

Damjan J. Ovsec, *Praznovanje pomladi in velike noči na Slovenskem in po svetu (Celebrations of Spring and Easter in Slovenia and the World)*, Ljubljana: Založba Modrijan 2010, 416 str.

Damjan J. Ovsec's monograph *Celebrations of Spring and Easter in Slovenia and the World* is a work of superlative dimensions, especially by Slovenian standards: over 400 pages of a large format, boasting close to 950 predominantly colour illustrations, with an exceptional print run of 2500 copies. No wonder that soon after its publication the book was proclaimed the »Book of the Year«. Perhaps more than its external features, its primary attraction rests with the content; over a number of decades now, ever since the time of Dr. Niko Kuret, no one has dealt with this most colourful and dynamic a segment of Slovenian folklore so comprehensively and with such an eye for detail.

Writer, ethnologist, art historian and historian of culture, Ovsec has devoted six years to composing the text and carefully choosing the illustrations, while drawing on a vast reservoir of knowledge acquired over decades. Given the scope and complexity of the topic, his approach was multidisciplinary, combining the perspectives of ethnology, anthropology, cultural history, as well as psychology, philosophy, theology and astrology. His method is primarily comparative, in the first instance describing spring and Easter celebrations across the different regions in Slovenia, noting their various forms and drawing parallels between them while also comparing them to similar or related phenomena in the neighbouring countries and elsewhere in Europe.

The title itself points to the book's ambitious scope that encompasses both Christian and pre-Christian era as well as territories. Moreover; in many places the book trespasses into non-European cultures (e.g., into ancient cultures of the Middle East and India, as well as China and Japan), particularly if it sets out to signal a universality of particular concepts and symbols. This is greatly underscored and aided by the numerous and well-chosen illustrations.

It is important that Ovsec has drawn our attention to the pre-Christian foundations of Easter celebrations and to its cosmological symbolism going back at least as far as the megalithic Stonehenge and other similarly ancient cultures. According to fertility concepts pertaining to Indo-European creation myths, the combination of fire (warmth) and water is paramount. These two principles have been symbolically incorporated into spring celebrations; the making of bonfires, leaping over the flames, the pouring of water over bonfire participants, etc. All of this was accompanied by various magic procedures: fertility rites, fortune telling, etc.

According to many world myths, both the cosmological egg and the sand grain denote the origin of the world. Significance here is less with the egg floating on the waves of the original ocean or the grain of sand needing to be lifted off the seabed, and more with their round shape and their exceptional smallness, especially in comparison to the cosmos. Following mythological interpretations our world originates from them. Both archetypal forms, the egg and the sand grain, represent, as it were, a condensed potential or a germ. This in essence is also the crux of Easter egg's symbolism, and Ovsec devotes a number of his book's chapters to this issue. We might add here that the clay replicas of Easter eggs, oftentimes decorated with cosmological symbols, appear as far back as in the archaeological findings from 9th and 10th centuries in the area of Kiev (cf. Zdeněk Váňa, *Svět slovanských bohů a démonů*, Praha 1990, p. 41).

The traditional colour of Easter eggs in Slovenia is red, red-brown or even yellow, depending on the vegetable dyes used (madder, outer onion leaves, crushed grape skins, Brazilin, etc). Alongside the colours white and black, symbolising light and darkness in turn, red was in fact the first 'true' colour of human culture, symbolising fire, blood and life, though the apotropeic meaning too was probably already present then. In Europe the use of red pigment can be traced as far back as the Neolithic Age, and among the Australian indigenous population it is still used in rituals (the colour of ochre). As Ovsec has shown, the etymology of the Slovenian word for the Easter egg itself, the word *pirh*, means an egg dyed red, though the first to write about red Easter eggs was Valvasor (1641-1693). Eastern Slovenian expressions *rumenica*, *remenica*, *remenka* for the various nuances of colour for Easter eggs, from red to yellow, testify to the fact that there was no conceptual difference between the two colours. Egg decorations only took off in the Baroque period. They are particularly interesting for some of the cosmological symbols depicted on the shells (the tree of life, bird, etc.), whereas the egg with its round shape has forever denoted the continuous cycle of the dying and regeneration of life and cosmos.

The Greek-Roman gods of cyclical regeneration of nature were Orpheus and Dionysus. They retained a significant place also in early Christianity where Christ could display certain Dionysian features and even adopted Orpheus' role of the "good shepherd" (the latter acquired also by god Mithras). The Orphic-Dionysian dualism built on the dichotomy of the physical and the spiritual. Both cults have left lasting traces, some recognizable in Slovenian folklore even today, while Kibela and Atis still live on in the festival processions of spring celebrations known as "pine wedding" (*borovo gostivanje*). When Christianity came to this part of the Europe in the first centuries of our era, gaining ground over the next few, the value system changed to some extent, but by no means did Christianity uproot the tenacious Pagan rituals and customs. These have sometimes only seemingly adapted to the new times, but more often than not they lived on their parallel lives alongside the official church festivals. Such mixed heritage of the original settlers was to some extent accepted also by the Slavic newcomers on the territory of the present-day Slovenia.

Fertility was also depicted with spring greenery (birch branches or some other flower decorations), still a feature of the embellishments of the figure of Green George (*Zeleni Jurij*). The festival of Green George has had a long and on-going tradition across the Slovenian ethnical territories, but not without regional variations. It would be fascinating to have these presented in some more detail. The celebrations of the festival *Jurjevo* are replete with the symbolism of light, sun, growth, all fertility types, regeneration and abundance. Unfortunately, however, the figure of Green George has received relatively little scholarly attention in Slovenia. Ovsec too has only been able to draw on what was available. In a wider context, however, the figure has been studied in more detail by a few Croatian authors (particularly V. Belaj and R. Katičič), who have also been able to shed some light on the existing relations between Eastern Slavic and Baltic cultural spaces. What has, however, remained more or less unclear, as also noted by Ovsec, is the connections with the corresponding figures existing on the British Isles (the Green Man and Jack-in-the-Green, the mythological Merlin, Sir Gawain). Ovsec's data and explanations are welcoming indeed, as is the rich pictorial material, which besides England includes also the German part of Switzerland. Traces of the greenery cult find expression in Slovenia and elsewhere in Europe also in the setting up of May-poles as well as in the Whitsun

customs, which represent the last markers of spring, and are followed in the summer by bonfire celebrations.

Amongst the mythological heroes of spring the book mentions *Svarožič*, »the young sun worshipped by Eastern Slavs even centuries after Christianization as fire in their home stoves«. We could add here that *Svarožič* was also known to Western and Southern Slavs, particularly under its other name of *Radogost* (see *Studia mythologica Slavica* 2010). It might be possible to see a parallel for this character in the Slovenian folk figure of the young prince *Kresnik* as well as in the customs of the bonfire festival and the Christian celebrations of John the Baptist.

As Christianity became a prominent force it, of course, influenced the values and criteria of the pagan world. One of the most interesting chapters engaging this topic is devoted to the dating of Easter and the different calendar systems and reforms. This complex problematic is conveyed in a most accessible and systematic form. The symbolism of the signs of the zodiac is also explained extremely clear. The chapters on Easter as practiced under Christianity partly already differentiate themselves from mythology in the narrow sense of the term, as they touch upon Christian biblical symbolism, eschatology, soteriology and liturgy. These questions are addressed in the chapters discussing Ash Wednesday and the Great Fast, Palm Sunday, and the Holy Week with the attendant church ceremonies (such as processions and passion plays) as well as folk customs, rituals and superstitions. A special chapter is devoted to Easter food as eaten in Slovenia and elsewhere in Europe.

In modern times, from the end of the 19th century onwards, Easter celebrations have taken on certain new features. The Easter rabbit, for instance, was introduced from German speaking areas, becoming a frequent motif on Easter cards. The chapter on Easter cards brings many new insights indeed and a lot of comparative material. The bourgeoisie evolved its own style of celebrations, and this topic is given a detailed treatment in the chapter on Easter celebrations in Ljubljana. In towns as well as in the countryside there were differences in how Easter was understood and celebrated, also amongst different religious groups (Jews, Evangelicals, Orthodox), and *Ovsec* gives due attention to this aspect as well. The book concludes with a chapter on the common European heritage as it relates to Easter, followed by a bibliography and sources, index and the list of sources for the pictorial material.

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