

Traditional Rituals and Beliefs in the Peoples of the Balkans



Cultural and Social Anthropology

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Abstract

In traditional beliefs, rituals and customs of the people of the Balkans, we notice external factors, like the phenomenon of casting an eye on someone, magic tricks and beliefs on magicians and future predictors or seers, the cult of water, stone, vampire, etc. These phenomena come as a result of the similar historical past. These rituals have been practiced in special occasions, to pray for a good health, or to prevent different illnesses or evils, as well as to pray for prosperity in the family. With the acts of the rituals it is aimed at realizing the wishes in a non-natural way, through prayers, blessings, oaths or different magic formulas, and with frightening acts. The rituals are passed from one generation to the other and nowadays they are still preserved in detached rural areas, whereas in the urban areas traditional rituals are less present. In fact, today they have a different connotation, like the celebration of Saint Valentine, reading the cup of the coffee, reading cards, etc. even though they are of a different character, they are still a means of identifying us as a community of the Balkans.

Introduction

When we examine the traditional cultural heritage of the peoples of the Balkans, can notice common traditional features or elements that are results of neighboring contacts during history, historical facts and similar life conditions, as well as the level of social development of the people in this region. It must be emphasized the fact that cultural elements and phenomena, which are similar, in almost all people of the Balkans, besides rituals and beliefs, there are also the phenomena of casting an evil eye on somebody, the cult of water, the cult of forest, the cult of the wolf, stone, vampire, etc. and these phenomena do not have a lot religious differences.

A special movement that flows in the complex veins of ethno culture is also mythology. Leftovers of ancient beliefs that come out of paganism and that are various in the Balkans, they have preserved the rituals, the mythical scenes, which are practiced in certain days of the year, during celebrations, according to the case, to have good health and to prevent illnesses, bad luck, evil, to have good luck and good economical conditions.

Rituals have been present since the beginning of the human culture, when the man though that the world was in a great fight of the good, the creation of the world and creative beginning against the evil, destructive forces, tendency towards chaos, etc. Myths and rituals are unlimited in archaic societies and they represent events that explain the history and origin of every nation. The necessity for continuation is symbolic reproduction of events that based on two essential elements. The first is the idea of time movement in a continuous cycle, where the same events happen to come again and again, like: birth, maturity, death, poverty, abundance, joy and suffer. The second, it is the belief that at the end of the cycle the power of good decreases and needs support, which is gained through certain ritual activities. Rituals are considered as sacred, they have magical powers and they can affect the surroundings. They renovate the balance between the good and evil, order and chaos, civilization and anarchy and they allow contradictions in all levels – natural, social and cultural.

In the field of cultural and spiritual heritage we can notice a lot of similarities in the beliefs and popular imaginations not only in south-Slavic people, but also in other peoples of the Balkans, like for example, concerning diseases, their diagnosis and their healing process. These common features are seen in magical methods, procedures and ritual acts (for example, the use of the thread, ties, fabric to prevent and treat diseases). There are applied songs, magical rituals or foretellers, prophecies or healing through magic tricks.

A lot of popular beliefs are connected to the act of birth, especially in the families where kids died and they wish for a baby who lives and then he/she is healthy. With the belief in the birth it is also connected the belief of the foreteller, who determine the destiny of the baby. In this context, it is very common the belief that the baby immediately after birth, without being breast-fed, is sent to be baptized in church and with casual godfathers. This means that the godfather or godmother was someone who was accidentally there, at the church, without paying attention if it was a man or woman, rich or poor. (Kitevski 1982:127). For the same purpose, there were practiced other methods. Thus, it was believed that the first child born alive, without being breast-fed, they should pierce his/her right ear and put an earring, which symbolized an amulet that protected him from all evil external influences and disasters. (Kitevski 1982: 127-128)

Even though Muslims did not set a godfather, still the belief of a foreteller to determine the destiny was present in all the peoples of the Balkans, as the most ancient form of the belief in faith (Schubert, 1982:89). The foretellers are descendants of ancient Moirs (the Greek goddess of human faith), but they are not identical to them. They are not goddesses as Hellenic Moirs, but they are demon women and they are set in a low range of the mythological hierarchy (Schubert 1989: 90). In the beliefs of the Balkans, foretellers (fairies) of faith are invisible and for this reason it is thought that: "Foretellers come the third night, generally in midnight and then they negotiate about the fate of the newborn baby" (Penushliski 1968: 303). With the coming of the foretellers (fairies), the woman who helped in the birth, serves as an important negotiator between the parents and the child on this part, and foretellers on the other part... between this world and the other world..." (Schubert 1968: 92).

The rituals in the birth of a baby are connected to the general idea of coming from nowhere of a "wild" creature, that through washing, clothing and setting of a name should be sent away from the "chaos" and gets to know the organized "world" of a community and their religious presentation according to determined canons (for example, the ritual of baptism). There are also other rituals connected to the gradual socialization of the child, respecting individual traditions. For example, the same is the ritual regarding the first steps of the child and when he/she has to choose among the things the parents present, which symbolize different professions (scissors – tailor; pencil – official employee; hammer – master). By this act, it is determined the future of the child. In different traditions, among the rituals there are also the first hair cut, circumcision, etc.

The second ritual of life is marriage – one of the most complex rituals connected to numerous acts. There are the rituals of the wedding, religious rituals and the obligatory marriage in the state offices, where there are included a lot of cultural features. It is interesting that in the Balkans there are archaic forms of marriage, like the "purchase of the bride" by the future groom, which happens in some Muslim groups, or the "kidnapping" of the bride and locking her in the groom's room.

Taking care of the health is also closely related to the activity of foretellers or witches. They use different devices and other "magical" tricks, including water from sacred springs and with the songs they express formulas of different rituals, which they sing three or nine times (Vrazinovski 2000: 50 – 52, 116-117). The preacher in singing is usually the trusted person, from whom you look for healing, not only in diseases, but also for other cases. In this context, it is common also the belief in the fact of casting an evil eye on somebody, which may seriously damage children (Vrazinovski 2000: 423).

A lot of beliefs are related to the foretelling power of dreams. The belief in dreams is also very common even nowadays, without considering the education or the social state of the people. Often, things are seen in dreams and they have certain meanings for people, and they tell what is going to happen, either bad or good.

Even though there are simple messages in the dreams and in what happens in them, very often people understand them in their own way. When the dream comes true, convinces the people and enforces their belief for what they have seen in the dream.

Casting an evil eye on someone is a magic that happens by casting a bad look on someone – especially from the people who have bright color eyes (mainly blue, but also black), with big eyes, connected eyebrows and so on. It is thought that the strong belief in the power of the eye has been more common in Muslim people of the Balkans and this has influenced the spread of this belief to the Christians, too (Djordjevic 1938, Pilichkova 1984: 172).

Protection from the "evil eye" urges the need for amulets, magical words, whispering bad words to something beautiful, with back-wearing of clothes, etc. People who suffer from the cast of an eye, are treated by magical words, when different stones are used, like hot coal, charcoal, but also different plants. We must emphasize the importance of orders in protection from magic, which is universal and which has a special importance as a protective means against magic or casting of an eye. As a preventive device against the casting an eye on somebody in the Muslims in the Balkans, usually there are used the blue and black beads, snake skin, holed stones, etc.

The peoples of the Balkans have given a special magical power to the stones with holes. To heal from a headache, they saw the sun; they threw seeds in their fields through stones like these, hoping to give the right production. The cattle went through open caves in spring (they went in one side and went out to the other) hoping to make them healthy and to give them good production. Holed stones, in some countries are seen as means of treating the uncontrolled urination of children at night, by urinating in such stone and whispering "un-understandable" words to the child. In some cases, holed stones are hung on the doors or near bees, for abundance and fertility. In addition, in some certain regions of Kolonja (Albania) when children hear for the first time the song of the cuckoo, they take a stone and they say: "Cockoo, my head is a stone and yours is a fluid". They do this for the purpose of being strong in the future and feel pain.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Bota shqiptare 1943: 54-55)

In alternative medicine of the Balkans it is very well-known the tying and untying of nodes, the tying and measurement of the sick person with different threads, belts, fabric and very often accompanied by the whispering of secret words to have health, to be protected by the casting an eye on, demons, etc.

Moreover, to tie the destiny of a girl or boy, not to get married in the future, they took threads and measured the donkey from the head to the tail and then from one hip to the other. Then they put the thread in a box, and they whispered three times the words “close the faith of... (the name of the girl or boy)”. They took the box closed and on Saint George’s Day they threw the box in a septic hole.¹⁸²

There is of a great usage and very common in the region keeping amulets – magical objects that were put magical or supernatural powers on, to be protected by evil forces, vampires, curses, casting of an eye, snakes and a lot of other disasters. In the Balkans there has been used the mirror during the magic, magical healing, whereas the reaping hook is used in protecting rituals. In Muslims, amulets and beads are more common, which they generally hang or sew them in clothes.

In almost all the countries in the Balkans, we notice the presence of wizards (magicians), especially those who practice black magic. Magicians are generally old women that do magic with threads, hair, mouse stool, cat or dog stool, or even human stool, to make evil magic to the enemies of their house, in the village. For example, in some regions of the North of Albania, it was believed that “when they hate someone and they want to deprive someone of their health, they took hair; they put it on a grave or under the head of a dead person. With this act it was believed that the person would start palling and staying in bed until death.”¹⁸³

The belief in wizards, foretellers and the power of prophecies and various explanations of dreams, in magic rituals, things and drinks, in the magical function of words, has always been present in life, especially during war, social riots and transitions, when the man faced illnesses and the death of a relative, when the man faced hunger and when he feels hurt, threatened, abandoned. Then everything gets another meaning and become a means to face the impossible, and the faith in an unseen power that can help when there is nothing left but hope that the man can survive even in most impossible conditions. Sometimes, such a belief creates a fake utopia for a better life, to solve problems, to gain more power, which even when they cannot defeat evil forces, at least they can help him to be protected from them or to face them.

In these people, it is very known the belief in wonder powers of the water. The cult of waters, known as sacred water or healing water, singing water or as it is called blessing water. The belief in healing power of water is present in the Muslims of Balkans. We notice in this group also the ritual of throwing water behind their back, in order that everything can flow like the water flows in a river.

Since ancient times, it is mentioned the fact of giving gifts to the Gods or sacrifices made for them, their worship in monasteries, churches, etc. The sacrifice is a known habit in all religions. They are given for the health of people and animals, to heal sick people, “to protect them from evil”. Some magic rituals serve as a testimony of cultural unity of the Balkans.

For this reason, prophylactic magic is based on the principles of positive imitating magic, or on the faith that disease, in a symbolic way, can be transferred from one object to another. Magic enables the reaching of something that can protect the individual or the community in general. Furthermore, because of the invisible forces, it comes to the visible world in other spheres and all of this is made possible by practicing different magical effects (Celakoski 1989: 16).

In this context, “beside their social state, when people feel the need, in many cases, they do not avoid magicians, but they refer to them for help” (Vrazinovski 1989: 88). For this reason, in many countries “magical rituals are shocking and they resemble screams or pain that come from the bottom of their heart and tongue. Words echo, suffer and search another way to relieve from the burden they have. The words thrown on disasters are more shocking, because they tend to change the merciless way of faith” (Kletnikov 1987: 273).

Different beliefs have followed human development since ancient times and they have represented it even today, by becoming part of human life. Different beliefs are as ancient as other religions, even more ancient. They preserve as archives the remains of previous phases of human development (Barjaktarevic 1958: 6).

The rituals regarding the birth of a baby boy exist in all nations and this is done through the rituals and customs like holding a baby boy in front of the bride. In Christian people there is a tradition that a boy should lead before entering the house of the groom, whereas in Muslims a boy rolls over the bed of the newly married couple, before even the couple sits there. This is done with the purpose that the bride gives birth to baby boys and not girls. With this ritual it is strengthened the sense of faith and spiritual connection to the gods. Thus, with ritual acts it is requested to fulfill the desires and wishes in a natural way: with mysterious means, with similarities, accompanies, through words (prays, curses or different magic formula), with scaring acts, etc.

¹⁸² I. Dalliu - Magjite..., “Dituria”, 1928 4: 149)

¹⁸³ Z. Harapi, Menijt, 1940: Shkoder, Folklori I, Sht.ZP: 79)

But if in patriarchal societies the ritual is the center of existence, fulfilled with a deep semantic and symbolic content, in traditional culture it gradually loses the primary archaic meaning, it gains new religious dimensions and in many cases, a big number of celebration functions lose their role.

In the fourteenth century, the peoples of the Balkans were invaded by Ottomans, who brought a different kind of radical and Muslim culture, which dominated the countries of the Balkans until they were freed. It derives very well current myths and new ones, which are dedicated to the Turkish people, that later one are accepted even by other countries of Balkans, for different reasons. This is a very difficult period for Christian culture, which has stayed for a very long time without its education and it faced different folkloric changes.

Celebrations during winter in the Balkans are related to the belief to defeat the evil forces of the nature – demons, devils, vampires, fairies, dead people who cannot find peace, who are mostly defeated by carnivals and fires. The unlucky Tuesday (people didn't work so the cattle did not get sick) is present in all peoples of the Balkans, besides their religions.

In general, in the Slavic religious system, as well as other special Slavic religious systems, goddesses are also present, divine creatures seen as female creatures. There are testimonies¹⁸⁴ that in the sixth century people worshiped a female God: "Sun and rain and all the goods are given to us by her, because she has the power to give life and death to whoever she wants".

Through this, it is surprising the solidarity of people, especially female solidarity, because women traditionally are connected to the house, whereas men went to exile or in the army. In the rituals of life, the woman takes part in rituals of birth and funerals. After the birth of the child, it is the tradition that in the first days, only women could visit the mother. The dead people could be washed, dressed and burnt only by women. It is women who sing in weddings, when the groom is dressed and they mourn the dead. Some celebrations have a female character, like the ones dedicated to diseases (St. Barbara), snakes and wild animals and the scarification in the autumn.

In another characteristic is also the belief in the vampires, which dates back to ancient times and for this reason we cannot determine clearly their form and their time and space dimension. What we know now relate only to some thesis of bloodsucking demons that can live only by sucking blood from human beings. As such, they have been mentioned in a lot of mythological short stories, popular beliefs and written literature. Their function urges different metaphorical interpretation related to the contemporary points of view in the Balkans.

Bearing in mind the spread, the presence and the preservation of the motif in our region, a lot of scholars consider its origin in the Balkans. Among them, we can mention John Leon in "Modern Green Mythology and Ancient Greek Religion" that "vampires are invented by the Slavs, like the devil is an invention of Christian religion" (Lawson 1946: 376). This idea relates also with the assumptions of Alexander Brikner, according to whom "the classic notion and the form of the vampire in the seventeenth century, started somewhere in the Balkans, from Macedonia, through fables with vampires that later on spread through all Europe" (Brikner 1985: 283). The same idea shared the Polish scholar Kazimir Moszynski, according to whom "the name vampire in Macedonian goes to Serbians and Croats... and later on to all Slavs through all Europe" (Moszynski 1967: 658-659).

By comparing the rituals of funerals in some of the most ancient nations, Cajkanovic noticed that the ritual of keeping the dead body for some time before it is buried is mentioned in Apuleius in *Metamorphosis* (Apuleius 1975: 2, 21) connecting it to the area of Thessaly in the town of Larisa. This ritual is preserved mostly in the Balkans, whereas it is not seen in other ancient cultures or even in the modern one, like the Indian one. This strengthens the thesis mentioned above. The interpretations for its creation are connected to the purpose that no devil animal (bird, dog, cat, mice) where the soul of a person rests, can harm the dead by jumping or by turning it into a vampire with a soul that wanders in the night and that can damage the life of alive people (Malinov 2000: 61).

In fact, according to the convictions of the scientists who have dealt with these problems, beside universal spread, the cosmogonies preserved myths are a few. They are mostly a heritage of those people who had the chance to preserve something from the ancient culture (Radin 1996: 5). These mythological short stories with the passing of time become part of the popular belief in vampires, which serves as a source for the literature of current nations of the Balkans. New animist beliefs in demon creatures of all kinds are related to the literary tradition, including here vampires; they have their origin in dirty creatures, like not baptized children, those who committed suicide, cursed people, those having demons in their souls or a dirty soul (Tolstoy, Radenkovic 2001: 383).

The dog and the wolf are the most common terry morph icon of vampires in most Indo-European peoples. Chajkanovic in his book "Myth and religion in Serbians" lists a lot of examples in Slavic, Greek, German and Celtic countries (Chajkanovic 1973: 322), where you can notice the belief that the dead that come out of the grave have the form of the wolf, in which it is hidden the soul of the dead person and for this reason vampires have also been called "wolf people" (Spirovska, Vrazinovski 1988: 8). This kind of variety in beliefs leads you to the conclusion that they are very old and maybe the origin comes from the imagination of the wolf, as a presentation of gods from the

¹⁸⁴ Eliade, M. *De la Zalmoxis* Genhis Han Paris, 1970: 11.

underworld (Chajkanovic 1973: 458). Moreover, a lot of cults of gods and mythological creatures of pagan religions, which are related to the kingdom of dead, refer to a negative valorization connected to frightening and evil forms of the wolf, with howling, biting, eager desire for the dark (Durand 1991: 77).

Blood and its sucking known as features of vampires in massive contemporary cultures, do not have metaphorical meaning just in the beginning. In the modern world possibilities for interpretations are increasing because the vampire is not just a human being, but it also has to be scary, with hypnotizing look and sharp teeth to bite the victim. In a broader sense, stories about vampires, which are still considered as mysterious creatures, make the cosmogony pillar of the world. For this reason they are still part of the popular consciousness, as well as in the art and culture in the Balkans.

Examination of traditional rituals of the people of Balkans is very interesting today, because it gives responses to a lot of issues. On one hand, they are connected to the history, ethnic, sub ethnic and religious belongings of their preachers and on the other hand, with the characteristics of their culture.

These rituals and religions have a long tradition, especially in patriarchal environments. They are part of the understanding of the world and they are made in a certain time and in certain ways. They are learned and practiced like the chores at home, or with the cattle. Their role in everyday life in general and in special occasions is of a great importance. Belief and rituals passed to other generations and innovations could hardly influence, because people in the past were led by their belief in themselves. People believed mostly in supernatural powers than in contemporary medicine, especially in cases when they called a witch or magician, who knows secret tricks, appropriate ritual in a certain case, which is generally connected to magic verbal formula, or any other prophylactic magic, especially when the person is sick, if they will survive or not. And in this case, the help of the doctor was needed only when all other means were used and very often it had no result.

However, basic rituals are destined to cyclic continuous and unchangeable reproduction of these myths, and their extremity is also preserved. Passing these rituals from one generation to the other is the main care of a society and with this people shares their common experience, their help and the education of the young by the elderly, how they can act in certain situations; and this makes their life more interesting. This is how the rhythm and sacred order is preserved in the tradition, but also in their identity, by differentiating one from the other, from the foreigners, through their rituals and accompanying images.

In industrialized and post industrialized societies traditional religious rituals are substituted by civilized ones. There are also a lot of cases which have become part of the life in a certain town, like the celebration of different saints, carnivals or even Saint Valentine, in the western countries. But nowadays, even in the Balkans, these celebrations have been present, even though they still remain isolated in the villages (dominating model for the Eastern Europe).

Magic practices are mostly of a psychological character and the faith in their realization does not disappear, but it is present even nowadays, partly in another form (for example, "reading" the cup of coffee or reading cards). Of course, these elements, even though being of a more current character, continue to identify us as part of Balkans community.

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