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## SAINT GEORGE'S DAY IN THE BALKANS — CUSTOMS AND RITUALS IN BULGARIA, SERBIA AND MACEDONIA

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**Abstract:** This study gives an insight into the geographical distribution of the customary practices and the inter-cultural exchange between the societies that live in the Balkans. It focuses on finding the similarities and differences in some traditional customs of different nations practiced on St. George's Day. By examining and comparing practices of Orthodox rural communities of Slavic origin, some representable religious and magical rituals, folklore and traditions incorporated in the festivities dedicated to Saint George in three Balkan countries — Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia are presented. The legendary image of the Saint and his characteristics contributed to the numerous and various customs and traditions connected to communal celebrations which can be clearly spotted in the defined geographical area, especially among rural communities. Within parallel existence and interrelationship between Balkan communities and intermingling of nations, the common roots and the development of similar ethnographic heritage, certain overlapping between Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia in celebrating St. George's Day are evident.

**Keywords:** cultural geography; customs; Bulgaria; Serbia; Macedonia

### Introduction

Saint George's cult was widely distributed through the Christian world among Orthodox and Catholic believers and was also familiar even to the Muslims (Bowman, 2012). Saint George (*Greek* – Γεώργιος (*Georgios*), *Latin* — *Georgius*, c. 275/281 — April 23<sup>rd</sup> 303 AD) is one of the most respected saints worldwide, who became respected as a martyr almost immediately after his death on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 303 AD (Clapton, 1903; Walter, 2003). As a popular legendary figure, St. George took the important place in folklore culture of the Balkan nations (Radisavljević-Ćiparizović, 2005; Terzić, Krivošejev, & Bjeljac, 2015b). The customary practice uses a number of nature related elements that are characteristic for all the festivities dedicated to the Saint (fire, flowers, herbs, water, sheep and lamb, horse, snake, processions, chanting and playing the

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flutes, pipes or ringing the bells, visit to the open fields and rivers, bathing and drinking the spring water, etc.). These elements extracted from the popular St. George's legend, are widely incorporated in the customary practice. This way, they have been preserved till today within folklore and customary traditions of rural communities, especially important for cattle breeding and agricultural communities, where they were connected with and identified to different ancient folk customs and beliefs, linked to the basic folk occupations, agriculture and farming, land and vegetation (Kulišić, Petrović, & Pantelić, 1970; Čajkanović, 1973; Ajdačić, 2007, Terzić, Bjeljac, & Ćurčić, 2015a).

Ritual and custom are both considered as social behaviors specific to given cultures. Each is used to reinforce social bonds and structure. According to the Oxford Dictionaries (n.d.), the term "ritual" is defined as a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order (e.g. ancient fertility rituals). Ritual as part of active operations in the cycle structure of customs can be interpreted as a type of repetitive social activities with a series of strictly defined symbolic actions. This actually indicates that the ritual has no obvious meaning, but it often reveals the broader context of its association with the individuals or groups based on secular or sacred plan (Marjanović, 2011). However, definitions of customs and rituals are somewhat overlapping as both are learned social behaviors. In anthropology, rituals are actions with intentional symbolic meaning undertaken for a specific cultural/religious purpose, and may reinforce broader community social bonds, but in strictly defined formalized ways, while customs may be less formal (though no less rigid) unwritten laws, such as sort of manners, dressing code, or a proper behavior expected. Both may include religious or secular reinforcement, while performing each properly indicates membership in a self-defining cultural group. In the form of festive and celebration events, customs are often constituted as complex, formalized events that are endowed with special symbolic meaning (Stoeltje, 1989). Customary practice of the nations, as a part of national heritage, is the base of every culture. However, it is not the static base of culture. It is transferred from one generation to another, from one society to another, and during the transfer it is dynamically changed. Different societies act dynamically in the selection, marking, reviving, interpretation and representation of cultural heritage. The national folklore is diverse and enriched by spiritual values that are connected with various cultural expressions (music and dances, as well as customs, rituals, beliefs, skills, crafts and oral literature - songs, stories and legends).

The present-day picture of the Balkans is a world in which the main ethnic criteria (e.g. origin, language, religion, etc.) are different. The region is mostly

inhabited by Slavic ethnic groups (Serbs, Bulgarians, Croats, Macedonians, Bunjevci and Goranci), but also Greeks, Turks, Albanians, Romani (Gypsies) and others. Mechanisms for the preservation of traditions were developed and functioned in the Balkan area, despite its great mixture of nations in this relatively small space (Marjanović, 2011). Customs as unwritten rules defined by nations are transferred from one generation to another, but also from one place to another through migration flows. Several studies have already drawn attention to the “interesting fact that one of the peculiarities of calendar customs of the spring-summer cycle which distinguishes the Balkan people tradition from other Slavonic traditions is the hypertrophy of the cult of St. George and the feast days connected to his name” (Sobolev, 2007, p.16). Some maps of the first volume of the *Lexicon of Spiritual Culture* (MDABJ 2005: maps 42, 43 and 44) show ethnographic aspects of the cult of St. George on the Balkans (celebrated on April 23<sup>rd</sup> and/or May 6<sup>th</sup>), establishing the presence of the saint's cult throughout the entire Balkans. It is evident from the existence of a feast days in the folk calendar for all Balkan peoples without exception (Sobolev, 2007). Considering regional distribution of customary practices, we should note that even within one country or region, some villages developed their own traditions and local cultural expressions that can be recognized like something unique. However, festive celebrations and customary practices are widely present in all Balkan nations, especially within rural communities (Terzić et al., 2015b).

#### *Research procedure*

In this study, only the most common and most representative customs (nationally recognizable) were taken into consideration. The research was undertaken in the period 2010–2013 and is based on literature review and information gained from various types of publications and sources (available in different languages), personal contacts and interviews with experts in the field of ethnology, as well as interviews with ordinary people from different communities and countries. Moreover, the field research that was conducted (including Serbia, Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria) involved observations of customs and practices within several festivities organized during the St. George's Day, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, but also exceptionally some customs and festivities were performed a day before and after the holiday.

Customary practices dedicated to the St. George's Day are widely present within the Balkans, but also in wider European space. They are practiced by Christians — Orthodox and Catholics, but also respected and practiced by Muslims and other religious groups (Terzić et al., 2015b). These customs reflect certain unity and some regional differences in terms of some elements and practices that

appear locally in relation to the ethnic origin, language and religion. This is especially obvious in relation to differences in practices applied by Slavic and non-Slavic communities (Figure 1). Therefore, we focused on searching for regional differences and cultural intermingling of customary practices of ethnographically close nations — focusing on three neighboring countries Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia. These nations share Slavic origin and language, religion, geographical, historical and cultural space, and have been exposed to the same cultural influences and exchanges since their settling. The main focus of this study is to examine the similarities and differences in folklore, customs and traditions of these three Balkan nations in celebrating the St. George's Day. Therefore, the comparative analysis was conducted.

### **Saint George's Day in the Balkans**

Saint George's Day is the feast day celebrated on April 23<sup>rd</sup> (accepted date of St. George's death) in Eastern Orthodox churches that use the old Julian calendar, as well on May 6<sup>th</sup>, according to the new Gregorian calendar. However, even though Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia use different religious calendars, in these countries people celebrate the Saint George's Day on May 6<sup>th</sup>. Although a "fixed" feast, it has in fact been celebrated on variable dates in both Eastern and Western Christian practices (Bianchi, 2011; Couroucli, 2012). Through the world many Christian churches are dedicated to Saint George, and they celebrate Saint George's day in a strictly defined religious ceremonies (Darch, & Burns, 2006, p. 56). Christian religious traditions that take place on St. George's Day refer mostly to the organization of solemn processions in churches. Besides, some bigger celebrations occur in churches that are named after the Saint, as well as in towns or villages where he is taken for a patron. These celebrations often happen in the form of open festivals, mass gatherings and large feasts (Terzić et al., 2015b).

The tradition of celebrating Saint George's Day is closely connected to the pagan rituals and festivities associated to the spring and nature celebrations. According to the number and variety of customary practices, it can be said that St. George's Day, among Balkan nations, is a very important holiday. The richness of the customary tradition accumulated on St. George's Day should rather be viewed in the light of the celebration of spring-time vegetation, as well as the concentration of special customs on pagan pre-Slavic celebrations of awakening of nature and the arrival of the spring (Arnaudov, 1971; Bosić, 1996; Bakirci, 2010). In the complex of these customs and beliefs, the main rituals were: sheep grazing, ritual slaughtering of a lamb, preparation of various dishes, ritual bath in the river or springs, setting of live fires, decorating with greenery

and flowers and conducting of love spells (Figure 1). Mentioned customs are quite dominant and common to all Balkan nations, as well as within the European range, suggesting a common origin of customs and of its antiquity (originating from ancient Roman festivity of the Palilia – Shepard festival) (Drobnjaković, 1960; Arnaudov, 1971; Gavazzi, 1991; Bosić, 1996; Terzić et al., 2015b).



Figure 1: Geographical distribution of ethnographic elements in the Balkans (Source: R. Jovanović, 2015)

Collective festive rituals practiced in the Balkans, dedicated to the patron saints of the village community (*sabor, slava, sluzhba, panagjur, obrok, kurban*), the family and kin group, the household and the individual (*krsna slava, imenden*) are most usually viewed in ethnology as being uniform, but performing various functions at different levels in the social structure of the traditional village (Hristov, 2002; 2007). Some authors pointed out that the South-Slavs' collective rituals are representative of the corresponding type of social community in the Balkan village (Stamenova, 1985; Vlahović, 1998; Hristov, 2007). Links between people and Saints are established by the annual celebration of the patron Saint or getting a Saint's name (Darch, & Burns, 2006), such as Name day (in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia) and Family patron feast (unique for Serbs) (Terzić et al., 2015b). The contradistinction between the Serbian *slava*

and the Bulgarian *sabor* with *kurban* in Macedonia, as well as the variant of imposed *imenden* (name day), could be followed throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hristov, 2002) as a part of initiative for national identity creation (Popov, 2007). There are also some traditions that reflect a symbiosis of religious and folk customs in these three nations.

### *St. George's Day in Bulgaria*

In Bulgaria, Saint George's Day (*Gergyovden*) on 6<sup>th</sup> of May is widely celebrated. St. George is considered as the most popular saint, guardian of shepherds and herds in the Bulgarian traditional beliefs. It is one of the most common Name day festivities among Bulgarians that is celebrated within a family. Saint George's Day is also a public holiday in Bulgaria, as he is also the patron of Bulgarian Army (which was made official with a decree in 1880) and on that day military parades are organized in the capital city (Sofia). However, for centuries, among Bulgarian peasants, St. George was regarded as their protector, the patron saint of farmers and shepherds. In mountainous areas of Bulgaria, there are numerous customs connected to the celebration of St George's Day (<http://www.unesco-bg.org>).

The typical cattle rituals are interwoven with rituals connected with agriculture, health and well-being. In the spring night prior to the feast, young girls gather flowers and herbs in the field in order to decorate the front doors of their houses (but also barns, cellars, cattle-shed and sheep pens) and ritually feed sheep and cattle with it. Women make three wreaths from those flowers and herbs: one for the sheep that will be milked first, the second for the lamb that will be sacrificed and offered to the saint, and the third one is for the milk vessel. At dawn on Saint George's Day the shepherds take the herds out for a grazing and when they come back a ritual milking of sheep is performed. A firstborn male lamb is slaughtered as a sacrifice to the patron saint (called *kurban*). Usually the sacrifice is made on a stone altar. The ritual stone crosses (*obrochishta*) in the field, at which the family communities of the village offer a blood sacrifice (*kurban*) to honor the patron saint, are characteristic of the entire territory of Bulgaria and of the villages of the Bulgarian-Serbian frontier region (Hristov, 2002; 2007; Hristov, & Manova, 2007). The bones are gathered and buried in an anthill after the holiday, with a wish for sheep to become as numerous as ants. Sometimes they are thrown away to the river so that the milk starts running like water (Dukova, 1992). It is believed that the blood of the lamb has strong protecting powers, so people used to make a blood crosses on the children's forehead to keep the evil eyes away (Sedakova, 2004, p. 246).

In these customs, villagers often dance *horo* (traditional Bulgarian chain dance), they take a bath in the morning dew and drink three sips of *silent water* from local springs as a cure (Stamenova, 1985; Marinov, 1994, p. 816). A big table for the whole village is set on the green fields in front of the church, outside the village or near the cattle sheds. Ritual meals are placed on the table, including roasted lamb, various dishes of milk, cheese and meat, fresh garlic, and special Gergyovden's bread having a special place. This bread is also made in a ritual way. The water needed for the kneading of breads is called *mulchana* (silent water) or *tsvetna* (water with flowers and herbs) (Arnaudov, 1971). The maidens perform rituals of marriage focus — swings, divination for marriage. They sing folk songs which contain the motif of St. George, who goes to the field, defeats the dragon and unlocks the water and fertility (Stoynev, 1994, pp. 79–83).

#### *St. George's Day in Serbia*

Religious holiday and patron saint festivity dedicated to Saint George in Serbia (*Đurđevdan*) takes place on May 6<sup>th</sup>. It has an important place in Serbian history, literature, legends, folklore and customs. A unique practice that developed in Serbian Orthodoxy is the so-called family celebration (*krsna slava*) which is the most representative element of the Serbian national identity (Vlahović, 1998). It is a Christianized form of an ancient ritual of worship in which every family, as well as other groups and institutions (e.g. schools, churches, villages, guilds or military units), celebrate a saint or protector, and gather on the saint's feast day for a celebration. The main focus is set on family feast and table, prepared and set with great attention (Grubačić & Tomić, 1988). The most important assets of every table are lightening candle, saint icon, glorifying bread (decorated with crosses and leaves), red wine, and lamb or pork meat, with rich gastronomic specialties. In the early morning the head of the family, usually followed by male family members, visits the local church to get the family blessing and the blessing of the wine and glorifying bread, and gives a modest contribution (e.g. wine, oil, bread or money) to the priest.

In fact, about a third of the Serbian population celebrate Saint George as a home patron. These customs are also shared to a large extent by Serbian population in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Romania, Bulgaria and other European countries. In Serbian rural communities, on Saint George's Eve, there is a widely accepted tradition of decorating home gates and houses with greens and flowers. This is especially practiced among families whose family patron is St. George.

There is also a common custom of placing herbs into a pot of water with red Easter egg on the Saint George's Eve. This water is then used for washing the faces of the children in the morning, for beauty and health reasons (Bosić, 1996). There is also a custom of spending this day in nature (Reveille of St. George), reflected in some legendary gatherings of Serbian brigands, who gathered on this day in woods in order to fight against Ottoman Turks. In some villages in mountainous regions of Serbia there still exist an old tradition of ritual sacrificing of the lamb. The shepherds choose the prettiest lamb from their herds, decorate it with floral wreaths, place the small candle on his horn and sacrifice it on stone altar near the religious shrine or in the churchyard. The lamb blood was once used for drowning small crosses on foreheads, cheeks, chin and chests of folks, and they were washed with spring water. It is also regarded as a great shame not to eat lamb on this day. In Raška area (*Sandžak*) in Southwest Serbia, among Muslim (Bosnian) national minority, the common name for this holiday is *Omaha*, which included scooping the spring water from rivers and fountains and washing the face with it. The tradition of bathing children in spring flowers and blossoms is still known throughout southern parts of Serbia: in Podujevo, nettles are picked from the garden, dipped in water and used to sprinkle on children in order to give them strength; in Preševo, children were bathed in nettles or in water from the river, fetched the night before and mixed with various herbs. The bathwater was then thrown back into the river to prevent potential harm to the child. Saint George's Day is also celebrated by Gorani national minority that live on southern parts of Serbia, in Gora area of Šara Mountain (Hasani, 2002), near to the borders with Macedonia and Albania.

The revitalization of the cattle breeders' ritual on Stara Planina Mt. (since 1991) resulted in the organization of the festival called the *Prayer under Midžor Mt. Peak* (since 2000). The celebration consists of the practicing religious Prayer (scarification of the firstborn lamb) in the village of Vrtovac. This ritual containing pre-Christian elements is placed in a small village chapel with stone crosses dedicated to St. George. The festival is organized in village Balta Berilovac on Stara Planina Mt. and it is incorporated in the program of the sustainable development of the local communities of this area, representing local traditions including national dances, local gastronomy tournaments and other cultural events. It is officially included in the national register of intangible cultural heritage in 2012.

#### *St. George's Day in Macedonia*

The religious feast of the Holy martyr George the Victorious, known as St. George's Day (*Gjurgovdjen*), is celebrated on May 6<sup>th</sup>. It is considered to be the



largest spring holiday celebrated not only by the Christians but also the entire population in Macedonia. Celebrating *St. George's Day* among Orthodox people, and *Hidrelez* among the Muslim in Macedonia is something completely spontaneous and natural. This, on the other hand means that its foundation is the celebration of nature, the awakening of vegetation and life in general. In the life of the people in Macedonia, the summer half of the year begins with St. George and lasts until St. Dimitrios Day (*Mitrovden*, on November 8<sup>th</sup>). Therefore, in one Macedonian proverb, it is said: "Georgian Day has come, wait for Dimitrios Day (*Dojde li Gjurgovdjen, čekaj si Mitrovden*)" (Kitevski, 1996, p. 236). On St. George's Day many and various customs are performed, with strong magical apotropaic order, similar to Serbian and Bulgarian customs, aimed at ensuring progress and fertility of goods and fields, health, happiness and progress of people (Celakoski, 2002).

Among the most common customs and songs associated with this day, those so-called herbal customs and songs are performed during the harvesting of herbs, the evening before the feast, and on the very day, early in the morning. The harvesting of the newly sprinkled and contaminated plants is associated with the usual purification, as well as with the custom of feeding the cattle, and they believe in the magical power of herbs. Herbs are picked from the nearby forests, whereas some herbs are believed to possess magical powers. From these flowers a wreath was wrapped around the cattle during the first milking. Most often it was made thicker so that people are strong and obese and gentle enough to be healthy, that is, the power of this plant to be transmitted to man, fertility, berries from fields and milk from cattle (Petreska, 1993; Fidanoski, 2008). The *kurbans* (sheep sacrifices) are celebrated in the churchyard, at a stone cross — most often located above the village — consecrated to the saint whose day is celebrated when the *kurban* is celebrated, at old graveyards or holy trees. For instance, in the villages of Trstenik, Preod and Pavlešinci in the Ovče Polje region (Eastern Macedonia), there is a stone cross where the *kurban* is slaughtered on the feast of St. George (Bocev, 2007). There is also well known *Drimkol* custom with *Dervish* dance connected to gatherings of young men in the woods on St. George's Eve (Filipović, 1939, p. 526).

In some Macedonian villages there is a custom of pilgrimage to some holy places dedicated to Saint George. The joint celebration with visits to the same cult places (sacred trees, stones for health and fertility, springs) related to the saint is also present nowadays, for example, Gyurvyevo, Dabye, Gyurgyovden hill, Gyorgyov Kladenec, etc. The ritual activity around these stones is particularly intense in the holiday days. On that day, people roll through the opening of these cult stones or circle around it. It is believed that the stone,

representing the saint that is spiritually connected with, will provide health, fertility and total protection against unwanted influences during the whole next year (Kotev, 2001). Such a feature is considered to be so-called "Ilin Kamen" in the village of Zvegor, Delčevo; "Pobien Kamen" in Gevgelija; "Dupen Kamen" in the village of Vevcani; also the healing stones in the villages Oreovo, Bitola, Kovces area near the village Krushevica, Mariovo (Vražinovski, 2002, p. 216); "Benli Tash" (Beležit Kamen) near the village of Ilovitsa, Strumica (Kotev, 2001); "Dupeniot Kamen" in the village Dražilovo, Skopsko (Filipović, 1939); the famous "Govedarov Kamen" located near the village Pesirovo, in Ovche Polje (Karadžoski, 2001/2002); and many other places throughout the Republic of Macedonia. Here sick or healthy people gather around, especially infertile women.

Name day (*imenden*) is celebrated in many homes (where people bear the Saint's name as *Gjorgija*, *Gjuro*, *Gjurga*, *Gjore*, *Ganka*, *Ginka*, *Gjurgjica*, etc.) or it is celebrated like small version of home festivity. On this day all religious temples are visited, especially the churches bearing the name of the saint. In Macedonia on this day special liturgy is made (baptisms), and the most interesting is the *lihtium*, also known as the *eardia* (refers to the customs that took place on both May 6<sup>th</sup>), in the town of Struga, on the shore of the Ohrid Lake (southern Macedonia). Namely, on St. George's Day after the solemn liturgy, together with church officials, people take church relics and make procession to the Crni Drim River. Here the water of the river was blessed, and various agricultural objects were placed in it, such as straw, ropes, etc. and then taken from the water and sprayed through the home for health. In recent years, tradition has been renewed and held on May 7<sup>th</sup>, when, after the solemn liturgy in the church of St. George, the relics of St. George were taken from the eponymous monastery in Rajčica (town of Debar in western Macedonia) and carried through the Struga's streets.

### Conclusions

Every ethnicity has more or less rounded complex ethnic, religious and cultural characteristics. Their collection makes what we now recognize under the term "identity". Identity is continually re-created and transformed. Many studies show, directly or indirectly, that the construction of identity occurs in time and therefore in history. For the sake of such terms as tribe or ethnic group, the majority of historians refer to "regional groups" or "regional populations" that, at one time in their existence, have recognized and/or have been recognized by their neighbors as such (Esoavelomandroso, 2001). Two nations can have similar or even identical ethnic origin, same religion or confession, or very close

and homogenous cultural background (language, mythology, oral and written literature, folklore, customs and patterns of daily life). On the other hand, geographically close nations and ethnic minorities, sometimes insist on creation of identity differences (typical for Balkan nations, especially within Slavic group) (Djordjević, 2003).

Within parallel existence and interrelationship between Balkan communities and intermingling of nations in the Balkans, with a continuous process of exchanging knowledge, adopting techniques and technologies, customs and rituals, images and ideas, the common roots and the development of common Balkan cultural heritage become obvious. The result is reflected in great similarities in customary practices performed in different parts of the Balkans, practiced by different nations. Moreover, along with all these similarities, the customs and traditions in celebrating St. George's Day as a spring festival and religious feast are something common for all Balkan nations and extremely similar within Slavic groups. There are many historical, cultural, traditional overlapping between heritage assets, especially in ethnographical ones, between Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia. The importance of St. George's Day celebration assured the preservation of traditions in the rural communities of Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia, which can be tracked in the long-lasting traditions of application of various customs related predominately with the cattle breeding, agriculture and love and marriage. The belief of the people in the efficiency of the rituals performed on individual, family and community level, resulted in preservation of these customary practices with minor changes until today, which are obviously to the great extent shared by three presented countries.

Some traditions have recently grown to the form of local festivals and festivities, pointing to their exceptional social and cultural values. On the other hand, each village and region developed its own traditions and interpretations of joint customs, adding to its unique cultural value and representativeness. *The St. George's Day — the spring celebration* was in 2014, in the process of joint nomination to the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List, as a common heritage of several nations, but eventually it was rejected. It should be noted that there were many inconsistencies in the nomination process itself, making it “politically colored” act, where some states were included in the process, while some are not (Bulgaria, for example). In order to avoid such circumstances and promote joint heritage and traditions, cherishing European values and respecting regional differences, more research must be conducted, applying interdisciplinary approach and providing inter and intra-regional perspectives, more consciously and transparently than ever.

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