

Bojan JOVANOVIĆ  
Institute for Balkan Studies  
Belgrade

## PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE MYTH ON THE KILLING OF ELDERS

*Abstract:* The mythical origins of the story on the killing of elders asserts a presupposition that such a rite never existed as a common ritual practice among the Balkan peoples, to which their traditions testify. An analysis of the mythical aspect reveals the psychological roots of the tradition, the chief function and meaning of which lie not in factual, but in psychological reality. The account of the rite is a symbolical substitution for an actual ritual that satisfied a community's psychological and social needs for such meaning. Part of folk tradition primarily as a fictive invention, the ritual on the killing of elders clearly sends a message which forbids an act that would bring into question the social, moral and spiritual foundations of a community.

Although memory of cultural experiences is a condition and necessity of human survival, their transmission in traditional accounts is accompanied by changes influenced by individual and collective factors. An evocation of these experiences is therefore mainly a recollection whereby narratives are creatively altered and actualized. However, in spite of changes, the constants of relevant experience, embodied with an unconscious structure, a pattern of thought and behavior, remain unchanged. In contrast to the manifest narrative and receptive level, mythical contents were not conceived deliberately. They are a product of images, motifs and archetypes unconsciously forced upon the mind, which only after verbalization acquired the makeup of a connected, logical presentation.<sup>1</sup> Jung's idea of the archetype as a psychologi-

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<sup>1</sup> C. G. Jung 1977/a, 110.

cally inherited unconscious pattern of emotional and spiritual behavior expressed in a mythical image, connected to the instincts and open toward spirit and freedom,<sup>2</sup> is more definite in the context of those elements of the tradition that, according to N. Frye, signify motives as lesser narrative units.<sup>3</sup> Verbal ritual renews the mythical elements of the story and gives a conviction of their reality;<sup>4</sup> thereby actualizing its original natural and spiritual meaningful layers. Without relying on mere repetition, as an impersonation of an event, the narrative on the ritual of the killing of elders in folk tradition actually expresses the possibility of spiritually transforming inherently negative, i.e. undesirable, impulses. The principal image on the killing of elders unconsciously admits the possibility of such a naturally spontaneous relationship toward aged community members, though transposed into a story, it becomes spiritually transformed, gaining different significance through a fabulous aura.

The account on the killing of elders serves chiefly a logical molding and interpretation of existing logical, irrational impulses which if unleashed could threaten the community. Projected onto symbolical reality, the mythical substance of the unconscious drama illuminates those mental factors whose mechanism of action in the presupposed, hypothetical, ritual becomes more understandable.

#### BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE RATIONAL

Striving to fathom and articulate a reality that eluded man's immediate control and rational understanding of the world, a myth proffered an experience of mental reality, and its exaggerated value became an essential feature of magical and animistic consciousness and its importance in traditional cultures.<sup>5</sup> Considering they begin where the power of rational and immediate practice ended, magic, religion and myth evolved in a mental reality that is complementary to factual reality.<sup>6</sup> In traditional societies that presupposed belief in the truth of a myth, a myth is experienced, so the presented experience is equal to the event itself, whose factual evidence can be replaced with an appropriate subject from mental reality. Such reality presupposes the possibility of a fictive act with identical cultural consequences.

<sup>2</sup> C. G. Jung 1977/d, 537-542; 1977/c, 138.

<sup>3</sup> N. Frye 1991, 41; 1979, 120, 401.

<sup>4</sup> E. Kasirer 1978, 104.

<sup>5</sup> S. Frojd 1970, 206-207.

<sup>6</sup> B. Malinovski 1971, 75, 126.

From this standpoint Freud examined the act of patricide in pre-hordes and set out that the mere impulse of hostility toward a father, the desire and fantasy to kill and eat the father, were sufficient to condition that moral reaction which created totemism and taboo. In this way we can escape the inevitability of linking the origins of our cultural heritage, of which we are justly so proud, to horrendous crimes that offend our feelings. Thereby the causal link stemming from the beginning and reaching into the presence would not be impaired, because mental reality was significant enough to bear all these consequences.<sup>7</sup> Instead of a perpetrated act, we are faced only with impulses, an urge to commit the act, which does not occur because its factual realization is prevented.<sup>8</sup> Unconscious desire for the death of a close relative as deliberately unrecognized and suppressed emerges, as Hugo Klein has shown, through the psychopathology of slips in everyday life.<sup>9</sup> So, the suppressed and unrecognized desire is projected beyond the current reality of space and time into a mythical era that allows its scenic elaboration.

The mythical past is a screen onto which the projected content of the currently unconscious is transformed into a fabulous spiritual invention. The belief that the ritual practice had been performed until the development of moral and rational motives that eventually led to its abolition is founded on such a scenario. An examination of the significance of the psychological reality in the creation and transmission of the tradition on the killing of elders reveals its motivational aspect which helps elucidate the paradox of its mythical history. Namely, paradoxical in comparison with the present time, because detached from it, mythical history, as Levi-Strauss set out, is at the same time bound to it.<sup>10</sup> Detached from their mythical ancestors, posterity shows its proximity with them in an actualized event wherein a potential instinctive negativity is transposed into a story and transformed into a social good.

Situated in the remote past, the account on the killing of elders is a mirror which is submitted to an aggressive phantasmal impulse the actualization which is expressed as an impossible and unacceptable ritual. The message of the story clearly warns against and forbids such an act, in the name of survival of the human group. Satisfying chiefly the conscious and

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<sup>7</sup> S. Freud 1970, 287.

<sup>8</sup> S. Freud 1970, 286.

<sup>9</sup> H. Klajn 1993, 196–204.

<sup>10</sup> K. Levi-Stros 1966, 274.

unconscious needs of community members that narrate and listen to an account, its content, in fact, leads to a wider framework of meaning, through the language of symbols. The individual, as a member of a community, is not a participant in the ceremony, but a partner in the ritual of narration, exposed to an internal space wherein the drama of relations toward the symbolical holder of social power develops and is resolved.

*Phantasmal reality*

The ritual spoken of is a relevant event that outshines other events in the level of its mental reality. Rather than conjecturing and establishing whether the primary scene of patricide really took place in the remote past, it is more important to view its phantasmal reality as a live socio-psychological presence in the tradition of the lapot (killing of elders). The truth of the account was expressed with a belief in its facticity, and not the mere existence of the facts. The impression the account leaves is identical with the real experience of the world, thus from that standpoint the lapot is true as a phantasm of a projected patricidal desire.

The mental reality offers a more satisfactory understanding of the role, function and meaning of the tradition on the killing of elders. Transmission of the tradition by word of mouth presupposes a different relationship toward a narrative that is not linked with factual, but rather with mental reality. Freud resolved his dilemma on the significance of the mental and factual by pointing to the possibility of a primeval act. The statement 'at the beginning there was a deed', which concluded his paper *Totem and Taboo*,<sup>11</sup> the author of psychoanalysis rephrased the opening of the Scriptures, on God's creation of the world. However, the imperative declaration of names in the divine creation of the world follows the creation of heaven and earth. In the order of creation, verbal expression of creative will follows primary creation, and there is no statement as to whether it was carried out with the assistance of words, or whether words were used only when light was to be created. Belief in the ability of words<sup>12</sup> to come to life is based on the idea of a fundamental connection between words and their object. In mental reality,

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<sup>11</sup> S. Frojd 970, 288.

<sup>12</sup> In magico-religious practice, words constitute a powerful means of creation, a defence from evil, and a tool for making miracles. Christ's miracles in the New Testament result from faith the strength of which is confirmed by the materialization of what has been said. See Mt 17, 20; cf. also Mt 21, 19; 21, 21.

belief in the creative power of words equates the fictive with the factual, therefore verbal inventions have the status of actual existence.

If, therefore, the primacy of the deed is accepted, as the necessary beginning, it does not presuppose repetition, i.e., the ritual known in cultural tradition. Thus from Freud's point of view, the killing of elders as a ritual is impossible, either as a permanent or occasionally repeated action, practiced among Old Slavs, that is, Proto-Slavs, the ethnic and social ancestors of the Serbs. This profound cultural aspect of the purported ritual should be singled out for its arbitrary and unreliable reference to unverified and unverifiable data from remote prehistory, as corroboration for the existence of the same ceremony or its remnants in the near or distant past of a particular tradition. This kind of argumentation has been presented in support of the lapot as a ritual on the killing of elders in Serbian tradition, despite results of analyses from the data collected on the tradition.<sup>13</sup> Literal interpretations of the mythical character of the folk story disregard these results, and place the ritual on the killing of elders in a remote, unverifiable, Old Slavonic past, where relics of Slavic culture would suggest its existence in Serbian tradition. However, all of the aforementioned ethnic entities, from Proto-Slavic, then Slavic, to the Serbian, have sustained during their periods of development rituals and myths wherein the motif on the killing of elders had essentially psychological meaning.

On the basis of archeological and anthropological findings about religion in prehistory, which sublimate remote ritual practice and mythical images, it is quite unequivocal that men then did not kill aged community members. Namely, Paleolithic burial customs plainly evince a piety toward the dead, a need to protect them and send them off as safely as possible to the other world.<sup>14</sup> The developed mythology of prehistoric man reveals a being capable of creating complex symbols and penetrating into the secrets of the world.<sup>15</sup> Although limited, without encompassing all communities on that level of development, this knowledge naturally offers a valuable insight into their spiritual practice, religious understandings, moral principles, ritual and burial customs.

An examination of tomb contents has revealed an absence of violent deaths of those who died in old age, given the human age limit of that time.

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<sup>13</sup> N. N. Veleckaja 1996; S. Petrović 1996, 47.

<sup>14</sup> A. Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 55–65; B. Gavela 1969, 71–72.

<sup>15</sup> A. Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 143–144.

In early prehistoric times, the dead were buried in a fetal position. In the following stage, the dead were laid supine, and in the latter stage cremation was most widely accepted and used, in numerous ways among the Slavs.<sup>16</sup> Considering the relevant facts linked to burial rites in traditional Slavic culture, the significance of their myths on death becomes more clear. Tales on death were a way to face the end of life, and a way for its mythical transcension. One of those widespread myths is the tale of the violent execution of elders.

The substance of the ritual practice on the killing of elders appears extant only in the myth, i.e. in the tradition transmitted from one generation to the next. Substituting the ritual, the myth fulfilled the role of a phantasmal ceremony that repeated itself only in tradition. The narrative ritual, which showed its basic meaning and real function in psychological reality, deeply and convincingly renewed its symbolical substance of the account. The mere narrative in the form of a story is molded as a ritual pattern,<sup>17</sup> which is not founded on recounting the actual ritual on the killing of elders, but on the possibility of transforming unconscious impulses toward such an act.

#### *Creating a past*

Although Freud spoke of patricide in pre-hordes as an actual deed, disregarding its mythical, i.e., phantasmal essence, in "*Formulation Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning*," published in 1911, he developed the idea of primary and secondary processes, juxtaposing them to the principle of reality. Ascertaining that meaning can replace activity, Freud discovered that traumatic events described as memories by patients never actually took place, but were a product of their imagination, i.e. instincts as the power that immediately caused them.<sup>18</sup> Considering that conscious images of the world are a product of unconscious psychological activities whereby facts of the immediate palpable world are transposed into spiritual reality, the psychological world as the source of man's conclusions of the real world<sup>19</sup> should be comprehended as the sole reality and substance of the ritual on the killing of elders.

The account of the ritual is the result of psychological activities whose reality is reflected in the phantasmal expression and experience of primary

<sup>16</sup> A. Leroi-Gourhan 1968 57–58; D. Srejšović 1991, 41; L. Niderle 1954, 61–74; S. Trojanović 1901, 5–9.

<sup>17</sup> N. Frye 1991, 28–29.

<sup>18</sup> S. Frojd 1971; G. i R., 1985, 30–31.

<sup>19</sup> K. G. Jung 1977/b, 81.

psychological impulses and deliberately unrecognized desires.<sup>20</sup> Coming from the unconscious, a trace of phylogenetic processes contains the non-conscious impulse whose confirmation in cultural experience has acquired specific archetypal meaning accumulated beneath the threshold of consciousness in our collective unconscious. If, therefore, the archetype stems from a long and relevant experience toward expression of the collectively as yet non-conscious, then its unconscious emergence is a kind of memory that acquires specific meaning in the conscious and relations between the conscious toward that substance.

Comprehended as the bearer of an unconsciously inherited pattern of emotional and spiritual behavior, the archetype in the motif on killing elders expresses a primary auto-plasticity of the phantasmal impulse. However, the unconscious aspect of the tradition points to an alo-plastic dimension of its content and tradition as a mediator of collective messages.<sup>21</sup> On the level of the nationally unconscious, it contains messages relevant to an ethnic community which is united by culture and tradition, with its immediate function in the narrower family unconscious.<sup>22</sup> The phantasmally shaped content of the tradition is a factor in forming impulses that are recognized as unfavorable and subdued in the unconscious. The primary, instinctive status of the non-conscious impulse, recognized as unfavorable, acquires archetypal con-

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<sup>20</sup> Originally, the term phantasm comes from the Greek word meaning an apparition, whose etymology has been related to the name of the old Greek god of sleep, Phantasus, responsible for both pleasant and unpleasant dreams, as well as his brother Morpheus, who sends human shapes to the dreamer, are the sons of Hypnos, the god of sleep, and nephews of Thanatos, the god of death. Phantasm also stimulates the creative imagination. Early phantasms, encompassing basic structures of the psychic actualized through individual experience, contain not only primal scenes, but also scenes of castration and the types of eroticism associated with the individual developmental phases. Cf. D. Krstić 1988, 667; Ž. Trebješanin 1996, 77. According to M. Klein, being unconscious representations of instinctual wishes, phantasms are directed towards an object. Cf. M. Klein, 1983. Expressively present in childhood and early youth, phantasms most often disappear later and rarely develop into relevant artistic symbols. Cf. V. Matić 1983, 109-116. The impossibility of fulfilling the wish for a certain object entails a variety of manners of fictional gratification which, in waking state, may be expressed through rich fantasies as elaborate fruits of imagination.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. S. Ferenczi, 1989, 86. Ferenczi's analysis shows that the auto-plasticity of dreams is based on projection, and the alo-plasticity of the intercourse on the mechanism of introjection.

<sup>22</sup> On the concepts of the national and family unconscious, see: V. Dvorniković 1939; E. Brus Taub-Binum 1993, 22-27.

notations precisely on the level of verbal heritage which has an important mediatory role in traditional culture. The mythical, as a living root of the spirit, "provokes" a phantasm on the killing of elders whose negativity is released by an evocation of the fictive ritual. The account of a once organized and approved rite evokes the possibility of participation and accepts a scenario as an ontogenetic confirmation of the phylogenetic impulse.

In the narration of the ritual on the killing of elders, the mythical relict strives toward historization through narration of events long since past. The subjectmatter of the ritual is interpreted by a myth on immortality situated in ancient times, and closest to the world of fairytales, the spiritual proximity of which arouses in the listener the necessary suggestiveness. The difference between supposed recollection and memory<sup>23</sup> opens the door to mythical imagination. Memories of objects, events and scenes is not memory in Plato's sense of evocation of a soul abiding in the world of ideas,<sup>24</sup> but a process of permanent creation and the development of a reality marked by the past. In the process of creating the past, the mythical imagination adds up memory, adjusting it to the current time and directing it toward the future. The aura of the past, presented as an authentic memento, becomes a suggestive and living reality.

Memory spins in unconscious phantasmal desires, unrecognized by the super-ego, rational aspirations and valid moral understandings. Striving to rationalize unacceptable pulsations, the Ego creates a story that interprets unconscious subjects in an acceptable way. Conforming to narrative demands, a fabulously idealized tale is symbolically the transmitter of surplus of meaning underscoring the socio-cultural context of the experience. The intensity of the experience asserts its importance on the level of tradition in which it lives and renews itself as an authentic experience. In the tradition, it relates to a nearer past, a recent occurrence, and the narrative moment suggests its ritual reality.

Events appear from the standpoint of recollection, not as they really occurred, but as they might have occurred. Their utopian and psychological component is projected on the plane of the feasible, becoming a psychologi-

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<sup>23</sup> E. Kasirer 1978, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Unlike the body belonging to the transient material world, the soul is immortal and eternal and it belongs, according to Plato, to the spiritual world of ideas. Before its earthly life, the soul existed as an idea, the pure incorporeal spirit in the human body. Hence, the knowledge of this world is in fact the soul's memory of the ideas it has seen in its prelife.

cal fact and part of spiritual reality through imagination. Tradition, as a collective memory, actualizes the reality of the feasible, and not only evocation of the factual. Memorized factual contents linked to location, time and figures are in the status of memory. Memory via the senses, wherein the expected desired scene is inscribed, was registered in tradition as a mythical subjectmatter, and then transposed and integrated into the sensuality of memory. Memory linked primarily to the universal structure of the subjectmatter points to the logic of mythical imagination whose archaism knows not form, but its absence.

The empty space opens possibilities for unimpeded recording of the instinctive on the level of a culture that prevents its immediate expression, and satisfaction as a primary impulse, but accepts it as fiction. A phantasmally unknown aspect of man's being acquires in tradition the possibility of immediate confrontation with himself, his spiritual life as a reality of the world. The fairy-like conclusion underscores the immediate interest for abandoning the intimated ritual the likelihood of which is annulled at the point of cathartic experience.<sup>25</sup> Therefore reference to cultural past is not merely evocation of an event but a way to prevent it. Reminder of a possible undesirable action points to the sense of the negative motive tied to the ritual of killing elders in traditional narration. The ritual as a narrative is not as grim as the reality; it is merely a recollection of it in the context of a constituted past as an undesirable present and future.

Memory is a factor of mental reality molded according to the criteria of desires. Considering that the presence cannot be amended, the ritual on the killing of elders is placed in the past and acquires the desired phantasmal character of a brutal act. From an unconscious impulse toward a conscious revealment, the phantasm is transformed and becomes a story serving to liberate structural tensions between members of different generations. The pre-conscious aspect of the phantasm is a mental reality in which negative impulses are expressed and neutralized. Like regulations in a ritual process by which an individual of marginal social status achieves temporary elevated ritual significance, thus the account on the ritual killing of elders gives higher importance to sons, as younger community members and future power-holders, than their current status. The fictive killing of the holders of current patriarchal power has a ritual function of their symbolical execution which, according to the ritual rule, renews its power.

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<sup>25</sup> L. Vigotski 1975, 269.

## ПСИХОЛОШКИ КОРЕНИ ПРЕДАЊА О УБИЈАЊУ СТАРАЦА

## Резиме

Анализа предања о убијању старих показује да његови примарни митски слојеви не потичу из непосредне чињеничне реалности већ да су психолошки мотивисани. Археолошки докази о најранијем неолитском сахрањивању, којим је зачет култ природно умрлих остарелих чланова колектива, дубини тог искуства дају одговарајућу културну и архетипску релевантност. Транспонован у фиктивну творевину, обред убијања старих се исказује као могућа последица природно инстинктивног агресивног мотива млађих према старим члановима који оличавају актуелну друштвену моћ. Показујући да би задовољавање тог мотива довело у питање саму заједницу, предање не оспорава његову психолошку реалност. Пројекцијом обреда у митску прошлост признаје се та реалност која живим предањем указује на њену актуелност.

Основни извор предања је психолошки мотив који фиктивним обредом изражава актуелни однос сина према оцу у тренутку промене њихових реалних статусних улога. Психолошки јасно сагледана мотивациона раван предања указује на вредност духовног принципа архетипа који одређује другачији однос према остарелим члановима колектива. Независна од непосредног фактицитета, вредносна релевантност предања као духовне творевине огледа се у његовој јасној социјалној и моралној поруци. Прича о фиктивном обреду није евокација догађаја већ начин да се укаже на неприхватљивост таквог чина и тиме спречи непосредно убијања старих.

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\*Due to a technical fault, the notes at the conclusion of the article "Killing of Elders as a Scientific Myth", in the previous volume of the Balcanica were omitted, which has considerably diminished its value and usefulness. We apologize for the omission, and have tried to make amends. As the theme of the article "Psychological Roots of the Myth on the Killing of Elders" is connected with the author's paper from the previous issue of the Balcanica, we have appended the notes on the above paper to the new article.

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