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PHILOSOPHICAL-RELIGIOUS AND SEMIOTIC FOUNDATIONS OF SOME ETHNIC CULTS (BY EXAMPLE OF THE CULT OF GODPARENTHOOD IN SERBIAN CUSTOMARY PRACTICES)

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Abstract.

This paper deals with the cult of godparenthood (*Serb.* “кумство”) in the light of Serbian folklore. The author considers the retrospective of the role and significance of the institution of godparenthood throughout the history: from the divine cult, through the character of St. John the Baptist, to the current roles that the godfather plays in contemporary society. It interprets the natural phenomena that are connected to this cult: the Godfather’s Straw and John’s Beam (*Serbian – Jovanovagreda*).

Purpose: The aim of the research is to get to the essence of the cult role of the godfather and to reveal its deeper semantics in the domain of the Slavic divine pantheon.

Methodology: The study was conducted using a comparative method based on processing an array of empirical material.

Theoretical and Practical Value: The theoretical and practical significance of the study is to identify a common cultural code for Slavic ethnic groups, which allows constructing geopolitical relations in the future for Slavic peoples.

Keywords: godfather, godparenthood, Godfather’s Straw, baptism, customs, Slavic pantheon

ФИЛОСОФСКО-РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЕ И СЕМИОТИЧЕСКИЕ ОСНОВАНИЯ НЕКОТОРЫХ ЭТНИЧЕСКИХ КУЛЬТОВ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ ПОЧИТАНИЯ КРЁСТНЫХ РОДИТЕЛЕЙ В СЕРБСКИХ ТРАДИЦИЯХ)

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена культу крёстных родителей (*Серб.* “кумство”) и его отражению в сербском фольклоре. Автор даёт ретроспективный анализ роли и значения “кумства” в истории Сербии: от священного языческого культа через образ Иоанна Крестителя до современного статуса крёстных родителей в сербском обществе. В статье также интерпретируются природные явления, связанные с культом крестничества, получившие в фольклоре названия “Соломинка крёстного отца” и “Луч Иоанна” (*Серб.* “Jovanovagreda”).

Цель – постижение сути и выявление культовой роли и значения крёстного отца в пантеоне славянских богов.

Процедура и методы исследования. В исследовании использовался сравнительный метод обработки эмпирических данных.

Теоретическая / практическая значимость. Определение общего культурного кода славянских этнических групп, который позволит выстроить новые геополитические отношения между славянскими народами.

Ключевые слова: крёстный отец, крестничество, «Соломинка крёстного отца», крещение, традиции, пантеон славянских богов

INTRODUCTION

The cultural continuity of an ethnic group is based on its tradition. The accumulations of newer social matrices have made the foundations of bygone times and many customary forms have blurred or even become opaque in relation to their original sense and meaning. Even though they have been left without the former customary format and are only realized through some social roles, many rituals have lost their essence, so they are approached formalistically in the modern society because only their surface meaning which has remained in the social understandings of the modern reality is observed. It is exactly their deeper, not easily discerned meaning which hides in itself the source of all, even modern concepts of a certain custom, that remains hidden in semantic layers of the word that describes them.

Indeed, not a small number of linguists, who direct their research towards ethnolinguistics and linguoculturology, are aware of the fact that language is used to reveal the world [8]. According to Ranko Bugarski [2, p. 17]: «With language, since time immemorial, man interprets nature and shapes culture as his own, human world, where there is a constant interaction between language and culture». Speaking about the expansion of anthropocentrism in contemporary linguistics, Rajna Dragičević concludes: «contemporary linguists are to a greater or lesser extent culturologists» [4, p. 9]. According to its characteristics, in the context of linguocultural terms, a precedent phenomenon stands out, which implies the phenomenon «which is well-known to all the representatives of the national-linguocultural community and which is current at the cognitive level» [4, p. 15]. And precisely one of the most representative precedent phenomena in Serbian culture is the godfather. There is really no speaker of the Serbian language community who could not

explain who the godfather is, what his role in our lives is and what status the phenomenon of the godfather has in our culture. However, since the precedent statements can have both superficial and profound meanings, one can rightly ask the question of how much is the contemporary man actually familiar with the profound meaning of the linguocultureme «godfather»? In other words, who really the godfather is in the former cultural scenario? Who hides behind today's cult of the godfather? What is the primeval essence of godparenthood? What constitutes the roots of this phenomenon? For what reasons is the godfather and godparenthood given a greater spiritual importance and responsibility towards children in relation to other close and more distant relatives (and even the child's parents)?

In modern Serbia, the role of the godfather is well-known to everyone: first of all, he is the first witness at the wedding ("best man" in English), and when the newlyweds get an offspring, the godfather has the honorary role of naming and baptizing the newborn baby. However, this role has become quite formalized, therefore today parents most often choose the name themselves and propose it to the godfather in order to «jointly agree» on the child's name, or the godfather suggests several names and the parents choose among those the one that they like the most. If the parents are religious, the godfather participates in the child's church baptism ceremony and, by agreement, performs other ritual acts of shearing at the child's home. The shearing implies trimming, i.e. cutting strands of baby's hair and laying them in a small cap that the godfather has specially bought for this occasion. In this rite, it is obligatory for the godfather to gift the child and to be gifted back by the parents, as well as making a feast for the closest relatives and friends. Even though it is still a common belief that the godfather must be given special and above all lifelong respect and that the godparenthood must be nurtured

and passed from generation to generation, what remains blurry is the mystification of these rituals, their nature and reasons, as well as the true role of the godfather in the lives of our ancestors in ancient times.

Thus, the cultureme «godfather» («КУМ») has kept our attention in the direction of re-examining the retrospective of social relations and beliefs with the goal of constructing a folklore image of the world in relation to the cultural concept of godparenthood («КУМСТВО») in Serbia's distant and nearer past. Especially since the chosen precedent phenomenon can be rightfully considered a cultural universal in European languages. Therefore, the subject of this paper is the linguistic image of the Slavic world created by the linguocultureme «godfather» in the branched relations that it builds from the basic cultural scheme through cultural processes and connotations all the way to the rounded concepts and systems of ideas and beliefs.

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE CULTUREME «THE GODFATHER» («КУМ»)

The Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Slavic Mythology reads: «GODFATHERS – spiritual parents. There are four types of godparenthood in Serbs: “wet” or “baptized” godparenthood, two “dry” (“wedding” and “sheared” (the godparenthood that is created in the process of the haircutting ritual)) and one created “in trouble” for protection. Among all, the baptized godparenthood is the most important: it was considered “religious”, unlike others, which are made “on the basis of friendship» [7, p. 317]. Godparenthood has always been considered a great honor. In our tradition there is hereditary godparenthood by the male line. The best man, i.e. godfather, at the wedding would then baptize newborns in that family. Since the relationship with the godfather and his family was considered to be familiar along the spiritual line, there was a ban on pairing young people across families connected by godparenthood (even though there was no genetic connection) since they were considered spiritual relatives so that offense would have been a spiritual incest.

There are interesting limitations related to the participation of godfathers in the ritual of baptism: the godmother cannot be a pregnant woman – so that the godchildren would not have a difficult life or a premature death. The godmother cannot be a woman, either, at the time when the church considered her «unclean».

A dominant figure in the rite of baptism is the godfather. The godfather used to name a child based on church holidays at the time of birth or based on child's ancestors (great-grandfather or great-grandmother) or based on some other circumstances in which the family lived (if the children were dying one by one, the godfather would name them: *Stanko, Stana, Ostoja, Živko, Živka, Živojin, Živana*, etc. so that the child would stay alive; in poor families the child would be named *Hranislav* so that he could feed his family, and children left at the intersection ((the rite of accidental godparenthood)) would be named: *Najden, Najdan, Najda...*). The godparents have numerous obligations related to the baptismal rites, both moral and material. Therefore, the godfather pays for baptism, gifts the priest, buys a white cloth, decorative wax candle and lavishly gifts the godchild at the baptism itself, but also on various occasions (birthdays, starting school, first communion, graduation...) and big holidays. The godfather and godmother always buy the richest gifts for their godchild, with which they need to overshadow all the rest which was supposed to attract abundance in the godchild's life. And vice versa, in our tradition, the godchild respects its godfather more than his/her own birth father. Serbian well-known sayings are: «The godfather is respected on earth and God in heaven! The godfather is respected the most in the world! What God is in heaven, the godfather is on earth! The godfather comes after God!» According to the tradition, the godparenthood is broken only if daughters are born in the family (godparenthood is passed on by the male line) or due to some family tragedies. However, the godparenthood cannot be broken without asking for forgiveness and permission from the former godfather. Then, the parents resorted to accidental godparenthood (godparenthood by chance) by inviting the first person who

walks by at an intersection or in the church and finds an unbaptized child (which was left at the intersection). That kind of a first passerby becomes the child's godfather, throws a coin at it, names it, cuts its hair. In any case, godparenthood was literally considered a sacred social institution which went beyond the usual familial relations and which created unbreakable bonds between godfathers and godchildren. According to the oral tradition and the sayings of old storytellers, the godfather was respected even with a certain dose of veneration, which was reflected on the whole godfather's family. The godfather and his kin were always indispensable guests at every celebration, taking the central place at the dinner-table.

Petrović believes that "...in the ancient rite of "haircutting", when the godfather says the child's name, by this act, by disclosing the name, a new life is gifted, a new existence of the child. Because of such belief, the godfather's power, on a symbolic plane, is equal to the power of the creator" ... "knowing of the name ensures the influence on its bearer: this is the magical aspect, the secret connection of the symbols. Among other things, 'knowing the name' also means having 'power over someone'. ... Therefore, the role of the godfather is inviolable because he, by saying the name during the 'haircut' rite, in a mystical way simultaneously transmits the voice and decision of the God, by which the reputation of the God is enhanced and at the same time that of the Godfather, so in the godfather's hands, conditionally, is the deed over the child's existence" [10, p. 26]. The godfather takes the child over from unholiness (the devil) and introduces it to the governance of the good deity, in the present sense, the Christian Lord God.

Certainly, godfather and godparenthood represent the oldest social and spiritual concepts, older than Christianity, so the institution of godparenthood is today still raised above the everyday religious beliefs. It is now clear that the godfather was in ancient times literally regarded as the godly envoy, a cult personality with a halo of holiness on earth. It can even be identified with a kind

of a personal or a family priest¹. "As the mediator in domestic deities, a certain divine reverence belongs to him; and since all those deities are, in fact, the diseased of the house in question, so does the godfather receive a certain deadly, chthonic character. By the way: if this mediation between the living and the dead, this responsibility that someone, on our behalf, so-to-speak descends among the dead and represents us there – also otherwise known in Serbian religion, the comparative function that the "pobratim"² from the trouble has during the 'opening' of the patient. That the godfather really has a chthonic character can be seen from his inseparable connection with St. John, who is, for certain, a chthonic deity" [14, p. 81].

All mythologists are of the opinion that the cult of godparenthood hides a long-forgotten pagan chthonic deity that mediated between this and that world, and which received a Christianized character in the form of Saint John the Baptist who baptized Jesus Christ and thus became the deity of godparenthood. «Kumimte Bogomi Svetim Jovanom!» (free translation – «In the name of God and Saint John, be my godparent!») – was said when someone was asked to be a godparent. When it comes to him,

¹ "The godfather has an unusually prominent role in the domestic cult. He has very important duties in the most important moments of that cult: at birth (that is, name-giving), at ceremonies at puberty ("sheared godparenthood"!) at the wedding, and at the appeasement of revenge. Similarly, in the case of adoption, the godfather must attend the act. At naming, at the wedding, at adoption, the godfather introduces the newborn, the bride or the new family member into the domestic cult; at the haircutting, he offers a "sacrifice of replacement" to the ancestors of his godchild; at the appeasement of revenge, his task is to appease the ancestors seeking revenge. The ceremony (especially regarding the wedding) is complicated, but from all of that can at least be concluded that the godfather is the mediator between the living and the deceased – deceased ancestors, who are interested in all that is happening to their family, and from which an approval must be obtained, a consent for every change in family relationships. (A lot of suggestive ideas about all of this are given by Fustel de Coulanges in his work *La cite antique*, and by E. Samter in *Geburt, Hochzeit und Tod*, although Samter attaches a big role to completely undetermined demons "and at the expense of ancestors") [14, p. 81].

² Serbian word «побРАТИМ» could be translated as "god-brother", and «побРАТИМСТВО» as godbrotherhood.

the belief about *John's passageway (gate)* must be mentioned. There is a folk saying, now somewhat forgotten: "Everything must go through John's passageway!" John's passageway is the gate of God where from souls, as they deserve, are led to either heaven or hell. Therefore, the godfather of heaven, St. John, receives and distributes the souls of the deceased. Until the time comes for John's gate, during their time on earth, the earthly godfather takes care of people and that is why he is a cult personality in the earthly life and is called the divine father – the godfather as a father takes care of the spiritual path of his godchildren.

This legend is supplemented by the legend of the Godfatherly (Godfather's) Straw¹, the constellation known as the Milky Way², and the irrefutable message of which is that the souls of the dead travel through this light tunnel to the sky all the way to the divine gate: «In the belief of many nations, especially Indo-European ones, the Godfather's Straw represents the way by which souls go to heaven and generally to the Other world, and by which gods travel. This is the way that the German *Vodan*, the God of the dead and the leader of the souls, also takes» [7, p. 187]. There are various folk beliefs about how this constellation came into existence, and the most famous one is the one that Vuk Karadžić noted in his *Rječnik*: «On Christmas Eve, a godfather came to his godfather to borrow the straw. The godfather then responded that he

could not give him the straw because he needed it for the Christmas rite. He told him that, at that time, he was only able to give the straw to Christ. However, the godfather stole the straw, but spilt it on the way. God punished the godfather and left the trace of the straw on the sky so that all people could see it as a warning» [5, p. 444]. A story like this has its own counterpart (or source) in the Oriental legends of the thief that spilt the stolen straw. Interestingly, this is not a folk but a Christian legend, because the church sanctioned godparenthood and gave the baptism ritual a new form in the form of a church baptism.

So, the souls of the dead are led to the gate of God (John's passageway) by the spiritual father (godfather) on the heavenly way of the God (Godfather's Straw). They are led on this path by the divine godfather, that is, the deity of the dead and the leader of the soul embodied in the character of Saint John in the period of Christianization of ancient Slavs. This ancient deity is chthonic, underworldly, and based on the taboo of blood (godparenthood is considered not only spiritual but also blood relation). It is obvious that this deity mediates between this and the other world, i.e. between the living people and their ancestors. Naming the child opens the way of incarnation of the ancestor in the child. The godfather is the representative of the alive man before God. With the rite of haircutting, a sacrifice is offered in the form of godchild's hair to the ancestors. The godparenthood formed by baptism is a Christianized form of the sheared one. The rite of haircutting followed with placing the new godfather's cap on the child's head. The cap is a charm and has protective character. The trimmed strand of hair is handed over to the guardian angel that is connected to the spirit of ancestors. The godfather was considered the protector against diseases. The godfather is the protector that is responsible for the child for all of his life and the name itself that the godfather has given is protective. Since the godfather is the envoy of the God, godfather's curse is heavy because it is the curse of the God. Godparenthood is not a joke. Hence the popular saying (free translation): "What the godfather curses never has luck!"

¹ In all our mythological sources, the connection of the straw to the world of the dead is widely known. Sacrifices to gods were served on straw since time immemorial. This custom has remained with us in the ritual during the day before Christmas when straw is brought into the house because that fasting feast is intended for the souls of our ancestors. The straw stays on both the first and second day of Christmas and cannot be cleaned. The ritual throwing of walnuts in the corners of the room is also used in this capacity because walnut is a fruit that has a direct connection to the underworld. Cheeping is the way of communication (silent language) with the ancestors because Christmas Eve is the "holiday of the dead", a feast intended for the souls of the deceased [14, p. 187].

² The Godfather's Straw is a bright band that can be seen in the night sky and that represents a multitude of distant stars of our galaxy, the Milky Way. In the Godfather's Straw itself, we can see a nice cluster of stars with five bright stars, which is called Cassiopeia. The galactic composition of the Godfather's Straw consists of 120 billion stars and 10 billion suns.

In resolving the enigma of the linguocultureme “godfather”, Petar Skok’s interpretation of its etymology might be useful. He associates the term godfather with the Latin term *compater* for the godfather and *commater* for the godmother, recognizing in the prefix con- our noun godfather. The very meaning of the Latin lexemes in literal translation is: “co-father” and “co-mother”, and in Skok’s view «...they express the spiritual kinship acquired at baptism» [11, p. 232]. Such an interpretation is really compatible with the cultural and mythological aspect of the lexeme «godfather».

What can we ultimately conclude about the mysterious side of godparenthood in the earthly life? It is indisputable that the role of the godfather in each family is of a cult nature and that the godfather is not only the symbol of the old Slavic deity, but also that it has the overall protective function of his godchildren (*kumašin*). What deity is represented by the godfather on earth? In his work “Jezički koreni Srba [The Linguistic Roots of the Serbs]” Nikić quoted Budimir: “In a word, *Dajbog* and *Dajbaba* are divine spouses known to all Indo-European religions as the personifications of the Heavenly Father and Mother Earth” [1, pp. 188-189]. Nikić then asks the questions: “However, what are: *Kombaba*, *Kubaba*, *Kumbabos*?”, recalling that the term ‘papa’ means: protector, (the word derived from the Vedic root *pa* which means: guard, protect, defend), and denotes the sun or the moon¹. Even today, in Serbian rural areas, one can hear the term “grandmother” (“baba”) which has the meaning of “father”. Based on the above, a logical conclusion is drawn: “In other words, in the expressions *Kumbaba*, *Kubaba*, *Kupata*, etc. we discover the original deities of the light of the sun, that is, of the moon” [9, pp. 99-100]. Therefore, the deity that symbolizes the cult of the godfather on Earth can only be the deity of light whose epiclesis is *Dajbog* (*Dažbog*), the deity of vows, happiness and fertility, according to some, the supreme deity of the

Serbs². He is also *Svarog*, which means ‘the one who gives life, growth, prosperity to all’, ‘all-shining’, ‘heavenly emperor’” [9, p. 98]. An additional argument to this conclusion can be the fact that, according to the legends of other European nations, the celestial path of light, known as the Godfather’s Straw, is “being driven on” by the Germanic supreme deity *Vodan*, the god of the dead and the leader of souls, who is also amatch to the Slavic *Dajbog* (*Svarog*), similar to the Gaelic god *Dispater*.

CONCLUSION

In the end, we can conclude that behind the precedent phenomenon of godparenthood, deep layers of a former religion and customs of our ancestors are hidden. In his character, the ancient deity *Dajbog* (*Dažbog*) or *Svarog* is embodied, who transported the souls of the dead through the stars of the Godfather’s Straw to John’s passageway (divine gate) pleading in heaven for the salvation of the soul of his “godchildren”. In Orthodoxy, that deity is in one part identified with St. John the Baptist who assumed the role of the divine godfather. Out of all, what is left is great respect toward the godfather without a clear stand about the cause of the mystification of his role.

Great potential in terms of semantic variation is realized in phraseologisms and related collocations in which the lexeme “godfather” is used [3; 6; 12; 13], and which reveal a broad and dense semantic field of the precedent phenomenon of godparenthood in understanding its various aspects: physical (ceremonial actions during weddings and baptisms), social (that indicate the regulation of social relations in the family circle and beyond in relation to the godfather), axiological (which reveal the values in the Serbian tradition) and emotional (which reveal the mentality and nature of the members of our culture).

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¹ Nikić explains that in the ancient cultures of our ancestors, the main deity of fertility was known as Baba (the grandmother) and appears in a complex form which reads *Kombaba*, whose spouse is called *Kombabos* or *Kubabos* [9, p. 99].

² *Dajbog* has its anthropomorphic form, his theriomorphic form is the wolf, his symbol, his reincarnation and his envoy. Also, there is a legend that the Serbs came from wolfs, i.e. that the Serbs are their descendants. The wolf is considered in our mythology a sacred animal.

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