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DU PROFESSEUR RADOVAN SAMARDŽIĆ,  
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Dragoslav ANTONJEVIC  
 Institute for Balkan Studies  
 Belgrade

## A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF THE FOLKLORE RITUAL SUBSTRATUM IN THE BALKANS

Substratum is a problem that in recent folkloristic and ethnographic literature has been ever more frequently discussed. Attempts are being made to find out points of departure and to establish the continuity of various folkloristic and ethnographic phenomena, to acquire information about the past events which are connected with the present, and to underline the decisive role they play in the contemporary trends. In making inevitable references to the past we have often found out that we cannot be restricted by the »from — to« limits, because some folkloristic phenomena are rooted into the past much more remote than it can appear at first glance.

The Balkan Peninsula, with Yugoslavia as its central country, at the very frontier of what is called East and West, has been exposed to rich influences and it abounds in a wealth of interactions that existed between the most diverse cultures and civilizations in the past. In this respect the recent folklore material occupies a special and important place in the mosaïque of prehistoric, classical, Byzantine and Slav layers, on the one hand, and Central-European, on the other.

If we begin with prehistory on the face of archeological evidence, two basic elements in the Balkan folklore ritual come to the fore:

the Mediterranean, as older and sedentary, encompassing in its culture the whole of the Mediterranean and the Near East. The Mediterranean world bears witness to a strong communal spirit that existed in the spiritual culture, and it is a common knowledge that already in the third millenium B. C. it reached its height, embodied in the works of art, unsurpassed until today.

The Indo-European, the second and the younger component, stems from the newcomers and it has brought different cultural im-

pulses and outlooks on the world. Despite the lesser or greater divergences, and as an outcome of this duality, the Balkans have become a harmonious cultural centre, and with the emergence of organized societies it has been incorporated into every pore of the material and social fabric.

The cults of Magna Mater, Cybela, Isis as well as of Iranian Mithra and others have been brought to the Balkans from the Mediterranean cultural milieu, introducing the traditions of mysteries and orgiastic rites in their wake. Their main characteristics are the magic of fertility along with the awakening of the nature and the prompting of vital forces in men and in other living creatures. Remnants of those cults can be detected in ritual processions held at Christmas time, New Year's Eve, Epiphany (*Dodekameron*), and during the carnival, then in cattlebreeders' ritual *Premlaz*, in the celebration of St. John's Day (*Ivandan*), in rituals performed by *rusalije*, (water nymphs) and *Nestenaride*, as well as in similar rituals observed by almost all peoples in the Balkans. Blood sacrifice (bull, lamb, etc.) as well as various forms of fortune-telling by examining the entrails or shoulder blade of the sacrificed animal belong to the same cultural group. Telling the fortune by examining the shoulder blade is associated with Mithra's mysteries, while prophesying by examining the liver of the sheep (*brav*) was a Babylonian skill which spread all over the Mediterranean and was especially popular with the Etruscans.

A whole spectrum of beliefs and symbols associated with the Moon and its phases, in which the cosmogony of the myth about death and rebirth is reflected, can be traced back to the ancient Mediterranean cultures.

There is sufficient evidence even from later periods through which it is possible to establish, in varying degrees, the influence that the East has exercised over the Balkans. This is particularly true of the times of Alexander the Great when this influence was intensified. It is the time when the East was hellenised and the West was orientalised. The intermingling of oriental magics, superstition, mysticism, demonology, astrology and eschatology notions with Greek philosophy has resulted in a powerful syncretism.

By way of illustration we shall mention Dionysus' cult, which is confirmed in numerous epigraphic monuments. With its fraternities, which were made up of *mistas*, it spread all over the Balkans. As a god of fertility in men, cattle and in all the nature, Dionysus had all the attributes and instruments which were used in fertility rites. The remnants of this cult are particularly evident in mask dances performed by many Balkan peoples.

Mythological creatures of demoniac character play an important part in popular belief. Prominent among them are female beings such as *vile* (fairies), *samovile*, *samodive*, *nerheids* (sea-nymphs), *moiras*, *dzunas*, etc. In many respects these beings correspond to ancient Greco-Thracian nymphs. According to the latest linguistic and histo-

rical research carried by Dragojlović the South-Slav *samovile* are an inheritance of Thracian mythical origin. Their name has been derived from the Thracian goddess Jambadula. The author is of the opinion that the Roman language substratum in the Balkans has played a prominent part in the adaptation of this name. M. Eliade, in his discussion of Rumanian *dzunas* (fairies), has come to the conclusion that they bear traces of the Italic goddess Diana, who was protectress of women.

The contemporary Greek lamias, and Macedonian, Bulgarian and Kosovo *lamnjas* have their counterpart in the myths of *lamia Empusama*. The Greek *stuha* is another kind of demon which, to some extent, corresponds to the South-Slav *stuhač*. Likewise, *drakos*, who according to Greek tradition possesses superhuman powers, is identical with the Serbian *zmaj* (dragon) and the Bulgarian *zmej*.

Several details characteristic of popular belief with regard to death show in the Balkans a striking similarity with the classical cultural inheritance. Southern Slavs as well as Greeks believed that holes in the earth, pits and caves were the entrance to the underworld, which was reached by a waterway. At the entrance stood Charon as a relentless demon of death, to whom the dead must pay the fare across the water. For this reason money is placed on the lips or in the hand of the deceased. Christianity has transferred Charon's characteristics onto Archangel Michael, who delivers men of their souls by his sword.

Only very rarely can we follow the continuity of a cult through centuries as we can do in the case of *panspermis*. As an obligatory requisite at funerals and memorial feasts *panspermia* was known already in the classical times, and under this common term it was used both by Greeks and Southern Slavs in the description of church rituals in the Middle Ages.

The Slav newcomers into the eastern parts of the Balkans have been strongly influenced by Byzantine cultural elements. By way of illustration I shall mention only the Brumalias (*Vrumaliije*), the Byzantine fold festivities, which took place every winter solstice in the form of lascivious dances with grotesque animal masks and pantomime accompanied by prurient texts, and which were attacked and criticised by Church synods and prohibited by strict canons. In an earlier paper we have pointed out the striking identity that existed between the Byzantine scenario for the Brumalias and modern masked processions in the eastern parts of the Balkans, in an attempt to underline the elements of the Hellenistic and Dionysian religions and cults inherent in them. However, the masked processions in the western parts of the Balkans have been under the influence of the Roman Saturnalias, as has been proved by Gavazzi and Bonifacis-Rozin. The hypothesis that these parts of the Balkans have been influenced by the Roman and Romanic cultural inheritance is corroborated by some other customs as well.

The customs associated with certain annual calendar holidays, in spite of the Christian conceptions that the Church has superimposed upon them, have still preserved the ancient layers whose roots can be found in prehistory, classical times and Byzantium. Let us mention but a few details: Christian holidays that are observed between Christmas and Epiphany reveal distinct pagan features. The Christmas roast pig as a ritual sacrifice, possessing demoniac strength and magic powers, is nothing but an offering made in honour of Chronos and Demetra at winter solstice when people used to kill a pig to offer it to these deities. As for the holidays observed in spring, St. George's Day, a central holiday of all cattle-breeders, is celebrated by almost all Balkan peoples. Many magic acts performed on this day in order to ensure fertility, happiness and good health of people and their cattle show almost identical characteristics with those found in the religion of classical Greece and of Byzantium. Ritual swinging which was customary during the spring festivities was formerly part of Dionysius' festivals. The girls from Athens used to swing in order to honour the memory of Icarus's daughter Erigona.

In conclusion we wanted to point briefly at some substrata and to touch upon cultural layers and influences, mixed in the folklore of Balkan peoples, the origin of which lies in the distant past. It is only a bare sketch made for a future comparative and analytical study, which will include the corresponding genesis as well.

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