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A Local Pilgrimage in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Our Lady of the Snows in Kukljica, Croatia

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Abstract: This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in Kukljica on the island of Ugljan (Croatia) beginning in August 2020 for the purpose of the author's doctoral thesis. The complexity of initiating research in a new locality was further burdened by the pandemic, which inevitably affected the outset of fieldwork in this case. This article is thus intended to demonstrate how ethnographic research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and present an image of "corona reality" in the context of a local-scale pilgrimage. Through the example of the author's research in Kukljica, this article shows how the research community adapted to the prevailing situation, which was characterized by restrictions and the introduction of new rules, and demonstrates the continuity of local religious practice in a global crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: pilgrimage; local religious practice; COVID-19 pandemic; Kukljica

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1. Introduction

The moment I disembarked from the boat at the port of Preko on the island of Ugljan left a strong impression in my memory; it was then that I realized I was truly entering the field. Watching the passengers disembark, hurry, get into cars, and move off in various directions, I was left alone, reminiscent of my readings of Bronislaw Malinowski, who described his impressions while entering the field on Trobriand Island in the mid-1910s. The scene he describes, the moments of the slow disappearance of the boat that brought him to the southern shores of New Guinea, and his solitude on a tropical beach somehow resonated with the feeling that was overwhelming me at that time. It was my first time in the field completely alone, without mentors, colleagues, or contacts. The excitement, but also the burden that I immediately felt, stemmed from an awareness that, from that moment on, and for the next few years to come, this field would become an important world for me. I can almost imagine the "line" I had to cross by entering that area, deeply marked by taking on the role of a researcher, which would coexist with other parts of my identity from that moment.

The ability to connect with others is a fundamental part of the research process, and the fact that I was starting my research during the COVID-19 pandemic raised questions about my potential lack of ability to connect. The measures in force at the time did not facilitate getting to know, socializing, and connecting with others, so my first days in the field were marked by fear of failure and a strong sense of pressure. I would say that beginner's impatience and ambivalent feelings often characterize the process of entering the field. However, the weight that further burdened these initial uncertainties was the reality of the pandemic. Reflecting on the problems associated with the pandemic triggered a range of new uncertainties and questions, for which I did not have answers at the time. However, I often reminded myself of the fact that ethnographic research cannot be programmed—it is full of unexpected, unpredictable situations and a reflexive process that impacts every phase of the research (Maxwell 2004; cited in Atkinson and Hammersley 2007, p. 21).

This paper is a result of reflections on some of the challenges that arose during my research on religious practice that was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] It

focuses on an ethnographic study of the local pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Snows, which is held every year on 5 August at Kukljica on the island of Ugljan in Croatia. The research began in the summer of 2020, roughly five months after the national proclamation of a COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia. At the time of the writing of this paper, the research is still ongoing as part of a project funded by the Croatian Science Foundation.[2] Data from ethnographic fieldwork were collected through participant observation, informal conversations and later through interviews with approximately ten local people at that time, including both women and men, most of whom were middle-aged or elderly.

In terms of its number of participants and structure, this local annual event is far smaller than globally popular pilgrimages. As a practice, it thus had a specific dynamic and showed considerable resilience to global tendencies regarding the pandemic. The data collected indicate that there were some changes to the event as a result of COVID-19 regulations, but it did continue, unlike some famous pilgrimages sites such as Lourdes, which switched to online religious gatherings. Using the example of the worship of Our Lady of the Snows in Kukljica, I argue that local religious practices, which play an important role in local everyday life, are more resilient to such global crises as pandemics, while world-famous pilgrimage centers are more vulnerable to global trends.

2. The Pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Snows in Kukljica

Kukljica is a small municipality on the island of Ugljan in the Zadar archipelago, and the island is well-connected to the city of Zadar by a twenty-minute ferry ride. According to official national statistics from 2021, Kukljica had 645 permanent residents.[3] As a community, Kukljica has been heavily affected by depopulation, which is apparent during the winter, when tourists and the diaspora (most of whom live in various parts of Croatia and the US) have gone. The diaspora is important in the context of the pilgrimage of Our Lady of the Snows because these people mostly return to Kukljica around the time of the pilgrimage. Their visits to Kukljica also include spending time with family, relatives and friends and attending celebrations. The maintenance of transnational ties through pilgrimages can be defined through the concept of '*nostalgic pilgrimage*', which includes travelers who periodically return to places they once left, and whose arrival can be seen as a pilgrimage to their roots (Katić 2014, p. 145).

The pilgrimage is held on August 5 and the oral tradition on which the event is based dates it to 1514 C.E. When asked about the history of this event, all of the locals tell the same story about the Virgin Mary who saved fishermen caught in a storm at sea. The presence of snow during this event, which occurred in the month of August, is considered a miracle. According to the legend, the fishermen managed to seek shelter in Ždrelašćica Bay and thus saved themselves. In the same bay, there is a votive church dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows, built as a sign of gratitude for this miraculous intervention. A lot of the locals whom I spoke to, who are not necessarily practical believers, see this oral tradition as a historical event that underpins their sense of uniqueness compared with other island communities. Ždrelašćica Bay is the furthermost part of Kukljica and it also marks the end of the island of Ugljan. It is about 2.3 km distant from the center of Kukljica, where the parish church of St. Paul is located, which is a thirty-minute walk or a ten-minute boat ride (see Figure 1).

The votive church in Žrelašćica Bay houses the statue of Our Lady of the Snows—the central sacred object in this religious practice. This statue is made in human proportions and is not easy to carry, so the statue bearers use wooden boards to assist in its transportation. In August, the statue is transported by boat from the votive church in Ždrelašćica Bay to Kukljica's parish church of St. Paul, where it remains until September, when the statue is again transported by boat back to the votive church, marking the end of the annual pilgrimage. The preparation and realization of this pilgrimage involve various practices carried out by the local residents, who are the custodians of this tradition. Special attention is paid to the decoration of the statue of Our Lady of the Snows at dawn on the day of the pilgrimage. Only a small group of women from the local community participate in

this practice, dressing the statue in ceremonial attire and adorning it with votive gold (see Figure 2).



Figure 1. The location of the votive church of Our Lady of the Snows (author: Ante Blaće).



Figure 2. The statue of Our Lady of the Snows adorned with votive gold (taken by the author on 5 August 2020).

The first morning Mass at the votive church in Ždrelašćica Bay is mostly attended by the pilgrims coming from nearby parishes, while the second, main Mass is attended mostly by the local residents. Pilgrims from other parishes set off on foot from their villages during the night or at dawn to participate in the early Mass and they usually do not board on boats afterwards.

The procession begins at the parish church of St. Paul, where the locals gather behind the parish priest and then proceed on foot to the waterfront. The procession passes along the coast through the center of the settlement to the nearby pier, where boatmen await the pilgrims who then board boats. These boats then depart for the aforementioned Ždrelašćica Bay. The parish priest, the sacristans, the female choir, and a group of girls in white[4] are transported on the main boat. This marks the beginning of the boat procession, in which

the locals participate with boats of various types and sizes. Prayers are recited throughout the journey, and songs dedicated to the Virgin Mary are sung on the main boat. When the boats arrive at Ždrelašćica Bay, the statue is brought out from the votive church and Mass begins. After Mass, the faithful approach the statue, touch its garment, leave monetary offerings, and take photographs. Subsequently, the girls in white carry the statue to the main boat, which is pulled by another one back to Kukljica. A boat procession forms again behind the main boat, and the excitement in the atmosphere becomes apparent. This type of boat ride involves a unique style of navigation, with boats circling the main boat, creating a thrilling atmosphere (see Figure 3). After the boat ride, the boats return to the pier, where the procession is formed again, and the girls in white carry the statue back to the Church of St. Paul.



Figure 3. Boat procession with the statue of Our Lady of Snows (taken by the author on 5 August 2020).

Under normal circumstances, after the procession, the festive part of the celebration would begin, which includes various games, donkey races, and concerts. During 2020 and 2021, however, due to restrictions on gatherings, the festivities were cancelled, at least officially, by the organizers (municipal government and the tourist board). It is interesting to note that, in 2020, a smaller concert was held, but it was organized by locals and bar owners who later explained that they could not abide by absolutely no form of entertainment being offered to residents and tourists. The majority of those present were young people, but middle-aged and elderly people were not excluded, so the bars were quite crowded that night. Cancelling the entertainment part would have involved a significant financial loss for the residents considering that 5 August is the busiest day in Kukljica. From 5 August until the second part of the pilgrimage, which takes place in September, the statue is kept in the parish church of St. Paul. During this period, the faithful have the opportunity to visit their patroness at a closer distance and make vows. The pilgrimage in September has a similar structure to the one in August, but with a smaller number of people, as it takes place outside the tourist season.

This celebration has many features of a maritime pilgrimage, defined by Katić and McDonald (2020) as a set of practices that involves translocating a sacred object and/or people by boat as part of a ritual structure (p. 3). These are religious practices that primarily serve to protect fisherman and sailors; in the contemporary context, marked by depopu-

lation and the transition from traditional activities to the service sector, they also take on economic significance.

3. Research Methodology

Fieldwork in Kukljica began in August 2020. Before my first visit to the field site, I had made no initial contacts, but after a few days of staying there, I met a person who helped me find some initial information, which was a good starting point. This person was well connected with a significant part of the community, which was of great help in terms of networking. She introduced me to some locals, some of whom later became interlocutors. I told every person I spoke to about the project and my position as a researcher, and their potential role as an interlocutor, as well. Kukljica is a small community, so this information spread quite quickly.

Most of the data presented in this paper were collected through the method of participant observation, which can be defined as "a long term intimate engagement with a group of people that were once strangers to us in order to know and experience the world through their perspectives and actions in as holistic a way as possible" (Shah 2017, p. 51). Participant observation has four main features: (1) long duration or long-term engagement; (2) it can reveal the social relations of a group of people; (3) holism; and (4) it involves a dialectical relationship between intimacy and estrangement (Shah 2017, p. 51). Interspersed through the text of this paper are some autoethnographic elements in the form of selective and retroactive descriptions of past experiences, which are used to highlight some "epiphanies" or subjective and transformative moments that had a significant impact on the researcher (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 275). Taking notes and describing my personal impressions, insecurities, and the processes I underwent as a researcher proved crucial, especially when first entering the field. These data later served as a base for my understanding of how the research was developing and building further research strategies and plans.

It is important to note that many tools for researching religious practices, especially qualitative methodologies, were seriously put at risk in the context of social distancing, including key ethnographic research methods such as observation and interviews, given the reduction in face-to-face interactions and social gatherings (Webb et al. 2000). Considering the actual situation, much patience was required to build networks in the community, a process that is still ongoing.

In the early stages of fieldwork, I attempted to identify where and how people moved through public spaces and what they were doing. I spent most of my time observing, taking notes, and simply being in places where people gather. I attempted to identify key gathering places, even transitory ones, and spend some time there to familiarize myself with the new situation and let people become accustomed to my presence. In Kukljica, I went to food and beverage establishments, sat on benches in front of the municipal government office and along the coast, as well as areas in front of shops, and the church of St. Paul during Mass. By spending time in the community, I sought to develop a sense of familiarity between myself and local people (see Feldman et al. 2003, p. 39).

The general atmosphere in Kukljica was different from what I expected. Despite the visible presence of tourists and the intense dynamics of people moving through public spaces, there was a mild sense of chaos, which was similar to almost any tourist destination in Dalmatia during the summer months. At first glance, the situation I encountered gave me the impression that things were unfolding as they would under "normal" circumstances, which provided some relief at times. However, given the situation in Kukljica, and the aforementioned chaos, initiating communication was not easy. Many locals were involved in their seasonal jobs and some were busy with intense preparations for the pilgrimage. Approaching the community is not a one-time process. Each individual's access is viewed as a repeated attempt to gain entry. In this regard, the fundamental question is what approach works in the specific context we are seeking to access (Feldman et al. 2003, pp. 57, 78), and this is an ongoing issue as the research develops.

After some time, I sought to determine which groups of people were involved in organizing and participating in the pilgrimage. I attempted to enter specific parts of the field by observing who occupied certain social spaces. These spaces involved institutions such as the tourist board, the municipal government, and the church, but in the case of Kukljica, they also included groups that were not associated with a specific institution but still played an active role in the community. In the context of the pilgrimage, these could be the girls in white, the boatmen, or the women's choir. I approached them as active agents of the community and active creators of social spaces who influenced the functioning of the community and, ultimately, the practice of the pilgrimage. Each group required a unique approach, as each had its own way of functioning. From a methodological standpoint, approaching each group required different considerations, planning, and various attempts to connect with its members, often with the help of individuals who were not part of the group. In this sense, it was necessary to have the support of a local person who could help in building a network of interlocutors (Feldman et al. 2003, p. 55). The initial contact person I mentioned earlier served as a vital link to various actors in the locality and helped me connect with particular groups of people in Kukljica.

4. The Pilgrimage in Kukljica during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A few days before the pilgrimage in August 2020, the municipality of Kukljica issued instructions to the locals regarding the manner in which the event should be conducted. These instructions were available on the notice board in front of the municipal government building and the notice declared that the procession must take place in conformity with official COVID-19 measures and restrictions. The locals were advised to participate in the procession using their own boats and cars or travelling on foot, rather than taking the usual large tourist and fishing boats that were able to transport a large number of pilgrims. While the owners of larger tourist and fishing boats were not prohibited from participating in the procession, they were requested to limit the number of passengers on board, to record the passengers' names, and to enforce mandatory masking. A distance of 1.5 m was recommended during Mass and the short walk in the procession upon return to the church.

Under "normal" circumstances, boarding the boats is a usually a spontaneous process, and boatmen are free to transport as many passengers as they wish. Moreover, the locals see transporting pilgrims as a matter of honor. The new rules caused confusion and unease among the residents, some of whom were undecided until the last moment whether they would participate under such altered circumstances. As this was my first contact with the field, I expected to join a boat ride spontaneously like the locals, but the situation I encountered was different, so I had to find a solution. I went to the tourist board and asked for information about the boatmen with the intention of learning more about the current situation and attempting to secure a spot on one of the boats. When I talked to one of the boatmen by mobile phone, I was told they might not even participate and this presented a serious methodological challenge for me. I could tell from the tone of his voice that he was quite nervous and other boatmen were also nervous when they later started to board people on their boats, and this made for considerable tension in the atmosphere. So as not to be left out of the event, my mentor and colleague organized transport and we joined the procession to observe what was happening around us. A lot of participants followed the official rules by wearing masks, but I could see that there was no listing or strict counting of passengers. It was difficult to make an assessment of the number of people who participated in the pilgrimage and later there were no official data that would indicate that number. Distancing between passengers was impossible in the boats, given the specific nature of sea travel. Later on, some bars in Kukljica, despite the cancellation of the entertainment program that was usually organized by the municipality and the tourist board, still held a part of the festive celebration.

The following year, the agenda of the 27 July 2021 session of the Municipal Council of Kukljica mentioned the organization of the celebration of Our Lady of the Snows, and so the parish priest decided to attend the meeting. It stated that the procession was to take

place but that the public health measures had to be respected. The parish priest stated that all measures would be taken into account during the procession, but it is unclear from the transcript if there was a plan for how this would be carried out or what specific measures were considered as related to the performance itself.[5] As in 2020, during the procession, the official rules appeared to have been respected, and despite the cancellation of the official entertainment part, local bars took it upon themselves to provide their services through the night. Clearly, members of the local community wanted to take their own decisions regarding the organization of this local practice, which took precedence over attempts to restrict and structure it. Hence, the reaction to the pandemic demonstrated local people's desire to preserve the essence of the pilgrimage and what it meant to them (Roszak and Huzarek 2022, p. 1). However, an important methodological challenge during this further stage in the research was how to establish contact with people from the church community, who were responsible for organizing the religious part of the event. This involved contacting a small number of locals, who belonged to a tight-knit circle with its own internal dynamics and hierarchy and who had access to certain objects, actions, and knowledge that were unavailable to other residents. At the outset of my research, several locals subtly avoided establishing contact with me. I could sense this through their brief responses, indefinite answers to my questions and mentions of a lack of time as a reason for not being able to meet with me. At that point, it was not possible to determine whether this was due to caution related to the COVID-19 situation or simply because I was unknown to them. However, through further planning and careful attempts, access was eventually granted to this specific group of people, with the additional assistance of the parish priest. The problem of access was not completely solved after entry, however, as it did not guarantee access to all the information I was looking for. Not all sections of a local community will be equally open to the researcher, nor will all participants be willing to provide data, and even the most open ones will not be able to provide all the information they possess (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007, pp. 61, 62). However, on other occasions during my fieldwork, spontaneous and straightforward connections were established with those whom I happened to meet. One such encounter took place in September 2020 when I was returning to the center of Kukljica by boat with some residents after visiting the votive church. I met a woman born in Kukljica who had been living in the US for decades, and she initiated the conversation. In a very nostalgic tone, frequently overcome by her emotions, she explained how much she missed Kukljica and how important it was for her to be present during the pilgrimage, declaring that "this cannot be missed", for example. During the boat ride, she was silently crying so there was more silence than conversation between us. The emotional tension was high, so I let the situation unfold without intervening or asking further questions, which left a strong impression on me.

Through these kinds of informal conversations and interviews, I learned a great deal about people's connection with Our Lady of the Snows and the procession. All the elderly people (over 65 years of age) whom I talked to and who had lived in Kukljica their entire life, said that they did not remember the procession ever being cancelled in their lifetime. Later in conversations with a lot of residents, both male and female, it became apparent that they experienced a sense of continuity and connection with the past through this practice—regardless of how the context changed due to social, political, and economic transformations. They see the pilgrimage as something that stands out and must be protected from structural changes. I remember a strongly emotional statement—"She belongs to us! - that I heard from a man while talking about the meanings that Our Lady of Snows represents to the locals. I realized that there is a sense of ownership through this worship. Some people from other communities on the island and the nearby island of Pašman participated in this celebration, and I formed the impression that the locals were extremely proud to be hosts once a year at this shrine dedicated to Our Lady. Through this worship, they created their sense of distinctiveness and uniqueness compared to the other island communities surrounding them based on the fact that it is the only pilgrimage on the island of Ugljan dedicated to Our Lady and visited by believers coming from other parishes.

The religious celebration symbolized their past, bringing back memories and a sense of nostalgia for past times, which they idealistically contrasted with their current situation. It became clear that at an individual, subjective level, people feel a connection between Our Lady of the Snows and highly personal life situations, crucial moments, transitions and vows, which adds another dimension to what the pilgrimage means for people in Kukljica.

My participation in the celebration during 2021 and 2022 did not reveal anything different from what I observed in 2020, which indicated that the celebration had not fundamentally changed despite external pressures. In other words, all the structural elements of the pilgrimage were maintained, albeit with the addition of official pandemic measures. The fact that the pilgrimage still took place and remained almost unchanged in terms of performance also speaks to the significance and stability of the religious aspect of this celebration. In the case of Kukljica, this religious aspect was very strong and served to fulfill the local's community need for identification, while the entertainment aspect was less fixed and more susceptible to change. However, the cancellation of the festival was a decision taken by institutions, while the residents, in response to the ban, took it upon themselves to fulfill their need for entertainment, which has become a customary practice.

5. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably affected every aspect of human existence and introduced newly contextualized systems of limiting human behavior on a global level. Without a doubt, it can be said that it was a crisis that shook and changed every lived reality. Anxiety, uncertainty, and fear became embedded in the "new normal" that individuals were forced to live in through the widespread acceptance of recommendations that came from the World Health Organization (WHO). These recommendations influenced the formation of various perceptions and interpretations of COVID-19 among the general public, transmitted through the media. Social distancing became a new rule of behavior, ranging from an awareness of maintaining sufficient physical distance from others to complete isolation in the case of infection or suspected infection with the virus. Masking became a social norm, a material indicator of social responsibility through which individuals express their acceptance of the new social rules.

Mobility, as one of the most significant characteristics of the modern era, faced a drastic change in terms of limitations, restrictions, and cancellations. Migration and any kind of movement was framed within a discourse about security and health policies in the form of bans or restrictions, along with travel, which is closely tied to religious life, religious tourism, and pilgrimage (Coleman and Eade 2004; Badone and Rosman 2004; Badone 2008; Vukonic 2002; Collins Kreiner 2016; Katić et al. 2014; Di Giovine and Jaeyeon 2019). Organizers of pilgrimages to shrines suddenly found themselves facing challenges in these new conditions and had to find some adequate alternatives, and thus large Catholic holy sites in Europe encouraged pilgrims to maintain and deepen their connection with shrines through online participation in religious ceremonies and virtual pilgrimages (Mroz 2021, p. 1). Franciszek Mroz (2021), who analyzed several pilgrimage centers in Europe during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, offered a model of adaptation for shrines and pilgrimage sites and listed several factors that every holy place had to meet. For example, the first factor was the guarantee of safety that organizers and hosts were required to provide in creating a secure space with enough distance for all participants, as well as ensuring stricter standards of hygiene. In this regard, previous traditional behaviors and habits had to change; touching and kissing relics and bathing in holy water were thus prohibited. Also, maintaining social distance and limiting the number of people simultaneously present in the sacred place was mandatory (Mroz 2021, pp. 17, 18). The first international virtual pilgrimage in the history of shrines was organized in Lourdes on 16 July 2020. In the case of Lourdes, one could see the effort invested in seeking new solutions and taking all steps to enable the return of tourists and believers as soon as the circumstances allowed. In collaboration with leading French health authorities, official protocols were developed to receive pilgrims and ensure their protection (Mroz 2021, p. 12).

The media and social networks transmitted pandemic news daily, inundating the media space. The pandemic affected all of personal and social life, introducing new regulations to social relations and human interaction in every area of the public sphere. This also applied to religious life, as in the early stages of the pandemic, religious gatherings, like all large gatherings, were prohibited (Tsironis 2022, p. 1). Church authorities were obligated to adjust to this new situation in the context of all kinds of gatherings; while this was met with a degree of acceptance, it also raised questions about these effects on religious freedom in the future (Zammit 2020, p. 86).

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the process of digital mediation globally by driving people to rely on social media and various networking platforms, which is why some Church authorities feared the erosion of personal worship and reduced possibilities of returning to the pre-pandemic "normal" (Lorea et al. 2022, pp. 183–90). Some authors have raised questions about the inability of religious communities to gather in a new post-sacred society (Olsen and Timothy 2020, p. 180). However, long before the COVID-19 pandemic, with the expansion of the internet in mid-1990's, online religion emerged as part of lived religion, just like offline religion (Helland 2005, according to Lorea et al. 2022, p. 189). Translating this into the context of pilgrimage, Susan M. Dunn-Hensley showed how pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham during the beginning of the actual pandemic switched to a virtual pilgrimage, demonstrating the remarkable ability of pilgrimages to adapt to changing circumstances (Dunn-Hensley 2020, p. 121). So, online religious practices gained a stronger presence, especially during the hard lockdown when the activities of some churches could be observed through their official websites and Facebook profiles.

The Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia[6] was the key institution in the Croatian pandemic context, serving as a mediator between crucial health institutions and the public. Believers were encouraged to follow religious ceremonies whenever possible by radio, TV, or in any other way that would allow them to attend without physically coming to religious buildings.[7] However, the need to continue and maintain pre-pandemic habits in the context of religious behavior was clearly evident in Croatia during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were some media-covered situations in Croatia during which journalists noted members of the Catholic Church failing to adhere to pandemic-related rules. For example, one of the better-known situations during the hard lockdown when churches had to close was a verbal and physical attack by two man on a journalist who was filming Easter Mass in the Sirobuja neighborhood near Split.[8]

In the case of the pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Snows in Kukljica, the number of people attending is unquestionably lower than those of pilgrimages to other national and international shrines. It is a place that is mostly visited in August during the main part of the pilgrimage and it is rarely active during other periods of the year. The celebration takes place only once a year and the majority of participants are from the local community. They do not need to travel in order to participate in the pilgrimage practice, in contrast to larger pilgrimage sites that require travel from long distances and are active throughout the year. The pilgrims continue to follow practices performed before the pandemic, just like those involved in the pilgrimages associated with St. Paul in Greece (see Tsironis 2022), thereby contradicting the assumptions of some previous authors who predicted an increase in isolationism and a potential reduction in pilgrimages to individual spiritual experiences (Roszak and Huzarek 2022, p. 5). In both this Croatian case study and the Greek one provided by Tsironis, we can see how resilient small-scale pilgrimages can be despite very challenging times. The Croatian case study supports the claim by Tsironis that places that are not driven by trends and temporary circumstances will show resilience in such situations (Tsironis 2022, pp. 2, 5). They contrast with the large pilgrimage centers such as Santiago de Compostela and Lourdes, which attract a large number of people throughout the year and which were considered high-risk locations for the spread of infection according to the pandemic health measures, leading some to temporarily close their doors.

This paper thus contributes to the understanding of local pilgrimage sites. Unlike the large international shrines, which were exposed to risks on a global scale, local pilgrimage in Kukljica showed considerable resilience to global tendencies. There was no talk about cancelling the religious part of the event or switching to online gathering. Also, the pre-pandemic behaviors did not have to be drastically changed and some locals showed independence in momentary decision making regardless of the official instructions. This pilgrimage is a crucial annual event that ties together the members of the local community and supports their feeling of uniqueness from other island communities surrounding them. Pilgrims express their personal connections with the patron saint through vows and prayers, as well as through their family and collective histories. For people coming from diaspora, the act of returning to Kukljica may take on a sacred dimension (see Basu 2004), where individuals seek to find themselves in others and others in themselves, turning places of memory into sources of identity. Such a journey is seen as a transition from the ordinary, everyday world associated with the diasporic home to the special sphere of ancestors in the place of origin. Also, the celebration of Our Lady of the Snows symbolizes the local community's continuity, which was threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, but was able to resist all these threats because of the commitment shown by this community.

6. Conclusions

This study has shown that the pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Snows involves multiple levels of meaning that extend beyond the religious aspect in a contemporary context. Although exploring pilgrimage during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging, the research revealed important aspects of this pilgrimage that are significant in the everyday life of the local community, as well as those who return temporarily to Kukljica. From the perspective of a significant part of the local community, the celebration is viewed as something highly ceremonial and special. It stands out from everyday life but is also woven into it, as the main actors are local people who continue the tradition and actively prepare everything necessary for the event throughout the year. The pandemic did not destroy the determination of local people and some members of the diaspora to maintain the pilgrimage. Therefore, it can be concluded that the pandemic in the case of Kukljica did not significantly affect the continuation of the religious practice, and that the participants' persistence, desire and need to maintain the pilgrimage in its customary form outweighed the health risks associated with the pandemic.

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Notes

1 The COVID-19 pandemic is a respiratory infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. The first cases of infection were confirmed in China in December 2019, from where the virus rapidly spread worldwide. The World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern at the end of January 2020, followed by the declaration of a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

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3 Source: https://dzs.gov.hr/ (Croatian Bureau of Statistics) (accessed on 1 July 2023).

4 Young local girls dressed in identical, purely white dresses, whose role is to guard and transport the statue.

5 Source: https://www.opcina-kukljica.hr/slu%C5%BEbena-dokumentacija/sjednica-op%C4%87inskog-vije%C4%87a/item/284-4-sjednica-op%C4%87inskog-vije%C4%87a-op%C4%87ine-kukljica-zakazana-za-dan-02-09-2021-u-18-00-sati (official website of the municipality of Kukljica) (accessed on 9 June 2023).

[6] Source: https://www.koronavirus.hr/en; https://civilna-zastita.gov.hr/en (accessed on 6 November 2022).

[7] Source: https://www.koronavirus.hr/ogranicavanje-okupljanja-i-druge-nuzne-epidemioloske-mjere-i-preporuke/961 (accessed on 6 November 2022).

[8] Source: https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/koronavirus/novinarka-dalmatinskog-portala-napadnuta-dok-je-snimala-vjernike-u-ckrvi{-}{-}-601360.html (accessed on 6 November 2022).

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