

DEATH AND RENASCENCE RITUALS, THE CASE OF RUSTICA RITUAL IN THE REGION OF KORÇA



Anthropology

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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. These aspects can be clearly distinguished by a professional. One of these rituals is called “Rustica”. This special ritual is mostly common in Korça, South East of Albania. Studies on this ritual show us its old origin and the connection with similar rituals of death and resurrection of gods. In this paper we will treat the ritual practice of Rustica in Korça and surroundings from the beginning of 20th century till now. Being aware of the political influence in Albanian social life, we will speak about past and present of this calendric ritual. With past we mean the period from 1900-1967 and from 1990 till now. We will treat this ritual according to the phases established by Arnold van Gennep. We will treat ritual practices shown in this ritual, symbols, religious impact, etc. In order to create a picture of the past of this ritual, a big help for us has been the prior ritual studies. In order to understand and illustrate how is this ritual practiced nowadays, we made an expedition in some villages of Korça surroundings.

Introduction

Among the calendric rituals of Korça region, a typical ritual that we meet only in this region is the Rustica ritual. This ritual seems similar with the “Rain call ritual” and other rituals whose characteristic is the death and resurrection of gods. This ritual is practiced by the orthodox population, as shown in previous studies. This was visible to us while making an expedition to this area as well. We also meet this ritual in South East Europe with other names.

In order to create a general concept on the meaning of this ritual and its form, we took into consideration the researches done by James George Frazer *The Golden Bough*, Arnold van Gennep *Rites de passage*, Victor Turner *Structure and anti-structure*, Max Harris *Carnival and other Christian festivals*, while for treating the symbolic use of the mask we referred to Mircea Eliade *Symbolism, the sacred and the Arts*, and other general information that we find in *Multicultural Festivals* of Christian Roy. For treating the orthodox religion impacts we referred to *The Oxford Dictionary*.

This ritual has been celebrated before the Second World War and after it, till 1967 when the dictatorship stopped every religious practice. During 1950 anthropologists made expeditions and the information gathered there has been published in the main studies that we have referred here. The Rustica ritual was practiced with many songs that are published at *Lirika Popullore I, Këngë Popullore të rrethit të Korçës, Këngë Popullore të rrethit të Devollit, Këngë Popullore të rrethit të Pogradecit*. Those songs are included in this paper in Albanian and English translation.

About the meaning of gods and ritual practices we referred to the Albanian anthropologist Mark Tirta, *Mitologjia ndër shqiptarë, (Mythology among Albanians)*, we also considered the analyses of Shefqet Pllana in “Studime Filologjike”, Ramadan Sokoli in *Gjurmime Folklorike* and studies on special regions like *Trashëgimia shpirtërore e Devollit* by Hysen Koçillari, and to some

papers, as “Disa zakone kalendarike popullore në Devoll”, by Vasil Xhaçka or “Praktika e Karnivalit në Polenë”, by Agron Xhagolli and Yllka Selimi. We found interesting to include here the Albanian Ukrainian rustica ritual practice. This community emigrated from Albania in 1800. Some studies say that this community emigrated from Korça region (Budina, 1993). All this scientific references are used to reorder the ritual organization at the beginning of 1900 to 1967. The ritual restarted its practice in some rural areas of Korça after 1991. Since then religion was declared legal all ritual practices started to get reorganized. While working with rituals we noticed that there are no studies about Rustica after 1991. For this reason we organized an expedition in Boboshtica and Polena that are two villages of Korça. These expeditions were made during the years 2016-2017. During this expedition we gathered information from inhabitants and ritual participants.

Rustica Ritual in the Past

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 (Frazer, 2009)

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. His story is simple. This god every year had the ability to die and resurrect. After his death all the vegetation was no more productive. For this Tammuz or Adonis girlfriend, Ishtar took the benediction of Eresh- Kigal god. Eresh- Kigal poured Life water to Ishtar and she went at the afterwards world to take Tamuzz. With the returning of both of them the nature was rebirthed (Frazer, 2009). In western Asia and in Greece they used to organize Adonis festivals.

The death of god was mourned by women every year. This god was personified with some wood that were hold in hands and thrown in the sea or rivers. In some places the resurrection of this god was celebrated the next day. In Alexandria women used to mourn and cry beating their breast and pulling their hairs while throwing water to Adonis image. They believed that Adonis would return tomorrow again (Frazer 2009) According to Frazer, this is the case of the cult of death and resurrection.

The dramatic character of calendric rituals appears with very touching elements. The idea of death and resurrection appears in many rites where it symbolizes the nature that goes to “sleep” for “waking up” after two seasons. Rites of death and resurrection are associated also with moon phases, for many communities the appearance of death is attributed to the moon (Van Gennep, 1960) Many centuries before Christ, Jews use to make big celebrations after steeling down in Palestine. They celebrated the end of Egyptian slavery (Osmani, 1997) Some folklore researches in Albania, according to many tales, associate calendric rituals of death and resurrection with the day of the dead and the practice of burying them with weapons and personal stuff (Starova, 1987)

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. These rituals have the characteristic of a god that dies and resurrects. Here we won't treat the ritual of Llazore because the phenomenon of death in this ritual is not such distinguished as the phenomenon of celebrating rebirth of nature. But we should point out that at the Llazore ritual we have the god or the individual, who dies and is resurrected after four days from a god. Also the carnival king in some cultures is believed to be a god that dies and resurrects again (Harris, 2003) Another interesting ritual and much loved one is the Easter celebration. In this ritual the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ after three days is celebrated every year. In Korça and its surroundings Easter has always been celebrated with seriousness.

Rustica ritual brings many ancient elements of a god with polytheistic roots, that dies and resources again. Also this ritual appears to have agricultural roots, it can be the death and resurrection of a god of vegetation and the end of plant live (Frazer, 2009) This ritual is also connected with Whitsunday that is celebrated almost at the same time in North of Albania. According to Haxhihasani, in this ritual we are in front of the cult of death, especially with the scarification of an agricultural god. And with its resurrection is the power of earth and animal fertility (Haxhihasani, 1988) Nevertheless, this ritual is also connected with nature worship. (Sokoli, 1982) Rustica is a ritual with magic character. And since it is practiced by women, it has matriarchal character. According to the calendric rituals classification of Victor Turner, we have *rites de passage* going through insufficiency to abundance and from abundance to insufficiency, (Turner, 2008) Rustica ritual should be classified in the second group. For being more specific, the Rustica ritual is a *rites de passage* that goes from abundance to insufficiency and this is also shown in the melancholic nature of this celebration.

Rustica has been celebrated in all the area of South East Europe like in Serbia, Bulgaria where it is called German, in Romania where is called Skolojan (Pllana, 2004) According to Jorgo Panajoti, this kind of ritual has very distinguished pagan rules and it is a spring ritual that in Italy is known as Rosalia (Panajoti, 1982) It has been celebrated in Devoll, Pogradec, Kolonja and Korça surroundings.

Rustica usually used to last three days, and during this time nobody should work in the fields, the mill should turn over, because it was going “to bleed” (Tirta, 2004)

The name of this ritual is almost the same in different Korça regions. In Polena it is called “*Rusica*”, (Xhagolli, Selmi, 1996) in Korça, (Haxhihasani, 1988) Devolli, (Haxhihasani, 1988) Prespa (Pllana, 2004) “*Rustica*”, in Boboshtica “*Rosica*”¹. According to Hysen Koçillari, *rusica* is a Latin name that means rose, (Koçollari, 2004) but during our interviews Elpi Manço told us that “*rosica*” comes from “*rosa*” that in Bulgarian means “morning dew”.²

In Devoll, the *Rustica* were celebrated 25 days after Easter. In Hoçisht some days before, three weeks after Easter (Panajoti, 1982) The same was true in Korça (Sokoli, 1982) But *Rustica* is considered to be the last spring celebration and according to the actual calendar it is supposed to be celebrated in the middle or at the end of May (Haxhihasani, 1988) In songs of Hoçishti village we find another specification about this ritual. It was celebrated before Saint Nicolas. (Haxhihasani, 1988) Saint Nicolas is celebrated by Christian orthodox of Korça region in 20 of May. So *Rustica* ritual should have ended before the feast of Saint Nicolas.

The practices of this ritual are similar to other calendric rituals too. It is celebrated by woman and girls. In Polena it is considered to be even a kind of “woman carnival”. (Xhagolli, Selmi, 1996) This leads us to many explanations. It can be a matriarchal celebration, or it could also be the only day where woman could go freely to celebrate, and it can all the time be the day when they say farewell to “*Rustica*”.

Women would go around the village singing and dancing special folk elements of this ritual. These songs in general ask for something. In Korça they used to sing:

Rustica, Rustica, / Na dërgoi rustica / Për një doçkë miell, / Ta bëjmë kulaçe, / Ta bëjmë pogaçe, / Të ftojme Ristozë, / Ristozë në ndiftë! / Qirie elejson! (Haxhihasani, 1988, p 185)

English translation:

Rustica, Rustica/ Rustica sent us here / to ask for a handful of flour / to make bun / to make crumpet / to invite Ristozë / Ristozë forgive us / Kyrie eleison!

In Hoçisht they use to sing:

Rustica, me Rustica, / Na dërgoi zoti Ristoz / Për një doçkë miell, / Për një kupkë vaj! / Rusica, me, Rustica, / Të bëj petanik, të ftonj, / Të më vish për shënë Koll! / Rustica, me Rustica! (Haxhihasani, 1988, p 187)

English translation:

Rustica, with Rustica/ to make quinces pie/ come for Saint Nicolas/ Rustica, with Rustica./ Rustica, with Rustica/ God Ristoz sent us/ for some flour/ and some oil/ Rustica, with Rustica.

The main point of woman walking through the village streets is shown through this songs. They asked for flour, butter, oil that would be the main ingredients to cook in this day.

¹ Oral interview of Elpi Manço, born and grown up in Boboshtica, high-school education, born in 1945.

² Oral interview of Elpi Manço, born and grown up in Boboshtica, high-school education, born in 1945.

In Devoll, girls and woman would get together in some houses of the village. They would cook pie and corns. It was forbidden to cook meat! The pie was made with legume and deserts. They collect the ingredients for making this from the village inhabitants. (Xhaçka, 1959)

Then they sing in Slavic:

Rusica, babe, rusica, / dajmi³ rusica. / Rusica moj rusica, / Dajmi brojnica⁴. /Rusica, Rusica (Xhaçka, 1959, p 270)

The main purpose of this celebration was the building of a clay doll up on a roof tile. This clay doll was called “Mother of Sun”. They would cover it with a fabric as a dead person is covered (Sokoli, 1982) All this practices would happen under a very big pomposity, as it was a real person. The clay doll, also called “nuskë” would have been buried outside the village border, in a hole dug by the river side. (Sokoli, 1982) After the funeral, the participants would share between them buns. It was likeable to share these buns through every house of the village and to feed with them the house animals. This practice was made to increase the animal’s dairy. In some cases they would share boiled wheat. (Tirta, 2004)

Here we have a similarity between the god bearing practice of Attis and Adonis. People use to engrave their image into the woods (Frazer, 2009) This image that is built with clay may had been considered the god of vegetation, or god of the field whose would resurrect again!

This is also documented by Qemal Haxhihasani in a material gathered in 1937 in Korça. “After walking, singing and dancing Rustica songs, girls would go somewhere out of the borders of the village to bury “the mother of sun”. They dig the earth and put there a doll with all the respect of funeral ceremonies. They would call: “Mother, oh mother / sun came and didn’t found you”, after that they would share buns, boiled wheat and corn. (Haxhihasani, 1988)

Sometimes ritual practices appear similar to each other like the practice of water spreading that looks similar to the rain evocation ritual. A song collected during 1983 by Tomorr Starova in Lin, part of Pogradec Municipality, informs us about the process of burying the dead with weapons and personal items. This song gives the feeling as with the keys that the god “mother of deer” will give, they would have the possibility to see all their dead predecessors. This is a very old burial tradition that is still practiced in some areas. The dead is buried with his personal stuff. But this song shows also that its ritual is connected with the cult of death. The burial practice with weapons and masks are very spread into the world, and death masks are also used in other rituals as well (Eliade, 1985) Since the Hellenistic period, people used to be buried with golden coins in their mouth or eyes. This coin was called “*obolos*” and it was a normal coin used during Hellenistic period. “*Obolos*” was thought to be used by the dead to pay Charon during the boat trip from Lethe to Hades (Roy, 2005) This practice is also used into the Albanian community of Ukraine, where the dead person is buried with money and clothes to get changed during his way, also he was requested to send the best regards to those who are in the other world. (Budina, 1993)

³ Slavic = give me (note of V. Xhaçka in the abovementioned paper, p. 270).

⁴ Slavic = give me (note of V. Xhaçka in the abovementioned paper, p. 270).

But even Christianity has the exhumation practice three years after the funeral. This practice through Christian orthodox is known as “the opening of earth”

Rustica Ritual Today

This ritual is practiced in Boboshtica and Polena, villages of Korça region. Unfortunately, areas where previous studies were made do not practice this ritual anymore. And we haven’t found previous studies of Rustica ritual in Boboshtica and Polena to make a comparative study on it. Inhabitants claim that they have practiced Rustica since 1990. This practice is still conserved.



Photography no 1. Rustica celebration in Boboshtica in 1990.

To explain the form of Rustica preparations in Boboshtica we met Elpi Manço, one of the leaders of these preparations. Rusticat in Boboshtica are called “Rostica”.

“Rostica ritual needs great preparations, days before the ritual. We start to prepare this ritual one month before. Or better say, after the Easter. We call all women that will be part of the ritual. Some of them will come, some won’t participate. We invite women from Boboshtica married in *Korça*, in *Pogradec* or *abroad*, in *Greece*. We invite women from other villages as well. In general we celebrate this ritual with 100 women in total. On the day of the ritual we walk at every door singing the *rostica* song in *Bulgarian* and in *Albanian*:



Photography no. 2 Rustica celebration in Boboshtica. Photo taken at “Rostica” Restaurant

In Albanian:

Më dërgoi rosica / për një dorë miell/ Të bëjmë kulaçe/ Të bëjmë pogaçe,/ Të ftojme ristoze./ Gëzuar, gëzuar, gezuar. Kështu urojmë.

In Bulgarian:

Ni pushtilla rostica / Da mi date drashience / Da mi date drashience / Ta i enko / Je i sence.

In English:

Rosica sent us / for some flour / to make buns / to make pancakes / to invite Ristozi / congratulations, Congratulations!

Everybody in the village gives us something to cook. Everybody opens the door and gives us something. If somebody had any misfortune, we don't knock in their door. They open it with their will and give to us something like eggs. We dance in the houses with a piper accompanying us. We used to pay a piper from Korça once. Now we have a piper that lives in Korça and we call him every year. The piper is always a man. It would be great if she could be a woman. This spoils our order and tradition but...anyway.

When we go to the houses they give to us flour, oil, eggs, butter and money. We take these ingredients and cook them to a house. We choose a big house with good equipments, so we have the possibility to cook many things. We divide the ingredients between us and then we decide what to cook. We cook pancakes, pie, pengjir⁵, bukvale⁶. Some will cook the pie, some the pancakes etc.

At the end we eat all this food at "Rostica" restaurant. This restaurant was named after our special ritual. We pay for the orchestra and they give us the permission to eat our stuff. The orchestra is made by three people, one playing clarinet, one violin and another plays the drums. We sing, dance we have a lot of fun.⁷"

Rustica ritual is also practiced in Polena as well, but in a different form. Young girls are allowed to walk from door to door and collect the ingredients. The girls are masked like a groom, painting moustache and beard, another one is masked as a bright wearing white dress and white scarf in her hairs. Other girls put scarfs with different colors; they put plastic bags in hands and paint their faces. Or someone can be masked as an old lady with a stick in her hands. The masking phenomenon is part of alienation and experiencing the transitive phase of the ritual. But as mentioned before, the rustica ritual for Polena inhabitants is considered being a woman carnival. They collect the ingredients to cook for Rustica celebrations. Their mothers, the woman of the village would cook these ingredients. The cooking process is similar with Boboshtica practice.

⁵ Pengjir is a kind of cake made with many egg yolks.

⁶ Bukvale is bread cooked with butter and water.

⁷ Oral interview of Elpi Manço, born and grown up in Boboshtica, high-school education, born in 1945.



Photography number 3. Rustica celebration in Polena, 2009



Photography number 4 Polena's woman cooking for Rustica celebration. Polena 2017

After cooking everything, they sit together to eat. From the food cooked on this day they take something to share with their familiars as well.

This is the Rustica ritual practice in Polena and Boboshtica. When we ask them for the burring of “Mother of the Sun” they shrug and say “this tradition was not practiced in our village. We practice only what we told”⁸

⁸ Oral interview of Marjeta Mançi, born in Vithkuqi, married in Polena, high-school education, born in 1974.

Traditional Ritual Cooking

Shefqet Pllana specifies something very interesting about the lunch of Rustica ritual, he considers this a feasting lunch. During this lunch they do not eat meat. The ingredients of this lunch are dairy and paste based. So we can say this is a half feasting lunch. Because during the Orthodox fast one cannot eat dairy products. In Devoll it was used to cook sorrel pie, pancakes, bukvalë. (Zdruli, 1986) In orthodox villages of Kolonja they use to cook a special kind of pie made with eggs, milk and butter. When this pie is baked it looks like a big fried egg. This pie is called *qumështor* that in Albanian means *made with milk*. Qumështori is still cooked from Christian orthodox for Pentecost, Whit Sunday⁹. In Polena they cook some different kind of pies, chick pea bread and cake¹⁰. In Boboshtica they cook pancakes, pengjir and bukëvale¹¹.

Ristozi and Pentecost (Whit Sunday)

Ristozi for the Korça inhabitants is considered to be Rustica. Ristozi is a Christian orthodox celebration that is connected with Pentecost. Pentecost from Greek language means “fifty”, and it is a religious festivity that is celebrated fifty days after Easter. At this day is celebrated the end of Easter and corn is harvested (Cross, 1997) In ancient Greece the last three days of the month were dedicated to the missing ones. Further than orthodoxy created a special day dedicated to the dead, that is celebrated one day after Pentecost, this day is called “Fest of all Saints”. (Roy, 2005) This day is dedicated not only to the martyrs of orthodoxy, but to everyone that is not between us anymore. During this day in all the Christian world organize celebrations called “Whitsunday”, this celebration is called so from the white dress that the newly baptized one wear. In many countries is preferred to wear something white in this day (Cross, 1997)

White clothes are used even in Rustica ritual in Boboshtica. We cannot say if this is an orthodox tradition or something local. Usually Rustica ritual is confused with Pentecost.

Superstitions on Rustica ritual

This kind of ritual was also connected with many superstitions. In popular beliefs “Rusa, Papusa” was imagined to be a mythical character to frighten out children. “If you don’t shout up, Rusa Papusa will come to eat you”, but Rusa Papusa could even be the priest. (Haxhihasani, 1988) “Rusa” was also imagined as a hedgehog with many legs.

In Ziqishtë and in Gjyres of Devolli, was believed that woman taking birth on Rustica day wouldn’t have the opportunity to get pregnant again. This phenomenon was known as “giving birth to Rusa”. The only child born during Rustica celebrations was called “Rusa”. To have “Rusa” of were affected by “Rusa” was the phenomenon of not having the possibility to give birth to other children. “Rusa” could affect even farm animals as well. To avoid this, it was used to give

⁹ Oral interview with Liljana Çunga, raised in Kolonja, married in Tirana, high-school education, born in 1965.

¹⁰ Oral interview of Marjeta Mançi, born in Vithkuqi, married in Polena, high-school education, born in 1974.

¹¹ Oral interview of Elpi Manço, born and grown up in Boboshtica, high-school education, born in 1945.

her something from the lunch of the Rustica day cooked by the women of the village. Farm animals were feed with pies of Rustica lunch as well. (Zdruli, 1986)

Rustica Ritual Beyond the Border

Rustica celebrations through Albanians immigrating to Ukraine appears to be a rite mixed with rain evocation ritual. The rain evocation ritual was divided in two parts. The first part is similar with the same actions made by Korça inhabitants, meanwhile there was another mystic ritual practiced in intimacy without the participation of the village community. This practice was the burying of a clay doll, whose figure was engraved up on a roof tile. Then this figure was buried in a fertile field, with all the death rituals. Her “tomb” was visited after three days and was sparkled with water. Than the buried figure was taken out of her grave and thrown into the water. (Budina, 1993)

This ritual keeps the character of Rustica ritual practices as a god of agriculture that dies and is buried in a planted field. This god was respected as a human being and death rituals were practiced like in Albanian traditions for their dear ones.

Conclusion

In this ritual we had the possibility to talk about the organization of Rustica ritual, that appears to be very ancient and with many pagan rituals. The influence of the dictatorship system in forbidding ritual and religious celebrations affected the loss of many ritual practices, but not of Rustica ritual. Before 1967 Rustica ritual was practiced in the main villages of Korça region, Kolonja region and Devolli region. This ritual is applied only by women. They would celebrate with joy and fear from this god that could harm them and their successors. The ritual started to get organized with a lot of nostalgia, but not in all the Korça regions. This ritual conserves some characteristic of the former ritual, meanwhile pagan elements connected with the mythology of death and resurrection of a god, are not existent anymore. In Rustica ritual we find two special practices one is the process of engraving a clay god, who was believed to resurrect after death, and the second is the practice of collecting the lunch ingredients from the inhabitants of the village. This practice is different from other calendric rituals.

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