

Popular Religious Artistic Creation and Pilgrimage Tourism

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between contemporary folk art and forms of pilgrimage tourism. These are objects that are manufactured today, often modelled on older forms, which are available to pilgrims for purchase, so that they may retain the memory of the pilgrimage after leaving. Here are also included the so-called “items of piety”, at least in their most modern version. These are contemporary and modern forms of folk art, which are significant for the study of both the phenomenon of pilgrimage and contemporary forms of Greek folk religiosity.

Keywords: pilgrimage tourism, items of piety, popular religious art, traditional religiosity, objects available to pilgrims for purchase.

Nowadays, the phenomenon of popular pilgrimage tourism is booming, as parishes, associations, and even tourist offices undertake the organizing of excursions and pilgrimages to monasteries and shrines of the Orthodox Church. It is a current that is constantly growing and spreading, constituting one of the main expressions of Modern Greek folk religiosity. Moreover, similar phenomena also occur in other countries, as nowadays the old practice of pilgrimage has taken new dimensions and a modern content, becoming what we usually characterize as «pilgrimage tourism». One of the basic principles of the psychology of the pilgrim is that he wants to take with him a souvenir of the holy place, the church, the monastery or the shrine visited, in order to keep close to him the blessing of the pilgrimage and to follow up, in his imagination, up to infinity the psychological stimuli and the religious experiences that he had tasted and experienced during his pilgrimage¹. On this basic position is based a large part of tourist industry associated with the so called «pilgrimage» or «religious» tourism, which increasingly develops, always with the blessing and co-operation of the great religions and, for us, of the Church.

This is not a recent phenomenon. In various museum collections throughout the world are preserved objects of Christian art², to limit ourselves to Christian – and particularly to Orthodox – pilgrimage tourism, created to cover precisely this psychological need of the faithful pilgrim. And of course it is revived with new momentum nowadays, when various reasons lead to man’s return to the transcendental and the beyond, so that the monasteries, and all kinds of shrines, receive crowds of visitors. As expected, these commemorative objects present an external form that is understood and accepted by the people, to whom they are addressed³, that is, they are moving within the morphological limits and modalities of popular art, and they therefore constitute forms of contemporary religious popular art, closely associated with the terms and circumstances of the pilgrimage, as will be demonstrated below. In any case, an examination of these items leads to the mentalities and beliefs that support their creation and use. Here apply the conclusions of Henry Classie⁴, according to whom the study of objects constitutes the first step in the approach of human thought and human actions, especially when they occur in the cultural context recognized as «tradition».

In any case, the experiential relationship of the layman with his environment leads to the materialization of his system of thought over the physical objects of that environment, which he creates based on his needs and ideology, in order to use them, actually and symbolically⁵. According to Henry Classie, material culture essentially constitutes a display of emotion to the outside world and leads to the participation and diffusion of the layman in it, and these are topics dealt with convincingly by the theory of empathy (*empathy*)⁶.

As part of the material culture of the people, popular religious art has experienced and experiences many approaches, from various theories and schools⁷. Barbara Babcock has recently summarized the critical questions for the researcher, when dealing with similar issues⁸: what are the essential limits of the object, and how these are specified in their relation with man, who creates or uses them? To what extent traditions varies and where are the boundaries between manufacturer and user⁹, when creating and using articles, which, beyond their decorative or utilitarian role, express religious principles, represent beliefs or are related to religious systems and unofficial, popular versions of known religions?

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett¹⁰ attempted, for example, to define the beginning and the end of the particular importance of an object, but also its «permeability» by the populace. This is a fertile reflection, whose concepts, terms and conclusions we may subsequently use, in part, in examining modern forms of the popular religious art of the Greek people. It should be remembered that already Stilpon Kyriakides has pointed out the affinities between material culture and other fields, even the most abstract or «spiritual», of Greek traditional culture.¹¹ By accepting Barbara Babcock's view that objects are interpretations, objectifications and materializations of experience¹², we can more easily understand the older, but particularly insightful assertion of St. Papadopoulos, according to which the study of material culture is ultimately a new way of understanding and interpreting historical phenomena, and culture in general, in its complex totality¹³.

M. G. Meraklis proceeds to a more conceptually refined distinction, which offers another working tool to the researcher: he claims that there is a distinction between the technological and the folklore study of material culture, identifying this distinction in «the manners and customs developed around – I would even say inside – physical objects»¹⁴. Thus the view of material culture is defined from the perspective of folklore. At the same time, form, technique and style, the commercial demand that shapes production, and is sometimes shaped by it, as well as the emotional and symbolic charge of each object, are important terms for examining individual artifacts¹⁵ and for investigating their position in the life of the people.

In any case, we must examine the individual factors of differentiation, and how they operate in society, how they are expressed through the structures and circumstances of everyday life. In this respect, Petr Bogatyrev's view, that the meaning and social use of objects are realities inextricably bound together¹⁶, and that the message of each object is closely related to how, where, when and by whom it is used, is more relevant than ever. Recently, G. Vozikas, dealing with another similar form, the sticker signs of urban and other religious festivals, has pointed to the semantic and functional changes that highlight «their multifunctional and polysemous nature», their «boundaries and cultural dimensions»¹⁷ and, finally, the relationship between subjective and objective/real dimension of the world, based on the meaning developed by the objects themselves through this relationship.

The main theoretical question, which we will try to answer here, is whether this relationship also works vice versa. Do we have cases, in which objects already «charged» with religious meaning and ideological orientation are used again in modern popular religious art, aiming at the emotional reduction to the past, which constitutes common knowledge to those who participate in the same religion and the same ethnic-cultural community? Do we have, in pilgrimage tourism and in forms of popular art associated with it, an entrenched ideological charging of objects, that are used just for that reason, in order to resignify the tangible dimension of the world, imposing on the relationship of subjective and objective dimension their old and reinforced, or modified, meaning and not receiving or developing new meaning through this relationship. If this happens, we will have a second alternative case of operation and interpretation of the object in the material culture of the people, which can be used to illustrate and explore folk art, especially in our contemporary modern versions.

Let's look at our material. The items, to which we refer, are usually defined as «items of piety» and are sold as «blessings», in small shops, located in the areas of pilgrimage, in which case the economic benefit belongs to the monastery or the shrine, but also by individuals outside the sacred space, especially in large monastic centers; here belong, for example, the corresponding shops in the courtyards of the monasteries of Meteora, of Stavrovouni, as well as in Ouranoupolis and Daphni, at the entrance of the pilgrims to the Holy Mountain Athos.

However, the act of selling differentiates them from the older monastic practice of “blessing”, as “blessings” were offered for free, while the items of modern ecclesiastical popular art constitute commodities, traded under the specific economic conditions of sale and purchase.

One class of such items is any kind of printed material: biographies of elders and lives of saints, stories of miracles and guides for visitors, edifying books and impressions of other pilgrims, constitute topics, which are often traded, along with books or pamphlets of folk poets, forming products of our modern printed folk poetry, with religious and intensely emotional content. Then we have religious symbols with special charging and signification for the believer: images of cheap or expensive media, which reproduce the principal or the main miraculous icons of the monastery, for the sake of which the entire pilgrimage is often performed. Literally, here we see Jill Dubish’s observation that the image is the “signifier center” of the church¹⁸, and even extends to the whole symbolic and ritual process of the origin of the pilgrim, who wants to take with him a souvenir¹⁹ of the pilgrimage upon leaving, preferring a copy that is symbolically reinforced with the supernatural power of the icon, for the sake of which the pilgrimage was performed.

Essentially, these icons, on paper or wood, with frames bearing elementary woodcuts or engraved with religious symbols and a variety of forms, are sanctified because of the symbolic condensation of space, time and the supernatural over them, according to the belief and understanding of the believer. They are paintings, photographs or silkscreen on silver or glass, in normal size or miniaturized, in the form of a triptych, a diptych or an amulet that takes the form of a badge, laminated images or talismans for the car, attached with magnets in its interior. In any case, however, these copies, regardless of their value or the material with which they were made, serve as mnemonic topoi, as they carry an ideological, symbolic and metaphysical charge²⁰, which is immediately recognizable and can automatically recall memories and emotional reactions for the faithful viewer or buyer.

Here we have the use of an already loaded image object, which is believed to be adorned with elements of the supernatural power of the original, and it is bought by the pilgrims because of that. As recorded by Henry Glassie²¹, here the consumer’s version outshines the meaning of the manufacturer’s original, since communication and consumption are closely linked processes, which are always determined by the changing social contexts. Barbara Babcock²² believes that the context of the object, as well as the perspective of its use, affect its social meaning, but here the object is already charged by a long liturgical use, and radiates these concepts to potential buyers, so that the symbolic charge determines, to a significant extent, the interpretative framework of social parameters, in which it is included, understood and interpreted.

The use of such elements also resignifies objects already familiar, of not necessarily religious significance or substance; I am referring to amulets for humans and to amulets or ornaments for automobiles, which combine old forms and new uses, and constitute an important part of the items of modern folk religious art, directly linked to pilgrimage tourism. Triangular amulets, with crosses and passages from the Bible, are known in our popular art. The appearance of the car in our everyday life led, at the same time, to the creation of many ornaments for it²³, which are sometimes products of modern popular artistic creation, as the commoner carries to the new popular means decorative patterns, opinions and perceptions related to older, and certainly more traditional, means of transport. The automobile is adorned with the intention of decoration, as well as its protection from the evil eye, so that its occupants should be supernaturally protected from the various dangers involved.

Crosses knitted with beads, nazars or tassels, metal crosses and icons, icons with stickers or magnets, are included in this modern car decoration²⁴. The most treasured icon or the main palladium of worship of each monastery or shrine enters in a prominent point of the object, in order to give to the faithful the impression that its blessing and supernatural power is transmitted to him and to his car. Each time, the specific picture is related to the reference of the «common – commercial» to the «unique – non commercial» object, which is common in popular religious art, as it was studied and described by Igor Kopytoff²⁵. The common amulet becomes special with the representation of the miraculous image, it acquires special strength by the reference to it, it acquires uniqueness and it is charged symbolically, it connects the faithful to the particular pilgrimage even more, in a case of substantial individualization of this ritual relationship, which extends over time through the popular religious artwork.

Again images and objects with special supernatural value and ideological religious signification are reused, in order to give a special place to the object of popular religious art. According to Louis-Jean Calvet’s conclusion, the image functions here as a “memory guide” or “as a drive to the word”²⁶, since iconicity is essentially interpreted as “memory space”.

Relations between objects and people, which, ultimately, according to Henry Glassie²⁷, fully determine the meaning of things in the material culture of the people, are redefined, with the use of known and ritually charged performances in items of modern popular religious creation. The talisman becomes unique and the decoration of the car prophylactic ally effective²⁸ because, according to popular thinking, the familiar and miraculous performance transmits something of its naturally miraculous power to the artifact, allowing its owner to enjoy the protection of the divine and to carry the memory of the emotional moments of the pilgrimage to his future secular daily life. This trend of the extension of the sacred to the everyday and of the ecclesiastical to the secular, the trend of imaginary representation of pilgrimage and religious experiences to prosaic daily practice, which is psychologically necessary for the believer who wishes an extension of its psychologically palliative religious performance, appears mainly in the «prayer ropes»,

Which constitute a basic and popular type of modern folk religious art²⁹. From being mere monastic tools for the measurement of the time of prayer, the «prayer ropes» have now become amulets, because they are bought, they are «crossed» on holy relics and miraculous icons. Through this process, it is considered that they take on some of the supernatural power of those unique religious objects, transferring it successively, to the faithful³⁰.

The new “prayer ropes” have also taken the form of a bracelet, while they are sometimes decorated with precious beads or nazars, which, according to popular perception, prevent the “evil eye”³¹. Colorful 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, adapting their old symbolic charge to the standards of the modern society of pilgrims, with their specific needs. Now «prayer ropes» for children and teenagers are manufactured, blue and pink for boys and girls respectively, in an obvious effort of extreme secularization of what had formerly been strictly sacred.

The same can be observed also in the cases of the use of new materials, such as plastic, for items such as bottles for holy water or oil from the lamps of miraculous images, which are decorated with Christian symbols or similar representations. Plastic, which has dynamically entered the field of Greek popular culture³², is herewith attached to popular religious art, leading it to new forms that have become the subject of Modern Greek folklore.

It should also be noted that a similar morphology and standardized decoration pattern is also present in articles created for the graves of loved ones and cemeteries, which are included in popular religious art, and are often sold in the shops of the monasteries and the shrines, and which are mentioned above: candles, frames for photographs, censers, icons for the chandeliers of the graves, and special ornaments, of plaster or bronze, with funerary character, are included in the category of this mass popular artistic creation. These objects are associated with the memory, which refers to the dead, and they constitute what Michel Vovelle has characterized as “physical indicators”³³ which concern the end of life. The fact that they are decorated with religious symbols is due to the perception that the dead person is in «another world», in a sphere of existence outside the concrete human reality, in direct contact with the divine and beyond, therefore, somehow, he constitutes an active part of the current religious and spiritual reality of a traditional society.

The mass production and decoration of these items leads to a strong tendency for consumption, which increases with the passage of time, as is noted by Arjun Appadurai³⁴, so that concepts related to the ephemeral are introduced into the popular conception of the sacred, according to the conclusions of Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey³⁵. This leads to an effort for the return to the magical/sacred, through the use of old symbols and decorative forms in new shapes. This is the main reason why in modern religious folk art we have the depiction in wood or metal of decorative motifs already found in early Christian years, in marble or stone. This new use, beyond its ideological roots, leads also to interesting decorative achievements, giving new impetus and a new form to the products of popular religious artistic creation.

Another dimension is also the *vow*, which constitutes the motive for performing a pilgrimage, even in the case when the shrine or the monastery is located in a remote and inaccessible area, highlighting the efforts of the pilgrim to reach his destination. The vow, like prayer, is thought to propitiate God, not out of fear, but out of respect and love. A respect that springs from faith and the belief that God is omnipotent and man is impotent towards Him³⁶.

Vows usually follow the Byzantine tradition and consist of wax or small metal plates, silver or gold, depicting humans or parts of the human body. Often, however, the vow also turns into a magic perception, in the sense that if someone fulfills a vow or a pilgrimage, it is as if he is obliging God or the particular saint to fulfill his wish.

What is indicatively described above defines the main lines of a modern folkloric phenomenon, on whose individual configurations and expressions much could be written, in more detail, in the future. However, these sporadic findings may adequately support reaching certain relevant conclusions.

Modern popular religious art is directly related to pilgrimage tourism, which is constantly growing, since, as a product, it is intended to be purchased by these mass pilgrims. It is a kind of extension of the blessing of the pilgrimage, a physical point of memory and remembrance of religious emotions and experiences, a «memento»³⁷, with the deeper meaning of the word, so it is bought –and thus is produced- fast. In terms of symbols, in addition to the reproduction of old traditional symbolisms and expressive ways, as it is natural, the religious symbols and all kinds of representations of the central religious symbol or cult object of each monastery or pilgrimage are dominant. In the objects of popular religious artistry are reproduced the most treasured miraculous image, the saint or a photo of the reliquary with the most representative relics of each pilgrimage.

This is a kind of declaration of identity, which defines the emanation point of the supernatural power and identifies the source, as well as the pilgrimage dependence, of each individual object. In this case, the observation of M. G. Meraklis for the direct connection of utilitarian value and decoration in the objects and products of folk art is valid³⁸. The use of these objects is symbolical and ceremonial, within household worship and family religious behavior, but substantially, even from this perspective, they are useful objects, bridging the gap between the material and the spiritual life of the people. This special signaling comes from keeping the elemental forms of the past, which in popular thought is inextricably tied to the concept of religious practice, as with the prayer ropes or amulets. In the case of new objects, like amulets for cars, small icon stickers etc., it also comes from the use of symbols and figurative forms of representations, which are consistently symbolically charged with similar symbolic significations.

In the latter case, which is perhaps the most interesting, these representations that are charged with religious messages are used deliberately, in order to resignify things. A new meaning is not developed here, through the relationship of subjective and objective dimension of the objects, but through the form or the representation the old religious patterns return, expressed through new objects in form or functionality. Thus the classic conception of the relationship and the balance of meaning and social use of objects is reversed, as is methodically presented by Peter Bogatyrev³⁹, and a unique process is introduced, which is directly related to the reuse and management of tradition.

Basically, a kind of folklore also works here, which we often discover as root cause, behind many modern folklore phenomena. This is in the sense of the modern, resignified and commercial use of old forms of expression of folk art and traditional religious life. The new forms that are created have the need of ideological support of old symbols, otherwise they present no interest to the secular man, who recognizes and interprets these old symbols and forms, considering their use in a conservative system of ideologies and practices, attitudes and behavior, such as traditional religiosity, with its numerous expressions, as completely natural and expected.

D. S. Loukatos, dealing with the impact of tourism on the traditional life of our people, had written, in 1978, about the «archéo-folklore touristique» in Greece⁴⁰, as one of the forms of modern folklore of the time. Today, based on what we have noticed and attested above, we could perhaps talk about a peculiar «Christian-folk», with also a tourist dimension, and a special orientation towards the thriving pilgrimage tourism of our days. This is the main form of expression of contemporary popular religious art, which evolves and may in the future mutate, defining the living, and demonstrating the essential progressiveness of popular artistic creation, in its most modern dimension.

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