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Dragoslav ANTONIJEVIC
 Institut for Balkan Studies
 Beograd

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF ORIENTAL CULTS IN THE BALKAN FOLKLORE

We are often inclined to interpret the term and notion of Orient, oriental, as referring to such material and spiritual goods which had directly or indirectly come to the Balkans with the Ottomans, and which from the chronological point of view certainly belong to a more recent cultural stratum. Our observation in this paper however, concerned with much older epochs, with the periods of prehistory and antiquity, during which various cultural influences from the Orient came to the Balkans and which we can discern as pale fragments in the folklore of the modern Balkan peoples. It has been frequently that many cultures, based on the syntheses, deeper and more complex than in any other part of Europe have met and mingled in the Balkans. Hence the Balkans provide particular patterns and examples in this respect.

On this occasion we shall dwell upon those oriental deposits, implicated and preserved in the fertility cult, which has been maintained in some parts of the Balkans representing as a contemporary put it, »a live archaeological document«. We shall try to point out oriental roots in the recent folklore materials which have preserved the fertility cult. The method of utilizing archaeological sources comes up of itself, which corroborates the fact that the folklore and archaeology happily complement each other and, as Miloje Vasić said, »cannot even be separated from each other without causing a serious and great damage to the successful work in both these fields«.

Magna Mater, the supreme feminine deity was worshiped under different names: Cybele, Rhea, Hecate, Artemis, etc. in the entire Mediterranean area and in the Near East. The cult of Magna

Mater is testified in the Balkans by numerous archaeological monuments. Her cult means the personification of all the fertilizing powers of nature and man, in order to increase fertility. On prescribed the worshippers of Magna Mater went in processions, dancing to the deafening sound of cymbals and tympani, and then, in ecstasy, flagellating, castrating and wounding themselves. The orgiastic spirit of this cult, involved also the immolation the bull for the fertility of fields. It was transferred from Asia Minor to Greece at the beginning of the 7th century of the old era.¹

The cult of Magna Mater, or Cybele as the most ancient oriental fertility cult has been documented by iconographic, epigraphic and architectonic monuments in the Roman provinces which had been included in the territory of the Balkans.²

From the middle of the second century Magna Mater has been venerated throughout the Roman Empire. In her sanctuary in Rome a bull or a ram was offered as sacrifice and believers were sprinkled with its blood.³ Sanctuaries of Magna Mater and vows addressed to her were known to have existed and the contents of some vows point out to the existence of the *cognatio*, the community of believers which means an organized religious community.⁴

Isis. — At the same time when the written history was first created in the Balkans side by side with Magna Mater from South-West Asia, the great gods of the hellenistic Egypt, Isis and Serapis, as well as the celebrated Iranian Mithras, became also popular in the course of the second century. According to very extensive research by Petar Selem, the Roman provinces in the Balkans of that period were interspersed with the statues of oriental deities. Egyptian gods, banished in specific historical situations, particularly at the time of the Republic, when they served as the religious refuge mostly to the lower classes, will find out their own particular circles and thus also a *modus vivendi* with the deities of the Roman Pantheon.⁵

Like Magna Mater, Isis, is a fertility goddess and in the Balkans she is linked with the tradition of mysteries with orgiastic elements which the phenomenon of fertility, of sprouting of nature and of vital forces.⁶ The markedly agrarian cult of the Egyptian Isis, both in its original concept and by its real position in the cult, has sublimated the phenomenon of the fertility magic which

¹ Д. Срејовић — Д. Цермановић, *Речник грчке и римске митологије*, Београд 1979, 215.

² Љ. Зотовић, *Историјски услови развоја оријенталних култова у римским провинцијама на територији Југославије*, Старинар XIX, Београд 1969, 59.

³ Д. Срејовић — А. Цермановић, *op. cit.*, 241.

⁴ Љ. Зотовић, *op. cit.*, 60.

⁵ P. Selem, *Egipatski bogovi u rimskom Iliriku*, Godišnjak Centra za balkanološka ispitivanja 7, Sarajevo 1972, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

fits into the general atmosphere of the Mediterranean cultural milieu.

The archaeological monuments all over the Balkans show a close relation to the original cults among them. The connecting links exist in two basic cults and chronological strata. Isis is connected with Magna Mater and Cybele through concepts and ideas of fertility, whereas Serapis is related to Mithras through its chthonian character.⁷

Oriental goddesses who had come to the Balkans and had been accepted, adopted and personified in the fertility cult, in which the greatest stress was given to the orgiastic act, are always followed by masculine deities of oriental origin. They always intercourse with the latter for the sake of fertility. Osiris made love to Isis although they were a brother and a sister while Atys was the companion of Cybele. To Ishtar, a Babylonian goddess, Tammuz was both a son and a lover.

Serapis, Mithras and Dionysus, belong to the circle of oriental masculine deities in the Balkans. For our theme the most important subject is Dionysus and his cult, which comprises all the forms of fertility cult, which manifested in the powerful presence of fertility cult. i. e. of orgies and ritual sacrifices. As the deity of the general fertility, human, animal, agrarian, Dionysus is equipped with all attributes and instruments which are used in the rituals of fertility. In the first place there is the phallus and the ritual appellation, Bull, used for the god Dionysus has according to Milan Budimir shameful connotations.⁸

Dionysus' female attendants, the maenads, fell into ecstasy, shouting the name of the god. There exist many representations of dancing maenads on the vases from the end of the fifth century of the old era. They represented in ecstasy with all the characteristic attributes (serpent, thyrsus, doe, torch, tympanum, etc.).⁹

The epigraphic monuments confirm that the cult of Dionysus had its fraternities, composed of mystes, who contributed to the spreading of the cult and exerted an influence on Dionysus' movement in the Balkans.¹⁰

Folklor material

The recent folklore material in the Balkans keep the vestiges of all the above mentioned remote oriental deities of fertility. We shall try to corroborate this many of examples.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸ М. Будимир, *Са балканских источника*, Београд 1969, 109.

⁹ Д. Срејовић — А. Цермановић, *op. cit.*, 257.

¹⁰ М. Васић, *Дионисос и наш фолклор*, Глас САН ССХIV, Београд 1954, 158.

The first example. — In the masked processions which are formed on Christmas, New Year and at the Carnival time, a mask of the so-called »baba«, bride, is very characteristic of all the peoples. Its variations in the stage representation from one locality to the other are entirely understandable. The old woman with the child (doll) in her arms, in addition to comic gestures accompanied with the elements of parody, improvises with a masked man-dancer, who carries an enormous wooden phallus, the obscene scene of coitus, they are given hospitality in every house whose inhabitants express a particular wish for this symbolic scene of fictitious sexual act to be performed. In some regions this detail is carried out on a ploughed field or near a ritual tree in the forest.

The fundamental function of the mask of the old woman-bride is to secure fertility and prosperity in general and the simulated coitus only confirms the magic of fertility. This figure caused many controversial opinions in the science according to some scientists it derived from Magna Mater, according to some others from Cybele or Semele or from the Thracioan nursing mother. Frazer connects this figure with Demeter who gave birth to Pluto on a three times ploughed field. According to all indications, which we are unable to discuss more circumstantially, this figure in the masked processions of the Balkans represents a latent relict, the focus whose function is to secure fertility and in which a deity of a higher order, of the order of Magna Mater is manifested.¹¹

The second example. — »Premlaz« (shepherds' feast) is a festivity when Balkan cattle-breeders bring together their flocks in order to keep their animals together in the course of summer months, to gather milk and prepare dairy products.

After a strictly fixed sequence of magic actions by which this ritual is accompanied such as: live coals fire, ritual dancing and singing with the encircling of flocks ritually prepared breads, communion table and sacrifices, the united flocks are let out from folds at the very end of the ritual, and at this moment all the women present rush after the cattle, shrieking and screaming and singing in unison ritual songs, at the same time lifting their skirts up to their waists, exposing their nakedness in the direction of the sheep and touching with their hands the most intimate part of the body. It seems to us that in this detail has been preserved a clear vestige of the orgiastic cult of the ancient Demeter the heiress to the oriental deities of fertility.

The third example. — The festivities of St John's Day are closely connected with the fertility cult among the Balkan peoples. They are accompanied by orgiastic accents. Nocturnal dances round Saint John's fires, with unbridled eroticism and singing of songs in which intimate relations between the brother and the sister are

¹¹ K. J. Kakouri, *Dionysiaka*, Athenes 1965, 92.

mentioned, speak of the »sexual excesses of the youth«. ¹² This moment is particularly expressed in the Vlach custom, called »strndžanje«, when boys and girls spend the whole night, making love to each other.

This licentious behaviour and giving of girls to men on the appointed days of the year, usually on some feasts, are undoubtedly remnants of the orgiastic promiscuity, known in oriental fertility cults.

The fourth example. — We shall take a characteristic detail from the rite of rusalje in Serbia and Bulgaria. At Whitsuntide women fell into a trance which came over them in the course of the ritual dance either individually or in groups. In this state they fell to the ground, screamed, sang, cried and spoke incoherently. The girls called »queens« and the boys called »kings« danced a ritual *kolo* (round dance) round the rusalje, to the accompaniment of a characteristic music. Moving in a strange manner they touched the rusalja, poured water over her and spat masticated wormwood, garlic, mixed with vinegar on her.

M. Meisner was the first to state that rusalje represent the last vestiges of Magna Mater and that this ritual, by its dissipations can be characterized as a pure residue of the religion of Dionysus. ¹³ In his investigations M. Vasić too, has come to the conclusion, that the rusalje are a survival of the cult of Dionysus, with a marked orgiastic character. ¹⁴

Ways and means of the expansion of oriental cults

The ways by which oriental cults from the East found their way to the Balkans cannot be precisely established, on account of very scanty and often contradictory data. The archaeological monuments show that the ways and means of the spreading of oriental cults over the Balkans were very different. The great remoteness of ancient oriental fertility cults, transformed in the Balkan folklore, does not allow us on account of the lack of evidence always to connect such a distant past with the present time, in spite of the fact that cults and rites are far more resistant than other cultural goods. In the course of its long life, from prehistoric times and the classical, Greek and Roman periods new developments were added to older deposits enriching them by new meanings, new expectations and new ideas and bringing new experience. Thanks to this state of affairs the cults were able to survive over such a long

¹² С. Зечевић, *Оргијастичке свечаности летње солстиције*, Народно стваралаштво 13—14, Београд 1965, 1053—1062.

¹³ М. Мајзнер, *Дубочке русаље, последњи трагови из култа велике мајке богова*, Годишњика Н. Чупића XXXIV, Београд 1921.

¹⁴ М. Васић, *op. cit.*, 158.

period of time and to become a powerful weapon for the mastering not only of the naturalistic, senseless picture of reality but also of the very process of its creation.¹⁵

As we have already shown, the fertility cults in the more recent Balkan folklore indicate their oriental origin. It might be anterior to the classical, Greek and Roman periods but the sources from the hellenistic period supply us with the greatest quantity of the data concerning the penetration of oriental cults into the Balkans, precisely at the time when the entire expansion of oriental cults, as well as their revival, transformation, acceptance and adoption by the autochthonous population began to be felt.¹⁶ Many authors emphasize the great part played by Alexander the Great in the transference of oriental cults. This hellenistic wave left undoubtedly a profound mark in the later centuries.

The processes, inaugurated in the helenistic epoch, were intensified in the period of the Roman Empire, particularly with the appearance of merchants, sailors, customs officials and soldiers who declared themselves as followers of Isis and Serapis. »The promoters of these beliefs can be Egyptians, but they may also originate from Smyrna or Antiochia, from Palestina or from Greek islands, where Egyptian gods had been long adopted or fused with other Greek-oriental gods into syncretic sheaves of beliefs.«¹⁷

Egyptian cults came also with customs officials who were regularly of oriental origin. The oriental customs officials were accepted in Rome as very experienced employees for collecting of customs duties, but they also brought from the East the cult of Egyptian gods, Isis and Serapis and the cult of the great Persian god Mithras. They were, in a certain period of time, principal representatives of Egyptian cults which were also embraced by the members of the Roman society.¹⁸

It has been also proved that soldiers, both legionaries and officers, were promoters of oriental cults. »It is quite understandable, if we bear in mind the mobility of military units, their stay in different regions, and even in the East, during which time they were under intensive influence of the local religious ideas.«¹⁹

As early as in the second century the ethnical presence of Orientals, whereby the beliefs coming from East got also a stronger support, could be observed in Dalmatian town. The oriental cults penetrated into the interior of the Balkan Peninsula on all important military and commercial roads. The roads in the area of the Black Sea also played an important part in the spreading of oriental

¹⁵ Д. Антонијевић, *Византијске брумалије и савремене маскиране поворке балканских народа*, Balcanica X, Београд 1979, 124.

¹⁶ М. Васић, *op. cit.*, 158.

¹⁷ P. Selem, *op. cit.*, 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79—80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

cults in the Balkans, particularly in the eastern part of the Peninsula.²⁰

Two more roads along which these cults made their progress, have been established as of the greatest importance. One of them went over Aquileia and exerted an influence on the regions of Moesia Superior and the other went along the line of the Danubian boundary and over Dacia and Moesia Inferior passed over into Moesia Superior and Lower Pannonia.²¹

To all appearances, oriental cults entered into interesting relations with the autochthonous Balkan cults. According to an inscription from Bigesta, from the second half of the first century, it can be seen how a whole Illyrian family, only in the beginning of its process of Romanization, used the instrument called sistrum, which belonged to the cult of Isis, playing on it in the honour of the goddess Isis.²²

Under the influence of the Romanization, the indigenous population of the Balkans will transform their cults through *»interpretatio romana«*, while the deities and cults both of Hellenic and Iranian and of oriental origin coexisted at the same time.²³

The adoption of oriental cults was helped by their democratic character. In the social sense this component allowed the access to them to the lowest social layers, slaves and freedmen, emancipated slaves, who were ardent followers of these cults. They were very soon joined by the higher ranks of the society, particularly among the citizens of provincial towns *municipia* (colonists, veterans, legionaries, merchants, artisans). Actually, these were the only cults in which women could participate on an equal footing. Particularly in the cult of Isis, where the women played an important role.²⁴

The foci of oriental cults were sufficiently strong to attract the indigenous population not only from colonies, but also from the surrounding perimeters, who, having accepted the process of Romanization, integrated themselves into this society and obtained in different, even respectable functions.²⁵ »Already from the beginning of the third century, oriental beliefs were more or less adopted, by all the citizens of the Roman Empire, thus forming that block of pagan religious disposition which, in its integrality, will offer resistance to the invading Christianity. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that it is impossible to imagine the triumph of Christianity without previous activity of pagan oriental cults.«²⁶

²⁰ Љ. Зотовић, *op. cit.*, 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² P. Selem, *op. cit.*, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

Several centuries went by until the Slavs, like out of the darkness, burst with their migrations and struggles, into the Balkan Peninsula, in the ancient and dilapidated Roman Empire. They were obliged to get accustomed to the new climate and the new sun, as well as to new views of the world and to the urbanized way of life. It was a complex acclimatization of the fairhaired barbarian newcomers from the North. Their invasions forced the autochthonous population to withdraw to the Balkan mountains and the islands. Very soon the newcomers were obliged to adopt the cultural goods of the indigenous population which they found in their new home, goods impregnated with Mediterranean and oriental cultural characteristics and strata. The latest investigations show that the rites and cults of the natives were particularly attractive to the newcomers. The latest research bears evidence that various heresies in the Balkans had a great importance in the transference and preserving of pagan and oriental religions. They kept up old beliefs, rituals and cults, particularly those of oriental origin with ecstatic traditions. The science has proved that the Manicheans and the Bogomils have played a decisive part in the adoption and transmittance of elements of the Dionysiac religion.²⁷

The ideological link connecting oriental cults which had been assimilated in the Balkans in such a remote past with the modern folklore rites, expressed through the fertility cult, can have, at first sight, the epistemological character of a hypothesis. In spite of this, however, it obviously forces itself on us, as the folklore examples have shown. The essence of the view of world of the fertility cult does not allow of doubt in the genetic, formal and picturesque relationship of cults and modern folklore rites.

²⁷ D. Dragojlović, *Tračko kulturno i kultsko nasleđe kod balkanskih Slovena*, Godišnjak Centra za balkanološka ispitivanja 7, Sarajevo 1972, 186.

ПРИЛОГ ПРОУЧАВАЊУ ОРИЈЕНТАЛНИХ КУЛТОВА
У БАЛКАНСКОМ ФОЛКЛОРУ

Резиме

Аутор уводним реченицама одређује значење појма *оријент*, *оријентално*, везујући их за далеко старије епохе, него што је османлијска, за праисторију, нарочито антику, када су са оријента на Балкан пристизала, како то показује аутор, на разне начине и разним путевима многа културна добра и идејни утицаји чије бледе уломке изналази у савременој фолклорној грађи балканских народа. Аутор се користи археолошким изворима и компаративном фолклорном грађом. Узети у целини, ови се извори веома срећно допуњују, и не могу се одвојити једни од других, без озбиљне и велике штете по научни рад. Оријентална божанства плодности: Магна Матер, Изида и Дионис, присутна су у рецентној фолклорној грађи балканских народа, и то нарочито у играма под маскама, сточарском обреду „премлаз“, ивањданским обичајима и русаљама, на којима аутор чини анализу. Посебну пажњу посвећује путевима и начинима ширења оријенталних култова, њиховом прихватању, и преиначавању од стране аутохтоног становишта. Осврће се и на придошле балканске Словене који прихватају обрде и култове староседелаца. Значајну улогу у даљем одржавању и ширењу оријенталних култова имале су јереси, нарочито манихеји и богомили. Аутор остаје на тези да срж погледа на свет оријенталног култа плодности, не оставља никакве сумње у генетско, формално и сликовито сродство оријенталних култова плодности и савремених фолклорних обреда.

