

A Poetic Ritual Invoking Rain and Well-Being: Richard Berengarten's In a Time of Drought¹

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Notes on the Rainmaking Custom in Macedonia

Mythological poems and chants occupy a prominent place among recorded folk songs and memorized customs and rituals. Without them, folk culture would be unthinkable, whether in the Balkans or elsewhere. Collective memory, as the core of folk culture, has been preserved, protected, and passed down for millennia through the ritual performances of living folk traditions.

By combining spectacle with language, folk culture is syncretic. It involves a specific semiological amalgam of poetic and ritual texts, music, costume, and scenery. From these various elements, a multifaceted 'set' is created that is at once recitative, traditional, and localized, and often contains archaic features.² Many of these ritualized-cum-literary performances have been modified in Christian times and have taken on numerous Christian elements, symbols, meanings, and functions. It is well known that many motifs of myth, ritual, and worship have been re-patterned and remoulded from much more ancient and archaic religious traditions, and assimilated and adapted into Christianity.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Macedonia's rich, syncretic, mimetic, and ritualized folk culture went through a collapse, as did those of most neighbouring communities. Rural areas were ravaged, as were the ritual and magical chronotopes of village folk culture. No effective ways were quickly available to replace the rural settings that had been home to these ritual performances or to transfer them elsewhere, so it became all the harder to keep up any folk customs, myths, or rituals at all. And because so few recordings had been made—whether sound, photographic, video, or digital—a significantly large proportion of authentic Macedonian folk traditions never achieved proper registration let alone collection and preservation in archives. The overall result has been that many customs have gradually faded from popular collective memory.³

Information about these kinds of cultural amnesia and incursions into folk memory, including maintenance of the rainmaking rituals—in both their archaic and Christianized forms—peaked at the end of the twentieth century. This was partly due to marked shifts of direction in culture, research, and education, which have continued into the first years of the twenty-first century.⁴ For example, in recent years, thanks to an increased interest in ancient forms of culture, ritual, art, and communication, especially vis-à-vis folk carnivals, some customs have been rescued from oblivion and preserved for future generations. Examples include the so-called ‘Old New Year’ carnival at Vevčani near Lake Ohrid,⁵ the popular Lent carnival on ‘Forgiveness Day’ (*Pročka*) at Strumica, and the *Koledge* (Christmas Eve) customs. As for the rain-making rituals and songs, for many years these have been performed in various surrogate and substitutive ways, after being taken on (and in most cases, taken over) by the Roma population, mainly for practical reasons to do with social circumstances (poverty). These rituals have not been strictly related to any particular festival or date in the calendar, but have been performed sporadically in times of drought. The dry season usually lasts from spring through the summer, from the start of March to August: i.e. from soon after St. Tryphon’s Day, through St. George’s Day and Easter Day (*Veligden*), to St. Peter’s Day (*Petrovden*) and St. Elias’ Day (*Ilinden*).⁶

Macedonian ritual folk culture most probably descends from polytheistic practices long before the arrival of Christianity; and it seems highly likely that the recent reawakening of previously repressed collective emotions and memories of this ancient culture has been motivated by a recognized need to consolidate a Macedonian identity: that is, by reinterpreting aspects of culture and ethnicity that are endemic to Macedonia, to establish and normalize a culture that people can identify with. Another evident factor has been a kind of semi-conscious collective nostalgia, a hearkening back to the ‘good old customs and times,’ which—precisely by releasing locked up memories—corresponds more or less exactly to this repressed collective consciousness. Additionally, there has been a revival of the village as an entity, and this has involved a return to and rebuilding of rural settings. This process has not only been physical and practical but, through the restoration of rituals and customs, has also involved a kind of spiritual and mental renewal. Thus, the (re)establishment and (re)confirmation of a Macedonian identity has occurred simultaneously in terms of three processes: first, specifically Slavic cultural and linguistic motifs and patterns; second, Christian motifs and patterns; embodied in the notion of Macedonia as a country of the Bible; and, third, ancient, pagan and archaic cultural motifs and patterns that long antedate Christianity. What is more, precisely this

rediscovered awareness of the *multiplicity* of a historical culture that is unique to Macedonia has engendered a re-sensitization of the Macedonians to themselves. And all of this has meant, in turn, that even within all the turmoil and crisis of identity of recent times, some positive processes of re-interpretation of the Macedonian language have also occurred.

Macedonian Identity and that of Neighbouring Balkan Peoples

Every Balkan culture has its own rain-making ritual, based in sympathetic magic and mimesis. Among both Slavic and non-Slavic Balkan cultures, these customs have numerous shared and common elements, as well as various differentiated properties and features. Rainmaking rites go back to the earliest times, especially in the warmer and (and at times) drier areas where Slavic populations lived—such as Macedonia. In addition to its many similarities to other comparable rituals in the Balkans, the Macedonian rain-customs also include a sacrificial element. One peculiar practice, for example, involved hanging a frog from a tree and torturing it, and then praying to God to have mercy on it by sending rain. Some unusual practices have involved a snake, which also plays a part in other customs, for example weddings ('see 'Sitel').

The Balkan rainmaking customs themselves go by different names. They are usually referred to as the *Dodola* or *Peperuga* (*Peperuda*) rituals, after the name of the goddess of rain, wife or consort of the Slavic sky-god Perun. According to some researchers, among both the Slavic peoples (Bosnians, Bulgarians, Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Serbs) and non-Slavic peoples alike (Albanians, Greeks, Hungarians, Romanians, Vlachs, or Aromanians, and others), these pagan rites of worship are thought to be of Thracian origin, as are the names of these *Dodola-type* rites (including their many variants, such as *Dudula*, *Dudulica*, *Dodolă*, *Tuntule*, *Dudule*, *Didule*, *Gugule*, *Djudjule*). According to others, these rain-rituals derive specifically from Slavic languages, and the names *Peperuda*, *Peperuga*, *Peperuna*, and *Perperuna* are cognate with that of the storm-god Perun. *Peperuda* also means 'butterfly.' Other than among Slavic peoples, only the Vlachs and Romanians use the name *Pirpirună*. Among the Dalmatians and Montenegrins, the names *Prpac*, *Prporuše*, *Barbaruše*, *Čarojnica*, and *Čarobnica* are found.⁷ These names reflect differences among the central figures and their variant functions in the rites.

The two main variants known to the Macedonians are those of the *Dodola* type (*Dudula*, *Oj-dole* or *Ejdoli*, in the Veles district), and those of the *Peperuda* type. The *Dodola* type is more common, as is evident from the relative frequency of the names of the customs

themselves, the girl who is dressed by an older woman or women in the branches of willow, maple, oak (i.e. of a sacred tree), or in sprigs of barley or lilac. All the rainmaking songs contain a chorus or refrain, either of the type “Oy-dodo, oy-dodo-le” or, in the Christianized versions, “Oh God,” “Dear God.” This refrain is probably the opaque residuum of some archaic substratum, some archetypal and mythical image of the ritual, not just a formalized rhythmical patterning-procedure that is devoid of meaning.⁸

The rain ritual contains many aspects and elements: *speech*, including songs, prayers, and invocations; *dancing*, when calling at houses in the village; *singing*, both solo and chorus, unaccompanied by instruments; and *performance*, i.e. actions that are at once dramatic, repetitive, mimetic, and magical. The lead performer is usually a young girl, a virgin who has been stripped naked and ‘dressed’ in the branches of a sacred tree. Features endemic to the Macedonian custom include: branches and leaves of willow and elder; lilac and various herbs; and conducting the ritual on the fourth day of the week, which in some languages bears the name *Old-Slav-Day Perenden*, i.e. ‘Perun’s Day’, the Slavic equivalent of ‘Thor’s Day’ (*Thursday*) or ‘Jove’s Day’ (*giovedì, jeudi*). According to other beliefs, *Perun, Perin, or Pirin* was the supreme deity of the Thracians.

The various performative elements included in the rituals involve a girl-celebrant, walking from house to house and singing for the householders to come out, before spraying the house and herself being sprayed with water; and also sacrificing an animal to invoke ‘the higher powers.’ The ritual can also integrate visual or artistic elements and co-opt various other carnival customs, as well as distinctly Christian overlays from later periods, beneath which imprinted traces of pagan beliefs and customs are still evident. For example, in some villages in the district of Veles, in order to invoke a good harvest in any particular year, women traditionally pray for rain to “*give birth*.” In imagery of this kind, which occurs in various folk-rituals, the fertility of the land is symbolically identified with both the perpetuity of the human community and their own personal desire to find a husband and have children.

It seems that both rainmaking rituals and women’s songs are among the oldest folk customs. Motifs from both have also been transferred and assimilated into many other spring and summer rituals involving the natural cycle, blessings for the year—and therefore rain too, without which nature would not produce rich and fertile harvests. These seasonal festivals include St. George’s Day, St. Lazarus’s Day, Easter, Ascension Day (*Spasovden*), St. Peter’s Day (*Petrovden*), and St. Elias’ Day (*Ilinden*).⁹ The folk celebrations of early spring are mainly associated with St. George’s Day and the symbolic ‘virgin.’ In their invocations of fertility and

abundance, these evidently contain within them the core of all the other spring and summer magical rituals. Here I draw attention only to some that are connected with rainmaking, such as washing in the morning dew; walking down to the river-bank and dipping in the stream; and singing archaic chants to invoke the rainbow.¹⁰ What is more, just as performance of the rain-ritual predicts rain that will ensure fertility, so it is believed that failure to perform the ritual could cause a dry and barren year. Thus the ritual's dual nature is inscribed in collective memory: the *explicit* (i.e. performance) is counterposed against the *implicit* (i.e. non-performance, and therefore the forgetting, belittling, or denigration of the ritual). And hence the fear that long-standing ignorance of centuries-old traditions may be fatal for survival. Perhaps this kind of awareness has even contributed to the revival of these rich Macedonian ritual traditions, both pagan and Christian. Their revival, I believe, would be even stronger if it were supported by modern cultural institutions and creative industries, and incorporated into current life through outlets such as the new online media.

I well remember the celebrations and rituals associated with the St. Peter's Day holiday (*Petrovden*) among members of the *Mijački* clan in the village of Papradište, my father's birthplace.¹¹ I would watch the girls in their ornate local costumes sitting on swings hung on tree-boughs, rocking as high as possible, and people singing songs and dancing. Strictly speaking, these were not rituals in the literal sense. Rather, they contained elements of the rainmaking customs, which had been gathered up into a kind of *supra-ritual* medley of symbols and meanings, all associated with springtime. Today, it is much clearer to me that, as traces of ancient patterns or archetypes, archaic ritual symbols such as these tend to shift or drift from one ritual to another, in such a way that their original and perhaps more universal meaning—the natural instinct to survive and the human longing to be connected with the gods—tend to be hidden beneath the surface.¹² As children, even in city neighbourhoods, in times of drought we also used to draw or write crosses to guard against rain. As time has gone by, these customs have been abandoned or suppressed because of decreasing cultural and social interest in folk culture. But, as is often the case with cultural amnesia, there are times when cultural interest in ancient customs and rituals revives, and when interrupted memory is restored and finds its way back into life and art.

Richard Berengarten's *In a Time of Drought in the Macedonian Context*

This kind of breakthrough is sometimes effected by a person who does not originate from our region but who is in some way personally related or attached to it. And this has been the case with the poet Richard Berengarten (*aka* Richard Burns). His particular interest in the Balkan rain-customs was first inspired by his daughter, Arijana, whose mother is a Serb. His book, *In a Time of Drought*, contains seven cantos, each of which contains seven short lyrics. So this ensemble is structured as a single long poem which coheres thematically, stylistically, and semiotically. The archaic *topos* of the rain-making ritual in this book opens out into the theme of *fertility* in a universal sense—to include peace, prosperity, virtue, and the fostering of art and humane values.

In Berengarten's long poem, glossary, and interpretations, a two-way relationship is established. While on the one hand his book demonstrates his curiosity about the *Dodola* customs and admiration for them, on the other hand, he presents his 'long-range' reflections on the origins of customs which many other commentators have categorised and relegated as merely 'exotic' or 'primitive.' However, precisely this 'long-range' perspective has in itself fostered a spirit of research in him, which he has combined with the philosophical urge to interpret the primordial character of the *Dodola* customs and rituals, and to recapture their metaphorical and parabolic meanings—always, of course, through the prism of poetry. And here, I should also like to draw attention to the presence of an entirely new element in Berengarten's poetry, which is itself not only part-ritual but also specifically modern: namely, a consciously deliberated and articulated plea to stop repeating wars and atrocities. Delivered in a prayer-like, incantatory manner, *In a Time of Drought*, therefore, constitutes a call to transform the world into a more humane dwelling place, and to live in peace and plenty, freed from the 'spectres' of the past. What is more, the effect of this dimension is also to re-pattern the individual cantos of Berengarten's poem into forms of ritual *in themselves*: they transform into incantations that perform the magical function of invoking the Good.

For these reasons, *In a Time of Drought* is illustrative and paradigmatic both of his own *Balkan Trilogy* and of the images of the Balkans among 'innumerable' non-Balkan, European, and Mediterranean people. The images Berengarten presents curiously combine sensuousness, immediacy, and a lived physicality with a distant, reflective view. This combination in itself embeds an inner 'story' of Balkan cultures.

In these ways, in this book, two of Richard Berengarten's obsessive concerns intersect: on the one hand, the ritual culture of the Balkans; and, on the other, the Balkan wars as one of many incarnations of Evil. Against the backdrop of these themes, the strong presence of the

myth of Peace and Virtue is accompanied by an inherent belief not only that poetic language itself embeds elements that are both ‘ritual’ and ‘magical,’ especially with respect to sound, but also that the ensemble of these is inseparable from the ritual invocation of the Good. And this Good includes *rain*, as the embodiment that combines the water-element and the sacred connection between the celestial and chthonic worlds. For without water, there would be no fertility, no purification of ghostly memories or impulses, no forgiveness, no reconciliation, no purification or baptism, no revival or resurrection, and no peace. Through its ambitious structure and well-thought-out diction, the poetic identification of rain with the Good in the poem renews our memory of the magical power and effectiveness of the Word (*Logos*), whenever it is met by a clear and focused will (mind, desire) to motivate the bright side of the human world: that is, to awaken the Good and to put Evil to sleep eventually. And this is another way in which, rather than delivering a merely ‘typical’ or ‘usual’ poetic experience, this work by Berengarten constitutes, rather, a *poetic ritual*, which—by invoking the god of beneficent rain, of heavenly fructification, and earthly fertility—symbolically restores well-being and the parabolic figure of humanity.

The Macedonian reader now also has a rare opportunity to read a book of poetry that also contains a postscript, notes, and references. These include explanations, interpretations, a glossary of words and names, and other information about an archaic ritual. These extra features make the book relevant not only to poetic contexts but also to ethnological, cultural, historical, and scientific research.

All of this emphasizes the importance of the individual artistic and human contribution that Richard Berengarten has made as a poet to rethinking both Slavic and non-Slavic cultures in the Balkans. Berengarten, who is of Jewish descent, lives and works in the UK and writes in English. He has spent a part of his life in Belgrade and former Yugoslavia. He describes himself as a European poet and he is a friend of Macedonian literature and culture. These are among the various reasons why the appearance of *In a Time of Drought* in Macedonian translation comes as an expected and logical development and why we have published this book in Skopje in the PEN International *Diversity* series.

It has also been relatively difficult to ‘back-translate’ this work into Macedonian, all the more so because, paradoxically, it has effectively recast into English a densely layered discourse of magical rituals from the distant past, which had been written and enigmatically encrypted in Slavic languages, including Macedonian, as an inevitable and essential matrix of Slavic languages. In some respects, therefore, the translation into Macedonian may be said to

have involved a complex process of ‘restoration’ or ‘restitution.’ The meticulous translator/restorer, Lidija Nikolova, editorial assistant at *Diversity* and a gifted poet herself, has said: “I have tried to translate the ‘lyric code’ of *In a Time of Drought*, and to capture its poetic images as well as the sounds and the rhythms of the poem’s couplets. If a reader experiences something of this lyrical ‘dance’ of words, of the sounds and rhythms of the poem’s invocations of rain and peace, then I have succeeded in what I set out to do.”

I would like to add here that it has been particularly difficult to obtain photographic records of the Macedonian rainmaking customs. While textual records have been easy to find, we have no available complete, systematized archive of photographs of the *Dodola* customs and rituals. Even so, overall, the process of translating and preparing the Macedonian edition of *In a Time of Drought* has been encouraging, not only in terms of presenting the work of Richard Berengarten to Macedonian readers, but also in restoring a clearer awareness of the importance of folk culture of Macedonian people, in Slavic, Balkan, and wider European contexts. I therefore conclude this ‘hermeneutic’ (interpretative) introduction to Richard Berengarten’s *In a Time of Drought* by calling on our Macedonian authorities to do their utmost to support the research, protection, and interpretation of our Macedonian folk customs, rituals, traditions, and women’s songs—indeed, the whole corpus of ‘folk culture’—without which the survival of our ancient, multi-layered, and eloquent Macedonian identity is unthinkable.

translated by Lidija Nikolova et al.

¹ *Editors’ note.* This essay is a slightly modified and translated version of Katica Kulavkova’s ‘Introduction’ to *Во време на суша* [‘Vo vreme na suša’], the Macedonian edition of *In a Time of Drought*, translated into Macedonian by Lidija Nikolova (Berengarten, 2013a). This last revised edition of Richard Berengarten’s *In a Time of Drought* was published in English in the UK in 2011 (Berengarten, 2011), designated as the second part of his Balkan Trilogy. The book had two previous editions in English (Berengarten, 2008; Burns, 2006, 1st ed. in English) and one in Serbian translation (Bernz, 2004), which was awarded the international Morava Charter Poetry Prize in 2005. See also Berengarten, ‘За Додола I’ [Za Dodola’] (2013b).

² In Macedonia, the pagan *Dodola*-type customs of praying for rain have been hybridized with Christian customs: they have merged, for example, with the customs called *Pokrsti* and *Skrsti*, which involve the making of crosses and drawing crosses on the ground, outside the church. These are practices that traditionally belong to Ash Wednesday and St. Lazarus' Day, the Saturday before Palm Sunday. In some parts of the country, people still maintain pagan versions of these customs, while in others they follow Christianized versions. While the former are linked to the dates of Christian holidays and often coincide with them, they have retained their pagan *Dodola*-type forms (See „Македонска митологија и историја“ [‘Macedonian Mythology and History’] and Crvenovska-Risteska).

³ This footnote amplifies information in the REFERENCES, which provide an introductory checklist for specifically Macedonian contexts and examples of the far wider domain of Slavonic folk rituals and customs.

The earliest records of Macedonian spring and summer customs and rituals of the *Dodola* type were made by Dimitar Miladinov (1810–1862) and his brother Konstantin (1830–1862), which they published in their collection of folk-songs and described as Bulgarian (1861). At that time, Macedonia, which was then called ‘Western Bulgaria’, provided a very large number of these songs. Another great collector and authority was Marko Cepenkov (1829–1920): see especially his ten-volume work (1980, ed. Kiril Penušliski). The Croatian scholar Stefan Verković (1821–1893) published his collection in 1860. In recent times, Macedonian folklorists and ethnologists who have shown an interest in interpreting the *Dodola* rituals include Tanas Vražinovski, Blaže Ristovski, and Marko Kitevski at the Institute of Folklore and the Department of Ethnology at Skopje. See also Stojkovska (108) and Vražinovski (1983 and 2000:150).

⁴ “We bear crosses, we pray to God, / we bear crosses, God come, please come [...] / so grain and wine will be born / so grain and wine will be born, come, come!”

⁵ The first day of the new year in the ‘old’ Julian calendar (14th January). The day is called ‘Vasilica’ (‘Queen’s Day’).

⁶ *Translator’s note*: St. Tryphon’s Day, the equivalent of Valentine’s Day (14th February) in the West, falls on 1st February in the Orthodox (Gregorian) calendar. St. George’s Day (*Gjurgjovden*), which officially marks the beginning of Spring, is on 6th May (Gregorian), corresponding to 23rd April (Julian). St. Peter’s Day (*Petrovden*) is on 23rd June (Gregorian) and 29th June (Julian). St. Elias’ Day (*Ilinden*) is on 2nd August (Gregorian) and 20th July (Julian). *Elias* or *Ilias* is *Elijah*. His feast-day celebrates his ascension to heaven.

⁷ *Translator’s note*: These last two are cognate with *čarob* ‘magical’: hence *čarobnica* means ‘female magician’.

⁸ Consider a refrain like “*Oj dodole mili dože/ Aj zavrni, aj zagrmi/ Aj zarosi sitna rosa/ Da se rodi vinožito [...]*” A free translation would be roughly as follows: “Oh *Dodola*, dear God/ Let it rain, let it thunder/ Let drops of dew fall / So that the rainbow can be born [...].” Refrains such as these are encountered especially in the south-western part of Macedonia. In these chants, various subliminal factors, including etymology, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and ritual, may well embed multiple and largely complementary meanings and associations. For example, repetitions blend with images of *swinging* and the *swing*, which in turn allude to sexuality, to *rocking* and the *cradle*, and perhaps also to the errant flight of a butterfly (*peperuda*), which is also one of the names of the rain maiden.

⁹ Ascension Day (*Spasovden*) occurs forty days after Easter. It takes place on a Thursday, the fourth day of the week, which also possibly associates it with Perun. For the dates of these and other festivals listed here, see note 5 above.

¹⁰ Some examples of various spring customs and rituals among the Macedonians would include: weighing people on old rustic scales (*kantar*); making large shallow earthen vessels (*crepna*) on Ash Wednesday; women washing with herb-infused water by the river; and men washing with dew in the fields.

¹¹ Just as in Scotland, Macedonian society is traditionally divided into distinct clans or phratries, each with its own well-conserved customs and traditions, including costumes, music, and styles of architecture. The *Mijaci* are native to the south-western and central parts of the country.

¹² In the village of Teovo in the district of Veles, a rainmaking ritual used to be performed in dry periods. The celebrants, called *oy-dodlkite*, would sing a ‘Dodola’ song involving prayers and pleas to God to send down rain.