

Article

Madonna of the Reef in Perast and the Fašinada Custom: Relational and Representational Perspectives on a Maritime Pilgrimage

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Abstract: This article is about the Fašinada custom. The Fašinada refers to the transporting of stones by boat from the coast to a small island named Madonna of the Reef in Perast, Montenegro. This custom both commemorates the finding of a miraculous painting of the Madonna on a reef in the sea, and it furthers the island's construction by piling stones on that reef. I consider issues of both representation and relationality linked to this site. These two aspects constantly intermingle, and one cannot be understood without the other. In the first part of the article, I draw more on a political economy perspective on human intentionality and consider the material results of social relations. I describe and explain the complex background to the Madonna of the Reef pilgrimage, the different practices linked to this island and her saint, the transformations that Perast in general and maritime pilgrimages in particular have undergone over time, and then, I describe the multivocality of the contemporary Perast community. In the second half of this article, I consider relational and dwelling perspectives on the co-option and construction of the Madonna of the Reef, and how nature has affected social relations. In doing so, I consider “nonhuman agency” as one of the main reasons why the custom of the Fašinada has transcended its religious context and become a space for interreligious encounters.

Keywords: maritime pilgrimage; Madonna of the Reef; Perast; relational perspective; representational perspective



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1. Introduction

The Fašinada custom, as the locals call it, refers to the transporting of stones by boat from the coastal mainland to a small island near Perast in Montenegro named Madonna of the Reef. The custom both commemorates the finding of a miraculous painting of the Madonna on a reef in the sea, and it furthers the construction of the island through the piling of stones on that reef. In contemporary times, most of the people who perform the custom of the Fašinada are not practicing believers; and if they are believers, they are not Roman Catholics but rather Orthodox Christians, while the sanctuary is Catholic.

This very intriguing situation and the very complex, multilayered site led me to approach it from various research perspectives (individual, local, institutional) and through different interpretational frameworks (transnational, tourist, political, identitarian, religious, etc.). Nevertheless, in this article, I also wish to address the neglected relational aspect of Fašinada, between the locals (in some case pilgrims) and their environment, which encompasses the Madonna of the Reef. As I see it, this relational perspective is one of the main reasons why the custom of the Fašinada has transcended its religious context and become a space for interreligious encounters. I argue that the Fašinada's nonhuman agencies have enabled this practice to absorb other meanings and draw in participants with religious backgrounds and identities different to those present in the local community.

Furthermore, I believe that observing this site and the practices connected to it through a relational lens can offer fresh insights into this maritime pilgrimage and the community that created it. The name of the island itself, and the main religious motivation for visiting

the island, directs us to a religion–nature agency that goes beyond a human–nature relational perspective. Here, the rock, stones, and sea play an important role in transcendental relations with the sacred, especially in the fifteenth century when this practice allegedly started. While my main argument is built on a relational interpretational framework, I do not intend, however, to neglect the social aspects and human agency that seem important for understanding the true role that nonhuman agents play in this pilgrimage site and practices. This is why I have decided to take both perspectives as relevant contexts for understanding maritime pilgrimages to Madonna of the Reef.

Maritime pilgrimages can be defined as:

[R]itual practices that include boat travel for persons or icons as part of the actual ritual structure. Translocation of the sacred object and/or people also includes processing towards or over the sea to a location that has historical and/or folkloric connections with the object or the pilgrimage place. (Katić and McDonald 2020, p. 3)

Maritime pilgrimages emerged within specific geographical contexts where the population was oriented toward the sea, and the sea provided the basic resources for and determinants of local life, economics, culture, and religion. These pilgrimages concern the relationship between mariners' religious beliefs and changes in everyday life, tourism, heritage, and migrations. In some cases, this combines with the national identity, political economy, and institutionalization and heritagization of practices and sites (Katić and McDonald 2020, p. 3).

For the Madonna of the Reef sanctuary, there are three important dates each year. One is the date of the Fašinada custom (July 22). Another is the May 15 celebration, which is the only occasion when the miraculous painting of the Madonna “leaves” her island. This celebration is connected to a conflict during Ottoman times when, according to oral tradition, the Madonna saved Perast from Ottoman conquest. The third date (August 15) relates to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a universal Catholic holiday that transcends this local community. Over time, especially in the twentieth century, the Fašinada custom and May 15 celebration came to be performed in a similar way. In contemporary times, when all possible contexts have changed (political, social, religious, economic), the Fašinada has adapted and integrated certain new agents and players.

Since I view both perspectives, relational and representational, as part of a mosaic we build to gain a clearer picture of the context we are researching and trying to understand, I want to make use of them both. First, I will draw on a political economy perspective on human intentionality and the material results of social relations. This will help to set the stage, describe, and explain the very complex background of the Madonna of the Reef pilgrimage, the different practices linked to the island and her saint, and the transformations that Perast and maritime pilgrimages there have undergone over time. Then, I will describe the multivocality of the contemporary Perast community. Afterward, I will draw on the relational and dwelling perspectives to consider the co-option and construction of the Madonna of the Reef, with a focus on how nature has affected social relations. I want to be clear, however, that I consider both relational and representational perspectives as constantly intermingling. As both are necessary to understand the phenomenon, there cannot be—and should not be—any strict division in the research and its interpretation. Before I focus on maritime pilgrimages to the Madonna of the Reef, I will first present and position my approach as a contemporary relational perspective within pilgrimage studies and consider possible critiques.

2. The Relational Approach in Pilgrimage Studies and the Dwelling Perspective

Although a relational approach that considers nature and culture is not new (Latour 1996; Ingold 2000, 2011), within pilgrimage studies, only recently have scholars addressed this perspective and problematized the relationship between pilgrimage sites, routes and practices, and nonhuman agency (Pike 2019; Eade and Stadler 2022). In one of the first relational interpretations of pilgrimage, which focused on pilgrimages to

national parks in the USA, Lynn [Ross-Bryant \(2013\)](#) drew on Tim Ingold's approach in order to understand the "problematic relationship between subject and object, environment and culture" ([Ross-Bryant 2013](#), p. 13). In turn, Ross-Bryant drew on Adrian [Ivakhiv's \(2001, p. 4\)](#) descriptions of human and other-than-human relations as being "a tangled web within which the world is ever being created—shaped and constituted through the imaginative discursive, spatial and material practices of humans reflectively immersed within an active and animate, more-than-human world".

In 2019, in a special issue of the *Journal of Ritual Studies*, Sarah Pike initiated a discussion on factors that have been typically disregarded in studies of pilgrimage and festivals: on social networks created between human and nonhuman actors, and the important roles that other species and objects play in ritualizing and meaning-making ([Pike 2019](#), p. 74). The main theoretical inspiration for this special issue was Bruno Latour's actor–network theory ([Latour 1996](#)). Pike explains in the introduction, however, that:

to take the perspective of the new materialism is to not only focus on Latour's networks of actors, but on things themselves, the varying extent of their aliveness, and the meaning they accumulate, express, and lose as they move and are moved or circulate through the spaces of festivals and pilgrimage destinations. ([Pike 2019](#), p. 77)

In this special issue, the authors focused on rituals within different pilgrimage sites and practices. According to Jen Kreinath, actor–network theory "is relevant for the study of ritual as it provides a framework beyond focusing on the individual and the social, it accounts for actors as nodes in networks of relationship that are helpful to correlate pilgrimage and festival" ([Kreinath 2019a](#), p. 2). For Latour, an actor can be literally anything, provided it is granted to be the source of an action ([Latour 1996](#), p. 373). Latour proposed that researchers follow actors and trace the associations these actors make or the assemblages they enter into. The emphasis is on, to varying degrees, a processual and relational approach that helps overcome the dominant structural and representational approach to pilgrimages and festivals ([Latour 1996](#); [Kreinath 2019a](#), p. 2). Kreinath explained this as follows:

This approach makes it possible to conceive material objects—like rocks, stones, and trees—or different landmarks—like mountains, rivers, and hills—as other-than-human actors in pilgrimage and festival, becoming the source of action or being integral to the performance of ritual. ([Kreinath 2019a](#), p. 2)

Jens Kreinath takes seriously the significance of material objects in saint veneration rituals and how they assemble and organize social relationships through networks of human and nonhuman agents, and how these networks shape the devotee's perception and experience of the site ([Kreinath 2019b](#), p. 53). Moreover, and of relevance here, Kreinath argues that:

placing emphasis on the assemblages of tombs and trees can help identify how they organize social relations among members of different religious communities. By specifying the infrastructure of time and place, namely when and where ritual interactions take place, it becomes possible to identify how ritual actors are embedded in networks of social relations which extend to other-than-human agents. Furthermore, the analysis of these conditions which institute and enable group formation processes help to gain new insights into the devotees' social cosmology and local theology and how they are situated in saint veneration rituals at local pilgrimage sites. ([Kreinath 2019b](#), p. 53)

More recently, the relational approach has also been explored by John Eade and Nurit Stadler, who have sought to go "beyond explanations that focus solely on human actions, meanings, and interpretations, such as those informed by representational, interpretive, and hermeneutic approaches to human thought and practice" ([Eade and Stadler 2022](#), p. 137). They have looked into the "other-than-human" agency of animals, plants, and things, and how they affect humans rather than these entities just being the object of our affections or

control (Eade and Stadler 2022, p. 138). Eade and Stadler emphasized that there have been many post-structural analyses in a wide range of contexts that have shown how people interpret, explain, and perform pilgrimage. Yet, they stated that “the agency of other-than-human actors has seldom been acknowledged despite people’s evident engagement with these actors” (Eade and Stadler 2022, p. 142). Eade and Stadler provided an opportunity for pilgrimage scholars to place the agency as stones, water, magical objects, roads, and food, rather than seeing them as just part of the pilgrimage setting (Eade and Stadler 2022, p. 144).

To better understand this perspective, I believe the most relevant framework is Tim Ingold’s dwelling perspective. This refers to the “forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, [that] arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational context of their practical engagement with their surroundings” (Ingold 2000, p. 186). The dwelling perspective seeks to overcome the division between the “two worlds” of nature and society (Ingold 2011, p. 4). As Ingold emphasized, dwelling is not about the occupation of material structures, it rather signifies the “immersion of beings in the currents of the lifeworld without which such activities as designing, building and occupation could not take place at all” (Ingold 2011, p. 10). For Ingold, adopting a dwelling perspective entails looking at a building as a process of working with materials. It is more about bringing form into being rather than translating something from the virtual to the actual (Ingold 2011, p. 10).

For Tim Ingold, there are two kinds of making: co-optive and constructive. In co-optive making, an object that already exists is fitted to a conceptual image that links to an intended future use. In constructive making, the object is physically remodeled to conform to the pre-existing image. Ingold concluded that the history of things could be understood as alternating between steps of co-option and construction. He argues that we press into service what we find around us to suit current purposes, but at the same time, our objectives also change so that the modified objects are then co-opted in order to come in handy (Ingold 2000, p. 175).

I intend to observe and interpret the role of nonhuman agency involved in maritime pilgrimages to Madonna of the Reef in Perast, Montenegro within this interpretational framework. Following Eade & Stadler, Kreinath, and Ingold, I want to discuss the role and agency that nonhumans have within this pilgrimage; namely, how objects such as a rock, stone, branches, sea, and boat affect the creation and recreation of the maritime pilgrimage, and how they affect social relations within human communities. My main argument is that nonhuman agents play a crucial role in recreating not only the Fašinada custom, but also, at the same time, the Madonna of the Reef and the Perast community in general. I will present and discuss how natural features and objects that play different roles in maritime pilgrimages to the Madonna of the Reef shape and influence the human community.

There are also scholars who have examined the relational and dwelling perspective, that is, nature and culture relations, through a more critical lens, by focusing on the gaps between political economy, human intentionality, and material results (Howard 2018, p. 64). Penny McCall Howard argued that ecological anthropology has avoided integrating the analysis of human–environment relations with the political economy that structures ecological relations for most people in the world. Moreover, unifying the analysis of humans and nonhumans has led to a reduction in the scope of human intentionality and class division within human society (Howard 2018, p. 64). Howard, who works within a Marxist analysis of capitalism (Howard 2018, p. 68), has urged researchers to rethink the importance of human labor and intentionality, market pressures, and class relations. She has argued that the “anthropological analysis of human–environment relations has the potential to stretch from the individual and subjective experience of labor to its social and economic regulations, to include its intentionality and its alienation, its ecological relations, and its material results” (Howard 2018, p. 70). She thinks that if researchers avoid the question of intentionality and material results and focus only on immediate interactions, then we lose an understanding of how and why something was developed

and what significance it has (Howard 2018, p. 72). My intention is to build on both the relational and representational perspectives, but now I will move to present the Madonna of the Reef within a representational framework.

3. Madonna of the Reef and Representational Perspectives

The description of the Fašinada custom discussed here is based on a text from the late nineteenth century (Vulović 1887), a second text from the early twentieth century (Butorac 1928), and my ethnographic research, which was conducted in 2021 and 2022. My informants' memories of the custom (by informants who were active participants in the custom) stretch back to the 1960s. Since no descriptions are available that cover the period between the 1930s and 1960s, I cannot guess what the Fašinada looked like then, and what kinds of changes and transformations occurred during that period. Nevertheless, my informants mentioned certain transformations during the socialist period: for example, communist dignitaries participated in the Fašinada. When I began my research in 2021, the Fašinada had already been through a much more comprehensive structural transformation that was linked to tourism, boat engines, and increasingly diverse participants. Yet, the idea and the motive remained the same—that of taking stones to the Madonna island (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The two islands in 2021. Photo by the author.

There is a mixture of historical narratives that were created in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These are presented and represented through many local parish publications, and they also govern the sanctuary of the Madonna of the Reef. These narratives have found their way into local knowledge, and alongside my informants' experiences, they have merged into a narrative that almost every local person knows, shares, and uses to explain why the custom is practiced in the form it is. Yet in practice, this narrative has problems. From the first decade of the new millennium, Perast has changed, everyday life has changed for the people there, and the Fašinada custom has also changed. These changes did not make their way into the narratives, and it is only through participant observation that I realized the narrative I heard and the records I read do not correspond with the contemporary practice. How the Fašinada was supposed to look and how it did look before the new millennium is quite different to how it looks today.

According to the descriptions and explanations my informants gave me, during a fishing trip one night in 1452, two fishermen brothers from the Martešić family saw something on the reef in the sea in front of their town of Perast. When they approached the reef, they realized it was a painting of the Madonna with two candles surrounding her. They took the painting to their local church to venerate it. Yet, as in so many stories about sacred objects, the painting miraculously returned to the reef. After the locals brought it to the church three times, they finally realized that the Madonna obviously wanted to stay on

the reef. To please the painting, they expanded the reef into an island big enough to hold a church that would house the painting. Although it is not clear from the story where the painting was kept during the island's construction, for the next few centuries, the tale is that the people of Perast sank their old sailing ships, or ships they captured during battles, around the reef by filling them with stones. At some unknown point in time, they started the custom that is now called the Fašinada. Some authors connect the name with the Italian *faschinare* (to tie) because the boats involved in the custom are tied by rope.

To commemorate finding the painting on the reef, and to build the island that houses the Madonna's church, on July 22 each year, local Perast men, along with those from smaller settlements near Kotor Bay, travel in their small fishing boats to the most eastern side of Perast; this side faces the town of Kotor and is locally known as Pošovo. They collect stones from the sea near the coast and pile them up in their boats. Around the same time, they pick branches from the shore, and they use leaves to decorate the boats and help them hide the men on the boat (Figures 2 and 3). This part of the custom apparently originated from the period of conflict with the Ottoman Empire when they had to camouflage themselves because Ottoman boats were cruising and attacking both the town and the island. This also explains the fact that they had to follow the shore and travel across the entire Perast coastline to reach the most western side, locally known as Penčići, which faces Risan, the next settlement along. From that part of town, the Madonna of the Reef island is geographically the closest, so they were not exposed for too long. Before they started their journey by the Perast shore, they would group the boats, tie their boats together with a rope, and form a procession with a very defined structure. The local parish priest and dignitaries such as the mayor of Perast would travel on the first boat, the second boat was for singers dressed in traditional costumes, and the boats behind them were for all the other participants (Mihaliček 2012, p. 672). All the participants were supposed to be Catholic men from Perast and nearby settlements around Kotor Bay.



Figure 2. Preparing the boats in 2021. Photo by author.

The procession typically starts just before the sunset so that half an hour later, when the procession reaches the island, the sun is just about to set (Figures 4 and 5). The men in every boat start to row to contribute to moving the procession along. The idea is to go as close as possible to the shore to wave at their family members (women and children) waiting there. During their journey, they sing Perast Bugarštice (traditional songs). They start with a song called *Oj, vesela veselice*, which they sing until they reach the parish church of St. Nicola. After that, up to the island of the Madonna of the Reef, they sing a different song, titled *Dvoje mi drago zaspalo* (Mihaliček 2012, p. 672). Neither of these two songs have religious content; instead, they are ballads about love. When the procession approaches Perast church, the bells ring, and when the procession approaches the island, the island

church bells ring. Just before the procession reaches the island, the boats are untied, and they spread around the island, approaching it as closely as they can, so that they can toss stones as close as possible to the island and thus contribute to the island's continued existence and development, as they believe (Figure 6).



Figure 3. Stones and branches on the boat in 2022. Photo by author.



Figure 4. Preparing to start the procession in 2021. Photo by the author.

The old descriptions, and my informants, are not clear about what happens after that, but in contemporary times, the event has lost its ritualistic structure and become ludic, with participants on the boats throwing stones so the seawater splashes people standing on the island and participants in other boats. Most participants turn on their engines and start to drive back while some, who have had too much to drink during their journey, drive in a circle and become a danger to other boats and participants. Since the time of these older descriptions, Perast and everyday life there has changed; both the procession and the participants have changed. While they start from Pošovo on the east side of Perast, today they encounter swimmers from other parts of the region and the world who look confused: why are these guys in small old wooden boats taking stones from the sea and piling them up in boats covered in branches. Of course, someone familiar with the custom usually replies to such questions when they are raised.



Figure 5. In the procession in 2022. Photo by the author.



Figure 6. Stones around the Island of the Madonna of the Reef in 2021. Photo by author.

The Fašinada has become a tourist attraction too: it has even inspired the Fašinada Cup for sailing boats that race from the Tivat port to the Madonna of the Reef island, make a circle around the island, and return to the Tivat port. There are many tourist boats that bring in tourists from other parts of Kotor Bay, for instance, from Kotor and Tivat, so the number of boats that come to see the procession outnumbers the number of boats that participate in the procession. Moreover, these observers disturb the sea because they follow the procession in their motorized boats. This has made it harder for the men in the procession to row, and so in recent years, the procession has been joined by a larger boat with engines that takes the lead and pulls the procession with its engines on low to conceal the fact that the boats are not actually rowing. Most of these tourist boats are filled with young people in their bathing suits. They drink alcohol and play loud music, which creates a striking contrast with the procession participants who are all men (as other genders are not allowed on the boats) and who are trying to sing the procession songs.

Since there has been a population influx, over the years, the newcomers have made connections with the longtime locals, and they have started to assume an active role in the Fašinada. Certain changes to the Fašinada procession members stem from the fact that Perast is not presently as economically strong and important as it was in the nineteenth century. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, it was administratively downgraded

into a local community organization (*mjesna zajednica*), and so instead of the first boat carrying the town mayor, nowadays the president of the local community organization travels in that boat. More dramatic changes have occurred with the other boats. For example, I participated in the Fašinada in 2022, and the boat I traveled on exemplifies the general situation. Five of us sat in our boat, of which only one could have participated in the Fašinada twenty years ago, since he was the only member of the local community. The other participants were from Belgrade, Podgorica, Nikšić, and Zadar: three were Orthodox, and one was Roman Catholic. Every boat out of the two dozen or so that participated in 2022 had a similar combination of one or two locals and guests who had different geographical, identity, and religious backgrounds. The only unchanging detail present in 2022, the nineteenth-century description, and my informants' memories, was the fact that we transferred stones from the Perast shore to the island and threw them around the island.

Another important date is the May 15 celebration. This is a very important day in the local history, and for the Madonna of the Reef, it links to 1654 when Perast was attacked by an Ottoman army from both land and sea. These dramatic events are described in detail and are believed to be historical fact. Just as with the tales told of how the painting was discovered, the truth of these claims is not important for this article. What is important is that we have a written description of the May 15 ceremonies—one of the most important days in Perast's calendar—by the nineteenth century. According to nineteenth-century sources, the Ottomans came in from Risan, attacked Perast, burned some houses, and entered the town while the population hid in fortified houses and the town fortress. At the same time, the town was attacked from the sea and even the Madonna of the Reef island was bombarded. The defenders managed, however, to move the miraculous painting from the island to the fortress in time. According to my informants, this is what inspired the participants to camouflage the boats with branches during the Fašinada, and this is why the procession takes the shortest route to the island so as not to be exposed to attack for too long.

Here, we can see the blurring of lines between the Fašinada custom and the May 15 celebration. The painting is miraculous since it actively participated in the town's defense. According to the oral tradition, the Madonna (or as the story says, a lady in white) appeared on the walls of the town and blinded the attackers, which caused them to lose the battle. To commemorate this victory, won with the help of their maritime protector, Perast decided to dedicate May 15 to their Madonna of the Reef. Based on [Vulović's \(1887\)](#) nineteenth-century description, we can read how important that day was. In the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, the miraculous painting of the Madonna used to be transferred from the island to Perast on the last Sunday of April. People from Perast in great numbers and from nearby settlements around the bay would gather in their boats around the island, and they would be armed. The boats would be tied with ropes and line up in a semicircle ([Vulović 1887](#); [Butorac 1928](#), p. 26). Two priests would take the painting from the altar at the island church; the town major and the parish priest would follow them and carry the painting to "Madonna's ship", where the painting would be placed on the ship prow. The large Madonna's ship would quietly float within the inner side of the semicircle, and when the town major gave a sign with his handkerchief, the people in the boats surrounding Madonna's ship would fire their guns. On the shore, the other part of the community (mostly women, children, and other guests) would wait for the painting, kneeling. When the painting reached the ground, they would kiss the Madonna and follow her to church. On May 15, there would be another ceremony in Perast. To commemorate the battle won against the Ottomans, they would tie a live rooster to a wooden board and let it float a couple of hundred meters away from the shore while the locals would try to shoot it. The person who managed to shoot the rooster was celebrated. After this commemorative shooting and mass in the parish church, the most important part of the ceremony was a procession around Perast with the painting. It started from the church and moved toward Pošovo (the most eastern part of Perast toward Kotor), then it passed throughout the town up to Penčići (the most western part of Perast toward Risan), and after

that, it was returned to the church. In front of the church, four priests raised the painting on their shoulders, so that the procession participants could touch the painting, kiss the Madonna, or pass under her (Vulović 1887; Butorac 1928, p. 29).

When I participated in the Madonna day in 2021, I encountered hardly any of these events and practices. The rooster was not shot; this was presented to me as a consequence of the pandemic, but in fact, it was because the Association for the Protection of Animals demanded this. Once again, in 2022, there was no shooting. The religious part of the event was held, however. This day's religious element shows us how a diminishing community reflects on its religious practices. Unlike nineteenth-century celebrations, in 2021, there were only a few local men (up to ten) who boarded one bigger boat, usually used for tourist excursions to the island, and who traveled to the island to bring their Madonna to the town. They were nicely dressed and very well-mannered. They took the miraculous painting from the altar in the island church and positioned her on the boat's prow. Two men, together with the priest, held the painting, and the boat with the same group went back to the town. Some speedboats passed by and the men in the bigger boat had to warn them to slow down or their wake may splash the painting with seawater. This clearly contrasted with the nineteenth-century situation, and it shows how the context had changed.

The boat approached Perast's main waterfront, and the Perast parish church rang its bells to welcome its high protector to the town and the church. When we docked, the men transferred the painting from the boat and walked toward the church. They raised many eyebrows: the tourists and other visitors were confused and asked them what they were doing. Moreover, they had to pass through one of the restaurant terraces to reach the church. The restaurant close to the church has obtained a concession over one part of the main town square and can put his tables and chairs there. The painting presented in the church cannot be carried around the town in a procession as in the past. The main reason is the fact that all the restaurants and hotels in Perast now have their huge air conditioners in Stara ulica street in the old part of Perast. This used to be the road through which the painting was carried, but the air-conditioning units have made it impossible for the painting to pass along this street. Nowadays, if you walk down this street at the peak of the summer season, you will mostly find waiters, cooks, and cleaners having a break and smoking cigars. On Sundays, there are usually five or six people at mass, and on May 15, the church gathered a bigger crowd of over twenty. Very few still live in Perast, however, or they are from other parts of Kotor Bay. With the changes in everyday life and the town's transformation, the religious aspects to the May 15 Madonna day have remained more local compared with the Fašina.

4. The Fašina and the Relational Perspective

Now I want to discuss, in more detail, how nonhuman agents may influence pilgrimages and social relations among humans. My aim is to discuss the agency of natural elements within maritime pilgrimages to the Madonna of the Reef. I will consider: (1) the agency of the reef in the sea as it becomes an island and the focus of a pilgrimage, (2) the agency of the stones transferred by the pilgrims, (3) the agency of the sea that has to be crossed in order to become a pilgrim, and (4) the agency of the boat that pilgrims need to perform the pilgrimage. I will present and discuss how these natural features and objects that play different roles in the maritime pilgrimage to the Madonna of the Reef shape and influence human community.

The Perast locals and visitors do not endow the stone and reef with any symbolic or transcendental meanings; however, these people do build a relationship with their natural living environment: with the stones, reef, and sea. As Tim Ingold argued, "religion is not about representation of the world, but an existential commitment to the world in which we find ourselves and on which we depend" (Ingold 2016, p. 23). The reef on which the island of the Madonna of the Reef is now located was a natural reef for thousands of years. Then, in the fifteenth century, humans decided to use it and give it a multilayered meaning. According to old descriptions (Vulović 1887), it seems we are talking about three reefs

very close to one another. A bigger island named St. George is rather close to these reefs, and this island became anthropomorphized much earlier than the reef (Butorac 1999). No records state when these reefs were named by humans, but we can presume they were a part of people's everyday life, and that they encountered them on a daily basis either while fishing or going out from the bay or visiting the island of St. George. We can presume that for fishermen and sailors, this reef was one of the larger, more dangerous ones in Kotor Bay. By expanding and connecting the reefs, the fishermen transformed something that represents one of the most dangerous things for people at sea into a haven and a symbol of their human community. It is also not known whether these reefs, or at least one of them, had some kind of symbolic, religious, or vernacular meaning and importance for these people, but when they built the island, and the church on the island, the altar was constructed in such a way that you can reach behind the altar and touch the peak of the reef on which, according to tradition, the painting was found.

The church can be defined by its architect, the time period in which it was constructed, and its religious elements, but a reef is always a reef. It does not depend on human time or contexts, a religious context, or construction techniques. It was a reef before the island and the church were made, it was a reef when the island and church were being made, and today the reef that people touch is still a reef. Many tourists from all parts of the world and different religious backgrounds visit the island; a wide variety of tourist guides lead them there, but all the guides call the location an islet (*škrpjel*, *škoj*, *ostrvo*). It is only the detailed accounts that explain that the islet is the Madonna islet.

This observation clearly emphasizes nature's importance for this location. When humans created an island on these reefs, it was the painting that gave the island its name, as the island was created because of the painting. Nevertheless, it was the reef that gave the painting its name—Madonna of the Reef. The inputs from human and nature are equally important, both as signifiers and signified. Within the context of different religious and identity-related encounters, this reef's agency makes this location more accessible to anyone irrespective of their religious or national identity.

There is no record of when stones were first carried to the reef and where the first stones were carried from, but we do know that in the nineteenth century, the stones were brought from the settlements where the boats came in, and people from Perast picked these stones from their shores, and they still do this. The agency of the stones is quite clear here; every section of the stone shore in Kotor Bay has contributed to this island's construction. In Perast, only one part of the shore—the most eastern part toward Kotor—is the "field" from which the stones are "harvested". It is almost like Perast's shore on the Kotor side is being transferred and transformed into an island between the newly created Perast island and Kotor St. George's island. The small wooden boats that were the main form of transport at sea in the past also link to the stones. Nowadays, these boats frame the experience of participating in the Fašinada. Their agency emphasizes the relational aspect of the Fašinada. Despite the existence of boat engines, men have gathered from around the region, taken oars, and rowed boats full of stones to the island. As Penny McCall Howard argued, the relational context of people's engagements is particularly important at sea because "the limitations of the human body mean that people almost always experience the sea from a boat or from the shore" (Howard 2019, p. 40). Yet the same location at sea can be experienced quite differently depending on whether one is "dwelling" in an oil tanker, a canoe, or a sailboat (Howard 2019, p. 40), or is participating in a religious procession. It also depends on the roles that people play at sea: are they a skipper or a cook, for example (Howard 2019, p. 40).

In 2022, I was helping to row one of these boats, and I realized how hard it is to direct a boat fully loaded with stones and five men. You are challenged by the sea and waves that push you back, sometimes in the wrong direction, and you are in danger because the sea could crush you on the shore and there is no way you can row strong and fast enough to avoid this on time. If you also bear in mind that you must reach the island before dark, then it is easy to understand why the procession boats are tied together. Rowing together

makes things easier, but it also creates the old pilgrimage studies concept of *communitas* (Turner and Turner 1978) among the procession participants. Yet, this would not be possible without the agency of stones, boats, sea, and ropes. This means that people of any religion or identity can participate in the procession without being questioned at present, and without themselves questioning their religious and national identity.

The custom of the Fašinada has no current religious connotations, although it links directly to the island of the Madonna and aims to contribute to its construction. The point of the Fašinada is to take stones from one side of the bay and transfer them to the sea around the island. The stones do not possess religious and national identity, the boats can't be defined by their origin, and the sea is a barrier that everyone must pass. Only the men in the boats are designated by their identity, which extends beyond their bodily identity to more symbolic levels such as religious and national identity. This is one of the reasons why this custom was allowed even during communism and why distinguished members of the Communist Party even participated with no problems. This is also why it is hard to define what the local community is in Perast, as anyone can participate in this relational practice.

5. Concluding Thoughts

For Ingold, the dwelling perspective encourages us to look at building as a process of working with materials rather than acting on them, bringing form into being rather than translating from the virtual to the actual (Ingold 2011, p. 10). In this article, I have sought to focus on the creation of an island as a process of working with stones, sea, and boats. Three reefs that humans identified as natural, and that played a cultural role within a human community, already existed on the site of the island. Humans working with another material—stone—and aided by nonhuman agents such as the sea, boats, and reefs made an island that has both natural and religious and cultural agency. The miraculous painting as a religious symbol for and of the local community is also a nonhuman agent itself. The Madonna painting is defined by the island made for her, but the island is also defined by the painting.

This process and outcome well-illustrates the relations between nature and culture, pilgrimage, and natural features of the landscape, human, and nonhuman agency. These networks of human and nonhuman agents organize social relationships within the human community and shape devotees' perception and experience (Kreinath 2019b, p. 53). This is very important for the local community as the contemporary Perast community is mixed in terms of religion and national identity. I have sought to show how the Madonna of the Reef grounds and organizes social relations between members of different religious communities in Perast.

Another important aspect is the time context. Perast was a different community in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The human community had more animistic relations to this site and practices. This is evident in that the peak of the reef has remained visible, and it plays a role in the veneration of the Madonna. This observation directs us to vernacular devotions in mariners' and sailors' ways of life. Yet recently, the Madonna of the Reef has gained more tourist- and heritage-related meanings. The Madonna of the Reef is on the Montenegro heritage list. The custom of the Fašinada is organized on July 22, the high point of the tourist season in Montenegro. The outsiders who participate in the Fašinada plan their vacations to visit Perast at that time. Even for outside of the Fašinada context, the Madonna of the Reef plays an important role of transcending religious and national identity and connecting diverse members of the local community, for whom the Madonna of the Reef and practices linked to her are highly thought of. Additionally, indeed, the Fašinada is the main event in this celebration of human, nonhuman, and intrahuman relations.

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