља! Радуј се, ружо “Богдајске“ баште! Радуј се, орле кршног Пелистера! Радуј се, села Крстова Крстоносна дјево! Радуј се, Свете Мати Ане Враћевшничке саподвижнице! Радуј се, Стефанидо преподобна, Скадарска, Косовска и Битољска!

The places significant for Serbian spirituality and Church history are particularly clearly outlined in the canon where the hymnographer speaks about Stevka's journeys to the holy places. First, like an angel or St. Alexis, she metaphorically illuminates Albania with her presence there (canon song 3, troparion 1). Then, banished from her native Vraka, she finds refuge in Kosovo, a symbolic place on the map of Serbia:

Прогнани из родне Враке због имена и вере, на Косову нађосте утеху и заклон, у постојбини древној, крвљу освештаној. Ти, поред свога, и крст свога напаћеног и прогнаног народа ношаше. Ноћи и дани теби беху исто – молитва Христу у срцу чистом; неизмерни вапаји пробуђене душе, и вулкани љубави који све демонске замке руше (canon song 4, tropar 2).

The displacement of Stevka's family from Vraka village was a far-reaching consequence of the conflict between Albania and Yugoslavia on the Church issue, regarding the area of Shkodra, which started around 1913. One of the leading figures in the abovementioned strife was bishop Viktor Mihajlović, who was newly-appointed archimandrite in Shkodra by the Metropolitan of Cetinje Gabriel in early 1914 (Bido 2014) and then let the exodus of Serbian families from Shkodra area in 1933-1934.

After the occupation of Nazi Germany began in 1941, Stefanida travels with her family members to Žiča. During the trip they meet Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, the most influential Serbian clergyman of the time, later a saint of the SOC, who suggested that Stefanida stay in the Žiča monastery. On the way back, encouraged by sister Nada Adžić, Stefanida travels to Bitola, to the “Bogdaj” orphanage, where she lived until her death, praying for her nation, and strengthening her compatriots with the power of her faith. The hymn’s authoress compares her to a candle lit by God for his people (song of the 5th canon, tropar 3), a symbol of fervour in conversion and care. As a pious patriot dedicated to the Church, Stefanida is seen as an ideal patron saint of the Serbs (canon song 1, tropar 1), whom the faithful ask for protection and graces:

Недостојне наше песме прими сада, мати, у Христообасјаној небеској келији својој,
и измоли за нас, грешне и слабе, опроштај од Бога, Коме ти, света, вапијаше: “Ја,
иако сам грешна, ја хоћу свету милост само од Тебе!”

In the service, there are clear references to earlier Serbian hymnography dedicated to holy women, with numerous biblical and non-biblical *topoi*. A more characteristic one is the metaphor of a “manly” woman (“мужаствене храбрости си била”, first stikhera of the service), used in reference to e.g. St. Milica¹¹. The figure of Bishop Viktor of Skadar from the text, Stefanida’s spiritual advisor and confessor, not only glorifies the idea of spiritual directorship (stikhera 1 on litya) but also evokes the text about the life of St. Jelena Anžujška, which repeatedly stresses the close ties of the queen with Serbian clergy.

In summary, the figure of nun Stefanida/Stevka combines the early Christian eremitic tradition with the image of the Serbian saint, Orthodox Christian, and patriot. Its social task is to advance the spirituality of a society that was secularised during the socialist period, recalling the key points of its ideological resistance. Moreover, the texts are a symbolic depiction of the spiritual map of former and present-day Serbia, contributing to a broader narrative about the former unity of the Serbian Orthodox Church. From the religious point of view, through her steadfast *podvig* she also deepens the spiritual dimension of existence and increases the prestige of the monastic state in nowadays society. With the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije in 2020, intensive efforts to officially canonize the nun were suspended. Stefanida has still not been elevated to the glory of the altars, and her unofficial cult has now considerably diminished. Religious publicists’ attempts to revive it have not been greatly successful. One may wonder whether the lack of success is not due to the image of sainthood as promoted by the literary texts related to Stevka’s cult, whose image is radical for modern times.

¹¹ Archbishop Danilo III wrote that she ruled the country “with a man’s hand”.

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Abstract

Dominika Gapska

Unofficial Cults of Women in the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Example of the Nun Stefanida of Skadar, Bitola and Dečani

The paper is focused on a corpus of hymnographic texts dedicated to nun Stefanida/Stevka as an example of a literary work focused on the promotion of a newly revealed saint by the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose role is to elevate the spiritual essence of a society that underwent secularization during the socialist era, while revisiting the core principles of this society's ideological resilience. By using means of expression, such as modern language (vernacular), fragments of Stevka's letters, and Serbian cultural and religious *topoi*, the authors of the hymnographic texts made them more accessible to the contemporary believer. Additionally, the hymnographic texts symbolically represent the spiritual landscape of both past and contemporary Serbia, adding to a more comprehensive narrative about the historical cohesion of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Keywords

Female Saints; Serbian Orthodox Church; Serbian Hymnography; Serbian Modern Hymnographers.