

Slavcho Koviloski
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University
in Skopje
slavcho.koviloski@outlook.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-5925-6113

POZNAŃSKIE STUDIA SLAWISTYCZNE
NR 25 (2023)
DOI: 10.14746/pss.2023.25.19

Data przesłania tekstu do redakcji: 21.04.2023
Data przyjęcia tekstu do druku: 6.06.2023

Killing Under Masks – Death by Rusalía (Vasilichari) Groups in Ottoman Macedonia in 19th Century

ABSTRACT: Koviloski Slavcho, *Killing Under Masks – Death by Rusalía (Vasilichari) Groups in Ottoman Macedonia in 19th Century*, "Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne" 25. Poznań 2023. Wydawnictwo "Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne," Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, pp. 401–414. ISSN 2084-3011.

In this text, we refer to the killing by the *rusalía* groups (also known as *babar* or *jamalar* groups) whose members were wearing masks during the so-called unbaptized days (from January 7 to 19). In these centuries-old rites, old Slavic pre-Christian customs are mixed with Christian celebrations. Our interest relates to a pagan custom performed in the time of Ottoman Macedonia in the 19th century. Back then, the meeting of two such groups ended with bloodshed and the death of individuals caused by knives or sticks. The deceased were buried in the place where they were killed, thus there are rusalía, barbar or jamalar graves in several locations.

KEYWORDS: rusalía groups (babar or jamalar groups); masks; unbaptized days; Ottoman Macedonia; 19th century

1. Introduction

Returning back to the old Slavic culture opens a new perspective for comparative research of pagan and Christian customs. Some of these customs existed and functioned separately, whereas others merged. Coincidentally or not, some of the major Slavic pagan holidays coincided with Christian holidays (Christmas, Epiphany), thus the old pagan holidays gained a new expression.

One of the customs that survived from pagan times among the Slavs after they had received Christianity are the rusalias. Special attention has been paid to them, so they are the subject of numerous studies and there is abundant literature about them. Kuzman Shapkarev, Hristo Shaldev, Mihail Arnaudov and others have given their views on the etymology, meaning and certain aspects of these celebrations occurring in the second half of the 19th century. They based their works mainly on oral retelling of anonymous local witnesses as well as participants in the events. Depending on the place, there are various names that indicate the rituals associated with the unbaptized days (January 7–19). Thus, the people performing these rites can be found under different names: rusalia, babari, vasilichari, surovari, bamburci, eshkeri, jamalar (jalamar, jolomar, jamaljia), then babugeri, kalushari, etc. Although the rites of the rusalias, babars, eshkers, etc. are not identical (for example, the rusalias are silent, whereas the jamalars sing), we are going to consider them together in the context of the bloodshed and murders resulting from them, since they were occurring almost at the same time.

Our interest in the ritual games performed by these masked groups, dressed in specific clothes, refers to the deaths caused by the encounters between two rusalia (babar or jamalar) groups. During their encounter, a fight with axes, sabres and knives between the two groups would occur, and the dead were buried on the spot of the clash. Therefore, throughout the territory of Ottoman Macedonia there are so-called rusalia or babar (jamalar) cemeteries. Our aim is to describe the process of gathering the rusalia groups, their rituals, the way of fighting, as well as to identify the places where the fights took place, that is, where the members of the groups were buried in Ottoman Macedonia in the 19th century.

2. Gathering and performance of rusalia groups

At the beginning, we will emphasize that the topic of murders occurring during the performance of these rites has not been dealt with in a separate study so far, although there is abundant literature on the rusalia. In order to get to the results of our research dedicated to the clashes between different rusali groups and the fatal outcomes resulting from them, we will very briefly state that among both Eastern and Southern Slavs, rusalia groups are associated with the expulsion of impure forces. The detailed descriptions of the performance of these rites indicate that great attention was paid to performing them accurately. However, as mentioned above, certain details were practiced differently in different places.

The term rusalia is closely related to Proto-Slavic mythology, which was under Hellenic-Roman influence and built on Christian beliefs. In this way, a unique Slavic celebration had been created, which was held during the so-called unbaptized or pagan days between the holidays of Christmas and Epiphany, that is, during the twelve unbaptized days in the period from the birth to the baptism of Jesus Christ. We should emphasize that although the rusalia groups differed from the jamalar and babar groups that operated at the same time, the events related to their rituals largely coincide in terms of content, and events with fatal consequences could happen when performing the games and going from house to house and from village to village. That is why we are going to consider all of them in the context of the fights fought by two groups of men. It was believed that on the days of celebration of this holiday, when the dead were commemorated, dangerous demonic forces might have harmed the living, therefore various actions, such as rusalia rites, were performed as protection against them.

Ritual rusalia dances were performed by men dressed in clothes made of white cloth (shirt, long johns), whereas the jamalar custom was performed by men wearing masks. The rite involved carrying a wooden sword, which the dancers swung in order to expel and destroy the demons. In doing so, they were walking through the surrounding villages, visiting the homes of the villagers, performing magical games. Describing the jamalar groups, Stefan Verkovic states that they danced

night and day, they put rye straw on their backs, blackened their faces, wore beards and eyebrows made of goat hair, a leather hat, bells around their waists, and danced to the sound of a drum or a bagpipe. It is emphasized that men disguised themselves as women (Verkovic, 1985, 95). Before the New Year itself, vasilichari groups also gathered, as Kuzman Shapkarev informs us. These groups performed similar rituals to those of rusalia and jamalar, they consisted of unmarried boys and married men of middle age and went from house to house or to other nearby villages (Šapkarev, 1976, 100; Penušliski, 2004, 80), which basically corresponds to rusalia customs.

The general impression is that the group or troupe had specific demands regarding roles, clothing and public performance. Blackening the face with soot, using hemp or long hairs of animal and plant origin as eyebrows, mustaches and beards, leather vests, cowbells hung round the waist, crutches they rested on, stroke and knocked on gates with, accompanied by playing the bagpipes, zurlas, beating the drums and various tin plates at the gatherings, enriched the symbolism of the ancient custom of expelling evil spirits. In short, the transformation of the performers into “old men” and “brides” thanks to special “maskers”, as Jordan Plevnesh notes, over time turned these troupes into folk theater. “In accordance to those theatrical performances, the people created a great variety of human and animal masks, manifesting themselves as a great artist” (Plevneš, 1989, 104).

Shapkarev is related to another voluminous work that refers strictly to rusalia groups, and is of importance to our article. According to it, rusalia groups consisted of 20–60 men or boys, aged 20–40, all in pairs; the troupe formed a whole traditional dance group, accompanied by two pairs of musicians, drummers and trumpeters; the leaders were in pairs, one was called “prot” or “baltajia” and the other “kesejia”; the first of the couple coming after them was called “yuzbashia”; to the left and right, one in front, the other behind, walked another pair called “chaushis”; each company had 2–4 servants; two “callouses” went first as scouts. The further movements and actions of the troupe depended precisely on the two of them. The weapon the baltajia carried was an axe, whereas the others carried swords with the tips pointing upwards (Šapkarev, 1987, 113–114). The fact that some of the participants in the

ritual were or became blood brothers also speaks of the strong ties that prevailed in the rusalian groups, whereby the “principle of duality (pair), which is known to us from the Macedonian rusalians” was implemented (Načov, 1895, 63).

It is interesting that the terminology of giving ranks, i.e. roles among the Macedonian rusalies in a large number of cases is of non-Slavic origin: one of the leaders was named as yuzbashi, which was a rank of captain in the Ottoman army; the *çauş* were named according to the Ottoman non-commissioned officer rank; *kalauzi* means patrol, i.e. scout; the *baltajia* is named after the Turkish noun *balta*, which means axe, so in direct translation it means: “the one who carries an axe”; *kesejia* in literal translation from Turkish means road robber, and here it should mean a strong/violent person (Ĵařar–Nasteva, 2001); *prot* or *prota*, on the other hand, has no Turkish origin and meant the first (older, most significant) among the rusalii whose basis lies in the clerical rank of archpriest or protopresbyter.

However, there were also some other designations of the participants in the troupes, so besides the permanent “bride” (a man disguised as a woman), we also meet “*trkalyash*” (similar to the scout), “fortune teller”, “headman”, “*voyvoda*” (of the older ones, as one of the leaders), “grandfather” (again one of the elders), as well as in the post-Ottoman period “*pop*”, “prisoner”, “doctor”, “militiaman” (Zdravev, 1975, 370), etc. And this shows us that every aspect of the troupe’s activities was taken care of.

3. The fight of the rusalia (*babar, jamalar*) groups

The possibilities of ending the customs with a fatal outcome started with the departure of the members of the group from their home and going to another village. It is important that, before starting the ritual celebration, the men said goodbye to their family members and all their relatives with hugs and kisses, “as if going to an actual war, from where it is not known whether they will come back safe and sound” (Shapkarev, 1987, 115). This information is very significant, because it means that there was a real possibility of an accident occurring, which may have

resulted in death. That is why the farewell with the family represented a true ceremony of warriors going into the unknown, and it was important for the recovery of morale because the rusalia members were not allowed to contact the family during the entire 12 days while the performance of the rusalian customs lasted.

Moving inside the village was safe for the troupe, but once it left the village and moved to another, the chances of encountering another troupe increased. Therefore, the abilities of the guides, that is, the scouts, were of exceptional importance. To a large extent, the peaceful development of rusalia customs depended on their skill. They were supposed to inform the leaders of the group if they noticed the presence of another group in order to avoid an encounter. The troupes that considered themselves strong, simply headed to their intended destination; those who, on the other hand, would have felt the superiority of the others from a distance, stopped to get out of the way of the former or continued walking, but alongside paths to avoid a fight. The guides were also finding out if another group had already arrived in a certain village. If that was the case, they did not enter the village, but simply bypassed it. If, on the other hand, they arrived first in the village, the villagers welcomed them with honors, food, drink and clothes.

When two such groups met by some chance, there was extreme tension, which ended in a mutual fight, because most of the time neither of them gave way. Exceptions were made only if the numerical superiority of one group over the other was evident. In that case, those who yielded were obliged to express submission by bowing their swords to the ground. Also, they had to pass with bowed heads under the outstretched swords of the victors who stood on either side, making a corridor. Passing under the corridor with drawn swords meant great humiliation, and precisely because of this, such exceptions were rarely made (Shapkarev, 1987, 120–121). The negotiations between the leaders of the troupes took place in the middle of the road. If “no company wanted to humble itself and submit, and each stood persistently in proving that it was stronger and better, then the baltajia would have shouted: ‘*krmnina*’ i.e. even if blood is spilled, we will not give up. Also, the rusalia with the cry *krmnina* three times in a row supported the opinion and courage of their baltajia” (Tanović, 1957, 280). That meant only one thing: bloodshed.

We have already mentioned that the rusalija (jamalar, babar) groups were armed and fought with sabers and knives, but they also carried long sticks, called cheporoshki or suruvaski, with them. Hristo Shaldev states that: “according to the custom of the rusalians, it is forbidden to carry firearms” (Šaldev, 1930, 103). Dressed in a variety of camouflage clothing, with sound equipment which, according to past experiences, should have instilled awe in the ritual observers i.e. the enemies, we can in fact view these troupes as a sort of military groups. Their combat structure reminds us indisputably of the old pagan ways of warfare of the Slavs, when they intimidated the enemy with uproar and shouts. That is why we agree with Svetlana Tornjanski Brashnovic’s statement, complemented by Kristina Mitic’s conclusion that these processions represent “closed male groups” (Mitić, 2016, 86). The organized group of rusalija actually represented a solid core built around magical and physical powers, used to fully fulfill the tasks that arose from the rite.

We will supplement this point of view with the view that the rusalija and other masked groups can also be seen as small military units because they were organized according to hierarchy, were armed with appropriate weapons, acted with calls for mutual encouragement and intimidation of others, they were not subject to trial and punishment, which is why both Christians and Muslims tried to protect themselves from them. To what extent people were convinced that the murders carried out by these groups appropriately dressed for the occasion, i.e. masked groups were justified, is also shown by Mihail Arnaudov’s remark about the eshkars from Kailar region that there was a belief that the eshkars were not subject to criminal law, therefore the people living there at that time did not leave their homes “so that they wouldn’t suffer” (Arnaudov, 1920, 42).

The question is, why and how did ordinary peasants, farmers and herdsmen transform into a group with a solid core, united around the thought that blood should be shed? The reasons behind the demands expressed as ultimatum: “make way for us” or “get off our way” may be sought in the belief that the other group might be an apparition or might be possessed by evil forces that need to be destroyed; or in the belief that it is inevitable to perform the bloody ritual, or simply to demonstrate superiority (Kozarov, 2010, 44). During the unbaptized days, through their

play and swinging of swords, the rusalia groups emphasized the healing effect of their groups. However, it is interesting that “neither the baltaji, nor the keseji nor the dancer, i.e. the yuzbashi – consider themselves to be the bearers of the healing supernatural power... yet they consider their action to be an expression of the popular belief in such power of the troupes” (Ortakov, 1999, 263). This time the blood sacrifice was given by the defeated group, with the victors believing that in this way they were defeating the dark forces as well. The behavior of the rusalia groups conceived in this way, as much as they contain the ritual, they also contain the masculinist notions of showing strength and supremacy in relation to others and demanding their submission.

There were many such clashes in Ottoman Macedonia in the 19th century. The fighting brought unrest among the local population, but also among the Ottoman authorities, because public order and peace were disturbed. There are testimonies of K. Shapkarev and H. Shaldev, according to which, in order to avoid clashes, the authorities demanded to be informed about the activities of the troupes. According to Shapkarev, “before assembling and setting off, each group is provided with a permit from the local government after giving a credible message that nothing unpleasant and no mischief or any similar conflict will happen the way it was happening before” (Shapkarev, 1987, 121). Shaldev, on the other hand, wrote that “in order to avoid similar clashes and giving sacrifices, in recent times the Turkish authorities permitted rusalia games only when the village elders and the headman promised that unfortunate clashes would be avoided” (Shaldev, 1930, 105). These recommendations were not always fruitful, so the mentioned fights arose. They continued to take place, albeit with reduced intensity, in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, the custom of gathering in groups in the Kratovo region lasted until 1955 “after which they were banned by the authorities, and some were severely punished” (Georgievski, 2012, 304), while in the Prilep area of Krivogashtani “the authorities in the village banned these customs” in 1965 (Ristovski, 1975, 222).

Today, as a remnant of the old times, in the village of Sekirnik, Strumica region, a rusali group exists, but exclusively as a folklore group under the name Cultural Artistic Society “Rusalii”. The rusalia games that this folklore society performs today have a completely different

purpose (participation in festivals, etc.). And even though the old titular ranks such as *baltadjia*, *kesejia*, etc. have been retained in their public appearances (“*Todor Kapidan*”, “*K’rmazi fustan*” and “*Ali koch ava*”) (Dimovski, 1974, 167), they represent only remnants of former fighting groups of selected men who were ready to give their lives in the name of destroying evil forces, of friendship within the company, of strength and supremacy, i.e. of various ritual beliefs which were supposed to bring a good year.

4. Burial of the dead

The bodies of the murdered members of the groups were buried on the spot, without any religious ceremony, because they were killed during the unbaptized days. That is why no priest was called for them and no funeral was held. Piles of stones or a larger stone slab were placed on the graves to mark the place of the grave. Since such battles took place outside the villages, these graves were mostly located along the roads in the fields and in the hills, by crossroads, but also in some places which were more difficult to reach which then changed the toponymy with the noun: cemetery or grave. Both Christians and Muslims treated these graves with respect. They did not tear them down or damage them, but attended them with dignity by maintaining, cleaning and sometimes, by laying flowers, as the British archaeologist Arthur J. Evans noticed during his trip to Macedonia, in the wider area around Skopje, in the vicinity of today’s village of Petrovec (Evans, 2014, 50–51).

There is more information about fighting during the unbaptized days that resulted in deaths. Among the first data on fights and graves of members of the *rusalia* groups are the records of Stefan Verkovic who noted: “When one group meets another, they beat each other up. There are still today cemeteries along the streets and roads, which they say are *rusalian*”, with a note written on the side that: “In a village of Orizarci, Voden parish, four people were killed four years ago” (1985, 84). In Skopje, we are informed by M. Kratovaliev, “it recently happened in our place that two brothers who went with the *jamals* were killed: their graves are still standing and are called: ‘*rusalian*’” (1894, 179). In Bitola’s Radobor,

“there is a place called Grave in the Bara area. At some time in the New Year, babars met there; one of the babars died here and is buried here” (Trifunoski, 1998, 161). In another interesting case, “in Kukush Field, 4 km from the village of Gumendzha, there are rusalía graves on which the year 1842 is engraved. According to the informants, they were dug after the last slaughter of two rusalía groups” (Dimovski, 1974, 166). Furthermore, according to an oral tradition which was maintained all the way to the 1960s, the existence of the site Grob (Grave) near the village of Zhivojno, Bitola, relates to a babar fight: “According to the legend, Grob (the Grave) belongs to one of the babars who died on the feast of St. Basil in the clash between the babars from the villages of Zhivojno and Cetina and was buried in this very place” (Josifovska, 1963, 288). However, the origin of most of these graves is unknown. However, as Jovan Trifunoski notes, “the name itself shows that they could have been created at a time when the famous ‘rusalki’ games were performed in this area as well. As it is known, rusalii are folk customs in Macedonia, when men around All-Souls’ Day went around the villages and performed games with sabers...” (Trifunoski, 1987–1988, 387).

5. Conclusion

In the text we have referred to the rituals associated with the rusalía and other similar rites in Ottoman Macedonia in the 19th century. As noted by the researchers who worked on this topic, these centuries-old rites old Slavic pre-Christian customs are mixed with Christian celebrations. However, the topic of murders carried out during the performance of these rites has not yet been addressed in a separate study. That is why our interest has been related to the pagan custom performed by the rusalía troupes (babar, jamalar, surovar troupes) whose members were dressed in masks during the so-called unbaptized days (from January 7 to 19). The purpose of these armed groups that traveled from village to village was to expel evil spirits. According to the custom, if two such groups met, the leaders of the groups demanded that the others submit to them with the words: “make way for us”. Since submission meant great shame and humiliation, the groups usually refused this

proposal. Back then, that encounter ended in bloodshed and the death of individuals caused by axes, knives or sticks. To the question of where the transformation of ordinary villagers into highly motivated potential killers involved in a military group came from, one can answer that it is a mixture of the belief that the other group is possessed by evil forces that need to be destroyed, the belief that it is inevitable the bloody ritual to be performed, as well as the simple demonstration of superiority. The bodies of the murdered members were buried in the place where they were killed, so there are rusalija, babar or jamalar graves at several locations. No religious ceremony was performed for them, because they were killed during the unbaptized days. The idea of destroying evil forces seems to have influenced the long-time preservation of this pagan custom embedded in Christian beliefs.

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- **SLAVCHO KOVILOSKI** – PhD, literary historian and culturologist at the Institute of Macedonian Literature (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje). He is the author of several monographs relating to the 19th century, including women's writing, folklore, history of Macedonian literature, analysis of Slavic manuscripts: *Travel Literature in Macedonian 19th Century*, *Macedonian Women's Writing in the 19th Century*, *Prilep And Prilep Area in the 19th Century*, *Macedonian Literary Critique in 19th Century*, etc. He has been the editor-in-chief of the oldest Macedonian literary magazine *Sovremenost* and executive editor of the scientific magazine *Spektar*. He is the editor-in-chief of *Stozher* magazine of the Writers' Society of Macedonia. He was awarded the state award for science “Goce Delchev” for 2018.