

SACRIFICE, ORDEAL, DIVINATION

International conference

at the Pécs Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pécs, Hungary

Friday 12th–Sunday 14th December, 2014

Organisers:

Pécs University, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

Pécs Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

With support of „East-West”. *Vernacular religion on the boundary of Eastern and Western Christianity: continuity, changes and interactions* (ERC project № 324214)

In co-operation with the *Belief Narrative Network of ISFNR*

Call for papers

November 15th 2013

Dear Colleague,

We have the honour to invite you to our international conference and would be honoured if you contributed to its success by sharing your research findings. The conference is the tenth event within the series *Religious ethnological concepts in multidisciplinary approach* launched in 1993. Ever since that time it has remained our goal to apply an interdisciplinary approach to some of the key concepts of religious anthropology and review the latest research findings in folklore studies, anthropology, religious studies, cultural history, psychiatry and other disciplines, while engaging in conversation within and among professions in order to solve new scientific problems. Besides the Hungarian organisers, Pécs University and the Pécs Committee of the Academy, the Belief Narrative network of researchers which is part of the *International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR)* are once again kindly acting as co-organisers of the event. Our invitations have been sent, besides Hungarian scholars, also to a number of researchers in Europe, America and Asia, and indeed several excellent British, German and Spanish experts have already indicated their intention to attend. The conference will be held in English, occasionally in French or in German, and on request by applicants we might also set up a Hungarian speaking section. Papers delivered at the conference will be published, according to plan, in a series which has already proved successful and whose Hungarian title translates as *Studies on the transcendent*. We are hoping that an English version of the volume can also be produced.

As regards the proposed theme of the conference, rites of divination, ordeal and sacrifice play an equally important role in the Christian cultures of Europe as among peoples of other religions in other continents. Nevertheless, research of the subject in Europe is rather incomplete, particularly in comparison to the anthropological studies carried on in Africa. Each of the three topics in the title deserve to be studied separately, but at this conference our main concern is to analyse them from the perspective of the anthropology of religion in such a way as to grasp the internal connections of these areas and the outer connections organised around them. In general, it may be declared that European research lacks analysis of their

popular forms from perspectives of religion or religious anthropology. Particularly when compared to research into non-European peoples, there are not enough comprehensive summaries, descriptions of the phenomenology of religion or papers which highlight and interpret problems that we can rely on. These could highlight the role of various systems of sacrifice, ordeal and divination in the religious cultures of Europe, their place within official and popular religion and, most importantly, in the local communities of European societies, the public and private life of their people. At this conference we would like to make up for this shortcoming to some extent, therefore we would mostly like to hear talks about the interpretation of divination, ordeal and sacrifice as religious and/or social phenomena. We need to define their place within the religious systems of Europe, within the official, vernacular, popular and local religions in the full Christian context, including its denominational variants, as well as outside of it. We believe it is particularly important to examine Christian and non-Christian, religious and magical, as well as past elite and popular forms and practices side by side, bringing them, as it were, to a common denominator, using identical, 'syncretic' categories of religious anthropology.

As regards the possible aspects of analysing the concepts and rituals of *sacrifice*, the main aspects can be e.g. the sacrifice as a form of communication with the supernatural world; as an exchange relation with the deity; as participation in the sacred; as a joint feast with the deity; as a form of catharsis, cleansing and rebirth; Christian forms of sacrifice and formations existing in the vernacular variants of Christianity and labelled as 'magic' or 'folk belief' by research.

A few important subject matters: Sacrifices aimed at deities or saints, pleading for or coercing the gift of goods from heaven; sacrificial offerings, sacrificial fasting, vows of self-restraint, atonement, ascetic forms of *imitatio Christi*. Official and popular forms of offerings to the dead – masses or alms aimed to shorten suffering in the other world; feeding the dead, eating together with the dead, the burial feast as a sacrificial feast. Offerings to the dead as a form of exchange; ancestors of the family and the dead of the community protecting the family or bringing fertility to the community in exchange for food sacrifice (e.g. on the Christmas table or in the sacred corner). Objects of sacrifice, special sacrificial foods for the dead (mush, flat breads, milk, honey), fasting and food taboos as offerings to the dead, foods eaten during fasting, raw foods, archaic techniques and semi-finished products (unbroken hemp, unleavened bread) as sacrificial offerings to avert danger from the demon world. Sacrifices of food or of wool or hemp tied in with taboos offered to the demons visiting on winter holidays (Lucy, Perchta, Prehta, 'Tuesday's woman', 'Saint Friday', etc.). Sacrifices offered to house spirits ('building sacrifice') or the same as quasi sacrificial rituals with no spirit figure in the background. Sacrifice as a part of healing rites (food sacrifice offered to the dead who have been conjured up or to healing spirits or fairies).

Procedures of *ordeal* whereby communities sought the decision of the spirit world through an appointed official or priest in cases requiring jurisdiction (trial by hot iron, ordeal of the bier, trial by fire, by food, by throwing lots etc.) played hardly any part in modern age Europe. There do still exist, however, some popular procedures of ordeal and methods of divination used in this role for identifying sinners, thieves, perpetrators of bewitchment or for finding treasure that had been buried (e.g. spinning a sieve, casting beans, dowsing with sticks).

As regards *divination*, religious and non-religious, elite and popular forms alike are thriving in Europe. The New Age spiritualism is creating new formations and retrieving others the past, which are practised by professionals and lay persons alike. The occasions, purposes and functions are extremely varied; death, the weather, marriage, the length of life, outcome of illness, good and bad fortune and luck are topical to this day. As regards methods, means and spirit helpers of divination, variety is even wider. To quote Barbara Tedlock's categories: in all societies where divination is known, its inductive, intuitive and interpretative narrative techniques and knowledge acquisition methods are present and overlap each other.

To quote some examples: Divination in a dream, in trance or with the help of mediums; with the help of dead people, spirits and deities, presaging signs in dreams, from heaven, divination from the stars or the moon, divining from parts or functions of the human body (palms, face, urine, sneeze); from the intestines or shoulder

blade of animals, from formations of letters and numbers, from sand taking various shapes, from or with a book; casting dice, wheels of fortune, cards; 'seeing' in some bright or transparent medium, in a mirror, on the surface of water, in a crystal ball, from oil poured into water; divination from weather signs (thunder, rainbow) etc. To this very day, one of the richest groups of European divination rites is those aimed to acquire from the dead their supernatural knowledge or the capacity of seeing into the future. This is done by lying on top of the grave, invoking the dead, using symbolic techniques (e.g. with a mirror, or looking through a small hole or by walking a drawing a circle) to ritually creating the sacred space, or seeing the dead at a sacred place (in a church, at the crossroads, sitting on Lucy's chair).

The networks of concepts and rituals around divination, ordeal and sacrifice are interconnected or overlap at a number of points. Divination or ordeal are often the concluding act of a sacrifice or a sacrifice is at once an ordeal or divination rite. A good reason for discussing these three sets of concepts and rituals together on a joint occasion and in the light of each other is that such a context may be conducive to finding new points of connection and to re-structuring our existing knowledge.

For instance: animal sacrifices performed before incubation in a church; symbolic fasting before love divination; the love and death divination common during mid-winter festivals is tied in with giving certain types of food to the dead (e.g. placing food for them on the Christmas table); divination rites include giving offerings of food to demonic women who visit people during the winter festivals or on certain days of the week (divination by a flat bread given to Lucy or by the milk given to the Perchtas; animals were sacrificed as an offering to spirits guarding treasure in order to secure success of the divination procedure aimed to identify the place of the treasure).

Many aspects of this multi-layered complexity have already been summarised to a satisfactory extent. This means, for instance, the ancient and medieval material of certain forms of divination (e.g. catoptromancy, divination books, divination from dreams; the role of Greek, Latin or Arab astrological books) or regarding a particular people (e.g. Russians) or group of sources (e.g. medieval Germanic or Celtic sources); or the divination techniques of the elite magicians of the early modern period.¹ Nevertheless there are still many shortcomings and much that is incomplete. Certain areas are quite unknown, particularly as regards popular forms, the village practice of divination where local data and descriptions are scarce and incomplete and there have been very few analyses based on modern anthropological field work. Little is known about the role which magical specialists, diviners and seers play in contemporary communities and even less about the communities they serve with their knowledge. Therefore we would welcome papers about the role that contemporary forms of sacrifice, divination or ordeal play in the everyday life, religion or mentality of a community

¹ Some important comprehensive surveys covering also European material and research in the modern period are the following: Rose, H. J.: Divination. In Hastings, J. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* IV. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911; James, E. O.: Sacrifice and Sacrament. In Hastings, J. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* XI. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920; Müller-Bergström, Walther: Gottesurteil (Ordeal). In Bächtold-Stäubli, Hanns – Hoffmann-Krayer, Eduard (Hrsgs.): *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, III. Berlin – Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1931; Nottarp, Hermann: *Gottesurteilstudien* (Bamberger Abhandlungen und Forschungen, Bd. II.) München: Kössel Verlag, 1956; Heiler, Friedrich: *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*. (Die Religionen der Menschheit, Bd. 1.) Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961; Tillhagen, Carl-Herman: Volkstümliche Wahrsagekunst im Schweden während des vorigen Jahrhundert. *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* XIX (1970), 369-388; Thomas, Keith: *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971; Loewe, Michael-Blackler, Carmen (eds.): *Divination and Oracles*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980; Zuesse, Evan M.: Divination. In Eliade, Mircea (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Religion* 4. New York: Macmillan, 1987; Burnett, Charles (ed.) *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages. Texts and Techniques in the Islamic and Christian Worlds*. Aldershot: Variorum, 1996; Keszeg Vilmos: *Jóslások a Mezőségen. Etnomantikai elemzés*. Sepsiszentgyörgy: Bon Ami, 1997; Ryan, W. F. *The Bathhouse at Midnight. An historical survey of magic and divination in Russia*. Thrupp–Stroud–Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999; Tedlock, Barbara: Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation. *Folklore* 112 (2001);

or which explore the collective and individual motivations why a magical/religious specialist performing these rites becomes a diviner, and the beliefs surrounding them (regarding their capabilities, their learning and their helping spirits).

Another field worth exploring is that of the narrative traditions of rites and beliefs of sacrifice and divination, their folklore, literary and artistic representations, their narrative metaphors, motifs, topoi and genres, the interrelations of narratives and religious notions and beliefs.

Some techniques and functions (astrology, moon signs, divination from a mirror, looking in water, divination from shoulder blade, from dreams, from dream books, fate books, divination books and divination texts, e.g. the Sybilline oracles, apocalyptic and chiliastic oracles) have traditions going back over millennia in the various cultures of Europe. The legacy of ancient Greek and Roman or German, Slavic, Celtic, Hungarian etc. cultures, as well as ancient and medieval Arab i.e. Islamic influences have survived persistently in both elite and popular cultures. This rich historical material also invites exploration of the connections between contemporary and past forms, and the changes in the functions over the ages – a task which, again, has only been carried out with regard to certain topics.

We also welcome papers based on the study of non-European peoples and non-Christian religions which provide a different angle and offer new lessons for our European investigations.

Please, submit your application using the attached form, including an abstract of 10-15 sentences, by February 1st 2014. We need you to submit your abstract both in English and in the language in which the paper will be delivered. We will inform all applicants in the course of February whether their application has been accepted or, possibly, rejected (for this decision we need an abstract of sufficient detail).

We will require you to submit the full text of the papers during November 2014, some three weeks before the conference, so that we can send them to all participants and print them.

We are doing everything in our power to keep costs for participants as low as possible. At this stage we cannot predict costs of participation, all that we can say for sure is that there is no participation fee and we will probably be able to provide participants with food, while travel and accommodation will have to be covered by themselves. Accommodation for 3-4 nights will be around €100, while travel costs between Budapest–Pécs by rail are around €32. We will be able to reimburse the travel costs and pay for the accommodation of 4-5 persons coming from abroad. We will be sending you further information about costs in March at the latest, leaving you enough time to purchase low-cost air line tickets.

Please submit your application and your abstract to pocse@chello.hu by completing the enclosed form.

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Application Form

Name:

Occupation, institution, position:

Address:

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Title of the proposed paper:

Abstract: