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## **THE CURSE AS A REVENGE**

### **- ritual, magical and social aspects -**

*Abstract:* The subject of this paper are the ritual, magical and social aspects of the curse in the frames of the Macedonian folk culture. In the ritual and magical context, that presupposes a syncretic unity of the verbal and non-verbal magic, the focus is put upon the ritual side of the cursing act. The examination of the social dimensions is concentrated upon the reasons for approving the curse as a mechanism for rebounding evil.

*Key words:* curse, Macedonian folk culture, supernatural, magic, ritual procedure, doing harm, revenge, punishment, community values, women

Every single event of facing evil sets the question regarding the real answer. The act of revenge in that sense is unquestionable. Evil yields evil! This unwritten rule is well known to all traditional communities, including the Macedonian one. The ethnographic data show numerous and different forms of revenge that makes their classification difficult. However, one type of classification proves to be not only possible but also important when it comes to the traditional culture. It is a matter of a division into two groups, whose basic criteria for separation is the presence or absence of supernatural intervention in the backfiring of evil. The first group consists of those forms of revenge that are based solely upon the possibilities and the force of the human individual, while the second group counts on the assistance of the supernatural.

It is well known that the mythical-magical viewing of the world, characteristic for the folk culture, presupposes the existence of another reality of a higher order that attains emphasised symbolic of sacredness. All events in our profane life that can not be comprehended by the human reason, are interpreted to be positive or negative influences of this sacred reality, that spreads itself outside the borders of what is considered "from this world" and visible. It has a whole spectrum of powers belonging to another world that could resolve crisis situations of the man and the community, if one establishes communication with it. As a rule, the communication is set through magic. If one takes into account this type of comprehension, it is clear why the one who was a victim of evil, who goes through a crisis situation par excellence, asks and expects assistance from the world of the supernatural. Although this assistance is a key one for attaining the goal, there is always a need for a concrete activity of the offended or harmed victim that is established through the ritual and magical formulae and procedures. Their implementation is the key for realisation of the revenge and the punishment of the guilty part.

One of the most frequent forms of such revenge in the traditional community of the Macedonians is cursing, that is widely known among the population as "throwing a curse". The magical character of the curse is unquestionable. It is pronounced with a faith in the magical power of the word, that is able to provoke the forces of the "other side" to harm the guilty one with an Earthly kind of harm. This observation that stresses upon the verbal, is the one that can be most frequently found in the frames of the scientific thought. The curses are usually examined in the frames of the system of the folklore short genres, as stereotype expressions and codified formulas, and their ritual side is ignored. However, the field work shows that the verbal expressions, in most of the cases, is accompanied by a certain ritual and magical action, that, as told by my informants, is taken "so that the curse succeeds". In other words, the action takes upon a role of a guarantee, that confirms and strengthens what has been expressed, without leaving a shadow of doubt when it comes to the realisation of the curse.

In Macedonia the verbal invitation of evil appears accompanied with numerous ritual actions. One that is used most frequently is the action of taking off a scarf or the hat, that can be interpreted as a variant of ritual nakedness that is always useful when it comes to the communication with the "other world". The naked body or a certain segment of the body, that is usually covered, is neutralising the opposition nature-culture (Radenkovic Lj: 1996a, 90, cyr.) The removing of such important clothing signs of culture as the scarf or the hat, the ones who are cursing are positioning themselves "closer to nature" that is an endless source of outer world powers. On the contrary, carrying signs of culture at the moment of cursing is breaching the contact with the other world. The information that a woman's curse is not so dangerous speaks about this, since she wears a ring and earrings, contrary to man who does not wear anything made of iron, and this is why the curse which comes from him is more successful.<sup>1</sup> One could add to this interpretation the well known protective function of the iron, that rejects the demons (Radenkovic Lj: 1996b, 264-269; Dictionary of folk mythology of Macedonians: 2000, 167-168, cyr.), at the same time softening the desired effect of the curse.

The close encounter with the outer world is established also by ritual touch of the ground, where the demonic creatures that perform the curse live (Cajkanovic: 1985, 84, cyr.) I assume that this is one of the reasons for the actions as kneeling or rubbing naked elbows of the ground that accompanies the cursing action. One can notice that in both mentioned cases the touch with the Earth is done through parts of the body that in certain setting (banded leg or arm) have a outer, bordering position. In this position, the knee and the elbow become a border that separates one's own space from the space of the others - the Earth and its demonic inhabitants. Having a symbolic meaning of a border, they at the same time have a role of mediator through which it is possible to establish contact between the worlds. When it comes to the knee, its relation with the genus or the keen in the frames of the Macedonian folk culture is relevant. Thus, the action that focuses upon the knee could be interpreted as calling upon the dead predecessors to revenge due to the harm done upon a member of their keen. This interpretation is in accordance with the belief that the dead predecessors are protectors of their live keen, especially when they are in danger.

Establishing a contact with the predecessors is a possible reason for another ritual action that stresses the utilization of the knee. Joseph Obremski who has done research in Poreche in the '30ies of the 20th century has left some traces on this issue. His material shows that the one who threw the curse was in a sited position and rubbed his knees with his hands during the cursing. In this example the rubbing of the knees appears together with the scarf which is taken off (Obremski J: 2001a, 184). I have noticed the same action in the Maleshevo region, during my field research that was done last year. For illustration I will mention a life situation that led towards its utilization in the village of Negrevo (Maleshevo region). The grandmother of the informant, after her family was expelled from the property they bought (however, without having a proof on the payment in golden coins, without a witness), set in front of the house and rubbed her knees cursing the liar and his closest relatives: "To be carried in a carriage. So that you won't see any good"<sup>2</sup> I have registered the second example in the village of Vladimirovo, where the ritual rubbing of the knees was implemented as a method for reinforcing the curses ("To get rotten! Let the fire burn him! Let all his children be put in one grave") which were thrown because a barn was put on fire.<sup>3</sup> According to the informants, in both of the mentioned cases the curse was successful - the guilty ones and their families have experienced tragedies.

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<sup>1</sup> Informant: Verka Nikolovska (born 1942) from the village of Negrevo, Maleshevo region.

<sup>2</sup> Informant: Verka Nikolovska (born 1942) from the village of Negrevo, Maleshevo region.

<sup>3</sup> Informant: Jelica Goshevska (born 1938) from Negrevo.

In the past a component of the collective cursing act was the procedure of throwing stones on one spot, that resulted with a formation of a whole pile known as "gramada". This multiplied ritual procedure, that has been done at the same moment by all man in the village, was practiced when the perpetuator was not known, but also when his power or social status were a reason for not punishing him with another sanction. Contrary to the neighbouring nations that have rich ethnographic literature (Dzordzevic t, 1948, 280-286, Marinov D: 1914, 566-568, Bobcev S: 1917, XCIX-C), when it comes to Macedonia there are not many relevant data. The existence of the "gramadas" has been registered in Macedonia (Kitevski M: 1991, 22, Dictionary of the folk mythology of Macedonians, 224, cyr.), but I have not seen concrete situations of practicing this kind of collective cursing, as in the cases of Eastern Serbia, Herzegovina or Bulgaria. The reason should be found in the fact that it has been out of use for a long time, but no one succeeded in documenting it on time. During my field research in the period of 2000-2002, I have been given by incident very short information or memories that were transmitted from generation to generation, that assume but not confirm the usage of the collective stone throwing. At the same time I was given examples which when related to the analogies situations from other countries can give directions towards that kind of thought. For illustration I could present a case from the village Brezovo, Demir Hisar region, where the village in one instance gathered to curse the one who put the barn on fire. The barn burned down together with the sheep in it. "Let the one who burned the barn turn into a stone", was the curse pronounced by the gathered village population.<sup>4</sup> In Serbia, in the region of Omolj, there was a similar formulae "Let he, his home and his children turn into stones" - a curse which was followed by collective throwing of stones or rubbing a stone with a stone (Dzordzevic, T: 1948, 282). It is not illogical to think that in past times, even in Macedonia, the verbal expression was strengthened by an act in which the utilization of the stone aimed to provoke the desired effect, using magical means. the registered "gramadas" point towards the act of throwing the stone. This act on our territory was used in cases of individual cursing. By throwing the stone one wished for the hated person never again to return in the village which he had temporarily left, due to serving the military or due to economic emigration. In such cases the following formulae was pronounced: "You should come back when the stone comes back"<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the stone was used as well as a mean for protection from the consequences of the curse. IN the region of Kriva Palanka the women even today take a stone in the hand when they are cursed and say: "When the stone gets cursed, then I shall be cursed as well".<sup>6</sup> In Bitola, as reported by Tihomir Dzordzevic, women have put a stone in their belts when they were forced to swear at the court. It is difficult to say if in the concrete case it was done to avoid the punishment for false swearing or as Dzordzevic supposes (Dzordzevic T: 1984, 418) due to the strong belief in the power of the curse to get activated at the spot if it is pronounced in a "bad time", something that will be explained further on.

The Macedonian folk culture is familiar with numerous acts for strengthening the curse, that are "borrowed" from the Christian ritual. Crossing, holding of a "kandilo" (lightning device found in churches), lightning of a candle - these actions are used in combination with the procedures whose magical natue is obvious. In Mariovo and in the region of Demir Hisar I have noted a combination of taking off the scarf with holding the kandilo. In some areas they prefer lighting a candle - the event takes place in the church due to which the curse gets an attribute "God's" although basically it has a magical character. A support of this thesis is the practice of cursing in the area of Kriva Palanka. Here three candles are lightened and they are

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3<sup>4</sup> Informant: Fimka Brashnarska, born 1943 in the village of Rusinovo, lives in Vladimirovo.

4<sup>5</sup> Informant: Cvetanka Nikolovska, born 1927 in the village of Brezovo.

5<sup>6</sup> Informant: Denica Cvetkovska (born 1934) from the village of Smojmirovo, Maleshevo region. The same procedure has been noted by Obremski in Poreche (Obremski J: 2001b, 82-83).

held top down until they are completely burned, at the same time the sinner is cursed with a word or only in the mind which as it is believed has the same effect. The procedure is somehow similar in the Maleshevo region, where there is just one candle and a formulae that is said or thought: "Let him melt as the candle melts"<sup>7</sup>. In Mariovo the candle is lightened at the place designed for the dead: "This candle, I don't light it for health, I do it to him for the deceased, for the enemy that made (evil) things"<sup>8</sup>. There are variants where the candle is lightened in an unusual way, in front of the icon of a saint. In the Maleshevo region, for example, the saint from whom assistance is expected when it comes to returning the evil is St. Mino - a candle is often burned in front of his icon. At first glance one should say that here it is not a matter of throwing a curse. However, if one has the information on the meaning of this act, it becomes more than clear that it is a matter of a non-verbal curse, that in this case is completely disguised in a Christian form. In general, the presence of Christian elements are strengthening the legitimacy of the curse and they deepen the conviction of the ones who curse concerning the justice of their act. In their viewing of the world, the punishment that the guilty ones will face, as a result of the cursing done in a church has an unquestionable nature of God's punishment, although this is not according to the official Christian teaching. This teaching has a strong negative attitude towards the folk curse and it does not recognise a human intervention when it comes to God's justice. The punishment or the forgiveness of the sin is an exclusive task of God. The last judgement happens in the other world, and the curse's wish is that something bad would happen to the guilty one or/and to his closest relatives in this world.

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It is believed that the curse has a dangerous power. It is frequently said that if you curse in the wrong way the curse will come back to you. There is one belief that has not been forgotten according to which the curse automatically is realised if it is said "in the wrong time", something that is in direct correlation with the belief that during the year there is one moment of magical realisation that is not known. This moment is usually related to the "bad days", priority given to Tuesday, but when it comes to the hour, this remains unknown. The belief in a "bad timing" was so strong that people would be afraid to swear (that is, to self-curse themselves, since the curse was a part of the swear) although their statement was true. They preferred to resolve the conflict in another way, since "you never know which timing is bad" at the moment of swearing. In the village of Smilevo, in the Mijak region, I have noted one very interesting, Christianized variant of the belief in the power of the curse: "A God's bird would pass by, it would hear the curse and said amen - so the curse would succeed".<sup>9</sup> The fear of the curse would enhance the "knowledge" that there is no medicine for it. It can not be undone, contrary to the magic for which there is always a hope that it can be undone by contra-magic. This is especially true when it is a matter of a curse coming from a parent or from a Godfather. This is why it is said: "Let the Godfather curse you" or "Mother's and father's curse do not fall on the ground". The dangerous nature of the curse is reflected in the belief that it can punish not only the guilty one but also innocent people - this is why cursing of children was avoided and using them as warrant was a proof of the innocence of the guilty one. The curse could influence even unborn children. This belief was a basis for interpretation of all accidents, illnesses or unsuccessful undertakings in the family. They were comprehended as a consequence of a past curse thrown at some distant predecessor, whose name was even forgotten, while the reason for him being cursed was just an assumption.

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<sup>6</sup> AIF, n. 3754, informant: Jordanka Dimchova born 1934 in the village of Varavishte, lives in the village of Stanci.

<sup>7</sup> Informant: Fimka Branshnarska (see footnote n. 3).

<sup>8</sup> Informant: Janinka Bogoevska, born 1924 in the village of Ziovo, where she lived until 2000.

At the time when the belief in the dangerous power of the curse was strong, the cursing had quite real consequences. In the ethnographic literature of the neighbouring countries there are examples of people who, waiting for the moment of the realisation of the curse actually turned sick and died. (Dzordzevic T: 1948, Bobcev S: 1917, C). I have chosen from my collection of stories from the field the example of a girl who has run away from home, from the village of Bazernik in the Demir Hisar region. She was cursed by her own mother not to live a year more from the day when she ran away to marry contrary to the will of her parents. After the day the curse has been announced ("Let God does not give you a year more of your life"), an act that was strengthened by the mother taking off her scarf and holding a kandilo while she was cursing, the girl started to fade, she lied down in the bed and died in a year.<sup>10</sup>

The goal of this set of beliefs, that were supported by the life stories of the cursed, is a reason for the informants being reserved when the curse is the topic of the conversation. However, after the first uneasiness, without any problem a whole set of examples of sinners that have experienced misfortunes as a result of the cursing is being told. Often during the conversation there is an open manifestation or a certain dose of pleasure which is a consequence of the belief that the justice is being done because the curse has punished the guilty one. In other words, the curse as a revenge is not considered as something negative, but it is even affirmed when it is an answer to something evil. "It is not a sin to curse if someone has done you wrong" is a dominant attitude. The usual expression "the sin has got a hold of him" is a proof that the cursing is interpreted as a deserved punishment for an evil deed that was done. For the sake of truth, a smaller group of informants suggests a different solution: "One should leave it to God, he should act". God can be slow, but He does not forget: "If I did something wrong maybe one or two years I might escape His punishment but maybe the third or the fifth or the seventh year, He will find me, He does not forget"<sup>11</sup>. The field work shows that contemplation of such kind usually stay at the level of theory, while concrete life situations of facing evil result with the usage of a curse.

There is a wide spectrum of activities which are a valid reason for throwing a curse. They are located in a frame that was set by the folk notion of the crime or the sin, a term that is more widely used by the folk. A sin is each and every activity that harms another human being but as well such behaviour that does not aim to hurt anyone but is not in accordance with the moral norms and the appropriate model of behaviour in the community.

A curse is pronounced when it is a matter of a murder, treason, burning of a house, fraud, damage, theft - in fact those crimes that could be defined according to the contemporary notion of crime or breach of rule. However, the Godfather's curse in case of him being replaced without his approval is also very strong. The Godfather had a role of a mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead that were expected to help in crisis situation, so one could only suppose how severe was the disrespect of the Godfather judged. The cursing of the girl who has given birth to an unlawful child and has thus put shame on her family also deserves a right of legitimacy. Legitimacy increases if this girl kills and barriers the child, since her sin is a source of danger for the whole village. It could be hit by a strong rain or by a drought, which could put the existence of the whole community into danger. The cursing of the ones who have made a girl unable to get married is also justified. The source of her right to curse presents the significance and the role of the marriage in traditional society. One can understand even the act of cursing the girl that ran away from home to get married, since she was obliged to respect the choice of her parents.

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<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup> Informant: Fana Todorovska, born 1912 and Duca Troshevska (born 1939) from the village of Smilevo.

<sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup> Informant: Jovanka Kochovska, born 1928 in the village of Bazernik.

A common denominator for justifying the curse in the above mentioned cases (that are not the only ones) is the danger that they present when it come to the established values and rules of behaviour. The intensity of justification is different. It is defined by the meaning that the community assigns to the value that is damaged. As we had seen, the higher the value, the higher the support that it gets in the frames of the folk beliefs. The scope of the harm done is also taken into account. The justification of the curse is based upon the number of the persons who were hurt or could get hurt by the curse - the higher the number, the bigger is the justification. The highest level of justification is deserved for cursing the national traitors and different kinds of problematic persons that harm the village. A collective curse is thrown at them, since they deserve the most severe punishment. A person from the Maleshevo region was cursed by the whole village since he stopped the water running, something that is considered as a big sin: "Damned the one who has stopped the water. Let everything that is living in his house dies and the house itself gets destroyed to the ground"<sup>12</sup>

The second important moment, that explains the justification and the wide spectrum of events that deserve cursing, is the bad position of the ones who curse. They are reaching for the curse since they know that it calls upon the negative forces that could be dangerous even for the one who is cursing. Their reasons to do that is their grief and sorrow, but also the lack of power that would enable them to punish the guilty person in another way. The reason that is quoted most often regarding this lack of power is not having enough proofs or the fact that the harm doer is untouchable due to his high social status or his connections to the ones that are entitled to execute justice.

In a case when the person who has done the evil deed is not known, the curse was used not only as a mechanism for punishment, but also as an instrument for discovering the guilty one. This was possible since the cursing was done in public, in front of a big number of people. the reaction of the present ones was a decisive indicator of identification of the evil doer. The justification the curse was a proof of innocence, while the one who opposed the cursing was considered the guilty one. There were cases where the cursed one, fearing the consequences of the curse would himself admit the sin. there were other cases when a candle was lit in a church for the guilty person (a non-verbal curse), with the intention that this person brings back to the spot the things that he stole: "If he does not return the stuff something could happen to him, either to his child, or to his wife"<sup>13</sup> The thief would have to choose between two alternatives, if he is familiar with the fact that a candle was lit for him in the church. It is an obligation of the victim itself, to inform at least one person from the village about it, which is enough for the news to arrive to the one for whom it is intended.

In the category of the weak, for whom the curse is the only way of justice being done, a special place is designed to women. The informants agree in the opinion that: "Women curse while man swear". Surely there are man who curse as well, but this is a seldom case. Most probably this is an explanation of the belief in the bigger and more dangerous power of the male curse. For women the curse is a mechanism that they used when offended or when injustice is done to them. What is the reason that the curse has been proclaimed as a typical female reaction to evil? One of my informants said that the answer is to be found in female nature: "Women are much worse, no woman can be patient when nervous, she would say anything".<sup>14</sup> I agree that the emotional reaction of women in relation to everything that happens around them, including injustice, is in general more intensive than with men. However, focusing on this argument means to present the curse as a mean for reducing

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11<sup>12</sup> AIF, n. 3755, informant: Olimpijada Stefanovska, born 1936 in the village of Stancha, 1953 married in the village of German, Kriva Palanka region.

12<sup>13</sup> Informant: Denica Cvetkovska (see footnote n. 5)

13<sup>14</sup> Informant: Borjana Tushevka (born 1927) from Rusinovo village.

emotional stress caused by experiencing harm. This psychological function could be fulfilled through using another form of revenge, and this is used by man as well. Obviously the quest for the reasons should be forwarded into another direction.

In the social structure of the traditional community the position of women in many areas was marginalised. One of those segments is the judicial activity. Women did not have the right to participate at the village assemblies, when there were discussions on the crimes and the punishment was set. This means that they did not have even a chance to press charges which would result with an inquiry and potential punishment of the guilty one. Women were less trusted, especially when it comes to crimes related to the so called female morality, something that was related only to female physiology. An explicit example is the act of rape, that was very often considered as a consequence of the behaviour of women that must have been "asking for it", that is, provoked the act. Provided that this was so, the women had what she wanted, and the perpetrator should not be punished. To proclaim that a women has no morals was an easy task, since no concrete proofs were needed. The fact that she was visited by a man during the absence of her husband was a sufficient sign for the village to start constructing stories of infidelity. When this happens, the women had very big problems to throw away the accusation. If she was lucky, the husband would allow her to swear in her innocence and this would be the end. In another case, for a long time, even as long as she lives, she would get beaten. Her only satisfaction would then be to curse the ones who accused her. This development of events was described to me on many occasions. I was impressed by a story that was told to me by a women in the village of Trnovo, Kriva palanka region, who due to her beauty was an object of desire for the male population in the village. Since the unsatisfied wish generates hatred, her "fans" decided to punish her by accusing her for adultery. Fortunately, the woman succeeded in justifying herself in front of her husband by kissing bread and salt, but then she immediately took the bread in church kissing it and cursing the accusatory. Each of them had then some kind of accident.<sup>15</sup> This is just one of the situation which women could face in the frames of the traditional community. The women from the story was even fortunate, since her husband has allowed her to swear. More often he trusts the stories of the village and not the ones of his wife. Being in such a terrible situation, the women can not do anything else but to undertake a private revenge. Her physical constitution does not allow her to base her actions upon her own strength. Since she can not expect anything else from other people she asks assistance from the world of the supernatural, with which one communicates through magic. Having in mind that in the frames of the traditional community practicing of magic in a female ritual activity, there is nothing more logical for woman to find their place in the domain of "self-execution of justice".

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In the frames of the traditional community the curse is a mechanism for realization of the revenge. Not only that it is not evaluated in a negative way, but it is approved when it is used as a response to evil. This response is counting on the assistance of the supernatural forces that are able to resolve crisis situation for the individual and the community. The communication with them is established through ritual and magical formulae and actions, whose interaction results with the realization of the curse. Their application is the key for punishing the perpetrator. In the past the punishment that the perpetrator faced was very real (sickens, madness, death) due to the powerful faith in the dangerous strength of the curse.

The basic social function the curse is to establish the impaired order and to reaffirm the dominant values of the community. Its preventive role is also significant. The unfavourable destinies of the cursed are told as a warning on the consequences that might take place when the moral norms and the standard models of behaviour in the community are not respected.

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1415 Informant: Janinka Bogoevska (see footnote n. 8)

One should not ignore the psychological aspect. The utilization of the curse is satisfying the personal feeling of justice. If this feeling matches the collective idea for justice, the community approves or at least it does not judge cursing.

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Own field research