

Pagan aspect of Easter celebration, the case of Rusalim ritual

Jonida Sela,¹ PhDc

Abstract— Calendric Rituals in Albania are very common and they have pagan roots. Monotheist religions have tried to present them as religious rituals, but most of them continue to maintain their pagan aspects. One of these rituals is called "Rusalim". This special ritual is common in Polena village, Korça surroundings, South East of Albania. This ritual is part of summer celebrations and it is considered to be part of Easter celebrations. we discovered it during our expedition on calendric rituals of Korça region. In this paper we will analyze the organization of Rusalim connected with Easter and other summer rituals part of rites de passage.

Index Terms— *rusalim/ calendric ritual/ summer rites/ Easter ritual/ pagan rituals/ organizing ritual/ ritual practices/*

1 INTRODUCTION

Among the calendric rituals of Korça region, a typical ritual that we meet only in Polena, village of Korça, is Rusalim ritual. Polena inhabitants are a bulgarian-macedonain diversity leaving there since the IX, century[1] We are not sure if Rusalim is a ritual hereditated by their origins but from our expeditions we didn't found traces of this ritual in other villages of Korça.

This ritual seems similar with Summer Day, Llazore and other rites that are part of summer celebrations rituals. Rusalim is practiced during the holy week of Easter and is part of black Friday celebrations. Inhabitants of this village are Christian orthodox and they in general are not aloud to merry Muslim woman. Even now they celebrate weddings only among Christian orthodox and in this house they do not sell properties to people that doesn't have any connection with the village.

In order to create a general concept of this ritual we firstly needed to explain some important aspects of Easter ritual based on the above studies and we will also include the researches done by James George Frazer The Golden Bough. Since this ritual is not studied before by scholars, this research is based on interviews and expeditions made during 2016-2017 in Polena, village of Korca region, South East of Albania

2 EASTER ORIGIN

Under the name of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis and Attis were called the gods that represented life and agricultural revival. Egyptians believed that these gods had the ability to die and resource every year. This ritual celebration is different from place to place but their aim appears to be the same. The supposed death and resurrection of an oriental god, a god of many names, but in essence of the same nature. This definition opens up a large road of study [2]

Adonis or Tammiz is a god from Greek mythology that dies and gets resurrected. There are many gods with this characteristic that have the ability to come back from the world afterwards. Their characteristics appear to be similar. In substance they are gods of vegetation that will reborn in spring.

Adonis worship was practiced into Babylonia that it was taken by Greeks at the beginning of VII century B.C.[3] In western Asia and in Greece they used to organize Adonis festivals. According to Frazer, this is the case of the cult of death and resurrection. [4]

In Albania, the cycle of spring rituals includes many rites. There are rituals with a noted pagan character and religious rituals, where the gods die and resurrect. We will mention here Llazore ritual, Easter and Rustica.

But in the continuance of Easter celebrations we meet a rite called Rusalim.

2.1 EASTER CELEBRATION AMONG KORÇA INHABITANTS

¹ Jonida Sela is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art Studies, Tirana, Albania, e-mail: jonida@gmail.com

Among all Christian orthodox Easter is celebrated as the biggest ritual of their religion. Even dictatorship during 1967, when all kind of religious celebration, and religion itself was forbidden, Easter is one of the rare religious rituals that was practiced secretly. Of course in this ritual we meet elements of paganistic and popular celebrations. But the major part of them are now used in function of the monotheistic rite.

Preparations for Easter celebrations start 40 days before Easter during the feasting period. This long feasting makes Easter celebrations more loved and expected among practitioners. For this reason among South of Albania we meet even the saying "Waiting like the priest waits Easter"[5]

Last week before Easter is dedicated to special celebrations in remembrance of Christ's actions during his way to the cross. All this week among Albanian Christian orthodox is called the big week and all the days are called Big Monday, Big Tuesday etc, Friday is called Black Friday as we meet it even in other countries. After Friday we have the Big Saturday when Christ will resurrect. In English this week is called Holy week.

In the religious aspect, the Big Week is considered to be the spiritual purification week, but in popular traditions this week is a physical and hygienic week dedicated to house work and house cleaning. Every part of the house should be cleaned with hot water, and family members will have a shower on Sunday morning. Water has its magical meanings and is a sign of health and hygiene. [6]

On Big Wednesday was made anointed, this practice is used to tint believers with oil in their face and hands. This process is led by the priest and the practitioner should be baptised.

This phenomenon is practiced even among pagan rituals. It is applied at the "Llazor" doll, where young girls decorate this doll with flowers in his head and face.

During Big Thursday early in the morning women tint eggs in red. At the beginning are tinted as many eggs as the family members, then is boiled the other amount of eggs for all guests and visitors. During this day is not allowed to eat or break eggs. Eggs are conserved for Saturday evening.

The tradition of egg painting for Easter is connected with apostolic years[7] In Christianity Apostolic period is called the period from Christ's death till Apostles' death.

Red eggs are Easter symbol but they are considered to be even life symbol. Christians believe that painting red eggs means to remember Christ's blood, who was sacrificed for human sake. [8] 2

This is the Christian history connected with the tradition of death, renaissance and red egg painting.

Big Friday or as is known among Christians Black Friday is the day when Jesus Christ died on the cross. His body is anointed with herbs and scent and is covered with a red robe.

Frazer describes the same procession even for god Adonis 'his body was anointed with herbs, was sanged with

morose songs and washed with clan water and then covered with a red robe" [9]

While we read this scholar explaining about this ancient god's death we have the same image that Christian Easter created us about Jesus Christ's death.

Albanian folk songs classified with Easter keywords talk about different phenomena, but never about Christ and his sufferings.

During Big Friday inhabitants were gathered in the church garden. Their faces were sad about Jesus Christ's death. The priest divided people in two groups. Some children would go around to collect summer flowers for decorating Epitaf. Epitaf is a robe where the figure of Christ is embroidered. This embroidery is put up on a wooden throne and is decorated with seasonal flowers.

In Pogradec, children would go around the village to collect wood to make a fire. On the fire they would put an animal skull. This fire was part of Big Friday celebrations.[10]

The moment of Christ's resurrection is always processed with lights, so lighting fires for this ritual was a normal act similar to other calendric rites practiced everywhere in anytime. Like Summer Day fires, Saint George fires, Carnival fires, all these rituals and practices aim purification.

On Saturday evening those who had fasted for 40 days would take the communion and sacrament.

Ata që kishin kreshmuar për 40 ditë, i jepnin fund duke marrë kungatën dhe naforën e shenjtë. In Christian tradition the sacrament is among the most important religious mysteries.[11]

Communion in this case means to eat the god. Among ancient Greeks it was used to eat their god, Attis, in symbolic way. In Dionysian cult, was practiced a ritual eating, believers should eat something special, in this way they would have been more connected with god. In the cult of Mitra and Attis and other gods of Eastern traditions was used to eat wine and bread. This sacred food was then used by Christian orthodoxes.[12]

The host is a ritual bread, who is considered to be Christ's body. According to Albanian scholar Krasniqi has its roots from the ancient inhabitants of Mexico. Two times during the year they would build a dough god called Huicilopochtli. After building it was scrambled in pieces and eaten in a ceremonial way. According to Frazer, this tradition roots are before Christianity. They believed that eating this bread would have mystical connections with the god of dough. [13]

Times before communion was made in nature. In Serbia it was used eating oak or juniper leaves. In Neogiti, on Easter Sunday people used to drink wine mixed with bread and different green herbs.[14]

2.2 RUSALIM ORGANISATION IN POLENA

In Polena village is conserved a special celebration for Black Friday practices. This celebration is called Rusalim. In other words Rusalim can be identified as the first faze of Easter ritual.

During this day children would go around the village with a server decorated wit flowrs singing:

Atje poshtë në Rusalim,/ Në manastir të madh/ Atje pemë nuk kish,/ Po pemë na u shfaqnë./ Pemë ishte Ristozi (Krishti),/ degë qenë Apostonjtë,/ Rrënjë qenë aprofitët/ Që dhanë shaillëket./ Shaillëk dhanë e thoshin/ Për të hequrat e Zotit/ E ti besojmë, ne o Zot/ Të këqijat që hoqe./ Sot është një ditë e zezë./ Sot i tërë qielli nxihet.[15]

Translation

Down there in Rusali,/ in a big monastery/ there were no trees/ but trees we sow/ Ristozi (Christ) was a tree/ apostols were the branches/ roots were aprofits/ that gave us to eat/ They say this was for the name of god/ and we belive in you, God/ for all you suffering/ Today is a black day/ and the sky is dark

This is Rusalim song.

Rusalim is practiced by young girls and boys. They go around the village knocking in every door asking for red eggs. Woman would open the door and give to the red eggs. Eggs are decorated with seasonal flowers. This ritual is not accompanied by festive songs. After sunset children divide eggs between them and take their part into their families.

. In our view Rusalim is a sad ritual that aims to gather red eggs. This rit is conduced by a ritual walking. This ritual is celebrated during Big Friday, so it doesn't have a special date but is calculated according to the moon calendar. At the other hand the element of red eggs is used even in other pagan rituals as Summer Day, Llazure. We can even considered this is kind of Llazure ritual. The use of seasonal flowers is common between many other rituals as well.

3 CONCLUSION

Rusalim ritual is part of Christian orthodox Easter celebrations among the bulgar-macedonian diversity of Korca region, South East of Albania. This ritual is very rare and different from other rituals. We can state that has pagan roots because opposes Christian lows of sharing and breaking red eggs before Christ renasience. In general these pagan rituals practiced among Albanians oppose monotheist religions, this makes us believe that these rituals have pagan and ancient roots and are not connected with different religions practiced around. Rusalim has it's own song and ritual, its special practice but still is practiced under Easter celebrations.

References

- [1] Pepo, Petraq, Materiale dokumentare për Shqipërinë Juglindore të shek. XVIII- fillimi i shek. XX-të, Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë, Instituti i Historisë, Tiranë 1981, p 1
- [2] Frazer, James George, The golden bough, The floating press, 2009, pp 764-765
- [3] Frazer, James George, The golden bough, The floating press, 2009, p 780
- [4] Frazer, James George, The golden bough, The floating press, 2009, pp 790-791

- [5] Llukani, Andrea, Folklori Kristian, Shtëpia botuese "Trifon Xhagjika", Tiranë, 2013, p 212
- [6] Llukani, Andrea, Folklori Kristian, Shtëpia botuese "Trifon Xhagjika", Tiranë, 2013, p 225
- [7] Frazer, James George, The golden bough, Floating press, 2009, p 767
- [8] Llukani, Andrea, Folklori Kristian, Shtëpia botuese "Trifon Xhagjika", Tiranë, 2013, p 62
- [9] Krasniqi, Mark, Tradita e Pashkës së krishterë dhe rrënjët e saj pagane, Gurra e Traditës, Zëri, Prishtinë, 1991, p 229
- [10] Krasniqi, Mark, Tradita e Pashkës së krishterë dhe rrënjët e saj pagane, Gurra e Traditës, Zëri, Prishtinë, 1991, p 245
- [11] Krasniqi, Mark, Tradita e Pashkës së krishterë dhe rrënjët e saj pagane, Gurra e Traditës, Zëri, Prishtinë, 1991, p 245
- [12] Krasniqi, Mark, Tradita e Pashkës së krishterë dhe rrënjët e saj pagane, Gurra e Traditës, Zëri, Prishtinë, 1991, p 237

Interviewed

Interview, Naum Velo, Polena inhabitant, born in Polena 1927, elementary education