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# НОМО ВАРКАНИКУС

## Поведенческие сценарии и культурные роли

*Античность • Средневековье • Новое время*

**Балканские чтения 6**  
Тезисы и материалы

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утов Леонид Липавский [1935]. Его собрат по философским («чинарским») беседам Я.С. Друскин раскрывал эту мысль следующим образом: «...я вижу мир не таким, как он есть, и не таким, каким вижу, а каким хочу, а иногда не хочу видеть... Язык делит мир на части, чтобы понять его. И понимает части разделенного языком мира. Язык и соединяет разделенные части. Это деление мира на части предполагает и одновременно создает определенный взгляд на мир. При этом возникают два отношения: 1. Отношение разделяющего языка к разделенному — семантическое отношение. 2. Отношение разделенных языком частей — ситуационное отношение» [записи 1950–1970].

Дейктическая система — один из наиболее действенных инструментов «деления мира на части». Сложная или простая по своим ресурсам и правилам, именно она в первую очередь помогает человеку ориентироваться в пространстве и — по своей воле — это пространство расширять и ограничивать, осваивать и присваивать или отторгать. Будучи включенными в дейксис (это, разумеется, не элиминирует других их свойств и функций), диминутивы и, особенно и специально, новогреческие диминутивы *делят* мир и *соединяют* разделенное — и «одновременно создают определенный взгляд на мир», указывая, в самом общем плане, стратегию поведения.

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## SO THAT THE VIRGIN MAY SMILE (Ritual Obscenity as a Cultural Phenomenon)

### 1. Frame of reference

This paper considers certain specific dimensions of obscene language, with special regard to Slavonic and Balkan traditional culture. In this, ritual obscenity and invective phraseology are a sacral and/or sacred text.

In fact, in ancient Greek there existed a special term — *αἰσχρολογία* — denoting the «imperative» usage of insulting language within the frame-

work of fertility rites. As the metamorphosis of this rather archaic concept within the context of the folk Christianity, I should like to remind you that in Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Poland, Serbia, Bulgaria, etc., in some cases obscenity is still regarded as both a frontier and a bridge between «this» Universe and «that» — the reversed Universe; for example, there still exists a belief, according to which human beings could protect themselves from the evil spirits [or, as Russians would say, «от всякой нечисти»] by either swearing or praying. In this, as folklore tradition would suggest, «надо молиться или же материться» [«one must either pray or swear»]; parallel to this, it is also recommended that one should make either a sign of the cross, or an obscene gesture. In this respect, as we can see, invective acquires the rank of a sacred text.

To sum it all up, in my paper I will consider certain universal cultural stereotypes, with special regard to specific dimensions of obscene language within the framework of Slavonic and Balkan traditional culture. In this I will try to answer the following questions — what kind of ritual context requires the usage of obscene language, who swears and when is it right and proper to do so; when is the swearing considered to be a sacral and/or sacred activity, where may it take place and why?

Further, I will try to analyze the «morphology» of particular ritual texts, which one may define as «living antiquities». Although recorded recently, they represent some rather archaic concept of interrelation and communication between «the divine» and «the human» worlds.

And last but not least, the paper argues that ritual obscenity as a component of Slavonic and Balkan traditional culture represents the verbal paradigm of fertility rites, where the fruitfulness of the land, people and animals is regarded as the epitome of the ordered harmony of the Universe. Henceforth, the use of obscene language is considered to exemplify one of the strategies for achieving it.

## 2. Regarding the «female» obscenity

I should like to begin my presentation with the following story.

In 1981, as a PhD student at the Moscow University, I carried out field-research amongst the Bulgarian settlers in Bessarabia. In the village of Kirsovo, Komrat area, while recording the description of traditional funeral ceremony, I was told that, according to the local customary practice, during the day, women have to lament over the body of their

dead relatives, while during the night they have to «spin dirty funny yarns instead, so that the Virgin may smile».

The explanation which I was given by my informants as to why one has to narrate obscene jokes over the body of their dead relatives and laugh during the night before the funerals, was astonishing; at the same time, the idiom «so that the Virgin may smile» indicated to me certain implicit parallels between the folklore legend from Kirsovo about the consolation of the Virgin on the one hand, and the classical myth about the consolation of the goddess of agriculture and fertility Demeter, on the other.

However, it was not the similarity between the plot of the folklore legend and the plot of the classical myth that struck me most, but the fact that there was a certain almost breathtaking parallelism between these two texts not only on the level of their content, but on the level of their syntax too. As if the remark «So that the Virgin may smile», as spelled out by my informants in Kirsovo, was an exact translation of a verse from, let's say, the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, or — if you prefer — a quotation from the story concerning the origin of the Eleusinian Mysteries, as told by Apollodorus Mythographus.

First of all, I should like to briefly remind you of the content of the plot about the consolation of the goddess, as described in the literary sources. When Hades fell in love with Persephone and took her away, Zeus assisted him in this adventure. The grief of her mother Demeter had no end — she began seeking her daughter all over the world; eventually, she heard from one of the sons of Hyperion that Persephone had been raped by Hades; Demeter was furious and left the Heavens; dressed as an old woman, she wandered upon the world in search of her child; she mourned and kept fast (she tasted neither ambrosia, nor nectar); the goddess stopped smiling and because of that the earth stopped bearing fruit; eventually, she reached Eleusis, the city of Kelios; at first she sat next to the spring, beneath the rock, which later was called after her «Agelastes» [‘the one who doesn't smile’], so that the people might remember the sorrowful goddess was sitting there; afterwards she went to the palace of Keleos; there was a certain old woman called **Iamba** who used obscene language and made mourning Demeter smile. This is why it is said that women ridicule each other at the feast of Demeter — the goddess of cornfields and agriculture, worshipped by them as the **Earth-Mother**, and the prime source of fertility, and childbirth in particular.

Thus the name **Iamba** turned into the epitome of ritual obscenity, while she became the personification of life-giving laughter; later on, her image came to be one of the «labels» of the poetic norms of classical tradition; subsequently, the metrical foot [consisting of one unstressed and one stressed syllable], which was considered to be the most common measure in classical comic verse, was called after her — **iambos**.

According to another version of the story concerning Demeter's consolation though, it was not Iamba who made the goddess break her fast, but the old woman **Baubo**; she did it by lifting up her shirt, with legs wide apart, exposing her womb, and pronouncing obscene words, while showing to Demeter the new-born laughing child; his name was **Iakchos**. According to different versions of the story, he was considered either the son of Persephone, or the son of Demeter herself. When the goddess saw him, she laughed too, and smilingly accepted the drink. Thus the fast was broken and fertility came back to the world. As to the question, who the new-born child was, some specialists in classical studies [for example, C. Kerényi] suggested, that the appellation Iakchos expresses a certain specific concept of epiphany of the god [Dionysos] himself, because this lexeme labelled both a **name** of a deity, and a **shout of invocation**, «with which the divine child was hailed at the Eleusinian Mysteries»; that is to say, Iakchos and Bacchus were considered the same deity. According to the text of some Orphic stories, though, he was not only the son of Persephone, but also the lover of Demeter too. Apparently, there is one more striking parallel between the written, classical version of the ancient Greek myth and the oral, folklore text; the phonetic structure of the lexeme **Iakchos** recalls the phonetic structure of some traditional Balkan **shouts of invocation** accompanying joyful, passionate, ecstatic dance, like [Ихххх! Яххххх!] «Iakhu-khu», it seems to me that this phonetic similarity indicates further correspondences on the semantic and/or semiotic levels, which reflect upon a certain common cultural background.

As for the name of the old woman **Iambe**, who consoled the goddess, while it survived in modern European civilization only within the vocabulary of literary studies as a term denoting jesting verse, the traditional culture in the Balkans still «remembers» her as an old woman, lifting up her shirt, with legs wide apart, exposing her womb, and pronouncing obscene words, which are to bring fertility for people and animals, harvest and peace for Heavens.

An interesting comparison is the case of the carved stone reliefs in the Ireland, representing a gesture which recalls Iambe [and/or Baubo's] act. According to an anonymous author of the «Essay on the Worship of the Generative Powers during the Middle Ages of Europe» (1865),

«It is a singular fact that in Ireland it was the female organ which was shown in the position of protector upon the churches, and the elaborate, though rude manner in which these figures were sculptured, shows that they were considered as an object of great importance. They represent a female exposing herself to view in the most unequivocal manner, and are carved on a block which appears to have served as the keystone to the arch of the doorway of the church, where they were presented to the gaze of all who entered. [...] People have given them the name of Shelah-na-Gig, which, we are told, means in Irish, Julian the Giddy, and is simply a term for an immodest woman.»

Apparently, both carved stone reliefs in Ireland, and the classical literary texts about Iamba and/or Baubo, refer to a common cultural prototype, which is representative of the archaic concept of birth-rebirth mysteries.

As for the correspondence between the classical and the folklore versions of the myth of the consolation of Demeter, in both cases the goddess had to smile, and subsequently, to break the fast and/or stop mourning; in the classical myth it was an old woman Iambe [and/or Baubo] who made Demeter laugh; yet according to the folklore tradition, any storyteller-woman, who was spinning the obscene yarn during the period of mourning, could make the Virgin smile. These «dirty texts» are denoted in Slavonic folklore tradition by the adjective «blag»/«blazhen» [«благ», «блажен»], which could mean 'sweet', 'meat', 'fast-breaking'; this lexeme has also some sexual connotations; thus the hot sweet brandy which — according to the tradition — is to be served after the defloration of the bride, is again denoted by using the same adjective; it is called «Blaga rakija» [«Блага ракия»]. Significant in this respect is the evolution of the semantic shift of the Old Church Slavonic lexeme **blazhiti**; in some Slavonic languages [Bulgarian, Serbian], it denotes both 'breaking the fast', on the one hand, and 'narrating dirty stories and/or singing songs containing obscene words', on the other. At the same time **blazhiti** etymologically corresponds with the Old Church Slavonic word for benefit, prosperity, well-being [«blago»].

Ritual obscenity, connected with the observation of some «female feasts» [like harvest rites and/or ritual activities, connected with the child-birth], it is not only indicative of the maintenance of some unique relics of ancient classical mythological patterns, but also illustrates the process of transformation of some archaic cultural concepts, symbols and metaphors which still function within the context of Slavonic and Balkan traditional culture. As for the «female» dimensions of ritual obscenity [as described by Aristophanes' Thesmophoriazusae], they correlate with some aspects of the celebration of the Babinden («Бабинден») [Midwives'] feast day, which is to be observed on the third day after Epiphany. On that day, ritual obscenity is considered an «imperative» component of female ritual activities. The only ones eligible to participate in this festival are married women; moreover, it is obligatory for all the «young mothers» to attend, for the good health of their offspring. On that day, the saying goes, «the hen turns into a rooster and crows as such»; that is to say, «on that day, women rule the world and men have to remain silent and to obey the orders of their wives»; the central figure in the ritual ceremonies is the midwife of the village. She has to dance and shout «**Ikhu-khuu! Iakhu-khuu!**» («Иху-хуу! Яху-хуу!»), according to some of my informants, the midwife must also «lift up her skirt», imitating the delivery of a baby, so that the women and the earth may be fruitful. At that moment when she shows the new-born child, all the participants in the ritual ceremony have to laugh and shout «**Ikhu-khuu! Iakhu-khuu!**» («Иху-хуу! Яху-хуу!») as well. As we can see, paradoxically enough, the ritual scenario of the Babinden feast day «repeats» the scenario of Eleusinian Mysteries. This myth performs as a ritual.

Furthermore, as my informants emphasized, on that day women may only use obscene language, for the good health of their offspring. As for the men, they are not allowed to attend; moreover — they have to stay at home and must not leave it by any means; and if «defected» while breaking this taboo, the ones who are found guilty are to be severely punished; women are allowed to take their pants off and to penalize them by pinching them. As for the punishment, it is up to the women to decide what they consider appropriate in this case.

### 3. Regarding the «male» obscenity

As for the «male» obscene rituals, some of them correlate with the orgiastic mysteries of Dionysus, the god of fertility and wine, ecstasy and drama;

apparently, in the Balkans «male» obscenity is associated with masked rituals. Carnivals are considered the ritual core of fertility festivities; they are to be celebrated during the periods of 'transition'. They could be performed either during the Twelve Days of Christmas, often called the «Dirty/Bawdy Days» [«Мръсни дни»], or during the last two weeks before Lent [respectively, the seventh and the sixth week before Easter], known also as «Месни заговезни» and «Сирни заговезни». The men dance, following the rhythm of the bells which they carry on their belts and jump as much as they can, so that the harvest may be rich; quite significant in this respect is the fact that they either must dance silently, or if they speak, they have to use insulting language. This is considered to be an imperative component of the ritual. At the same time they chase the women and touch their breasts and legs. The leader of the dancing men, which are called «**kukeri**» (кукери) [in some areas they are known as «babugeri» (бабугери), «startsi» (старци), etc.] prays at the end of the festival for fertility of land, people and animals. His «prayer» is called «**blagoslavka**» (благославка), «**boguslavka**» (богуславка), «**blazhka**» (блажка), etc. These terms mean both 'the blessing and/or prayer consisting of fast-breaking words' and 'the sweet blessing and/or prayer to god'; the verses in his recitative consist of obscene words. In this, ritual obscenity ranks with sacred/sacral prayer. One may draw an analogy with the semantic shift of the lexeme for «swear», for example, which could either denote 'use of the language that is considered to be rude or offensive', or 'solemn promise'. In this way, the linguistic retrospection would clarify the semantic evolution.

### 4. About Semela as «Земля»

There is one more version of the classical story concerning the mysteries of Dionysus, the god of fertility and wine, that I want to talk about. It is about his birth by **Semela**. This story reflects upon one of the basic categories of traditional Slavonic culture. Moreover, it «survived» on the level of the language.

From the etymological point of view, the appellation «Semela» could be compared with the old-Phrygian word Σεμελα, denoting both 'earth' and 'the Great Mother'; with the Thracian word Σεμελα, denoting 'earth', 'land', 'soil', 'goddess' with Avestan and old Persian root of the word for 'terrestrial' — «zam», and with protoslavonic lexeme «zemia»,

denoting 'Earth' and 'Mother Earth', from this word, in turn, originated the Old Church Slavonic — Zemlia; apparently Bulgarian «zemlia»; Russian «zemlia»; Polish «ziemia», etc. Slavonic words for «Earth» have derived from the same stem. Significant in this respect is the fact, that in traditional culture the image of The Mother Earth stands for the image of the Virgin Mary, and vice versa.

Thus, as we can see, the Universe is regarded as a union between the «upper» male part, which is considered to be the sky; and below — female — part.

Furthermore, according to the legend about the Creation of the World, which is widespread amongst the Slavs, once upon a time the male sky was much smaller than the female earth. That's why he was not big enough to cover her. «And then God took the earth by her belly button and shook her, and she started shrivelling, and wrinkling, and shrinking, so she became smaller than the sky. Then the sky was able to cover her. That's why the surface of the earth isn't smooth, but has hills and mountains. So that she can be covered by the sky. That's God's blessing!»

The text of the legend quoted above reflects upon some etymological dimensions of the word for 'sky' in Slavonic languages. In the classical «folklore aetiology», certain aspects of semantic evolution of the concept 'sky' are illustrated. They refer to the particular semantic core denoting «to cover», «to wrap up», «to earth over», «to be above», while the actual concept for 'sky' — «небо» implicitly involves the Hieros-gamos mythological pattern, where the sky stands for a husband, while the wife is represented by an Earth. The rain is regarded as a manifestation of their union. This concept is still alive amongst Slavs and has a lot of implications in their popular culture. It is represented, for instance, by traditional paremiology. Quite significant in this respect is the proverb «Земя без дъжд и жена без мъж не ражда, плод не дава!» («Without rain the Earth doesn't give harvest, nor a woman without a man doesn't give birth!»). The analogy between the bride-groom and a sky, on the one hand, and the bride and the earth on the other, is more than obvious. Some traditional ritual wedding-songs illustrate a similar tendency. The bride-groom is called a «cloud», while the wedding guests are described as a «dark heavy mist» which covers the court-yard of a bride and makes «a new sun arise» in the house of the bride-groom.

*Паднала е тъмна мъгла над момини равни двори.  
То не била тъмна мъгла, най е била тежка сватба.  
Изгреяло ясно слънце над момкови ясни двори.*

*There was a dark cloud over to the bride's court-yard.  
It was not a dark cloud, yet it was a solemn wedding celebration.  
At the same time there was a bright sunrise in the bride-groom's court-yard.*

This allegory is a common pattern in Slavonic customs and ritual songs. The same metaphor, as one might expect, is used in Slavonic oral tradition in order to define the concept of 'war' as a «wedding ceremony», and therefore — as a «heavy cloud descending upon the Earth». In this the image of war is regarded as a synonymous and parallel to the image of the «wedding», and vice versa. Thus the basic cultural opposition, the opposition of «male» and «female» became connected with the opposition between the «sky» and the «Earth». Henceforth, the process of interaction and communication between these two worlds acquires certain «gender» dimensions. The sky signifies a bride-groom, while this marriage to the Earth stands for a rain.

Respectively, the absence of rain is considered as a lack of correspondence between the sky and the earth. The harmony of their relationship is to be restored by a particular ritual, which may be performed only by old women; they gather and make a **male** doll out of mud. Sometimes the doll is called simply «the Phallic one»; however, it might have also many different names, like: the Muddy John [Калчо, Калоян, Кальо]; or simply Ivan, Ian, Ianio [John], which is considered to be typical «male» name; etc.

According to the tradition, this ritual is to be performed either on one of the Thursdays between Easter and Pentecost; or any time during the summer, when considered necessary. The doll has to be covered with multi-coloured egg-shells, so that He might smile, the saying goes.

This doll has to be lamented over by using obscene language, and after that buried in the earth. In this way, as one of my informants emphasized, the mother Earth would marry again; as soon as the body of the male doll is inserted in her, the rain would start.

## 5. Conclusions

I should like to conclude my presentation by sharing with you the following consideration.

The analysis of ritual obscenity as a phenomenon of culture indicates that the Balkan and Slavonic folklore tradition has preserved — until now — some rather archaic mythological themes, motifs and concepts which continue to function as a component of a living ritual system.

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### ДЕМОН-ГЕРОЙ НА БАЛКАНАХ

В южнославянской народной мифологии выделяется «класс» демонов, имеющих черты народного героя, защищающего свое село, поля (или дом с земельными угодьями) от мифического противника, как правило, олицетворяющего бурю, непогоду, град. Генезис и функциональные свойства этого демонического персонажа (получеловек-полудемон) являются общими для ряда балканославянских (сербской, черногорской, болгарской, македонской) и неславянских балканских традиций (албанской, отчасти — румынской); различается, прежде всего семантика названий, указывающая на особенности происхождения и внешнего облика самого персонажа, а также на идентичного предполагаемого противника в битве. Семантические различия в названиях демона-героя находят отражение в контекстах быличек, где роль противника героя приписывается идентичному персонажу: такому же змееподобному существу (как и предположительно сам герой, в соответствии с его наименованием) либо «чужому» герою не змееподобного облика. Эти различия членят территорию балканских народов на запад и восток (независимо от их генетической общности, что на наш взгляд служит признаком специфически балканского явления на Балканах). Условная граница восток–запад проходит через территорию Сербии (Банат, западная Сербия, Косово) и Албании.