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**KILLING OF THE ELDERLY: THE MACEDONIAN CUSTOM
"SLAUGHTER OF THE OLD MEN"**

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Key words: killing the elderly, "slaughtering the elderly", senicide, patricide, trauma, rituals and myths.

Summary: This paper addresses the problem of killing of elderly people, a custom commonly referred to as "slaughtering the elderly" in Macedonia. Examples of this myth are registered across various regions of Macedonia, including Ohrid, Bitola, Prilep, Veles, Skopje and the surrounding areas, Dojran, the surroundings of Kratovo, Negotino, Debar, Drimkol, and the expansive hilly-mountainous regions of Maleshevo and Mariovo. The motivations behind senicide were numerous. It was commonly thought that during times of famine, killing of the elderly was a means of conserving scarce food resources. In addition, senicide occurred as a result of land confiscation, where the property or cultivation rights of the elderly were transferred to their younger generations. In some cases, these killing were considered an act of mercy, especially when an individual suffered from an incurable disease, or faced the challenges of old age, when people could not meet even their most basic biological needs, thus becoming a burden to the family or the community. The traumatic experience of sons killing their fathers, according to traditions, led to the abandonment of this brutal custom.

УБИВАЊЕ НА СТАРИТЕ: МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ОБИЧАЈ „КОЛЕЊЕ НА СТАРЦИТЕ“

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Клучни зборови: убивање стари лица, „колење на старците“, сеницид, таткоубиство, траума, обреди и митови.

Резиме: Во текстот ја обработуваме проблематиката на убивање на старите луѓе, обичај што во Македонија најчесто се нарекувал „колење на старците“. Примери за овој мит наоѓаме на пошироката територија на Македонија, од: Охрид, Битола и Прилеп, преку: Велес и Скопско, Дојран, околните на: Кратово, Неготино, Дебар, до: Дримкол и големите ридско-планински предели Малешевијата и Мариово. Мотивите што доведувале до сеницид се многубројни. Вообичаено се сметало дека со убивањето на постарите во време на глад се овозможувало заштеда на храна. Истото се извршувало и поради одземање на земјата што ја поседувале старите и пренесување на правата за посед или за обработка на помладите. Понекогаш убивањето било чин на милосрдие – особено кога станувало за тешка и неизлечива болест или, пак, ако станувало збор за длабока старост – кога лицата не можеле да ги извршуваат ниту најосновните биолошки потреби, па претставувале товар на семејството или заедницата. Трауматското искуство на синовите при убивањето на своите татковци, според преданијата, довело до напуштање на овој суров обичај.

The Issue of Killing of the Elderly

The custom of killing of the elderly has a long history entwined with morality, ethics, and social and domestic values that vary from country to country. While the majority of these values trace back to ancient times, this custom should not be considered exclusively as a practice of old and "primitive" societies, since in certain countries it was practised until a century or two ago, and in some cases it continues today under the name of euthanasia. Commonly recognised terms associated with the killing of the elderly include senicide, senilicide, and gerontocide, which are widely accepted in the majority of

countries. However, in some cultures where this tradition has deeper roots, older terms have been retained. For example, the practice was known as *etestupa* among the ancient Vikings; it was referred as *ubasute* (*obasute*) in Japan; it was called *talakutal* in the southern parts of India; whereas among the Slavic countries the practice of *lapot* has been observed in Serbia.

We refer to senicide as a cultural ritual involving the killing of the elderly. It has been the subject of analyses by sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, historians, and culturologists, whose general conclusion is that it is a phenomenon observed across a spectrum of cultures, ranging from the most primitive to the most sophisticated (Pousset 2023: 1). While in most cases, it has not been confirmed that such practices actually occurred, they have been transmitted through folklore, i.e. word of mouth. In other examples, such ritual sacrifices have been attested indeed. In both traditional contexts and documented cases, these customs may either be voluntary or integral to forced sacrificial rituals. These active-passive methods actually have raised the main questions that the researchers of this problem face. The fundamental questions that demand exploration include why the elderly were killed and what purpose their deaths served.

The motivations behind the elimination of the elderly population are numerous. It was commonly considered that killing the elderly during times of famine served to conserve food resources. In this way, by reallocating food from the elderly to the younger members of the community, they had a better chance of survival. Additionally, in some cases, the killing was carried out because of the confiscation of their land, with rights of possession or cultivation transferred to the younger ones. Furthermore, euthanasia was sometimes practised as an act of mercy, especially when the issue was a serious and incurable disease, or if it was a matter of old age when people could not fulfill even their most basic biological needs, thus becoming a burden to the family or community. Lastly, the elderly were killed when it was believed that they could turn into vampires. In such cases, murder and post-mortem rites were believed to prevent this feared outcome.

The forms of senicide vary across cultures and civilisations. The act of killing the elderly can take different forms, including a) direct physical liquidation by suffocation, strangulation, stabbing with knife and sword, or gunshot wounds; b) leaving the old in the wilderness, leading to death due to frostbite, heat stroke, dehydration, or starvation; c) voluntary sacrifice through suicide, accomplished by taking poison, using a knife or sword, etc.

Such sacrificial practices directly contradict the principles of Christianity, such as the commandment "thou shalt not kill." However, this deeply rooted custom, or at least the belief that such deaths of old people were performed, persisted for a long time among certain Slavic peoples, specifically in the Balkans. There is evidence of killing of the elderly in the far Russian north and among the Baltic Slavs. Historic records suggest that in the village of Zemlianky, Poltava province, Russia, during the 19th century, the elderly were abandoned in deserted places, where they "died of hunger and cold" (Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1902: 403). In Belarus, this custom is called *lopovshchina*, while in Ukraine several terms exist, among which the most popular is *sadit na lubochik* (sitting on a sled), etc.

The Balkan Killing of the Elderly

There is numerous data and a large number of articles on the practice of killing the old and infirm, especially in Serbia, where this custom has a longstanding history. Thus, the mythical custom *lapot* (the killing of elderly people, typically parents or relatives), which was practised in the eastern mountainous regions of Serbia, is an interesting subject for research. This noun has made its mark in topography (*Lopotnica*, *Lapashnica*), films, paintings, as well as in literature (Trojanovic, 1898; Gjorgjevic, 1923; Radovanovic, 1930; Bajraktarovic, 1999; Radenkovic, 2022).

According to the available data, the killing took place in public, most often involving a blow to the head with a stick, and less commonly with a stone or axe. The responsibility for taking the victim's life fell upon their own children. The event was witnessed not only by family members but also by the wider community. In some places, the entire village participated in these ritual murders.

Researching this custom, the Serbian ethnographer Simo Trajanović noted that stories about killing the elderly had been recorded even by Vuk Karadžich. The belief in this practice was firmly rooted in folk tales, especially in Zaečar and Pirot in the Niš region, the villages of Pirkovac, Sveti Arangel, Lalinac, as well as in Zapljan, and in Krepoljin, Sigam and Osanci in the Pozarevac region (Trajanovic, 11-12).

We completely agree with the opinion that the custom *lapot*, i.e. the killing of the elderly, "the endemic violence is not limited to the Dinaric Mountains, but is also present in other Balkan mountains" (Anzulovic, 1999: 47). Similar examples, albeit to a lesser extent, have been registered on the coast of Croatia (where the murders were carried out using a battering ram for demolishing large gates), on the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina (where the elderly were publicly executed using poison), as well as in the vicinity of Lake Ohrid in Macedonia (where, before swinging the ax, bread was placed on the head of the elderly, in order for the bread to take the blame for the death, "the bread is to blame") (Pousset, 2023: 21). In Montenegro, on the other hand, this custom is referred to as *pustenovanje*. There are also other, local variants, such as *bape-lupe* (in the region of Leskovac), murdering old men (*Vranje*), etc.

One of the reasons for families sending their elderly loved ones to die was their increased frailty and immobility, which consequently, turned them into a burden to the family and the community. Furthermore, when the amount of food decreased during dry or cold years, it seemed that the last stocks of food were unnecessarily wasted on the elderly, so in order to conserve resources, the old people were removed from the community. In addition to these purely practical and biological reasons, religious and magical beliefs were also considered. According to such beliefs, as stated by Gjorgjevic (1923: 150), "when he (man) gets old and weak, the divine power within him dies; in other words, the same reasons some nations killed their rulers for." Confirmation that the frailty, long illness and "suffering" of the old person may be a burden to the family, is presented by Vesna Petreska, who testifies "through oral informal conversations, as well as personal

experiences with rather old, frail and sick people, who define their own condition as 'burden to themselves'" (Petreska, 2024: 155-156).

However, the data on the existence of ritual murders of the elderly should always be taken with a pinch of salt, since if they had ever really existed, they would have been eradicated from everyday life long ago. Being passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, these accounts experienced a series of transformations, thus giving rise to the creation of myths, whose content is considered ritual-mythological i.e. fictional, not real by certain researchers (Jovanovic, 1999; Jakimovska, 2009: 211).

Since oral tradition is particularly susceptible to influence, the possibilities for spreading and transforming myths increase. In addition, such traditions acquire a new dimension with quasi-scientific interpretations and their incorporation into artistic literature, which contributes to the further spread of the mythical images of senicide. We believe that some of these traditions among the Slavic peoples may have been influenced by cultural concepts inherited from older civilisations with which they interacted and exchanged ethno-civilisational features, such as Rome and Hellas. It is also evident that the neighboring peoples, who also had similar beliefs, such as the distant Siberian peoples, were influenced by them as well. That is one way in which the traditions about the killing of the elderly spread, contributing to the creation of region-specific beliefs.

"Slaughtering the Elderly"

Similar to other Slavic peoples in the Balkans, there are traditions about killing of the elderly in Macedonia, so this custom is perpetuated in Macedonian folklore under the term slaughtering the elderly. The predicted death of the elderly could be violent, as the phrases, "Ripe for slaughter" and "Mature for axe" indicate, or it could be what we would call a quiet death, achieved by leaving the elderly in the wilderness, where death was inevitable due to lack of water, food, or simply the work would be done by wild animals, as depicted in the lyrics of a folk song, "They've sent grandpa to the mountain / to be eaten by the bears." In addition to folk songs, Macedonian folklore contains stories recorded by Marko Cepenkov and Kuzman Shapkarev

in the 19th century that specifically address the mentioned custom, thus representing an indispensable source for our research. Alongside Cepenkov's work, another important source are the studies of the Polish ethnographer and Slavist Jozef Obrebski, who studied Macedonian folklore for several years. A crucial part of our research, providing us with a general overview of the custom of slaughtering of the elderly, is the study of the same name by Vojislav S. Radovanović, in which, in the section on such South Slavic customs, he writes about the situation in Macedonia at that time as well. Lastly, we cannot overlook the field research records of Macedonian ethnologists and folklorists such as Tanas Vrazinovski, Lidija Kovacheva, Aleksandar Sterjovski, Ermis Lafazanovski, Vesna Petreska and others.

Like in other countries, a series of pagan and pre-Christian beliefs are intertwined with the social, economic, medical, religious, and legal customs of this era. According to available materials, the custom of killing of the elderly largely evolved into patricide. The reason for this phenomenon lies in the patriarchal system of family management. Namely, the man was the most prominent member of the community, serving as the head of the family. His word was the last and all family members were subordinate to him. This unquestioned authority extended to major communal activities such as household chores, agricultural work, mountain labour, commerce, and craftsmanship. However, as they aged, they became weaker and their authority declined, so their sons in order to gain power decided to remove them. This power could involve the eldest son inheriting authority or the younger sons forming their own families, which was not possible while their father was alive. Sometimes, this change of generations revealed the ferocity of the patriarch's children. In such cases, even before the father's decline reached its natural conclusion, the sons carried out his execution.

J. Obrebski noted that in the Poreche region, "The villagers admit that people were very cruel at that time." They believed to be wise, yet mistook the sprouts for snakes. They were so foolish that on their return from the market to the village, they would shoot from a distance, to verify if the returning villagers were the same people who had left a few days before. It is no surprise that patricide was practised

at that time. But later they grew wiser and abandoned this custom" (Obremski 2002: 85).

This depiction of the villagers from the Poreche region is followed by a direct statement about the father-son relationship, which refers to the sons' thinking about possible patricide;

"But whoever is reasonable shall say:

- Let him alive, even if he is to keep the fire burning only.

And whoever is a fool shall say:

- And let him die on me" (Obremski, 2001: 225-226).

We will cite another example in which an old man recounts, "In the old days, when a man used to be young, he would work, and as soon as he got old, and helpless, he would be slaughtered, come on, slaughter him!" Whether right or wrong, who knew? The people were simple, and wild, like wolves! Nowadays we are simple, too, like cattle, but we refrain from such actions, because it's a sin, God doesn't allow us to do that. Afterwards, a new law was enacted, prohibiting the slaughter of old people... and since then, we suffer in our old age, while our families struggle to take care of the elderly" (Radovanovic, 1930: 315). These two speeches indicate that there were indeed traditions of killing of the elderly people, but over time, they were abandoned and condemned as cruel, unnecessary, and regressive.

In the Poreche and Mariovo regions, there are numerous versions of the myth about the killing of the elderly. Most often, according to oral tradition, the son hides his father, who due to his experience, becomes the savior of the village. Such traditions, recorded in the 20th century, were passed down and continued the traditions from the 19th century. They were spread throughout the entire Macedonian territory, and were registered in Bitola, Dojran, Prilep, Veles, the Kratovo area, Skopje, Negotino, Debar, Drimkol, and the large hilly-mountainous regions of Maleshevo and Mariovo. It is remarkable that in Drimkol, the killings were carried out "with bread", meaning the executions involved hitting the head with a stick or axe, with bread placed on top as a symbolic justification. This reasoning assigned the blame to the bread. In Kratovo, on the other hand, no direct force was exerted on the elderly people, also instead, the folk tradition suggests that they were taken to forests abandoned to be devoured by wild animals. Folk

beliefs regarding the killing of the old, apart from the Macedonian population (Sterjovski, 1980: 533-541), have also been observed among the Turkish population in Macedonian territory (Lafazanovski, 2000), indicating a mutual influence and fusion of the two distinct cultures.

The version of the myth of killing of the old people in the Poreche region closely resembles the version recorded by M. Cepenkov from Prilep. Documented under the title "The Old Men Were Taken to the Mountain to Die" as a realistic story, its purpose is to illustrate the wisdom of the elderly in contrast to the expectations of the young. The story unfolds with the information that in ancient times, in a certain kingdom, when a man grew old and could no longer work, it was customary for his son to take him to the mountain and abandon him there to die of hunger. The protagonist of the story met the same fate, who realised that, once upon a time, his father had done the same to his father in the very place where this murder was to be committed. After contemplating for a while, the boy realised that the time would come when he too would grow old, and his son would be compelled to leave him in the mountains to die. Absorbed in this thinking, the son changed his mind, so he secretly returned his father home, hiding him in a chamber, without anyone's knowledge. The king opposed this custom, but he was not able to do anything since "it was his people's tradition." That is why he came up with a request, and that was for the sons to make a chain out of sand. Otherwise, he threatened, he would cut their heads off. Naturally, the task was impossible, "it won't be possible to start a sand chain!" The son who had hid his father was pondering on how to carry out the king's task, but he could not come up with any idea. Watching him low spirited, the old father asked him why he was in such a bad mood. After his son told him about the king's assignment, the father gave his son a piece of advice. He advised his son to request a demonstration from the king first, so he could observe the process and replicate it. The next day, the son told the king the same thing, leaving the king stunned by this answer. When asked where he had learned to say that, the son reluctantly answered that he was taught by his father. Moved by this revelation, the king addressed all those present, "Hey lads, did you see how an old man saved your

necks?" How precious an old man can be, he saved that many souls with a single word. That's why, from now on, you should take care of the old and look after them until they die from God, for they all are needed." (Сепенков 1980: 30-33)

As evident in this case, the topic of patricide is a dominant motif in the territory of Macedonia. The traumatic experience of the old man influenced his son, leading him to break away from the tradition and spare his father's life. The wisdom of the elderly, as recognized by the king, was irreplaceable. Although they were unable to work, their life experience proved invaluable, often representing a thin line between life and death. After recognising the need to preserve the lives of the elderly, the younger generations abandoned this custom. It is interesting to note the son's trauma upon realizing that his father had killed his own father in the same location, and the killing should not be carried out at his father's grave.

In a story recorded by K. Shapkarev, a rope of sand was supposed to be created by the young as well. Unlike in the previous story, it was a Turkish authority rather than the king, who asked the young people, accustomed to slaughtering their old fathers, to perform this impossible task. One of them, who hadn't slaughtered his father, was advised by him. Following his father's guidance, he first requested mule's milk, and a sample of the rope to observe its construction. This way the authority realised that behind the son's words was hidden the father's wisdom. In this case, the story ends with the punishment of the father killers, i.e. he ordered all of them to be slaughtered. The exception was the son who spared his father, and as a result he was rewarded (Shapkarev, 1976: 100-102).

In addition to the abovementioned versions of this tradition, several different versions have been recorded as well. As Radovanović reports, in Dojran and Mariovo, they once used to "slaughter the old people." The killings occurred either on certain rocks or near the hearth, where the heads of the family would gather. Both legends refer to a period of drought, when there was no seed to be sown in the fields. The old men advised their sons to find anthills, where wheat seeds collected by the ants could be found (Dojran, "Son, go and find anthills and there you will find wheat seeds"; Mariovo, "Son, go to that great

field, there's an anthill there, I've known it for a long time, if you dig it, you'll find wheat seeds") (Radovanovic, 1930: 320). Similarly to the story recorded by Cepenkov, the sons' reluctance to kill their fathers played an important role in rejecting this cruel custom. We encounter a distinctive display of compassion originating from the Skopje Torbešija region, Veles, and Ohrid as well.

We will present one more example illustrating the wisdom of old people; another wisdom from an old father. In a story from Veles, it is told that "in ancient times, the king ordered old people to be slaughtered." While many slaughtered their old men, one son decided not to follow the order, so he hid his father in a barrel. In the meantime, the king summoned everyone to the place where the sun rose. Advised by his father, the son headed in the right direction. Surprised by the son's accurate choice, the king asked for an explanation. The son admitted to disobeying the king's order, "I haven't slaughtered him, said the man, for he's been taking care of me since I was a kid, I couldn't bear to slaughter him." After this incident, the king issued a new order, "From now on, no old man shall be slaughtered, neither man nor woman, but they shall die naturally, succumbing to their own death." (Radovanovic, 1930: 319)

Passing Down the Custom Silently Through Oral Tradition

Regarding the custom of "slaughtering the elderly," we have identified several moral, ethical, and sensitive categories, which often appear as leitmotifs in traditions. They revolve around an old unwritten custom or law passed by the highest authority, resulting in old men being condemned to an untimely death; nearly always there is a violator of these laws or established norms, portrayed as the savior of the old man. Driven by conscience, feelings of guilt, and mercy, the son does not carry out the request to kill his father. This is a traumatic experience for both, the young and the old alike. Additionally, there is always a given task that has to be performed, whether it involves embarking on a quest to find a certain place on Earth or to make a rope out of sand. With the advice and wisdom of the elderly, the task is completed, followed by a confession of the young man to the highest authority that he has defied the order to kill his father. Because of the

honest confession and the old man's wise advice, the emperor, the highest authority, grants forgiveness, and abolishes the custom/order to kill the old.

The custom of slaughtering the elderly intertwines a series of moral, ethical, and sociological elements, revealing the cruelest, yet most empathetic characteristics of mankind. A society built on the principles of eliminating old people in reality could mark the border between life and death, especially in harsh living environments marked by cold, drought, darkness, and the like. On the other hand, folk beliefs demonstrate that even without the experience and wisdom of the elderly, the line between survival and extinction was thin. This collision of real and hypothetical scenarios is fully reflected in Macedonian folk beliefs.

Such traditions are much more than mere stories. Rooted in pagan times, they are never told in a sarcastic way, and the consequences that can arise from such acts are always taken seriously. While the thought that the moment may come when their old parents find themselves under the blow of their axe can sometimes cross the mind of the young, the old do not discuss it. They are aware of the possibility of a violent termination of their lives. The mere mention of the custom in their presence can evoke agitation and trauma, although on some occasions they can make jokes at their own expense, but only in the presence of their peers. While these folk beliefs may never be the subject of frequent storytelling around the fireplace or in other gatherings, they have never been forgotten. Quietly and carefully, they have been passed down through oral tradition.

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