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RITUAL OF KILLING ELDERS AS A SCIENTIFIC MYTH

Abstract: A folk tradition recounting the killing of aged people, called *lapot* among the Serbs, has been comprehended scientifically as a real ritual. Despite the absence of required archeological, historical and ethnographic evidence, the contents of the folk tradition have been literally interpreted, and the ritual of killing old people has been defined as a lawful, social and religious custom. Efforts to replace the lack of real evidence with inadequate proofs, have led to an equating of different rituals and procedures linked to the relationship toward the aged. A critical reference to such an argument shows that the practice of abandoning the aged, rituals performed for euthanasia and occasional examples of sacrifice or killing cannot be levelled with an alleged ritual custom of killing elders only because they reached a ripe old age. The mythical roots of the tradition point to quite a different role and meaning, of its being passed on and fostered as a surviving folk tale in traditional communities.

Death as the end to the course of life of every individual is a reason for holding death and funeral rites which are a culture's specific response to the inexorable natural fact of the final outcome of old age. Rituals bid the deceased farewell from this world and introduce them to the next. These two parallel and complementary worlds are the reality of the duration and survival of a community. Within a broader scope of time, encompassing past, present and future, the spiritual image and identity of a community was made up of its living and deceased members alike. The process of

growing old and dying defined death as a natural fact to which traditional society related through forms of ritual and religious practice. The importance of such practice is seen in ritual confirmations of natural events linked to the living cycle of an individual or whole community. Each of those events became socially and culturally relevant only after a ritual conducted in accordance with traditionally established regulations.

The social, spiritual and natural powers of a ritual are seen in the ability to bring about a necessary event in the place of an inexistent one. Withing the power of ritual and symbolical language is a narrative of killing elders which bespeaks, though specifically on the level of ritual, the possibility of creating, or bringing about, an inexistent natural event of the death of an elder community member. Rooted in narrative, the ritual radiates the aura of its mythical roots, fulfilling quite a different function in traditional community from the supposed evocation of an old ritual.

Facing old age

Bearing in mind the hardships of life that accelerated the wearing of individuals in traditional society, ripe old age was not a rule, it was an exception. Old age was not easy in those conditions, and it was a relief to elders that few managed to reach it. Thus longevity was rather a sign of specialness, recognized as divine mercy or sacredness, as rightly opined by Minoa.¹ In traditional societies, such as the Serbian, relations to the aged were more tolerant, as the elder members of a community were bearers of cultural memory, keepers of tradition and conveyors of life experience.²

Although relationship to the aged is tinged with a certain respect, the aged members of a community become feeble and incapable of carrying out everyday chores. They are necessarily marginalized, as their social value

¹ Ž. Minoa, 1995.

² Ibid. Only with the advent of literacy which curbed the tradition by word of mouth did elders lose the significance and status they enjoyed in society. Minoa argues, on the examples of the classic Greek culture and after in the period of renaissance, that in the period of glorification of strength, victory, youth and beauty, only philosophers and writers were privileged to live to a ripe old age. According to him, classical epochs of relative social stability were less favorable for elder members of society, while transitional, unstable periods were more tolerable. The idealized social model showed its dark side of the anti-humane precisely in its relationship to elders. Though there never was a so-called „golden age“ for old age, traditional societies closer to living reality offered a more tolerant and bearable life for their elders.

diminishes, and they become useless. The feeling that they are good for nothing is symbolically expressed in the saying „ripe for the axe“, or the Latin saying „seksagenarii de ponte“ (sixty-year-olds over the bridge).³ This reference to elders shows a negative attitude toward old age as an age of lost, drained life energy. Narratives of the ritual killing of elders in the past are meant to emphasize the magnanimity and compassion of a community that no longer performs such acts, but nevertheless cuts off elders from active life to a lesser extent. If the aforesaid narrative justifies such a status for elders, then the myth of past ritual killings is a sort of excuse for their unenviable position in society.

In contrast to the previous period of life, old age is its negation, so suitable reference to it has a negative omen. Facing the reality of old age is expressed in certain understandings of old age that are identical to mythical notions of immortality in explaining the origins of rituals for killing the aged. Just as natural death itself is an occasion for ritual, and not ritual killing the cause of death, so the negative connotation of old age as an occasion for its ritual annulment does not relate to specific individuals who would because of their age be brutally removed from their community. Although in the period of life that is nearing its conclusion, old age is not an inevitable death sentence for individuals who have their place in society. Ritual killing that would annul the period of old age until a natural death, would bring into question the whole tradition of deathbed, funeral and death rites.

Of course, the reasons set out for socially organized killings do not dispute the known fact of death as expected, necessary and desirable from the point of those who are concluding their journey and mission of life.⁴ Fulfilment of life and awareness of a natural end give one a feeling of harmony and natural conciliation in the last moments, a coming to terms with death calmly. The gradual loss of strength renders death in old age a natural necessity and inevitability.⁵ The death of ordinary people evolves within

³ T. Djordjević, 1923, 149; S. Trojanović, 1898, 18; Čajkanović, V., 1973, 112.

⁴ There have been many instances testifying to the wish and need of one for death as an expression of one's feeling of end to life. After laboring and living in a foreign country, aged economic emigrants return to their homeland only to die.

⁵ Cf. V. Rozanov, 1993, 8. The quiet and dignified facing of death that Andrić described in the Valjevo Podgorina. „Peasants come to the elder (i.e. their view of an old man, for he is no more than 65) Mirko Milinković, who is on his deathbed. He sits clothed, leaning with his back and head on a wall, with a blanket over his

the family, peacefully and quietly, with all life accounts settled, no wailing or despair. The peaceful awaiting of the end shows, in fact, the forgotten skill of dying known to cultures that, contrary to modern perceptions, related more naturally to death. Man and nature become consonant in the last hours of life, with the instinctive, unconscious knowledge of how to die more easily. Contact with the earth as a necessary natural return to the earth and the beginning of life rounds off, giving more meaning to the span of human existence in the world.⁶

Feast principle

In order to survive, a traditional society is renewed with characteristic rites of feasting and celebration which for a time suspend valid social principles and bring to life suppressed social realities. Although the manifest meaning of these rites is linked to a certain religious entity, their true sense lies in social self-renewal and self-adoration.⁷ However, in the shadow of cult symbols of strength and fertility quivers a collective fear of exhausting vitality, possible barrenness, entropy and death, with old age premonishing.

The negative connotation of death is conveyed to the elder members of society who become the symbol of that negative relationship, expressed through an imaginary, mythical rite. Ritual killings, permissible only in myth, clash with social rules linked to respect of elders. Recounting the ritual can, therefore, be interpreted as a utopian possibility of reality demonstrated in its negative perspective. This kind of demonstration is a temptation to reality, something like the model of celebrations, when valid social regulations are laid aside during festivity and prevailing principles marginalized so as to liberate slighted and subdued members of a community. Opening up toward that different reality, the content of the account conveys the shadow of its dark, negative emissions. The repressed, concealed energy is confirmed with the vividness of the story which becomes part of the existing world. On that level of narration, the story functions as

legs. He is clean-shaven and his hair is cut. Someone is always with him, in case he should need anything, and on the shelf is a wax-candle that might be lit any minute. He receives people quietly and when asked: how are you? replies: 'well, I'm rounding it off.' But he says so with no complaint or wailing, and the peasants do not even attempt to dissuade or console him. He will die in an hour or two." I. Andrić, 1982, 70.

⁶ Cf., B. Jovanović, 1992, 53, 97.

⁷ B. Jovanović, 1986, 10-11; E. Dirken, 1982, 352.

a phantasmal ritual with specific psychological and social meaning.⁸ The unreal and remote become real and close in the story and instigate a mechanism that converts the negative into an acceptable social and moral attitude.

Folkloric syncretization

Surviving records of narratives on the killing of elders are part of the documentation on folklore, the contents of which have specific syncretic traits. Oral accounts of the ritual, reliably alive when *lapota* - the killing of elders - was not practiced, depict an essential folkloric trait, as pointed out by Vladimir Prop.⁹

The tradition, kept alive and passed on vividly and intensively over the past centuries, created an illusion of an experienced „echo“, subsequently giving occasion to scholars to construct a supposed custom of killing elders. Preserved in many areas inhabited by Serbs, the tradition of killing elders is accompanied by a belief in early common-law practice. An important moment in keeping the tradition alive is a ritual narration which transcends the living, actual presence, and evokes events whose aesthetic dimension implies living memory.¹⁰ The step beyond the present time is, actually, a way of constituting a past that may have contents very remote from the present. By carrying the narrator and listener beyond time and the present moment, living memory sacralizes the cultural beginning into which the myth on human immortality was built. Evocation of the myth begins the narrative tradition on the need to obliterate a ritual that brought death.

Believing that the ritual of killing elders was indeed performed, scholars so far have attempted to recognize traces of the practice in recent customs linked to the relationship toward elders. From this aspect, the custom, known as *lapot*, acquired the status of a real event in our traditional culture.¹¹ However, the attempt to explain and interpret the tradition by way of

⁸ B. Jovanović, 1995, 209-214.

⁹ New forms of social life that bring historical development and overall social progress, though penetrating into folklore, do not fully conquer the until then forms of culture, as one Russian scholar said, the old does not die immediately, but continues to live side by side with the new, creating sometimes quite new cultural forms of syncretic character. Cf. V. Prop, Ja., 1976, 258. Veselin Čajkanović pointed very argumentatively to syncretism, as one of the most characteristic traits of Serbian folk religion, in his unfinished work „*Stara srpska religija i mitologija*“, so the headline might refer to the contents of a tradition on killing elders among Serbs. Cf., V. Čajkanović, 1994, 52-58.

¹⁰ R. Ingarden, 1971.

¹¹ V. Čajkanović, *Ibid*, 114-120; Drobnjaković, 1960, 130-133.

the early custom, means applying the ritual theory of the myth disputed precisely on the example of interpreting the ritual of killing kings. Namely, the killing of old kings at the inauguration of new, young monarchs, enacted as a traditional ritual in Frejzer's theory, is a myth without a supposed basis in the mentioned ritual act.¹² Carrying the ritual away from the contents of tradition is disputable as it is based on a model analogous in the interpretation of the creation of the myth: primarily as a mimesis of the early ritual.

Local interpretations of the tradition on *lapot* presuppose it as an indisputable, obsolete, ritual theory, particularly in the context of investigations of the myth, aiming to link the tradition with the once hypothetical custom. Identifying the mythical and ritual is the root of most delusions in enthnological investigations of the myth. Viewed as a reflection of the early ritual, the myth, as a motive toward determining ritual reality, has been underestimated in its essential aspect as a complex imaginative and cognitive creation.¹³ Namely, as Levi-Strauss has illustrated, certain events, whether real or imaginary, become relevant only if they are, as he said, good for thought.¹⁴ The psychological dimension of the mythic appears more significant than the material, real basis which is only an element of constituting mythic reality, and not its determinant.

Death allayed

Rituals with completely different functions are quoted to support the indisputability of this rite. For instance, numerous rites performed with the aim of allay death are viewed as a relict of the early custom of killing elders. As they are part of an entirely different round of ritual procedures linked to dying or seriously ill members of a community, their euthanasian

¹² J. Fontenrose, 1966, 18.

¹³ E. M. Meletinski, 1983, 34. Meletinski rightfully sets out the difficulty and impossibility of establishing the priority between myths and rituals considering their doubtless mutual connection and congeniality in primeval culture. Although many myths could not be reduced to rituals, the contents of certain myths are ritually put on a stage during certain ritual feasts. E. M. Meletinski, *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ Recent interpretations of the myth are based on a criticism of the naturalist theory which set out that the subject of mythological contents were certain natural phenomena that were being interpreted on the level of mythic opinions. According to Levi-Strauss, these phenomena, as well as ritual practice, present the very thing with which myths strive to explain not the reality of natural, but of logical order. Cf. K. Levi-Strauss, 1960, 130; V. Matić, 1972.

character must be distinguished from the supposed ritual of killing elders.¹⁵ Thus certain magic rites are a kind of alibi for an act that entails prescribed sanctions. In order to avoid the punitive measures envisaged by law or tradition, rites are performed to accelerate death, and to free the perpetrator from accountability for the act. Accelerated and allayed death of an enfeebled, old member of society results from the expectations of a community, and not the member himself, which is crucial in forming a conclusive stand and notions on the nature of death.

Abandoning elders

Entirely different from the ritual of directly killing elders, under the criterion of advancing to a certain age, is the practice of leaving elders to die in natural circumstances. Known in the traditions of many peoples and ethnic communities, especially among nomads, the custom of abandoning elders is also known in Serbia.¹⁶ Villagers who viewed natural death as the inevitable end did not in particular censure this method.¹⁷ However, the act does not bear the meaning of a ritual killing of parents. Leaving an elder in the wild is an act of separating a member from his community.

Isolated, abandoned, helpless, aged members of a society are left to social and looming natural death. This kind of relationship toward elders implies moral beliefs that differ from contemporary ones which set out the idea that evil is not just commission of a crime, but failure to do a necessary good.¹⁸ From the point of effect, a crime committed is identical to a good undone and a failure to offer aid, without which death is certain. Responsibility for death is viewed not in a performed ritual of killing, but in the failure to do good. However, organized killing of elders presumes a number of procedures pertaining to the prevailing ethics of action which value differently non-action as a natural state. By avoiding to do evil directly, one is enabled to distance oneself from an event that eventually takes place. The narrative procedure emphasizes thus in particular elements of symbolic removal and immediate distancing from the act of killing - such as bread, a

¹⁵ T. Djordjević, *ibid.*, 149-150; M. Barjaktarović, 1995, 18-19.

¹⁶ Vukošavljević wrote in 1936 that nomad gypsies in the area of Novi Pazar had left an old woman in a cottage to die. S. Vukošavljević, 1962, 204.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁸ Failing to do what is necessary and to offer assistance to persons seriously ill or on their deathbed with the aim of quickening death may be viewed as a passive kind of euthanasia.

woolen bundle or wooden hook. It aims to remove one from undesirable reality and lessen the moral implications imported in direct participation of the ritual act.

Leaving elders in the wild is primarily an act of separation, naturalizing the expected, anticipated natural end. Nature is given priority in determining one's duration of life, so the ritual is understood to have been the method carried out rather than the one of violent cessation of life. From this aspect, natural death is closer toward efforts to preserve tradition and secure survival, bringing into question the supposed killing of elders. Necessity of life, i.e. natural continuity is emphasized in the motive of abandoning and interrupting the ritual of killing, which is untenable in the tradition of the aforesaid rite.

Sacrificing Elders

Apart from the normal life span of an individual whose aging does not threaten the community, customary social rules are annulled in crisis situations. Extremely altered circumstances and disturbed relations in a given socio-cultural entity, threatening to mankind, create a different living situation where ritual violations of customary norms are viewed as a way out of the crisis. One way an endangered society expresses this state is through its relationship toward elders who become the victims of the adopted ritual. Abandoning elders to the elements or taking their life differs from the pre-supposed ritual of directly killing elders because they reached old age. The myth outlines the matrix of the potential, not previous ritual, which becomes topical when sacrifice is necessary. If in regular life circumstances story-telling gave an outlet for releasing negative energy, then the need for a specific rite in crisis situations emerges as a more suitable and realistic solution. By violating a valid taboo, death as a suppressed wish becomes permissible, but the act reestablishes valid principles and bans which become stronger after execution.

Bearing in mind, therefore, the autonomy of the narrative on *lapot*, its symbolic polysemy and mythic force that stood in place of reality, it is important to say that during a crisis it is precisely mythical creations that may display recurrent actions in real life. Images of vampires and witches show how certain mythic contents are an orientation of societal behavior in crisis periods.

Doubtless there have been instances of elders killed in the history of mankind and in Serbian traditional society. The medieval mania for witches

gives us a profusion of evidence of such a practice. This period, however, is uncommon altogether and differs from the usual historical times, an instance on the macro historical plane, which does not confirm the thesis on the ritual practice of killing members of a community because of their age. Individual cases, such as the recent killing and burning of an aged woman in the village of Vučkovica,¹⁹ are exceptions possible in ordinary life. Abnormal instances are, in fact, a warning to society to reexamine its relationship toward elders, and not a trace of ritual practice. Every such instance is a sting that incites the imagination and renews the mythical roots of the well-known story.

A story is circulated in the space between the normal and abnormal of the early ritual, fed and reinvigorated with rare events as historical, sociological and ethnological curiosities, as an illustration of abnormality among people, which does not prove the regulation of its reality with the social custom of killing elders. If we bear in mind the entirety of the experience, then individual events and accounts of it belong to integral social and cultural heritage according to which a relationship is established and a familiar tradition formed. The account of the ritual of killing elders confirms the tradition, which finds grounds for the ritual of narration in the story.

Problems of classification and absence of evidence

Absence of suitable evidence questions efforts made so far to understand the tradition of killing elders as an actual ritual. Doubt in the existence of the rite has not disputed the possibility of its being practiced in ancient times. Attempts to classify *lapot* among social customs,²⁰ social rules,²¹ or popular tribunals,²² show a degree of insecurity in the approach to the entire problem. Along with *prokletije* (a magic rite performed by members of a community by throwing stones to punish an unknown perpetrator of a crime), *lapot* is voluntarily included in a kind of popular tribunal, in which stoning is described as the punishment carried out in traditional societies for a committed offense, a disputable common element on the basis of which the aforementioned determination is executed. The popular

¹⁹ B. Jovičić, 1995.

²⁰ B. Drobnjaković, *Ibid.*

²¹ P. Vlahović, 1972, 16-18.

²² S. Petrović, 1992, 328, 336.

tribunal and retribution assume a grave violation of valid social rules took place, so the committed offense is severely punished. However, it cannot be said that old age is an offense, as a natural and socially normal development of the course of life, so advancement to old age can be no reason for the infliction of the severest punishment.

Considering that uncritical acceptance of the hypothetical custom of killing elders is present in recent studies,²³ the question arises as to the reliability of data taken over from folk tradition. Namely, it is quite certain that no relevant material evidence exists for the hypothetical custom of *lapot* that would provide grounds for the supposition of its practice in nearer and farther Serbian cultural tradition.

Efforts to prove the antiquity of the custom have been made in studies of ancient records.²⁴ However, the records merely indicate the length of the myth in time, without confirming the ancient practice of killing elders. The absence of such documents linked to local tradition raises no more doubt in the possibility that Serbs performed the ritual killing of elders. The doubt is based on a series of arguments that bring into question the ritual, defined in ethnology as a social custom, i.e. a social rule. For instance, in the area of Svrljig, the folk tradition of *lapot* is alive, but it is important to note the complete absence of any traces to corroborate the account. The absence of records corresponds, therefore, to considerably more relevant archeological findings that would confirm violent killing of elders. Namely, though the story tells of a comparatively near past, folk tradition has no memory of any place where elders were killed and buried according to the *lapot* ritual. If the custom of killing elders existed, such sites would have been remembered, or the site of their forcible burial would have been dis-

²³ V. Smiljanić, 1979, 148.

²⁴ V. Čajkanović, *Ibid*; S. Trojanović, *Ibid*; Speaking of the custom of killing elders in the tradition of the Masagetes, who lived on the banks of the Caspian Lake, Herodotus said, "There is no precise limitation to life, but when someone grows old, all his relations gather, slaughter him, and a few domestic animals, cook the meat and feast. They consider it the greatest joy. If someone dies of illness, they do not eat him, but bury him and mourn that he was not slaughtered," Herodotova istorija, 1996, 100-101. Many Herodotus's myths described as real events contain an account of a myth on killing elders. Of course, this cannot be verified, like the archeological findings of those sacrificed in the burial of tribal chiefs, but by describing cannibalism, i.e., anthropophagy in the killing of elders he broaches the question of the institution of funeral rites as cultural foundations of human identity.

covered by now. Finally, the mere existence of *lapot* as a way to end the life of an individual brings into question natural death, and traditional funeral practices linked to deathbed and funeral rites.

Considering that rituals dispatching a deceased person to the other world belong to the very foundations of spiritual tradition, their change or denial with a substantially different rite would bring into question the existence of traditional institutions on which the spiritual and moral identity of a community is built. The prohibition of murder is, along with the taboo of incest, a universal principle for regulating relations in every human community. Respect for these prohibitions in all cultures enables the existence of communities as human societies. The oldest written laws that inherited ancient traditions explicitly forbade parricide and the killing of elder members of a community.²⁵ Although differences among cultures vary widely, relations toward elders are not based in any community on their being brutally killed. On the contrary, many cultures, including the Serbian, deeply revered the aged. According to priest Dukljanin, the aged were competent in settling disputes concerning boundary alterations in the 12th century. „Elder” is an honorary name granted to those who preserved and cherished traditions. Mijačka villages in Western Macedonia and Montenegro had councils of elders to settle disputes among villagers.²⁶

A source of delusion

The absence of historical, archeological and ethnological evidence indicates that the ritual of killing the aged, marked as a social custom, social rule or popular tribunal, never existed and was never practiced in Serbian tradition. Uncritical acceptance of the myth, carved into a tradition with fairytale embellishments, has become a scientific myth. Science, which should have dealt with the myth, became its victim. The tradition on killing elders sends an entirely different message as to the impossibility of such a rite. However, the message sent by tradition was falsely comprehended by scholars, who pronounced the subject-matter of the tradition as an ancient ritual scenario.

²⁵ The oldest written laws regulated relations between father and son: *Zakonici drevne Mesopotamije*, 1989, 134, Article 195: „If a son hits his father, his hand shall be cut off”; *Dušanov zakonik*, 1987, 70. Article 96. „On murder” severely punishes the murder of parents: „Whoever is found to have killed his father, or mother, or brother, or child, the killer will be incinerated.”

²⁶ *Srpski Mitološki rečnik*, 1970, 276, under: *Starac*; Djordjević, T.R., *Ibid.*

The consequences of radiation of an ethnological phatomorgana, to which the investigators of this tradition were exposed, are discernible in the case of *lapot*. Suggestivity and the character of illusion delineate the scientific desert through which the investigators passed. The presupposed thesis of the traditional ritual was not adequately examined or proven, nor were the meaning and function of the account as a spiritual creation examined properly. Texts by which the account of killing elders was scientifically viewed as an early ritual are today considered documents for a scientific myth in the shadow of which remains a misunderstanding of the deeper messages of folk tradition. Reducing the symbolical dimensions of the account of killing elders to a specific meaning speaks of a source of delusion. It goes without dispute that there can be discussion of a custom as a certain cultural fact on the basis of story-telling, without the risk of its fictitious cultural-historical construction in a certain tradition. Therefore, including *lapot* in social norms is the result of projections of contemporary understandings of this kind of custom in times past. Justified suspicions in the real existence of the custom calls for a different approach to the contents of the story, of which only subsequent results would create conditions for an adequate understanding and correct definition.

ОБРЕД УБИЈАЊА СТАРИХ КАО НАУЧНИ МИТ

Резиме

Досадашња етнoлoшкa тумачења предања o обреду убијања старих показала су се недовољним у осветљавању његове природне суштине. Одсуство историских, археолошких и етнoлoшких извора као научних доказа показује да у традицији Срба обред убијања старих, означен као друштвени обичај, друштвено правило или народни суд није постојао нити је практикован као традицијом утврђен однос према остарелим члановима заједнице. Некритично прихватање овог мита преточено у предање и украшено бајколиком поруком постало је научни мит који се до данас одржао у нашој етнологији, али и у другим наукама које прихватају овакво тумачење народног предања. Суштина овог предања везана је за једну потпуно другачију поруку која истиче немогућност таквог обреда и указује на његову правну, моралну и људску неодрживост.