



Customary Practices and Symbolisms at Worship Events in a Virtual Religious Community

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Abstract

The present research in the context of Digital Folklore focuses on cultural practices and symbolisms existing at worship events in a digital environment. The method of online ethnography reveals customary practices of dominant beliefs, ideologies, behaviours, social actions, internalized patterns of behaviour, etc. that are formed during worship events in the religious digital community of the Anglican Church.

Keywords: *Digital Ethnography; Digital Communities; Internet Culture; Digital Folklore; Folk Rituals*

1. Introduction

The Internet is no longer considered a material construct, not just a technological medium, but also a means of communication as a coexistence field and mainly as a space for social interaction and a continuum of interaction between individuals and avatars, thus creating a field of folk culture (Gasouka & Foulidi, 2012; Foulidi, 2015). McNeill (2009) accepts the definition of Georges & Jones (1995, in McNeill, 2009) who hold that the term folk culture denotes expressive forms, processes, and behaviours:

- that we usually learn, teach, and present during the face-to-face interactions, and
- which we consider to be traditional: (a) because they are based on pre-existing data or models; (b) because they serve as evidence of continuity and coherence through time and space in human knowledge, thought, faith and emotion, and for this definition she points out that the communication technologies, especially the Internet, provide the framework for such an emergence and dissemination.

“Teamwork, massiveness, and sometimes organized collectivism, are the first and foremost feature of folk phenomena in other words of folk culture” (Meraklis, 2016, 29). Collectiveness is the most important of these features and appears very prominent in the internet, according to Katsadoros (2013), as it is related to the countless and varied folk groups formed online. These groups are not homogeneous entities that are bound and linked to geography, nor are they static (Staple, 2010), but their members come “from all classes and strata even of individual groups that constitute peoples” (Meraklis, 2016, 29). In this regard, folk in the sense of Folklore does not mean something belonging to or coming from the lower social class, since, as mentioned above, folk culture can be the culture of all social groups and classes. The shift in meaning to the group concept had already been highlighted by Dundes, who argued that there might be a reduction in the number of rural groups, but the specialization brought about by industrialization has created new communities within which a new folk culture is formed (in Newsom, 2013). Common goals (Ellis, 2001a) and group values shape the social identity of community members (Kazouli & Katsadoros, 2019). The traditional aspect of folk material is related to the customary practices of the web, digital or e-folk groups. After all, Folklore deals with “the traditional, by reason, deeds or actions, manifestations of the mental and social life of the people”, as N.G. Politis emphasizes. Expressions, behaviours, ideas and material objects constitute folk culture because they are the result of a process (Sim & Martine, 2011). The traditional is “everyday reality, it is the lifestyles, behaviours, practices, habits, beliefs” (Gasouka, 2006, 11), and they all have a continuum in time.

It is no longer possible to think of modern day life without internet access (Gauntlett, 2000; McNeill, 2009). Helmond (2009) points out that we create with others on the internet and share thoughts, ideas and, within our social networks, creating a new type of identity. In this context, Digital Folklore (Foulidi, 2015; Gasouka & Foulidi, 2012) has so far explored the mass mailing of emails (Kibby, 2005), myths transmitted online (Fialkova & Yelenevskaya, 2001; Fernback, 2003; Brunvand, 2004; Blank, 2007; Foulidi, 2015; Katsadoros, 2017), folk digital art, focusing on memes and Userpics (Foote, 2007; March, 2013; Foulidi, 2015), online games (Gillis, 2011; Kinsella, 2011), digital newslore (Frank, 2011), personal pages, digitally modified images (Frank, 2004), online jokes (Ellis, 2001b; 2002; Kuipers, 2005; Blank, 2012), folk religiosity (Howard, 2009), “the second life or better the online life” (Michail, 2009, 297), internet-related superstitions (Bacon, 2011), habitual behaviours in a virtual/potential learning community (Foulidi, 2015).

Consequently, digital folklore has begun to study issues of folk religiosity as it manifests itself in digital environments. “The issue of religion and religious practice, dominant in folk culture around the world, has always interested and still interests me as one of the foremost (if not the foremost) historical and cultural phenomena” (Meraklis, 2017, 14). For this reason, Megas earlier in his work “Greek Folklore Issues” studies folk religiosity and integrates the issues associated with it both to the customs of the life cycle and the customs of the cycle of time (Varvounis & Kouzas, 2018). Religion is a social as well as a cultural phenomenon and now all religions, regardless of their number of followers or beliefs, find themselves on the internet as well. Helland (2000) aptly clarifies the difference between the terms “religion online” and “online religion”. The former refers to sites that display information in a controlled environment related to religion, while the second refers to sites that constitute an “interactive religious environment” (Helland, 2000), since they secure online religious interaction. In defining the religious community, Campbell (2007) presents a scheme of four characteristics of religious authority on the internet: a) religious hierarchy (roles, religious beliefs, leaders); b) religious structures (community structures, patterns of practice, formal characteristics); c) religious ideology (common beliefs, religious ideas, common identity); d) religious texts (recognized teaching or formal religious books, such as the Bible).

2. Research Methodology

In this research, the online approach was applied (Gasouka & Foulidi, 2017). Ethnography approaches and studies the faith practices of folk groups, ordinary people and churches (Moschella, 2012) and interprets issues of community's faith. One of the researchers herein (henceforth "the observer"), after assuming the role of a full-status participant, applied participant's observation and free discussions for seeking in-depth knowledge of the multiple dimensions of life in the digital environment as an active member of the religious digital community. After taking permission for conducting this research, her identity as a researcher (/observer) was constantly evident. Initially, she submitted a request for approval to the group of Anglican Cathedral of Second Life. After communication via e-mail, permission was granted by the current Chair of the team, who runs Anglicans of Second Life, on July 20th, 2018, while discretion, confidentiality and respect for the personal life of participants had been agreed. The observer and the respondents were contacted from Sept. 1st, 2017 to Jan. 1st, 2019, with modern means of communication, either via chat (voice or text), notecards, or instant messaging (IM) supported in the virtual world of Second Life (SL) religious community. Observation and free discussion were also implemented, since online ethnography is a combinatory and multimodal method (Foulidi, 2015). The primary data were processed after coding, including classification, and categorized into classes that emerged according to the theoretical framework. The process of coding and searching for cases was completed when the theoretical saturation occurred, that is, when the comparison of new data produced in the research field with their theoretical categories, properties and the network of relationships between them did not offer any new theoretical perspectives nor they created the need to transform the empirically based theory already produced (Small, 2009).

2.1 Definition of Research Question – Objective

Online ethnography is a holistic approach to life in the digital community. The main question of this research is what customary practices and symbolisms exist in the context of worship events that take place in a particular digital religious environment. The goal is to record and interpret Digital Customary, in order to compare it with customary practices and symbolism that have been recorded in traditional communities.

2.2. Research Field

The main field of research was the religious community of Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral, Epiphany (99, 147, 49) - General, existing in the virtual world of Second Life (it is a virtual world that offers to its users the ability to "live" in three-dimensional online virtual areas that they themselves create or to visit and browse in public or secure virtual spaces, created by others). It is considered a sacred space for its members, dictating rules of conduct. This community was chosen because it was an open, inclusive community, where religious information is freely displayed, but mainly ensures frequent online religious interaction. Its members come from multiple cultural backgrounds, different classes and ethnicities, reflecting the multi-cultural nature of the digital religious community. They also accept virtual environments, because in addition to other features offered, they also create virtual identities, thus utilizing visual and verbal communication. This particular religious' community belongs either to the Church of England or it is an Anglican Church within SL. This includes those who are members of the Church of England or share the Anglican heritage or those with other names who appreciate what is provided. Members of the Anglican Church had the idea for its founding and an active role in achieving that goal.

In November 2006, Rocky Vallejo (a pseudonym in SL), who belonged to St. David's Episcopal Church, took over the initial information management, in the Kansas metropolis. In February 2007, Rev.

Mark Brown (a pseudonym in SL) took the initiative to lead the group. At the first meeting of the group with a limited number of members, Rev. Mark Brown shared the vision of creating an Anglican presence in SL through a church. The temple was created in the digital field of the community from March to May 2007. Espeth Guyot (a pseudonym in SL) shared this vision with his friends and Monty Merlin (a pseudonym in SL) was offered to create the cathedral with the help of Elspeth and Barry Lubezki (a pseudonym in SL).

The first service commenced on Jul. 16th, 2007 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJYjfjr-Qz4>). After reaching this goal, Rev. Mark Brown retired from active leadership. Supplementary data were collected from the following websites (accessed on Jan. 31st, 2020) to confirm what was found during the on-spot online ethnography:

- 1) <https://slangcath.wordpress.com>

This is the official website of the digital community, with the main information uploaded there. Electronic contact details with its members are available.

- 2) <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-in-daily-prayer>

This is the official website of the Anglican Church, where the main information about it is uploaded. Up-to-date information is constantly uploaded.

- 3) <https://www.facebook.com/AnglicansOfSL/>

- 4) <https://web.facebook.com/thechurchofengland/>

This is the Anglican Church's official Facebook account, which provides information on modern life in the Anglican Church.

- 5) <http://anglicanchurchathens.gr/history-team-st-pauls/st-pauls-athens/st-pauls-ministerial-team/>

This is the official website of the Anglican Church in Athens, where the main information about it and current affairs are uploaded.

- 6) <https://womenandthechurch.org>

This is the Church of England website, which contains resources and information for women in the Church of England.

- 7) <https://www.forwardinfaith.com/Resources.php>

This is a website that does not accept female priests/bishops of the Anglican Church.

- 8) <https://www.flickr.com/groups/aosl/>

Visual material from this community was very often uploaded on this website.

3. Description of Research Results - Worship Events Over Time

In the virtual religious community Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL, occasional worship events happen, set out in the religious calendar of the church year. Celebrations include a variety of activities and religious rituals, which are based on the participation of members, believers in the community but also whoever else wishes to. According to Kyriakidis (1946, 294), ritual “is an etic category that refers to established activities which are the result of a particular (abnormal, irrational, incompatible) intent and concern only a specific group of people.” The Internet also ensures flexibility of faiths, forms of participation and fluidity of integration, facilitating mobility (Karamouzis, 2015), as well as low access costs. Customary practices and symbolisms are presented during worship events that take place over the cycle of church-year. Three examples of celebrations are presented in the next subsections.

3.1. “Creation” or “Creationtide”

The first celebration in the cycle is the “Creation” or “Creationtide”, which the researcher found to be celebrated in a naturalistic and intense way during the period from September 1st to October 4th, according to their churches’ annual calendar. It was dedicated to God, whom accepted as the Creator and supporter of every life. To the psalms of this festival forests, rivers and fields participate that give their own praise to the Creator. In 2018, the celebration of Creation was magnificent, though it coincided with the rebuilding of the cathedral and the sim/” regions” (*simulation*: A term used to describe the server that simulates every part of virtual land in Second Life). The symbol of the Cross was roughly placed, which, according to the popular religious belief of this community, as the observer found, protects the members of the community.



Picture 1. Animals participate in the creation’s celebration (1).

There was a message in the community, that their famous cathedral is taking a break, as the Church of England celebrates the Creationtide in this period, they have allowed nature to take its

foundation, creating a calm oasis of prayer. They hope that online visitors enjoy the plants and animals presented and will come back to see the new improved cathedral when it will be completed.

On Sept. 9th, 2018, the observer, as she entered Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL, found that all members, as well as the believers who were present in the digital field, were discussing the meaning of the celebration and choosing pieces of classic music that would be heard during the celebration. Then they all came together and performed a baptismal wish and prayer (Note 1). In conclusion, all these days they would gather, pray, and honour God as a life-giver. They have repeatedly emphasized that each of us is a part of a unique, wonderful, complex web of life, created by God. They sent the message that it is important to have meaningful bonds between humans and “all living creatures on earth” (Genesis 9:10). At the same time, they reminded everyone of the duty of all people to manage effectively and improve the environment in which they live.

3.2. Posada

Then, the celebration of Posada comes, with a developed religious feeling. The observer was informed by women in the community that “posada” in Spanish means “inn”. Many community members emphasized that the celebration is very dear to them because they are given the opportunity to get to know others and also provide hospitality. They have a firm belief that the faithful who attend this worship service receives the blessing of Jesus and Mary. They have revealed that the celebration is based on the long tradition of real life, coming from Mexico. According to this, two young men in the community, dressed as Mary and Joseph, go from house to house in the village, searching for a room for the night, announcing to people that Jesus will soon be born. Afterwards, a large-scale festive ceremony takes place at the community church on Christmas Eve. This tradition is celebrated today, with elements of Mary and Joseph being hosted in different venues every night. In the digital field, that they remain, there is the opportunity for a celebration between the guests and friends and the host’s family. From time to time, carols may be included in worship and the narration of the Christmas message and sometimes the consumption of food and drink (according to Varvounis, 2018: “the case of food is characteristic of the connection between religious behaviour and daily practice, especially those used under specific time, celebration or worship conditions”). Most importantly, it is a period of concentration, meditation, prayer, without being overwhelmed by its complexity.



Picture 2. The completion of Posada Celebration in the Garden of Peace in December 2018 (1).

In the community, a week before the celebration begins, the preparation starts by posting a message that:

For the last two years they have had the opportunity to meet new people, visit different churches and sites and enjoy creation by Christmas. It would be wonderful to do the same this year. Who can you offer Mary and Joseph a place to stay for one night? On Sunday Advent (November 27th) at noon service, the avatars of Mary and Joseph will arrive at the first host's home. The evening of a day right for them, Mary and Joseph will move on to the next host. On Christmas Eve they will return to the Epiphany Island and settle in a stable tent, set up in the Garden of Peace.

They complement particular elements for its better planning:

Whoever would like to help, should let H.M. or C.E. know as soon as possible. The full list of hosts does not need to be finalized by Sunday Advent, but the first hosts need to be fixed as soon as possible. Last year there were people who wanted to volunteer while Posada was already underway.

Finally, in addition to the motivation of paying tribute to Jesus, they add the expression of a personal message for whoever accommodates Mary and Joseph, by uploading any event that happened during this hosting.

F.B., a community member, linked the celebration in the digital community to the real-life celebration, by stating that in real life this custom is also implemented in the village, having small statues of Mary and Joseph, who stay for a day in each house until Christmas Eve, where they are brought to church and placed at the Genesis scene.



Picture 3. At a community member's home during the Posada celebration (1).

Prayers, dialogue, reflection, hospitality, and fellowship offerings take place in this ritual. After the avatars of Mary, Joseph and Christ are accommodated in the virtual homes of community members, they end up in the Garden of Peace (Picture 2). It thus proves to be an essential opportunity for rebuilding relationships between people, for the co-existence of people of different generations together, but also for receiving the blessing of Jesus and Mary who are staying at their home.

3.3. Christmas Celebration

At Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL, Christmas was celebrated in faith with a large crowd of followers, believers, members and whoever else wishes to. The Bible was read at the Cathedral, which was dominated by the hope, born of the coming of Christ. Light has a redemptive and purifying power. Thus the community is decorated with lights and lit white candles, while striking gold balloons adorn the temple on New Year's Eve. A member of the community recounted the story, which they believed occurred during Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Judea, during Herod's reign.

On Christmas Eve, a member of the community invited the observer to her home, where they discussed the meaning of the Feast and showed the ornament with the replicas of Christ, Joseph, and Mary.

4. Discussion

All the celebrations, which took place in this particular digital environment with ritual brilliance and magnificence, followed a functional standard that was not always rigorous. They caused genuine religious emotion to the attendees. The ideology and practices of Anglican Christianity influence this particular digital community. The religious rituals, taking place in this particular digital field, responded to the need of worshipping God as the Creator and supporter of life, and the victory over Death as expressions of the deeply rooted beliefs and perceptions of the community's believers (Bourdieu, 1977). In religious rituals, as culturally defined activities, folk religious and worship perceptions are expressed, which dominate real life and are transmitted to the digital community.

Real-life symbols are adopted during their time, since the members of the digital societies of the cyber-space feel they share common boundaries and symbols in their community's experiences. The dominant symbol is the cross, which represents the temporal Death of Jesus, but most importantly the triumph, the Resurrection and salvation. It symbolizes the life, the power, the creation, which constantly accompanies the Church's creative course through space and time. It is depicted on the wood of life, because it is a life-bearing instrument. In the real Christian church there are crosses that can adorn walls, basins, ceilings and any other place in the temple. Its permanent positioning in a central place of the cathedral, and its occasional placement in outdoor spaces of the digital community, symbolizes the abolition of the spiritual death of man.

Candle lighting is associated with the sanctity of the symbol and refers to Jesus as the "light" of the world. The palm-trees are an ancient symbol of triumph and victory, blessed outside before the procession and being waived by the crowd as the cross passes by, the book of Gospel and the clergy. The whole church unites the procession and enters the sanctuary together. The candle and the palm-branches have the content that Christianity gives them. The symbolic reproduction of traditional customs of real life was adapted and transferred in digital environments, forming the cultural and religious "identity" of its members. The use of symbols consecrates the digital domain as a Christian area and allows the members to unite in a common Christian symbolism and to show their faith in Jesus Christ.

5. Epilogue & Conclusion

Digital Folklore studies popular religiosity online (Howard, 2009). It focuses on digital customary (Bacon, 2011), folk beliefs and religious content practices that are fostered by the Internet, allowing geographically dispersed people to share opinions, values and have common targets. After all, the repeated exposure to their common ideas reinforces their beliefs (Howard, 2009). The internet shapes and is shaped in the cultural context that it is used (Campbell, 2005; 2007).

In this context, this research focuses on aspects of folk religiosity on the Internet, which are customary forms of folk rituals and symbols that are elements of folk tradition (Ellis, 2000) and are adopted by digital communities. The field of research was Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL, a multicultural religious digital community. It functions as a sacred digital field, not as a residence of God, but a meeting and co-existence place of believers, who share their common values, visions, interests and illnesses. It was found that occasional worship events happen in the cycle of time that have a special character, but also elements of ritual and social interaction that respond to the needs and are consistent with the ideology of its members. Especially from September to October, the Creation Festival is celebrated with eagerness. Then, the Posada celebration comes, where members of the community, who wish so, host Joseph, Jesus and Mary at their home to receive His blessing and to display their personal actions. Then, during the celebration of Palm Sunday, a public procession of the believers with the palm-branches takes place. In the celebration of Christmas, with digital imitations of Joseph, Jesus and Mary, the hope, born of the coming of Christ, is shown. This is followed by the celebration of Easter and Pentecost, where its members and attendees engage in many and varied interactive ritual acts, dominated by light, to receive the Holy Ghost ritually and impart the word of God. The circular perception of time and the sense of perpetual repetition, presented in the real life of Christian communities, is also confirmed (Sergis, 2009).

The internet is becoming a field of everyday religious life and folk religiosity (Howard, 2009). It is a sacred digital field that enables believers to write religious content on a blog or forum, speak in chat rooms, pray, chat at all times of the day or night, participate in common rituals and take place at festive worship events. They bring experiences in the digital field and they form Digital Customary. They share their personal spiritual practices, personal anxieties and struggles and respond to other members with advice, suggestions, and emotional support. There are digital domains, in addition, for intellectual participation, in which they express their beliefs with specific gestures and repetitive actions. The behaviours that the digital communication favours are the result of cyberspace interactions (social networks) and are at the heart of online ethnographic research. The ritual acts, which once included physical acts, such as breaking bread or baptizing an infant, have now been expanded due to the internet. The religious rituals even include acts such as the participation of believers with palm-branches in the procession or the lit of the virtual candle (Post, 2015, 3). Therefore, religious liturgical life holds a prominent position in the internet.

Folk religiosity is shaped by faith and actions, which are adopted both in the natural and digital environments. There is the experience of believers, interacting online. Therefore, in all kinds of public worship ceremonies, these happening in the digital fields need to be included, expanding so the work of the pioneers Post & Beek (2016), focusing on exploring the emerging field of rituals in cyberspace. The modern folk religiosity nowadays includes the study of folk religiosity on the Internet, while digital folklore also studies these phenomena.

From the afore-mentioned it is concluded that the subject of Digital Folklore is the study of folk culture produced on the Internet and shaped by the continuous interactive communication of folk groups and subgroups that use a kind of post-orality, related herein to their religious beliefs. It is clearly a culture different from the corporative and bureaucratic one (Howard, 2005; Bronner, 2009), which is though spontaneously shaped by an increased number of participants.

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Note 1

“God, creator of the universe,
 Fill us with your love for the creation,
 for the natural world around us,
 for the earth from which we come
 and to which we will return.
 Awake in us energy to work for your world;
 let us never fall into complacency, ignorance,
 or being overwhelmed by the task before us.
 Help us to restore, remake, renew.
 Amen.”

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