

The Saints of Death in the Traditions of the Balkan People

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The article examines various versions of the myth of the division of the world among the saints in the South-Balkan folklore. Notwithstanding the diversity in the recorded versions of this myth, the functions of a master of death and of the nether world of souls are attributed to Archangel Michael; the Islamic peoples and communities on the Balkans assign the functions of an angel of death to Israel/Azrael. Many Christian saints have got the power to punish human beings by depriving them of their lives. Usually, in such cases the motif of a committed sin is involved, most often in relation to non-observance of a particular kind of taboo.

Key words: Balkan, folklore, master of death, saint, Balkan

In Bulgarian folk songs and tales there is a very popular theme relating the story of the division of the world among the saints. When God created the world and the first people on earth, he convoked a meeting of all the saints. St. Elijah was ordered to reign over heaven and over the summertime heavenly elements. St. Nicholas was granted supremacy over the oceans, seas and rivers. Archangel Michael was appointed to be the ruler of death and of the nether kingdom of the dead. In a folk song from the region of Tsaribrod, this cosmogonical myth is presented in a particularly expressive manner: when the three main cosmic realms: the heaven, the earth and the nether kingdom of the dead, were divided among the three “brothers” St. Elijah, St. Nicholas and Archangel Michael, “the sky thundered, the earth quaked and fish in the seas started fighting”. However, in various versions of this myth in the folklore of the Bulgarians other saints are also involved in sharing the global spheres of influence: St. Athanasius assumes command over the winter while St. Paul over the summer; St. John assumes patronage over sponsorship and fraternization, while St. Peter takes charge of the paradise (Yankova 2000). Notwithstanding the diversity in

the recorded versions of this myth, the functions of a master of death and of the nether world of souls are always attributed to Archangel Michael. That is why within the entire ethnic territory of the Bulgarians he is known by the nickname *vadidushnik* or *dushevadnik* ('soul taker').

In the popular conceptions and the folklore of Bulgarians, Archangel Michael is described as the most impartial among saints since "he forgives no one, neither the poor, nor the rich; neither men, nor women." When a man's hour of death comes, the saint "flies in through the chimney of the house" and stands at his deathbed with a golden apple in hand to lure his soul out and facilitate its parting with the body. As a folk song from the region of Plovdiv has it, God presented the Archangel with the golden apple so that he could easily entice the soul of the ailing Yana, which he did not dare take for nine long years. Archangel Michael takes the souls of dying sinners by stabbing them with a knife or sword. This is why burial tradition requires that a clean towel and a bowl of water be placed at the deathbed of every person so Archangel Michael can wash and wipe his hands after having wrung the soul out of the body of the sinful deceased.

A number of folklore motifs depict Archangel Michael as a "deaf and blind old man". God deprived him of his hearing and eyesight, and put a sharp scythe (sword, knife) in his hands because once, when he was sent to take the soul of a poor widow who had infant children, he took pity on her and spared her life. According to the beliefs of the Greek-speaking Karakachans (nomad mountain shepherds) as well, Archangel Michael is deaf. God deprived him of hearing because the saint was too merciful. Thus he would not be able to hear the whining and laments of parents whenever he has to take the souls of their children (Pimpireva 1998: 96).

After taking the soul of a deceased person Archangel Michael leads it along the path to the place of judgment in heaven where it should give an account of all its earthly acts and deeds before God and St. Peter. This is why in iconography he is often depicted with a pair of scales (symbol of justice) in his hands, with the help of these he weighs out the goodness done and the sins committed by the deceased (Kretzenbacher 1958).

It is an interesting fact that Archangel Michael is honoured by Bulgarians also as a heavenly patron of butchers since they likewise take the souls of slaughtered animals with their knives. Among Greeks the archangels Michael and Gabriel are also venerated as patrons of artisan butchers (Varvunis 2001: 183).

Among the rest of South Slavic peoples of the Balkans, belonging to the Eastern Orthodoxy and to Catholicism, Archangel Michael is in addition known by the nicknames *dushovadnik*, *vadidushnik* or *krvnik* ('sole taker' or 'the bloodthirsty') (Kuret 1970: 13–16; Bandić 1991: 21; Vražinovski 2000: 359), though among Serbs and Croats his functions of interceding with God for the souls of the dead are largely attributed to St. Nicholas. We need to clarify here that according to the official Orthodox calendar of Bulgarians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Greeks, Romanians and Albanians, the feast day of Archangel Michael is celebrated on October 8th, while Catholic Croats, Slovenes and Albanians celebrate it on September 29th, referring to it respectively as *Mihovil* or *Mohoya* (Croats), *Mihelovo* (Slovenes), *Shen Mili* (Albanians). Various legends depict the Archangel as a deity of the underworld, leading the souls of dead men to the other world; as a young man having 12 wings with which he screens and protects the moon from the raids of the lamia; as a God's messenger appearing either as a wanderer or as a beggar to entice the soul of the dying man with a sprig of basil (if he is righteous) or pierce it with a lance (if he is sinful). He holds a pair of scales in his hands to weigh the sins of the dead. He sends righteous souls to the guardian of the gates of Paradise, St. Peter, showing them the way with his right hand. With his left hand he sends off the sinful directly to hell (Bandić 1991: 21–24; Petrović 2000, T. 5: 313).

In the entire Balkan area the feast day of Archangel Michael is regarded as a "hard, cumbersome holiday". On the Saturday right before the feast day all Orthodox Christians commemorate one of the major official annual All Souls' days named after the Archangel. Serbs often also call it "closed" (Nedeljković 1990: 99; CMP: 188) or "autumn All Souls' day". Women make special oval or cruciform ritual loaves of bread which they give away together with boiled wheat to other people as offering at the cemetery. Quite often such loaves of bread are named after the Archangel or St. Petka (Bosić 1996: 185; Pamfile 1997: 207). Among South Slavic peoples the feast

day of the Archangel is also particularly preferred for organizing family reunions and community celebrations accompanied by a blood sacrificial offering and well laden common festive tables known as *sluzhba*, *svetets*, *slava* ('service', 'saint', 'glory'). In Eastern Herzegovina, at such family feasts, the host addresses the Archangel with the words: "May God permit St. Michael the Archangel to protect us from any misfortunes and hardships of life with his wing and with his flaming sword!" (Šarenac 1986: 245–246).

According to Greek traditional folk beliefs, the Archangels Michael and Gabriel were not trusted by God with the task to lead away the souls of dead persons to the kingdom of heaven. They have got thick ledgers wherein they record the names of their victims, particularly those who do not pay homage to their feast day. The population in the region of Ainos has the custom of hiding their shoes on the eve of calendar feast days, which otherwise are left outside in front of their doors. They believe that by doing this they will avoid premature death. Tradition requires that in honour of Archangel Michael the eldest men in a family should slaughter a rooster in close proximity to the temple or chapel of the saint with burning candles arranged around the sacrificial fowl (Megas 1963: 20–21; Constantinidou-Partheniadou 1992: 350). Bulgarians from the lands of Thrace also slaughter roosters on the feast day of the Archangel (Vaseva 2002: 9).

Many of the scientists doing research work on religions perceive the image of the Christian Archangel as a kind of successor to the ancient ferryman Charon who carries the souls of the newly deceased across the river of oblivion. Greeks often call him *Charos* (Lawson 1964: 45; Rodd 1968: 114–117). In their ancient conceptions the god of the dead is an enormous man with flashing eyes riding a black horse and wielding a sharp sword in his hand. He also carries arrows which he aims directly at the heart of his victim. Sometimes he is depicted as a vinedresser, a mower or harvester equipped with the appropriate cutting implement (pruning knife, scythe, sickle). Quite often he has some animal features – he is winged, his nose is like a bird's beak, his ears are long, his teeth are like the fangs of a predator. He turns into an eagle, snake or swallow. He is the keeper of the "lamps of human life". As soon as the oil in them burns out, the person dies.¹ And when God decides

to get married (this motif of His marriage is particularly widespread in the Greek folklore),² mass death sets in among people. This is because for His wedding banquet, instead of lambs, He “butchered infants” (Schmidt 1871: 224–236; Kyriakidis 1968: 102). The mythological relation Charon-Archangel Michael is also present in the conceptions of Romanian speaking nomadic Aromanians or *Armâns* (nicknamed *Cincars/Tsintsars, Koutsovlachs*). Among them the saint is known by the sobriquet *Khar*. In a similar context we should also include the folk curses popular in south Bulgarian lands wherein the demonic personage of *kharo* is always present as a kind of personification of death: “May *Kharo* eat you!”, “May *Kharo* take you!” (Dukova 1992). In some places in the lands of Thrace, death has its Christian mistress embodied in St. Anastasia (December 22nd). In the Rhodope region the saint is called *Nastasha* or *St. Black*. On her feast day women do no work at all for fear of having “their house blackened” (to avoid death in their household). An interesting fact to mention here is that, mainly in south Bulgarian lands, there is another Christianized androgynous personage of the same name – St. *Chernyo/Timnyo* (‘Blackie’/‘Darkie’) or *Baba/St. Cherna* (‘Granny’/‘St. Black’). Calendar celebration thereof occurs twice per year – in the winter and in the summer – and always follows the wintertime and summertime feast days in honour of St. Athanasius. In the region of the Sakar Mountain the function of a saint assisting dying people is entrusted to the “brother” of St. Athanasius, St. Antonius, called “St. Andonius the Saviour” in this region. When a man starts having severe deathbed pains the tradition requires that an icon of St. Andonius be placed beside him so that it would be easier for the soul to part with the body (Popov 2002: 314). Analogous concepts are also found among the population of Macedonia. When someone falls ill and is bedridden for a long period of time, an icon of St. Andonius is placed beside him on the bedclothes: “If his time to die has come, may St. Andonius take his soul, if he is going to recover, then the saint will bring him health sooner” (Risteski 2001: 166).

It seems to me that in the south Bulgarian lands the mythology-rite relation of the triad of saints Antonius-Athanasius-Euthymius/Blackie (January 17th, 18th, 20th) with Death has been influenced by the traditional outlook of the Greeks on life. The folk etymology of the name of St. Athanasius refers to “immortal” (Greek: *Αθανάσιος*)

and to “mortal” (Greek: *θάνατος*) and this is why the saint has been proclaimed patron saint of a large number of graveyard churches in Greece. Among Greeks there is a widely used phrase: “He now belongs to St. Athanasius” when referring to a man on his deathbed. To render homage to the saint of death, families used to slaughter roosters in his honour. The fowl is dedicated to the health of the entire family. Among Bulgarians the sacrificial offering of a rooster or a black hen is typical of the feast day of St. Euthymius who often duplicates on an etymological and ritual level the character of *Timnyo* or *Chernyo*. It seems that the semantic relation between St. Athanasius and his supremacy over death exerts decisive influence on the formation of an overall impression from the symbolic meaning of the holy triad. According to D. Lukatos, in the triad we can perceive a somewhat modern flavour of the ancient concepts about the three goddesses of destiny – the Greek Moirai (the Fates), who spin the thread of life of each new-born child on the first or the third night after its birth:

*Saint Antonius was writing,
Saint Athanasius was cutting,
And Saint Euthymius was censuring...* (Loukatos 1985: 91–96)

Yet another explanation is also plausible with regard to the relation between St. Athanasius and St. Black on the one hand and death on the other. Again, it is based on etymology. In the Orthodox calendar of Bulgarians and Greeks the summertime feast day of St. Athanasius (May 2nd) is followed by the feast day of the martyrs St. Timothy (correlation with the words *tama*, *tamen* ‘dark’, ‘darkness’) and St. Mavra (translation from Greek ‘black’). On the feast day of St. Mavra (May 3rd) Greek women abstain from using knives and scissors and avoid sewing garments because of the belief that their hands would be stained black. Elderly women are necessarily dressed in black on that day. No domestic and business initiatives are undertaken since these are all bound to be unsuccessful. Ethnographic sources indicate that when epidemics of infectious diseases broke out during the Ottoman rule, the churches and chapels named after St. Mavra became the most frequented holy places for the Greeks because of the sick seeking healing there (Megas 1963: 121; Constantinidou-Partheniadou 1992: 186).

Another triad of saints is also related to the conceptions about death and the other world of the dead in the Orthodox tradition of the Balkan peoples. This is the calendar triad St. Barbara – St. Sava (Sabbas) – St. Nicholas (December 4th, 5th and 6th). Among the Greek-speaking nomad Karakachans on the Balkans there is a popular saying: “Saint Barbara sickens, Saint Sava covers with cerecloth and Saint Nicholas buries” (Пимпирева 1998: 96). Its Romanian version is analogous: “Barbara commits barbarity, Sava reads burial service and Nicholas entombs” (Pamfile 1997: 237). An interesting fact in this case is that Bulgarians, Romanians and Karakachans often associate the name of the second saint in this triad with the female gender referring to the saint as “Saintess Sava”. Again, as a result of the folk etymology, the name is associated with the word *savan* (‘cerecloth’), from there with the concept of death, as well. There is a belief among the Greeks that they must pay special homage to the saint and pray to him to salvage their souls in the realm of the dead. According to a legend of theirs, St. Sava holds a net with his hands over the river of fire flowing through hell. If he happens to be angry or displeased with someone, he can loosen his grip on the net and the sinful soul would drop into the river (Loukatos 1985: 29–30). On St. Sava’s feast day a non-canonical All Souls’ Day is observed by Bulgarians in the region of Plovdiv. Women necessarily give away cooked wheat berries as offering in commemoration of their departed relatives (Stamenova 1986: 245). To the Romanians in Muntenia, “Saint Sava” is a sacred woman, who once suffered from measles. As a consequence of this illness she was left blind in one eye. On her feast day each woman prepares three tapers of pure wax and consecrates them to the saint in front of her icon in the church. After the divine service they take these tapers home. Whenever someone is taken ill with measles or seems to go mad, the three tapers are lit.

As I have mentioned earlier, in the traditions of Serbs and Croats in Slavonia the functions of a delegate of the souls of the dead in the other world are entrusted to St. Nicholas, also called “the Traveller”. In this sense a folk song recorded by Vuk Karadžić is particularly indicative:

*Please stay Saint Nicholas,
Let’s go to the forest,*

*Let's build ships,
And use them to carry the souls
From this world into the other.* (Nodilo 1981: 531)

A number of researchers of the old Serbo-Croatian religion presume that the mythological involvement of St. Nicholas with domination over waters and shipping predetermines his function of a saint taking the souls of dying people (secondary function probably arising on the basis of this domination). Thus, he turns into a kind of substitute for Archangel Michael, the chief Eastern Orthodox master of the souls of the dead. In this sense some prominent representatives of the Serbian and Croatian ethnology describe a Christianized follower of the ancient Charon in the figure of St. Nicholas, while others relate him to Wodan, the Germanic god of the dead (Čajkanović 1973: 333–334; Nodilo 1981: 531; CMP: 399; Petrović 2000, T. 5: 314).

In the mythology and the calendar tradition of the Slovenes the image of St. Varvara (St. Barbara) is loaded with the concepts of death and the other world of the dead. The vivid description of the throes of death of the saint in the hagiography served as a basis for emergence of a great number of folklore texts (songs, sagas and legends) which reiterate the motif of her heroic death. In a similar context various folk beliefs were born, some of which depict the saint as an unfailing attendant to people on their deathbed. Others characterize her as a keen and ardent patroness of the artisans who are under a daily threat of severe injury or death due to their working environment (miners, foundry workers, blacksmiths, masons, stone quarry workers). This is why Slovenes call St. Barbara “Attendant at death”. On her feast day everybody carries a piece of iron (or a petty ferrous object) hidden in their clothes to protect themselves from demons, witchcraft, diseases, and death (Möderndorfer 1948: 27; Kuret 1970, T. IV: 13–14). In Catholic tradition, to a certain extent, analogous functions are attributed to St. Gertrude (March 17th). According to the words of the prominent German investigator of the cultural heritage of the peoples from South East Europe, L. Kretzenbacher, the saintess bears a close resemblance to the Orthodox Archangel Michael because on the first night after a man's death his soul is under the control of St. Gertrude (Kretzenbacher 1958: 112–116). The concepts of Romanians about St. Barbara are analogous to those of Slovenes. They also believe that the saint helps

those dying; she alleviates their suffering and takes their souls less painfully (Pamfile 1997: 236). Anyhow, among all Orthodox peoples on the Balkans St. Barbara is venerated as the master of measles. According to Greek ethnologists, her image includes reflections of some ancient pagan beliefs and conceptions related to the reverence for the goddess Hecate, protector of children, city gates and roads, as well for the three goddesses of destiny, the Moirai (Megas 1963: 24–25; Loukatos 1985: 23–26).

While outlining the Balkan model of the saints, lords of death, I would like to add that the Islamic peoples and communities on the Balkans assign the functions of an “angel of death” to Israel/Azrael. In the conceptions of the Muslims, he is invisible to common people although he is of enormous stature, with multiple legs and multiple wings (Lozanova 1998: 21). Along with these saints “specialized” in taking human lives, in the tradition of the Balkan peoples there are many other beliefs and concepts of similar nature, too. Reference is made here to those Christian saints who have also got the power to punish human beings by depriving them of their lives. Usually, in such cases the motif of a committed sin is involved, most often in relation to non-observance of a particular kind of taboo. All saints are known to get angry when women and men work on the official calendar feast days. But apparently among the “angriest” in this respect are St. Theodore, St. Paraskeva, St. Elija, St. Peter and St. Procopius. He takes the lives of those girls and women who meet for a working-bee to spin wool and chat. According to a Romanian myth, the cruel saint cuts the abdomens of maidens open, pulls out their intestines and spreads them over the farmyard fences or hangs them on the tree branches (Marian 1994: 244–248). In Western Bulgaria, Eastern Serbia and in Macedonia, St. Paraskeva (St. Petka “Friday” as translated from Greek) often appears in the form of a snake before those housewives who do not observe the taboo on wool spinning on Fridays and punishes them, sometimes even by death (Popov 2008: 76). Bathing and swimming in the sea or rivers on the feast days in honour of St. Elija, St. Peter and St. Procopius is banned by the tradition since these rulers of summertime elements always claim a victim – someone is drowned. Further examples of a similar kind can be provided but most likely this is unnecessary. They would just supplement the general traditional point of view outlining the beginning and the end of each human life as a thread

spun by the Fates or by their Christian successors, the saints, i.e. “the thread of life.”

Notes

¹ According to a legend from the region of Botevgrad, “the stars were born from the marriage of the sun and then became icon lamps of Our Lord.” As every human being has got a dedicated star in the heavens, 40 days before her/his death the oil in the respective icon lamp starts to diminish until “God finally blows it out”.

² According to the conceptions of the Greeks from the Ionian Islands, as reflected in their folk songs, Charon’s wife is called *Charontissa*. Their wedding ceremony took place at sundown. The wedding table was covered with a black linen cloth and the cutlery resembled cut-off male arms and infant heads (Rodd 1968: 118).

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