

CUSTOMS AND RITUALS COMMON TO THE PEOPLES OF SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract: This paper examines some of the customs and rituals of the annual holiday cycle that are prevalent among the peoples of Southeastern Europe. These are mainly customs related to agricultural and pastoral communities, and especially to the magical and ritualistic effort to achieve euphoria, fertility and good harvest. The economic, social and cultural conditions that contributed to their spread to the peoples of the region, their local variations and their adaptations to the cultural tradition of each people, and their progress from traditional to popular culture, i.e. their forms and survivals, are examined today, in the age of modernity. The forms of their reproduction and management today, in the context of folklore and all kinds of tourist farms, are also examined, as well as the tendency of their replacement by modern ritual forms.

Keywords: Customs, Rituals, South-Eastern Europe, Balkan Folk Culture, Comparative Folklore, Ritual Performances

Comparative folklore has long been concerned with the investigation of constituent elements, rituals and ritual performances common to the various folk cultures of the Balkans and in general to south-eastern Europe. The associated scholarly literature is consequently large, very detailed and particularly interesting. As for Greece, there is, for example, the work of Prof. Georgios Megas, together with a range of other comparative views and interpretations. Here and there nationalistic tendencies may make their appearance, particularly in theories regarding origins, but despite this all this work forms the basis for more recent views (Varvounis 2015, 2016, 2018, Puchner 2018).

Prof. Walter Puchner has in recent times systematically examined the matter. Using the theatrical aspect of ritual performances as a point of departure, he has systematically looked at the aspects of Balkan folk culture that present common features. Since as a rule his work deals with questions of comparative folklore, it has most certainly contributed to the Greek bibliography on the subject. Indeed, performative folk ritual performances and similar forms of folk theatre that are tied to the ritual expression of metaphysical acceptance and questing appear throughout south-eastern Europe, above all in Orthodox lands and secondarily in Catholic areas and in Muslim communities, too, in this fascinating area (Varvounis 2007).

Such in outline is the contribution of Puchner's research to the field of the folklore of religion in southeastern Europe and such are the foundations and scope of

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his work. The full extent of its impact, however, is to be found above all in his work on the figures of Lazarus and Judas in the Balkans. This is because his contribution to the study of the religious folklore of south-eastern Europe includes information on traditional and ritual religious behaviour in the area in question and the folklore of religion itself in this region, as presented by Puchner, along with the formal classifications that he adopted, or rather, created.

The first of his contributions that we will look at here deals in particular with the figure of Lazarus, as depicted in the Orthodox tradition and folk culture of the Balkans (Puchner 1979, 1989a, 2015a). In his extensive study, Puchner examines both conventional and more arcane sources, that is, sermons, hymnography and iconography. He also looks extensively at ecclesiastical ritual performances and the liturgical background that relate to Lazarus in connection with religious tradition, at folk myths relating to the subject, at folk songs, customs, proverbs and at the survival and depiction of all this in literature.

The procedure is the same in a similar piece by Puchner, in which he deals with Judas in the same fashion (Puchner 1978, 1982, 2015b). Once more, he uses similar sources to deal with the matter of how the figure of Judas appears in customs and in folk literature among the peoples of south-eastern Europe in comparison to how it figures in corresponding ecclesiastical sources. And so Puchner puts together a dossier of the folklore pertaining to both these saints, just like the files, as it were, that the study of hagiology has compiled on every saint.

The scholar of religious folklore, however, is not only interested in church tradition and its reception by the common people (Varvounis 2017a, 2017b). We folklorists of religion are also interested in the vivid ritual performances engraved in the cycle of the year that the common people frequently tie to feasts of saints or to some other important festal landmark. And, of course, here we should mention Puchner's contribution to the study of the folklore of the theatre (Puchner 2016). In his treatment of *agermoi* [an *agermos* is a round made by groups of singers of the houses in a village or neighbourhood. The songs performed are normally connected with the arrival of a new season] and elementary theatrical performances, he focusses on the works and actions that comprise various aspects of these activities, including the rituals, verbal manifestations, traditional carols and the symbolic objects and actions designed to ensure a good harvest and to ward off evil influences associated with such festivals.

Puchner studies forms of ritual performance involving action, that is, competitive and mimetic or ecstatic acts, and primary forms of folk theatre, which involve metamorphoses by means of masks, disguises, interactive behaviours and theatrical roles. Thus he comes back to the close study of folk ritual performances (Puchner 1980) and the songs and speeches that go with them (Puchner 2009a). He also returns to the matter of how they are they are to be integrated in the study of popular theatre in all of south-eastern Europe (Puchner 1989b). This is an area, as we have said, that offers communities and identities, in that it has the all the features of a unified cultural entity.

Puchner has concentrated on matters concerning the theatre in its early, pre-aesthetic and primary forms, and has done research on folk theatre, something which endows all his work with a perspective drawn from theatre studies. Nevertheless, he has at times also dealt with other forms of folk religious sensibility, usually ritual or custom-based. He has also produced important findings regarding matters of religious folklore. Some of these concern theory, mainly regarding modern forms religious folklore and their relationship to folk theatre and expression. Some of them concern the investigation of forms of folk theatre that have evolved in various parts of Greece and have their roots in local tradition (Puchner 1983).

In his work on the folk religious traditions of the people of south-eastern Europe, Puchner concentrates on types of theatre and performative rituals. These he studies both in relation to the Balkans and of areas of the Mediterranean further afield (Puchner 2009b). To do this, he draws upon an extremely wide international bibliography, which he is able to do, not only thanks to his general knowledge of foreign languages, but in particular because he knows the languages of the Balkans, an important ability for scholars based in Greece. He is anyway deeply familiar with the non-Greek academic literature and this naturally informs the treatment he employs in his work (Puchner - Varvounis 2011).

Typical of Puchner's work and the approaches he uses is the fact that he is deeply interested in the historical background of those he studies. He does not hesitate to identify cultural continuities in the terms that his research requires (Puchner 1997). On the other hand, the fact that he employs groupings and examines his material in terms of the categories required by a perspective that comes from theatre studies (Puchner 2017) most certainly enhances his treatment of religious folk rituals. It contributes to a real understanding of the various elements that form these rituals and of the way in which they function as part of the organic whole of the folk culture of Greece and of other Balkan peoples.

I have stressed the importance of Walter Puchner's research and writings here, because they form a contemporary and academically perfect example of the comparative study of, and interpretative outlook on, common ritual elements in the traditional folk culture of the peoples of the Balkans, which makes use of the Greek and non-Greek literature on the subject in exemplary fashion. Nevertheless, the study of such material has probably reached its limits with Puchner's work, which concentrates and summarizes the preceding scholarly literature on the subject and has exhaustively covered various individual cases and has made use to its limits of the methodology that he has employed.

Nevertheless, comparative research may still continue. In addition to the phenomena of traditional culture, is also the rituals of contemporary folk culture of the Balkan peoples that present similarities on which there has not yet been any work by folklorists or anthropologists. This group of phenomena is not the result of the co-existence for centuries of the peoples of the Balkans as subjects of various multi-ethnic empires. Nor is it the result of the survival, regeneration and reshaping of ancient civilizational elements that formed the cultures that older scholars investigated. Rather, it arises from the foundations common to all these peoples constituted by Orthodoxy

and by Orthodoxy's relations with Islam and it concerns traditional religious behaviour (Varvounis 1993, 1995, 1997-1998). These phenomena are also most certainly the result of the prevalence of identical or similar conditions throughout the Balkans.

The historical, economic and social conditions that developed after the 1980s in the Balkans and in particular the development of tourism, with all the various financial, social and cultural consequences that it brought with it (Hall - McArthur 1998: 5, Maksin 2012), led to the formation of similar material conditions throughout the Balkans, on which, as is to be expected, a common cultural superstructure arose. As regards folk culture, one may observe once more the phenomenon of the presence of features in today's folk culture common to various Balkan peoples (Thompson 2015: 25), particularly in regard to religious behaviour and religious sensibility on the part of the common people, on which we focus here.

This current cultural change occurs fundamentally on three different levels. One of these concerns changes in concepts regarding the world and the shaping both of views regarding the world that these changes give rise to and the formation of associated rituals. The second concerns the introduction of new cultural models and the ever-advancing urbanization, as it were, of Balkan folk cultures. The third concerns the adoption of various ways of handling older tradition, which shape today's folk religious sensibilities and sense of religion in the Balkans. We now examine each of these factors separately.

To take first changes in views of the world and the rituals whereby such views are generated and expressed: The common conditions that we have mentioned above are linked to the pre-eminence, even among the peoples of the Balkans, of the tendency towards secularization and desacralization. This is particularly the case among Christians of various sects and above all among the Orthodox, albeit less the case among Muslims. Furthermore, both secularization and desacralization are phenomena of cultural globalization and the changes that it is bringing to traditional cultural systems to the Balkans and Greece (Labadi - Long 2010: 78 ff.).

The gradually shifting of the line between the natural and the metaphysical that is the result of advances in knowledge and the introductions of new technologies has also led to a movement of various folk rituals away from the cultic and supernatural to the social and recreational. This is a development that can be seen among many peoples and it is gradually changing traditional religious systems, adapting them to the demands, needs and spiritual quests of our time (Fairclough 2006).

On the other hand, as regards the cultural influence of new technologies, scholars have discerned a tendency towards the introduction of new cultural models, which spread primarily among urban populations in the Balkans during the 1990s and subsequently among rural populations in the area. These new cultural models, which generally emanate from Western Europe and the USA, are about to replace older cultural forms and older ritual displays, which, for the reasons explored above, have fallen into disuse. These older forms and rituals no longer satisfy the spiritual needs of the people and have therefore been rejected and are no longer carried out (Howard 2003: 37, Taylor 2004, Chirikure - Pwiti 2008).

Thus a culture of an urban type, as it were, is being exported to large cities and then to the countryside, which, as it is adopted, leads to the predominance of a new folk culture, one that is urbanized, so to speak, and is above all typified by the phenomenon of a counterfeit urbanization, as it were. Thus arises a cultural homogeneity, which forms the goal of cultural globalization. This frequently occurs in the guise of the convergence, so to speak, of various local folk cultures, so that one is now confronted with the appearance of a new urban form of folk culture among all of the peoples of the Balkans without exception.

This process usually rests upon the wide dissemination and use of contemporary cutting edge technologies and their application. That is, it rests on the widest possible access to the internet and on the use of many types of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These make communication easier and faster and they function as vehicles for the promotion and adoption of habits and patterns of life, of culture and of group-based action and expression pertaining to ritual, culture and custom (Kalay - Kvan - Affleck 2007).

Finally, in regard to processes connected with the management of tradition, social media are fundamental to the formation of cultural systems in the Balkans (Varvounis et al. 2016). By means of this, the oldest cultural capital they possess is reused and transformed, enriched and renegotiated, as part of a process of reflexivity, so that the dynamic cultural process that tradition involves, which overwhelms and then shapes today's folk culture, continues to advance.

The main processes here are four: the survival of older aspects of culture, sometimes completely unaltered and sometimes slightly adapted, in so far as such aspects continue to be organic elements of daily life. The revival of aspects that have disappeared are revived for various reasons and come to the fore once more, which, bluntly stated, occurs in the form of self-conscious, folkloristic performances (McKercher -Du Cros 2002: 67-68). The most typical example of this is the revival, as performances, of customs that have ceased to exist. Furthermore, the true constituents of old aspects of culture have altered greatly, in order to adapt to today's social and economic conditions, that is, to today's version of the material base on which the culture rests. On this foundation stands the spiritual superstructure of folk culture (Timothy - Nyaupane 2009: 78). Lastly, the introduction or creation of new elements by other cultural systems that enrich tradition and form the shape of folk culture today, in the manner we have already mentioned.

Such tendencies are developments common to folk cultures throughout the Balkans, irrespective of religion and ethnicity. Whether slow or fast in their evolution, they are to be found throughout the area and can be seen in research both in folklore and in anthropology.

This, of course, arises from the fact that common economic and social conditions prevail in the area. It also arises from the integration of a fair number of Balkan countries into the European Union, since European policies involve the application of measures that tend towards convergence and cultural homogenization. That this is so lies in the fact that the cultivation of similar folk cultures is regarded as a step

towards achieving the creation of a common European cultural whole, even as regards folk culture. This is believed to aid in the realization of the cultural goal of final European union (Varvounis 1997).

We thus find ourselves confronting a new world of common cultural elements, which now exist not for historical reasons nor have ancient cultural origins and now survive, but because they are subordinate to external influences that shape them. Many phenomena are common to all the peoples of the Balkans and are studied by various soi-disant folklorists in these areas. Such phenomena are, for example, the secularization of older forms of religious ritual, the creation of new forms of ritual whose common feature is how spectacular they are, the folklorization of folk ritual observances and practices and the creation of new forms of public ritual, of which the social aspect overrides the secularist and metaphysical (Aplin 2002: 54, Watkins - Beaver 2008, Hollowell - Nicholas 2009).

These new, common components of ritual are evolving before our eyes and are the subject of research by folklorists. We most certainly cannot foresee how they may develop, since this is not the job of the discipline of folklore. We can, however, interpret their form and nature, trace their birth and development and formulate research approaches to the factors that lead to their creation and adoption (Hardin 1978, Hall - McArthur 1993, Carter - Grimwade 1997).

And it can certainly be seen that similar developments generally lead to similar cultural results, which are paralleled by similar developments elsewhere, outside south-eastern Europe. This change is also the result of cultural globalization, which tends to group together cultural phenomena that occur in various populations, so that matters regarding the evolution of the various folk cultures of Balkan peoples can be easily compared to similar developments and entities found in the traditional life of populations elsewhere in the world, a tendency which becomes clear, if one looks at the considerable international bibliography on the subject.

The appearance and spread of new forms of ritual in the Balkans, as is clear from our analysis, is the most basic and most weighty manifestation of contemporary modern and post-modern folk cultures in the Balkans (Nodoro - Pwiti 2001, Diemberger 2007, Wiedmann - Bachmann - Wüstefeld 2010). This is the reality behind the shaping of traditional life and of the character, the structure and the distinguishing features of the cultures of the Balkans. Thus the study of such cultures, in which the discipline of folklore holds first and definitive place (Keitumetse 2011, Araoz 2011, Logan 2012), is an important tool in the recording, study and interpretation of the common contemporary cultural tradition of the peoples of south-eastern Europe, an area that has suffered greatly, but is of great significance.

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