

Oaked Fires in Serbia. “For the Slavs, the Tree Remains all Central and Bearing”

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They set out early in the morning, men with axes, boys in tow and, for some, the odd girl champing at the bit. The woods are some way from Bujanovac, but these columns of individuals resembled statues who have moved off their plinths, heading to the woods that call them with mesmerising force. The groves seem to speak in this part of Europe, where the Serbs still commune with a spirit of past. Industrialisation has yet to kill off this element, yet to estrange the citizens from the south from their magical ends.

The woods have, historically, served as links between the finitely mortal and timeless supernatural, a manifestation with roots in the earth, deeply grown and burrowed, and leaves in the canopy, a link pointing to the heavens. The Norse peoples worshiped Yggdrasil, a great, worldly ash tree cosmically sustaining the mortal and immortal, whatever the form.

For the Slavs, the tree remains all central and bearing, the fecund creature that holds the seeds of all, the progenitor for the verdant world. To down such a tree, or, in the tradition of the badnjak, to remove a sampling of oak covered in brown gold leafing, would require ceremonial preliminaries. And so this cautionary note has survived, more in the context of communal gathering and pursuit, as it does on this day, the determined axemen of the village, fortified by wine and local brandy, making their way as if in a deep trance, towards the woods that call them with mesmerising calls. There is a slow motion carnival feel to this, and this is topped by a horse plumed in red baubles, heading with a look of obedience, to the show. To the woods, and there, you shall find yourself with a branch's severance, a small tree's beheading.

With the necessary badnjak samples gathered, religious authority is consulted. At the local church in the village of Rakovac in the Preševo Valley, an area awash with mineral goodness from its waters, the priest is buzzing and busy, a man deluged with attention. He is parachuted in to perform ceremonial duties after his previous counterpart committed adultery and fled for Austria with his new bride. There, he keeps up a long Yugoslav mission of feeding other economies with the *Gastarbeiter*.

Contributions are made as each oak tree is blessed with a dip and a splash, and the icon kissed, all taking place in the church yard and a Christmas freeze. The line of oak carrying devotees forms like a living forest, moving slowly through snow and frozen mud. The fire in the church yard burns as welcome and promise, and here, the Christian message is tagged to the pagan, a feat of neat historical reconstruction: the heat brought from burning the badnjak suggests the three shepherds warming the stable of Jesus's birth.

The music commences, wind meeting brass, the clarinet engaging the trumpet. Vocal

chords are exercised. The procession to the village square commences with a noisy enthusiasm that drowns out the doubts of despair and dark thoughts. Solemn celebration thatches with defiance.

At the village gathering, evident hierarchies seem to take shape. The in-crowd is to be found in proximity to the brandy, or rakija, cooking away in a capacious stove overseen by two men whose teeth have seen better days. The outers, hugging a local convenience shop like frozen sparrows, gaze on with a slightly menacing look, though this is merely temporary and marked more by curiosity than anything else. They bide their time and will, when the moment comes, commit to the ring dance that is bound to eventuate.

There are old men, craggily faced and withered with memories and young men with short hair, some even shaved, with suspicions of the new age. NATO, throbs the sentiment in this crowd, cannot be trusted over the mischief in Kosovo (the recent moves by that confused political entity to create its own army in defiance of the stationed troops from the alliance have released fears). History remains a set of betrayals, missteps and misunderstandings, a vice that seemingly clamps on this region. The next disaster is deemed as inevitable as the next tummy upset.

The bonfire gathers momentum in the village centre, the primeval lusty flame that lights hope and shreds fears. It is all fire in this region: fire in the woodstove that delivers the distinctly flavoured food of immense quantity while warming houses; fire in the church yard that acts like a beacon for the faithful; fire to dance around; fire as life. The inferno is sovereign, governs the soul, dictates the process of communing. It is elemental. To gaze at this promethean flame in the home stove or in the village square as it rises to consume is to be alive and feel the veins warmed, to embrace something atavistic and deep; to know that you can endure what is to come despite the calamities that might be faced and, truth be known, to deny.

Children release eardrum creasing crackers with irritating enthusiasm, some casting them into the mother flame; flare guns are released, usually by those yet to reach puberty. (Where the gun speaks, whatever form it takes, the conversation may prove violent.) Earlier in the day, live guns were fired, a stutter in the wintry air softened by the snow-capped earth and the vegetation creamy white from heavy falls. While celebratory, these have a sinister undertone, a promise from Serbs to counterparts – the Albanians, for the most part – that they are up for a fight in the demographic and political struggle for this region.

The rakija that heats in the stove overlooking the small centre in Rakovac – one can hardly call it a square, given the misshapen nature – is cooked for the masses, and the men who come to it are filled with its manna-giving properties. The warming liquid is distributed in plastic cups, and are filled to their dripping brims. The set of dances start to breakout, vigorous, energetic, even manic. The gyration and jangling around the fire signals pagan tribute and affirmed living, for it is here, in this dance around the flames, that reassurance comes in abundance. Then, a man of about forty raises a flaming sample of fireworks, an all glorious flare. The entire audience is illuminated, faces in rapture. The fire, alive from the oak, continues to feed.

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