

THE ROLE OF GENDERS IN RITUAL PRACTICE OF OUR PEOPLE

In former years numerous research has shown that in the ritual practice of our people, more precisely in their beliefs, there exists a variety of prohibitions or taboos which tend to acquire some specific features on certain occasions.¹ These taboos serve as some sort of “regulators” of an imagined link between people and supernatural powers that are most often seen as animistic.² All the available material contained in the rich literature on this subject shows that the concept of supernatural beings is based on our people’s belief that they are similar to human beings and hence have the same activities and reactions as humans. They can be good and benevolent but also evil and vindictive; therefore, one must win them over for one’s purposes either by bribing, bestowing gifts, worshipping or avoiding any conflict or disagreement that might provoke their fury or revenge and thus harm both people and their environment.

The religion of the Serbs, regardless of phases it passed through,³ has preserved such a system of taboos with woman having a specific role in it. These original ancient beliefs generated the popular distinction between male and female work, days, sides, demons etc. On the basis of this distinction a belief has been created that everything man does is predetermined to be good, progressive and “correct”;⁴ both he and his work are a real blessing not only for his home

¹ Bandić, D., *Tabu u tradicionalnoj kulturi Srba*, Biblioteka 20. vek, Beograd, 1980. The definition of a taboo: “Taboo can be defined as a set of negative regulations (prohibitions, restrictions) used to summarize people’s behavior and which stem from their imagined relationships with the supernatural. Therefore we shall include in a taboo those negative regulations by which people regulate their relationships with the supernatural in all its manifestations – from the notions of the soul and manna to that of God.

² Opinions differ on whether numerous prohibitions are based on different notions of the soul (animism), on an idea that everything is ruled by an almighty and formidable power – manna or if taboos should be treated as religious phenomena.

³ Our present religion has undergone three phases: the first was theism with a dominant animistic system; later on these pagan beliefs acquired only formal Christian characteristics; the last phase is atheism which became popular in the latter half of the century.

⁴ Man is untouchable in our ritual practice. He is not to be contradicted or approached; one must not touch his things when he starts some work; he is not addressed by his first name or asked where he is going or what he is doing... and all other things.

but for the entire community which he dominates. Even the right side, that of progress and the sun, is attributed to man.

By contrast, woman is seen as a “menace” and is forbidden many things lest she should place man in some danger.⁵ The taboos restricting woman and her activities put her automatically into supernatural being – a representative of the “supernatural” that must be avoided. On the other hand, man is a magically “clean” representative of this living and really existing world which, according to the taboos, belongs to man.

Judging by the real state of things, it is difficult to fully comprehend our ritual practice, the gender relationships, and numerous taboos that restrict mostly the activities of woman. Paradoxically, woman as a representative of the “supernatural” has a dominant role in the rituals and customs throughout the year. Her domination starts at the beginning of Lent and lasts through the end of the agricultural year (usually from March to August). Thus woman comes into this Man’s world at the time of the reawakening of nature, when the seed is planted into the soil and the gradual revival of this world begins.

Woman starts her essential role by gathering plants that will have healing and magical powers throughout the year both for people and cattle. She does this at the feasts starting with Todor’s Day, Holy Innocents’ Day, and Willow Day and finishing with Palm Sunday, seven days before Easter. They are all accompanied by appropriate women’s songs and activities performed with no assistance from men. A very significant role is also attached to *lazarice* (girls singing traditional songs on the eve of Lazar’s Saturday); people believe that they make processions for the benefit of the fields, cattle, and people. In the procession of *lazarice* dancing is almost as important as singing; the main dancing elements like stamping, turning around and leaping are defined by ethnocoreology as ways to conjure the wind, help the crops to grow and be more fertile. The participants of processions are exclusively women (earlier young women, but nowadays infant girls).

Women are also entrusted to defend the homestead against snakes and other pests; they are responsible for protecting cattle from sorcery and spells. They start their numerous seasonal festivities on Todor’s Day (the first Saturday of Lent) and complete them on Jeremiah’s Day (May 14).

At times of great drought woman regains her importance – she is the one who appeals to supernatural powers to be merciful and send the rain so that planted crops can grow and bear fruit. At the end of the agricultural year woman has an important role not because she works so much but because she performs the rituals. Women are responsible for the spirit of wheat; they decorate the last handful of wheat, make it into a garland or some other form, take it to the barn, sing to it while adorning it or dance around it.

⁵ Woman must not “dirty” man and his things when she menstruates or at the delivery and forty days after that; she must not touch him or wash and patch up his things on certain days, nor can she say good-bye when he goes somewhere.

Since man is the representative of the "physical world," he deals with the dark or "dead" time of the year, from Slavias (Feasts) to Whit Sunday when the earth is virtually lifeless. The following ritual activities are solely men's responsibilities: the piglet, paying first visits on Christmas morning, organizing the winter ritual processions (koledari, sirovari, vucari, busari, vertepi). Women perform these ritual activities only in some exceptional situations.⁶

From this brief survey one can notice that at the time of nature's reawakening the ritual activities determining people's survival are performed by woman, the magically "unclean" representative of the "supernatural." During the usual winter lethargy, however, the ritual activities are conducted mainly by man, that magically "clean" representative of the "physical world," which is felt as real. This means that the survival of that which is of this world, a living part of man's world, depends on the activities of woman as someone who represents the "other world," the supernatural world. During the winter months man dominates out of fear that the "supernatural world" might prevail completely; the whole period itself abounds in the supernatural and the nonliving and therefore it is of crucial importance that a magically "clean" man should appear to perform all main rituals and thus protect this part of the year against a complete transfer into the "supernatural world".

An important question arises: is this gender roles distinction accidental or not? What is the reason for entrusting the magically "unclean" representative of the "supernatural world" to perform the ritual activities of the summer when nature reawakens and the soil bears fruit and when the course the year affects the survival of not only the woman and her family but also the entire community?⁷ The answer can be found in the so-called life circle of customs, namely the taboos referring to woman at the times of her pregnancy, delivery, wedding and partly funeral ceremonies.

From man's point of view woman has one supernatural trait, that of creating life (by giving birth). Thus she is particularly dangerous when giving birth, so for forty days after delivery she is not (and was not) allowed to touch anything in the house or to "mingle" with other members of the family. Nor is the period of pregnancy harmless either; woman was allowed to work in the fields until the very moment of delivery (even to deliver her baby there) but in other

⁶ Woman only can do so-called man's work if she is a widow and such has assumed the role of the head of the household. Then she can be a first visitor on Christmas morning, bake Christmas buns, bring straw into the house and visit the cattle on Christmas Day; this means that even during this "dead" season of the year man does not perform alone all ritual activities.

⁷ All the past ritual practice seems to have been confined to the house, that is the family, its settlement, and the community as well. D. Bandić claims that the house is the place of woman's evident domination, man being responsible for the things outside. My viewpoint, however, is quite different because it is obvious that woman dominates man's world throughout half of the year, from the time of nature's reawakening till the end of the agricultural year.

activities she was restricted by various taboos, both those that considered her harmful and those by which she was protected. Not being able to solve the greatest mystery that woman contained, our distant ancestors assigned her a supernatural role. Thus she became magically “of the other world,” and a mysterious element in the living part of this world, which belonged to man.

Acquiring these characteristics she resembled nature and its powers, which were inexplicable. As such she was able to invoke rain, scare away storm clouds, create a link with the ancestors by offering gifts and conveying messages to them. She affected either vicariously or indirectly the fertility of crops and cattle; woman was also capable of breaking or casting spells if necessary. She was probably the only one who was able to constitute a link with supernatural beings and powers determining the survival of people in general.

A final question to be answered: what does woman stand for in this living world of man? She seems to have the same significance as the *magna mater* – Great Mother or Mother Earth for all people.