

Dragoslav ANTONIJEVIĆ
Institute for Balkan Studies
Belgrade

THE PURPOSE OF STUDYING CALENDAR CUSTOMS

Abstract: Calendar customs are viewed in a new light, from the facets of theocentric and anthropocentric theoretical systems, which on the plane of feast-time, are brought into contact and interacted in concept and practice alike.

On the basis of abundant ethnological material collected and published thus far, and personal experience acquired in numerous field investigations on popular religion, rituals and customs, I have devoted considerable attention to the study of calendar feasts and holidays among Serbs and other Balkan peoples. Altogether, with the use of written documents and more modern methodological approaches, I have observed that, evolving in internal and external reciprocal and intermittent processes, two essential patterns are intertwined during calendar feasts among Orthodox Christians in the Balkans, one theocentric, and the other anthropocentric, representing in conjunction the backbone of calendar (annual) feasts. More recently, similar views and ideas from new standpoints are to be found in works by Bojan Jovanovic.

In postulating my thesis, I availed myself of the system theory, i.e. with the results of its authors: Rody, Michelson and Britten, which partly resembles the structuralism of Levi Strauss, but not essentially. What is the essence of this theory? First of all, it transcends the limitations of simple functional cause-and-effect relations in feasts, the way they are most frequently interpreted in ethnology. It accurately depicts a specific network of mutual causalities, in a special way. In that sense, the system theory offers a wide framework for the analysis of feast reality. It is a meta-language and

paradigm that encompasses relations through a unique perspective of mutual relations of cause and effect within structural compulsions of systematic interactions. In this way, the system theory builds a bridge between different phenomena within the framework of feasts, adapting cross-fecundation of specific analytical techniques as well as more general theoretical abstractions. No elementary part can be comprehended by itself, therefore its interactions with the entire system, which is modeled in the internal processes of an environment and its times, must be investigated.¹

Naturally, within the theory system is a decisive question - the *question of time*, as a crucial definition of the idea and praxis of every feast. Time is the essential problem of anthropology, and Henry Bergson claims that time is a capital problem of metaphysics. Essentially, time is succession. For studying feasts, the *time cycle* is perceived as a closed circle or spiral.² In ancient philosophy, a circle was a symbol of cyclic development and reversion to the beginning, always to new beginnings and the conjunction of beginning, middle, and end. Heraclitus' idea on the circumference of the circle which contains both the beginning and end in gnostic philosophic symbolism is represented as a snake biting its tail.³ Therefore, the time cycle, having a beginning and end, is quantitatively and strictly symmetrical. Cycles have beginnings and ends that recur. First of all, there is the life cycle (biological reproduction of man), then there are rituals, ceremonies, and annual holidays in which the past is replicated *in illo tempore*. Mirce Eliade was right when he said, „periodical feasts carry participants to the primordial time which is always the same, which belongs to eternity.“⁴ The archetype is in the cycle time, and that is eternity, i.e. man's desire to go back to the beginning.

Feasts are included in holy time, the divine time of cyclic passage, reverting to the eternal beginning which is at the same time always new, as we have been taught, that „you cannot step into the same river twice“.

Calendar holidays belong to holy time with precisely defined dates in the church calendar that fit in with the popular lunar calendar „which at the same time presents a very open reconstruction of the folk year and ordi-

¹ D. Antonijević, *Savremene teorije u etnologiji*. Glas Srpske akademije nauka i umetnosti, CCCLXX, Department for social sciences, 27, Belgrade, 1995, 34-35.

² D. Antonijević, *Traditional and Popular Culture*. A Symposium at the Royal Academy of Letters, Stockholm, 1987, 80-81.

³ D. Dragojlović, *Učenje antičkih filozofa*, Dijalektika 1, Belgrade, 1980, 61.

⁴ M. Eliade, *Sveto i profano* (separat), Vrnjačka Banja, 1980, 44.

nary daily life, so rooted in and known to all in times when literacy among the populace was negligible, so to speak“.

Theocentric traits in calendar holidays created images of saints celebrated in liturgical prayers and Communion, and internal, subconscious, desires of man to rise to the holy and divine, which contains the force of power, and it is quite natural that a religious man deeply feels the need to satiate himself with this power.⁶

Divine anthropomorphism, eternalized on church frescos as liturgical representations and icons depicting saints, inspired piety among masses and excited the imagination, raising spiritual dynamism to the sphere of the supernatural. God is represented primarily with symbols extended into iconography and psychism, as the human form of god and the saints had triumphed.

Despite efforts put forth by theologians and the church since medieval times to confirm the spiritual character of God, and to preserve that divine immateriality, people believe in the reality of God, which I have noted on many occasions during my field investigations. It is referred to as substantial reality, which is too ambiguous to satisfy both doctrinal orthodoxy and the mental habits of man. God is envisaged sitting on a throne, watching down on mankind. And when the Bible says that God created man in his own image, Christians comprehend the similarity first as physical, and see God in human form. Medieval Christians took over the material image of God from the Old Testament. This god is certainly not shown to people. You cannot see my face, God says to Moses, because man cannot see me and live.⁷

Popular piety connected with calendar holidays oscillates between a purely monotheistic vision of God and anthropomorphic images of saints in a realistic manner with Christian symbols, which leaves in man's mind triumphant pictures and an atmosphere of holiness, but also of fear.

Serbs in medieval times, writes Radovan Samardžić, entered upon a spiritual life which established, for the period of suffering to come, a vertical of their history. Only with the cult of St Sava, as a separate branch of Eastern Orthodoxy. Serbs perceived they had a religion with the cults of their saints, in a language they spoke, and literature and art that glorified

⁵ M. Nedeljkovic, *Godišnji običaji Srba*, Belgrade, 1990, XI.

⁶ M. Eliade, *op.cit.*, 8.

⁷ J. Le Goff, *Srednjovekovna civilizacija zapadne Evrope*, Belgrade, 1974, 112.

their rulers, archbishops and martyrs. The close connection of interests between state and church certainly helped St. Sava's orthodoxy to acquire national character.⁸

The basis of the family Patron Saint's Day should be sought in theocentrism, and its origins at the time when Christianity took root among the Serbs. The period is positively the time of St. Sava. Though Christianity had reached the Serbs centuries before, it had not attained the spiritual heights it rose to during the life of St. Sava. By introducing a family Patron Saint's Day among the people, St. Sava wished to break up with pagan beliefs. Dimitrije Bogdanović has a point when he says, „St. Sava and his disciples and missionaries with determination severed the opportunistic and smattering missionary tactics of the Archbishopric at Ohrid, taking up energetically to teaching Serbs the Gospel in keeping with the highest orthodox ideals of the monastic orders of Mount Athos and Palestine. This is the most crucial stage in the Christianization of the Serbs.“⁹ The origins and development of the family Patron Saint's Day must be viewed in the overall framework of activities pursued by St. Sava, Bogdanović continues. We wish to add that these phenomena in Serbian popular religion - the family patron saint and cult of St. Sava can be treated as „Serbian“, an ethnic trait of the Serbs.

After the Patriarchate of Peć was established in 1557, the church put forth great effort to renew and spread the cult of St. Sava. Testifying to the revival of the cult of St. Sava as a special substance of Serbian piety are the many churches that sprang up across the lands inhabited by Serbs, though not as splendid as they had been during the medieval reign of the Nemanjić dynasty.¹⁰ Small, unpretentious churches were built in remote villages, and most important, the church sent out unassuming icons to those who celebrated the Patron Saint's Day, to hang up on the eastern walls of their homes, with a candle burning beside it, marking the small domestic altar before which a family crossed themselves, praying to their patron saint for

⁸ R. Samardžić, *Za carstvo nebesko*, „Kosovska bitka i posledice“, Institute for Balkan Studies with the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, special editions 44, Belgrade 1991, 10-11.

⁹ D. Bogdanović, „Krsna slava kao svetosavski kult“, „Glasnik“ of the Serbian Patriarchate, Belgrade, 1961, 206.

¹⁰ Samardžić R., *Ideje za srpsku istoriju*, Belgrade, 1989, 221.

protection. Christian relics like these were to be found in village households across Pomoravlje, Banja, and Šumadija.¹¹

Making up a complete whole with the theocentric part of the calendar feasts is the anthropocentric system, of more or less intensity, not as a binary opposition, but as a complex model consisting of numerous layers of animist, mannerist and other religious systems. However strongly Serbs wished to abide by the Christian teachings, like other Orthodox Christians in the Balkans, they retained traces of belief deeply rooted in the spirit of the ordinary man, beliefs carried down from times long since past and often similar to the ways of thought of superstitious man. These elements make up part of the calendar holidays. Even certain basic ideas of magic practice are contained in them. Thus, between magic and religion, we see a continuity, a common threshold enabling transition from one to the other, without disputing the originality of either. Besides, invocations of god and saints in magic rituals (exorcism) testify to the existence of a common threshold. The close connection of religious rites in calendar feasts with magic rites is seen at work throughout the year, which makes it difficult to separate religion from magic. Sometimes the religiously-magic and the magically-religious are identical. These two aspects of coexistence in the Christian religion are based practically on a realistic stand of believers. Even if the teachings of theologians oppose it. However, I maintain my stand that religion, meaning here the religion of the saints,¹² i.e. the class of calendar feasts, addresses certain beings whose inclination man is trying to evade, and which can always refuse to grant his wishes.

It is known that the church had since medieval times struggled persistently to root out pagan customs, beliefs, myths and cults, by persuasion, illumination, threats and punishment, etc. My opinion is that man is in that respect unchanged, he is still superstitious, gullible, full of fears where his earthly and future existence are concerned. Illness, failure and death haunt him perpetually, and fear dims his powers of perception. He is constantly aware of misfortune, presently and ahead, and therefore attempts to prevent, avoid or drive it away with actions that mostly have nothing to do with true Christianity, but are rooted in magic and ancient cults. He brought

¹¹ D. Antonijević, „Banja“, Zbornik radova Kongresa udruženja folklorista Jugoslavije, XXXVI, Belgrade, 1989, 19.

¹² D. Antonijević, *Običaji i obredi Balkanskih stočara*, Special editions of the Institute for Balkan Studies with the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 16, Belgrade, 1982, 117.

Christian saints to replace his old gods, giving them attributes that once belonged to the pagan gods. Prophet Ilija is the saint of fire, thunder and lightning. St. Nikola rules over the seas, he is the patron of sailors. St. Djordje is the patron of flocks and shepherds, even warriors. Other saints are healers or guardians, they protect believers from illness and evil. Thus, depending on circumstances, a believer will invoke a saint who has the power to help him in his troubles, and he will try to propitiate him with prayers and offerings. Since the early days of Christianity, people adhered to these ancient traditions so strongly that the church was forced to bend and compromise. Thus many feasts and holidays were introduced into the Christian calendar and adjusted to the spirit and celebration of the new religion, but not completely.

Some calendar feasts follow phenomena which are, viewed externally, characterized by unbridled impulses and exaggeration in merriment, such as dancing, singing, and large quantities of food and drink. „Excessiveness is not only by chance an epiphenomenon of the agitation that it causes and develops. It is necessary for the success of the feasts in celebration, and participates in their creditable virtues, which contribute to the renewal of nature and society.“¹³ Some feasts, therefore, end as a rule in frenzied orgies, transforming into a specific rhythm and dance. There are numerous instances, such as Ivandan, Djurdjevdan, and others, where man is transformed from a *homo faber* into the eternal *homo ludens*. Vast masses undulate in a reel, beating their feet to the ground, the shakings heighten ecstatic instincts, spontaneously coming to glowing heat and erotic freedom. The reel does not stop, „couples suddenly step out of the dance to play in the nearby woods and return to the reel that goes on till morning.“¹⁴ Woods become holy temples of promiscuity, as once among ancient Greeks. „It is quite understandable that a feast, representing such a paroxysm of life and solving in such a violent way the most trivial worries of daily life, should appear to an individual as another world, one in which he feels encouraged and transformed.“¹⁵

However we differently we may conceive or present feasts, jammed into one season or distributed throughout the year, according to the established dates, they everywhere serve a similar function. Feasts bring inter-

¹³ R. Kajoa, „Teorija praznika“, Kultura, 73, 74, 75, Belgrade, 1986, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

ruption in work, liberation from restrictions and subjugation, they mark man's destiny in a special way, a moment when a myth, dream etc. is lived through. In these moments, there appears in the mind a need to reactualize archetypes, that rule over the domain of the conscious and unconscious, and, in particular the subconscious, to experience, as it were, the world alert. There is a strict logical principle in this that affects the products of the spirit wherein symbols acquire their highest expression in supraconscious experience.¹⁶

As we have set out, two basic spirals, theocentric, and anthropocentric, prevail in annual calendar feasts. The stages of development show them to be syncretic in action, a confluence and permeation of different religious idealistic systems, cults, customs and practices, pagan and Christian, often with contradictory and irreconcilable principles and stands, in a unique view of the world and concept of reality, „with the help of which man creates an organized image of himself and everything around him.“¹⁷

With this supplement, we have obviously offered only a compendium on the annual cycle of customs that deserve elaboration and open up new prospects for a monographic whole of customary life. As may be discerned, despite the present Christian illusion, feasts go back to the oldest days of antiquity. The meaning that popular forms of religious respect have for a proper understanding of the religion of a nation is vast, not only because religious instincts find external expression in that act of respect, but also because so many Serbian religious customs have ancient origins, and are, in fact, remnants of old Balkan, Old Slavonic religions and practices, and God knows how many other beliefs, as yet unknown to us. However strongly a nation wished to live in accordance with the teachings of Christ, within it lived on many beliefs that were not Christian in the true sense of the word, beliefs deeply rooted in the spirit and mind of the ordinary man, beliefs inherited from bygone times, often very similar to the manner of thought of aboriginal man. By combining the theocentric and anthropocentric theoretic stands, as seemingly two contrasting views, an imaginary spine has been created that essentially integrates pagan and Christian beliefs as issues of the human mind, classing them into certain systems disposed to encompass all logical alternatives offered in the countless variants of the annual feast cycle.

Translated by Dragana Vulićević

¹⁶ B. Jovanović, „Elijade“, *Književna kritika*, 6, Belgrade, 1986, 118.

¹⁷ D. Bandić, *Narodna religija Srba u 100 pojmova*, Belgrade, 1991, 7.

О СМISЛУ ПРОУЧАВАЊА ГОДИШЊИХ КАЛЕНДАРСКИХ ОБИЧАЈА

Резиме

У овом раду су у новом светлу сагледани годишњи календарски обичаји православних народа на Балкану, кроз призму геоцентричног и антропоцентричног теоријског система који се у равни празновања мисаоно и на делу прожимају или додирују и међусобно повезују. Дакако, комбиновањем једног и другог становишта, на изглед као два супротна циља, остварена је замишљена вертикала која суштаствено интегрише паганска и хришћанска веровања која је створио људски ум сврсатавајући их у одређене структуралне системе који имају намеру да прекрију алтернативе понуђене у безбројним варијантама годишњег празничног календара.