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THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FOLK CHRISTIANITY AND PAGANISTIC BELIEFS IN TRADITIONAL BULGARIAN FAIRYTALES AND LEGENDS

The spread of Christianity in the Balkan Peninsula acted as one of the catalysts for the formation of the cultural structures of each nation. Alongside the beliefs and rituals of Christianity, it can be observed that the beliefs and rituals of paganism were not totally erased but coexisted under a new cover. That was the moment for the birth of folk Christianity. Under the prism of folk Christianity, paganistic rituals, old beliefs, and customs were reshaped to some degree so they could follow the principles and beliefs of Christianity. A part of the cultural structures reshaped by folk Christianity were the traditional fairytales and legends. This paper will give a brief example of the transformation by presenting a few narratives, giving their synoptic structure and underlining their original paganistic elements and how they were transformed into Christian elements.

Keywords: Folk Christianity; paganism; fairytales; legends; elements.

During the Middle Ages, the spread of the Christian faith in the Balkan Peninsula acted as one of the catalysts for the formation of the cultural structures of each nation. Nevertheless, alongside the beliefs and rituals of the new religion, it can be observed that the beliefs and rituals of paganism were not totally erased but coexisted under a new cover. Thus, this was the moment for the birth of folk Christianity. Under the prism of folk Christianity, paganistic rituals were incorporated with a new meaning into the rituals and feasts of the Christian calendar. Old beliefs and customs were reshaped to some degree to follow the principles and beliefs of the Christian faith (Kalojanov 2002, Kitanova 2015). Beside the beliefs, rituals, and customs, a part of the cultural structures that folk Christianity reshaped were the traditional fairytales and legends.

Traditional fairytales and legends are significant for studying a nation's cultural structures. This is because, inside those narratives, people presented their morals, hopes, fears, the impact of prominent historical events, etc. For this reason, from the 18th century onwards, folkloric and cultural studies considered recording those preserved oral traditions a critical task (Zipes 2012: 30–35).

In Bulgaria, traditional fairytales and legends can be found inside multivolume ethnographic collections. To name but a few of the most well-known of them, the collection *Sbornik ot Narodni Umotvorenija, Običai i Drugi Šabirani iz Razni Bălgarski Pokrajnini* published by Atanac Iliev in four volumes in 1888, *Sbornik ot Bălgarski Narodni Umotvorenija* published by Kuzman Šapkarev in nine volumes in 1891–1894, *Sbornik za Narodni Umotvorenija, Nauka i Knižnina* (SbNUNK), which later was renamed into *Sbornik za Narodni Umotvorenija i Narodopis* (Sb-

NUN) [1]. This collection was published annually from 1889 until 2013 and counts 65 volumes. For the first 27 volumes, it was published under the Ministry of National Enlightenment (*Ministerstvo na Harodnoto Prosveštenie*). In 1913, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (*BAN-Balgarska Akademija na Naykite*) took over the publication. Another collection in recent years is *Bălgarsko Narodno Tvorčestvo* published in 12 volumes from 1961 to 1963. In these multivolume collections, where fairytales and legends can be found, the fairytales are separated into multiple categories, and three principal are most common: fairytales about animals, fairytales about magic, and fairytales about everyday (ordinary) life. This kind of distinction does not exist for legends, or at least it is not yet well established and popular.

Two significant findings can be mentioned upon studying all the traditional fairytales and legends [2]. First, fairytales and legends that have Christian elements in their narratives and others that do not. Second, fairytales and legends with Christian elements can be separated again into two groups: those whose narratives were influenced directly by Christian sources (the Old and New Testaments, apocryphal texts, vitae of saints and martyrs etc.), and those whose narratives were influenced by pagan or generally non-Christian sources but with time Christian elements were incorporated in them. For the first group, a few examples are: fairytales and legends about King Solomon, whose influences derive from a circle of apocryphal texts about him (Petkanova 1982: 87–94), the fairytale „The Grateful Dead“, whose influences derive from the narrative of Tobit in the Old Testament (Gerould 1908), the Bulgarian dualistic legends about the creation of the earth and man which derive from the apocryphal text of „The Sea of Tiberias“ (Petkanova 1982: 19–22), and the legend „Saint John of Rila, a Cattle Herder“ which derives from the multiple texts of Saint John of Rila’s vitae (Ivanov1936: 1–108).

For the second group of fairytales and legends, a few examples will be presented, with a brief interpretation of their narratives so it can be seen which were at first the paganistic elements of the narratives that changed to Christian elements under the influence of folk Christianity.

Fairytales:

1. “The three Brothers and the Golden Apple (*Trimata Bratja i Zlatnata Jabalka*)” – This is a popular Bulgarian fairytale with many different versions. It is a fairytale about magic, and the most common narrative is as follows: three brothers were living with their father (or mother), and they had a tree that once a year bore a golden apple. But each year, a dragon (Hala) came and ate the apple. The father then asked his older son to guard the tree. However, the son failed in the task as he fell asleep. The father asked the middle son to guard the tree the following year, and he failed too. The youngest son went the next year, and he managed to hurt the dragon and keep the golden apple safe. His brothers grew envious of him. They followed the bloodstains left by the dragon on the ground, which led them into a pit (or cave). The two older brothers asked the youngest to lower him with a rope into the pit to see what was down there. As soon as they lowered him, they cut the rope and abandoned him. The boy discovered that the pit was the entrance to another world and

had many adventures there (he killed the dragon, saved the life of a princess, and so on). Finally, the saved princess became his bride, and they ascended to the upper world by flying on the back of an eagle. Once the boy had reunited with his family, his brothers wanted to harm him again, but he found a way to punish them and lived happily ever after with his wife.

The narrative's paganistic elements are quite a few: it is the golden apple, which held many symbolisms in pagan cultures, especially symbolisms about spousal love and affection, about fertility and abundance, about beauty and health. Until very recently, in rural areas, apples were used in several traditional rituals occurring during a wedding or at the birth and christening of a child (Popova 2008: 62–69). Another paganistic element is the three levels of the creation (heaven, earth, and the underground). That was a strong early Bulgarians' mythological belief about the division of the world and how passing from one level to another could happen through secret passages (such as the pit in the fairytale) or with the assistance of a supernatural being (Georgieva 1993: 41). Another element is the help of the eagle (Georgieva 1993: 52–54), which was one of the sacred animals for the early Bulgarians (others were the deer, the bear, etc.). The Christian element incorporated into the narrative can be found in one version recorded in SbNU vol.1, 1889, from the Ahăr Ćelebi district, where the younger brother became Saint George. A further main difference is that he is presented as a married shepherd from the beginning of the fairytale, so when he rescues the princess in the underground world, he is rewarded with gold. The title of the fairytale is „Saint George“.

2. “The Golden Maiden (*Zlatnata Moma*)” – Another popular Bulgarian fairytale about magic. The story goes: a stepmother hates her stepdaughter, so she sends her into the woods to be lost and perish. However, the young maiden finds a hut in the woods where an old woman lives. The old woman gives shelter to the maiden under the condition of helping her with the house chores. The maiden is kind and hardworking; she even takes care of the lizards and frogs which the old woman keeps as pets. So one day, the old woman tells the maiden to go with her to the bank of a river. When they arrive there, the old woman tells her that she will take a nap and the maiden must wake her when she sees the river's water turn gold. The maiden observes the river and sees the water turn red; after a while, it turns black, and a bit later, it turns gold. She wakes the old woman, who grabs her, sinks her into the water, and tells her to pull up a chest from the river bottom. When the maiden emerges from the water, she is all gold and shines like the sun. The old woman says that she can return home now with the chest as a gift for all her hard work. When the maiden returns home, her stepmother is astonished by her looks. They open the chest, and it is full of precious stones. The stepmother asks what happened, and the maiden tells her of the old woman in the woods. The stepmother then sends her own daughter because she hopes she will be rewarded in the same way. However, unlike the stepdaughter, this maiden is mean and cruel like her mother, and she treats the old woman and her pets ill. So when they go to the riverbank, the old woman tells the maiden to wake her when the water turns black. She sinks the maiden, tells her

to grab the chest from the river bottom, and when the maiden emerges, she is all black like charcoal. When she returns home, her mother is terrified by her looks, and when they open the chest, the inside is full of stones. The end of the fairytale has two versions. In the first version, the golden maiden's reputation reaches the kingdom's borders; thus, a young prince comes to see her, falls in love, and proposes to marry her. In the second version, the brightness of the maiden eventually transforms her into the moon.

The narrative's paganistic element is the character of the old woman, who is obviously a witch. This can be verified first of all by the animals that she kept as pets because serpents and amphibians were considered the familiars of witches; secondly, by the magical way in which she rewards the two maidens (Guiley 2008). As for the second version of the narrative, another paganistic element is the transformation of the maiden into the moon. In early Bulgarian mythology, the sun and the moon were considered persons, or, at least, they were thought to originate from human beings. Sometimes they were even thought to be brother and sister (Georgieva 1993: 19–27). The Christian element in the narrative is replacing the old woman with God Himself, transformed into an old man. Some other details of the narrative differ, for example, the kind of the chores (to wash a black cloth until it turns white), but the main plot and the end of the narratives are the same. The versions of the fairytale with the Christian element are approximately ten, and they can be found in SbNU vol. 3 (1890), 13 (1896), 15 (1898), 38 (1930), 41 (1933), 48 (1961), 49 (1962), 56 (1980), 57 (1983) from the districts of Voden, Pirdop, Ohrid, Prilep, Gabrovo, Lom, Orhan, Vidin, Bansko, Graovo, Pazardžik, Strandža. The titles of those narratives are „The Evil Stepmother“ and „The Stepdaughter“.

3. “A Pauper and Grandma March (*Edin Siromah i Baba Marta*)“ – Grandma March is one of the best-known superhuman beings in Bulgarian folklore, so there are uncountable fairytales and legends about her. Grandma March is the only month of the year's cycle that is represented in a female form- the other months are represented as males – and her personification as an old woman, a grandmother, is considered by some to be an influence of the early Bulgarian matriarchal family (Čobanov 2014: 281–285). In those matriarchal families, the older women were usually caring, advising, and controlling the family members due to the experience and wisdom gained with old age. From another point of view, March is the month in which the transition from winter to spring happens, so the blooming and rebirth of nature were consistently linked with the fertility of female supernatural beings and goddesses (Nikov 2014: 125–128). Fairytales with Christian elements about grandma March are almost nonexistent, except for one version. In this version, a pauper decides to pray and respect grandma March as people do with saints. Thus, feeling very flattered, grandma March takes the pauper under her wing and eventually helps him become rich. This version is recorded in SbNU vol.7 (1892) from the Sofia district, and the title is „A Pauper and Grandma March“. There is a possibility that similar fairytales existed, but they were not recorded. Nevertheless, it seems that

maybe at some point, even grandma March was influenced by folk Christianity and elevated to a saint's position.

4. "Saint Wednesday/Saint Friday (Sveta Sreda/Sveta Petka)" – This is a short religious fairytale. The narrative goes as follows: a woman is cooking in her home in the evening when suddenly someone knocks on her door. She opens and sees in front of her saint Wednesday, but she does not realize who she is. Saint Wednesday tells the woman that she will help her with the cooking, but the woman remembers that the neighbor borrowed her extra pot, so she goes to take it. When the woman explains to the neighbor why she wants her pot back sooner, the neighbor is terrified and tells her that the woman who visited her is saint Wednesday. She must not return to her home until morning because the saint will boil her along with her children inside the pot. The woman spends the night in the neighbor's house, and when she returns home in the morning, saint Wednesday is gone. This fairytale can be found in SbNU vol. 4 (1891) from the Voden district. Another version of the tale can be found in vol. 62 (2002) from the Sakar district, where the saint is named Friday and has a much more morbid image because she appears in front of the woman covered in blood from head to toe. Saint Wednesday or „crazy Wednesday“ is the personification of a supernatural being that appears during saint Theodore's week. Saint Theodore's week is the first week of the Lent, and, like other calendar periods, it has a negative character.

People believed they must keep some prohibitions during those negative or „bad“ periods. If someone breaks those prohibitions, they will be in great peril or face great misfortune (Kitanova 2015). A few of those prohibitions were brushing or cutting hair for the whole period, bathing in the evening hours, using knives or other sharp objects after dusk, etc. (Kitanova 2015). In the fairytale, the woman broke the prohibition of cooking in the evening hours, so Saint Wednesday/Saint Friday came to punish her. The image of the punisher saint is more prevalent in Russian folklore, but indeed every Slavic nation has its own image of this particular saint. So in this fairytale, there is one more remnant from paganistic beliefs, that is, the sequence of negative period→ prohibitions during that period→ breaking those prohibitions→ punishment from a supernatural being. Under the influence of folk Christianity, supernatural beings are transformed into saints.

Legends:

1. "How Džerman Became a Saint (Kak Džerman Stanal Svetec)" – This legend is not well-known. As shown by the title, it narrates how Džerman came to be a saint. It goes as follows: one day, God was walking on earth along with Saint Peter and Saint Elijah. They arrived at a tavern and found Džerman there drinking wine. Džerman saluted them and praised God. Saint Peter whispered in God's ear that Džerman was thinking of becoming a saint; that is why he was praising Him. So God decided to punish him for his pride and flattery and sent Saint Elijah to cause hail to fall in Džerman's barley field. But Saint Elijah went to Džerman and warned him about the plan. So Džerman sold his field to a priest. Later, when he met God and Saint Peter, he boasted about how he sold

his field and gained money. Saint Peter again told God that Džerman had tricked them. So God decided to bless the barley so it would grow in great amount and quality, making Džerman jealous and disappointed in the selling of the field. Again Saint Elijah warned Džerman, so he found the priest to whom he had sold the field and told him that someone had warned him about a hail fall. He claimed that he would feel really awful if he was to blame for the priest's poor crop, so he asked the priest to give him his money back. The priest agreed, so Džerman reclaimed the field and had an excellent crop. Before the harvest, he was visited once more by God and Saint Peter, and they realized that he had tricked them again. This time God decided to curse him to harvest only crop head. However, again Saint Elijah warned Džerman and advised him how to save more than crop head. Much later, God and Saint Peter visited him and saw that he had tricked them once more. So God said to Saint Peter that this man was really cunning and he would grant him his wish to become a saint because maybe they would benefit from him in the future.

That is how Džerman became a saint, and people started to pray to him for protection from hail fall. This legend can be found in SbNU vol.49 (1962) from the Graovo district. According to Lilija Stareva, who has published many books about folklore beliefs in saints and their cults, Džerman (Bulg: *Джерман*) was an old pagan deity who dominated the weather conditions, especially rain and hail (Stareva 2003:200). So this legend narrates the ascendance of the pagan deity to sainthood. In folk Christianity, Džerman has been connected with German (Bulg: *Герман*), who was Patriarch of Constantinople (715–730 A.D.) and is celebrated on 12th May. Maybe the connection between them was established due to the similarities in their names. Even nowadays, specific rituals occur during the saint's feast in some provinces to protect the crops from hail and to invoke rainfall (Georgieva 1993: 233).

2. “Saint Elijah and the Thunders (*Sveti Ilija i Grāmotevicite*)” – Legends about Saint Elijah in Bulgarian folklore are again numerous. Either as the main protagonist or as a supplemental character (as we saw in the previous legend about Džerman), he is incorporated into several narratives and people hold many beliefs about him. One of the most prominent beliefs is that the saint controls or causes thunders and lightning bolts (Georgieva 1993: 233–234, Stareva 2003: 266–272). Usually, this belief is preserved exclusively in oral tradition, but we discovered a recording of it on two occasions. The first one can be found in SbNU vol. 58 (1985) from the Blagoevgrad district and the second in *Sbornik ot Bălgarski Narodni Umo-tvorenija* published by Kuzman Šapkarev (vol.8) from the Ohrid district. On these occasions, the narratives are really short, barely two sentences each. The recording of SbNU is entitled „*Saint Elijah and the Thunders (Sveti Ilija i Grāmotevicite)*“ and narrates how the saint travels through the sky with his chariot and controls thunders and lightning bolts. The recording of Kuzman Šapkarev has the title „*Of Thunder and Lightning (Za Gărmežot i Treskaicata)*“ and narrates how thunders and lightnings are the results of the saint's fight with a serpent (*lamja*).

Other saints that were considered to have fought the serpent in the sky are Saint Nicolas, Saint Constantine and Helena, and Saint George. In Bulgarian tradition, it is well known that Saint Elijah replaced the Slavic God Perun, the master of thunders (Georgieva 1993: 233–234, Stareva 2003: 266–272). The connection between them and the replacement of Perun with the particular saint most likely happened due to the narrative from the Old Testament about the saint's ascendance to the sky. According to 2 Kings, 2: 3–12, Elijah, accompanied by Elisha (his successor as a prophet of Israel), approaches the Jordan. He rolls up his mantle and strikes the water. The water immediately divides, and Elijah and Elisha cross on dry land. Suddenly, a chariot of fire and horses of fire appear, and Elijah is lifted in a whirlwind. As Elijah is lifted, his mantle falls to the ground, and Elisha picks it up. Thus, the biblical narrative gave the elements for Saint Elijah to connect with Perun as his pagan counterpart. In folklore, it created the picture of the saint who travels across the sky on a fiery chariot that causes thunders and lighting as he is crossing the sky. Here again, as we also saw in the previous narratives, under the influence of folk Christianity, we have the replacement of a pagan deity with a biblical figure.

Thus, with those brief examples, we took a glimpse at the transformation of paganistic elements in traditional narratives – fairytales and legends. The most usual transformation in the narratives, as we can observe, is the replacement of pagan deities or supernatural beings with Christian individuals (either by God himself or saints or biblical figures) or the ascendance of pagan individuals into sainthood.

[1] Today is most well-known as SbNU.

[2] Our main source was the collection *Sbornik za Narodni Umotvorenija i Narodopis* (SbNU). Over 3000 fairytales and legends are recorded from all over Bulgaria in the long span of the collection's volumes, and they are repeated in the previous and following collections.

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