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Godfatherhood in the Hat

Veselin Čajkanović

In the stories of Janko M. Veselinović, that are full of good ethnographic details, there is a story titled “Kumova kletva – Godfather’s Curse” (Slike iz seoskog života – Pictures from the Village Life, II, Belgrade, 1899, SKZ 54, 2, 1 idd.) An old man Srećko Sokočić is a godfather to Stanojlo Puretić. Stanojlo is a village serf and a short-tempered man. In a moment of anger, Stanojlo condemns Srećko to a beating. Srećko together with all the peasants rebels against such an outrageous condemnation: Is it possible that a godson wants to beat his godfather, the one “who held him in his arms”? In all this, neither the protests nor the prayers help. Stanojlo orders the verdict to be enforced.

The old man Srećko makes the last attempt and tells Stanojlo: “Not the godfather and St. John!” But Stanojlo says “I will not do it to my godfather”. Then he takes off his hat, puts it on the ground, away from himself, and says, “There, the godfatherhood is in the hat.” They started hitting the old man, and while the beating lasted, Stanojlo was saying, from time to time: “There, the godfatherhood is in the hat!” When the beating was over, the old man Srećko got up and cursed Stanojlo: “May God give you grief in your life! ... I wish that your joy turns into sadness! ... May you never have any children,” etc. Srećko’s curse left a strong impression on Stanojlo: he is repenting and reasoning like this: “A godfather is greater than a father ... A godfather can curse – God accepts his curse before his father or mother’s curse... He who is cursed by a godfather has no luck “etc.

It is unclear to the average reader why Stanojlo takes off his hat and why he solemnly declares that the godfatherhood is in the hat. You could immediately notice this: The whole manipulation with the hat has, obviously, a magical character. Stanojlo knows that he cannot raise his hand against the godfather, as he is connected to him through the relationship of godfatherhood, and therefore seeks for the option of breaking that connection, or, at least for the moment, not to be held accountable for it. For that purpose, he removes his hat, throws it away, and declares that the godfatherhood is in the hat. What is the purpose of this? In order for the whole thing to be clear, it is necessary to know what the significance of the hat is, what is godfatherhood and what is the connection between the hat and the godfatherhood.

It should be noted that the godfatherhood is an old tradition. Its beginning, essence and significance have not been clarified as yet. There is no need to go into all these questions, but I will try to make only one statement about the religious significance of

godfatherhood. A godfather has an unusually important role in the native cult. He has some very significant duties in the most important moments of that cult: at birth (giving names), at puberty ceremonies (first haircut) at the wedding, and in settling the blood vengeance issues.

Source:

Srpska književna zadruga osnovana 1892 godine; Kolo: LXVI, knjiga 443

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Veselin Čajkanović (1881 -1946) was a classical scholar, philosopher, ethnologist, religious history scholar, and Greek and Latin translator.

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