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SOME THEATRICAL ELEMENTS IN THE CARNIVAL RITES OF THE BALKAN PEOPLES

Although there has lately been more and more worldwide research which has focussed on the oral tradition of folk theatre, in the field of Balkanology, with the exception of isolated studies, no systematic or comprehensive work has as yet been done on this type of folk tradition. For this reason the Balkanological Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts took an important step recently in organizing a special conference devoted to the study of folk theatre in the Balkans.

With a view to further and more probing investigation of this interesting question, I shall try, to review and isolate certain theatrical elements in Balkan masked carnival rites.

First of all I shall give a brief description of the typical ways in which three Balkan carnival rites are performed: the Kalogeros in Greece, the Kukeri in Bulgaria and the Oale in Serbia; afterwards I shall analyse the material and draw some conclusions.

The Kalogeros

The masked players are in groups, with one to two Kalogeros, dressed in animal skins and with masks over their faces. They have bells hung round their waists and they carry staves. One of them holds a large wooden phallus, and another scatters ashes from an air gun over the spectators. In some places they also carry sacks of ashes for the same purpose. They are followed by an old woman dressed in rags, who carries a basket with a doll in it, likewise dressed in rags, representing a baby. The procession is concluded by two or more young men dressed as brides, who are known as gipsy-women. They carry swords

and whips to protect the group from being teased by the onlookers. In some places a black man and a doctor are added to the procession. The unruly group goes around dancing, making a row, teasing the onlookers in the street and at the windows along the street, and asking for presents, usually in the form of food. At last they reach the village market place, where one of the Kalogeros marries one of the brides, using the wooden phallus to simulate sexual intercourse with her. The other Kalogeros flies into a rage and kills the newly married Kalogeros. Then his wife flings herself on her dead husbands' body, weeping and wailing. Finally the dead Kalogeros returns to life by his own powers or with the help of the doctor.¹

In Thrace this performance is combined with an actual process of ploughing. Two brides are yoked to the plough, which they pull three times round the village market place. A sower goes with them and scatters seed from a sieve. While this is going on, the onlookers shout: „Ten piastres a kilo of wheat”, „Five piastres a kilo of rye”, „Three piastres a kilo of barley”, „Amen, O God”, „For the poor to have food, O God, feed the poor”.²

Kukeri

The group of masked players is made up of: the Kuker, an old woman, young men, girls, an Emperor, his body guard, often also a Moor, a priest, a doctor, a bear-keeper, a gipsy etc.

The most important person is the Kuker. He is dressed in a sheepskin or goatskin, with the hair on the outside. On his head he usually has a mask made of fur, with horns and ears. A red pepper serves as a nose. Behind he wears a fox's tail and in front, either hidden under the fur or exposed to view, a carved wooden phallus, painted red. He is armed with a broom, a wooden sabre or a staff. The old woman is dressed in an old female folk costume of local type. She has a hump on her back, and is sometimes represented as pregnant. Her face is either powdered or rouged as if she were a bride, or else hideously blackened. She often carries a distaff and spins, and sometimes has a baby — a doll wrapped in rags. The young men and girls are dressed in local folk costumes and are powdered with flour and rouged. The Emperor is usually a well dressed young man in a cloak, often with a long beard, and has on his head as a crown a basket wound round with a white handkerchief. Pieces of metal representing medals are hung round his neck. He smokes a long pipe. He is usually accompanied by a bodyguard or rides

¹ St. Kyriakides, *Two Studies on Modern Greek Folklore*, Thessaloniki 1968, 106—107.

² *Ibid.*

in a car. Some bodyguards wear red belts and are called soldiers or, in Turkish, *sejmens*. The *Kadijas* and Turkish tax-collectors carry chains and notebooks for collecting taxes. The priest is dressed in a cassock or wrapped in a blanket. The gipsies and bear-keepers are in rags, their faces blackened with soot.³

The *Kukeri* go along the streets and round the houses in the village, making an enormous noise and din. They dance with deafening shouts, jump up and down, strike their bells and joke with the spectators, chasing the girls through the audience with the intention of simulating intercourse with them with the wooden phallus; they do this above all with the old woman. The priest has an appropriate rôle: he marries the *Kuker* to the old woman, or the masked young men to the girls. The doctor is at hand to help if any of the players collapses with exhaustion or pretends to fall ill.⁴

At the end of the performance the Emperor appears. He is carried on carpets or is in a cart. The group goes to the market place, where the villagers, male and female, adults and children, are assembled. A communal feast is prepared, over which the Emperor presides, together with the worthies of the village and without any of the masked players. They, in the meanwhile, led by the old woman, yoke themselves to a plough. A rope tied to the plough is inconspicuously cast round the Emperor's chest. The Emperor, holding a glass of wine in his hand, pronounces toasts and good wishes for a plentiful harvest, many children and so on. At the same time the masked players pull on the rope which binds the Emperor and he falls down, then suddenly seizes the plough and starts driving it with the others yoked to it. After halting several times he takes a measure of grain and sows it. At this point the people drawing the plough get in his way, he falls down and drops the measure of grain, and this is all repeated three times. As he ploughs, he strikes the assembled people with a stick. When evening falls, he is led home, where he prepares a feast.⁵

Oale

Masked carnival processions are met with in Serbia under various names: *ole*, *oale*, *dalije*, *divlje svadbe* (wildwedding), *dedice* and so on.

A group of young men, single or married, with masks corresponding to their rôles, perform a wedding ceremony with the bride, the bridegroom, the two witnesses (*stari svat* and *kum*) the bridegroom's brother, father and mother, the priest and the

³ X. Вакарелски, *Етнография на България*, София, 1974, 705.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 703.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 704.

other wedding guests. Each person makes himself an appropriate mask for the part and function which he has. The bride is in a white dress, with a veil on her head and a wreath of thorns, the groom has a long beard and moustaches, the priest wears a cassock and a monk's tall headdress (kamilavka) and instead of a real censer holds an old tin containing live coals and dry paprika to cense with, and a cauldron of water and a brush to sprinkle with. The two witnesses hold wooden candles, the master of ceremonies is in rags, with bells round his waist and knees. The bridegroom's father and mother are also in rags. He carries a staff, the „mačuga”, thicker at one end than at the other, symbolizing a phallus, and she carries a basket containing a rag-doll which represents a baby. They are in masks so that no-one can recognize them. They are all on horseback and ride to the accompaniment of deafening music round the village and houses, in front of which they dance wildly and invoke blessings for fertility. When they reach this pitch of excitement, the bridegroom's father assaults the bride with the staff, simulating sexual intercourse with her. When the procession round the village is over, the wedding of the bride and groom is celebrated under a tree, after which dancing starts, accompanied by a tremendous amount of knock-about confusion. At the end the bridegroom has to die, and the „wild wedding” turns into a „wild wake”, at which the bride laments and the priest holds a funeral service. Finally the bridegroom comes to life again.⁶

Even a crude comparison of the carnival rites from Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia which have just been described reveals unquestionable similarities and coincidences. These are understandable if we bear in mind that the exceptionally close parallels in the social and historical circumstances of Balkan patriarchal society gave rise to a heavy predominance of common and identical elements in material and spiritual life. For centuries the systems of belief and of ethical values remained unchanged (similar or the same) in the patriarchal communities of the Balkans. Even after the break with patriarchal ways, the reflexes of the common Balkan cultural and ethical traditions continued to live for a long time. This is the background against which we can set the marked similarities and common features in the masked carnival rites which I have described.

I shall leave aside the magical and religious significance of these ritual performances. This aspect has received sufficient attention in anthropological literature from Fraser's time to our day. Instead I shall here try to examine them from the point of view of the theatre, as ritual performances which have interesting visual dramatic elements. It is true that there are

⁶ Д. Антонијевић, *Алексиначко поморавље*, СЕЗБ LXXXIII, Београд 1971, 181.

scattered references to such elements and accounts of them — to mention a few authors, by Kakouri and Puchner in Greece, Arnaudov and Kacarova in Bulgaria, Matić and Antonijević in Serbia etc. However, as I remarked at the beginning, as yet there is no comprehensive theatrical study which takes in the whole of the Balkan area.

In the rest of this account I shall concentrate on those aspects which in my view could be considered as embryonic theatrical forms. Of course they are not performed as theatre proper, but they represent a particular type of pretheatrical ritual performance, the so-called „Urfeld” as Puchner calls it, or „forecourt of Thalia” as I term it.

One. The masked ritual performances in themselves, taken as a whole, are a kind of action or act in which certain human relationships are established. Of course this element on its own is not sufficient for such performances to be called theatrical. Some writers go too far in treating action as a universal distinctive feature of drama. Action as a characteristic of theatrical art is only one of the necessary conditions for drama.

Another necessary condition is an area for the performance to take place in. This can be a place of cult or ritual significance, the assembly place of the village, the market place, the street or an enclosed area (a house or café). The village market is the place where the inhabitants of the village meet and mix every day and so it is the best site in which to perform large-scale carnival rites with a scenic element.

Two. From the point of view of the „spectacle” the stage props are of particular theatrical importance, especially the animal costumes because of their deep-rooted magicoreligious associations. The transformation or disguising of a man with the help of masks, movements, mimes and speech is one of the necessary conditions for all drama. It is rightly pointed out that masks have always been the tools of (supernatural) power.

Three. For any masked ritual performance the players choose their rôles themselves and must possess certain qualities — for instance they must be coitty, they must be able to mimic, to speak well and so on. The players sometimes spend a long time getting ready, they make their masks and the rest of their costumes and sometimes learn their parts. These elements impart a certain theatrical character.

Four. The strongest dramatic moment is the death of the principal hero and his revival. This scene expresses an optimistic, rather than a pessimistic attitude, a confident belief that man can influence nature in her various moods, that he can affect the processes of reproduction by means of a magico-religious ritual which forms a bridge between the real and the super-natural. In all these complex activities, symbols and groups of symbols play a principal part.

The lament over the dead hero, besides its profound magico-religious significance, points forward to a future without pessimism and self-destruction. It rather expresses ideas of self-preservation and the assurance of a better and happier future life, and even casts light retrospectively on the beginnings of consciously dramatized mourning for the dead. According to some scholars, the actual lament over the dead can be regarded as the starting point from which tragedy developed.⁷

This tragic element in the masked ritual performance may in fact be an embryonic stage in the development of the aesthetic category of the tragic.⁸

Five. In masked carnival rites which are intended to ensure prosperity, the elements of tragedy and comedy go hand-in-hand. This, according to Kakouri, „supports the argument that tragedy and comedy have the same sacral origins“.⁹

Apart from this, comic improvisations emerge in a countless variety of forms, for instance in the simulated act of sexual intercourse, which is a necessary and integral part of the ritual performance. This scene in particular gives people a chance to enjoy themselves without restraint.¹⁰

It is well known that the church authorities repeatedly condemned and anathematized carnival rites which gave scape for the expression of unbridled human passions and above all for obscenity.

Certainly the portrayal of unsatisfied human urges leads to heightened nervous tension and stimulates latent or concealed energy. The expression of human passions in these ritual performances gives nature uncontrollable (uncanny) force in the area of sexual liberty, and this is in direct conflict with the rules imposed by a patriarchal society. Thus what is deeply buried in man comes to the surface in these carnival rites.

Six. The masked players often engage in dialogue with the spectators. During the conversation they disguise their voices, as they have to portray the characters which they represent in the parts which they play. The course of development which the performance takes amidst the public and the deliberate changing of the words in improvised conversation can fairly be regarded as a precursor of dramatic dialogue.¹¹

The dialogue is particularly prominent in the scenes of symbolic ploughing and sowing, when the sower enters into conversation with the onlookers. The language of the monologues and dialogues is the everyday language, often rough and coarse, of the village people.

⁷ K. J. Kakouri, *Dionysiaka*, Athens 1965, 111.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

The masked players do not learn their parts, they know the content of the ritual (as some habitually take the same rôles for years on end) and when they are performing they can improvise with complete ease.¹²

Seven. The question of the spectators' rôle is especially important. In these ritual performances the actors and spectators form a single whole. Thus the difference between performers and audience is lost or does not exist; the carnival rite is a closed psychological system.

The collective participation of performers and spectators is the main characteristic of folk drama. Each individual takes immediate part in the performance and can at any moment change position (between player and audience), something completely contrary to the institutionalized theatre, in which the performer (the actor) is clearly distinguished from the spectator or hearer.¹³

Everyone is united in the carnival rite, everyone has the chance to show himself and his worth. They are all aware that each individual can take part in the performance and that they all share the same acknowledged communal values. People are not divided, not alienated from one another, and for this reason the carnival rites are readily accepted.

In these communal ritual performances a sense of brotherhood, peace and liberty, equity and innocence reigns. It can be said that everyone joins in one great common round dance in which they all embrace, laugh and wish each other well, expressing their friendly feelings, in a word, that warmth and tenderness which is common to all individuals. As a consequence, Rousseau would say, people (communities) come to be more closely united.

Finally I should like to emphasize the fact that all the elements which I have isolated in this analysis and characterized as theatrical can, in my view, be regarded without qualification as valuable sources from which we can draw convincing arguments in studying the genesis of the theatre in general.

¹² N. Bonifacić-Rožin, *Svadbena igra »Traženje ptice« kod Valvasora i danas*, Narodno stvaralaštvo — Folklor 1, Beograd 1962, 30.

¹³ B. E. Гусев, *Истоки русского народного театра*, Ленинград 1977, 6.

НЕКИ ТЕАТРОЛОШКИ ЕЛЕМЕНТИ У ПОКЛАДНИМ ОБРЕДИМА БАЛКАНСКИХ НАРОДА

Резиме

У продужетку наших проучавања, вредновања и продубљивања усменог фолклорног театра на Балкану, овим радом покушавамо да одредимо неке битне театролошке елементе у обредним играма под маскама. За анализу овог феномена узели смо три игре: Калогери у Грчкој, Кукери у Бугарској и Оале у Југославији. И груба аналогија поменутих обредних игара, открива несумњиве сличности и невероватне подударности. Оне су разумљиве ако се има у виду да је изузетна сродност социјалних и историјских прилика у балканском патријархалном друштву турског периода довела до снажног заједништва и идентичности у материјалном и духовном животу. Систем веровања и етичких вредности вековима су били непромењени у балканским патријархалним срединама. Чак и после раскида са патријархалним режимом, рефлексии балканског културног и етичког заједништва остали су дуго да живе. У овом раду остављамо по страни магијско-религиозна значења ових обредних игара, и приступамо изналажењу неких театролошких елемената у њима, а који, по нашем мишљењу, означавају извесне ембрионалне театарске форме.

На првом месту, ту је сама акција, радња, чин и дијалог којим се успостављају специфични односи унутар игре (играча и извођача). Затим простор (место) где се игра изводи заједно са посматрачима-публиком која не остаје хладна и пасивна. Колективно учешће извођача и посматрача је главна карактеристика народног глумовања. Овде је сваки човек непосредни учесник у игри. Реч је о лицима која у сваком моменту могу да мењају места, што је сасвим супротно институционалном позоришту, где је глумац дефинитивно раздвојен од гледалаца.

Са гледишта „спектакла“, сценска опрема има изузетан позоришни значај. Нарочито животињске маске и костими. Преображавање-прерушавање човека у неки лик, помоћу маске, покрета, мимике или речи, један је од неопходних услова сваке драме.

За било коју игру под маскама извођачи се бирају међу собом. Они морају поседовати извесне квалитете, да су, рецимо, духовити, да могу да имитирају, да добро говоре и слично. Извођачи се понекад дуготрајно припремају, праве маске (костиме) и друге реквизите, а понекад уче и своје улоге.

Оно што чини драмски најјачи тренутак јесте само умирање јунака и његово ускрснуће. Ова сцена носи идеју оптимизма, вере и убеђења, да човек може утицати на природу и токове њене ћуди, да може да делује на процесе производње магијско-религијском игром, која чини мост између стварног и натприродног. У свим тим сложеним поступцима главну улогу играју симболи и симболички низови. Ламент над мртвим главним јунаком, поред превасходно дубоког магијско-религијског значаја, указује на будућност у којој нема песимизма и самоуништавања. Овај трагични елемент у игри под маскама открива ембрионалну фазу естетске категорије трагичног. Међутим, трагични елемент и елемент комедије иду паралелно, што оправдава аргумент да су трагедија и комедија из истог светог извора. Комичне ситуације се јављају у безброј варијаната, рецимо симулирање коитуса, што пружа одушке народном расположењу и весељу. Сви су здружени у овој игри у својој једнодушности, приказујући себе и своје „вртине“. Свесни су да сваки појединац може да учествује у представи и да вредности једне људске групе сви признају. Људи се не деле, не отуђују.

Ово би били само неки од елемената које смо издвојили и протумачили да могу бити театролошки, и да се без резерве могу узети као изворни (исконски) у правцу проучавања генезе театра уопште. Сва се они, по нашем мишљењу, налазе у предворју Талијиног храма, или како их је Пухнер означио у предпољу (*Vorfeld*).