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***THEMATIC HORIZONTAL RESEARCH REPORT FOR***  
***THEME 3***

**Rural heritage and collective identity**  
***Building the sustainability of rural communities***

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture plays a leading role in contemporary societies, contributing to the network of relationships between people and the environment, both rural and urban. Modern societies show an increasing interest in preserving their culture and especially their cultural heritage, both movable and non-movable. Protection and promotion of cultural heritage has also been seen necessary in many countries, while its potential has been sometimes exploited as a factor of development. During the past decades many efforts have been made –on international and European level- to increase social awareness of traditional cultural values in order to prepare people to accept them as a contribution to sustainable development. In relation to this, cultural heritage and cultural identity have been the subject of continual study and investigation, in an endeavour to understand the different folk cultures and to build a link between tradition and modern life.

The interest in folk culture in Europe has been connected with great intellectual trends of the close of the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century: Enlightenment, Romanticism and Positivism. A renewed interest in folk culture followed the recent ecological movement and the contemporary quest for return to one's roots. In this context, emphasis has been laid on expressions of cultural identity, especially those connected to rural customs, rituals and festivities. Such cultural elements have been traditionally used to mark the progressing of time, informing about events important to the whole community, usually related to the change of seasons, religious celebrations or important stages in the course of human life (birth, creation of family, death).

In the present research, special emphasis has been given to the symbols and signs that build community cohesion and identity, while effort has been made to study the deepest meaning of cultural manifestations. For each custom or ritual, there is a short description of the main elements, its main symbols and signs of expression, its original character and mission, that in most cases is aimed at securing good fortune and fertility. Whenever possible, additional comments are included explaining the recreational character of a ritual. Consequently, an effort has been made to show the contribution of rituals, rites and customs to the formation of cultural identity within rural communities, and their role in the preservation of cultural heritage.

Rural customs and various events, including rituals, rites and celebrations, keep the collective memory alive and manifest, in the most eloquent way, the strong foundation and the values of a community upon which its social and cultural evolution has been built. Some definitions will help to create a common understanding while perusing this research:

**A custom** indicates the repetitiveness of a certain pattern of behaviour, which is laden with symbolic meaning, undertaken by members of a community in specific situations that bear

special significance for the community; it may also be a regulative instrument of social relationships. A **rite**, being in its classic version a realisation of a myth (which is at the same time a specific scenario of actions and behaviours), regulates the relationships between a social group and its surrounding real environment, including also the supernatural world. A rite is realised publicly and solemnly with all richness of symbols and magic practices closely related to the philosophy of life and the system of beliefs (as R. Tomicki put it “religious – mythological image”). A **ritual**, is either identified with a custom, or used interchangeably with the concept of a ceremony; it bears, in any case, the meaning of a precisely specified mode of action, such as ceremonial gestures or celebratory processes.

The past decades have born witness to various efforts for the protection of cultural heritage, while its potential has been exploited as a factor of economic development. In recent years a large number of traditional buildings have been restored, renovated and reused. Local traditions, rural rituals and values have been brought to the forefront, while arts and crafts and related activities have been seen as means of empowerment of local people. Thus folk culture has emergent as a constituent part of sustainable development.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

Rural customs and other folk rituals and events play a leading role in the culture of the three countries participating in this thematic research and exhibition. The national or regional profile of the areas that became the focus of the research, in terms of history, geography and cultural evolution and characteristics, provide the background to understand the expressions of contemporary folk culture.

**Greece** has one of the longest standing cultural traditions due to historical and geographical reasons. Greece lies at the South end of the Balkan Peninsula in the crossroads between Europe and the East. Great civilisations and cultures have left their impact through the ages all over its geographic extent. Ancient Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Ottomans had moulded the Greek regions and influenced its peoples. Rural areas, especially those of the North (Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace) were the ones who sensed the various changes. These communities have also largely contributed to the cultural evolution. Change and continuity have been definitely the underlying features of these rural areas, especially in the periods from the late 19th century until the Balkan Wars, when neighbouring areas (Greece, Bulgaria, and to a certain degree Serbia and Romania) experienced competing national movements claimed brethren in Ottoman areas of Northern Greece, on historical, linguistic, cultural and religious grounds.

In the period from 1912 to 1925 various migration phenomena, in certain cases forcibly, led to the settlement in the regions of a number of population groups (from Asia Minor, the Turkish Black Sea coastal area, Eastern Thrace etc.) had subsequently consequences to the social and cultural identity of the rural communities, especially those of Northern Greece. The geopolitical changes of 20<sup>th</sup> century largely affected the areas of Greek Macedonia and Thrace. The latter being characterised by two main elements; firstly by the multiplicity of cultures, which have resulted exactly from the rapid and revolutionary geopolitical change of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in its social and economic structures; and secondly, the constantly seeking ways of its societal groups to secure the harmonious co-existence of their different identities and cultural particularities.

Both East and West have exercised influences on Greek culture, while great civilisations have left their impact through the ages all over its geographic extent. Living in the same geographical area for centuries, speaking a language that has naturally evolved from antiquity, Greeks continue, mostly in the rural communities, to exercise their traditional customs and rites. Rituals dating back to antiquity, signs and symbols expressed on different occasions, especially during festive events combining Christian and pre-Christian elements, depict the multifaceted and multilevel cultural identity of the rural areas. A plurality of mutually interdependent signs and symbols guide and regulate the social practices of every day life. Consciously or unconsciously reproduced, they provide a cultural code that manifests itself on various occasions.

**Poland**, situated in Central Europe, has a culture closely related to the country's long history. The Polish folk culture is closely connected with the formation of the feudal system, reflecting the life and situation of peasantry, including customs, rites and rituals, feasts and festivals of a unique character. The research concentrated on the territory of Małopolska, which is situated in the south-eastern part the country, constituting a unique centre of the Polish Carpathians, not only in the geographical sense, but also the cultural one. Małopolska is one of the oldest (10<sup>th</sup> c.) and the most important regions of Poland. The main centre of the area, Cracow, was the capital of the country until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> c.. During the time of the annexation (1772-1918) Małopolska, which was under the rule of Austria (the so-called Galicia), played an important role in the reconstruction of the Polish state, regained after the 1<sup>st</sup> World War.

The folk culture of *Małopolska* was shaped in the result of many centuries' changing settlement processes. *Małopolska* was characterised by constant migration of people, including populations of Polish, German, Russian, Valach and Jewish origin. Indeed, the ethnographers distinguished in Małopolska as many as twenty-four ethnic groups. All these groups "manifested" their identity by a number of cultural elements such as architecture,

attire, dialect, customs and rituals. This ethnic, cultural and religious “melting pot” formed throughout centuries an extraordinary richness of cultural landscape. In the territory of Małopolska the research concentrated on two regions: Podhale and Rzeszów.

**Podhale** is a historical – geographical land in the south of Małopolska which spreads at the foot of the Polish Tatra mountains, the highest mountain massif in the Central Western Carpathians. This relatively small area (approximately 34 km x 24 km), bordering on Slovakia in the south, constitutes a unique centre of the Polish Carpathians not only in a geographical sense but also in a cultural sense. Podhale is commonly regarded to be a bastion of vivid and genuine folklore, where elements of folk tradition are fostered and creatively developed by its inhabitants called “podhalańscy highlanders “ or “Podhalanie”.

**Rzeszów** lies in the Sandomierska valley, whose relatively rich soils, a well-developed net of rivers and streams and mild climate made agriculture the basic industry of Rzeszowiacy. The area includes native Polish people of the western part of the former Ruskie voivodship, settled there a long time ago. The folk culture of Rzeszowiacy was formed during its over-six centuries of historical and social development, initiated by intensive settlement of people of Polish origin in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries on the territory. Due to their relative wealth, the local communities adopted a distinct ethos expressed in monumental buildings, richly equipped interiors, decorations and attire which are characterised by elements of rural and noblemen’s fashion, as well as rich customs and rituals.

**Bulgaria** is situated in the middle of the Balkan Peninsula – one of the geographically most varied and fertile regions in Europe. The two components of the Bulgarian nation – proto-Bulgarians and Slavs, after a certain period of dynamic migrations, founded their common state. The wealth of elements of different ethnic and later on of different religious cultures, strongly influenced the rural culture in Bulgaria and determined its basic characteristics and development. Because of the fertile and flat fields, abundant vegetation and mountainous countryside, Bulgaria traditionally developed (and is still developing nowadays) the sector of agriculture, including fruit-growing, stock-breeding and timber industry; it also developed craftsmanship, connected both with the rural and later with the town culture, traditionally comprising textile and clothes, metal, leather, ceramic and wooden wares, building and other occupations for the needs of everyday life.

Bulgaria adopted Christianity in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and as part of Byzantium, it became a powerful state in the European South-eastern region during the Middle Ages. Under the cultural influence of Byzantium, the Bulgarian culture played the role of a “bridge” connecting Antiquity and Byzantine civilisations with the rest of the Slavonic world. The tool that helped this cultural interaction was the Bulgarian language, the first Slavic liturgical, literary and state-administrative language.

A significant change in the traditional culture became apparent with the coming of the Turks in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the mass conversion to Islam in some regions. To a great extent, the rural culture preserved its traditional character; although it adopted new characteristics, primarily connected with the compulsory new and entirely different religious canons that later increasingly penetrated into more and more activities of everyday life. The festive-ritual system turned out to be a fundamental factor for preserving the cultural identity of the Balkan man and of the Balkan Christian communities and its further sustainable development.

Today the question is whether the features of the new rural culture can guarantee the sustained development of the culture itself and of significant aspects of rural life in the Bulgarian regions, as well as of the identity of the communities themselves. A dilemma facing rural culture today is also whether it can offer solid motives for people living in the countryside to remain there – for example by developing rural tourism through preserving the local natural and cultural resources.

### **THE FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH SYNTHESIS FOR THEME 3**

The thematic synthesis of the national research reports was aimed at providing the main directions for the formulation of the exhibition scenario and the selection of the objects to be exhibited. The focus of this synthesis lies in the **symbolisms** that have been preserved in the conscience of rural communities, thus remaining alive as a foundation of their collective identity. Celebrations, weddings, rituals and customs provide a forum for community gatherings and for revival and preservation of long-held traditions reinforcing the community spirit. Symbolic events may have lost their potency in present societies; however their significance remains high, because customary and traditional acts incorporate a nostalgic dimension, relating the past to the present, keeping the collective memory alive and demonstrating, in a unique way, the difference between everyday life and celebrations, the latter having a primary function as sources of joy and cultural expression, usually through dancing, singing and sharing food and drink. The present research attempts to interpret the role of such events in the process of social and cultural evolution, to show how social capital is being built and enhanced.

This report is structured along four “thematic units” that reflect manifestations of symbolic acts in the ethnography and current practices of the three participating countries, Greece, Poland and Bulgaria. These units refer to a) apotropaic and protective acts, b) symbolisms of fertility, c) ecstatic rituals and d) rites of passage and reflect also the structure of the exhibition scenario.

## THEMATIC UNIT 1. APOTROPAIC AND PROTECTIVE RITES

This unit includes apotropaic and protective rituals and objects related to the 12-day feast of Christmas and to the carnival. Christmas brings with it a rich range of customs expressed by the preparation of special breads and the performance of rituals related to divine adoration and the warding off of evil spirits. The meaning of these customs and rituals is relayed through a diversity of objects: animal-head or demonic masks, bells, swords and shepherd's sticks, as well as musical instruments forming parts of masquerades, are worn by children or adults to drive away the evil spirits and the forces of winter and darkness; carolling bells, houses, boats, holy crèches, Christmas decorations and *porte-bonneur* form part of rituals related to the religious character of Christmas; specially decorated breads and wafers depict the hope for affluence and abundance of food throughout the year.

### Disguises and masquerades during the Twelve days and the Carnival

The **apotropaic** (warding off and protecting against evil) customs and rites are most probably the earliest in human culture. They appeared as a specific reaction of man against the destructive or demonic forces identified by him as total threat to his very existence. Taking place in crucial periods of the year - the winter solstice and the awakening of the earth in spring - they are an irrevocable segment of the folk calendar and ritual system of rural culture. In the chain of customs, **disguises** and masquerades hold a significant place, especially those practised during the **Twelve Days**, from Christmas to Epiphany, and during the **Carnival** period.

In **Greece**, disguises are among the most persistent rural customs of the Twelve Days (*Dodekaimero*). Costumes constitute, as in many other cases, a non verbal sign of expression and communication among the members of a community. The disguisers of the *Dodekaimero* wear animal skins, cover their faces with masks and hold or tie bells around their waist. They walk or dance around the villages in groups and do performances with symbolic meaning whose main purpose is to drive away the evil spirits that threaten nature from blossoming and producing new fruits. The masks are thought to depict the souls of the dead ancestors, who are recalled to protect the community; however they may draw their origin from the ancient demons of vegetation.

The groups of disguisers bear different names, *Kallikantzari*, *Lykokantzari*, *Rogatsia* or *Rogatsaria*, *Babougeri* etc. The most representative disguises are those appearing in some areas of western Macedonia, in eastern Macedonia and Thrace (Kali Vrysi, Monastiraki in Drama, Nikisiani in Kavala etc.). They include disguises which have as main elements the masks, worn principally to protect the face and conceal the wearer's identity, but having also an **apotropaic character** driving away the evil spirits, the forces of darkness and winter and "opening the way for the spirits of light and the coming of spring". Also



symbolic is the role of the bells that reinforce the apotropaic character of the mask. The resounding **bells** are used, irrespective of the material and method of their construction, to **ward off** evil by virtue of the sounds they produce. Bells moved on from their original use (means by which the flock could be recognised by the shepherd, frightening away wild animals) to a metaphysical one, and were worn to keep away evil spirits and demons. They thereby acquired a magical and religious quality, which was extended to other uses in folk tradition, invariably of a symbolic nature.

In some places (e.g. Monastiraki in Drama, Nikisiani in Kavala), disguisers organise “drama” performances in the streets. Accompanied by musicians, they frighten the people by throwing at them ashes from the bags they carry or by the sound of their bells. In some cases a mimic action of ploughing or a sword game with large wooden swords ending up with a performance (Nikisiani) of an eventual death and resurrection of a member of the group or a wedding re-enactment (Kali Vrysi) completes the ritual.

During the period of **Carnival** (*Apokria*) masquerades are to be found all over Greece, but especially in Thessaly, Macedonia and Thrace and some islands, for example Skyros. The symbolic purpose continues to be present, although these generally have the character of light-hearted entertainment. The masquerades are known by a variety of names (*Karnavalia*, *Koudounati*, *Koukougeri*) and appear in groups, some of which are standard (e.g the bridegroom-bride etc), while others are formed on the inspiration of the moment. The wearing of animal skins, masks in a variety of shapes and large sheep-and goat- bells hung around the waist are the main features of these disguises. They also have their local variations, often associated with local historical events.

The **masquerades** in the district of Naoussa in North-west Macedonia are a characteristic example. The custom, known as the dance of the *Yenitsaros* and the *Boula*, is connected with the fighting of the inhabitants against the Turks during the Turkish occupation. Its origin is to be found in the ancient ceremonies celebrating the coming of the spring. Symbolic movements, dances and other mimic gestures make up the initial forms of the custom, to which new elements have been added during its evolution. Those in disguise cover their faces with impressive wax masks, all white with colours in the place of eyebrows, a false moustache attached and three very small openings for the mouth and eyes. They also cover their chests by rows of thousands of coins that produce a particular sound while moving or dancing.

Amongst the most impressive carnival masquerades are those held at Sochos (a mountain village near Thessaloniki). They begin with the *Triodion* and climax on the last Sunday of Carnival and Clean Monday. The masqueraders are called *Karnavalia* and differ from those in other regions in two main features: the face mask and the bells. The mask (today made

by a black woollen material - *Sayiaki*) is decorated with colourful geometric designs and beads. It ends up in a peculiar pointed head dress filled with straw as an extension of the mask, which is colourfully decorated by narrow paper ribbons and with a fox tail at the top; horse hair is used for the moustache. Around the waist of those disguised are tied five heavy bells, especially selected for this purpose. Holding a long stick or a wooden sword in one hand and a bottle of strong drink in the other, *Karnavalia* go around the streets striking their bells, offering drink from their bottles to the people they meet and exchanging wishes. Folk musicians also participate. The custom is shared by the entire settlement, being closely connected with productivity of the fields and flocks.

The character of disguises of the carnival in the countries of western and central Europe is slightly different, although they have many common elements; notably the costumes and the masks.

In **Poland** the Carnival (*Zapusty*) covers the period from New Year or the Epiphany until Ash Wednesday. It is the prolongation of the Twelve day of Christmas, preceding the Lent period and Easter. It is a period of joy and revelry, the highlight of which is the last days of carnival, called "*mięsopust*" or "*ostatki*". The rich carnival rites include colourful and joyful processions of people wearing fancy dress, animal masks and looking like monsters. Until recently, in the territory of Małopolska, fancy dress processions were the continuation of Christmas carolling. On one hand they had a religious character, since they reminded the inhabitants of towns and villages of the evangelic events related to the birth of the Messiah. On the other hand, they had magic functions: to imbue the soil and animals with fertility and people with good luck in the forthcoming year. If the carol singers and people in fancy dress missed a house, it was a bad omen. Only men went carolling, mainly bachelors and lads, comprising a colourful and humorous travel folk theatre. The popular element of carol singing groups was a star - moveable, polygonal, carried on a long pole, lit from the inside, as a reference to the Star of Bethlehem and a symbol of good luck. They also carried a **crib**, a small richly decorated edifice with mobile or static figures inside, related to the scene of Christ's birth with "*Herod*" and animal monsters: a goat, a bear, a stork, a horse and a "*turoń*" - an ancient magic animal.

The tradition of a mobile crib was derived from nativity plays that were initially held in churches. At the end of the 18th century the cribs, as a carolling rite, were taken out of churches to perform scenes related to Christ's birth. Small, moveable cribs with portable statuettes were constructed by domestic artists; they took the form of a stable with two towers on the sides. A typical Polish specialty was widening the gallery of characters accompanying the main plot of the birth of Christ, by including statuettes of peasants,

merchants, inn owners, soldiers and other people with whom the viewers are familiar from everyday life.

The richest setting among the cribs was given to the so-called “**Cracow crib**”, considered to be one of the phenomena of Polish folklore. It dates back to the middle of the 19th century, when the carpenters, brick-layers and tillers from the suburbs and neighbouring villages, deprived of jobs during winters, started making small cribs for presents and bigger ones for the groups of carol singers. In the beginning of the 20th century, under the influence of mason master Michał Ezenekier, a characteristic crib form evolved related to the architecture of Cracow’s buildings.

**Carolling** with “Herod” is a peculiar show referring to the evangelic record of the birth of Christ, the Homage of the Three Wise Men, the Massacre of the Innocents and the death of King Herod. An important role is played by people dressed up like animals and supernatural, weird creatures. They are very animated, running all over the place, snapping their moveable mouths gore with their horns, and at a certain time performing an enactment of death and resurrection. These monsters symbolise fertility and the revival of nature, and their presence at home is intended to provide good luck. Herod’s death, which completes the play, represents the death of nature and its rebirth in the spring; it also symbolises the birth of a new King - Jesus. All the participating characters must have appropriate outfits (fur coats, old uniforms, cardboard armour, helmets and wooden sabres), and, most importantly, fanciful masks covering their faces. Fancy dress, set gestures and behaviour are meant to reflect the character of specific people and scenes. The devil is very active; besides a mask with horns and tongue, a tail and chain, it has a fork, with which he threatens the residents, particularly the children. The show lasts from a few to over ten minutes and finishes by collecting contributions for the carol singers.

An interesting form of carolling in the territory of eastern Małopolska (the neighbourhood of Rzeszów and Gorlice) was the so-called “*Draby noworoczne*”. The carolling groups included men or boys dressed up in fur coats, masks with moustache and high conical hats made of straw. Their legs, arms and bodies were sometimes tightly wrapped with straw. Noisy tinplates and chains were attached to the costumes. The villagers awaited “*Draby*”, whose presence would bring good luck to the inhabitants, but they also feared them, as they leapt into a room much like robbers, made noise, shouted incomprehensibly and tried to grab them and give them offerings.

The **Bulgarian** mythology has it that during the twelve days, also called *Pagan*, *Karakondzho*, *Dirty*, the earth is visited by the evil-doing ghouls, vampires, goblins and by the most malicious and frightful demon, *Karakondzho*. To oppose the wicked creatures, the *koledars* are joined by the *kukers* (mummers), who perform the major apotropaic function

of driving the evil hordes away. The *kukers* are young men disguised behind huge frightening masks or with blackened faces, dressed in sheep and goat furs, girded with clattering bells and a wooden phallus usually sword-shaped. The time of the masquerades varies from region to region - the games are performed on different festive occasions, associated with winter solstice or spring equinox - Christmas, New Year, *Sirni zagovezni* (the first Sunday before Lent).

The *Surva* international carnival of masquerade games in Pernik is an interesting modern form. Traditional *kukers* with their horrible masks and deafening bells, clad in furs or “decorated” with multi-colour trumpery, disguised brides and bridegrooms, priests, bear-keepers with trained bears, gypsies, doctors, tax collectors, barbers and other interesting characters participate in the public “spectacle”. The great popularity and vitality of the *kukers’* masquerades is due mainly to their theatrical nature.

### **Christmas rites**

The celebrations and the rituals taking place at the time of the year when days start to lengthen, have a dual meaning: to drive away the evil spirits, forces of winter and darkness that, according to ancient popular beliefs, are fighting nature and the blossoming of the earth; and to ensure happiness and fertility for the family and the community in the new year.

In **Greece**, Christmas customs include carol singing (*kalanda*), performed by groups of young children, the decoration of Christmas tree (or a boat/ship), the preparation of the Christmas table, that must have abundance of food and the lighting of the fire, which has a sacred and apotropaic character against evil spirits (*Kallikantzari*) that invade the houses and will be driven out in the Epiphany with the holy blessing of the waters. On Christmas Eve, groups of boys and girls holding metal triangles or drums and other musical instruments visit the houses and narrate the miraculous story of Christ’s birth while they address wishes for good health and happiness to the inhabitants of the house. Housewives reward them in order to ensure good fortune and abundance. Christmas table is an occasion for the family to meet and celebrate together. Christmas bread (*Christopsomo*) richly decorated (*ploumidia*), different kind of pies and candies (*Christokouloura*) are included in the festive meal. The tree with its decoration and greenery that symbolises life and vegetation or a decorated ship (common in the islands) bring into the houses warmth and joy.

In **Polish** folk tradition Christmas is considered to be the most important celebration of the year. It is also called “*Gody*” or holiday celebrated “with dignity”, particularly solemnly and reverently, just like a wedding. In this sense Christmas, which takes place during the winter solstice, is considered as a moment of marriage between day and night, light and

darkness. In the rich set of Christmas rites, many beliefs from pre-Christian times have survived. Matrimonial and agricultural fortune-telling is conducted, and the connection with spirits of deceased ancestors kept.

On Christmas Eve all actions performed have a magic and fortune-telling meaning, often of All Souls' Day character. The exceptionality of this day is emphasised by the decoration of the living-room. An important role is played by green branches of a spruce or a fir, the so-called "*podłaźniki*", popular in Małopolska and in Podhale, hung from the ceiling or attached to paintings, decorated by various objects made of straw, blotting paper and fruit - mainly apples and walnuts. Of great importance for the Christmas rites were also, in older times, the presence of sheaves of wheat in the room, the straw spread on the floor, the hay placed under the table cloth on the Christmas Eve table, as well as spiders elaborately made of straw, which were hung under the ceiling. Such decoration protected the house from evil, while the fruits were considered to be the traditional food of the deceased spirits.

The highlight of the Christmas Eve was a solemn dinner. It was opened with the ceremony of sharing "*opłatek*", a thin, rectangular piece of cake baked from wheat flour without yeast characteristic only in Polish culture. It came in special forms with engraved decoration related to the symbols of Christmas and refers back to a pagan custom of sharing bread as a sign of brotherhood and peace, while decorations, the so-called "*światy*", were symbols of protection and prosperity for the family. On the Christmas Eve table there were abundant dishes also meant to provide the house with good luck and wealth.

Almost similar rites are to be found in **Bulgaria**. According to the Bulgarian tradition, the *koledars*, carol singers, (bachelors, engaged or newly married young men) are the acknowledged characters in the sacred night rituals. The *koledars* carry shepherd crooks in their hands; they are dressed in traditional holiday costumes and wrapped in heavy hooded cloaks, with high fur caps, decorated with strings of popcorn, dried fruit, bunches of flowers or box-sprigs. The entire requisite symbolises not only the potential power of life, but also the power of man to oppose the evil forces that roam the world that night. Led by the experienced *stanenik* (king), who carries a wooden wine vessel (*baklitsa*) and a ritual tree - most often an apple or fir branch - the *koledars* set out on their round. They visit every house in the village, sing carols, say blessings for health and prosperity to the family and are in turn rewarded with gifts and corresponding blessings. The symbolism of the entire festivity is to imply the idea of eternally reviving nature. This explains why the world tree motif has survived in many carols and why Christmas predictions are so crucially indicative.

Christmas Eve, known also as *Badni vecher*, is the greatest family holiday of the Bulgarians. People believe that the prosperity of home, the good harvest and the fertility of

livestock during the coming year depend on that particular night, which accounts for the rich symbolism of ritual practices and dishes that enhance the festivity.

Early in the morning, festively dressed women knead the ritual breads from the best flour, while young unmarried or newly married women sing corresponding ritual songs. The Christmas breads as symbols of bloodless offerings are lavishly decorated with doughy birds, leaves, crosses, suns, circles etc. Another kind of bread is dedicated to the main rural occupations - agriculture and stock breeding - its decoration consists of images of domestic animals, pens, vineyards, wine casks etc. The third kind of ritual bread is a ring-shaped bun.

The central moment in the preparations for the holiday is the *badnik* (Yule-log). A hole is drilled in a freshly cut oak, pear or beech log, in which incense grains, wine and olive oil is put for a rich crop. The opening is sealed with beeswax and wrapped in white linen or hempen cloth. Arranged in this way, the *badnik* is placed in the hearth and “the new fire” is kindled. The anointed *badnik* is not only a symbol of the new sun, but also a representation of the Tree of life and is ready to be offered to the newly born God. The Yule log is to burn in the hearth till morning; its live coals have magic and healing power the whole year.

Christmas dishes are meatless. They are arranged on a low table or a layer of straw, spread on the ground around the hearth, so that everybody faces the fire. Boiled dry beans and wheat, rice, lentils, dried fruit, raisins, dried peppers, all of them swell up when cooked - thus they can be interpreted as symbolising child conception and particularly pregnancy, with the developing foetus in the womb and the emergence of a newborn infant. Garlic cloves (against evil unclean force), onion bulbs (for the family to enlarge and property to increase in number like the many layers of the onion), honey (for a “sweet” life of the young), nuts and other fruit are invariably served on the festive table.

The eldest man in the family smokes the table, the rooms, the pens, the granary, the sheds and the yard with incense and “invites” God to the table. A prayer is offered; then he raises the round flat bread with a silver coin kneaded in it high (for the wheat to grow high) above the heads of the master and the mistress of the house and breaks it. The first piece of the bread is left by the home icon with Christ’s Mother. Whoever gets the bread with the silver coin is considered the luckiest individual next year.

The **Christmas tree** became an element of the New Year celebrations early in the 20th century, but its traditional decoration is associated with the Christmas table, as the Christmas tree is also adorned with dried fruit, popcorn and self-made toys and later on with shiny many-coloured toys, specially worked out for the case. The abundantly decorated Christmas tree stands for the Tree of Eden, heavy with fruit; the everlasting green of the fir-tree symbolises the expectation of and the belief in the spring revival of nature. Under the Christmas tree, Santa Claus puts presents for the children.

## THEMATIC UNIT 2. SYMBOLISMS OF FERTILITY AND THE REBIRTH OF NATURE

The fertility of the earth is symbolised by the rituals of Easter and by harvesting celebrations that conclude cultivation cycles. Easter is for Christians the most sacred event of the year, symbolising also the regeneration of the earth and its preparation for bearing fruits. The dividing line between religious and fertility rituals is very fine: Palm crosses, *lazarines*, Easter eggs, *epitaphios*, specially decorated breads are complemented by parades and ceremonies that transcend faith to symbolise health, fortune and a good harvest. Harvesting celebrations include also symbolic objects such as bowls with grains and fruit, ear corns and special bread.

### Easter celebrations

Easter is the most significant celebration for the Christian world. Closely associated with spring and the renaissance and rebirth of nature, it incorporates rituals and customs that can be traced back to antiquity.

In **Greece**, Easter - also known as *Lambri* or *Anastasis* (resurrection) - incorporates not only the religious element of Christ's resurrection, but also is the most significant spring celebration, symbolising the joy of people for the revival of nature and the beginning of creativity.

The highlight of Easter celebrations is the Holy Week, an extension and intense experience of Lent, full of symbolic actions contributing to the understanding of the Divine Drama. Although the ritual of the Orthodox Church is assumed by the priests (men), women are almost exclusively involved in the dressing of the Epitaph (Holy Sepulchre) and in the other preparations in the houses and in the Church. The almost exclusive participation of women in the practices celebrating Easter is explained by the fact that women are linked with fertility and growth, they give life and birth. Therefore all the customs and rites related with the death and resurrection of nature and humanity are dependant on the feminine knowledge and competence. Resurrection is preceded by Lazarus Saturday along with Palm Sunday, while the songs (*agermoi*) of Lazarus Sunday, bearing his name (Lazarus *agermoi*), are widely known and popular. Groups of boys and girls dramatically narrate the story of Lazarus and announce his resurrection while carrying baskets with freshly cut flowers and collecting the eggs of Easter. In some cases only girls participate in the songs of Lazarus (named *Lazarines*) while married women are excluded. The reason for this is that Lazarus had only sisters. In Western Macedonia, Thessaly, Central Greece and the Peloponnese, the custom had an intense social character since it offered to girls the opportunity of coming into contact with the micro-community of their village, walk around the houses show off their skills and become known as potential brides. The *Lazarines* hold

a basket decorated with flowers in which they place white eggs offered by the housewives. The baking of bread-made figures depicting Lazarus also carry a pre-resurrection symbolism (Aegean Islands), as well as the procession of effigies on flowery funeral beds of Lazarus (Epitaph) made out in rough shapes and colourfully decorated (Cyclades, Crete, Ionian, Epirus). In inland Greece, Lazarus breads are distributed for the souls of the dead.

Lazarus' Saturday, before nightfall, is considered the most appropriate time to prepare the palm leaves that will decorate the churches the next day, Palm Sunday. The blessed palms along with the flowers will be distributed to the attendees of the service and be kept at their homes to drive away evil. In the rural areas they used to ritually strike the bundles in the fields, the trees and the vineyards.

Holy Thursday and Holy Friday are associated with funerary customs. It is a common practice for women to visit the cemeteries and to decorate the graves with flowers. The most important event of Holy Friday is the evening procession of the Epitaph, led by the liturgical flags and the cross and in some places accompanied by local bands playing funeral marches. In most places a women's chorus sings special songs contributing to the atmosphere of devotion. In the islands the procession of the Epitaph takes place close to the sea. In the older days, the custom was to bring in the main door of the house the costumes of sea-farers lost at sea. The procession of the Epitaph is closely related with popular customs, the purification of the houses and the lands, and the commemoration of the dead, because according to ecclesiastical tradition Christ visited Hades and met the souls of the dead. In general, the Epitaphs gather all the power of the Holy Week. Therefore, sick and weak people used to pass three times under the Holy Sepulcher hoping to receive the blessing to bring them good health.

It is well known that ritual symbols constitute an integral part of the festivities lending a special interest to each ceremony. Easter symbols are abundant. The egg is the symbol of Easter par excellence. Eggs, mainly the ones painted red, are known throughout the Orthodox world. Considered as a source of life and of perfection, the egg symbolises in Christian times, as in the past, rebirth and good fortune. Red, a powerful and apotropaic colour, has been related to ancient Greek and pre-Christian traditions (e.g. Adonis and Attis etc) and is linked with Christ's blood, which is considered as a means to drive away evil. Keeping intact the egg during "egg tapping", is a sign of good health, while greetings follow a specific ritual: "Christ has risen", to which the response must be "He truly has risen".

Easter symbols (candles and flowers, bread and *tsourekí*) are considered to have a miraculous power, while the lamb is the main Easter food in the whole Orthodox world. The Ecclesiastical symbol of the lamb, denoting Christ according to the Apocalypse,



comprises the power of the victory over death. In the whole Mediterranean civilisation lamb, and especially the newly born, is the expression of the renewal of nature happening in spring. Its destiny is to be sacrificed in order to secure this renewal.

Since Easter is not only a religious but also an ancient rural spring feast, it is significantly important to be celebrated in the open air and accompanied by music, dances and athletic games, the latter aimed at demonstrating power, skillfulness and the community spirit.

In **Poland** symbolic elements of traditional Easter rites are: a green twig, water, fire and food, including an egg and Easter cake, the so-called “*paska*”.

The highlight of Easter is the Holy Week. It begins on Palm Sunday, which commemorates Christ’s solemn arrival at Jerusalem. On this occasion, the villagers bless Easter palms in churches as a symbol of reviving life and vitality, considered to acquire curative and magic powers after their blessing. In different sizes, the palms are made of willow twigs and other evergreen plants, decorated with flowers made of blotting paper and ribbons. It was believed that the ritual touch or blow with a palm restored vitality to people and animals. In the territory of Małopolska there was a common custom of putting crosses made from palms under the first ploughed ridge, which was intended to secure a good harvest and protect the crops from storms and hail.

On Holy Saturday churches carry out the rite of blessing water (purifying and curing power), fire (power destroying evil) and food intended for solemn breakfast on Sunday of Lord’s Resurrection. Coals from the blessed bonfire and water were taken home and used in households both for apotropaic procedures and home medicine. The traditional “*święconka*”, a basket with blessed food contains “*paska*”, horseradish, salt, smoked ham and sausages, a statuette of a lamb (made of cake, sugar or plaster) and eggs - “*pisanki*” - decorated in various techniques. Eggs were shared during the Easter breakfast; they were given as presents, applied as a cure for diseases, and the protection of home and its residents against evil.

Another important Polish rite is “*Śmigus-dyngus*”, traditionally held on Easter Monday. On this day people pour water over each other, which with its purifying and reviving power is aimed at providing health, good luck and harvest.

In **Bulgaria**, Easter is celebrated in a similar way. With the “maiden” character of their rites, *Lazarovden* (St. Lazarus’ day) and *Tzvetnitza* (Palm Sunday) repeat in a specific way the “male” Christmas - this time, however, it is the young girls called *lazarkas* that herald the spring awakening of nature. The girls dress in bride’s clothes to imply expectations of getting married; magnificent wreaths of flowers and peacock plumes adorn their heads. Similar to the *koledars*’ groups, the *lazarkas* go from house to house (in some places they

visit the fields, meadows and sheep pens as well), sing songs of praise, wishing the host and his family health and prosperity. In return, they get fresh eggs. Around the baskets with the offerings, they perform the specific dance “*Buenetz*”. Later on, people gather in the village square where the common large *lazarkas*’ dance starts.

Finally, the *lazarkas* let their wreaths float on the river water. They believe that the girl whose wreath comes first will be the first to marry; she is also chosen as “*kumitza*”, the leader of the *lazarkas* next year. The participation of the young girls in the *lazaruvane* marks their socialisation - it means they have grown up and are ready to marry.

After the church service on Palm Sunday, consecrated willow tree twigs are woven into wreaths to decorate the home icon and the doors of the house. The willow tree is considered a symbol of everlasting youth and eternally reviving nature and its twigs are expected to bring health to the family. Women girdle willow twigs round their waists to get enough strength for the harvest-time. Willow tree twigs are placed on the graves of deceased ancestors too.

At Easter, the expectations of people that awakened nature will bring health to them and their livestock and fertility to the land, are the centre around which the entire symbolism of the holiday is structured. The first painted eggs are dyed in obligatory red; one is put by the home icon, the second on the ritual bread and the third one is rubbed on the face of every child for health. They keep these eggs throughout the year, as they are believed to possess healing properties. The painted eggs have rich decoration of geometric and stylised anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and vegetation representations (birds, butterflies, fish, snakes, spiders, swastikas etc.). The ritual breads are round or oval pleat-shaped buns, sometimes with a hole in the middle, but always with a red egg on them.

Easter is also the time when the whole village celebrates with songs and dances; the girls swing on swings for health and for the love of a good-looking young man and not of a dragon! Close relatives and friendly families visit each other, share the festive table, exchange ritual breads (during the last century they were generally called “*kozunaks*”) and dyed eggs. A traditional game is played where each player hits the other player’s egg with his own. This is known as “egg tapping” and the holder of the last intact egg will be the healthiest person throughout the year. On that day, people greet themselves with “Christ has risen” and get the response “He truly has risen”.

### **Harvest rites**

In **Greece** the principal traditional rural customs were - and in many cases still are- closely related with agricultural activities and rituals usually linked to a feast day, which par excellence aimed to guarantee the survival of people. Combining pagan and Christian

practices, most of them have been preserved across the ages as having a great significance for securing the rendering of the fields and in consequence a good year for the family and the community.

For the farmers the way earth is going to receive ploughing and harvesting is considered as very important. For this reason farmers offered the first fruits (6th of August) to the church to be blessed (especially in northern Greece and Thrace). Many symbolic actions are related to sowing; among them is the Feast of Seeds, known with the ancient name *panspermia*, which is celebrated on the feast day of the Virgin Mary (Presentation of the Virgin, 21 November), called “*Messosporitissa*” i.e. protector of grain in the middle of sowing period. During this day in many rural areas people used to eat as a main meal a combination of boiled cereals and vegetables, and to share a small portion with neighbours in order to guarantee the abundance of crops.

Among the symbolic actions linked with the cycle of cereals and of the corn, it is worth noting the sowers’ habit of tying the last ears of corn in a nice bouquet with different forms (comb, cross etc.), which is sometimes hung around the iconostasis of the house (the place where they usually keep the icons) or hung from the ceiling. In some regions (e.g. in the island of Karpathos) they leave in the fields some ears of the corns, while tracing around them a magic circle with a sickle.

In **Poland**, especially in eastern Małopolska, the celebration of a solemn end of harvest was called “*wieńcowiny*” or “*okrężne*”. Recently, the term “*dożynki*” has been adopted, which is popular in the whole country. The rite originating from pagan traditions, is related to the cult of fertility deities, starting after the completion of the most important field works, mainly at the turn of August and September. It could be also held a little earlier on 15th August - the day of Assumption of St. Virgin Mary, called in Polish culture the God’s Mother “*Zielnej*” holiday. In this way the God’s Mother is considered to be the patron of soil and its crops: herbs, flowers, cereal and fruit.

The “*dożynki*” rite started on the day of completing work on cutting the cereal. The harvesters produced a sheaf - “*snopek żniwny*” decorated with flowers, and a wreath of cereal ears, which they gave to the host and the hostess. Thanking for the hard work, the host invited the harvesters to an evening party. On the field a small amount of the uncut cereal was left, the so-called “*przepiórka*”. It was a symbolic contribution for field animals, which has an older origin (a gift for the world of spirits). The *dożynki* rites in manors were much more spectacular. For this occasion a special *dożynki* wreath was made, which was brought to church in a solemn procession of men and women in smart clothes, musicians and harvesters. After the blessing it was given as a gift by the best harvesters to the squire. The rite was accompanied by *dożynki* songs recounting the hard work, expressing wishes of

good luck for the host and encouraging him to treat the harvesters. The squire, the owner of the fields, paid the harvesters their remuneration; next the party began which lasted until late at night. The *dożynki* rites along with all other basic rites are still practised. The role of hosts has been taken by self-government representatives of various levels, and the *dożynki* rite has assumed the form of a folk festival. A characteristic element of *dożynki* is still the wreaths made of different kinds of cereal, decorated with ribbons, herbs, fruit and flowers. The tradition requires that the grains from the wreath should be added to spring sowing in order to secure a good harvest. The traditional wreaths most often had a shape of a crown or a hemisphere. The modern form of a wreath depends on its creators' ingenuity; however, it is always set in the Polish folk and religious tradition.

In **Bulgaria**, the last of the spring-summer prosperity-bringing customs is related to the end of harvest. Then the so-called *brada* (beard) is made from the largest full-eared wheat spikes, especially left uncut by the reapers. The spikes are tied with a red thread and the ground around them is dug with the point of the sickle, then it is watered and "fed" with pieces of bread in the four cardinal points. The harvest women start singing and dancing around the *brada*. The best of the harvesters ritually washes her hands and cuts the spikes in one cut; then she weaves them in a pleat (*brada*). The decorated *brada* is solemnly carried to the village and is left in the granary where it is kept until next year. This imitative magical act is meant to secure a future good harvest. Similar to that are the preparatory sowing practices in autumn. The largest seeds are chosen and mixed with tiny pebbles for the wheat to grow large. The sower puts something red in the measure vessel - a red pepper, a bunch of flowers or fibrils of red yarn and even a comb - so that the wheat becomes ripe (associated with red) and thick as the comb teeth.

### THEMATIC UNIT 3. ECSTATIC RITUALS

*Anastenaria* or *nestinar dance* is a representative example of ecstatic rituals practiced in the Balkans, allegedly of pagan origin. With roots in ancient times, these rituals have kept alive the memory and bonds of communities which many generations ago arrived from the Black Sea to Thrace. Barefoot villagers walk over hot coals on St Constantine and Helen's day, performing an ecstatic dance influenced by the sound of a specific tune. Symbolic objects include dressed ikons, as the central item of the ritual, musical instruments (lyra and drum), sacred kerchiefs (*amanetia*). Although turned into a tourist attraction in recent years, the ecstatic abilities of firewalkers that are inherited or attained after a lengthy preparation and meditation, remain solid parts of a rural tradition that has managed to stay alive. Today this ritual is practiced only in **Greece** (*Anastenaria*) and **Bulgaria** (*Nestinar*).

In **Greece** this custom is only held in parts of east Macedonia, mainly in the villages *Ayia Eleni* and *Langada*, while in **Bulgaria** it takes place in *Strandzha* villages. The most remarkable part of the custom remains the fire-walking that takes place in the evening. The fire is lit up early in the evening by a member of the group who has inherited this privilege by his forefathers. When the flames have died down and a thick bed of red hot coals has formed, the *Anastenarides* arrive holding the "*amanetia*" and icons of the saints and dancing continuously. They begin a circular dance around the red coals while the music grows louder and louder arousing the dancers into a state of ecstasy. At the same time, sighs (*anastenagmi*) are heard, from which the custom takes its name. The *Anastenarides* start to walk on to the coals and dance on them with bare feet, without appearing to be burnt or to be in pain and without the soles of their feet being harmed in any way. According to descriptions of scholars, walking on the fire is the supreme proof of sanctity of the dancer. The fire walking and the immunity to the burns of the *Anastenarides* attract many visitors. Many scientists, mostly psychologists, observed the custom in order to find an explanation of this immunity, which still remains unexplained.

The cultural context of *nestinar* dance, regarding both its nature and observance, goes back to ancient pre-Christian times. The distant prototype to the *nestinar* ritual was most probably a certain act of sacrificial offering on fire. Elements of the earliest prehistoric human culture, ancient priestly rites and sun-cults are clearly perceptible in the *nestinar* festivity. Ancient local Thracian practices have also infiltrated the *nestinar* ritual act.

The pursuit of sustained sacralisation of the custom, gradually imposed on it the observance of a complex set of ritual acts - holding the icon of Saints. Constantine and Helena with raised hands, falling in a deep religious trance ("*prihvashtane*", "*obzemanie*", meaning "obsession"), acquiring the capacity of foretelling events, specificity of the *nestinars*" cries during the fire-dance, dancing crosswise or in circles around and in the live coals, etc.

The very practice of this ecstatic dance confirms that the cultural phenomena that bring the Balkan people together are time-resistant. The traditional observance of the *Anastenaria* festivity on May 21 in different villages in *Strandzha* is shared by their Northern Greece neighbours who come especially for the day. The joint celebration strengthens its authenticity and, by increasingly attracting young people, the *nestinar* tradition becomes not only interesting and arresting, but it also turns into a stable interaction of traditional and modern spiritual cultures and a factor of social and ethnic rapprochement.

#### **THEMATIC UNIT 4. RITES OF PASSAGE**

Rituals celebrating the passage of nature from one season to another and the passage from adolescence to married life and maturity in the lifecycle of humans, have always had a special significance, imbued with symbolic acts and objects. The summer solstice days are celebrated by fires and divinations, coinciding with St. John the Baptist's day. Fire symbolises purification, but also protection against misfortune, bad luck and illness. Divinations accompany the solstice celebrations: love fortune-telling, interpretation of dreams and clairvoyance, all connected to future love and marriage. The wedding celebrations have their own symbolic objects and parades: rich bridal dresses with decorated head cover and jewellery, wedding flags, dowry chests and special foods, including decorated breads, cakes and pomegranates.

##### **Summer solstice fires and future predictions**

Rites of passage include customs and rituals that celebrate birth, initiation, marriage or death. Many occur during in the annual liturgical calendar and most of them if not all, at seasonal changes. To the latter belongs a well known **Greek custom**, that of *Klidonas* ("Soothsayer"). It is celebrated on 24th of June, the Feast day of Saint John the Baptist, marking the summer solstice, an astronomical phenomenon that impressed traditional people and led to many superstitions. St John's day provides an opportunity to revive all the customs and practices of the summer solstice, when the inverse movement of the sun begins, that of decline, which six months later will lead to the winter solstice. Therefore, it is not strange that in almost the whole of Europe people celebrate the sun's momentary victory by lighting up fires. These open air summer fires have their counterparts in the winter fires during Christmas.

The summer solstice fires, into which are thrown wreaths of flowers in many Greek regions (especially in May), are not only fires for jubilation and purification, but also fires for protection against misfortune, bad luck and illness, which, traditionally, man feared would happen due to the suns' gradual decline. People usually jump over the fires to dispose of

bad luck and misfortune. It is also obvious that people in that period of season's change wish to have a glimpse of the future. They pursue many practices aiming to reveal their destiny. These happen between the 23rd and 24th of June, the most common being the prediction by means of water, a ritual that is a community matter rather than an individual one. The divination by means of water is immutable through centuries and follows the same ritual since the 11th century. On the evening of the 23rd of June, a young girl, whose both parents are alive and in good health, goes to the central fountain of the village in order to take water. She carries a pot and without speaking to any one ("wordless water") brings it to the house where the divination will take place. There, persons -mostly young- who wish to predict their destiny, throw into the water some precious personal objects (eg a ring, a cross) preferably made of gold or silver. They then cover the pot with a red piece of cloth and secure it by a chain and a lock. They put it outside the house, where it remains the whole night to be seen by the stars. The following day they gather in the house and the same person who secured the *klidonas* opens the pot. Then she proceeds by taking out from the pot, one by one, the objects and telling oracles they inspire. In Thrace the custom is known as *Kalogiannia* and ends up with traditional dances and music.

In **Poland**, St. John's rites, called "*Sobótka*", "*Kupała*" were held on the night preceding St. John the Baptist's day, the shortest night of the year (23/24 June). At that time, according to folk customs, the earthly world was visited by strangers from the hereafter and spirits of deceased ancestors. This holiday has pre-Christian roots and was originally related to the End Holiday (*kupała*) celebrated to worship Slavic god *Swarożyc*. The St. John's night traditions is focused on the mystery of life, the triumph of light over the darkness, fertility rites and love fortune-telling. It is a holiday of fire and water. According to folk beliefs, in the evening, on river banks, or in hills or clearings or in places often visited by creatures from the beyond, bonfires were made, the so-called "*sobótki*". Girls dressed in white, with belts made of herbs, joined by boys, gathered around the fires and started dancing, singing and jumping over the flames. The herbs which had miraculous power protecting people from evil spirits were burnt in the bonfires.

At Midsummer night especially young people had also a ritual bath. Submersion in water or bathing in night dew was to provide them with health and beauty, as well as happy love and marriage. The attributes of St. John's nights are wreaths laid by girls on rivers as an element of matrimonial fortune-telling. The wreaths made of herbs, wild and garden flowers, with a candle attached to a board, were the symbol of maidenhood. Good luck was brought by the wreath which floated on the river without obstacles, or was taken out by the girl's beloved one.

In **Bulgaria** Enyovden (St. John the Baptist's nativity) is the day of the summer solstice. As nature passes to a new state of potency on that day, *Enyovden* is particularly suitable for divinations and magic acts with symbolic characteristics. In the night, the heaven opens, the stars come down close to herbs and provide them with greater curative power; the upper and the lower worlds gather and the universe is crowded with magicians, vampires, dragons and wood nymphs. The emblematic fire jumping has died away on that day, but the Bulgarian tradition has preserved it on *Sirni Zagovezni*.

Even before sunrise, maidens, young married and old women go to pick up fresh herbs and flowers - they tie them into a posy, called *Enyo's bunch*, as it is believed that the herbs have the greatest healing power on that day and that this curative property weakens every day until it is completely lost (this phenomenon was scientifically proved). The herbs and flowers picked up at dawn are pleated into big wreaths, through which all family members pass for health.

Because of its transitional nature, *Enyovden* is suitable for divinations and for public acknowledgment of a significant change in the girls' life - i.e. that they have now reached sexual maturity and are ready to get married. The interesting custom of *Enyo's Bride* is directly connected with the maiden's passage to a new status. The main character is a small girl - St. John's earthly bride, whose wedding attire is a sign of the girl's wish for getting married. The maidens solemnly carry "*Enyo's bride*" to every house, to the fields, pens etc. After that the traditional "singing over the rings" is performed. The previous night every girl put her posy with a ring attached to it in a copper of silent water (the vessel is filled with water from the spring and carried home in silence, thus water is believed to preserve its magic mediatory power). *Enyo's bride*, blindfold, takes the bunches out of the vessel one by one, while the girls sing songs hinting at what their future bridegrooms will be like. These short refrains, in fact riddles-metaphors, reveal different aspects of people's everyday life. Such divinations via singing are performed for prosperity, health and a better future for the entire family. Because of the ancient character of the custom, similar songs-metaphors are well-known to some other Slav and Balkan people.

### **Wedding rituals**

Marriage belongs to the rites of passage that have a special weight for the life cycle of persons in a given society due to the fact that they manifest the transformation of relations of people who commence a new cycle in their lives. As a rite, it produces effects beyond the moment of union which have a social impact. Thus all the ritual actions reproduced during the wedding have a special meaning and their significance is consciously or unconsciously recognised. Many bridal traditions and rituals, still observed today, draw their origin from the past when evil spirits were believed to rule people's existence, being



envious of happiness and awaiting every chance to attack people's joy and good fortune. Therefore, the bride and groom should be protected in order to ensure happiness. Music, singing and dancing were an attempt to drive away these spirits by the noise they produce.

**In Greece**, marital customs are diverse, due to their close link with local traditions and regional cultural identity or with the special character of the community that has created or perpetuated them. However there are some common elements which compose the nucleus of the custom despite the variations. In every traditional Greek marriage there are three main parts to be distinguished: the preparatory rites, the wedding ceremony and the week after the wedding with the ritual extensions.

The *preparatory rites* include the invitation to relatives and people from other villages to attend the wedding ceremony. The ceremony is announced in several ways, mainly by sending young boys as emissaries. They usually hold baskets with fruits, nuts, candies made from sesame seeds and honey (*melekouni* or *sesamomeli*) or drinks and sing traditional songs inviting people to attend the event (today invitations have a printed form).

A fertility symbol is also the bridal bread, which represents well-being and is said to bring good luck and health to the couple. The traditional wedding day is full of symbolism. Both parties are dressed in separate homes. Relatives and close friends assist the bridegroom to get shaved and dressed with new clothes, usually traditional ones. Young girls assist the bride to wear the traditional wedding costume embroidered with bright colours aiming to protect her from evil spirits and demons. The purpose of the bridal veil is the same; it is believed to protect the bride from the evil eye of an ill-wisher. Relatives of opposite families adorn the bride with gifts of gold jewellery. Local musicians play traditional folk music. Generally speaking and depending on the local tradition, the wedding takes place in the bride's village. A band escorts the groom to the church and another band retrieves and walks the bride. When the bride is getting ready to leave the house, relatives from the bridegroom's side come to receive her from her father and walk her to the church. The man on a horse holding the *flambouro* (wedding banner) is usually in front of the group.

The *flambouro*, one of the most important wedding symbols in many Greek areas, is a flag made usually by a big square piece of red cloth put on a long wooden stick and decorated with different elements according to the local tradition. In Macedonia they use kerchiefs to adorn it; in some places they put on it a pomegranate, a symbol of fertility, or other fruits (always there in number).

In *Sarakatsanis'* villages the *Flambouro* is made on the Friday before the wedding either by a young unmarried boy or by the groom's mother. With a cross on it, a symbol of faith, it is decorated with many other fertility and prosperity symbols - coins, apples, gold or coloured ribbons or threads, chains, etc. In some *Sarakatsani* areas three *Flamboura* are

prepared with stitched wooden pompons (*kiritsia*) flower shaped and with bells in their centre, symbols of fertility and apotropaic. Coloured pompons also decorate the bundle of woods to be used for the cooking of bread and food of the wedding ceremony. The pompons will be offered later on by the groom's mother to the women taking part in the wedding preparation. She will also give them kerchiefs, which will be used to lead the dances.

The wedding ceremony, with a few exceptions, takes place in the church. Once it is completed, the newly weds are walked to their house accompanied by friends and relatives. In front of their future house the groom's mother will receive the bride and welcome her by offering honey, sweets or nuts. In some places they also offer a glass of water or bread while a pomegranate is given to the bride to throw it to the courtyard in order to secure prosperity. The wedding feast takes place right after the bride's reception with drinking and folk dancing.

**In Poland**, celebrating marriage is connected to a set of customs and rites shaped by tradition. At this important and symbolic moment of transition, change of family and social status, the wedding rites are intended to secure good luck to the bride and groom.

Wedding ceremonies lasted from a few days to a week and they were held at the time of "*zapusty*" or in autumn after the harvest. In the territory of Małopolska after recognising the possibility of solemnising marriage (the so-called "*zwiady*"), matchmaking ("*zmówiny*") took place, and later "*zrękowiny*" comprising elements of old property contracts. The initial consent to solemnise a marriage, agreeing on a dowry completed by the ritual of drinking vodka and paying for announcing the wedding in church, meant the beginning of preparations for the wedding. A host and a hostess ("*swaszka*") were chosen, as were best men, wedding clothes were made, food and drinks were gathered and guests invited.

In the Rzeszów region the wedding was preceded by a party at *swaszka*'s (the so-called "*swaszczyzny*"). The wedding ceremony was started by "*zrękowiny*" in the morning, and after the parents' blessing the wedding procession moved towards the church, and then to the bride's house, where the wedding reception and the party with musicians had been prepared. In the meantime, another wedding procession had to overcome colourfully decorated barriers - and in order to cross them it had to pay with vodka and sweets. The most important wedding rite was "*oczepiny*" symbolising the transition from maiden status to the circle of married women. It was performed by the ritual of taking the wreath off the bride's head and putting on it a bonnet. On completion of the wedding there was a rite of moving the bride to her husband's house together with the dowry kept in a wooden, colourful chest.

The wedding rites were accompanied by numerous items. They were: a wedding "*różga*"

("wiecha") - the symbol of the bride's maidenhood. It was made the day before the wedding and it was used for wedding rites until "oczepiny". "Różga" was made by a top of a spruce, on which a rich decoration of flowers, herbs, fruit, feathers, and ribbons was placed. The bride's wreath, decorated in the region of Cracow with a bunch of flowers and ribbons, was also artistically distinguished. Having taken the wreath off, a bonnet decorated with sequins, beads or made of a lace, was put on the bride's head and covered with a kerchief.

An important role in the wedding rites was played by a wedding cake (the so-called "korowaj") - round bread decorated with artificial flowers, feathers, birds made of pastry, herbs, and apples. Cutting and sharing the cake completed the wedding rite.

In **Bulgaria**, a wedding is the most important event in the life of the rural man and woman. Through it, the reproduction of the clan is secured and its striking rituality guarantees the sustained development of the community. That is why the magic nature of the wedding rites and the close relation of ritual and song have survived in modern times.

The main characters are the bridegroom, the best man and his wife, the bride's brother-in-law, the matchmakers. Ritual wedding bread of rich symbolic decoration is kneaded. In both houses, wedding banners (white and red) are prepared -they will be later combined in one. The wedding tree - a pine or fruit tree, is adorned with gaily coloured threads (against evil eyes), with flowers (for happy and long-lasting marriage) and fruits (for the young couple's fertility) etc.

The wedding ceremonies are accompanied by songs. The saddest ones are performed while the bride's hair is ritually braided, the wedding wreath is made from flowers and the bride's face is veiled with thick white or red cloth. In the early 20th century, the white bridal dress appeared as a symbol of her immaculacy and purity. "Taking" the bride from her home is not easy - the bridegroom is forced to "fight" or give "ransom" for her. Sometimes he just slips a gold coin in her mother's bosom - a tribute of her mother's milk. Wheat, millet, nuts or dried fruit, sweets and small change are thrown on the public for health and fertility while the bride is leaving home and on completing the wedding ceremony.

A significant moment of "passage" is when the bride enters the bridegroom's home on a spread-out white cloth. Her mother-in-law hands the bride a bread, honey and fruits in order to "bring prosperity" to the house, "presents" a small child (symbolising the future childbirth) and finally takes her to the fireplace to bow and pay her respect to it. The bridegroom's mother leads the young couple into the house in a yoke or with a kerchief tied around their heads - symbols of shared hardships and toils. The songs accompanying the ceremony are full of joy as new help is coming.

The preparation, preservation, exposition and shifting the maiden's chest with her dowry to the bridegroom's house is heavy with symbolism. The maiden chest often remains the only "personal territory" of the married woman.

The virginity of the bride is publicly announced with rifle shots and the bloody spots on her white chemise serve as a proof of her immaculacy. After the wedding guests' expectation is thus satisfied, they drink "mulled brandy". The last stage of the "passage" is the act of removing the bride's veil and of taking her wreath off - the change in her social status brings a change in her clothes, adornments and headdress too.

### **Interpreting rural customs and rituals**

Celebrations and rituals have a central position in rural communities reinforcing the process of social identity building. Many of these are strong even in our days, providing an opportunity to members of a community to meet and rejoice together.

All customs and rituals described above and illustrated by the objects and the related material of the exhibition, show in the most striking way, that beyond differences, all these rites have common elements that form the common European heritage. They also reflect not only the wealth of rural culture, but also similarities that bind rural cultures together and can strengthen their values towards a sustainable future for rural communities.

In contemporary, multicultural societies, in which there is a strong need to reinforce the intercultural dialogue, the various values of rural communities (intellectual, ethical, aesthetic) can contribute to cultural and social balance. Traditional cultures are not only able to offer elements that help us to understand "the other", but can also direct people towards social forms that do not isolate the individuals but, on the contrary, help them to function as members of a social entity.

The experience of post-modern societies, in which values are confused and the relations between the individual and the whole are de-constructed, suggest that a return to traditional social values can give heed to an important lesson, that of integration; integration of the individual into the group, of art into everyday life, of death into life, of the body into existence, of nature into culture. It is not strange that in the post modern societies two cultural notions coexist: "tradition" and "modernity", once antagonistic, but now converging for development. It is indeed one of the main problems of development to transform contradictions into complementarities and encourage people to act less as mere observers and more as active members of their community and at the end become more human.

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