

PHENOMENOLOGY OF FOLK RELIGION
EXAMPLES FROM MACEDONIAN FOLK TRADITION

The investigation of such an important anthropological problem as religion is a complex research challenge. Having in mind the differentiation of specific categories of culture, we find that is necessary to define the different categories of religious systems as well. We are of course focused upon the category of religion that is compatible with folk culture.

In ethnological science there is no definitive consensus regarding the utilization of a term that should cover this specific category. Few terms are used, such as folk religion,¹ rural Christianity,² folk theology,³ folk religion, folk Christianity, folk theology,⁴ syncretic Christianity,⁵ Pagan Orthodox Christianity⁶ etc.

Up till recently it was thought that there are no detailed investigations of folk religion in Macedonia. However, after the publishing of the studies of Polish ethnologists and anthropologist Joseph Obrebski the scientific opinion of the public has changed, and it is quite probable that through critical reading of this legacy his pioneering work will be acknowledged. In the '30ties of 20th century Joseph Obrebski, investigating the folk culture of Poreche people in Macedonia in the context of the religions of the people of Eastern Europe, established that, according to its features, it is a totally specific category of religion. He calls it Pagan Orthodoxy. Folk religion, as a separate category, is defined as a *"complexity consisting of a number of elements, different by genetics and content, that have been mixed and that are related to a specific system that includes the newer elements and the Christian concept as well."*⁷ The research of the specificities of the folk culture and religion of Poreche society, as well as the theoretical basis that he had at the time, as a doctoral student of B. Malinowski, enabled him to estimate in detail and to look closely to the category of folk culture - this is why his theoretical analysis can be considered relevant and current even today. This religious system, finds Obrebski, *"that is still a part of culture, and that is only partly related to the church organization, is surely a combination of pagan and domestic elements with Christian ones, a combination that creates a specific structure, a tight one, a consequent one, in which all heterogeneous elements are interrelated and form a whole, a certain Orthodox Paganism, that is adjusted to the needs of social organization and the needs of the Macedonian villager, assimilated by his basic concepts and cultural positions. In this sense the local system of folk religi-*

¹ Bandic 1991. 10.

² Eliade 1992. 167

³ Eliade 1992. 167

⁴ Bandic 1991. 10.; Eliade 1992. 177-179.

⁵ Yankova 1999. 9-10.

⁶ Obrebski 2001a 9-15.

⁷ Obrebski 2001b 9-15.

on undoubtedly is close to the one that was characteristic for the people of other Slavic countries."⁸

Thus, "folk religion" refers to the religious complex that was characteristic, during a long historical period, for the wider population, i.e. for the villagers at the Balkans, and Macedonia as well. This fact is very important since the category of people that is of our interest – the village population, is a dominant cultural factor during the Middle ages, while the "higher" or educated classes, that had religious education especially after the period of Christianization of Balkans, were concentrated in very small circles, especially in the cities' and Christian church centers. In addition to our opinion regarding to the specificity of folk religion as a separate anthropological category there are facts that show that this category was dominant at the Balkans, besides the survival of many other official religious teachings and cults, especially in the pre-Christian era.

In this sense the category of "folk religion" is a complex structure, comprising of different heterogeneous elements and segments according to their genetic and functional nature, but a structure that still functions in harmony, and enables folk religion to be not only a mixture of different religious values, but also to function dynamically, enabling itself and its components to develop into specific anthropological phenomena.

Folk religion of Macedonians possesses these basic features, so that researchers can discover all types of layers (Pre-Indo-European, Indo-European, Paleobalkan, Oriental, Slavic, Christian, Islamic etc.) and also discover the differences or changes of the functional and semiological features of certain segments of religion. However, we would like to emphasize upon a certain feature of folk religion of Macedonians, which could probably be identical to other folk religions in our proximity: that the mythical and religious way of thinking of people in the cultural context that is characteristic for folk cultures does not make this kind of differentiation and segmentation of what it defines as its religion. Thus, people do not know that their religion contains different religious elements. This means that they think that their religion and especially their mythical and religious viewing of the world is complex and total, that it is flawless in its functioning. The members of folk religion, that is realized in this case under the wing of Orthodox Christianity, do not question the intensity of Christianity, neither the Orthodoxy as such. On the contrary, this complex and complete system of folk religion functions as a Christian one, i.e. as an Orthodox one.

An identical conclusion could be drawn when it comes to the religious feelings of Macedonians with Islamic faith, who in spite of their weak ties to Orthodox Islam, find themselves "true Muslims". As historiography shows, a part of Macedonians after the conquests of the Turks in Macedonia, due to certain social-political and economic circumstances, have accepted Islam, and thus formally gained certain rights that they could not gain otherwise, as "infidels" in the Turkish Empire. Islamization as a process took different paths in different periods and regions in Macedonia, but this is not the topic of our research, so we would only point towards some of the recent research that focuses upon the results of these processes.⁹

⁸ Obremski, 2001b 10.

⁹ (Stojanovski 1998. 101–118.; Svetieva 1992. 21–23.; Sokolovski 1984. 65.; Limanoski 1993.)

When it comes to defining the specificities of the category “folk culture”, especially of the one of Islamized Macedonians, we find that the results of ethnological investigations that reveal many similar or identical religious features are far more important, the same being valid for the folk religion of Macedonians-Christians. These facts only confirm our thesis, as well as the thesis of J. Obrebski, that the category ‘folk culture’ is a system or a whole made up of different traditions that, depending on the official religion that the population accepts in certain cultural, historical and social circumstances, could be Christian or Muslim. A number of ethnological researches at this territory show that the system of folk religion of Islamized Macedonians includes, even today, many religious elements from the Pre-Islamic period. V. Petreska,¹⁰ investigating the example of a part of Islamized Miyaks from Western Macedonia, shows that the spring ritual calendar includes a number of elements that are related to the celebration of Christian holidays. Even more, the structure of the ritual activities is closely related to a number of different aspects and religious traditions from the Pre-Islamic, i.e. Christian period of the Macedonian population.

MYTH AND MYTHICAL VIEWING OF THE WORLD AND THE CATEGORY OF FOLK RELIGION

Myth, i.e. mythical viewing of the world is the category upon which the whole system of perception and creation of notions related to man and his world are created.¹¹ Thus, it should be investigated as a basic phenomenon of human culture, or more precisely, as the only relevant system of the religious and socially prescribed behaviour of people in a certain culture. Mircha Eliade, the famous researcher of myth and of the history of religious thought in general, finds that “*myth is a cultural and quite complex reality (...), a holly story, and thus a »real story«, since it could always refer to reality.*”¹² Thus, myth could not be understood as a certain fiction, idea, fantasy or something imaginary, according to which people organize their whole behavior. On the contrary, myth is based upon conscience and the notions of people regarding realistic events, the true stories that oblige people to behave according to the prescribed rules. Myths contain the holiest truths about people, their ancestors, their country, so that it is quite understandable that these fundamental elements of identity of people are valued as holy truths in the awareness of individuals and in their mythical knowledge and notions. This is where the important fact stems from, established by M. Eliade, that: “*In those societies where myth is still vivid, natives make a difference between myths as realistically stories and tales, which are called fake stories.*”¹³

Thus, the term “mythical reality” is maybe the most relevant to describe the phenomenon of the mythical experience of people, the feeling that they in fact located in a certain virtual reality. Probably, for the researchers and for the contemporary individual, seen from a historical and time distance, mythical notions and mythical reality are only mythical ideas about something that does not exist, but we should try

¹⁰ Petreska 1998. 7–144.

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss 1988. 103–236.; Lévi-Strauss 1989. 202–228.

¹² Eliade 1992. 17–18.

¹³ Eliade 1992. 20.

to finally understand that what is mythical for us today is not the same for the people in other social and cultural surroundings, neither the way they think nor their awareness. Nothing is mythical, in the sense of imaginary or fantastic, on the contrary, this is the only reality for them. If we understand mythical reality in this way, we will be on the right path to understand the basic features of the functioning of the mythical awareness, and to interpret the most important categories that participate in the constitution of mythical reality.

The founder of contemporary tendencies in the investigation of symbolic forms of communication, especially of the mythical way of thinking, Ernst Cassirer, finds that mythical opinion is the *“only form of conscience that has strictly established characteristic features”*¹⁴ when it comes to cultures of archaic people and folk cultures of European people. According to him, mythical thinking has a number of specific features that are its basic elements. The most important one is that *“it lacks the category of »ideal« and thus when it finds itself related to something that has a nature of pure knowledge it has to turn into something real, in something that looks like existence, so that it could be expressed.”*¹⁵ This means that mythical opinion does not create notions at the level of ideas, but that it turns them into something more acceptable, touchable, and visible, something that has a form of activity, that could be re-created into a reality. In this sense, mythical thinking is expressed as “concrete” thinking in the literal sense of the word: everything that it embraces experiences a special concretization, merges. Scientific knowledge tends towards merging the clearly separated elements, while the mythical notions let what is merged to overlap. Instead of the unity that is a result of merging, instead of a synthetic unity, it is a unity of the different, here we have a real coincidence, a real similarity.¹⁶

Mythical thinking does not make a distinction between the imaginary and the real, the objects (the physical things) and the notions (images) that represent them. This is why it is totally equal if one takes into account only the ‘real’ objects, or only their images or representations. This is how the mythical categories of causality are created, it is usually based upon facts of sensory knowledge. Mythical causality presupposes that each touch, proximity or similarity of objects and phenomena in space and time is a relation of cause and effect. Event where from today’s perspective one would think that they are a result of accidents or coincidences, mythical thinking rejects such explanations, tending to relate the answer to the relations of cause and effect.¹⁷ In the frames of mythical thinking and mythical activity, a part of an object replaces the whole and it could be used equally as if it represents the whole. Having in mind the analysis of the types of magic of J. Fraser and many others after him, we find that B. Jovanovich’s definition that the magical thinking is realized according to the rules of magical analogies is correct. This mental category embraces all variants of mythical thinking.

Although it is more than clear that the mental process is a category that is fully based upon a system of communication through symbols, few clarifications should be made, that closely define the essence of the symbols and their role in the

¹⁴ Kasirer 1985b 29.

¹⁵ Kasirer 1985b 50.

¹⁶ Kasirer 1985b 73., 76.

¹⁷ Kasirer 1985b 56., 58.

process of mythical thinking.¹⁸ Having in mind the previously made remarks on the features of mythical thinking, the conclusion is that the system of mental creation is based upon a corpus of symbols that are related in a certain way and present the desired ideas. However, the understanding of the essence of the symbols from today's perspective differs significantly from the one in the context of mythical thinking. Namely, one could say that there is no clear notion on the symbol as a form that using associations successfully transmits information between the participants in communication. Mythical awareness, objects or events that present or should be presented through symbols are not understood as transmitters but as carriers, owners and keepers of the essence (power) that the events or objects possess. The symbols do not present, they do not associate, but they carry the condensed magical power. This attitude is called by E. Cassirer "substantial".¹⁹

In the cultures where the transmission and organization of information are incorporated primarily in the ritual (as are in fact all folk cultures), it is important to note that there is no unique semiological system that is specially established to fix, keep and process information, but this is done through the institution of ritual. Thus, in the system of sign and symbolical communication one uses elements from the natural and cultural environment (elements of environment, objects, parts of habitats, food, clothes etc.), ascribing them special symbolical meanings.²⁰

Having in mind the basic categorization of religion made by Emil Durkheim, where the first category consists of religious beliefs, and the second of religious rituals, we could categorize the values of mythical thinking and mythical awareness into two basic groups:

- mythical and religious notions and knowledge (acquired and existing at the level of mythical thinking);
- mythical and religious activities (activities of people that are in concordance with mythical knowledge and notions)

As a result of mental processes, people develop notions, beliefs, knowledge, that are the only benchmark in the creation of the image on oneself, others and the world. Thus, the sums of the values of mythical thinking "*are organized according to codes - systems made up of conditional signs and symbols, that articulate through this sum the spiritual profile of a certain community, its viewing of the world.*"²¹

If one could conclude that the mythical notions, knowledge and beliefs are a result of the process of getting to know mythical reality, and that they are often turned into logical wholes made up of unique essential units, such as the codes, then the only possibility to act, to create a certain reaction in the sense of organization or restructuring of these knowledge is undertaking of activities, or more precisely, ritual activity. Ritual is the only medium that enables activity due to the intervention into mythical reality.

¹⁸ Meletinski 1995. 232.

¹⁹ Kasirer 1985b 67-68.

²⁰ Bayburin 1993. 11.

²¹ Kodovi I/1, 1996. 5-6.

RITUAL - UNIQUE FORM OF ACTUALIZATION OF MYTHICAL REALITY

In this part we would like to focus upon few essential issues related to ritual. We would like to emphasize the core of the ritual, which through the rigidly established rules of behavior enables people to direct their activities towards creation, re-creation or transformation of mythical reality according to their cultural needs.

This means that ritual, as an immanent anthropological and cultural phenomenon, has a special nature, in the context of cultures and societies, to function as a unique form of activity, form that enables creation, re-creation, work. Thus, ritual cannot be considered as a type of formal 'show', performance, but on the contrary, as an act through which actors directly participate in the creation of new social and cultural moments or re-create the old ones according to the principles of cyclic repetition, and according to the models of archaic beginnings.²² This is why E. Cassirer is right - when analyzing antic cults and mysteries he concludes that *"what happens in these rituals, as in a number of other cults and mysteries, is not just imitation of an event, but the event itself and its direct implementation, this is perceived as a real and true events, this is why it is totally functional."*²³ Dragoslav Antonijevic in his study "Dromena" dedicated to the analysis of the rituals under masks of the Balkan people, says that the Greek word *δρῶμενα* stems from the verb *δραω* "to do, to work, to be active"²⁴ thinking that the dromena is a *"type of stereotypization of a certain activity, not totally practical, but still attached to it, a reminiscence and anticipation of the real activity."*²⁵ He insists that this essential feature of the dromena should be perceived as a *"deed, act, instrument, activity, event..."*²⁶

Thus, it should be concluded that all elements of the ritual are associated with activity, work and protection. Mythical awareness presupposes ritual as a basic medium for actualization of reality. Through the ritual one obtains, destroys, cures, kills. *"The ceremony shows, the ritual transforms, and the transformation is most visible when it comes to ritual 'birth' from liminal state - at least in the rituals that mark life crisis."*²⁷ "Beautifying", aesthetics is minimized or it appears as a second-hand elements, even in the secularized ritual forms, that include primary forms that have already disappeared or have been transformed.²⁸

In the context of above mentioned thesis on the essence of ritual, we will focus upon few semantic meanings that the ritual itself has or had in the tradition of Slavic People. This is going to be, most probably, another proof that the ontological meaning of the word is related to the notion of activity, event, work.

The "Interpretative dictionary of Russian language" says: **обряд** - ceremony, act; strictly established activities regulated by custom that include additional activities, primarily of cult character.²⁹

²² Risteski 2001. 1-41.

²³ Kasirer 1985b 50-51.

²⁴ Antonijevic 1997. 7.

²⁵ Antonijevic 1997. 8.

²⁶ Antonijevic 1997. 24.

²⁷ Turner 1989. 169.

²⁸ Risteski 2001. 2-3.

²⁹ Ushakov 1974. 707., s.v. obrjad

The Etymological Dictionary of Fasmer, says that the term “ritual” stems from the word ***ob-rjad**’, pointing towards a more detailed explanation to **rjad** - ukr. **rjad**, (ancient Russian) **rjad**’, (ancient Slavic) **rjad**, **redăt** (Bulgarian) meaning “order, regulation, line”; Serbian and Croatian **rêd** ‘order’, Slavic **rêd** “order, regulation”, Czech **řad** “system, class, order, regulation”, Slovakian **rād**, Polish **rząd**, as well as the verbs that stem from the word *order* whose basic meaning without any doubt is to put in order, to regulate, and what is even more interesting the word **řediti** in Chech means to “manage”.³⁰

The “Interpretative dictionary of Russian language” of Vladimir Dalj, contains beautiful examples that show that in the Russian language from the end of the 19th century many of the original semantic forms of the word 'ritual' were clearly and without any doubt used, where the semantics of the word and its meaning show the direct link to the activity, when things get done, get ordered, get realized.

A number of examples are given where the different semantic meanings of the words are visible: **obrjazhat**’, **obrjadit**’ “regulation, cleaning, ordering”, *hozjain’ dom’ obrjazhaet*’ - the master of the house takes care of the house; *hozjajka dom’ obrjazhaet*’ - the housewife takes care of the house (cleans it, orders it); *kto korovă obrezhaet* - the one who takes care of the cow (everything that has to be done in relation to the cow – note by Lj. R.); *obrjadyt nevestu* - preparation, ornamentation, clothing of the bride, putting on the wreath (narjadit’ kă vencu); **okrutniki obrjadilis** - masked, disguised, while the word obrjad “household, regulation, order (organization) of the house, habit, utilization, usage”.³¹

The provided data show that the primordial and basic semantic meaning of the term “ritual” is order, regulation, re-arrangement, organization. Thus, the designation and the understanding of ritual as an activity or act that is taking place under strictly defined and social and culturally established norms are second-graded, while primarily ritual is a basic, unique activity, act of fixing things, ordering them, managing them, or re-arranging them, regulating something that was previously not regulated, or re-establishing an order that was disrupted. In fact, this is the primary and basic idea upon which all known cultures rest, and this is the idea that the world, man and everything else in it was created from chaos, from Nothingness, but always through forms of activities, acting upon natural or through divine forces, where the primordial act is an act of structuring, organizing of chaotic elements and creating of the World. This is why the most important corpus of rituals in their essence contain and carry the idea of re-arrangement of the world, the re-cosmologization and harmonization, but based upon the principles of re-creation and pre-time. “*This regeneration (repetition) of the act of creation in ritual (similarly as the repetition in stories) actualizes the very structure of life, giving the whole and its parts a forced symbolic and semiotic nature, and it serves as a guarantee regarding the absence of danger and the well being of the community.*”³²

³⁰ Fasmer 1978. 108., s.v. obrjad, rjad, rjadyt, rjazhu

³¹ Tolkoviy slovar’ 1881. 618, s.v. obrjazhat’, obrjadyt’

³² Toporov 1982. 16.

CONCLUSION

Although there is no definite consensus concerning the usage of a unique term that incorporates the type of religion practiced in folk cultures, still we find the term "folk religion" as most suitable. We define it as a religious complex that during a long historical period was characteristic for the wider population, i.e. for the villagers at the Balkans, including Macedonia. This fact is very important since the category of people that is a subject of our scientific interest, the village population, is a dominant cultural factor during the Middle ages, while the "higher" classes, or the educated classes that received mainly religious education especially starting from the period of Christianization of the Balkans, were concentrated in small circles, especially in cities or Christian church centres.

In this sense the category of folk religion is a complex structure including elements and segments that differ according to their genetic and functional nature, but they function in harmony. This enables folk religion to be not only a complex of different religious values, but to function in a dynamic way, and to develop itself and its elements as specific anthropological phenomena.

The ones who practice folk religion, as in the case of Macedonians who practice it under the wing of Orthodox Christianity, or partly in the case of Islam, do not question the intensity of Christianity or Islam. On the contrary, in their minds this complex of folk religion functions as an Orthodox Christian one, or an Islamic one.

Also, we have shown that in the folk cultures, similarly as in the cultures of archaic communities, myth should be analyzed as a basic phenomenon of human culture, or more precisely as the only relevant system of religious and socially prescribed behaviour of people in a certain culture. Thus, myth could not be perceived as some sort of fiction, idea, fantasy or imagination according to which people organize their behaviour. On the contrary, myth is based upon the awareness and the notions of people regarding actual events, real stories that oblige them to behave according to the rules. Myths refer to the holiest truths about people, their ancestors, their country, so that it is quite understandable that these fundamental elements of the identity of people are valued as holy truths in their awareness and in their mythical knowledge and notions.

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