

METEOROLOGICAL BELIEFS RELATED TO THE VENERATION OF HIGH- MOUNTAIN CHRISTIAN HOLY SITES IN SOUTHWESTERN BULGARIA

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METEOROLOGICAL BELIEFS RELATED TO THE VENERATION OF HIGH-MOUNTAIN CHRISTIAN HOLY SITES IN SOUTHWESTERN BULGARIA

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Abstract. This report presents field ethnographic records for spring Christian holidays, celebrated on the high peaks of South Pirin and Ograzhden Mountains. Despite the fact that the studied holidays were full of ritual practices, rich with symbolism, the report focuses on their meteorological aspects, due to the fact that the analyzed holidays are dominated by meteorological beliefs and rituals, which are aimed at the provision of rain and soil moisture during the summer calendar cycle.

Keywords: Christian holidays, peaks, meteorological beliefs, provision of rain

Introduction

This article deals with some folk beliefs about Cristian holy sites, located on the high peaks of South Pirin and Ograzhden mountains in Southwestern Bulgaria¹. The mountainous and alpine relief of Southwestern Bulgaria allows the positioning of important for the local people Christian saints on the highest point of the local landscape. Depending on the settlement location, the highest point ranges from 600 to over 1500 m above sea level. Until the end of the 20th century, this type of holy places were venerated entirely in their natural code, i.e. open-air sacred places formed around natural phenomena such as caves, slopes, specific trees etc. In the last 20 years, the sacralized natural code has been replaced by massive crosses, small marble replicas of chapels, wooden or metal altars, and even small churches.

From a pragmatic point of view, the peak is not the most convenient place for worship, liturgy, sacrifices and organization of common table for the villagers. But the fact that the veneration of such holy places has survived to this day shows their significance for folk psychology and faith. An objective reason, visible even from the point of view of a modern observer, is related to the accumulation of practical

¹ Field ethnographic records are made within the field researches of the University Research Center for Ancient European and Eastern Mediterranean Cultures.

meteorological observations and knowledge serving the needs of primitive agricultural production (Sharlanova, 2018, p. 78; Arnaudov, 1971, p.167; Popov, 1991, p. 80).

St. Kostadin Peak, near the village of Delchevo

Every year on May 21, the residents of the village of Delchevo sacrifice a lamb at St. Kostadin Peak (1378 m), also known with the Turkish name Yuch Duruk (Fig. 1). The holy place existed entirely in natural code until 2011, when began the construction of eponymous chapel.

According to the legend, local shepherds saw hailstorm from the peak, while grazing their flocks. Fearing that the natural disaster would destroy the village, they began to pray, and the storm suddenly stopped. Since then, they sacrifice an animal on May 21 (Kostadinovden). Locals report only one case when the lamb was sacrificed in front of the Church of St. Virgin Mary in the center of the village, and not at the peak. As a result the harvest was destroyed by a terrible hail.



Figure 1. St. Kostadin Peak and the village of Delchevo, Pirin Mountain (Photo by Dimitriya Spasova).

It is also important to note that in the northern foothills of the peak, where the village of Dragostin is located, the church built in 1852, bears the name of Saints Constantine and Helena. The temple holiday on May 21 is celebrated with lamb sacrifice even nowadays, when the village is depopulated and officially deleted from the Bulgarian map.

St. Kostadin Peak, near the Village of Paril

May 21 (Kostadinovden) is the most important Christian holiday in the village of Paril. The only church in the village called "Sts. Constantine and Helena" has temple celebration with a sacrifice.

The celebration of St. Kostadin in the past was connected with the provision of summer rain. According to the informants² the main duty of the villagers was to make a lamb sacrifice and to prepare a boiled mutton for community feeding in the churchyard. The elderly people insisted that the sacrificial food should be eaten only by the villagers, because of the belief that, if it is given to strangers, hailstorms would fall in the summer. It is also interesting to note that some ethnographic data from the beginning of the 20th century indicate the same celebration in the highest part of St. Kostadin Peak (1454 m), located between the villages of Paril and Lovcha (Paskova 2008: 21-22). During our field study in 2009, none of the informants had gone to celebrate Kostadinovden in the mountain, but local memory still remembers that the sacrifice was once prepared at St. Kostadin Peak (Fig. 2).

The meteorological functions of St. Kostadin are also visible in the Vai Dudul (butterfly) ritual, which has an interesting feature in the local tradition. In Paril, as everywhere in Southwestern Bulgaria, the ceremony is performed by young girls during prolonged drought. The butterfly must be an orphan girl covered with elderberry so that the face cannot be seen. She is led by the other girls in the village. The procession stops at each door and sings a prayer song. The hostess pours water on the butterfly, who jumps, imitating raindrops.

What is interesting to note is that the tour of the village is the first part of the ritual. The second part is related to the recommendation

² Informant Irina Firkova, born in 1921 in the village of Paril, lives in the village of Paril, education elementary school. Occupation – farming

of elderly women to prepare three prosphora and to worship St. Kostadin Peak. This time the maiden procession goes to the church to leave the first prosphora. The second one is cut into nine pieces. On the way to the Peak, the procession passes through nine water sources to leave a piece of prosphora, to bow and sing the prayer song. The last stop is at the very top, where they leave the third prosphora, while singing the prayer song, crossing themselves and making a deep bows. The peasants believe that it will rain after the ritual.³



Figure 2. St. Kostadin Peak in Slavyanka Mountain (Photo by Dimitriya Spasova).

Pilentseto Peak, near the Village of Dobrotinovo

May 9 is an important Cristian holiday for the villagers of Dobrotinovo. At Pilentseto Peak (1472 m – the highest point of the local landscape), local people celebrate St. Krastor. The sacred space of the Peak is marked with a metal cross, which, according to the ethnographic information, had replaced an earlier wooden cross with similar dimensions. A pine tree is attached to the cross (Fig. 3). According to informants the tree must be cut off by an unanimously chosen person

³ Informant Irina Firkova

who meets certain moral criteria and reputation – it is strongly emphasized that he should be known for his good name and high moral qualities⁴. The chosen one cuts off the tree from the forest near Pilentseto Peak, marks it with a small cross, and ties it to the metal cross, where the tree will stand until the next holiday a year later.



Figure 3. Pilentseto Peak (Pirin Mountain), the Cross and the pine tree. The hearth is visible below (Photo by Angel Yankov).

A sacrificial animal is slaughtered at the foot of the cross early in the morning on St. Krastor's Day. It is believed that the original sacrifice was made from deer meat, telling the famous legend of the deer sacrifice, replaced later by a lamb, sheep or cow (Markov, 2009, p.141; Genov 2010, pp. 252-253). In the same place the villagers make the hearth to prepare the sacrificial soup, the worshippers light candles and place the brought breads. The church liturgy is also performed there.

⁴ Informant Slavka Avroneva, born in 1922 in the village of Dobrotinovo, lives in the village of Borovo, education elementary school. Occupation – farming

Before leaving the Peak, women dance a ritual *horo* with a specific snake steps around the cross and pine tree, singing:

*Oh, dear St. Krastor,
You came joyful,
Let us send you joyful!*⁵

The *horo* dance is leaded by an unanimously chosen woman, who also meets certain moral criteria – *she is not proud and she does not offend people*.⁶

In the ritual song St. Krastor comes joyful and leaves joyful, and in return he rewards people with rain. Among the locals even today one can find the statement that the sacrifice at Pilentseto Peak is made to pray for rain and to ensure fertility. As an evidence is indicated the rain when people leave the holy place or the rainfall in the days after the holiday.

Connection with the rain is also evident in the explanations why the pine tree is planted. It is believed that the tree should not stay too long. For this reason, it is replaced every year on the St. Krastor's day. If a drought occurs during the summer, a person from the village climbs on the Peak to throw away the old tree and to replaces it immediately with a new one. Thus, replacing the tree at the beginning of the agrarian cycle, magically affects the revival of nature, fertility and rain (Markov, 2007, pp.35-37; Markov, 2009, pp. 140-143).

Lyaski Peak, near the Village of Staro Lyaski

Directly related to the provision of rain is St. Christopher's day, celebrated on May 22 at the Lyaski Peak (1500 m). The day of St. Christopher, better known by the villagers of Staro Lyaski as the Holy Spirit, is defined *as more important than Easter* (Ivanov, 1896).

The sacred space of the Peak and the rites performed during the holiday in the past are extremely interesting, because of combination of pre-Christian and Christian beliefs and rituals. For example, the most

⁵ Informant Slavka Avroneva

⁶ Informant Slavka Avroneva

sacred part of the Peak is a cave, considered a home of the dragon and the most beautiful girl from the village of Musomishte. Around the cave at sunrise, the villagers sacrifice a lamb with black fleece. Again around the opening of the cave the parishioners light candles, place breads and other ritual foods, the priests perform liturgies and so on (Fig. 4 and 5). The cult continuity and the heritage of ancient Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean religions in the feast of St. Christopher / Holy Spirit was studied by Vasil Markov, Angel Yankov and Anton Genov (Yankov, Markov, 2004, pp. 45-60; Markov, 2009, pp. 103-111; Markov, 2010, 88-94; Markov, 2007, pp. 20-23; Genov, 2018, pp. 224-225). I will focus my attention on the meteorological aspects of our ethnographic information, because most of the performed rituals are related with the provision of rain.



Figure 4. Lyaski Peak dominate the landscape of South Pirin Mountain (Photo by Dimitriya Spasova).



Figure 5. Lyaski Peak. Elderly woman from the village of Lyaski honors St. Christopher during the holiday on May 22 (Photo by Dimitriya Spasova).

In our ethnographic information we repeatedly observed the obligation to make sacrifice every year and the fear of negative consequences if the ritual is not performed. In the second half of the 19th century elderly shepherd remembered:

One year we didn't climb to the peak and we didn't make a sacrifice. But during that year everything was destroyed by hailstorms. It didn't just happen, but a samovila (local mythological creature) came from the peak and uprooted every important old tree (Ivanov, 1896).

More than a century later in 2018, during our field research, the answers regarding the sacrifice in the sacred space of Lyaski Peak was still the same:

Dimitriya Spasova: *Why don't you make your kurban (sacrificial soup) somewhere near the village to make it easier for the local people?*

Dimitar Kyupchev⁷: *This is impossible! It must be prepared there! Even if it rains heavily, you go there! You can't do it down in the village! The priest doesn't allow it (because) we do it for rain.*

The second obligation, which is no longer fulfilled, was to throw proshpora into the cave. From the oldest published information we know that in the 19th century there was a custom to throw proshpora into the cave early in the morning, before the sunrise. According to the explanation this was done to protect the summer agriculture from hail (Ivanov 1896).

Another prohibition related to bad weather and dangerous storms is the ban to take sacrificial meal down the peak:

Nothing should be taken down the peak. The knuckle, the skin – everything goes into the hole...⁸ Or... They say it is wrong to take kurban down in the village. If some of it left, we must pour it into the hole⁹ (into the cave).

The following story testifies this requirement:

Many years ago, we prepared the hearth to make kurban. Suddenly it began to rain. The rain was pouring down, so we had to light the fire again, we had to start all over again. Because of the weather there were very few people, maybe 50 at most. We usually use a 100 liter pot, which equates to 250 servings of food... We poured everything into the hole! Everything!

⁷ Informant Dimitar Kyupchev, born in 1949, in the village of Staro Lyaski, lives in the village of Lyaski, education elementary school. Occupation – farming

⁸ Informant Nadka Serdareva, born in 1933, in the village of Staro Lyaski, lives in the village of Lyaski, education elementary school. Occupation – farming

⁹ Informant Stoyanka Stoykova, born in 1928 in the village of Staro Lyaski, lives in the village of Lyaski, education elementary school. Occupation – farming

Another story tells:

There were hunters in the mountains. And they caught on bass – who can climb there (on the peak) and bring down a sacrificial meal. The bass was caught so they came, our people gave kurban and they took it down. They did what they wanted to do. But then suddenly the weather got worse, strong wind began to blow and it started to rain. People were already eating when this natural disaster happened... And then people said: “There is something wrong?!” And then they understood that they had given from the sacrificial meal! How angry the Holy Spirit was! And none of this sacrifice carries anywhere! All left must be poured into the hole!¹⁰

The last obligation is to dance ritual horo with snake steps, around the entrance to the cave before leaving the peak. The dance is accompanied by a special song, related to the idea of providing a rainy summer:

*Oh, dear Holy Spirit,
when you explode and crack,
the whole forest shakes,
and a small child in mother's arms,
and a red lamb under a sheep,
and a ferocious serpent on the stone!
Oh, listen to our prayer!
Send peaceful rain on the fields,
protect the gardens and vineyards from hailstorms and wind!
So we will bring a sacrifice again next year! (Ivanov, 1896)*

It is believed that as soon as the people leave the peak, it will rain:

¹⁰ Informant Vyara Chongova, born in 1948, lives in the village of Lyaski, education high school. Occupation – farming

*In the evening we often return in the village with rain! ... When the Holy Spirit thunders and flee from the peak, we know the rain is coming!*¹¹

The rain is a guarantee that the Holy Spirit is satisfied and will protect from hailstorms and disasters, and will provide fertility in the field (Markov 2009, pp. 103-109).

Rain rituals are concentrated mainly during the holiday, but could also be performed after it. During a prolonged drought, elderly women, necessarily widows, climb on the Lyaski peak, bringing with them ritual bread. They put the bread near the cave of the Holy Spirit and pray for rain. Then they lie down to sleep (probably imitating sleep) and return to the village. It is believed that after this ritual it will rain.

Palatski Peak, near the Village of Palat

The veneration of the Lord's Ascension on Palatski Vrah (581 m) – the highest peak near the village of Palat – is also connected with the provision of rain. The same situation we can observe in the neighbor Krastilski Peak (795 m) (Markov, 2015, p. 9). Viewed from the Struma valley Krastilski and Palatski peaks dominate the landscape of Ograzhden mountain with their specific pyramidal shape. The peaks for its part offer panoramic views to Pirin, Belasitsa and Ograzhden Mountains and Struma valley (Fig. 6).

According to informants, until the middle of the 20th century, the Lord's Ascension day was the most important Christian holiday in the village of Palat. After a certain decline, because of the political situation in Bulgaria, the celebration is resumed and a ceramic chapel and a huge metal cross are placed on the very top of Palatski Peak. In the wide meadows below the highest part of the peak are placed wooden benches and tables, as the modern veneration of the holiday is mainly associated with the organization of a common sacrifice.

¹¹ Informant Vyara Chongova, born in 1940 in the village of Staro Lyaski, lives in the village of Lyaski, education elementary school. Occupation – farming

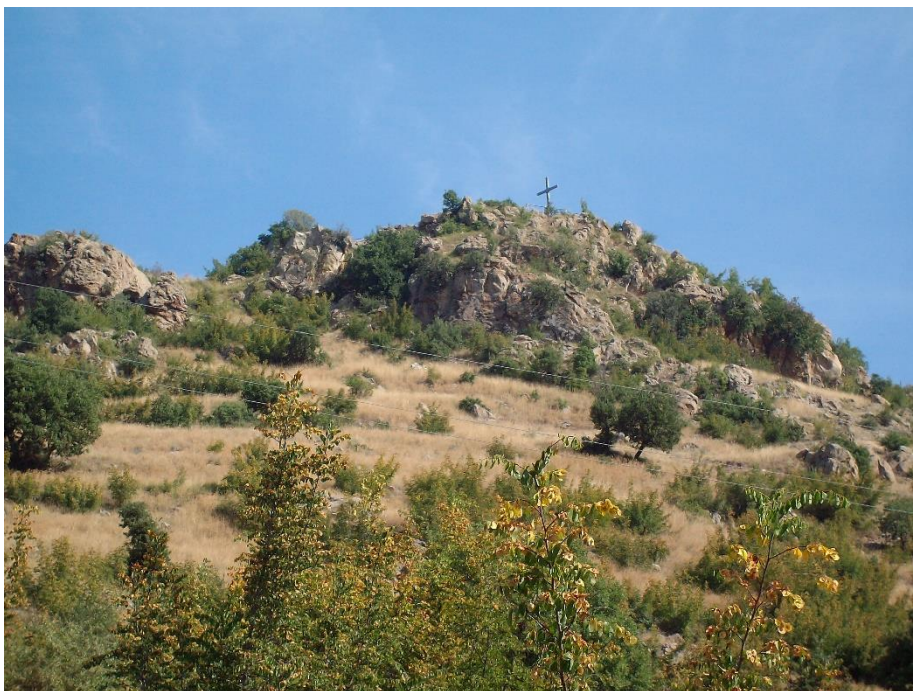


Figure 6. Palatski Peak (Ograzhden Mountain), viewed from the south (Photo by Dimitriya Spasova).

Preparations for the Lord's Ascension in the recent past began a day earlier when a sacrifice is slaughtered in every house on the eve of the holiday. The sacrificial animal is not typical for the Christian rites in this region, because according to local tradition, a goat is slaughtered instead of lamb. The meat is baked at night and the next day at noon, along with pies, breads and other foods, it is brought to the Palatski Peak as an individual family sacrifice to St. Spas. Informants motivate the choice of the animal by the local belief that St. Spas is mischievous as well as the goat is mischievous. The tables were located just before the ridge and were on an ancestral basis, and each genus must take its specific place.

Before sitting at the table, all the villagers climb to the top to light candles. Previously candles were lit on a rocky spot next to the modern chapel, and were attached directly to the stones. In 1960s a local priest placed a metal cross on one of the larger stone blocks to mark the site with the main Christian symbol.

The common meal is accompanied by dances and fun. The informants believe that st. Spas will send them with rain as soon as they leave the holy place:

We all eat, drink, get up and leave... And it immediately starts to rain. We usually return in the village wet.

Dimitriya Spasova: *Is it rain every year on Savior's Day?*

Sofiya Pashova: *Yes! For example there was a little rain this year (2013), but it was still good!*¹²

Conclusion

The continuous living on certain territory accumulate a lot of meteorological observation and knowledge, explained with irrational beliefs about serpents or saints connected with hails. Places with the highest semantic meaning are these where local people notice repetitions of meteorological phenomena during the years. That's why we observe a lot of rites and beliefs, associated with the highest point of the landscape. On the highest peak local people worship the hail saint (or the dragon in pre-Christian times), whose holiday is considered to be the most important holiday of the local calendar.

We could also assume that all residents of mountainous and semi-mountainous villages know well where does or doesn't the rain come from. Unfortunately in the presented territory, the only registered example is Lyaski Peak and the belief that the rain in the Gotse Delchev's field comes from that direction. It should also be noted that the venerated hail saints are also patrons of fertility. Their holidays in the period May-June are necessarily accompanied by a sacrifice and a common meal, which is symbolically attended by the saint. The main goal is to honor the patron saint and to ensure fertility during the summer and autumn seasons.

¹² Informant Sofiya Pashova, born in 1932 in the village of Palat, lives in the village of Drakata, education elementary school. Occupation – farming

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