



## Rusallias - Women's Trance Ritual

Every year on Pentecost, (the seventh Sunday after Easter), in the villages of Duboka and Neresnica (East Serbia) women pass into trance. It's believed that they are possessed by Rusallias (mythical beings resembling nymphs). These women are called Rusallias also. If somebody is interested in connection between Rusallias and Goddess Diana s/he can read a little on it in the book "Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions" by Mircea Eliade.



There are several different legends which tell us of the origin of this ritual. Common in all of them is the death of Queens. Today, rituals which are connected with Queens (from other parts of the country) have lost most of their authentic meaning. The most characteristic is the so-called "procession of Queens". In this ritual girls (Queens) go through villages. Common names for all girls in the ritual are "Queens" but only one is actual Queen. Other girls play following roles: King (with cap and sword), Court lady, standardbearers (two girls with banners) and singers/dancers. Queen's role in the ritual is only to sit on a chair with veiled face. In front of every house in the village these girls dance and sing sacred songs. They solicit the Slavic Goddess Lada at the end of the every song. The purpose of these rituals ("processions") today is to bring good look to every house.



One month before Pentecost women able to fall into a trance feel some kind of excitement or even fear. Frequently, women begin to be very disturbed after they dye eggs, (of the first Thursday before Pentecost). Before some woman fall into trance she begins to look impassive and stunned and to talk ruptured and disconnected. Sometimes she begins a furious dance and howling. Then she passes into a trance. These women can't return to a normal state of consciousness without performing the dance by Queens and Kings. While these women are in trance they sometimes begin to speak. Sometimes, it's communication with dead souls, but frequently these women prophesize. It's believed that Russalias speak through them.

The entire ritual from the beginning till the end of the trance state is accompanied by music and dance. They are the most important parts of the ritual. In fact, for women is enough to hear sacred Rusallia's melody to fall in trance.



Sacred Rusallias' melody recorded by M.A. Ana Matovic

This monotonous melody can be performed only during the Holiday. In earlier times people had used bagpipe to play this melody, but after 1935 this one is performed on violins also.

Serbian ethnologist Dragoslav Antonijevic suppose that by dancing around the Russalias in trance an imaginary bound between the living and the dead can be established in the sense of Dance Macabre. According to his opinion "the leader, waving a long knife during the entire dance, chases death away and in inexorable rhythm drags life out in victory over the dead."



The center of the village, which is the main gathering place, is the main gathering place, is used for staging the ritual. Here women experience trance before the eyes of many spectators. When some women fall into trance, three girls (Queens), three young men (Kings) and a bagpiper come running to her.



The bagpiper begins to play sacred Rusallina's melody. This melody is, as noted above, one of the most important parts of the Rusallian's ritual. The Queens and Kings dance three times around the women in trance. After that, two Kings take the woman in trance to the river. There Queens and Kings dance

around her three times again. After that one King chews garlic and wormwood, fills his mouth with water and sprinkles the face of the woman in trance with this mixture. Then, they dance around her.

This time it is the dance which is usual in funeral rite. The Queens sing the following words:

"Opshi shi yarasha!  
Shvinkodate yarasha  
Asha, bela, sha!  
Shpinden gura may!  
Ayde bela ay."

This is probably in Vlachian (I don't know this language) and this means something like this:

"Stand up hop  
One more time  
Again, so beauty  
so do you hear  
let's do it beauty."

When the woman in trance opens her eyes Queens hold her and dance with her. Kings hold their knives. Queens turn the woman around three times under the joined knives, and in this way finish the ritual.

The community highly respects women able to pass into trance, because, first of all, they were obviously chosen by a deity that possess them, and also, because they are in a position to convey the deity's will to the people.



This text is mostly based on the book "Ritualni trans" by Dragoslav Antonijevic. Pictures are by S. Trojanovic (1901) and by G.A. Koppers (1938) First version of this article was published in american pagan magazine The Crystal Moon Magazine. Rusallias is not pure Slavic ritual. This is probably syncretism of older Balkan customs and Slavic paganism. If you are interested in read about similar rituals more connected with Vlachs and Roumanians I wrote The Queens of Air, another article published in The Crystal Moon Magazine.

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Agora/8933/rusallias.html>