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Godfatherhood in Traditional Communities

Vera St. Erlich

In the Catholic Church, there is a godfather at baptism, the sponsor at the confirmation ceremony, and the witness at a wedding ceremony. They are selected separately each time. They are also very respected everywhere and considered in some ways as relatives.

In the Orthodox Church, there is an even greater role. The same people or people from the same family are chosen through several generations to be godfathers, and the godfatherhood is an unconditional barrier to marrying. The godfather or wedding witness is so active at the baptism or marriage ceremony that it is he who says, “I baptized him” or “I marry them’’.

Arguments among godfathers are considered to be a sin, and therefore godfatherhood is proposed when two clans are “engaged in a feud” and they need to settle their dispute. Vuk Vrčević brings out examples of how tribal tribunals condemned opponents to become godfathers to the other during difficult disputes and there was the danger of blood revenge, that is to say, they had to become godfathers to their opponents’ children who are still to be born.

There is one special type of godfatherhood – haircutting godfatherhood, which is called that way because the godfather cuts the child’s hair when the child is one year old or even older. In this case, the godfather can even be a person of different religion, and Muslims also knew this ritual. In Vrčević’s story : ”Lijek za kosovske rane” (“Cure for Kosovo Wounds”), some outlaws kidnapped wives and children of three beys and sought ransom for those prisoners. One bey sent them some less treasure than they were looking for, but offered them the haircutting godfatherhood. The outlaws accepted the treasure, cut off children’s locks of hair, and became godfathers to bey’s children – which meant protection for the outlaws and for their further extortion.

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Vera Stein Ehrlich (1897 – 1980) was a social anthropologist who made significant scientific contributions to the development of cultural anthropology in the Balkans.

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