

# **Cross-cultural exchange: Saint George's day customs as a common heritage of Balkan nations**

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## **Abstract**

Saint George is one of the most popular Christian saints throughout the world. There are numerous and quite diverse customs related to his celebrations. However, the most interesting and wide-spread customs integrated, largely into the national identification, are those traditionally practised among some of the Balkan nations. This research gives insight into such customs: ones that, in fact, represent a mixture of Christian and pagan religious rituals, folklore and tradition. Such ethnographic elements have always had an important role in tourism. Recent UNESCO initiatives for the registration of intangible heritage assets and their protection and presentation highlight the significance of this kind of heritage, indicating the necessity of its protection as something unique and of common interest.

KEYWORDS: customs, intangible heritage, presentation, Balkan countries

## **Introduction**

Cultural heritage consists of material and spiritual assets that should be incorporated within the prosperity of human society. Cultural heritage is the basis of every culture; it is not only a representation of the past, but it is also an element of the present and future of all nations. Cultural heritage is not the static basis of a culture. It is not transferred passively from one generation to another or strictly from one historical epoch to another. New generations dynamically act in the selection, marking, reviving, interpretation and representation of cultural heritage. In fact, oral folk traditions formed in the ancient past are transferred from generation to generation (continuity of transfer of cultural form) and

articulated by the primary form of human communication: language. Oral traditions and culture are based on customs, rituals, beliefs, music, skills, crafts and oral literacy. National folklore is diverse and enriched by spiritual values that are connected with customs, festivities, music and dances, stories, and legends. This type of cultural heritage is mostly presented through festivals, events, and tourism. Cultural heritage potentially represents the most important factor in forming a national brand that creates the basic positive image of some nations.

Religious holidays and patron saint festivities dedicated to Saint George have an important place in European history, literature, legends, folk songs, tales, and customs. The latter use several elements typical for festivities dedicated to Saint George; herbs and flowers, water, fire, animals such as sheep, horses, snakes, and others. It also includes processions, chanting, playing flutes, pipes or ringing the bells, gatherings in nature, bathing and drinking spring water, etc. The customs differ from nation to nation and are connected to dominant ethnic or religious groups. Likewise, local communities have developed different customs. We can easily assert that each village has its own traditions and elements that can be recognised as being unique. In this study, only the most common and the most representative customs related to Saint George's Day festivities were taken into consideration.

## **Methodology**

The main focus of this study is to examine similarities and differences in folklore, customs and traditions of different Balkan nations in celebrating St. George's Day, as well as giving an insight to some non-Christian celebrations that are similar and mostly associated with spring celebrations. The research focuses on consulting various types of publications and sources (available in different languages, which makes research more difficult to conduct), personal contacts and interviews with people from different countries, as well as field research (parts of Serbia, Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey) conducted in from 2010 to 2013.

## **The Balkans**

The Balkans is a popular name for the region extending over the Balkan Peninsula. It is a geographical and cultural region of South-Eastern Europe, spreading over 666,700 square km in different states: Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Albania, and relatively small parts of Croatia (the land between the rivers Kupa and Sava), Slovenia (Primorska, Notranjska and Dolenjska regions), Romania (Northern Dobrogea), Turkey (East Thrace) and Italy (Provinces of Trieste and Gorica). Geographically, this region is bordered by four seas (the Adriatic, the Aegean, the Sea of Marmara, and the Black Sea), three rivers (the Danube, the Soča, and the Sava) and two straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles); historically, however, its northern frontier stretched as far as the Carpathian Mountains (Okey 2007).

The region is inhabited mostly by Slavic ethnic groups (Serbs, Bulgarians, Croats, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Bosnians, Bunjevci and Gorani), but also Romani-

ans, Greeks, Turks, Albanians and Romani (Gypsies), Aromanians, Israelis and Ashkali. The predominant religion in the Balkans is Orthodox Christianity, followed by Catholic Christianity and Sunni Islam (Okey 2007). The present-day Balkans is a region in which the main ethnic criteria (origin, language, and religion) differ. Throughout the region's long history, several factors have marked out the dividing lines, which now separate the people and the countries in which they live.

For Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia, history has been marked by a series of migrations, conquests, wars and political alliances at more or less distant times in the past, intermingling and displacing different nations. Their descendants today speak different languages and profess different religions (Couroucli 1997). These nations have organised their states to assert their internal integration, based on a sizable majority with similar ethnic characteristics. However, they are also embracing diverse national groups, originating from other Balkan countries, which are different from the national majorities.



Image 1: The Balkans – ethnic and religion map (by Rada Jovanović, 2014)

In the Balkans, the sharing of shrines by the adherents of two religions was common during the Ottoman period and afterward. Furthermore, this practice is known all over the world (Bielenin-Lenzowska 2009). There is also a long list of similar festivities and traditions in celebration of saints. In particular, Saint George's Day Festivities include some of the most common folklore rituals related to protection against evil and ensuring the welfare of a household or community.

## **Saint George, the martyr**

Saint George (Greek: Γεώργιος (Georgios), Latin: Georgius, c. 275/281–23<sup>rd</sup> April 303 AD) is one of the most venerated saints in the Christian world (Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches). Historians have argued about the exact details of the birth of Saint George for over a century. It is likely that he was born in a Greek Christian noble family in Lydda (Palestine). His father, Gerontios, was Greek, from Cappadocia, an officer in the Roman army, while his mother, Polychronia, was a Greek from the city Lydda (Palestine). As both of his parents were Christians, he was named Georgios and was raised with Christian beliefs (Darch 2006). He joined the Roman army in Nicomedia during Emperor Diocletian's rule and became an imperial guard (Walter 2003). In 302 AD, Diocletian issued an edict that every Christian soldier should be arrested, and every other soldier should offer a sacrifice to Roman Gods. George denied the emperor's edict and declared himself a Christian. Even though the emperor attempted to convert George with numerous offers, George stood firm in his beliefs (Darch 2006). After various torture sessions, including laceration on a wheel of swords, George was executed by decapitation in front of Nicomedia's city walls, on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 303. His sufferings convinced Empress Alexandra and a pagan priest Athanasius to become Christians as well, and they joined Saint George in his martyrdom. Saint George's body was returned to Lydda in Palestine for burial, where Christians soon came to honour him as a martyr (Walter 2003).

According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, the oldest preserved text fragment of Saint George's narrative is *Acta Sanctorum*, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. However, *Acta Sancti Georgii* was soon banned as heresy by Pope Gelasius I (in 496), as according to the compiler, it confused the martyr with his namesake, the celebrated George of Cappadocia (Smith 1867). A critical edition of a Syriac *Acta of Saint George*, accompanied by annotated English translation was published by E. W. Brooks in 1925. The oldest hagiography from the 7<sup>th</sup> century was originally written in Greek. It recognises Saint George as a witness, Christian soldier, and a martyr. However, only the later hagiographies gave some insight in his wonders and the most popular legend in which Saint George was immortalised, the tale of Saint George and the Dragon (Gibbs 1971).

## **The legend**

The legend of Saint George and the Dragon was brought back with the Crusaders. The earliest known depiction of the legend dates from the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian text (Hackwood 2003) and its representation from the iconography of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The standard iconographic interpretation of the image shows Saint George slaying a drag-

on and often includes a young maiden who is watching them from a distance. The dragon represents both Satan (Rev. 12:9) and the monster from his life story, while the young maiden is Empress Alexandra. Thus, the image interpreted by Byzantine iconography is an image of the martyrdom of the saint (Walter 2003). The image of Saint George is represented as a kind of medieval knight on horseback, armed in the orthodox fashion, and as the bearer of gifts to those who are fortunate enough to win his favour.

In the fully developed Western version of the legend, commonly accepted in the Eastern world as well, as a part of the Golden Legend:

... a dragon made its nest at the spring which provided water for the city of 'Silene' (perhaps modern Cyrene in Libya or the city of Lydda in Palestine). Consequently, the citizens had to dislodge the dragon from its nest for a time, to collect water. To do so, each day they had to offer the dragon first a sheep, and if no sheep can be found, then a maiden instead of the sheep. The victim was chosen by drawing lots. One day, this happens to be the princess. The king begged for her life to be spared but with no avail. She was sent to the dragon, but at that moment Saint George appeared on his travels. He faces the dragon, protects himself with the sign of the cross, slays the dragon and rescues the princess. In returning to their savior, the citizens abandoned their pagan religion and converted to Christianity (de Voragine 1900).

Many places around the world incorporated the theme of Saint George's legendary fight with a dragon within some local sites. This is a common thing as the legend uses the classic theme of a princess, a dragon and a heroic saviour, which is a generic premise common to many legends, fairy tales, and chivalric romances worldwide. Special functions and powers of the saints rely on magic-ritual and myth-narrative culture. Thus, the apocryphal legend of St. George the dragon killer is widespread in folk legends and spiritual verses as a part of the narrative folklore; it does not reflect the magical and ritual culture in which St. George is usually the protector of cattle.

With the recognition of miraculous characteristics of the saint, as well as his legendary fight with the dragon, such characteristics of his personality were harmonised with the common folkloric beliefs. In this manner, people placed under his protection their essential, social and material needs and problems, considering this saint to be a helper in times of need (Fučić 1962; Okey 2007). Saint George is also one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, and as such is regarded as one of the most prominent military saints. This was the main reason for the intensive preservation of Saint George's cult to the present day. The cult was respected especially in rural cattle breeding and agricultural communities, where he was connected and identified with different ancient folk customs and beliefs. He was linked to the basic folk occupations, agriculture and farming, land and vegetation. Saint George's cult, the cult of a neochristian martyr, was present in the Christian world, among Orthodox as well as among Catholic believers, but it was familiar even to Muslims (Gibbs 1971).

Because of the main characteristics of the saint, many countries, towns, and villages have taken this saint to be their patron. Many patronages of Saint George exist

around the world, including England, Georgia, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, Croatia, Slovenia, Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, and India.

## **Saint George's day: reflections in folklore and customs in Balkans**

Religion has the tendency to incorporate itself into all spheres of everyday life and culture. No religion has ever been completely independent of culture, people and time. The need for religion is an original, basic human need, like love, the feeling of emotional security, order and harmony in life. This statement affirms that religiousness is one of the most original and authentic human experiences. In particular, there is a current question of tolerance in multicultural and multi-ethnic societies that are not homogeneous in the ethnic, religious or cultural senses (Radisavljević-Ćiparizović 2007).

Saint George has a place among the most popular and most respected saints in many cultures, Christian and non-Christian. Customary practices related to St. George's Day are, however, much older and associated with the original respect for forest demons or gods, lords of nature, water and animals, which were later replaced by St. George of the Christian religion (Kulšić 1970). It is well known that certain features of some pagan deities were shifted to Christian saints, as a sort of reconciliation of religious elements during conversion to Christianity. In this manner, the church only gave the old rituals a Christian mark. It is widely accepted that the folk calendar is considered to be a mixture of the Christian church calendar with other calendars: farming calendar, astronomical, lunar-solar calendars, related to the world of the dead, and others. When the Christian church introduced the celebration of saints (usually according to the date of their death), the pagan calendar already existed. In that way, Christian holidays and saints were given new meanings, depending on whom they replace within pagan celebrations. The division of the year into a number of codes makes defining a calendar very complex. The calendar also reflects the overlapping of the mythical and magical roots of the folk calendar with a schedule of mandatory and prohibited actions during the holidays of some of the saints.

The saint is seen as the protector of all spheres of life: work, health, benefits, prosperity, well-being, absence of misfortune and similar. Links between people and saints are established by the celebration of a saint or receiving a saint's name and, by marking this each year, this relationship is intensified due to the celebration of holiday of the patron saint (Bowman 2012). In addition to some common features of the saints within the Christian worldview, in Slavic folk cultures (specifically among Orthodox Slavs), some special features of the saints are recorded. Even though most of the saints are common for both Orthodox and Catholics, the differences between them occur in the positions and functions of certain saints in Eastern and Western denominations.

In ethnological science, it has been proved that only a few Christian elements are related to the celebration of St. George's Day. In the customary practice of this celebration, pre-Christian magical ritual elements and traditions are dominant. The Balkan Slavs link growth and fertility rites which take place on April 23<sup>rd</sup> or May 6<sup>th</sup> with St. George's

Day. These dates also correspond to the cycle of the Pleiades, a star cluster that divides the year in two, which in Greek mythology, was related to Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, earth and agriculture. Analogies between Saint George and a number of mythological figures, slayers of dragons and monsters have been well established. One of these parallels can be seen in Apollo of ancient Greece, who was another dragon slayer and life/spring/water bringer, whose shrines stand on the frontier between the world of the men and the underworld. The hero descending from two races is a frequent theme in oriental mythology (Bowman 2012).

In contrast, the celebration of St. George and some traditions related to it are associated with the old Roman Palilia which were held on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April (almost simultaneously with St. George). The festival was celebrated in the honour of Pales, the tutelary divinity of shepherds (Okey 2007). Given that St. George is renowned as the protector of the flock, and as such, he occurs in Slavic and other European nations, it also proves that his function is very old and belongs to the deity that he replaced. Likewise, St. George appears also as a protector of wolves in some legends and cults, which is the main characteristic of the ancient supreme Slavic god Perun (Čajkanović, 1973).

Folk traditions and customs connected to the celebration of this Saint differ slightly among different nations. However, some similarities exist, mostly among neighbouring nations. According to the number and variety of customary practices, it can be said that St. George's Day, in general, among Balkan nations, is a very important spring holiday. This statement is based on the fact that, besides Christmas, no other holiday has as many rituals and customs as Saint George's Day. Most likely the main reason for the celebration of St. George is that it is set in the time of the greatest proliferation of nature. On this day, people of different nations traditionally performed religious, non-religious and magical rites directed at ensuring prosperity, love and happiness. These customs are common to all Balkan nations, as well as within the Europe as a whole, suggesting common origins and antiquity (Gavazzi 1988, 1991).

## **Saint George's day among the Balkan nations**

Saint George's Day is the feast day of Saint George. It is celebrated by various Christian churches and different nations on April 23<sup>rd</sup> (traditionally accepted date of St. George's death in Eastern Orthodox churches that use the old Julian calendar) or according to new Gregorian calendar on May 6<sup>th</sup>. Before the calendar reform that occurred in 1582, all Christian nations celebrated Saint George's day on the same day. Saint George's Day, although ostensibly a fixed feast, in fact, has been celebrated on variable dates in both Eastern and Western Christian practice. In the Orthodox world, it is often moved to the Monday following Easter Sunday, because it cannot be celebrated during Lent. In Western Christian custom, Saint George's Day has not remained fixed either (for example in England, the holiday disappeared from the church's official calendar during the Reformation, reappearing later as a June festival). The Catholic Church has recently retrograded Saint George's Day into a simple "commemoration" based on doubts about his historical existence and martyrdom (Darch 2006).

In the popular calendar, however, April 23<sup>rd</sup> or May 6<sup>th</sup> seem to owe their relative importance to something more than just certain personal deeds of the martyr, to whose memory the day is dedicated. The way Saint George's Day is celebrated is different from place to place. However, the basic spiritual and folkloric meaning remains the same. Saint George is also regarded as a protector of nations, towns and villages. Celebrations organised in towns and villages are mostly open festivals and celebrations. They also include carnival-like gatherings dedicated to the saint to whom the villagers are committed and to whom they show their gratitude for prosperity and preventing the plague, fires, floods, and wars. Many Christian churches worldwide are dedicated to St. George, and they celebrate this day in strictly defined religious ceremonies. Christian religious traditions that take place on St. George's Day are mostly of solemn processions in churches. However, some family celebrations take place on this day as well, such as a celebration of the name day (which most Orthodox Christians celebrate, in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia).

A unique practice that developed in Serbian Orthodoxy is the so-called family patron festivity (*krsna slava*), which is a highly distinct element of Serbian national identification. This religious family custom is greatly respected among Serbs (in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Croatia), reflected in the fact that about a third of Serbs celebrate Saint George as a home patron (Drobnjaković 1960; Grubačić & Tomić 1988). There are also some traditions that reflect a symbiosis of religious and folk customs, which is reflected in religious processions to the fields or cemeteries, as well as blessings of the livestock, in which pastors have the major role. During the celebration, people gather in the streets and make processions throughout the town; they pray and thank God and the saint for the prosperity of the town and its residents (Bosić 1996).

Perhaps the richness of the tradition accumulated on St. George's Day should be viewed in the light of the fact that the Greek form Georgious means a ploughman, a cultivator of land. If we look back to the ancient predecessor of the holiday, we must take into consideration that such a tradition is closely connected with springtime vegetation. This is in line with special customs practiced on certain ancient dates that were followed in order to mark the awakening of nature and the arrival of spring (Hiimae 1981, 1996). All the ritual practices that were and are still performed before and on St. George's Day were done in order to protect crops, livestock, to ensure good weather and to contribute to the fertility of the fields (Kulišić, Petrović & Pantelić 1970). These rites should also ensure the good health of people and cattle, to protect from evil and bring the overall profit and progress of the household, or even the entire community.

Among the Balkan people, there is the widespread belief that demonic beings are very active on the eve of St. George's Day. It is believed that on that night a vast amount of magical rites and witchcraft is conducted in order to harm people and livestock. For the oneself as for the others, the "evil eye" is supposed to have the capacity to strike men, women, children, but also animals, plants, trees, vineyards, etc., but also various inanimate objects (workshops, shops, houses, etc.) and even the work of somebody (Cingoz & Santur 1993). Therefore, for protection, among people a variety of ritual customs emerged, which were carried out in order to protect or bring some benefits and to

attract fortunate circumstances. In the complex of these customs and beliefs, the main objects of ritual activities were decorating items with greenery and flowers, milking sheep, sacrificing a lamb (Image 2), ritual bathing, the setting of live fires, and conducting love spells (Bosić 1996). Within the practice of these customs, the use of basic elements such as water, fire, plants and animals was of essential importance.



*Image 2: Sacrificial lamb for St. George's Feast, Serbia<sup>1</sup>*

The most widespread and prevalent custom of celebrating St. George's Day is decorating items with greenery, various plants, and flowers. This custom is generally present in most of the rituals that are performed in the honour of the saint. Decorating houses, people, animals, places of ritual, statues of the saint, home icons, food containers, etc., is still done almost everywhere. Usually on the eve or in the early morning of St. George's Day, before sunrise, people would go out in the fields, forests and gardens and pick different plants and flowers, which are then used for rituals and magical purposes. Since the majority of practices in almost all Balkan and other Slavic nations are related to livestock, a great number of such customs is connected to Saint George's Day. Some of these include running the animals on pastures, milking and cheese preparation, decorating

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<sup>1</sup> Photo published online: <http://vesti.knjazevac.org.rs/vesti-iz-knjazevca/knjazevac-molitva-pod-midzorom-vrtovac-2014-foto-video/>

cattle (particularly sheep and cows) with flowers and herbs, ritual transition of livestock through water or fire for protection, sacrificing of a lamb, preparing lamb meat, shepherd feasts, etc.

Water also plays an important role in St. George's Day folk customs. The ritual of bathing and washing in dew, spring, river or lake water in the early morning of St. George's Day, as well as pouring or spraying with water among young people, is performed in order to preserve health and beauty. In some places, the custom of throwing a young girl into water has survived, which is a testimony to the memory of former human sacrifices that were offered to pagan deities and that were later replaced by St. George (Čajkanović 1973).

Fire had a similar role. Within Saint George's Day customs, and in general springtime customs within Balkan nations, fires was set in order to contribute to the health of people and cattle, as well to attract fertility and avert evil. These customs consist of people or livestock passing between two large fires or jumping over a fire, which is carried out among the shouting and chanting of the participants. Widely spread customs in the Balkans area conducted on Saint George's Day included various love spells, usually performed in some secluded rural areas. Young girls' fortune-telling and magic enchantments for happiness and love were once quite widespread and rich ritual practices among Balkan people. Nowadays, very few such customs remain (Okey 2007). Vlach magic is well known and still practiced in the eastern parts of Serbia and Romania, and since they are in immediate sphere of the occult, remains a secret among people who use it: it is not to be spoken of.

### **Some unique customs of Balkan nations**

St. George's Day was and still is a day of fun and frolic: the spring festival also requires precautionary measures to assure fertility and well-being. In mountainous areas of the Balkans, young men and maidens walk to natural areas, pick herbs and flowers, set up swings, groom tree branches and sing songs welcoming nature's rebirth. They also bathe in dew or running water. Moreover, the festivities include dancing and jumping over fire, bathing in rivers and drinking from flowing water. Throughout the Balkans, people in villages decorate their houses with leaves and flowers. The tradition of bathing children in spring flowers and blossoms is still known throughout Serbia, Montenegro, and western Bulgaria, as well as in some parts of Bosnia, Macedonia and Albania. In Macedonia and Bulgaria, young people celebrate the day by swaying on swings, symbolising growth, vitality, virility and fertility (Abbot 2011).

In the north-western parts of Croatia, there is still the old custom of *Jurjaš* or *Green Juraj* in which the figure of Saint George is decorated with greens and herbs. There is also the custom of visiting village homes by costumed and decorated girls and boys on Saint George's Day (Fučić 1962). In Slovenia, *Green George* and the company of goat-skin-clad youths, or *koranti*, enact the struggle between winter and spring. In some parts of Slovenia, especially in *Bela Krajina*, Saint George's Day is celebrated the same way as in Croatia, with visits of masked young people singing and dancing along and bringing good luck to homes and their village, but this is practiced on April 24<sup>th</sup> (Drobnjaković

1960). Moreover, St George is a patron saint of Slovenia's capital Ljubljana. In parts of Carinthia (southernmost Austria), among the Slovene minority, Green George, covered from head to toe with leaves, is symbolically drowned as punishment for the infertility of cattle or for not having brought enough rain (Okey 2007). There also may be a connection between the Croatian Georges, the Slovenian *koranti* and the Phygian *korybantēs* (medicine men who cured madness with orgiastic dancing) (Hjuzak 1957). A similar custom is also practiced in Romania by the name of Sangiorz (Bloj, Gheorghe or Gotoj, depending on the region). In some Romanian villages in the Maramures region, the main custom on Saint George's Day is "wetting", in which boys throw buckets of water on girls, as a fertility ritual.

Balkan nations in general designated St. George's Day as the "herdsman's holiday" or "the feast of the herds". St. George was known to them as the shepherd, lord of the forest and, as St. Sava stated (according to a popular belief), the protector of wolves (Kulšić et al. 1970; Stoianovich 1994; Ajdačić 2007; Okey 2007). In the eastern parts of Serbia and in the south of Bulgaria, there remains an old shepherd custom of dawn grazing of the sheep, ritual milking, as well as the ritual slaughtering of a male lamb. Among some Bulgarians and Romani people, there is still the custom of using lamb's blood for making a blood cross on children's forehead to keep evil eyes away (Abott 2011). An analogy can be drawn between the custom of children making noise with rattle bells on the eve of St. George's Day (practiced in some villages of Serbia (Srem) and Romania) and a similar custom in western Bosnia, according to which they make noise by blowing of trumpets and horns made of willow bark, believing that this will protect them from evil (Bosić 1996; Popić 2013). In different parts of Greece, during Saint George celebrations, religious processions take place, as well as reviving the old customs, such as wrestling, horse riding, and horse racing (Arachova, Skiathos, Skyros, Kos, Ksanti, Neo Souli, and Kaliopi).

Saint George as a legendary figure has parallels in Turkey, Hiderllez (in old Turkish Hidir Ilyas) a combination of Hidr, who stands for springtime and new life, and Elias, who is a symbol of the sun and whose importance was well documented in Anatolian and Balkan folklore (Uca 2007). Hiderllez corresponds to Saint George's Day (celebrated on April 23<sup>rd</sup> in the Julian calendar, May 6<sup>th</sup> in the Gregorian). It marks the beginning of the season for good navigation and highlands transhumance (Cingoz & Santur, 2003; Uca 2007).

Green George of the Balkan Slavs corresponds to the Green One (*Al-Khudr*) of Muslim Arabs, a spring deity whom Syrian Christians associate with St. George (Okey 2007). The figure of *Sari Saltik* in Albania can also be associated with Saint George. Sari Saltik was the founder of the local Bektashi order, and his cave remains a pilgrimage site; it is visited by a large number of people on May 6, Saint George's Day (Elsie 2001, 99). In Turkey (Anatolia) and Albania, some Muslims make pilgrimage to Christian shrines dedicated to Saint George, believing in its healing powers. Some Muslim traditional practices performed on the feast on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May are used for recovering from illness, e.g. hanging pieces of cloth over the rose branches or in some religious shrines, jumping over fire, and wearing clothes sprinkled with spring water (Uca 2007; Bakirci 2010).

Without their own native religion, Romani people, in Serbia as well as in other Balkan countries, used to mix Islam and Orthodox Christianity rituals with pagan elements, adapting their customs to local environments. The most important holidays celebrated by the majority of Romani people are the New Year and Saint George's Day (Đorđević 1999). They celebrate St. George's Day under the name *Ederlezi*, when they celebrate the return of spring. St. George's Day is also known as the Feast of the Gypsies and is identified with Ruz-I hizir or Chidr in Muslim tradition (Đorđević 1999). St. George's Day is also celebrated by the Gorani national minority populating Southern parts of Serbia, in the Gora area of Mountain Šara. Gorani are Serbians who converted to Islam in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but they kept their original Christian customs and holidays (Hasani 2002).



*Image 3: Hiderllez celebration in Turkey<sup>2</sup>*

Similar customs are still practiced in some non-Balkan Slavic and non-Slavic nations, apart from religious specifics, such as those in Moldavia, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Russia, Estonia, Armenia, Cyprus and many other countries.

Today, these traditional customs and celebrations are beginning to be organised as local cultural events, and are becoming more popular and appealing to tourists. As

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<sup>2</sup> Photo published online: <http://aregem.kulturturizm.gov.tr/Resim/35574,dsc00038.png?0>.

these celebrations are open to the public, they start to attract increasing numbers of visitors, regardless of ethnicity or religiosity. However, the customary practice has remained something unique and important for different nations and local communities. These customs are considered to be specific cultural expressions, various in form, but with common elements shared by different nations and particularly present in the Balkan area.

## **Recognition of intangible heritage and tourism brand creation**

Intangible cultural heritage can be recognised in oral traditions and language, traditional and visual arts, social practices, rituals, and festivities, as well as in the knowledge of nature and the universe and its application. The most valuable contribution to recognising the importance of intangible cultural heritage on the international level was given by UNESCO in 2003 within the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the convention, the Member States made a pledge to take the necessary measures for the identification of intangible cultural heritage in order to protect it.

The intangible cultural heritage (practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces) is associated with certain communities, groups and, in some cases individuals who recognise it as part of their cultural heritage. This heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history. It provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. According to UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage from 2003,

intangible heritage can only be identified with reference to communities, groups or individuals that recognize it as part of their cultural heritage. Thus, it is important to identify clearly one or several communities, groups or, if applicable, individuals concerned with the nominated element.

Tourism is considered to be a very complex phenomenon, because of its effects on social, cultural, historical, and natural environment and relationships in all their multiple facets. The anthropology of tourism does not have a homogeneous approach. Rather, it contains within itself a great diversity deriving from the way of constructing itself with respect to a myriad of thematic objects. There are many studies (Moscardo & Pearce 1999; Okey 2007) dealing with religious tourism, tourism and social change, as well the social impacts of tourism and tourism and ethnicity. Studies about the protection of authentic cultural heritage show the need to discuss tangible and intangible ethnic and cultural values in the view of sustainability. Some academics indicate that culture is the instrument in tourism development with the greatest potential to change tourism as it has a substantial historical texture and ethnic heritage. In this regard, culture is turning into a renovation strategy and, nowadays, many cities are being designed as cultural zones (Lickorish & Jenkins 1997; Taylor 2001; Okey 200).

Within the Balkan area, there are numerous rituals, customs, skills and techniques representing intangible cultural heritage and presenting the identification point of Balkan nations. With parallel existence, intermingling and interrelationship between Balkan nations, the same roots and the development of common Balkan cultural heritage become obvious. They are reflected in the continuous process of exchanging knowledge, adopting techniques and technologies, customs and rituals, images and common ideas. This can be seen in similarities of the traditional national costumes of all Balkan nations, in dance practices reflected in circular manner (*horo, kolo, or sirtaki*) as well as in folklore and rituals connected with respecting supernatural beings, songs, fairy tales and national heroes. National heroes have different names but all represent a Balkan hero reflecting the image of Hercules (Todorova 2009). Along with all the similarities, the customs and traditions of celebrating St. George Day as a spring festival and religious feast is something common to all Balkan nations. Intangible cultural heritage is usually connected with tangible cultural heritage (immovable or movable cultural assets) and in this manner it increases its own value.

A tourism brand includes numerous elements: individual services and product brands, public institutions, elements of culture, art, science, sports, natural and anthropogenic resources, events, people, architecture, cultural-historical monuments, artistic creativity, information and ideas, etc. (Okey 2007). It can be said that it includes all the elements that could improve the positive picture of the Balkans by distinguishing it from other parts of Europe. The positioning of a brand is the process taking the place in the mind of the general public, and especially in tourist minds. If a positive image of the region, country and nation is created, there is a greater chance that a tourist will decide to visit this place. Therefore, the most significant elements of national and cultural identification should be recognised, linked and presented to the global public in the best possible way. The long-standing global negative image of the Balkans has gradually begun to change in the public's mind. In that sense, it is necessary to direct all available resources to building strong and positive national and tourism brands. This is an instrument that will enable the valorisation of cultural and social elements and obtain international support through the influx of investments and tourists.

Intangible cultural heritage is a particularly attractive element of cultural and tourist services. The promotion of ethnological elements in the tourist industry is very common, and the most recognisable ethnic elements become apparent icons of a destination. The combination of those elements can form a tourism brand. Moreover, some of its forms are often sold in the tourist market as souvenirs. Globally recognised tourist markers of the Balkans are mainly ethnic elements, but it must be noted that each region and each country has its own distinct characteristics. Taking into account the demographic composition of multi-ethnic and multi-religious nations in the Balkans, some ethnological characteristics can be singled out that are equally representative in the cultural and tourism sense. The essence of creating the national and tourist brand of the Balkan region can be seen in the efforts of properly presenting all existing values of this multi-ethnic region, as well as in creating new values by improving all its negative sides.

It seems that rural areas are increasing their interest in terms of tourism because of the authentic characteristics of the cultural assets. Recognition of rural areas and lifestyles that have authentic cultural traits increases the awareness of historical, natural and cultural features. However, they are losing their authenticity and are being merged into modern communities (Cai, Gartner & Munar 2009). The relationship between local culture, ethnicity and identification in the context of tourism raises the issues regarding the extent to which cultural relativity is respected.

Protecting cultural authenticity in sustainable tourism can be clearly seen as a global-local practice reflecting the global political economy of tourism (Rogers 2002; Smith 2007). Commercialisation has the most important damaging impact on the authenticity of traditional local cultures. It makes some adaptation of traditional cultural events and customs for the tourists, and in this manner leads to the creation of “fake folklore”. More importantly, it has little value for the local population or for the visitors (McKercher & Du Cros 2002; Cai, Gartner & Munar 2009). The problem is the potential conflict between the economic and cultural interests, which leads to culture being sacrificed for reasons of promoting tourism and creating additional economic value at the price of losing the ethnic and cultural value (Cohen 2002; Smith 2003).

The presentation of a common cultural heritage in this ethnically diverse and colourful area is regarded as a most promising activity, as the construction of a modern society requires interculturalism, active interrelationship among different ethnic, religious and cultural groups, mutual respect and tolerance (Djordjevic 2003). The initiative of the promoting and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage has triggered intensive activities among European countries in representing the uniqueness and importance of proper cultural heritage, reflected in the folklore, tradition and customs of nations. St. George's Day is a national or provincial holiday in many countries, and it is a common name day or the patron saint of many towns, villages, churches, and families. This is the reason that this saint and his day are celebrated with great festivities and rich customs. Some famous festivals are held during St. George's Day (Arachova, Greece), The Parade of the Bulgarian Army (Sofia, Bulgaria), Saint George's Day assemblies, the prayer on Midžor (Knjaževac, Serbia), Arhirkapi Hiddrelez festival (Istanbul, Turkey), and others.

The number of domestic and foreign tourists attending these festivities is increasing. The festivities are beginning to be developed as parts of the tourism services of towns and regions. St. George's Day – the Spring Celebration was in 2013 nominated to the UNESCO's Intangible Heritage List, as a common heritage of several nations (Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, and Turkey). However, it should also be nominated by other countries, including Greece, Bulgaria, Estonia, and others. Joint activities in recognition and protection of heritage tourism promotion as well as the creation of a diverse and colourful tourism product of Balkan region should become a goal of all Balkan countries. A complexly designed product that includes tourist services of different countries should appear in the tourist market not as competitive but as complementary. In this way, the role of intangible heritage assets in specific Balkan tourism brand creation can be acknowledged. The most effective ways of using these elements in promotional activities and tourist offers of the Balkans should be found, and they need to be developed in a sustainable manner.

## Conclusion

Legends, beliefs, religious and magical rituals, superstitions, myths, folk stories, songs, and dances, along with some folkloric customs have always been important assets of local communities. They are specific cultural expressions and important elements for national identification. Moreover, they have also been an important element in tourism development, in the sense of representing ethnographic differences, giving special atmosphere and the sense of a spirit of a place. Such elements are mainly used in the tourism interpretation of historical sites or some cultural assets. Saint George's Day customs and festivities are being revived in different parts of the Balkans, nowadays taking the form of festivals and special events. Those events (religious or non-religious) are becoming increasingly popular among tourists.

The varieties of local customs practiced on St. George's Day in the Balkans are particularly colourful and interesting. They also have a great potential for being used as tourist presentation. In this sense, a positive impact of tourism enables the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. This can be accomplished by reviving old customs and traditions and empowering the pride of local communities by giving it another meaning and greater importance.

Saint George's Day customs and festivities are shared and practiced by different nations in the Balkans area. Bearing in mind that its importance and representativeness is acknowledged by the joint initiative for inscribing the Saint George's Day Spring Celebration to UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage, this should contribute significantly to its preservation, revival and tourist presentation. The UNESCO initiative is only the beginning of the identification process of intangible cultural heritage worldwide. It is expected that Balkan nations will start to nominate more aspects and examples of their cultural heritage. As this kind of cultural heritage is mostly presented through festivals and various events, it also has the possibility to become a tourist attraction.

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**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** običaji, nematerialna dediščina, predstavitve, balkanske države

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