

# **THE HOLY SPIRIT HOLIDAY IN THE VILLAGE OF NOVO LYASKY, GOTZE DELCHEV REGION**

Angel Yankov, Vasil Markov

University Research Center for Ancient European and Eastern Mediterranean  
Cultures

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

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The settlement is newly founded. It appeared as a result of the massive migration of the inhabitants of Staro Lyasky in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the old settlement was situated at about 1000 m above sea-level in a hardly negotiable area at the foot of Lyasky peak (the Pine-tree or the Holy Spirit) in the southeastern part of the Pirin mountain, the new settlement has climbed down to the borderline between the mountain and the field. It is situated between the villages of Musomishta and Koprivlen, not far from the town of Gotze Delchev.

From time immemorial the Holy Spirit holiday has been celebrated at Lyasky peak (1412 m above sea-level). In the past, it was celebrated on May 9 when the Orthodox Church celebrates St. Christophor, but since 1916 until now the celebration has been made on May 22 (here they celebrate it according to the old style). Only when the people keep the Lent, the holiday is drawn ahead. The informants are positive, "It cannot be drawn back!".

On this occasion, according to the tradition a black ram is slaughtered at the peak. It could be a big lamb as well but it is absolutely necessary to be chosen a black, male animal. The church buys the ram appointed to be sacrificed or someone offers it as a gift. If there is no black ram in the village, it has to be found somewhere around. "We will wade across the villages and will find it". A bargain is not made, the ram is bought at the price fixed by the owner. The sacrifice must not be weighed. The evening before, the boded mutton makers

spend a night in the church in Staro Lyasky. They get up early, at 3 a.m., and leave for the peak with the ram. For the last years they have had a sleep on the peak itself. There are usually 4-5 people.

A little before dawn the boiled mutton makers climb the peak which has the shape of a cone with a slant eastern and a very steep western side (picture #1). On the top itself there is a cave and the ram is brought up in front of the cave opening. Two candles are lit on the ram's head (picture #2). The slaughterer, who has to be a bachelor, makes the sign of the cross and kills the ram near the hole where the ram's blood has to run out (picture #3). The moment of the slaughter is exactly when the sun rises on the horizon.

From this moment ahead everything is in the hands of the chief boiled mutton maker. His main duty is "to make the boiled mutton so delicious to be liked by the people"<sup>4</sup>. The sacrifice is taken down to the fire below the peak where they firstly strip off the skin of the ram, take the entrails out and put the meat in the cauldron. The head, the heart and the lungs are boiled as well. When they are ready to be taken out, the meat has to be chopped, the head - boned and then put in the common boiled mutton. Only the skin, the horns and the entrails are thrown in the hole (picture #4).

At the same time the whole village is awake. After sunrise everybody is ready waiting for the church bell which is a signal for leaving. Some years ago, i.e. when the people lived in Staro Lyasky, the marriageable girls used to go out to a height above the village where the single men used to make the fire for the first Sunday before Lent (Sirnitsa), and began to sing,

Shine on, shine on, Delitze,  
twice as early as at sunrise,  
three times as early as at dawn.

We will go up to the top  
and find maiden Elena  
maiden Elena, maiden *dukena*”<sup>5</sup>.

At this place they sing two verses and take a rest. The bachelors from the village reply to them with outcries and shots from guns and pistols. Uphill in the forest, the maids come out at a high place, sit on the ground again, singing the above-mentioned verses. For the third time, already stepped on the top, they finish the song.

While the boiled mutton is being prepared the people from the village arrive and light candles (they bum up a bundle of candles with a brisk flame) near the hole, drop coins in it and leave small gifts beside the icon of St. Christophor. The women decorate the small cave with bunches of lilac, iris and melilot – all of them “dragon’s” flowers, and arrange their ring-shaped cakes around the cave (picture #5). Usually more than 200-300 people gather on the top, the meadow gets overcrowded (picture #6). The old people confess, “For us this day is even harder than Easter”<sup>6</sup>.

The neighbouring villages keep the holiday, too. The path, which is climbed by the pilgrims, goes through the village of Musomishta and takes its direction up to the ridge. It crosses the imposing St. Gerska rock (the small plateau above it forms the first terrace between the field and the peak), then the path reaches Staro Lyasky (the second step) and through the Vapa place (the third step) it gets to Lyasky peak. Even up to this day this path has been called the Spirit’s step.

At noon consecration of water is made on the top around the hole. The priest reads a sermon (picture #7). The chief boiled mutton maker brings a mug of boiled mutton, the Priest blesses it and then it is put back in the cauldron. It is time the blessed boiled mutton to be served.

Those present, divided in families, take a seat around

the specially arranged festal tables. Except for the ring-shaped cakes and the boiled mutton, on the tables there are plenty of vegetables, various home-made dairy products, sausages, wine and rakia. As a tradition a little piece of the shoulder of the lamb is given to the priest and this practice is kept each time. "When we gather here, the soup is given in a wooden bowl to be eaten, we do not carry it with us when we go back. If the half of the boiled mutton was not eaten up, it would be poured in the hole."<sup>7</sup> The hole is deep and the old people claim that "when you go down the hole, something rumbles, you can hear some noise"<sup>8</sup>. At present, it is covered with lots of raw hides, bones, horns so they make it lower. After the meal a man from each table gathers the left-overs and takes them to the cave. It is forbidden to take the boiled mutton down to the village. "Everything which is dropped from the boiled mutton here, must be thrown in the hole"<sup>9</sup>. The village churchwarden passes by each table and collects small voluntary donations for the church.

After the festal dinner the present old women take each other by hand to dance the ritual "horo" around the cave (picture #8). Meanwhile they sing the following song,

"Oh. you dearest Holy Spirit,  
when you thunder, when you blare out,  
the whole land shakes.  
Baby son in mother's womb,  
thin-fleeced lamb under a sheep,  
and poisonous serpent in the rocks,  
and many-coloured lizard under a stone..."<sup>10</sup>

The ritual dance "horo" is open and slow, the old women step forward firstly with the right leg then with the left one. They turn round the hole three times. Each time when they face east, against the sunrise, they stop and make the sign of the cross. After the third turning around, the horo finishes,

the last part of the song is sung immovably.

A little later everybody climbs down the peak. They pass the steep slope covered with hornbeams, beech-trees, hazel bushes and rare coniferous trees of black pine and get to the Vapa place, which has a shape of a wider and comparatively flat meadow. In the middle there is a huge stone which is difficult to lift as there is no a suitable part to catch it (picture # 9). The man, who can lift it, is ready to get married. The rest are not at the age of maturity yet.”<sup>11</sup> After the test the bachelors begin to dance “horo”. Both the dances and songs continue until late. “They do not hurry, there is no clock”<sup>12</sup>. The pipe and the bag-pipe are the usual instruments used (picture # 10). This tradition has not been broken so far.

Sometim es the bachelors mount a horse and accompanied by a drum, demonstrate their abilities as riders climbing down the steep path. All the people get together by the church in Staro Lyasky.

Presently, the Holy Spirit holiday is generally celebrated in this way in the village of Novo Lyasky. Reasonably this holiday provokes a number of questions: Why is not the Holy Spirit celebrated according to the Orthodox calendar - on Monday after Pentecost, but on May 22? How and why has this day become more significant than Easter? Why does the holiday relate to St. Christophor? These questions can find an answer only after tracing back the development of this festal complex during the years. In this case the article “Old-time holiday in the village of Lyasky, Nevrokop region” written by the teacher A. Ivanov and published in the newspaper “Novini” at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> c., gives us the key to the solution of this enigma<sup>13</sup>. From the article it is obviously clear that at the beginning the holiday used to be dedicated to the dragon who lived in a cave on the top and guarded the field boundaries from the hailstorm. Then the

pear-shaped sheer pit as well as the gifts put in it according to the tradition. They could be viewed as a “living ethnographic parallel to the underground sacrificial pits at the ancient Thracian sanctuaries, studied archeologically<sup>19</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the sacrifice of the black ram is of great importance. The colour of the animal gives a hint that it was intended to be a mythological personage from the underworld. What is more, his blood runs out exactly in the hole - altar. It is a religious practice, which has good parallels to honouring of divinities from the underworld, both in ancient Hellas and Thrace<sup>20</sup>. Dropping the black fleece in the hole as a gift is significant as well. The sacred fleece has a number of parallels among the mythologies of ancient Hets, Hellenes and Thracians<sup>21</sup>. It is worth paying attention to the preserved ancient practice of sacrifice segmentation in two parts. The first one - a direct gift to the divinity (blood, fleece, horns) and the other one - the meat - sacrificed food for the people. The pouring of the boiled mutton leftovers in the hole – altar could be considered as an antique pagan heritage, too.

At the same time, the sacrifice of a ram exactly - classical zoomorphic solar symbol in the religions of the East Mediterranean — gives a hint that the mythological personage to whom it is offered, owns simultaneously underground and solar features. In fact he is the Lord God. The obligatory male sex of the animal makes us consider that most likely we talk about the supreme male divinity in ancient Thrace - the Thracian Dionisos as an archetype. The time of offering the sacrifice also suggests the solar functions of the sacred in the antiquity pagan divinity. It is exactly before sunrise; the burning candles on the sacrificed ram's horns; making the sign of the cross against the sun at the time of the ritual “horo”, participation of fire in the cult by the bundles of burning candles near the opening of the sacrificial pit as well as the round shape

both of the coins and the ritual bread, placed here<sup>22</sup>.

As it was mentioned above, we have good reason to assume that the earliest pagan mythological personage used to be honoured here through the dragon's image. In the legend about the dragon from Lyasky peak could be seen traces coming from the ancient East Mediterranean idea about the temple as a home of the divinity as well as the folklorized version of a sacred marriage between a divine personage and an ordinary woman<sup>23</sup>. To prove the idea that the dragon is the oldest honoured pagan divinity suggest also the "dragon's" flowers - melilot, iris and lilac, placed as a gift near the pit - altar. The pagan ritual of "turning round" the hole testifies for this, too. It is made from an open "horo" with a specific ritual step reminding the movements of the serpent - dragon. In the utmost degree, however, the dragon's characteristics appear in the unnatural functions given to the Holy Spirit from the horo song accompanying the ritual. There, the honoured mythological character is at the same time a patron of fruitfulness and a thunderer - functions typical, to a great extent, to the dragon in Bulgarian traditional faith<sup>24</sup> as well as to the male divinity in ancient Thrace as an archetype<sup>25</sup>.

It is worth being mentioned the traces of a female pagan mythological personage. They could be found both in the image of the dragon's wife living with him at Lyasky peak, and in the image of the wood-nymph punishing people for not respecting the patron of the territory. In these traces heritage coming from the image of the Great Goddess-Mother<sup>26</sup> could be sought.

In comparison to the male pagan divinity, her traces in the legendary material here are rather indistinguishable. Therefore, we have to mention the fact that the traditional holiday shown here, begins with just a female initiation. The maids climb up the peak singing a ritual song, which goes



about a particular maid - Elena. She lives at the peak so they hope to meet her. It is most likely the essence of dedication to the new status - maidenhood. At this point we have to ask the question: Isn't she the same maid from the legend who the dragon kidnapped and made his wife?

All these facts make us think that in the past the female mythological personage undoubtedly used to have stronger significance. Definitely the patriarchal nature of Bulgarian traditional culture paid less attention to it in the legends. This hypothesis has been confirmed indirectly by the fact of male initiation - lifting the huge stone and horse races<sup>27</sup> hardly happen at the end of the celebration after its culmination at Lyasky peak.

In conclusion, we would like to specify that the analyzed Holy Spirit holiday near the village of Staro Lyasky,, Gotze Delchev region, represents an exceptionally interesting and valuable source of the ancient Thracian heritage in Bulgarian traditional culture. Furthermore, the fact that the ancient pagan ritual practices keep being connected with the megalith-altar with a considerable degree of certainty confirms the thesis about the preserved ancient Thracian heritage in the legends and rituals on particular sacral places in Thrace. This assertion transforms the ethnographic information, commented here into a valuable local source for the religion in ancient Thrace as well.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia of Pirin region. Vol. 1. Blagoevgrad, 1995. The research Was organized as a part of the complex field expedition in May, 2004 within the framework of Bulgarian-Greek project "Art and culture with no limits" with the financial support of the Phare Programme of the European Union.

<sup>2</sup> Informant: Angel D. Tashkov, 38 years old; Informant: Dimitar G Kypchev, 68 years old (chief boiled mutton maker for 9 years).

3. Informant: Dimitar G Kypchev, 68 years old.

4. The same

<sup>5</sup> Dukena – wealphy (author's note); Informant: Stoyanka Stojkova, 75 years old

- <sup>6</sup> Informant: Nadka Kr. Serdareva, 70 years old.
- <sup>7</sup> Informant: Dimitar G. Kyupchcv, 68 years old.
- <sup>8</sup> Informant: Simeon At. Stojkov, 77 years old.
- <sup>9</sup> Informant: Nadka Kr. Serdareva, 70 years old.
- <sup>10</sup> Informant. Nadka Kr. Serdareva, 70 years old; Informant: Stoyanka Stojkova, 75 years old.
- <sup>11</sup> Informant: Georgi D. Milenkov, 61 years old.
- <sup>12</sup> The same.
- <sup>13</sup> A. Ivanov, Old-time holiday in the village of Lesky, Nevrokop region.  
- Novini (News) newspaper, year 6, issue 67, 2 1.05.1896; issue 68, 24.05.1896; issue 69, 28.05.1896. – In a short version look “Sources of Bulgarian Ethnography”, Vol. 2, Sofia, 1999, p. 258-261.
- <sup>14</sup> The Lyasky dragon used to be the younger son who ruled, over the lands to the South of Pirin between the rivers of Struma and Mesta; he used to live in Alibotush (Slavyanka) mountain. Since he grabbed the beautiful Toplitsa - the priest's daughter - from the Easter horo in the village of Musomishta, his father, the old dragon, drove him away from Alibotush. Then he chose St. Gerska rock for his home, namely the cave below the rock. But after the priest had found his daughter, the dragon and his wife moved to the Peak of the Pine (Borikata), at present known as Holy Spirit or Lyasky peak. In old times a lot of people used to see him there but since “the folks became mischievous” and the guns appeared, the dragons have already been hiding themselves from the people. Look A. Ivanov, op. cit. - Novini (News) newspaper, issue 68, 24.05.1896.
- <sup>15</sup> “Oh, you dearest Holy Spirit,  
when you thunder, when you blare out,  
the whole forest shakes.  
Baby son in mother's womb  
and thin-fleeced lamb under a sheep,  
and poisonous serpent in rocks.  
Oh, listen to our prayer,  
send quiet rain to the fields  
to the fields, to the meadows.  
Keep the gardens and vineyards  
from hail, hailstorm and wind,  
and we will bring you boiled mutton  
and an appeal will make to you  
to be healthy till the next year.” - Look A. Ivanov, op. cit. – Novini newspaper, issue 69, 28.05.1896.
- <sup>16</sup> The same.
- <sup>17</sup> The same.
- <sup>18</sup> The archaeological remains from the ancient 1 hracian sanctuary are situated at the highest rocky part of Lyasky peak. They represent a group of crumbled stones and brown-black earth with a shape of an irregular circle with a

diameter of 30 m. On the surface fragments of Thracian hand-made, thick-walled ceramics with brown and brown-red colour could be seen. As a whole it must be referred to the first millennium BC. The presence of fragments of Roman tiles (teguli) gives a hint that this sacral place used to function during the Thracian-Roman epoch, too. The sacrificial pit is situated at the peak as well, at the highest and the most northerly part of the sacral territory.

<sup>19</sup>. Collection Koprivlen. Sofia, 2003, p. 132-144.

<sup>20</sup>. Fr. Shamou, The Greek civilization. Sofia, 1979, p. 163-226.

<sup>21</sup>. Iv. Marazov, Mythology of gold. Sofia, 1994, p. 173-190.

<sup>22</sup>. The practice of spending the night before the holiday in the temple has an antique pagan origin, too.

<sup>23</sup>. V. Markov, The God's traces, Blagoevgrad. 2003, p. 7-55.

<sup>24</sup>. D. Marinov, Folk faith and religious folk customs. Sofia, 1994, p. 299-302.

<sup>25</sup>. Al. Foil, The Thracian Dionisos. Vol. 1 Zagrei, Sofia, 1991, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup>. Iv. Venedikov, The copper threshing-floor of the proto-Bulgarians. Sofia, 1983, p. 241-259.

<sup>27</sup>. The lifting or throwing of a stone imitates the divinity's act of heroism or the hero from the ancient pagan religion on the Balkans - Look: E. Teodorov. Bulgarian folk heroic epos. Sofia, 1981, p. 35-51. The horse-races in the southernmost part of our ethnic territory could be accepted as an ancient Thracian heritage. Look: V. Markov, Al. Gotzev and A. Yankov, Sacral area in ancient Thrace. Blagoevgrad, 2003.



Picture № 1



Picture № 2



Picture № 3





Picture № 4



Picture № 5



Picture № 6



Picture № 7

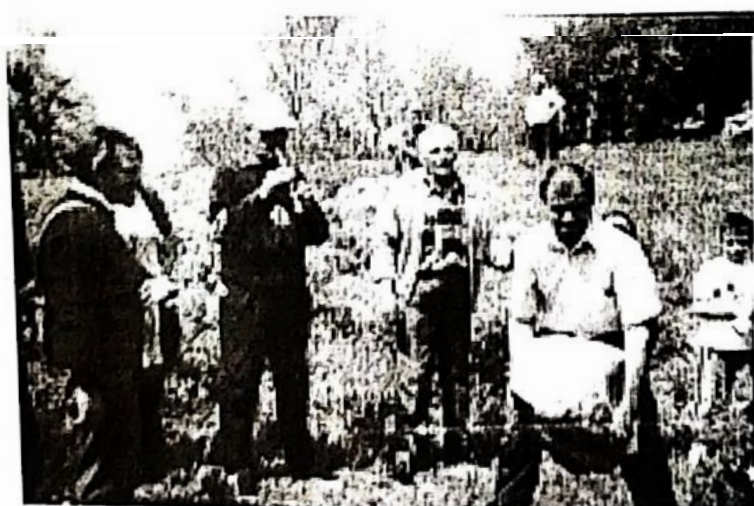




Picture № 8



Picture №9



Picture № 10