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Folk Customs And Beliefs In Kosovo And Metohija Between The Two World Wars

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Abstract: The geographical region of Kosovo and Metohija in the period between the two world wars was characterised by traditional societies and a large number of folk customs and beliefs. In my paper, I will deal with the customs and beliefs that marked the daily life of the population in this area, based on ethnographic literature and the press from that period. Folk customs and beliefs had almost always accompanied many actions that people performed on various occasions. The custom of wearing amulets was widespread, especially among the Muslim population. There were many customs related to folk medicine, wedding and married life, holiday celebrations, as well as customs relating to death and funerals. In the house and family it was the women who preserved the customs, faith and tradition. A good proportion of those customs and beliefs have been preserved to this day in Kosovo and Metohija.

Keywords: beliefs, folk customs, Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Kosovo and Metohija, the interwar period.

Introduction

Kosovo and Metohija was located in the south of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. After the first division of the Yugoslav state into regions, the area of Kosovo and Metohija was part of Southern Serbia. After the next division of the Yugoslav state into nine *banovinas* (regions), this area was part of the Banovina of Vardar, Morava and Zeta (Simeunović 1964: 16, 23).[1] On the basis of the census from 1931, about half a million inhabitants were recorded on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, most of whom lived in the part that belonged to Zeta Banovina (Simeunović 1964: 27). Most stated that they consider Albanian as their mother tongue, Serbian being a second language (*Definitivni rezultati popisa stanovništva* 1931 (I) 1937: IX). Compared to the 1921 state census, the number of inhabitants increased through natural growth, but also due to the settlement of people (colonists) from the northern parts of the Yugoslav state. There was a high birth rate, but also high infant mortality, and the average family had more than seven members (statistically the family had four children) (*Statistički godišnjak Kraljevine Jugoslavije za 1929* 1932: 116–121). Therefore, Kosovo and Metohija were distinguished by their young demographics (Simeunović 1964: 62-63; 110). In relation to the social structure, the agricultural population dominated in relation to employees in trade, banks and transport. In these areas, there was a small percentage of employed women, who worked more in the home and household. The number of employees was the highest in the city of Kosovska Mitrovica in relation to other cities in Kosovo and Metohija (*Definitivni rezultati popisa stanovništva od 31. marta 1931, Vol. 4* 1940: 183, 269–291, 317–333). The high percentage of the population employed in agriculture did not mean the highest incomes, which could be achieved in other professions, so it is not surprising that the social progress of the population in Kosovo and Metohija was slow. The percentage of the population employed in industry and crafts, trade, banking and transport, public services, liberal professions and the military was low and insufficient to initiate the processes of social modernisation (Dimić, Vol 1 1996: 25; Slavković Mirić 2018: 225).

The largest percentage of the population of Kosovo and Metohija lived in the countryside. Muslim villages were close together, while Christian villages were scattered (Cvijić 1931: 516–517). The villages gave the impression of neglect, with primitive houses, unchanging customs and traditions and were

encompassing with inadequate nutrition and poor hygiene (Radovanović 2004: 320–325). There were a small number of towns and villages. In the towns, a large percentage of the population was engaged in agriculture. (Slavković Mirić 2018: 95).

In the interwar period the population of Kosovo and Metohija lived in family cooperatives (*porodične zadruge*), 'joint living' across generations. This meant that several generations from the same family lived together with collective production and social equality of all family members. Cooperative life was better preserved among the Albanians in Metohija, where there were cooperatives with 80 members each. It was easier for them to raise children in a cooperative household than in a single family. The cooperative was headed by a 'host' and 'hostess'. Men worked with agricultural belonging to the farm while women did housework and took care of the customs. The disintegration of family cooperatives was influenced by the agrarian reform carried out after the First World War, and which included, among other things, the fragmentation of large land holdings into small holdings), but also by a strengthening of the desire of individual members of the cooperative to dispose of their earnings themselves (Barjaktarović 1950: 197–209, 1956: 275–282, 1955: 239–247, 1976: 239–247, 2004: 327–358; Krasnići 1960: 137–171).

The state set up education and schooling in an effort to improve underdevelopment in Kosovo and Metohija. However, the school system was sparse, school buildings were inadequate and in poor condition, as was school furniture. There was a lack of qualified teaching staff because they rarely came to work in this area from other parts of the country. Children were often absent from school due to parental ignorance, distance, illness, and agricultural work. The situation was similar in secondary schools. Secondary education failed to educate a greater number of professional workers for the development of the economy and to increase the flow of candidates to higher education institutions. There was a reduction in the number of high schools and the opening of civil schools (*građanske* škole), with more practical courses, although these too were not adequately accepted by the majority of parents, who did not consider it necessary to send their children to school (Dimić, vol. 2 1996: 93-94; Isić 2005: 18–57; *Osnovni statistički podaci o razvoju i stanju* školstva *u Federativnoj Narodnoj Republici Jugoslaviji* 1957: 3–10; Pejić 1999: 585–587).

Illiteracy was one of the main problems across the entire country, especially in the south, where according to the 1931 census more than 80% of the general

population were illiterate. For women this figure was almost one hundred percent (Bondžić 2009: 21-22). The state tried to deal with this problem through courses for the illiterate, libraries, reading rooms and the creation of national universities, but progress was very slow (Slavković Mirić 2018: 326–327).

Inadequate development of education, economic and social opportunities influenced the people of Kosovo and Metohija to live conventionally, primarily in rural areas. This changed slowly, as people had difficulties accepting innovation since they were preoccupied with various customs and beliefs that were maintained until the Second World War, when the reality of war prompted change to begin (Bovan 2004: 172–173). Social life in Kosovo and Metohija attracted the attention of ethnologists. They collected valuable material about traditional customs and beliefs, hospitality, family organisation and life, the 'family cooperative', family tribal life, artificial kinship (godparenthood, fraternity, step-parenthood), the village community and its role in life (Vlahović 1988: 134, 2004: 220–228).[2] It is important to note that old customs were well preserved. The most important cult was *slava* (the family St). Weddings and funerals were also performed according to traditional customs (Stijović 1979: 237–380).

In this article, dealing with folk customs and beliefs in Kosovo and Metohija in the interwar period, my goal is to give an overview of traditional customs. The topic is very broad, so I certainly cannot deal with all customs in detail. However, I will give an overview of village customs, folk literature and songs, folk medicine, customs related to holidays and celebrations, as well as customs related to death and burial. In the preparation of the article, I have used ethnographic literature and the newspapers from the interwar period. I would like to single out authors such as ethnologists and anthropologists Mirko Barjaktarović, Milenko Filipović, Vidosava Nikolić (the first female PhD in the ethnological sciences in Serbia), Petar Vlahović and Tatomir Vukanović, and literary historian Vladimir Bovan, who in their research dealt with folk customs in various parts of Kosovo and Metohija.

Customs of rural life

The population of Kosovo and Metohija lived simply, mainly in villages. The village carefully guarded its customs and beliefs, so there were numerous rituals related

to the construction of a house (Jovanović 2007: 548–551; Vukanović 1986:11–30). When building a house, the most suitable place was chosen. This was determined either by the oldest male member of the house or by going to a seer so that he could say where to build the house (Vukanović, vol. 2 1998: 62). The new house was usually built above the old one, most often where "the cattle like to lie down or the rooster to crow". A sacrifice (*kurban*) was offered during construction and lunch was made from the meat for workers and members of the household. It was important to start construction on a Monday or Thursday in the middle of summer, to be finished by autumn. When entering the house, one would jump right foot first over the threshold (Tojaga Vasić 2004: 305–317).

Folk customs and beliefs were often accompanied by many special actions (Darmanović 2004: 167–179). The production cycle (ploughing, digging, sowing, harvesting, beekeeping, sheep shearing, etc.) was accompanied by many customs the goal of which was to ensure economic success (Vlahović 2004: 220–228).

People believed in the extra-human value of nature. In Sredačka župa district (near Prizren), trees were respected and certain rituals were associated with them. In addition, stones were respected and power was attributed to them. Soil had a magical significance in the treatment of disease and was especially connected to the cult of the dead. Fire and the hearth were symbols of life, as was water (Nikolić 1960: 113–137; Nikolić-Stojančević 2003: 83–102).

Each house had a domestic snake guarding it. Both Serbs and Albanians believed in supernatural beings, angels, devils, witches (*një shtrigë*), fairies (*zanë*), *kallikantzaros* (*karakondžula*, malevolent goblin), fairies, *čumas* (a personification of the plague) and others (Filipović 1967: 71). In the Nerodimlje region, Tatomir Vukanović studied the legend of the famous Lena fairy, who healed people using trance, helped barren women to have children, dispelled magic, etc. (Vukanović 1937: 198–200). People believed that you would get sick if you slept under a 'fairy' tree (Nikolić-Stojančević 2003: 138).

The custom of wearing amulets was widespread, especially among the Muslim population. These included teeth from a wolf, a pig, a claw from a wolf, ancient coins, and so on. Words written by a *hodjas* (Muslim priests) were also worn as amulets by being placed in special triangular or cylindrical cases and worn around the neck (Filipović 1967: 73). An example of an amulet was a horseshoe that was placed on the threshold or doorpoSt A piece of twig was a common amulet that was carried sewn into a belt or shirt (Vukanović 1986: 199).

Folk literature and folk songs

The folk literature of the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija was very rich (Bovan 1980, 2000, 2002a, b). Folk poetry is best preserved by people living a traditional way of life, within the framework of old rituals and customs, as well as folk epics belonging to the oral folk tradition. The traditional cooperative preserved and cherished folk tales, fables, curses, oaths, toasts, riddles, sayings, questions and proverbs (Denda & Dželetović 1993: 32; Vukadinović & Bogavac 2001: 149–156). People were singing as they went to and from work in the field, as well as when knitting or embroidering handicrafts. Most often, men sang heroic folk songs accompanied by a fiddle, or the songs were in the form of speaking or reciting the lyrics. The people of the Gora region (in southern Kosovo and Metohija) had a well-developed spiritual life, as can be seen from the language, songs, embroidery and clothing. The content of the songs reflected of the life of the region, often including farewell songs for those going on *pečalba* (seasonal work abroad). Everyday speech and folk songs were characterised by rich language that the Goranians called *Naški* or *Goranski* and which was similar to the language of the Serbs from Sredačka župa district (Lutovac 1955: 43–44; 54–55).

A interesting folklore phenomenon was the singing of folk songs while turning the baking pan on the table or on the floor, especially in villages. This was mainly a female custom performed for various festive occasions. This custom was very popular among Albanians and was common in the towns between Peć and Đakovica. In the village of Kačanik, located in Uroševac district, these types of song were used as lullabies and as songs for posthumous rituals. Vukanović points out that singing folk songs while turning the baking pan was most beautiful in Albanian. This custom was also common among the Turks, who believed that in addition to its entertainment function, it also had some magical effect (Vukanović 1956: 118–157).

Oral folk literature has long attracted attention and has been studied in detail since the 19th century. Ivan Jastrebov, Russian diplomat, historian and ethnographer, researched regions and folk literature in Old Serbia[3]and Macedonia in the 19th century. The recording of folk songs continued in the interwar period (Bovan 1980: 141–155; Petrović 1988: 155–161).[4] The literary magazine *Srpsko Kosovo* was the first publication intended for youth and public enlightenment

and had contributors from various backgrounds and professions. This magazine published lyrical and epic poems, and a special role was devoted to folk literature and ethnography.[5] The magazine *Božur sa Kosova*, as a continuation of the activity of *Srpsko Kosovo*, also focused on the preservation of oral folk creativity.[6] Based on the research of ethnomusicologist Ljubica Janković, folk dances in Metohija were influenced by dances from Kosovo, the rest of Serbia and Montenegro. However, this area was richer in non-choreographed songs. According to Janković, women from Peć were more creative in their dancing than those from other parts of Metohija (Janković 1937: 118–122).

Folk medicine

In addition to the efforts of the Yugoslav state to build a modern healthcare system, people had deep-rooted understandings that included popular beliefs. The magazine *Vardar* notes that the problem lay in people's lack of education and the distance of doctors: "Scientific truths were inaccessible in the countryside, hardly anyone received and read any magazine or newspaper because there were few educated people in the countryside. The population of the village needed medical help. A distance of 10 km from doctors had the effect that the peasant exposed himself/herself to waste of time and unnecessary expenses, so he/she, being hesitant anyway, left his/her illness to fate or magic" (*Vardar*, 5 July 1935: 4; *Vardar*, 6 November 1935: 1). In addition, medicines were expensive and discouraged peasants from treatment. Adam Pribićević, publisher, writer and politician, in 1924 settled in the village of Vučitrn, wrote based on contemporary events, that people would lie down waiting for them to get well on their own or with a spell (*bajalica*). According to Pribićević, people in the countryside were sadder for sick cattle than children, considering the circumstances: "it would be more difficult for me if my bull died than if my child died. If a child dies, God will give me another, but if a bull dies, people will not give me another" (Pribićević 1996: 297-300). It was all connected with the poverty of the rural population, although it seems a little exaggerated, because I see from the sources that the family was highly valued.

Many beliefs about the spread of disease were widespread; it was believed, for example, that it was best to take brandy as a way to prevent malaria, that whooping cough could be treated when flying at an altitude of 2,000 meters,

and that a tumour could be treated with the juice secreted by a bee during a sting (Jovanović 2011: 465). Quackery was very widespread, medicines that were not given by prescription were resold by grocers and pickpockets. Stojan Čupković, from the Yugoslav Central Institute of Hygiene, states that some people bought medicines outside pharmacies. Čupković wrote that "specialties" were advertised in different ways, "imposed on the people with reckless ingenuity; half-educated people bought a cat in a bag, spent money on white and yellow powders, castor oil and aspirin, all without marking the composition and contents of the medicine, often with homeopathic content. Barbers extracted teeth, or whoever could, and doctors did the least" (Čupković 1940: 511–516). Only those who fell into bed due to illness and exhaustion were considered sick. Most of the patients were not isolated, but only their bed, linen and dishes. Sick children were nursed by the mother, men by older women of the family (often by village fortune tellers (*vidarice*) for a payment). People believed that God determined who would get well and that those who were not destined to live would die. If a patient was lying down because of a cold, then that person was not washed, but rather covered with blankets to keep him/her warm. If a patient lay down for a long time, he/she was washed every week. Those caring for the patient threw the water, nails and hair of the patient into a stream or some hidden place so that no one would step on them because that person would get sick (Nikolić- Stojančević 2003: 117–118).

Ethnologist Vidosava Nikolić writes that in Podrima, people generally used sympathetic magic for healing (Nikolić 1957: 565–582). Folk medicine often brought them more harm than good, as Mirko Barjaktarović wrote about the Rugova region, located to the north west of the city of Peć (Barjaktarović 1960: 163–241). It was believed that every illness was 'written', i.e. destined, or came through magic from curses, the evil eye or from someone's 'intention' to transmit a disease (Nušić 2021: 136–138). Disease was called *lošetinja* (something bad), an epidemic was called *rednja* (going in order), and it was believed that diseases were brought by warm winds. Disease was treated with folk remedies, divination, and witchcraft. Plants were used as treatment, and there were herbalists skilled in the treatment of various specific diseases; in some families the skill of treatment was passed down the female line. Traditional healers or fortune tellers were usually women who were poor and were supplementing their income with these treatments. A *vidarica* learned treatments from the elders in her family and wouldn't tell them to anyone "because the

medicine will not work and they will forget it", as stated by Vidosava Nikolić Stojančević in her research. These women received compensation in the form of goods or some other value, or in money; sometimes they treated "for *sevap*" (divine reward for a good deed). Among Muslim Albanians, Muslim priests (*hodjas*) dealt with treatment, most often by giving patients prescriptions against various diseases. Both Serbs and Albanians called the medicine *iljač* (from the Turkish word *ilaç*, medicine). The medicine was procured by a fortune teller who, along with application of the medicine, also performed various magical acts such as touching the floor, blowing into the patient's face, whispering various formulas, etc. Individual diseases were imagined by the people as living beings with supernatural powers, which were evil and harmed people. They thought of the *čuma* as an ugly woman with dishevelled hair and a torn dress who went from house to house killing people and livestock. Nervous disorders and madness were said to mean that an evil spirit (called *djavo* by Serbs, *djalli* or *şeytan* by Albanians and Turks, related to the English 'devil') entered a person (Nikolić-Stojančević 2003: 118–120).

Villages defended themselves against disease in different ways. In fear of a *čuma*, the village was surrounded by a ploughed furrow using a certain ritual. When there was an epidemic of the sheep pox virus, the infected cattle were buried alive. Children sick with whooping cough were given donkey's milk. Tuberculosis, for example, was treated by leaving the sick person to sleep 'with the sheep' in the mountains for two to three weeks. It was believed that malaria was contracted from green melons, corn or early fruit. Toothache was treated with various herbs or tobacco. Medicinal herbs were collected on holidays such as St George's Day in Spring (*Đurđevdan*), the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus Christ (*Spasovdan*), the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul (*Petrovdan*) and St Vitus Day (*Vidovdan*). Herbs were dried and prepared partly for sale in the market, and partly for the needs of the *vidarice.* In towns there were folk pharmacies, where medicinal herbs, other folk remedies and pharmaceutical products were sold. The owner of one such shop in Prizren was Drvarević, a Serb, while the Bokši brothers, who were Albanians, owned such a shop in Djakovica (Darmanović 2004: 167–179; Vukanović 1986: 470, 483–484).

Illnesses and infertility were 'cured' by lighting many candles outside church. This was also done in Kačanik village around the Turkish *türbe* (tomb), where Christian women came from as far away as Peć and Prizren; Muslim women did not have this custom (Krivokapic 1936: 337). In the towns Prizren and

Đakovica and Orahovac village there were *türbes* who 'treated' various diseases. In Prizren, in the part of the city called Mahala Saračhan, there was a *tekke* (a type of Islamic religious building where the Muslim priest reads a prayer) with several *türbes*, where people came because of problems with their cattle, infertility, or children's illnesses. The second *türbe* was *Karabash Efendija türbe*, where people sick with fever or suffering infertility came, as well as Muslims and Christians. There were eighteen of them in Djakovica, which especially treated the mentally ill (Nikolić-Stojančević 2003: 137–138).

Deaf, mute and mentally ill people were taken to monasteries. Patient pilgrimages to monasteries were based on the Christian custom that certain Sts cure certain diseases. In the monasteries, after the priest read a prayer for them, the sick crawled under their relics and other holy objects. Everyone went to Serbian monasteries: Serbs, Albanians Muslims and Catholics and other religious groups, the same being true for the *tekke*. In Koriša, a village in Prizren municipality, there was a hagiographic cult of St Petar Koriški, where Serbs, Albanians, Turks, Vlachs and Romani made pilgrimages (Vukanović 1986 III: 15, 19–20, 78–92, 93–115).

Devič Monastery in Drenica was a famous place for the treatment of the mentally ill. This monastery is dedicated to St Joanikije of Devič. The patient was supposed to spend the night in the church near the grave of St Joanikije, and several days in the monastery. Pilgrimages for various illnesses were also made to Dečani Monastery. This Monastery is located near Dečani town and was founded by Stefan Dečanski, king of Serbia. In Nerodimlje village, in Uroševac municipality, St Uroš was the patron St The Monastery of St Uroš is located in a hamlet above the village. St Uroš was invoked in the village to help people, who would say "*In sha'Allah* (if God desires) St Uroš will help". Famous monasteries for healing were also the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, located near Mušutište village in Suva Reka municipality; Vračevo Monastery, located in Vračevo in Leposavić municipality; the Monastery of St Petka in Mušnikovo village, near Prizren; and the Monastery of St Mark in Koriša village, near Prizren.

Among the cult places were springs with healing water, for example Krkbunar spring in the vicinity of Prizren, where both Serbs and Albanians came (Filipović 1967: 76). In the village of Mušutište, near Prizren, St Bogorodica church was visited by both Orthodox Christians and Muslims (*Vardar*, 8 September 1936: 2). Barren women also went to monasteries where they offered money and an animal. Priests then read prayers over them and they drank holy water (Stojančević 2009: 17–18).

The ritual year

The celebration of specific holidays during the year was accompanied by rituals. The same custom was celebrated by people from several religious faiths. Orthodox and Catholic Serbs, as well as Muslim Serbs, Albanians and Turks, celebrated Christmas as the biggest holiday. There were various customs around Christmas. A Christmas tree (*badnjak*) was cut and it was brought into the house for health, progress and happiness. On Christmas Eve, the Christmas tree was lit as a symbol of love, unity and family life. Straw was placed around the hearth as in the stable where Jesus Christ was born (the fireplace was a very important place in the house when it came to performing customs). Muslims in the Gora region and in Drenica village also brought and burned Christmas trees, and they also performed other customs in the same way as Orthodox Serbs. Muslims in Sredačka župa district near Prizren, burned Christmas trees, brought straw into the house and ate chestnuts and walnuts, which were thrown around the house as sacrifices to the ancestors. Albanians in Samodreža village, Vučitrn municipality, also cut down and burned Christmas trees and prepared figs, walnuts and chestnuts for Christmas. Cabbage pie was prepared for dinner on the eve of Christmas, which Albanians also ate. Sparrows were also caught before Christmas and eaten during the holiday (Bukumirović 2007: 95–252; Filipović 1937: 462–475; Vlahović 1930: 574–577).

Apart from Christmas, Easter, the most important holiday in spring, was especially celebrated. Other important holidays were usually saints' days (*slava*), especially among the Orthodox Serbs. On this day, customs were – and still are – observed that included a candle and special bread baked and decorated only for this day (Jovanović 2018: 89–99; Kostić 1931: 28–34). Some of the most common *slavas* are St Tryphon of Campsada on 14 February (*Sveti Trifun*), St George's Day on 6 May (*Đurđevdan*), the Feast of St Demetrius of Thessalonika on 8 November (*Mitrovdan*), St Nicholas Day on 19 December (Lutovac 1955: 43–44, 54–55). *Mitrovdan* was celebrated not only by all Serbs, but also by Albanians and Turks, since this holiday was considered the beginning of the winter half of the year and many deadlines were attached to it, such as completion of work in the field and other work outside. In addition to the holidays they celebrated, like the Orthodox Christians, Muslim Serbs also celebrated *Eid al-Adha* (Turkish *Kurban Bayram*, the second of two great

Muslim festivals, the other being *Eid al-Fitr* or Turkish *Ramazan Bayram*) (Filipović 1937: 462–475).

Some holidays were accompanied by certain customs. I will mention some of them. The Forty Martyrs (*Mladenci*) were celebrated on 22 March, also celebrated by Muslims under the name *Sultan Nevrus*. At that time, 40 cookies (*mladenčići*) were made as a symbol of a long and sweet married life. During the time when the Martyrs were celebrated, manure and straw were burned to prevent fleas and snakes. *Pročka* or *Bele Poklade* was the day of the beginning of the Christian Great Lent on the eve of Easter in the Kosovo region, when people forgave each other of insults and mischief. An egg is hung on a thread and everyone present tried to catch it in their mouths. In the evening, fires were lit and jumped over. Lazaros Saturday (*Lazareva subota*) was celebrated on the Saturday before Easter. On Lazarus Saturday, processions of *lazarice* girls went from house to house and sang Lazarus songs, the goal of which was to preserve the health of the members of the household. The songs were addressed to the householder, the housewife, the house, the child in the cradle, the unmarried young man, the unmarried young girl, the farmer, the shepherd, the mason and the traveller (Vlahović 2004: 220–228).

There were also customs related to work in the field, I will mention only two here. If there is a drought in the summer days, then the *dodols*, girls who went around the village and called for rain, would gather. The harvest was accompanied by many customs, such as leaving the last handful of ears unharvested in the field or plucking them with special rituals and carrying them home. God's beard was a ritual object that symbolised the end of the harvest. A sheaf would be woven into a shape with an ear of corn at the bottom resembling a beard. This item was kept under the eaves to ensure fertility and wealth (Filipović 1967: 71).

Birthdays were not celebrated because of the large number of family members, but male members celebrated name days. Name days were celebrated by Orthodox and Catholic Serbs and Catholic Albanians. According to research by Vidosava Stojančević, despite women being responsible for the celebration of customs, name days were celebrated only by male family members (Stojančević 2009: 65).

Woman as guardians of customs in the house

In the house and among the family it was the women who preserved the customs, religion and traditions. Sources agree that the role of women was very important, although society was still divided along gender lines. It is often emphasized that traditional society was patriarchal. Nevertheless, based on the interpretation of sources and customs, we see that the female role in the home and family was the basis for almost all customs. Society, according to ethnologist Tatomir Vukanović, had certain expectations of women. A woman should be hospitable, modest, respect tradition, and maintain all religious holidays and ceremonies (Vukanović 1986: 133).

Women were connected with soothsaying, magic and care-giving, since they cared for the sick, the children, and the dead. They also had their own places to gather, especially during the winter when there was not much work in the fields. Then, girls built special huts (*kućarice* or *zemljarke*) that were holes in the landfill (*bunjište*, an archaic Serbian word denoting a place on a farm to throw garbage) or the ground where they spent the winter days embroidering, knitting and sewing (Filipović 1937: 460–462). We will see the significant role of women in the next section, which concerns lifecycles and shows how women were an indispensable part of all customs, and almost always the main initiator of tradition and family.

Lifecycle rituals (birth, marriage and death)

Birth: the special role of women

A woman's 'special duty' was to give birth to children. In order that the first child be male, the bride should put on a man's shirt on the Saturday before the wedding, and wear it during the night. In addition, before the wedding, a male child was placed in the newlyweds' bed (Stojančević 2009: 18).

When giving birth, women squatted or stood because they believed that the child came out easier that way. There were different customs during childbirth, clothed in the mystery around the arrival of a new member of the family. Dur-

ing a difficult birth various magico-religious actions were carried out to ease the pain of the woman in labour (the husband jumped over her three times, the woman in childbirth sits on her husband's *chakshiras* (woollen breeches, baggy above the knee but tight around the knee and lower leg) or drinks water from her husband's right shoe. These customs were similar among Albanians. (Vlahović 2004: 220–228; Vukanović 1986: 212–213). According to the sources, these actions involved the husband and/or his belongings, which, in my opinion, was supposed to give the woman strength and in some way support childbirth. When a child was born, the woman would tie the umbilical cord with her hands, using a red thread that she then cut with a sickle. Attention was immediately focused on the child, and on the woman only later. The birth of a child was highly valued, especially if the child was a boy. There were sayings for a boy and a girl, respectively: "the mountain cries and the house sings", and "the mountain sings and the house cries" (Nušić 2021: 87–90). The new-born baby was rocked over the fire, which had a magical role. This ritual was accompanied by a protective formula to ward off demons (female *kuvada* or male *babinjanje*) (Vukanović 1964: 63–98). Various measures were taken against spells, such as amulets, garlic, tar, soot. On the third evening after the birth, the child's *sudjenice* (invisible spirits or fates; for Albanians *moire*, *fati* or *ore*) come to determine the child's fate, and thereafter the child was given a name. A woman was considered impure for forty days after giving birth, after which she went to church with the child to have a prayer read for her (Filipović 1937: 475–483; Nušić 2021: 125). According to the sources, there were big differences in attitudes towards the woman if she gave birth to a male or female child. In Prizren, a women in childbirth lay in the house for seven days if she gave birth to a male child, and three days if she gave birth to a female child. After World War II, younger women began to give birth in hospital maternity wards. At around that time certain customs were abandoned, although many remained (Stojančević 2009: 19–20).

Wedding customs

Marriage was the most complex among all the ceremonies and customs because it included many elements from folk life, mythological belief, various superstitions, elements of magic, customary law and elements of oral folk creativity (Bovan 2004: 18–19, 39; Bukumirović 2007: 95 –252; Filipović 1958: 74–77;

Manojlović 1933: 39–51; Nikolić 1961: 59–104; Nušić 2021: 129; Vlahović 1931: 43–45). The first information about wedding customs was given by Ivan Stepanovich Jastrebov, Russian consul in Prizren in the 1970s and 1980s and also a writer and collector of wedding songs. In addition to his records, we also have contemporaries from the interwar period who wrote down wedding customs (Filipović 1937; Vlahović 1930; Božović 1998).

Girls married between the ages of 17 and 25, boys often later. Marriage usually took place between families of similar wealth and from the same or nearby villages. A matchmaker went to the proposal and carried a gift (a bottle of brandy and a silk scarf decorated with ducats). At that time, they also discussed how much the bride price would be. That money was given on major holidays until the girl's parents approved the proposal. Gifts were then sent to the future groom's family as a sign of consent. Several years passed from the engagement to the wedding, during which time the parents (especially the mother) and the closest relatives instructed the girl in household chores and marital duties. Weddings were usually held on Sundays (Thursdays for the Turks) (Božović 1998: 91–92; Filipović 1967: 50, 141; Predojević 2002: 129–145; *Vardar*, 10 February 1934: 2; Vlahović 1930: 574–577)

The main problem in carrying out wedding customs was the expense involved. There were examples where parents demanded excessive compensation for the girl. It is interesting that the president of the municipality of Dečani said that Albanians (although it was not only an Albanian custom) will be ruined by three things: brandy, taxes and buying brides (Slavković Mirić 2018: 402) and therefore the clergy influenced a change in these customs (Bovan 2001; Kostić 1928: 112). This custom changed more quickly in cities, more slowly in villages, and slowest in mountain villages (Bovan 2004: 145).

Based on the sources, I can conclude that the social and cultural conditions of life influenced marriage customs. Sudden and frequent socio-historical upheavals and displacements (such as wars) influenced the population to return to old family relationships (family cooperatives), but also to earlier conditions for marriage, earlier ways of marriage, etc. This is why marriage customs have been preserved for a long time in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, as with others customs.

Death and burial customs

Death and burial were accompanied by many customs. Before death, the dying person confessed and said goodbye to his or her family. Money was put into the dead person's mouth, pocket or belt. According to the legal deadline, the dead person was taken out of the house 24 hours after death. The household members did not prepare food while the dead person was in the house, that was done by *mešalje*, female relatives from the extended family who kneaded bread and prepared food. In Kosovo and Metohija, a sacrificial ram or sheep was slaughtered (according to the gender of the deceased). After the deceased was buried, a meal was prepared (*trpeza*). Among the Albanians in Drenica and Metohija, as well as among the Orthodox Serbs, neighbours and friends came to the bereaved house for a "healthy head" (the desire for other family members to remain healthy) (Filipović 1937: 483–487).

Hired lamenters was an old custom among Albanians and was often applied in Prizren, Peć, Djakovica and Priština. This custom was common in Homeric times, and has in fact been practiced for at least 4,000 years (see more: Håland 2014). Laments were mainly a typical sacrifice to the spirits of deceased ancestors, which had its roots in the traditional attitude to death. Among Montenegrins and mountain people in the Kosovo Metohija area, hired lamenters were known derisively as *diplanje*, meaning 'playing with the *diple*' (the *diple* is a traditional woodwind instrument). The mourner received a gift (a thin scarf, socks, slippers, etc.), in order that the deceased will have what is needed. Professional lamenters (*narikača*) performed laments with a chorus of women. The principal lamenter would place herself next to the corpse, which would be lying on a mat on the floor, and the other women would sit next to her with their legs bent. Then the professional lamenter would start caressing the corpse, starting from the head and working towards the feet, while singing a lament. At the end of each verse, all the women present broke into wailing together. This form of funeral, rather than a church funeral, was more commonly felt to be compulsory. Everyone present listened in the greatest silence (Vukanović 1965: 173–212). Here I find confirmation that women were very important, although it is often said that the traditional society was patriarchal.

Catholic Albanians around Đakovica used to scarify their cheeks as sign of mourning for the dead during the performance of laments (Filipović 1967: 49, 759). This was normal in other societies during the performance of laments (see

more: Håland 2014). In Rugova, those who came to mourn were treated to two cups of bitter coffee each, and on the day of the funeral, they ate a meal with plenty of meat (Barjaktarović 1960: 163–241).

Everyone went to the funeral, and as a sign of mourning for the dead, women turned their dresses inside out and did not adorn themselves. The burial was accompanied by traditional rites with wider social and logical meanings, and followed with a very elaborate grave cult (Vlahović 2004: 220–228). The dead person was buried in a wooden coffin, and was carried on an improvised bier. In Priština, a vessel containing wine and oil was broken so that there would be no more disease in the house, or at least not in the near future. Tombstones in the villages around towns Priština and Uroševac were generally procured from Skopje. Among the Orthodox Serbs in Prizrenski Podgor (a region in the foothills of the Šar mountains stretching from Prizren to the village of Dulje on Crnoljeva mountain), the deceased could be buried in an old grave (Filipović 1967: 70). A seven-day, 40-day, half-year and annual memorial ritual were observed (it is the same today). After 40 days, the younger villagers took off their mourning black, and at the annual commemoration everyone took it off. *Zadušnice,* a day of commemoration of all the faithful departed (All Soul's Saturday), which is still celebrated today, was considered to be the glory of the deceased. All Soul's Saturday is celebrated four times during the year (Bukumirović 2007: 95–252).

An adult man was mourned for a year, during which time shepherds did not play and women wore black scarves. If a woman died, only her closest female relatives would mourn her. There was a lot of divination around the dead. If the corpse did not decompose in the grave, it was believed that the dead person had been a great sinner, so villagers extracted his or her teeth and used them for witchcraft in the treatment of teeth (*Stari Kolašin*). A widower or widow could remarry after a year; the wedding took place in the evening and there was usually no rejoicing (Nušić 2021: 136–138). In addition, according to beliefs about the afterlife and the soul, the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija believed in vampires, who were great sinners during their lives and returned after death to bring misfortune to the living (Darmanović 1992: 195–203).

Conclusion

During the interwar period the area of Kosovo and Metohija was characterised by a traditional way of life and a large number of folk customs and beliefs. Over time, customs changed, although very slowly. The village carefully preserved its traditions. The population often returned to traditional customs when they felt threatened (during wars), which is why the customs were preserved for a long time, even to the present day. A good example of this is family cooperatives, which were very important in the Ottoman period when the population was protected in this way. After liberation from the Turks the cooperatives decreased in size, but they survived. Between the two world wars, although reduced, they basically preserved some important principles, i.e. several generations of the same ancestor lived in the cooperative, there was collective ownership, collective production and collective use of goods. The role of women was also preserved, for example, the role of the oldest woman in the cooperative, the role of the housewife, the role of the mother in making decisions about marriage.

Customs followed every part of life. This is why they were very complex. This is especially important for the area of Kosovo and Metohija, where different ethnic groups lived with their own customs. This area is interesting to many researchers in the fields of anthropology, ethnology and history. Special attention was paid to rural areas because customs were most prevalent here. The cyclic nature of the environment that surrounded rural society inevitably requires cyclic agricultural work, where each stage was accompanied by certain magical rites and actions that should contribute to the harmonisation of the rural community and ensure its prosperous existence.

Folk beliefs were used in the treatment process, so people in the countryside rarely visited a doctor (who was far away, and medicines were very expensive). The lifecycle (birth, marriage, death) was accompanied by very complicated rituals. Women were very important for the preservation and maintenance of these customs. The role of women, based on the sources read, contradicts the view that society was patriarchal, although this was often taken for granted. Society was divided into men and women, although women were certainly important. The role of giving birth to children (with boys more highly valued), raising children, preparing for marriage, fulfilling marriage obligations, maintaining the household and garden, treating household members when

necessary, then the customs surrounding funerals and mourning, were just some of the roles that a wife had.

In the interwar period, the society of Kosovo and Metohija was characterised by education and economic underdevelopment, which is one of the reasons why customs survived for so long. But, even in more developed societies, despite the general high level of literacy, the development of scientific and medical knowledge, and wide access to scientific information, the reproduction of elements belonging to customs and rituals continues. This can be seen especially clearly in the rural agricultural environment, and to a lesser extent in urbanised society. The rebirth of certain elements of traditional views and rituals, conspicuous adherence to ancestral rules and customs today represent the ethnic identity, the national identity of the population.

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Notes

[1] See also Službene novine Kraljevine SHS, Vol. XXII, (Beograd, 1922); "Zakon o nazivu i podeli kraljevine na upravna područja", *Zbirka Službenog glasnika*, Vol. XXXVI (Split, 1929), 4-5; *Politika*, 4 October 1929, 3; *Politika*, 3 September 1931, 3.

[2] An extensive bibliography on ethnology was published in the book "Kosovo i Metohija u svetlu etnologije. Prilog bibliografiji" (Jovanović 2004).

[3] By Old Serbia and Macedonia, i.e. South Serbia, we mean in a narrower sense those regions that were freed from five centuries of Turkish slavery after the Balkan wars and joined the Kingdom of Serbia and the Kingdom of Montenegro through the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913. These were areas in the valleys of Lim, Ibar and Raška, followed by Metohija, Kosovo and Vardar Macedonia (Čeliković 2017).

[4] Živko Nikolić published a collection of Lazaric songs from Sirinić, Pera Ilić published a collection of reapers' songs from Nerodimlje, Vladimir Đorđević published a series of

songs from Kosovo and Metohija, and Grigorije Božović published an epic poem about blood tribute (the Ottoman practice of forcibly recruiting soldiers among children from the Balkans) given to him by Petar Kostić. Miloje Milojević recorded folk melodies in Kosovo and some lyrical songs, and Kosta Manojlović described wedding customs in Peć and published a collection of wedding songs. Jovan Hadži Vasiljević published lyrical songs brought by settlers (colonists) to Kosovo and Metohija, Gliša Elezović published a collection of folk songs from Kosovo in the Dictionary of Kosovo-metohija Dialects, Tatomir Vukanović recorded folk laments in Kosovo, and the sisters Ljubica and Danica Janković published a collection of songs with a description of folk dances. Milivoje Pavlović published a collection of songs from Sredačka župa, Miodrag Lalević published folk songs from the Istok region, Miladin Nikačević Simić published Lazaric songs from Sredačka župa, and Ilija Šoškić published folk songs from Peć.

[5] See also Srpsko Kosovo: list za srpsku omladinu. 1920–1934. Ed. Stanojlo Dimitrijević. Skoplje; Kosovska Mitrovica: M. Dimitrijević.

[6] See also Božur sa Kosova: omladinski nacionalno-prosvetni liSt 1934-1938. Ed. Risto Durutović. Kosovska Mitrovica: b.i.

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