

CLASSICS IN EAST EUROPEAN ETHNOGRAPHY SERIES: "MAGICAL SITTING" BY VESELIN CAJKANOVIC

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Translator's Introduction

If the protean figure of self educated language reformer Vuk Karadzic accomplished the larger part of collecting materials on Serbian mythology, religion and folklore, Veselin Cajkanovic was the one who brought the latest philological, historical, ethnological and comparative methodologies of inter war Europe to bear on his life project of reconstructing from that vast material the pre Christian, pagan Serbian mythology and religion. Born in 1881 in Belgrade, he graduated in classical philology from the Great School (precursor to Belgrade University), and continued his studies in Leipzig and Munich where he obtained his Doctorate in 1908.

Trained in classical studies, but extremely well versed in European ancient and Mediaeval history, literature, religion and mythology, as well as archeology, anthropology and comparative religion of his time, he usually proceeded by taking a popular custom, a proverb or a superstition and then taking the reader on a breathtaking comparative tour that would end with reconstructing its religious and mythological meaning. An opaque piece of curious behavior, like making the guest sit in our house if only for a moment, would thus become meaningful as a survival of what used to be a magical act fully incorporated into a comprehensive magico religious world view. Cajkanovic's main ambition was to reconstruct such a world view, the pre Christian pagan Serbian religion and mythology as it was formed before Slavs came to the Balkans in the 7th century, and during the first centuries of their conversion to Christianity.

Cajkanovic did most of his work between the wars in Belgrade where he was a professor at the University and a member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. He died in 1946, and did not leave a line of successors, or a "school" of comparative religion, as he might have done, being in many respects a figure comparable to what Mircea Eliade was in

Romania. The communist regime after the war did not look kindly to this type of scholarship, and even to this day, most of his work is still in manuscript form waiting to be published. One major collection of his essays was published in 1973 by Srpska knjizevna zadruga in Belgrade. (Cajkanovic, Veselin. 1973. Mit i religija u Srba: izabrane studije, edited by V.Djuric. Beograd: Srpska knjizevna zadruga).

Cajkanovic's work is a very rich source for students of South Slavic folklore and oral literature, students of pre Christian Slavic mythology and religion, as well as students of comparative Indo European mythology.

In addition to that, as both an original thinker and a product of the European science of his time, he is an interesting subject for the student of intellectual history and historian of ideas.

Describing sinners in Tartarus, Virgil utters the famous words on Theseus:
sedet auternumque sedebit infelix Theseus*

Virgil is here invoking an old myth. Theseus and Pirithous had gone to the underworld to abduct Persephone for Pirithous. But they were not successful in their exploit and they were punished for their impudence. According to Epitomy 1, 24 of Apolodorus, "Theseus and Pirithous came to the kingdom of Hades, but were deceived there: that is, Hades invited them to sit on Leta's chair, and wait for guests' gifts there; but when they sat, they stuck to the chair and were bound to it with ropes of snakes". Then both had to stay in Hades, according to some myths, forever, while according to others, Hercules freed Theseus (or both) and returned him to the upper world, when he visited Hades (1).

A few other fragments referring to this myth have been preserved. The most ancient among them is the one from Panyasis, which says that "Theseus and Pirithous do not look like they are bound to their

chairs, but rather than chained, their bodies are fused to the rock". A fragment from Scholias to Apollonios Rhodos is short and precise: "Theseus and Pirithous descended at Tenar to the underworld, they sat there on some rock, and then they could not get up". And all other data, both literary and archeological, point to the same that Theseus and Pirithous descended to the underworld, that they sat down there, and that afterwards they couldn't get up nor leave the underworld. There are differences in detail though, so that, according to a group of monuments, Theseus and Pirithous sat on a rock; and according to another tradition, they sat on a chair. That difference does not matter very much. It is more important, however, that, according to some, Theseus and Pirithous were bound to the rock or to the chair.

From the whole tradition, it is clear that Theseus and Pirithous had to remain in the underworld because they were deceived into sitting. The question now is what is so fatal in sitting. Carl Robert thinks that this is a motif from folk tales, and refers to folk tale 87, collected by Grimm brothers. Although he says no more, it is clear what he alluded to. Many peoples have tales about "deceived Death". These tales tell how somebody (usually some blacksmith) received a gift from God whereby whoever sits on a particular chair, or some other object, has to stay glued to it; and then how he somehow enticed Death, when it came to take him, to sit on that magical place: Death took the bait, sat, and could not get up any more. Folk tales with this motif have been found with almost all European peoples. There is a Serbian tale about Death that became glued to a pear tree, as well as a tale of "The Blacksmith and the Lame Daba". Such a magic chair figured in the Ancient Greek myths, as well, for instance, the chair Hephestus made for Hera. Theseus and Pirithous according to the explanation implied in Carl Robert could not get up because they sat on such a magical chair.

This explanation of Theseus's and Pirithous's case seems, at first glance, very convincing, but it has certain weak points. First of all, not one source tells anything about the magical power of the chair or the rock, while the folk tales of the "deceived Death" type never fail to mention it. If no source talks about it, it is probable that they didn't know about it. Secondly, we see that majority of sources say (or surmise) that Theseus and Pirithous were bound:

That fact proves even better that these sources really couldn't have known the motif of the magical powers of the chair, for otherwise they wouldn't have mentioned binding that would have been unnecessary in that case. Let us also add that it is the oldest sources that mention binding, and that Roman authors, as well, knew about it, and even the Etruscians. All that should go on to demonstrate that the folk tale motif of the "magic chair" was not sufficient to explain why sitting in the underworld should be fatal for Theseus and Pirithous.

The explanation should be sought elsewhere in the religious notions of the primitive man. I will attempt to explain that here through a few very ancient beliefs of our people. I will focus on some cases where sitting is desired, and on one case where sitting, or reclining, is forbidden. When polazajnik (first visitor on Christmas day) comes into the house, he should sit there. That sitting is an important act, and is performed with special ceremonies. "When polazajnik has performed spells, they set a pillow for him in the middle of the house and he sits and crosses his legs. The hostess wraps an apron (povesma) around him and so attired he sits for a little while, so that the hens would sit on eggs better. While he is sitting thus, the hostess serves him with coffee and brandy. When the polozajnik is about to leave, they present him with the apron he was wearing, and in addition they give him socks or gloves, or two three grosh of money" (2). "Polazajnik has to sit, and then they treat him with some coffee and brandy". "When polazac enters the house, it is not good if he doesn't sit". Moreover, in order to force the polazajnik to sit, or in order for sitting to be more secure and complete, sometimes they snatch the chair under him so that he has to fall to the floor. It is evident that offering the polazajnik to sit is not a matter of good manners here, but a religious observance.

It is not hard to establish what the aim of this observance is. Asking the polazajnik to sit, offering a chair or a pillow, belongs to a known sequence of magical acts the aim of which is to bind the guest, really, or symbolically to the house. We are, of course, particularly eager to bind a polazajnik to our house because he is a divine guest and fertility of humans, livestock and fields depends on him; but it is in our interest to insure for ourselves the good will of any guest, for any guest might be a concealed

divinity. It is not hard to guess the way a guest is bound, and what are the magic acts performed by the host or members of the household: these include taking off of his shoes, washing his feet, a meal. It is clear that offering the guest to sit belongs to the same category, and that it has the same aim sitting is an act which will bind the guest to the house in which he was sitting. That sitting, that is to say, offering the guest to sit, belongs to the appropriate ceremony at welcoming the guest, could be clearly seen in the *Odyssey*, which is a classical source for understanding the most ancient Indo European hospitality.

In that connection, it is also easy to understand the well known rule that anybody who visits us has to sit if only for a moment ("so that the wedding guests could sit": as our people explain that custom). "... whoever comes to the house, has to sit, for if he does not sit, neither will the hens sit on eggs". Germans also have a similar observance: "Wenn man jemand besucht, darf man nicht stehen bleiben, sondern muß sich, wenn auch nur auf einen Augenblick, setzen, sonst nimmt man den Leuten die Ruhe mit". The observance is very ancient, and it originated at the time when there was a belief that through sitting, in the same way as through salt and bread, a covenant might be established with the guest that the guest will be bound to our house if he sits in it if only for a moment.

When sitting has the power to bind people one to another according to the analogic magic, it is understood that it will be avoided in all those cases where this bind is not desired. I will give one clear example. In some cases of serious disease our people resort to "opening" of the diseased. The "opening" is performed by the adopted brother (pobratim). The procedure is complicated, and has to be repeated several times at certain intervals. Judging by the place where the diseased person is "opened" (in the house, on the doorstep, by the river, at the unknown person's grave, at seven unknown person's graves all of them characteristic places where the soul of deceased ancestors reside); judging by the procedures performed (chaining, and then freeing the diseased; manipulating the pebble which is "shadowy" from a river, and which is taken there as the third person of the company); judging from the words uttered on the occasion (required formula "to open the slave from the grave", or similar ones), it

could be clearly seen what is the aim of this whole complicated procedure: the diseased is being symbolically introduced to the company of the dead, and then the adopted brother is freeing him from that company. Therefore, during the whole time of performing the magical operation (and that takes a long time because it is performed both at home, together with the diseased, and by the river, without the diseased who stays at home for the period), the diseased resides in the other world. What follows is most important. The "diseased" such is the rule for his behavior "must not eat anything until the opening is finished, and in the same vein, he must not lie down either, until the adopted brother returns from the river" (3). The reason why he must not eat, while in the company of the dead is quite clear: there is a widespread belief that if a living person visits the world of the dead and there partakes of food, he cannot return to the land of the living says Frazer (4) and offers many examples as proofs. When Pluto abducted her and brought her to the underworld, Persephone had to stay there because she was deceived into eating a few persimmon seeds. And why the diseased must not recline during the "opening"? Obviously because by the power of the analogous magic, he would thus remain bound to the other world forever (5).

It is obvious from all the above that sitting, seen from the viewpoint of the history of religion, could be a magical act which, within the framework of analogic magic, will establish a certain relationship, a covenant. This result should be of interest to us because, as far as I know, sitting as a religious phenomenon has not been investigated until now. Theseus and Pirithous had to stay in the underworld because they sat there if for a moment, just as Persephone had to stay in the underworld because she tasted of food there. Sic Parcarum foedere cautim est!

Notes

* There sits and will sit eternally unfortunate Theseus.

1. The Greek poesis ludibunda tells how Hercules forcibly ripped Theseus and Pirithous from the chair on which they had been stuck, so that a part of their

body remained on the chair. It is interesting that such a parodistic detail could be found in a Croatian story.

2. Let us mention, by the way, that this way of welcoming guests and giving of "guest gifts" is typical one and the same with all the Indo European peoples: the guest first has to sit, and only then will he receive the guest gift.

3. A similar prohibition, in a similar situation, is to be found as early as in the Babylonian song of Gilgamesh: Gilgamesh went to the other world to seek immortality; it was promised to him on the condition however that he refrain from laying down for six days and seven nights (that is, while he was in the other world).

4. The belief recorded by D. Marinov (Popular faith and religious folk customs, Sophia 1914, p. 39) is interesting: when a man falls in the water, a devil with green hat comes to him and offers him to drink water if he drinks but a sip, he will drown.

5. I am familiar with one other case when sitting is prohibited. It is a custom in Machva that the bride, when she is about to leave her parents' house for her bridegroom's house has to stand up in the carriage. Here the reason for not sitting must be in that the bride, which is parting from her ancestors, and still has not come under the protection of the ancestors of her new home, is very vulnerable to evil spells in that transition state, and has to take care not to keep those spells by a sympathetic act such as sitting.

Thus it was established by the order of Parcae!

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