
Christmas in Spain: Religious Syncretism Historical Review

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Abstract: This paper considers the basic features of the festive culture of the Christmas cycle in Spain. It is shown that this series of party actions has born a range of successive layers, incorporating some features of the cultures, which existed on the area of the Iberian peninsula from the time of the Roman sovereignty till nowadays. Based on the factor analysis, four basic factors (the factor of religious syncretism, socio-economic factor, the game factor and the cohesion factor), which modified the picture of the party cycle during the whole period of its existence were derived. As a result of this analysis, the paper concludes that the tradition is being subject to gradual modernization, because of the changes of public discourse.

Keywords: Christmas, Spain, religious syncretism, superstitions, common religion.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of the Christmas cycle parties in Spain. This series of party actions has born a range of successive layers, incorporating some features of the cultures, which existed on the area of the Iberian peninsula from the time of the Roman sovereignty till nowadays. The basic massive of customs and attributes has emerged during the absolutism epoch, was reglamented by the Catholic church, but at the same time continued to have some pre-Christian features. The rapid secularisation that started during the recent decades favoured the modification of the party's content. The intensified growth of anticlericalism, agnosticism and atheism during the recent years, as well as the nature of capitalism make the problem of studying Christmas and the party dates connected with it within a context of the relationship with the religion relevant. Also, the study of superstitions connected with these dates has an heuristic potential.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Julio Caro Baroja paid much attention to the study of this cycle. The process of studying the calendar ritualism in Spain starts with his fundamental study "The Carnival". Later the parties just of the Christmas cycle in the current context were not paid due attention by the scholars. Most part of the papers published on this topic is devoted to the historical or local aspects of studying the Christian ritualism. In the study of Gomes Vosmediano (2012) the features of the baroque Christmas, some prohibitions on the participation of certain characters or committing some particular actions are deliberately investigated. Rodrigues Galliar (2009) in the study "Christmas over time" in general terms investigates the parties of the Christmas cycle and the relevant paraphernalia and ritualism. Among a few of studies on this topic we should emphasize the study of Ariño Villarroya "The general religion: a case of Christmas" (2007), in which he introduces the concept of "general religion". The researcher relies upon the similar practices which take place in different countries of Europe during celebrating Christmas. As a distinctive feature he names leaving the religiosity, which is treated not only in terms of the Catholic church, but also as an action of the national and civil religiosity.

The analysis of practices connected with the consumption culture and the paraphernalia that accompanies it is presented in the study of Nicolas Ajeda, Martinez Pastor and Garcia Manso (2019). The authors pay attention to the problem of family virtues in the context of the Christmas advertisement of different companies. The study of Ejido (2020), which is similar to this study by its thematics is devoted to the advertisement video of the National Lottery aimed to emphasize the cohesion of different social groups under the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nowadays in studying the phenomenon of parties of the Christmas cycle one can find the lacunas connected with the problems of religious syncretism, well-established secularism and attitude towards the religion as a whole. The enforcing trends of anticlericalism lead to the emergence of the large amount of agnostics and atheists. The recent statistical data of CIS of Spain suggest that in November of 2020 11% of respondents identified themselves as agnostics, 14,1% identified themselves as atheists and 10,9% identified themselves as indifferent non-believer. At the same time their quantity is continuing to grow. The quantity of reverends is continuing to decrease (from 20,4% in February of 2020 to 18,8% in November of the same year). Thus,

studying of this topic can be heuristically useful and can determine the urgent content of the main party of the year in the European countries.

METHODS

The main method of the study is the factor analysis of the existing pattern of the party. It is necessary to allow for the historically well-established tradition on the area of Spain, the current socio-economic state of the Spanish society and the political discourse as the key factors for our analysis. The base of the study are the field research collected by the author during the period of 2009-2019, archive documents and the studies of some Spanish anthropologists on this topic.

RESULTS

Christmas in the Christian countries is one of the culminative moments of the year, which is anticipated very much by the children and adults. It is absolutely special time of the year, which includes some celebrations, during which one can observe mass walkings and chamber meetings of the family members. The respective decorations and rituals are inherent to the Christmas period.

Today the Christmas cycle lasts from two to four weeks and it includes the following celebrations: Saint Nicholas Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas (24-25 December), New Year and the Epiphany Day (6 January). For the Christians all over the world this event is the symbol of saving, the day of realizing the God' sun on the Earth, the hope for the victory over the death and sufferings. The history of birth of baby Jesus in the Christian countries is translated to the people living in them by means of teaching, sermons, illustrative pictures, performances and mass media.

The festive acts of the Christmas cycle are distinguished by their special colourite. Due to the age-old Catholic tradition this day is one of the most favorite national celebrations. Thus, the first factor emphasized by us under the analysis of this party tradition is the factor of Christian religion and the religious syncretism. During some centuries of its existence the Christmas cycle got a large quantity of rituals, which can be used to distinguish it among other similar parties of Western Europe. In this cycle the relics of ancient beliefs, severe rituals of the Catholic church, traditions of the Middle-age mysteries and area performances, the habits of aristocracy of the last centuries and novations of industrial epoch were reflected.

In the whole cycle in Spain we can emphasize celebrations having the religious component in their base and the secular celebrations that don't have such component. In the origins of the Christmas cycle more ancient pagan beliefs take place, among which the Roman Saturnalies are the most famous ones.

Julio Caro Baroja, speaking about the origins of winter Carnivals, says that Saturn seemed to be the God of agriculture initially, but the Romans of the Republic Epoch didn't remember about it yet.

They connected Saturn with Yanus and the beautiful epoch, when everybody was equal and could live under abundance without any trouble (Caro Baroja, 2006).

The distinctive feature of Saturnalias was a series of festive actions, described by the ancient authors. In particular, there are mentions on the gifts (Katull, Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, Convivia Saturnalia and others), delight of the national masses and numerous jokes. Svetonius writes about choosing the king of the party by means of lot (this role belonged to young Neron). The inversive moment in celebrating Saturnalias has to be emphasized separately, the servant took the place of the master, and the master took the place of the servant. Later the aforementioned features were smoothly incorporated into the new Christian paradigm.

Of course, Saturnalias have emerged in the well-developed society with well-established public institutions. The date of holding Saturnalias, from 17 to 23 December, from 17 to 20 December (under the reign of Augustus) coincides with the time of winter solstice, one of the key astronomic dates in the agricultural calendar, one of the turning points of the year. Since the ancient times it meant the birth of a new day (the addition of the day). This date was celebrated specially in many regions of the planet. Incorporation of separate elements of the primal cult of the particular area into the institutional system of pagan Gods leads to the emergence of primary syncretism. It is rather hard to emphasize the separate elements in it, as the system was rather open and flexible.

Monotheistic religions behaved in a similar way, Christianity in this case, when by means of modifying the conceptual matrice it included the separate pagan elements into the content of a new religious party. Thus, the syncretism of the second time allowed to keep the autochthonous features of more ancient beliefs thus encouraging the development of a particular model of ritualism, unique for each Christian region.

Some separate elements of the agricultural cult can be traced in the Catalonian Christmas tradition. The necessary attribute is a log Tió, which is defecating gifts at the Christmas night. This, at first glance, strange tradition represents the well-being of the family twice. The very log symbolizes the hearth, warmth in the house, living fire, which provides the well-being. The action executed by this item for the agriculture meant fertilizer, fertility. It's not casual that one of the characters of modern casual Christmas, El Caganer, or the defecating person, should be also connected with the agricultural cult.

The current state of the Christmas ritualism shows the syncretic elements implemented into the general canvas of the Christian tradition. The custom of choosing the king of the party is kept and takes place on the Epiphany

Day. In the traditional for these days food, El Roscón, a cake in the form of the ring, a bean or small figures of the king and the queen of the party are baked.

One more festivity of the cycle considered having the inversive nature, is Saint Nicholas Day or the party of the small bishop. The mentions about it are met in the novels of the Golden Age of the Spanish literature, in particular, in the novel «The life story of Gusman de Alfarache, the observer of the human life» by Mateo Aleman some mentions on “the small bishop” are met. Julio Caro Baroja (2006) wrote that the party of the small bishop is the most famous party of those connected with Saturnalia.

The festival lasts for three weeks, since 6 December (Saint Nicholas Day) till 28 December (the Day of Saint Innocent Babies of Bethlehem). During the first day one boy is chosen as a small bishop among different boys singing in the church choir. The second date meant the period of ceasing the power of the small bishop and presented a series of festive actions and suppers.

Benites Blanco (2013), studying the party of the small bishop in the monastery Santa Cruz del Valle de los Caídos provides a small review on the most famous traditions of this ritual. In particular, he mentions about Burgos, Palencia, the Basque country, Navarra and the monastery Montserrat. In these regions a complex of the most famous rituals connected with Saint Nicholas has shaped. The party was several times subject to prohibit especially after the Trident Cathedral, which called for regulating the actions relevant to the national religiosity. The nature of this party in the Middle Ages was absolutely different from that we can observe today. Julio Caro Baroja (2006) writes that after dressing up in the costume of the small bishop the young people began to parody the representatives of the priesthood, to joke, sing and dance and finished everything with a great supper. Such behaviour couldn't be not condemned by the side of the servants of the church. We can conclude that in this case we can speak about that laughing culture that was written about in Bakhtin's works. In these acts we can see the free expressing of feelings, leaving the taboo not from the sacral matter, but from the religion as an institute. Such behaviour doesn't evidence of the absence of the belief or mocking over the Christian virtues, which can be observed in our days. It is rather an expression of the unclever energy of the young people, its maximalism and the will to laugh at the things, which present to be funny for her.

The current state of this party presents a successful experience of restauration of the tradition that has gone far away long ago. In the case of Burgos we can speak about a double restauration. For the first time after more than 300 years of oblivion the tradition was restored in 1950th years by Bersunegi Aruti, the music teacher and lasted until its retirement. For the second time since 1998 with the creation of choir Pueri Cantores this tradition has been living till our days. As it was stated above, its nature differs very much from others. Today it presents as a realization of clericalism. The children taking part in the festive actions are taking part in the Christmas mess, are walking triumphantly across the city and giving sweets to the people. The most archaic moment is that of expressing claims from Burgos' children, which the small bishop exclaims to the Major of the city. It is the inversive nature of the party, which makes Saturnalia different, that is kept in this party today. Besides, the voices of young children performing psalms cause the association with the innocent babies and arouse the noblest emotions among adult spectators.

Thus, we can see, how in the separate acts of the Christmas tradition the syncretic elements continue to be kept till today. Despite the struggle of the church (and later of the science) against the national religiosity, profanation and superstitions, they are inherent to the human being by nature. The modern world is still not free of superstitions. As Hobbes (1989) wrote, almost all the people because of the fear for the future resort to the signs the amount of which is too large to enumerate them. The superstitious signs are the religious relics and often despite the negative attitude of the church are treated by the believers as an omen. The significant dates in the human being life give the reason for applying these superstitions. One of such moments is Christmas as a transitional phase, and New Year equally. These superstitions are aimed at getting well-being in the family during the ongoing year.

The new clothing put on for the party and the even number of the guests at the table will provide the luck. When the number of guests is odd, an additional empty utensil is put on the table or a vase with honey is put at the center of the table. A widespread sign for New Year is to put something gold into the glass with champagne, to put on the lingerie of the red colour or to come out the threshold with a suitcase, which presages a trip in the ongoing year.

The emergence of new superstitions is rather a logical process. Christianity was struggling against superstitions throughout its history as pagan signs. The divination, fortune-telling and domestic and meteorological signs were related to the superstition. In the Soviet period the monograph of Shakhnovich “The superstitions in the science world” (1969) was issued, in which the superstitions were viewed as a part of religious tradition. The belief in transcendent phenomena was a base of religion, as well as of superstition. Small signs can be found in the behavior of rather rationally thinking people identifying themselves as atheists. Sometimes the signs turn into the element of generally accepted game.

Considering the superstitions within a context of religious syncretism, one should point to their organic relationship with the religion, into which they happened to be implemented, despite the struggle against them. The problems of capitalistic world, such as unemployment, encourage the development of irrational belief in the

miracle. The Christmas and New Year signs aimed at improving the well-being tell us about it. Thus, we can derive the second factor, socio-economic one. It was noticed in the soviet historiography that “the fact of wide passing of mystics of different kind has a social base now, reflecting the crisis of capitalistic society in the periods of declines and crisis of the social system, as all the history of human society suggests, the mystic moods cover a significant part of the society” (Tajourizina, 1969).

Economic, political and social stability, of course, influence the religious conscience, its forming and destroying/strengthening. Within the harder environment the favorable ground for the development of superstitions and bad omens is created. The superstitions connected with a table appear as such in the Spanish Christmas traditions. Beside the mentioned number of the utensils, the sign connected with the traditional Spanish desert Turrón also takes place. It should not be cut at the table, but should be broken into small pieces before serving to the table. In this ritual an irrational belief in the supernatural forces, that was adopted since one's childhood and that became a habit, having lost its autochthonous sense.

The influence of the globalization process should be also attributed to the economics factor. The total replication of the Christmas parties under the conditions of the capitalistic consumption society leads to the escaping of several rituals. In particular, decorating of the house, the nativity procession, the Christmas tree decoration are changed gradually in all the world by the purchased ones (Kupisiński, 2014). This trend in the consumption society can be treated from Baudrillard (1981) position of religious symbolics as a simulacrum. Within a context of globalization traditional Christmas songs villancicos are sometimes replaced by the songs in English. Often in the supermarkets Corte Inglés one can meet Santa Claus, which is not inherent to the Spanish culture and appeared under the influence of the Spanish culture.

In the secular or post-secular society the church is restricted in its invasion in the public life, especially in those matters that concern the human rights or legal issues, but as for the private life, especially of the moral, in these issues the role of the church is still strong (Donegani, 2015). The Spanish society didn't have any sustained development of secularism, as it was the case in the neighbor countries. After the rejection of the national Catholicism policy the movement towards the society that is more free of religious rituals was extremely forcing. Christmas in these conditions gradually becomes more and more secular, the religious filling of this party is reduced to the several attributes (setting the nativity procession, Christmas cards and cavalcade of magicians on the respective day) treated as a part of tradition. So, we can derive a third important factor when analyzing Christmas and the parties of this cycle, which is the factor of game, which was analyzed in the national parties by such authors as Heisinga (2001), Caro Baroja (2006), Tokarev (1977), Bakhtin (1990) and others.

The factor of game is extremely important in the context of secular society, in which religion takes place in the public area equally with the alternative forms of worldview. The practice of religion would become more and more a matter of private choice and cease to have any effect on the public sphere (Köhrsen, 2012). During the field research carried by the author it was found out that the parents who adhered to atheistic, rationalistic or non-theistic views helped their children to write letters to magicians, to learn Christmas songs treating it as a part of children's game, in which the unwritten rules well-established for ages exist, which are performed or modified, according to the possibilities of the participants. So, in the case of extreme atheism the house can be decorated only by secular attributes, and the phrase “Merry Christmas” loses for the speaking its religious connotation.

The last factor that we should derive is the factor of cohesion, which is connected with the transition to the post-industrial society and more individualistic society becomes less voluminous, but still important. We should explain the proposed thesis. According to the polls of informants, twenty-five years ago the Christmas supper even in big cities implied not only the cohesion of the family, but also the common table for all the citizens of the tenement houses. Today this party act gave way to a more chamber supper within one predominantly small family. Applying the terminology of Turner (1975), Christmas is a liminal period, and as a consequence of that communitas, the implicit law of cohesion arising from the relationship with totalities emerge. So, there is no sadder view than a person who is celebrating Christmas alone. His neighbors and friends, will have him come over, of course.

So, we can conclude that today a factor of cohesion becomes primordial for celebrating Christmas as a central winter party in Spain.

CONCLUSION

After holding the factor analysis of celebrating Christmas and a series of parties connected with it temporally and meaningfully, we can conclude that the tradition is being subject to gradual modernization because of the changes of public discourse. In Spain together with the rapid development of the secularization process, opening new traditions and spreading the ideas, which are not familiar to the traditional viewpoint of the church, a set of traditional Christmas attributes expresses the surprising resistance. Under the influence of socio-economic challenges a new set of invented traditions and superstitions arises. As Hobsbaum told “It's clear today that the globalization doesn't destroy the local, national and other cultures, but it is coupled with them in different

unexpected combinations”. Studying these combinations in the area of festive culture seems to be a prospective field of knowledge in terms of national identity.

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