

# ISLANDNESS AND THE RESILIENCE OF VERNACULAR RELIGIOUS RITUALS:

An ethnological perspective

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## Introduction: Focus and structure

This article offers an ethnological analysis of two vernacular religious rituals preserved in Croatian island communities, focusing on the ways in which insularity shapes ritual practices and contributes to the experiences of islandness. Two comparable case studies are explored: the Passion procession on the island of Hvar (*Za križen / Following the Cross*) and the Marian spring procession on Rab (*Križi / Crosses*). Both traditions are settled within a predominantly Roman Catholic country (almost 80%) that shares the Adriatic Sea with Italy. These five-centuries-old rituals belong to a plethora of vernacular religion<sup>1</sup> expressions that rose from long continuum of cultural influence on local communities from the key centre of Western Christianity.

Leaning on discussion in Humanities and Island Studies, we understand islandness as “a complex concept that describes island existence under conditions of prolonged insularity” (Starc, 2025, p. 14), seeing it as a practice, or more precisely, “corporeally, affectually, practically, intimately, ‘as a deeply visceral lived experience’ (Hay, 2006, p. 34)” (Vannini & Taggart, 2013, p. 227). Vernacular religious rituals here serve as an ethnographic lens through which specificities of island life become visible. The analysis thus demonstrates how traits of insularity, such as geographical boundedness and delayed urban development, actively structure rituals and intensify communal participation. Drawing on ethnographic conversations with ritual participants, as well as participant-observation method, the study shows how these processions foster social cohesion, generate powerful affective experiences

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<sup>1</sup> As a term, *vernacular religion* is used throughout the present article. It is understood as religion as practiced and perceived (cf. Primiano, 1995). We are aware of academic synonyms for this term, including *popular religion*, *folk religion*, *popular piety* and *popular faith*, which have been discussed by a number of scholars across disciplines in the past three decades. However, due to subtle but noteworthy differences in their meanings, the term vernacular religion was considered the most appropriate.

and sustain collective identities in contexts marked by mobility, depopulation and seasonal absence. The analysis also engages Turner's concept of *communitas* and Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence to explain the resilience and continued social relevance of vernacular religion expressions in contemporary island life. Our interpretation additionally draws on anthropological, sociological, psychological and religious studies perspectives.

After providing geographical and historical background to contextualise the Eastern Adriatic Archipelago, the article brings a brief overview of rituals' structure and religious setting. The aim of these sections is to equip the reader with contextual information necessary for understanding the subsequent analysis. The analysis begins by emphasising transformations in vernacular religious rituals and religious experiences amid de-insularisation. In this study, de-insularisation refers to processes through which infrastructural, economic, social and cultural changes bring life on the islands closer to mainland conditions (cf. Starc, 2025). Furthermore, the transformations of religious rituals are analysed through the framework of dynamic shifts between the two essential 'foundations' of vernacular religion, identified as the perceived sense of sacred and the vernacular. Tracing their dynamic, the following sections explore some of the most vivid affective experiences of attending the processions, proceeding with analysis of the various meanings interwoven into the observed traditions. By situating rituals' meanings and experiences in the island context, we seek to demonstrate how (de-)insularisation shapes practice, structure and lived experiences of vernacular religion expressions in island communities.

#### Background: Contextualising the Eastern Adriatic Archipelago

Rab, with size of approximately 90 km<sup>2</sup> and a bit more than 7,000 inhabitants, and Hvar, around 300 km<sup>2</sup> and 10,600 settlers, are considered two well-populated Croatian islands situated within the Eastern Adriatic Archipelago. With over 1,200 islands, islets and reefs, of which around 50 are permanently inhabited, Croatia, like Greece, has one of the most indented and geographically diverse coastlines in the Mediterranean. According to the 2021 population census, the total population of the Croatian islands amounted to 120,437 inhabitants, marking a decline from 124,955 recorded in the 2011 census (Klempić Bogadi & Podgorelec, 2025, p. 61). Island residents thus comprise just slightly over 2% of the total Croatian population. Although the majority of islands are sparsely populated, their economic and cultural significance is considerable, primarily due to the intensive development of tourism, especially on larger islands such as Rab and Hvar. Administrative governance of Croatian archipelago is fragmented across seven coastal counties.



Figure 1 - Map of the Mediterranean showing Croatia (centre) on the eastern side of the Adriatic Sea (source: GISGeography).



Figure 2 - Map of Croatia highlighting the islands Hvar and Rab (source: GISGeography).

Historically, island communities have sustained their livelihoods predominantly through agriculture, maritime activities and navigation. Olive oil and wine production, alongside fishing, have constituted the backbone of economic life in the eastern Adriatic for centuries (cf. Faričić & Čuka, 2020). These activities were largely organised within feudal socio-economic systems, which assumed different institutional forms under successive political regimes. While some Croatian islands developed strong urban centres as early as the Greek and Roman periods, everyday life on the islands has predominantly been organised within villages and smaller rural settlements. Due to the relatively short distance from the mainland, island functionality has historically depended on coastal urban centres, marking them as “near islands” (cf. Starc, 2020). Ferry connections, particularly those intensified after the Second World War, have primarily linked islands to nearby mainland cities, which provide administrative, commercial, educational and healthcare services unavailable locally.

Inter-island connectivity, however, remains limited, resulting in a fragmented archipelago that does not function as an integrated spatial or social system. This structural isolation helps explain why communities from one island are regularly not engaging with the rituals or social practices on neighbouring islands. Also, in this regard noticeable are differences in dialects, musical and dance traditions from northern to the southern part of the eastern Adriatic coast. Nevertheless, all Croatian islands share a common historical legacy. Over the five centuries during which the continuity of the researched rituals has been documented, these islands have experienced a series of political and administrative transformations. The shifts include governance under Venetian and Italian authorities, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, fascist occupation, socialist Yugoslavia, and, currently, the modern Croatian democratic state. Such political discontinuities have left lasting imprints on island societies, their economic structures and cultural practices. Centuries of Italian proximity and authority has resulted in strong cultural and commercial ties to the wider Christian Mediterranean and a lasting affiliation with the Catholic Church. Within such framework, religious processions have become a widespread and locally embedded form of vernacular religion across Croatian islands, mirroring similar expressions along the Catholic world. These are typically held on major feast days such as Good Friday, Corpus Christi or various Marian feasts (e.g. the Assumption of Mary), as well as during local patron saint festivals.

Structural realities of life on all Croatian islands include continuous emigration, population aging, demographic decline and the resulting erosion of local communities. As Podgorelec (2010) describes, these processes represent a long-term migratory “fate” of eastern Adriatic islands (cf. Blagaić, Dunatov & Niemčić, 2025). In contrast to Rab, where a smaller number of circular migrants return home specifically to participate in the *Crosses* procession, the Hvar procession attracts a significantly larger number of such returnees, along with a substantial influx of people who are not from the island but are drawn by pilgrimage motives or other personal reasons. As one participant noted:

*Quite a few come, especially in Jelsa [the biggest of the six participating villages]. People arrive with sincere intentions, truly wishing to engage in the religious dimension, but there are many who come simply to watch and say they went on a trip (IEF rkp 2534, p. 2).*

Despite their locally specific features, both rituals share a common historical foundation: lay confraternities (*bratovštine*), i.e. predominantly male lay religious associations that emerged in Italy during the 12th and 13th centuries and spread significantly along the eastern Adriatic coast during the 14th and 15th centuries (Benyovsky, 1998, p. 137, Pešoda Vardić, 2024, p. 293–

295; Škunca, 1981, p. 32). Just like procession, these associations were not unique to the Adriatic or Mediterranean but formed a broader phenomenon across the shared Catholic world.<sup>2</sup> While both processions are traceable to the 16th century, some authors have suggested even earlier origins (cf. Potočnjak & Španjol-Pandelo, 2022, p. 31-32; Bratanić, 2008, p. 7-8, Pavičić Kotin, 2008; Petrić, 2016; Radonić, 2023). Although established alongside the institutionalised Catholic Church, confraternities often held strong social, charitable, political and economic functions, shaping both the spiritual and everyday life of local communities (cf. Sule 2004). As Pešoda Vardić notes, they were even “often seen as institutionalised meeting places for the urban elite” (2024, p. 295). Their influence on the eastern Adriatic coast persisted until Second World War, when confraternities were formally abolished under the communist regime of the newly founded Socialist Yugoslavia (cf. Blagaić Bergman 2014). Nonetheless, traces of their presence endured to this day mainly through religious practices, most visibly on Hvar, where lay confraternities remain active in ritual life and heritage preservation, especially in preservation of the *Following the Cross* procession. On Rab, their legacy survives merely symbolically, such as in the flags carried during the *Crosses* procession.

### Passion procession *Following the Cross* & Spring Marian procession *Crosses*: Overview of analysed rituals

Our research demonstrated the value of studying cultural expressions, including vernacular religion, specifically in island communities, where geographical particularities have shaped them into culturally distinct and self-contained entities, strongly preserving traditions. The importance of addressing specificities of vernacular religion practices on islands emerged during our ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2024 and 2025 on two Croatian islands, Hvar and Rab, focusing on formally recognised forms of Christian-Catholic vernacular religious rituals.<sup>3</sup> We understand vernacular religion as a set of practices that emerged among the people within the context of the dominant religion, yet shaped by local traditions. These practices help maintain social hierarchies, relationships and roles within the community, and derive their legitimacy from the interpretation of, and reference to, religious values. This is especially evident in the activities of lay confraternities.

Two comparable yet distinctive case studies in the focus of this article include the Marian procession known as *Crosses*, practiced on a local level on the island of Rab on the final Sunday of April, and the UNESCO-listed *Following the Cross* procession, nationally significant tradition held on the island of Hvar during the night from Maundy Thursday into Good Friday (holy days leading up to Easter). Both are deeply emotional and sensory-rich island processions rooted in expressions of vernacular (Roman Catholic) religion, involving active participation from local communities. They share a centuries-old continuity sustained through vows, yet differ significantly not only in visibility – with Hvar’s procession attracting several thousand participants, including a notable number of pilgrims (island outsiders),

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<sup>2</sup> Pešoda Vardić provides an extensive overview of literature on confraternities (see 2024, pp. 293–294).

<sup>3</sup> The research included dozens of individual and focus-group semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation of the processions and the preparatory organisation. It was done in collaboration with Dr. Joško Čaleta and Pavel Gulin Zrnić, as part of the research project *Island Ethnographies – Island Heritage and Environmental Futures as Drivers of Island Community Development (BAŠOTOK)*. We are grateful to our colleagues for sharing their fieldwork insights and experiences. The project is funded through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021–2026, Next Generation EU (PI: Dr. Marina Blagaić, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, 2024–2027, project code: 2011).

whereas Rab's remains a primarily local event gathering up to a thousand – but also in religious focus: Hvar's ritual commemorates Good Friday and the Passion of Christ, while Rab's honours the Virgin Mary and expresses gratitude for deliverance from the plague. They also differ in terms of their temporal framework: Hvar's procession takes place at night, under the light of the full moon, while Rab's procession begins in the early morning hours and culminates at 11 a.m. with a solemn mass for all participants in the main church in the town of Rab.



Figure 3 - The morning *Crosses* procession on the island of Rab, held on the last Sunday of April (2025).



Figure 4 - The *Following the Cross* procession on Hvar, held overnight from Maundy Thursday to Good Friday (2024).

The two traditions also diverge in their social and historical framing. The spatial structure of Hvar's tradition reflects a distinctly rural landscape, with six simultaneous circular processions taking place through neighbouring villages in the southern part of the island. Two of these villages – Jelsa and Vrboska – are located on the coast, while the remaining four – Pitve, Svirče, Vrbanj and Vrisnik – are situated inland, together forming a symbolic circular route of approximately 25 kilometres.

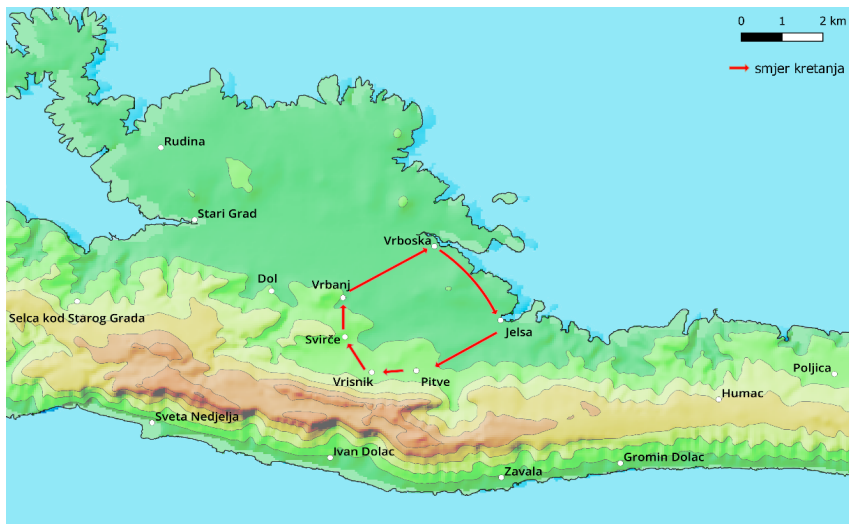


Figure 5 - *Following the Cross* processions routes on the island of Hvar (red arrow indicates direction) (map by Šime Vukman).

Besides their symbolic function, the six villages complement one another in practical terms, forming a network of reciprocal resources in everyday life and constituting a functional and relatively self-contained region on Hvar. The origins of the procession are dated approximately to the first half of the 16th century. Some interpretations link it to the peasant uprising of 1510–1514, others to the emancipation of the central island villages from the patronage of the Hvar cathedral or to a specific expression of devotion associated with medieval confraternities (Bratanić, 2008. Pp. 7–8). Narratives of our interlocutors and written sources (Pavičić Kotin, 2008; Petrić, 2016; Radonić, 2023) testify to an uninterrupted continuity of the procession for over five centuries, with the exception of the Second World War and the evacuation of islanders to El Shatt refugee camp in Egypt in 1944, where as many as eight thousand believers walked for three and a half hours under strong desert winds (Pavičić Kotin, 2008, pp. 55–57).

Each procession departs at the same hour from its respective parish church (around 10 p.m.), led by a cross bearer (*križonoša*). The role of the cross bearer is held in especially high regard; in some villages, men register for the honour as much as two decades in advance. Although the processions never intersect, each one visits all of the participating churches along the route. In each church, the group pauses for approximately half an hour to perform central chant of the tradition in their own version: the traditional Passion chant “Gospin plač” (‘Our Lady’s Lament’). This archaic and meditative chant is performed by a couple of designated singers who have been carefully preparing months ahead, learning the skill from elder singers, thus ensuring the transgenerational transmission of oral tradition. After visiting all

churches and paying respect to Christ's tombs – artfully decorated shrines by gifted individuals in each parish – the processions conclude in the early morning hours as each group returns to its home church.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, Rab's procession follows a spatial logic shaped by historical feudal ties, guiding participants from villages across the island toward its sole urban centre, the town of Rab. Though different in its spiritual meaning, it demonstrates similar social purpose by bringing together and connecting the local community. Archival documents confirm that this procession has been continuously held since the mid-16th century, while indirect evidence suggests its existence as early as the 11th century. Originally, the procession functioned as a collective ritual, marking the unification of the Rab community into a single community of believers. Devotion to Our Lady of Rab dates to the first half of the 16th century and is linked to the miraculous healing of a nun in the Benedictine convent on Rab. Following the abolition of the Diocese of Rab and the establishment of separate parishes, Marian devotion became firmly associated with *Crosses* procession, underscoring its lasting importance for the identity of the island's community (Potočnjak & Španjol-Pandelo, 2022; cf. Blagaić & Niemčić, 2024).

The faithful from all six rural island parishes – Barbat, Banjol, Mundanije, Kampor, Supetarska Draga and Lopar – set out from their villages in the early morning, each led by a cross bearer, walking in prayer and song toward the central church in Rab, where the local community awaits them. Although they do not begin simultaneously, the groups converge at a similar time at the entrance to the island's only town, once the seat of the bishopric.

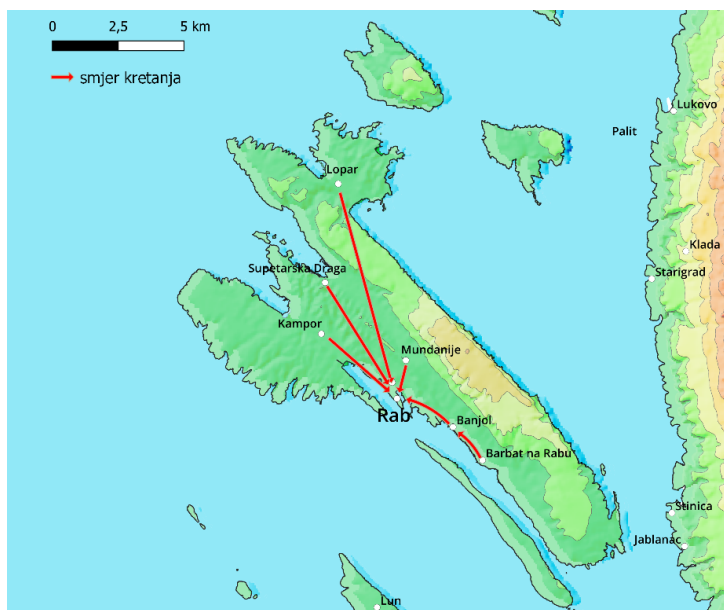


Figure 6 - *Crosses* processions routes on the island of Rab, Croatia (red arrow indicates direction) (map by Šime Vukman).

<sup>4</sup> A brief audio-visual illustration of this tradition is available in a video produced in 2023 by the Jelsa Tourist Board: <https://youtu.be/jAQwcZVUR5Q>.

Each group is distinguished by its banners of parish saints, prayers and song repertoire. The crosses are decorated with green wheat, flowers and occasionally grapevine. Unlike on Hvar, those who carry the cross remain consistent year after year, with some individuals fulfilling this role for decades (cf. Blagaić & Niemčić, 2024, pp. 172–173).

### Transformations of vernacular religion expressions amid de-insularisation process

One of our interlocutors reflected on the Hvar's procession with a mixture of nostalgia and concern:

*Not much has changed [in the Following the Cross procession since I was a child], except that, generally speaking, what the Church offered back then was the only thing available [on the island]. Now, there's an overwhelming amount of competition... There are just so many other things that are more attractive to girls and boys. As a result, interest [in the procession] is slowly fading. Some things are changing out of necessity, but if you start making too many concessions, then that 'true spark' begins to fade and gradually, but systematically, the spiritual dimension gets euthanized. That's what worries me about where this is all heading in the future. It seems to me that spark is slowly being drained, and all that will be left is the shell and that shell is already starting to fall apart at the seams" (IEF rkp 2534, p. 22).<sup>5</sup>*

This ethnographic reflection serves as the thematic core of the present article. Reading both the lines and what lies between them, one can sense the depth of experience and emotional impact that this particular vernacular religious ritual on the Croatian island of Hvar can evoke in its participants. This sentiment is rooted not only in local religious devotion but also in the Christian Mediterranean tradition of emotionally charged, community-centred religious expressions that blend sacred symbolism, centuries of historical continuity and intense collective experiences.

The quote also expresses a quiet yet persistent sorrow over the gradual erosion of the 'true spark', that is, erosion of religious depth and communal meaning embedded in the Hvar's procession, as it increasingly faces both disenchantment (Weber's *Entzauberung*) and re-enchantment (cf. Testa 2024)<sup>6</sup> in the context of modern distractions and competing cultural forms resulting from globalisation, modernisation, and, in the context of Hvar, de-insularisation. Nevertheless, even today, the procession continues to gather a commendable number of local people. Apart from local community, Hvar's procession attracts several thousand pilgrims coming from outside of the island, primarily thanks to improved maritime transport. This is all the more striking considering the length of the route, its highly localised organisation, the island's relative remoteness and its centuries-old embeddedness in local history.

The transformations seen in the two studied rituals have already been analysed in our earlier research. Focusing on key elements of island processions and their role in shaping community and future-making on the islands of Hvar and Rab, we argued that island

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations in the present text were translated from Croatian by the authors.

<sup>6</sup> We understand disenchantment as the rationalisation and gradual loss of spiritual meaning in the modern world, while re-enchantment, in our view, refers to the ways in which sacred meaning is reintroduced or reshaped through new cultural forms.

processions function as culturally embedded practices through which communal belonging is reproduced via shared bodily movement, sound, silence and affective experience. This showed that such collective ritual movement not only sustains diverse forms of belonging but also actively transforms and ritualises island space, shaping shared perceptions of the island as a lived and communal environment and motivating future-oriented community practices (Blagaić & Niemčić, 2024). In the context of broader island mobilities, we also analysed the role of vernacular religion as a magnet for return and visitation. We observed how both participants, and the experiences of those who emigrated, shape and are shaped by the tradition, highlighting the reciprocal influence of migration on living cultural practices. The challenges which such traditions are facing empower communal resilience and pride (Blagaić, Dunatov & Niemčić, 2025).

Building on described research and trying to understand the enduring appeal of those centuries-old traditions, this article focuses on the function and resilience of vernacular religion practices in contemporary island life. It does so by using two key and seemingly opposing yet deeply interconnected and interdependent ‘foundations’ – the vernacular and the sacred, understood as vernacular religion ‘foundations’ (cf. Blagaić, Dunatov & Niemčić, 2025). Such dual nature of vernacular religion (and its academic synonyms) has been repeatedly described by scholars across disciplines through a series of dialectical tensions, such as sacred versus profane (cf. Eade & Katić, 2016; Jukić, 1983, 1985), local versus transnational (e.g. Peña 2011), official/formal versus vernacular/informal (e.g. Belaj, 2014, Brettel 1990), elite versus popular, fixed versus fluid (e.g. Badone, 1990), individual/private versus communal/public (e.g. Ammerman 2021), etc. These dualities are not simply oppositions but interrelated dimensions whose tensions continuously shape the dynamic vernacular religion expressions. As Badone has noted, “the relationship is more than simply oppositional. Rather than viewing official and popular religion as monolithic entities, immutable and distinct, it is more fruitful to focus on the dialectical character of their interrelationship” (1990, p.6). Considering the above, we explore how the shifting balance between these elements of vernacular religion contributes to its endurance among diverse and heterogeneous parts of island communities driven by a range of religious and secular motivations and thus shapes the experiences of islandness.

### Affective and corporeal experiences: Building collective effervescence

For the thousands of people taking part in local procession on the island of Hvar, the Passion night lasts nearly ten hours. Every minute is spent fully immersed in the crowd and the movement, sequencing steps, mournful melodies, prayers, quiet conversations, occasional laughter, moments of silence, and finally, tears. There is a palpable sense of excitement in the air:

*When we were kids, we used to tremble with excitement waiting to finally join the Following the Cross procession. Back then, we had to prepare something for the long journey ahead. I still remember: I had a little coat and I sewed a pocket inside it so I could carry an orange. That orange was special because I had saved up little by little to buy it just for Following the Cross procession. And so, we set off, and there was no way anyone could get tired or fall asleep. Along the way, we prayed to God and listened to what people were saying (IEF rkp 2534, p. 53).*

In this procession, a polyphony of experiences unfolds: some are immersed in prayer, others focus on singing, some count their steps and the distance walked, while others hum “spiritual chansons”, whisper in quiet conversation or rummage through their backpacks for a bit of refreshment... On a chilly spring night bathed in the light of full moon, the whiteness of the confraternity robes emerges, candles flicker atop tall lanterns and tulle flutters gently from the heavy cross:

*They follow the old path by the large pine tree, then turn off the road toward the church. Usually, around that time, the moon rises, as it's always the night of the full moon [around Catholic Easter]. The route passes through olive groves. It feels like ascending the Mount of Olives, just as Jesus and his apostles did that very evening (IEF rkp 2534, p. 33).*



Figure 7 - Night views during the procession in Vrboska, island of Hvar (2024).

Gravel crunches beneath the steps of the crowd, both familiar and strangers, while weary feet drag on, persistent prayers resound and the air vibrates with the sound of deep tones of ancient chants sang by *kantaduri*:<sup>7</sup>

*It always moves me when we arrive in Jelsa and get to the front of the Town Hall. There's a crowd gathered right there. We only start singing once you can slowly see Jelsa itself. Then it falls silent: it's 11 p.m., especially if the sea is calm. From a distance, you can hear the chants sung by the people of Jelsa. The melodies grow stronger and when we reach the front of the Town Hall, we start singing 'I repent, dear God'. Every year, it almost feels like a test of our musical skills.*

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<sup>7</sup> A central moment of the Hvar tradition is the performance of the ‘Gospin plač’ chant (‘Our Lady’s Lament’) by two *kantaduri* (lead singers) and typically three *odgovoroči* (responding singers), conveying an archaic layer of vernacular sacred singing that has been transmitted orally across generations and entrusted to the community’s most skilled vocalists due to its interpretative complexity (cf. Čaleta, 2012; Milošević, 2015). A recording featuring *kantaduri* from Jelsa is available at: [https://youtu.be/tID\\_ks9ngng?list=PLdN3EFqH9jNj856odlbiOymrEBMogH](https://youtu.be/tID_ks9ngng?list=PLdN3EFqH9jNj856odlbiOymrEBMogH).

*Then, as we all pass through, they join us inside the main church. Once everything is settled, two kantaduri quietly enter through the front doors and begin to sing. Honestly, even now when I think about it, I feel like breaking down in tears... (IEF rkp 2534, p. 81).*

Throughout the long night, six processions bring life to the central part of the island, visiting churches as the holiest sites of their communities and symbolically consecrating the paths they traverse, thereby marking out their own *axis mundi*, the “centre of the world”. The final moments of processions in the morning hours – when the cross-bearer completes the circle after whole night and collapses into the arms of the priest and embracing his own family – culminate in a climax of “I like to say, high tension and emotional intensity” (IEF rkp 2534: 27). This extraordinary experience generates “dazzling surface” that marks the Hvar tradition (IEF rkp 2534, p. 22), leaving a profound impact both on community members who uphold the tradition annually and on outsiders, i.e. visitors and pilgrims alike.



Figure 8 - Return of the Jelsa cross-bearer to the main square at the end of the overnight procession, island of Hvar (2024)

For the vast majority of our interlocutors, the emotional experiences evoked by the procession go beyond purely sensory and somatic sensations, although the latter remain far from insignificant. For instance, on Hvar, the ritual involves nearly 25 kilometres of slow walking over sometimes steep or uneven terrain, with some participants walking barefoot or in woollen socks; hours of meditative singing; the fresh spring scents of Mediterranean herbs and the sea; moonlit views of the island at night; and occasionally even intense storms, heavy rain or strong winds. A particular physical burden falls on those at the head of the procession who carry heavy and tall cross or lanterns weighing more than ten kilograms.

On the island of Rab, the length of the procession varies depending on the distance between each village and the town of Rab. Although the longest route – from Lopar to Rab – covers just over 10 kilometres, which is less than half the length of the Hvar route, the significance of this ritual lies not in its length but in its symbolism: participants walk on foot along nowadays travelled by car or along neglected country paths rarely crossed except by hiking boots.

Such an undertaking undoubtedly immerses the participants of the procession in the island's natural environment, far removed from beaches and tourism, evoking a time when the presently overgrown fields of this fertile island were still cultivated; when today's asphalt roads were merely village paths; when travel to and from the island had not yet been organised through regular ferry services (est. 1963), unlike today, with between 13 and 23 crossings daily; when the local population lived in far more modest conditions; and when the Rab's population was considerably larger in number and younger. As these changes have unfolded over the past seventy years or so, many of our interlocutors are in fact direct witnesses to the process of de-insularisation on Rab. In this sense, the processions function as a kind of homage to a former, often romanticised, sense of islandness.

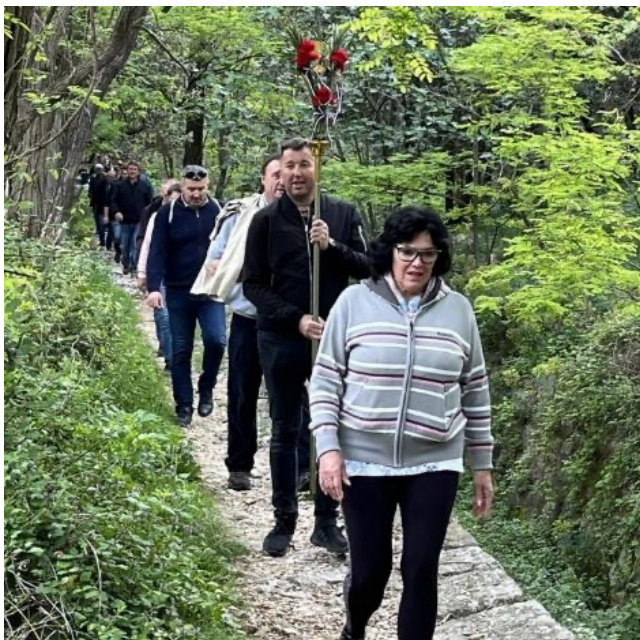


Figure 9 - The Lopar procession makes its way through a forest path toward the town of Rab (2024).

Older men and women who take part emphasise precisely this physical act of walking as key to the emotional impact. For some of them, the procession is a profound act of commitment:

*I kept going back and forth, saying I'll go, then I won't. My wife said, 'Don't go. You'll get sick, you'll be soaked. You have to be out there for two, two and a half hours, all wet'. I'm more of an invalid than healthy, but I still make it through that day. It's a feeling inside... I can't really explain it. My kids tell me, 'You're*

*crazy, you'll fall somewhere on the road, no one can come get you because there's no car access'. But no, it gives me strength* (IEF rkp 2535, p. 58).

The physical challenge is more than a test of endurance, as it becomes a medium through which the body performs an act of penance and channels the spiritual dimension of the ritual. In this embodied devotion, the sacred is made tangible. In that sense, vernacular religion can be understood as a ritualised bodily act, where gestures, scents, movements, sacred images and relics create a direct link to the supernatural (Jukić, 1985, p.21). The body thus carries both pain and spiritual renewal. As participants push beyond their perceived limits, they may feel empowered by the effort, filled with pride in their resilience, as well as gratitude toward the sacred force they believe supported them. This moment of strength becomes a lasting point of reference, shaping how they face future life challenges.



Figure 10 - The procession from Supetarska Draga descends toward the town of Rab (2024).

The synchronised movement and singing of participants in both island processions, combined with their shared presence in the same landscapes and exposure to same sensory stimuli serve to synchronise and intensify emotions among individuals, giving rise to what Durkheim famously described as collective effervescence (Durkheim 1912).

Durkheim proposed that human beings are dual in nature, existing both as individuals and as members of a collective (Pizarro et al., 2022). Expanding on this idea, Serge Moscovici observed that it is precisely through participating in ceremonies like these that people come to realise they embody both an individual and a collective self (Pizarro et al., 2022). This dynamic interplay, experienced intensely during rituals, fosters a heightened consciousness of community and reinforces the participant's commitment to the collective. Such a sense of belonging can be interpreted through Turner's concept of *communitas* (Turner, 1969, 1974), i.e. a state of equality and human connectedness that arises in liminal moments, such as

rituals and, in our case, the processions. Through annual repetition, *communitas* is re-enacted and reinforced, serving as a key mechanism in sustaining the procession's centuries-long continuity. This continuity is anchored in the meanings individuals embed in the processions which in turn develops their identification with the island community.

### Layers of meaning: Spirituality and tradition in dialogue

By approaching the studied processions through the lens of experiences shared by our interlocutors, we managed to identify multiple layers of meaning woven into them. Their complexity and, at times, apparent contradictions, reflect Eliade's dichotomous framework for understanding religion and spirituality, which simultaneously opposes and reconciles the sacred and the profane (cf. Eliade, 2002). A similar view is offered by Eade and Sallnow, who, in the context of pilgrimage, describe it as an arena where religious and secular discourses intersect and contend (Eade & Sallnow, as cited in Belaj, 2010, p. 9). This perspective is echoed in theological observations on vernacular religion described as "a complex reality of religious expressions that are a vital reflection of the spiritual and material needs of an individual, a region, a diocese, a group, a people, or a historical period, defined above by the liturgy and below by magic and superstition" (Šimić, 1987, p. 14). Moreover, within theological studies there is a distinction between the religious and the folk (vernacular), the latter being "a distinctly human form of expression on Earth," deeply rooted in the customs and practices of specific local or wider communities. It is "closely tied to genuine human impulses", "imbued with a sense of belonging to one's homeland" and as such, "helps shape the values of tradition" (Jukić, 1985, p. 26).

While these observations may be critiqued for essentialising human experiences, the core of our analysis of the ritual meanings in collected narratives aligns with a similar perspective. For instance, the religious dimension conveys meanings shaped from above, consistent with Christian doctrine. These meanings are clearly framed by the timing and context of the events. Thus, on Hvar, this includes Lent as the most significant period in the church calendar, Holy Week as its climax, and the Passion as the very essence of Christianity. On the island of Rab, the Marian procession takes place on the eve of May, a month traditionally dedicated to the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary since the Middle Ages.

The meanings associated with the vernacular dimension, referred to by some of our interlocutors as "folklore", "custom" or "tradition", encompass aspects of performativity, structure, identity reproduction and the cultural values attributed to this heritage. For younger participants, the procession is often less about religion and more about pride and belonging:

*On that holiday, everyone steps up, even those who aren't very religious. But there's something about it, maybe tradition or just the way it is... everyone goes, so we go too. It's a custom, and that whole Sunday, the entire island comes together, making it really special (IEF rkp 2535, p. 22).*

This phrasing emphasises the participation of procession more as a communal cultural event than a personal act of faith. Still, it shouldn't be dismissed as 'empty' since it carries a strong sense of community and belonging:

*People go gladly. Especially when old memories come back. Often, people have a vow... so they go. I mean, for this procession, people really want to go. You can*

*feel it, see their willingness, their desire... a real sense of togetherness (IEF rkp 2535, p. 24).*

This quote highlights the processions as a liminal moment (Turner, 1979, p. 467), where everyday identities fade and individuals undergo a symbolic transformation from the personal to the collective, reflected, for instance, in the way participants, perhaps unconsciously, often speak in the plural rather than in singular when describing their experiences:

*This Following the Cross procession, it's something that truly brings the whole town, the entire island, together. If anyone speaks against this tradition, we instantly get very protective. It's something that will probably always keep us close, from the oldest person in the village to the youngest (IEF rkp 2534, p. 69).*



Figure 11 - Processions from all villages on the island of Rab converge at the entrance to the town (2024).

The “protective” attitude described by the interlocutor reflects a deep pride in tradition, intricately woven into the identity of Hvar’s people. It testifies to nearly five centuries of continuity in both individual and collective duties, such as “honorary” roles involving carrying the cross and various candlesticks or chanting the “Our Lady’s Lament” – exclusively male domains – as well as the “invisible” women’s work, like decorating Christ’s tomb, cleaning churches and preparing meals for the confraternity members during Lent. In other words, tasks essential to organising and carrying out the ritual.<sup>8</sup> Threats to these rituals, such as those posed by the secular, anti-clerical Yugoslav communism (1945–1991) and the COVID-19 pandemic, only fuelled defiance and strengthened the practice. “Back then, we

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<sup>8</sup> The research highlighted how these processions, particularly on Hvar, reinforce traditional social structures that may conflict with modern norms, such as gender equality, underscoring the need to further explore gender roles in vernacular religion practices.

participated even out of spite”, most Hvar interlocutors recalled about maintaining the processions under communism.

Similar testimonies come from Rab, an island close to the harsh prison camp situated on the small island of Goli otok, notorious for detaining political dissidents. Residents of Rab lived daily with the physical and symbolic proximity of brutal repression. Some of them even worked as sailors on supply ships for Goli otok or transporting goods produced on the island through forced labour – a system of punishment and “re-education”. Lopar, a village in the North of Rab facing the prison island, even had its own doctor practitioner there. Despite repression, Rab’s people continued participating in the *Crosses* procession, bravely performing religious act in a mandatory secular regime. Though never officially banned, special permission was required yearly and often met with institutional obstacles. For example, on the procession’s day – the last Sunday in April – a state-organised youth rally (*slet*) was mandatory for all schoolchildren, with no excuses for absence. Some interlocutors noted that adult men often skipped the procession to avoid workplace sanctions, leaving women and children as the predominant participants during communism.

This persistence in preserving centuries-old popular devotion testifies to its significance in island communities as a powerful symbol of identity and Christian continuity in the eastern Adriatic. In fact, both traditions are central to the identity of observed islands, especially on Hvar where their absence is unthinkable. The Hvar procession is more than just the night of Maundy Thursday. It is a year-round tradition with clearly defined duties for the cross bearer and his family, confraternity, choir and *kantaduri* singers. One could say that the cross bearer “serving that year” symbolically embodies the community’s local and religious identity and takes on a penitential duty that marks the start of a new annual cycle. That year, he is expected to resolve any conflicts within the community, symbolising a fresh start and community harmony. The greater the duty, the greater the honour, which is why the cross bearers can feel “victorious” (IEF rkp 2534, p. 57). After Easter Sunday, his efforts are rewarded with a lavish meal shared with many (male) villagers, confirming his social and economic status.<sup>9</sup> In smaller villages, monetary gifts from neighbours can be generous, leading some “people to enrol their very young children because it’s a prestige thing, something that has to be done” (IEF rkp 2534, p. 57).

The strict adherence to order and rules within the rigid framework of patriarchy is also central to the Rab procession. Like on Hvar, cross bearers (often men from the same families for generations) carry deep symbolic weight. The insistence on ritual performance precision reflects a latent fear that disrupting the form could perhaps threaten the sacredness of the act. Thus, religious meaning merges with ethical duty, as participation affirms order, hierarchy and community.

Though perhaps not as evident in everyday life, the strong cohesion, near-mandatory participation and clear social structure of the island communities, which is evident through the observed traditions, reveal defining features that constitutes the experiences of islandness. These rituals, therefore, function both as a lens through which islandness becomes visible and as a catalyst that annually reinforces and connects the sea-bound community.

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<sup>9</sup> An interesting remark from one of the interlocutors captures this well: “Some have given up on becoming cross bearers due to the financial burden, even though deep down they may have wished to take on the role...” (IEF rkp 2534: 42).



Figure 12 - Decorating the cross in Supetarska Draga, island of Rab (2025).

An interesting aspect of both traditions is the involvement of neighbouring villages, which creates space for subtle competition between local identities. This is a clear example of campanilism:

*defined and studied in Mediterranean communities and highlighted in a set of sociocultural traits identified by Mediterranean anthropologists... It reflects the historical and spatial specificity of Mediterranean villages, often described as 'separate kingdoms', 'small republics' or 'village-states', whose boundaries form the basis of campanilism, rooted in their isolation and limited contact with social centers. (Perinić Lewis, 2011, p. 215).*

In her study on campanilism on the island of Hvar, Perinić Lewis emphasises the community's strong cohesion, built on daily, personal interactions and close familiarity among its members. While they feel a profound connection to their community and its environment, they simultaneously highlight real and perceived differences with neighbouring and more distant villages. "In such close relationships, differences are accentuated," she notes, "while similarities with others are deliberately overlooked and marginalized" (Perinić Lewis, 2011, p. 218).

Thus, rivalry between parishes on the observed islands over who has the most beautiful cross, who sings better,<sup>10</sup> whose decoration of the Christ's tomb on Hvar was the most elaborate,

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<sup>10</sup> On Hvar, special attention is given to the quality of singing: "When entering each village, the aim is, of course, to sing as well as possible. From village to village, there's a sense of competition in every church, to make each performance better, so that those listening who are, in a way, 'judging', can say, 'They were good'. It's always a kind of competition, lasting the entire night. Naturally, the acoustics vary from church to church, some better, some worse. So, for instance, when you reach Jelsa, you know you have to sing well. In Vrisnik, even more so, because it's the neighbouring village, so for it, we have special

who had more procession participants, lanterns or folk costumes etc. is quite common. Such competition draws public attention since good reputation travels far: “people talk about it afterward... retell it” (IEF rkp 2534: 59). These processions reflect island hierarchies, negotiations and tensions, often shaped by class differences, particularly between urban and rural communities. Participants continually navigate the space between the sacred and socially regulated.



Figure 13 - Christ's tomb decorated in Svirče and Vrisnik, island of Hvar (2024).

Our interlocutors often viewed the profane meanings as being in sharp contrast to religious ones, noting that the “folkloric dimension” is increasingly overshadowing the “spiritual”, leaving “religious immersion in all of it somewhat aside” (IEF rkp 2534, p. 15). Though seen as “two completely different impressions”, these meanings overlap in deeply felt emotions that “touch the heart” (IEF rkp 2534, p. 15). Some participants described these feelings as hard to put into words:

*People wait all year for Holy Week to come. It means a lot to everyone, from the youngest child in the village to the oldest. When it arrives, something... just awakens... certain, certain emotions rise up (IEF rkp 2534, p. 55).*

*For us from the village, for us islanders, it really means something. It's something hidden... Like, you'd never see someone cry in everyday life, but when Good Friday morning or Holy Thursday comes, when we go to the cemetery... people just start crying, the tears come on their own... it just happens (IEF rkp 2534, p. 56).*

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verses, unique stanzas that must be sung there. The whole night is full of those little surprises” said an interlocutor from Svirče village (IEF rkp 2534, p. 59).

*When Lent comes, that's when we feel like ourselves again. It comes from deep within the soul and... (IEF rkp 2534, p. 41).*

The symbolic pause after the word “and” points to a deeply personal experience that is recognised as the foundation of vernacular religion (Jukić, 1985, p. 26). Though rooted in individual feeling, it gains collective force through emotional synchrony with others, giving rise to a state of collective effervescence. Yet for such emotional sharing and community-building practices to emerge, strong cohesion of the community through shared space, local history and everyday life is essential. As one interlocutor illustrated reflecting on the harsh past of the Hvar island life:

*There are many people from the mainland who say, 'Oh, that's just folklore, this and that'. But I say, you don't know what it means to live on an island. Sure, it's not the same island or the same way of life as before.*

*But imagine back when this procession was first established... living on the island was always a challenge, even more so than on the mainland... Back then, there was no electricity, no running water... many things were missing and whatever you had at home was never enough. People shared what little they had: I'd give you this, and you'd give me that. The wine we produced, which was our only source of income since there was no tourism, had to be taken to the mainland and sold, but you also had to save some of what you earned that year for the next, because if there was disease or drought, there'd be nothing left. That's how it was.*

*And then you'd look to the sky and put your trust in God. Now, that was the feeling. You had to be part of all of it, and I guess Jesus' suffering felt closest in those moments, much closer than the joy of Christmas or even the Easter celebration. Probably because life was so hard (IEF rkp 2534, p. 54).*

Seeking the sacred in materiality and familiar emotions is central to vernacular religion, as it relies on visible signs that let believers physically connect with the supernatural (Jukić 1985, p. 21). This happens because “vernacular religion focuses more on emotional states than on intellectual understanding of religious principles and theological doctrines” (Vidović, 2017, p 747). The following quote captures the tension between “cognitive understanding” and the experience of the otherworldly:

*My family's Catholic. My dad was always involved with the church, like the priest's right-hand man. I was an altar boy, always around the church, kind of the priest's favourite, working with everyone. But faith? That was the last thing on my mind. I didn't really understand any of it. It was mostly just emotion. That's what kept me going, what made me want to be part of it. But back then, I didn't really bring God into it, and I didn't truly understand Him (IEF rkp 2534, p.21).*

Interlocutors from both islands often described the processions with words like peace and beauty, walking and calmness, song and togetherness, tradition and devotion. This complexity of feelings shows that the experiences of the processions cannot be reduced to a mere religious emotion. It is a complex web of affects shaped by personal, family and collective narratives, as well as by external factors like time and environment. For example, on Rab, accounts from all rural parishes noted how the Crosses procession also stirred strong

excitement about the approaching summer. The procession to town was traditionally rewarded with the first ice cream of the season, marking the start of summer and the tourist season. Thus, the procession was a layered experience, blending religious ritual, communal singing, traditional costumes and the experience of the town as a space of special significance:

*I'd say about 75% of people would tell you that day is the first ice cream in Rab. Back then, people didn't go into town five times a day like they do now. It was an experience. That was a big deal. The Crosses procession was at the end of April and that's when the ice cream season would kick off... Life was different back then, the whole idea of 'town' was different..." (IEF rkp 2535, p. 5).*

To put shortly, the experiences of the processions on Rab and Hvar are neither straightforward nor uniform, nor are the communities of these islands entirely homogenous. They are shaped by a complex interplay of personal history, family tradition and one's place within the community. Still, despite this diversity, there is a shared seriousness and a sense that by taking part, people are "doing something important", even if the feeling cannot be fully expressed in words – vividly reflecting the subtle, elusive essence of islandness.

#### Reaching *communitas*: Final reflections

With this paper, we set out to analyse the appeal and resilience of vernacular religious rituals on Croatian islands of Rab and Hvar, functioning as both expressions and reinforcements of island identity. We focused on two central practices: Rab's Marian spring procession *Crosses* and Hvar's Passion procession *Following the Cross*. Vernacular religion was approached through the concept of two essential 'foundations' – the vernacular and the sacred. Our analysis suggests that their dynamic interplay is a key mechanism that enables vernacular religion expressions to remain resilient, accommodating various individual needs while preserving communal coherence.

The dense ethnographic descriptions and analysis in this article highlighted some of the most vivid and meaningful experiences related to the rituals and their layered meanings that blend personal devotion, collective belonging and the need to sustain both connection with the divine and social order. As many of our interlocutors have noted, these traditions "amaze with their sense of togetherness" (IEF rkp 2534, p. 17). We interpret this experience through the concept of *communitas*. Paradoxically, although Turner's *communitas* is anti-structural and characterised by temporary egalitarian "sentiment for humanity" that liberates individuals from normative social roles (Turner, 1974, p. 274), in the context of Rab and Hvar, the *communitas* is actually not generated spontaneously. Instead, it emerges through long-term, highly structured forms of participation where each participant plays a distinct role, contributing to a process that symbolically and literally unites individuals who are otherwise separate in daily life.

This heightened sense of togetherness is temporally limited, lasting no more than a single festive night or day. The ephemerality of the sense, essential to the concept of *communitas*, plays a key role in generating the nostalgic narratives associated with these processions. Collective ideal thus becomes a focal point catalysing imagined visions of harmonious life rooted in sacred values and communal belonging. In this sense, it resonates with what Eliade described as the "ontological thirst of the religious man" (cf. Eliade, 2002, p. 40–41).

Whereas vernacular religion once played a central role in structuring island temporalities and everyday rhythms, in contemporary life of islands across the eastern Adriatic, it is increasingly being perceived as community heritage rather than as an integral part of daily or spiritual life. Nowadays, it functions primarily as a symbolic and emotional anchor of identity, shaped by romanticised memories, and visions, of former experiences of islandness.



Figure 14 - Descent of the procession from Supetarska Draga into the town of Rab (2024).

The analysis of affective and corporeal experiences presented in this article shed light on importance of their synchronisation in reinforcing the sense of togetherness which, in turn, culminates in what Durkheim termed collective effervescence. Involving more than physical presence, it is intensified by preparatory work, financial contributions and dedicated time invested by participants, all of which contribute to a strengthened sense of community. These heightened states are enabled by particularities of insularity, such as geographical boundedness, historical isolation and delayed urban development, which condition the high level of participation and intensify communal engagement. While the island communities are neither homogeneous nor uniform, their members share a profound sense of responsibility and seriousness during these rituals. This helps to explain their continued appeal among younger generations which may be less drawn to formal religious frameworks growing up in increasingly secular world.

Finally, these traditions serve as living bridges between past and present. They memorialise former ways of life, evoke nostalgic attachments and sustain community ties in the context of demographic change and secularisation. That is why vernacular religion expressions on Rab and Hvar operate as a mechanism for cultural continuity and social cohesion, contributing to the experiences of islandness. These rituals are at once symbolic, affective

and practical, revealing how religious and vernacular elements together sustain resilient, adaptive and deeply meaningful forms of community life in island contexts. They show that even in the contemporary era, long-standing traditions continue to anchor identity, mediate social relationships and provide spaces for both collective and individual engagement with the sacred.

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