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A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF CULTS AND SYMBOLS OF BALKAN CATTLE-BREEDERS

Various important elements influence the preservation of old customs and beliefs for such a long time at the cattle-breeders in the Balkans, the one undoubtedly being the geographic environment, as well as, connected with it, the traditional nomadic and semi-nomadic mountainous cattle-breeding. Also relevant are complex and difficult to grasp historical factors. In that area we have to count on the results of archeology, philology and the other social sciences.

The whole life of cattle-breeders — beginning from the setting off to the pastures and returning from them, and to herding of livestock, processing of milk, curing, and performing the rights and duties of cattle-breeders' chiefs and seniors — was developing according to fixed and unwritten customary law. Isolated in the mountainous areas of the Balkans, the cattle-breeders have been able to preserve archaic customs and beliefs concerning the cattle, directly and indirectly.

All these beliefs had a definite function. They had been connected primarily to the objects, locality and time which, were of utmost importance for the life of the community, whose existence depended from the fertility and breeding of cattle.

On the basis of the grouping of holidays in the cattle-breeders' calendar one could conclude that much attention is given to the cults and beliefs which are connected with the period of Spring, which means of driving cattle to the mountains (*izdig*), as well as Autumn period, when the cattle descends to the valleys (*xdig*). In other words, these are periods when cattle-breeders' movements begin or end.

To the oldest layer of cattle-breeders cults in the Balkans belong the following: cult of fertility, of fire, of water, of vegetation, astral cults, cult of sacrifice, taboos etc. Archetypes of these cults are found in the prehistory. It would be erroneous if we would make comparisons between contemporary cults and those with the elements of prehistory, as this would mean neglecting of millenia of development and of unrepeatable social structures. Therefore, one should endeavour to find that complementary relationship which would help in explaining the present-day survivals of cattle-breeders' cults and symbols.

Within the cults and symbols of cattle-breeders we find the original and the most ancient religious system, which emanated out of the mystical interpretation of nature and of the deification of nature's powers. On the basis of these very beliefs corresponding magic rites and actions have been created.

The object of deification were the powers of nature imposing man's dependence on them, i. e. the sun, the water, fire, the stone, trees, animals . . . In order to avail oneself of their help and protection, or to acquire protection against their eventual regressive action, a whole series of characteristic and various actions and rites were formed by the cattle-breeders, and expressed through particular cults, as well as through specific behaviour towards the transcendental power wanted for help. This way of behaviour of cattle-breeders expressed through prayers, askings, sacrifices and the like, united the cattle-breeders into a firm community. Namely, they felt as being together by means of their common beliefs, feelings, anxieties, and gritudes to the divinity whose seat was believed to be in a tree, in the fire, in water, in the atone and the like.

In the neolithic of the Balkans, in the frames of the fertility cult, besides the personification of mother-ancestor or mother-earth in its various forms, an important role is played by the representations of animals. Representations of the ox and sheep on the terra-cottas of neolithic plastics are also connected with the fertility cult. Cattle bones are quite frequently used for making of amulets, which are considered as specially useful and effective.¹

Without entering into a more detailed and closer archeological analysis, it suffices to underline the fact that mentioned animal figures, related to the fertility cult and to the rites of the homeopatic magic, had a dominant role in the life of neolithic cattle-breeders. Moreover, they were also rather closely connected to ancient ways of domestication of these animals, which is witnessed by ample traces in the folklore tradition of Balkan peoples.²

Not only in the cattle-breeding areas, but also in farming regions in the Balkans, admiring of bull, of ox and of cattle was developed. There are special days in the year, such as „ox worshipping” when people does not work because of the benefit to the health of the cattle. Especially this kind of cattle

¹ D. Garašanin, *Religija i kult neolitskog čoveka na centralnom Balkanu (Religion and Cult of the Neolithic Man on Central Balkans)*, The Neolithic of the Central Balkans, National Museum, Beograd 1968, 224—225.

² *Ibid.*

should not be put in the yoke. In some areas cakes are prepared which are intended to this animal. Successful *apatropaion* is the amulet made out of the bull's bone, to which shepherds attribute mysterious protecting power against invisible evil beings, against thunder, snake's bite, illness etc.

There is a numerous magic plaiting of rites by which cattle-breeders want to increase fertility of the cattle, such as the following: a day before *Durdevdan* (St. George's Day) shepherds dig in an egg and a lump of salt and let them overnight in order to make cattle breed as ants do. Which the ritual *Durdevdan* lamb being served, the lamb's bones are gathered and dug in an anthill, so that sheep would breed just as ants do.

The sacrificing of the Saint George's Day Lamb (i. e. *Durdevdan* lamb) is one of the most significant cattle-breeders' cults. It synthesizes plants which in the days of Spring begin to grow luxuriant, thus providing good fodder for the cattle.

The fire is an obligatory follower of the summer mountain pasturing (*bačijanje*), beginning from the moment of initial gathering of the cattle and sheep until their final coming together. The oldest member of the cattle-breeders community, the *bač* sets the fire and takes care of it. Before the sunrise on *Durdevdan*, the shepherds drive cattle between two burning fires. In order for the cattle to be healthy a rite of „live fire“ is performed. The most widespread method for getting the live fire was by making friction of two peaces of dry wood. This archaic way of making fire brings us back to the ancient times of the prehistory.

The basic goal of magic rites connected with fire is to protect and ensure the cattle and returns from it during the grazing season in the mountains, by the figurative power of the magic of fire, which in the times past, was the source of life, the essence of all things and of complete nature.

It was always believed that the fire, as an element of exceptional phantasm, is connected with the future. Deep semantic import of fire amounts to the eternal flame of man's energy which strives towards distant horizons, towards conquering physical and spiritual worlds and the outer space.

The cult of vegetation is very developed by the cattle-breeders. Various plants which often have their ethno-medical significance are the object of adoration by cattle-breeders. Quite an example of this kind is the cult of St. Spruce at the Vlachs in the Carpathians, which was noted in the eighteenth century. The cattle-breeders believed that the trunk of the spruce had a divine power which helped people and their cattle. On the basis of such a belief a powerful connection between cattle-breeders, who have been the champions of the belief, and the trunk of the spruce had been established, while they offered to it sacrifices and prayers.³

The whipping of cattle on St. George's Day, as well as making of wreaths to be hanged around sheep's necks and used as ornaments for the sheepfolds, had a magic and symbolic meanings. This was a way for the new and fresh force to be introduced into everything alive, and particularly into herds of

³ W. Antoniewicz, K. Dobrowolski, W. H. Paryski, *Pasterstwo Tatr Polskich i Odhala*, Wrocław 1970, 187—192.

sheeps, so important for the existence of the social-productive community of cattle-breeders.

The willow is ascribed with exceptional magic meaning, and it is a symbol of immortality of nature and of source of life itself. The ancient Greeks too attributed the same significance to the willow tree. The use of a willow — a plant which is unable to grow without water — represents a talisman which brings along the rain. By striking the ground with willow twigs, one is about to cause rain. The sheep-folds are also tied with willow branches in order to obtain fertile and healthy cattle. At the Assumption Day shepherds make crosses out of willow twigs, as well as besoms, in order to clean up all evil. If the willow branch is burned in front of the door of a hut, evil powers shall be driven away.

The old custom of flagellation by using verges is intended to bring about fertility and abundance. It is also believed that by such an action damaging influences can be averted, such as evil gazes, evil spirits and the like, i. e. the ones which are always lurking and ready to attack both men and cattle. This is why the cattle-breeders whip one another with willow verges at particular days, and such a ritual is also used with the sheep.

The custom of ritual flagellation of boys was also related to the Artemis cult in Sparta, and boys' blood was supposed to spatter the altar of the goddess.⁴

We have noted at Vlachs raising cattle in the mountain of Pind in Greece that a species of pine-tree is believed to be able to protect people against lightnings and thunders. That pine-tree is usually topped with a small cross-like branch which, as believed by the local people, is never stricken by lightnings.

Springs in the mountain and the water in general, besides their particular practical significance, were important elements in the cults too. According to homeopathic magics by means of water one wants to increase the yield of milk during the summer pasturing in the mountains. That is why the sheeps are being sprinkled with spring waters, and the shepherdess-girls are thrown into the water.

Water too has strong magic effect. Its mythological basis is related to the origins of humankind which are found in the water. The water heals, it rejuvenates and ensures eternal life. It is necessary for purification and regeneration, wherefrom the beliefs according to which springs and rivers possess life and power, as well as eternity.

While doing field-work on Vlachs in the region of Ovče polje in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, we found out the details of the cult of the „herdsman stone". We have, namely, seen the Vlachs visiting this stone on the eve of Saint George's Day, in order to seek salvation against diseases of people and cattle. They perform certain rituals on the stone, sacrificing a lamb over the rock itself. At departure, they take away a small piece of that stone, and carry it the whole year around, as an amulet to insure protection

⁴ D. Srejšević — A. Cermanović, *Rečnik grčke i rimske mitologije (The Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology)*, Beograd 1979, 55.

against disease and any other evil. After the year is over, they return the pebble to its place in the rock.

The stone, with its hardness, expresses the force of supernatural powers, while its indestructibility symbolizes the durability of eternal existence. Some stones are considered also to be the dwelling-places of gods.

The standpoint is widely accepted in relevant literature according to which the Indo-European peoples have brought to Europe the cult of sun (solar cult).

It is also known that the cattle-breeders' tribes of the Bronze Age have left traces in the stone on which the sun calendar was designed, with the dates of solstices fixed in advance, i. e. the notes of the days of performing particular rituals which were intended to make, in a magic way, the nature fertile.⁵

The astral cults are also known to the Balkan cattle-breeders. This is understandable since the very existence of cattle-breeders in the mountains depends on the sun and rain. Whereof the symbolic acts and beliefs conjuring the power and force of sun, such as: the ritual bread called the „sun”, which is being broken on St. George's Day at the doors of sheepfolds at the moment of sunrise. In the antiquity as well as in prehistory the cult of the sun was related to fetishism, sacral prostitution and sacrificing of humans.

A rather developed custom of encircling flocks of sheep with dancing, accompanied by a unison singing during the first milking of sheep at the summer mountain settlements is an outstanding characteristic of the Balkan cattle-breeders' folklore. Dancing around something — in this case around sheep or cattle — is documented on the cave paintings dating from the late paleolithic. This magic encircling by an enclosed ring (circle) in the direction of the movement of sun is also a trace of an ancient cult of the sun known to all Indo-European peoples.

Cult offerings at Balkan cattle-breeders are manifest in various aspects. Sacrificed are: sheep, lamb, ox, but also milk and milk products (cheese and cream). Thus, no cattle-breeder, no summer mountain settlement, would miss to slaughter a lamb for Đurđevdan, regardless of their present-day religious or national affiliation. At the common feast, each cattle-breeder has to taste from everybody's food (i. e. lamb). In this case we have a clear manifestation of the collectivistic trait of the primitive mentality, according to which everybody should participate in everybody's belongings, as it is believed that everything is mutually dependable. In other words, everything depends on the power and prosperity of the whole social and productive community of the clan and cattle-breeder type.⁶

According to some religious theoreticians the slaughtering of lamb, as a typical sacrificing ceremony, together with the prohibition of eating lamb's

⁵ *Religiozni obredi, obižaji i simboli (Religious Rituals, Customs and Symbols)*, Beograd 1980, 317.

⁶ D. Nedeljković, Đurđevdansko jagnje i „kravaj” u Maleševu kao participacioni relikv primitivnog kolektivnog mentaliteta (*Đurđevdan lamb and „kravaj” in Maleševu as a participative relics of the primitive collective mentality*), *Vjesnik Etnografskog muzeja IV*, Zagreb 1938, 55.

meat until *Durdevdan* (beginning of May) point to ancient traces of totemism. This totem-rite of Balkan cattle-breeder's otherwise known to other peoples too, is confirmed by archeological findings, since representations of cattle and sheep on terra-cottas on neolithic plastics of the Central Balkans witness to a very developed totemism.⁷

Another contribution to mentioned conclusion is the belief that bones of sacrificed lamb have a magic power of foretelling the future and destiny of flocks and people, but the power of fertility as well. Also the interpreting of signs on the liver of sacrificed lamb is treated as cattle-breeders' particularity. Liver was considered a center of life so that its appearance reflected general state of affairs in the universe. Therefore an able interpreter could learn the will of gods at the moment of sacrificing. The hepatoscopy, i. e. fortune-telling by means of liver, has been rather developed along the Mediterranean Basin, and particularly in the land of Etruscans. This is witnessed by the famous bronze model of liver, used in the ceremony of introducing priest candidates into the mystery of fortune-telling. And true, the priests did not rely on intuition when they were looking into the intestines of sacrificed animals, using instead specific formulae which were almost of a mathematic character.⁸

Generally speaking, sacrificing cults of the Balkan cattle-breeders are connected mostly to the old-Mediterranean and pre-Indo-European religiosity.

To conclude briefly: related to cults and symbols of the Balkan cattle-breeders are two religious conceptions and traditions, i. e. the Indo-European, whose bearers are immigrants, and the Mediterranean, which is aboriginal. The rich archeological materials discovered in the Balkans are a significant source for Studying above mentioned traditions. But to these one should add the necessary Hellenistic interpretation, as well as all those layers of customs and beliefs of the peoples with whom Balkan cattle-breeders, nomads and semi-nomads, were in direct and indirect contact. Also relevant are many elements in cattle-breeders customs and beliefs in which one recognizes Thracian Dyonisos or Illiric Sylvan. Of particular importance is the issue of relation between the Balkan cattle-breeders' cults and beliefs, from the one hand, Slavic religion, from the other. In other words, it is a fact that South Slavs, after their arrival to the Balkans, accepted from the aborigines the ways of nomadic and semi-nomadic mountain pasturing and cattle-breeding, which also should be borne in mind.

⁷ D. Garašanin, *op. cit.*, 244.

⁸ J. Wellard, *The Search for the Etruscans*, London 1973, 145.

ПРИЛОГ ПРОУЧАВАЊУ КУЛТОВА И СИМБОЛА КОД БАЛКАНСКИХ
СТОЧАРА

Резиме

Реч је о краћем раду из области балканске религије који више отвара и назначује проблеме, али и који покушава да одговори или реши нека питања.

У култовима и симболима аутор се сусреће са веома старим религиозним системима, насталим из мистичне интерпретације природе и деификације њених сила од којих је човек био зависан (сунце, вода, камен, дрвеће, животиње и др.). Да би се добила њихова помоћ, или се евентуално заштитили од њиховог регресивног деловања, балкански сточари су створили читав систем специфичних облика понашања у одржавању култова. Молитве, жртве упућене безименим трансценденталним силама смештеним у дрвету, води, камену, ватри, итд., прожимају сваки обред.

Архетипове сточарским култовима аутор налази у праисторији, античким и оријенталним митовима.

У оквиру култа плодности, осим трансформације мајке-претка или мајке-земље, у њеним разним варијацијама, видну улогу играју представе животиња познате на теракотама неолитске пластике централног Балкана. У култу плодности магијским сплетом обреда сточар жели да повећа плодност стоке, здравље, напредак и приносе.

Култ ватре као обележје једног изузетног фантазма, посебно у извођењу „живе ватре“, има доминантну улогу у сточарским обредима. Основни циљ магије ватре је да се стока и приноси од ње заштите и обезбеде преносном снагом магије ватре која је у далекој прошлости била извор живота, суштине ствари и свеколике природе. Дубоки семантички смисао ватре значи продубљени пламен човекове енергије који тежи за даљим хоризонтима на пољу освајања физичког и духовног света.

Култ вегетације је врло развијен код сточара. Разне биљке које често имају етномедицински значај предмет су обожавана сточара. Упечатљив пример чини култ св. Смреке код Валха, који верују да у њеном стаблу постоји божанска сила која може помоћи људима и стоци. Код пиндских Влаха у Грчкој, бор посебне врсте може да заштити човека и стоку од муње и грома. Врби се такође придаје изузетно магијско значење као симболу бесмртности природе и извора живота. Стари обичај флагелације прутевима има за циљ остварење плодности и изобиља. Уз то, овим се чином желе да отклоне штетни утицаји (зли погледи, зли духови), који стално вребају и користе погодне тренутке да нападну човека и његову стоку. Због тога се сточари међусобно шибāju у одређене дане у години, врбовим прутевима, а тај ритуал примењују и на овцама.

Вода поред свог изузетног практичног значаја има одређену улогу и у култу. Водом се према прописима магије жели да увећа принос млека. Светом водicom се шкромпи стадо и људи, она лечи, подмлађује, а о извесним празницима се чобани бацају у воду. Вода има јако магијско дејство очишћења и регенерације. Њена се митолошка основа везује за настанак људског рода из воде.

Камен својом тврдоћом изражава снагу натприродне силе, а његова неуништивост симболизира трајност вечне egzистенције. У одређеном камену бораве богови. Отуда је и његов култ доста развијен. Леп пример пружа „Говедаров камен“ на Овчем Пољу, где се обављају култне радње са жртвама, које је аутор проматрао у извођењу влашких сточара.

Астрални култови су такође познати балканским сточарима. То је разумљиво кад се зна да од сунца и кише зависи опстанак сточара у планини. Отуда су и бројне симболичне радње које дочаравају снагу и моћ сунца. Паралеле се могу наћи у праисторији и антици, где су култови ове врсте били у тесној вези са фетишизмом, сакралном проституцијом и људским жртвама.

Култне жртве код балканских сточара јављају се у разним видовима. Жртвује се стока, али и млечни производи. Жртва јагњета о празницима заузима једно од најзначајнијих места у култу. Према неким теоретичарима религије, клање јагњета као типично жртвене церемоније са тачно утврђеним забранама када се сме, а када не

сме да користи јагњеће месо у искирани, указује на трагове евентуалног тотем-обреда у балканских сточара, иначе познатог и код других народа на свету, и потврђеног на археолошким споменицима.

Хепатоскопија — прорицање судбине помоћу јетре жртвеног јагњета, представља посебан и веома значајан чин у сточара. Ова врста дивинације била је позната још старим Вавилонцима и Хетитима, а посебно Етрурцима. Јетра је сматрана центром и средиштем живота, а њен изглед је омогућавао добро упућеном тумачу да сазна вољу богова у тренутку доношења жртве.

Ауторов закључак је, да се у култовима и симболима балканских сточара назире две основне религиозне концепције и традиције: старија медитеранска, и млађа индо-европска, које се укрштају и потврђују у рецентном етнографском материјалу, а чије се аналогije налазе и документују у археолошким споменицима на Балкану.