

Summary

At one with God and Nature Folk culture in the Balkans

The book “At one with God and Nature” presents Balkan folklore as a significant part of folk culture, which is based not only on the Slavic and Christian legacy, but also traditions that are an amalgam of elements inherited from earlier inhabitants of the Balkan peninsula. In it we find echoes of pagan religions carried into our times through oral culture (folklore and faith) and behaviour (cultural and ceremonial practices).

The author divides the calendar year into three, in accordance with the three principal stages of human life and with regard to these she presents festivals related to nature’s growing cycle, skilfully showing how humans are dependent on the forces of nature and the flora and fauna. This is illustrated by Bulgarian, Macedonian and Serbian folk texts.

The book comprises three main chapters: “Birth”, “Bloom” and “Death”, preceded by an introduction in which the author conducts historical reconnaissance by chronicling events on the Balkan peninsula from Antiquity through to the present day.

The first chapter (“Birth”) discusses the importance of choosing a child’s name, the ways in which such a choice is made and the cult of ancestors (related to inheriting given names). Attention is given to predicting a child’s future, which is determined by “the orisnica”, on which a person’s future and fortunes depend. Festivals related to the awakening of nature are then analysed, starting from the festival in honour of St. Tryphon, which heralds the start of the active summer season. This is followed by a description of successive festivals and traditional celebrations (martenice, kukeri, lazaruwane, St. George’s Day, festival of water nymphs etc.). Here the author focuses on the “awakening” of certain atmospheric phenomena, such as rain, and the magical, celebrations related to them. This chapter ends with a description of nestinarstvo, an practice from eastern Bulgaria, no longer performing its former role and functioning solely as institutionalised folklore utilised for tourism purposes.

Chapter Two (“Bloom”) is devoted to ceremonial traditions during the seasons when nature is in bloom and when humans are in their prime of life. The author analyses festivals celebrated at harvest time and those rituals that ensure an abundance of crops. Examples of such festivals include St. John’s Day, “hot days”, and St. Elias’ Day. These celebrations take place when the sun is at its highest point, and then slowly loses its power, which is when nature begins its ‘descent’ towards winter. This is why the analysis here focuses on the period of human maturity, which is connected with marriage and its associated change in social status.

In Chapter Three (“Death”) the author describes autumn and winter traditions, the festivals associated with nature “falling asleep” and “dying”, when the harvest has been collected and stored away, and when the next period of rest begins, along with expressions of thanks to the holy guardians of the home. This cycle begins with St. Dimitri’s Day, Michaelmas and “wolf’s days”, and closes with the *koleda* of the festive season and the New Year. These are followed by the “unchristened days”, when nature closes the cycle and prepares to start anew. The symbolism of human death is skilfully incorporated into storytelling (bajane), folk methods of healing through words and healing ceremonies. The author’s focus then moves to lamentational folk songs, necrologies, printed remembrances of the deceased and tombstone epitaphs. The book closes with a sub-chapter on “stopanin”, the guardian of the home, one of the ancestors bringing the present and former generations together into one whole. This provides closure for both the eternal cycle of nature and of human life.

Each of the festivals or stages of human life described in the book is illustrated by texts, primarily folk texts, but also several fragments taken from literature. Except for those in their original spoken language or dialect, each text is translated into Polish, which allows the reader to discover the Balkans’ rich oral literature.

Translated by Rob Pagett