

## Folk religion in the Balkans and the Qur'anic account of Abraham

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Dedicated to Riccardo Picchio on the  
occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday

This essay scrutinizes a key religious myth in Biblical (Jewish and Christian)(1) and Qur'anic (Islamic) traditions,(2) the myth of Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his most beloved son as God has commanded, a sacrifice not needed when God sends a ram or lamb from heaven as a substitute offering. It analyses the ways in which this myth encapsulates the ethnic and/or religious identity of Muslim communities in the Balkans, Bulgaria in particular. In so doing, it examines the correspondence between belief systems in both Slavia Orthodoxa(3) and Slavia Islamica,(4) and focuses upon the correlation between the written canon of the Sacred Scriptures, the Bible and/or the Qur'an, and the oral convention of folk religion.(5) Indeed, as fieldwork amongst rural communities in South-Eastern Europe indicates, the Abrahamic sacrifice is regarded by both Christians [Petkanova-Toteva 1978: 189-201]; Stojčevska-Antić 1987: 159-61; Popova 1995 I/1: 145-70; Badalanova and Miltenova 1996] and Muslims [Djordjević 1984: 205]; Blagoev 1996: 70-83; 1999: 312-340] as the basic building block of their sacred *Kurban* ritual ceremonies, a theologeme, while the image (and/or name of) Abraham/Ibrahim functions as the epitome of sanctity and a symbol of unconditional faith.(6)

The epistemological principles of the present essay are relatively simple and straightforward. My approach to the 'religions of the book', a term used for the religions based on the Bible and/or the Qur'an, is anthropological;(7) but unlike many anthropologists who begin from theoretical presuppositions and then impose them upon the actual material, I build my arguments in the opposite way, empirically from the texts. In this I focus upon the oral hermeneutics of the Holy Scriptures, with special regard to their vernacular vocabulary; my work rests upon a corpus of folklore material collected over the last century and a half, which either refer to the Biblical account of the Filial Sacrifice, or

its Qur'anic counterpart, thereby spelling out the vernacular paradigm of the encounter between Christianity and Islam. While it is accepted that there has been explicit interaction between, on the one hand, the Jewish and Christian religions and the Jewish and Muslim on the other, an analysis of this material provides evidence that in the Balkans, there was also an implicit interplay between these two culture-religious encounters. A similar approach was taken by the Ukrainian scholar Mikhail Dragomanov in 1892, in his, "Notes on Slavic legends of a religious and ethical nature", in which he compares Jewish, Muslim and Christian versions of some common themes and characters (Moses, Elijah, etc.) and analyses their appearance in Biblical (Jewish and Christian) and Qur'anic texts, referring, also, to some Talmudic accounts. Dragomanov maintains that Muslim storytellers, "the very first editors of the Qur'an," preserved Mohammed's account in the form it was given to the Prophet by his Jewish contemporaries (then living in Arabia); more than this, he argues that, as early as the seventh century, some of these stories were also transmitted orally amongst the first communities of Christian hermits in Egypt [Dragomanov 1892: 263]. The Ukrainian scholar suggests that Jewish storytellers, "the pivotal systematizers of monotheistic teaching," were the first to compile the earliest version of many stories that later became part of the Qur'an [Dragomanov 1892: 253-65; 275-82]. Particularly significant in this respect is the fact that some of the folk interpretations of the legend of Abraham, as recorded among Muslim communities in South-Eastern Europe, contain narrative components which are to be found neither in the Qur'an, nor in the Bible, but in rabbinic (and/or midrashic) texts. And vice versa: among the Eastern Orthodox Slavs in the Balkans there exists a corpus of traditional folklore narratives and songs about Abraham's sacrifice that very clearly relate more to rabbinic and midrashic texts and the Qur'anic tradition than to Biblical accounts. In a sense, these materials can be looked upon as "living antiquities" reconciling the three Abrahamic religions; in other words, they do not merely represent theological divergence, but also furnish evidence of a common origin [Badalanova 2001]. In this way empirical folklore facts become the means of elucidating the hidden background of a given cultural phenomenon. Further, these folklore accounts can confirm or deny numerous academic hypotheses, even the most sophisticated. A theoretical postulate is no more than an elegant assumption unless it fits into the framework of the

empirical material. More than that, it should transform it from amorphous data into a systematized entity. "Good" theory gives empirical data a structure, while an accurate and authentic database can approve or disprove theoretical presumptions.

A number of theoretical attempts to define the vernacular vocabulary of folk religion have been made in Eastern Europe. One of them, traces of which can be perceived in this essay, is based on the semasiological strategies of an analytical approach to the popular faith. It is represented by the ethnolinguistic school of the study of religion, founded in the early sixties by a leading Russian scholar, Nikita Tolstoi [1996: 145-160]. Tolstoi was concerned with the description of the "grammar of the ritual text" [Tolstoi 1982: 57-71], and with the "conventional vocabulary" of popular faith in particular. In contrast to accepted Soviet practice, in his writing culture was perceived within the framework of religion; thus the term "folk spiritual culture" (*narodnaia dukhovnaia kul'tura*) [Tolstoi 1998: 35] came to denote religion at the popular level. At the same time, he used the terms "folk faith" (*narodnaia vera*), "folk Orthodoxy" (*narodnoe pravoslavie*) and "customary Christianity" (*bytovoe khristianstvo*) [Tolstoi 1996: 146-148; 1998: 146] to signify folk religious narratives, songs and rituals.(8)

A parallel anthropological approach to the phenomenon of popular faith in other Slavic countries has developed over the last two decades. Thus in Bulgaria, a large body of work on the folk parameters of Christianity and/or Islam has been published [Zhivkov 1981: 23, 1987: 139, 173; Mikhailova 1988, 1998, 1999; Nedin 1991; Kovacheva-Kostadinova 1998: 44-58, etc.]. Likewise, Polish scholars have coined a series of terms denoting the folk parameters of religious life: "folk religiosity" (*religijność ludowa*), "popular faith" (*pobożność ludowa*), "folk Catholicism" (*katolicyzm ludowy*), etc. [Ciupak, 1973; Kwaśniewicz, 1983: 25-39; Kasprzak, 1999: 37-61; Tomicki 1981: 29-70], which are primarily, though not exclusively, applied to a synchronic approach to religious phenomena.

At the same time, in twentieth-century Eastern Europe a parallel interest in the diachronic analysis of religious stereotypes may be observed. In 1914 Anichkov, a professor at Petersburg University, defined the system of popular belief as a distinctive confessional paradigm, seeing it as a cultural phenomenon representing both pre-Christian and Christian traditions. He used the term *dvoeverie* [dual faith] to denote it [Anichkov

1914: 286-307; Tolstaia 1987: 154-68; Levin 1993: 31-52; Ryan 1999: 14, 26; Mikhailova 2000: 3-4].

In the early 1980s, Boris Uspenskii developed a related idea [1982, 1983]. Instead of *dvoeverie*, he prefers to use the term *diglossia*, applying it not only to linguistic but also to cultural phenomena. In his view, *diglossia* (when two or more varieties of a language(s) are used by the same speaker in different cultural contexts) is characteristic, for example, of the period of conversion in Kievan Russia. It was in these turbulent times of change that the new religious canon of Christianity encountered the old belief system of pagan faith, thus creating new cultural and confessional patterns which still survive; correspondingly, Old Church Slavic began to function as the high form of the language, acting as the basic vehicle for the "transplantation of Byzantine culture to Russian soil" [Uspenskii 1983: 9-10] not only in strictly linguistic terms, but in a much broader, cultural sense. Meantime, Russian was used as its low vernacular counterpart. In this way Uspenskii combined both a syntagmatic and a paradigmatic approach to religious phenomena, where the linguistic model served, in a manner typical of the Moscow-Tartu Semiotic School, as a universal paradigm of culture. Hence, culture was studied as a language. This approach has strongly influenced my own.

Over the last twenty years, certain East European scholars of Balkan religion, as well as some from Western Europe and the USA, have started using the term "Crypto-Christianity" to denote specific facets of the encounter between Christianity and Islam in Asia Minor and the Balkans (especially Bosnia and Albania). According to Stavro Skendi, "in Crypto-Christianity the two religions, Christian and Moslem, coexisted." He emphasizes that during Ottoman rule Crypto-Christianity meant "the appearance of individuals in a group who, while publicly professing Islam, satisfied their conscience by practising Christianity — Orthodox or Catholic — in private" [1980: 233]. Crypto-Christianity is one of very few terms common to both Eastern and Western specialists in the study of religion. Although I do not use this term, the concept has proved valuable to me.

This essay does not only take into account established academic ideas and hypotheses, but also provides new data on the popular dimensions of the religions of the book, the Bible and/or the Qur'an, derived from fieldwork conducted in both Christian and Muslim

communities by myself and by colleagues at the Bulgarian Academy Institute of Folklore.(9) The accounts provided by the latter, and in particular the folklore materials recorded over the last twenty years from the Pomaks in the area of Mount Pirin,(10) and from Turkish minorities in north-eastern Bulgaria, are significant in that they reveal the correlation between, and interdependence of, two creative processes: the popular adaptation of Islam on the one hand, and the islamization of local oral tradition. They also epitomize the tendencies in popular faith in the Balkans to act as a bridge between different religious traditions, both orthodox and heterodox.

#### The Qur'an in the making: Islamic folk narratives about Abraham

The folk narratives about the Prophet Abraham and his son recorded among the Muslim Pomaks and Turks in Bulgaria function as texts which are regarded by both tellers and audience alike as oral counterparts of the Qur'an, with the storytellers considered transmitters of the Prophetic revelation. It is appropriate to note here that the actual term "Qur'an" refers to the concept of recitation [Peters 1994: 158], while Allah is considered "The Speaker" [Rasmussen 2001: 30-57; more generally, Bedford 2001: 1-14]. With respect to this, Muslim tradition reflects unease at any challenge to the Qur'an as the ultimate manifestation of divine power. Indeed, "it is a book and it persists as a book, highly synchronous and interlinked, with a mosaic rather than a linear structure, and with much cross-stitching of phrase and motif. But it is more than a book: it is also an event and it persists as an event in the form of its proper recitation" [Bedford 2001: 11-12].

How is the oral performance of the Qur'anic text conceptualized by believers in Bulgaria? Fieldwork in Muslim communities indicates that, from the point of view of ordinary folk, telling stories from the Qur'an is considered a sacred undertaking; as informants often point out, the Word of God should not be uttered incorrectly; such an action is considered sinful. Only the chosen (gifted speakers and talented story-tellers) may relate Qur'anic stories. In traditional societies "story-telling" means charisma. It embodies spiritual and prophetic power. Story-tellers are also the memory-keepers of their communities, and as such they know not only its past, but also its future. Obviously, in such a context a story-teller acts as mediator between the Word of God and "those who have

submitted" (*muslimuna*), and he is therefore believed to be the ultimate spiritual leader of his group. His position in the local community is both important and prestigious. This phenomenon is characteristic of the culture of story-telling in the Islamic world, and the Balkans in particular.

On the other hand, the folkloric aspects of the Qur'anic saga of Abraham, as we shall see, possess a sizeable ethno-religious dimension. In Balkan Muslim communities the prophet who intends to sacrifice his son is known as Azreti Ibrahim [Djordjević 1984: 205], Ibrahim (and/or Ibraim) Peigamber (Appendix, Text 1), Ibriam (Text 3), and even Ismail (Text 2). In some tales, he is even called Issa Pengamberin, i.e. Issa the Prophet (Text 4),(11) and these Islamic accounts encompass, apparently, not only the Qur'anic text of the filial sacrifice, but also its Christian and/or Jewish (that is, its Biblical) counterpart. Thus the name of the character who has to slaughter his son (Issa) echoes, in a specific way, the name of one who in the Genesis account is to be sacrificed (Isaac). Muslim accounts recorded in the Balkans indicate that the name of the victim son varies too; he may be called both Isaac and/or Ismael. Unlike high Jewish/Christian and/or Muslim theological tradition, low Islamic folk tradition is less concerned with specifying the name of "the one and only son." This is, in fact, the same with the Qur'anic text, although Islamic scholars are reluctant to acknowledge it. Nowhere in Mohammed's account is Abraham's son's name mentioned; indeed, the name of "the one who was considered by the Prophet to be his only son" has always been the subject of heated speculation among Jewish and Christian scholars on the one hand and Muslim on the other. Islamic tradition, however, holds (and this is regarded both as a conventional rule and/or a theological principle) that the victim's name is Ismael, whereas Christian tradition settles on Isaac [Doughan 1995, 169-71; Kunin 1995, 49-51; Yunis 1995: 150-53, 163-64, Noujaim 1995, 159-61]. As will be seen, this becomes one of the most significant distinctions between the Jewish and Christian dogmatic tradition and the Muslim, if not a distinction Islamic oral tradition views as important.

An analysis of Islamic folk legends of filial sacrifice from the Balkans, Bulgaria in particular, indicates that these texts relate primarily, but not exclusively, to the classical account in the Qur'an. However, Mohammed's account is simply the major contributor to the process of shaping the plot. Story-tellers, needless to say, regard the Qur'an as the

essence of their religious identity, but their retelling of the Abraham story relates not only to the Qur'an-based teachings of Mohammed, but also to the traditional patterns of folk Islam. (12) Their narratives, as we shall see, also have other, at first sight surprising, links with other religious traditions. Although each story-teller is convinced that his tale is true, and springs "from the Holy Qur'an itself," repeating Mohammed's sacred utterances word for word, as Edward Leach once remarked, "that is how mythologies are presented. They do not exist as single stories but as clusters of stories which are variations around a theme" [Leach 1983: 25].

It was also Leach who developed the methodology employed in the present essay, that of the functionalist social anthropologist who believes:

that sacred texts contain a religious message which is other than that which can be immediately inferred from the manifest sense of the narrative. Religious texts contain a mystery; the mystery is somehow encoded in the text; it is decodable. The code, as in all forms of communication, depends upon the permutation of patterned structures. The method of decoding is to show what persists throughout in a sequence of transformations [Leach 1983: 2].

The folk renderings of the Qur'anic narrative of Abraham's sacrifice recorded amongst Balkan Muslims also contain this "encoded mystery". When deciphered, they may elucidate, both syntagmatically and paradigmatically, the patterned structures that have undergone a series of hidden processes of permutation, passing in the Balkans over time through various socio-political and cultural transformations. The functional parameters of these legends, however, remain constant, with the story of Abraham serving to justify the chief custom of Muslim communities, the annual ritual sacrifice of a lamb or ram at the end of the Ramadan fast, on the feast popularly called *Kurban-Bairam*, or *Koch-Bairam* [Blagoev 1996: 70-83; 1999: 70-83; Djordjević 1984: 204-05].

Thus in 1987, during field research conducted by members of the Bulgarian Institute of Folklore amongst Muslim communities in the north-east of the country, Evgenia Mitseva recorded a fascinating folk interpretation of the Qur'anic text about Ibraim (see Appendix, Text 1). It was narrated by Mehmed Ibraimov Iusek, aged sixty seven, who explained to her the origin of the feast day of Ram-Bairam (known as *Koch-Bairam*, where the word *koch*

means “ram” in the local dialect). According to his story, the ritual slaughtering of the ram on that day went back to the son of *Peigamberi* (the Prophets). The narrative structure of the text consists of a string of episodes, each a self-contained entity, which are analyzed below. The textological analysis serves as the starting-point for further anthropological exploration of the folkloric dimensions of the Qur’anic text about Ibraim. Thus the process of mutual interaction between Islam and Christianity may be illuminated more comprehensively. Indeed, as Schwarzbaum notes,

anyone who dips into the Qur’an will immediately learn that its whole fabric is interwoven with numerous Biblical narrative hints and cryptic allusions, as well as with full-fledged Biblical and Extra-Biblical legends and folktales. Frequently Mohammed employs Old Testament stories in the way a preacher does, who usually illustrates his ideas and teachings by means of a fascinating story, picking out a few incidents or one single detail out of the complete tale in order to point the desired moral [Schwarzbaum 1982: 10].

The textological examination of Bulgarian Muslims’ oral Qur’anic accounts corroborates these theoretical observations.

I shall begin my analysis by examining each segment in turn.

Segment 1: One of the prophets, whose name was Ibraim, had been childless for many years

This episode functions as the introduction (proem) and correlates not only with the Qur’an [Sura 11.75] but with the Bible too.(13) At the same time it explores a motif typical in Asian and European epic tradition, that of the miraculous conception (and/or birth) of the hero (either the protagonist or the antagonist) [Propp 1976: 205-40]. The legend starts with the announcement of a miracle: the childless old couple is given a wondrous child.

Segment 2: Ibraim had been married twice

This detail shows how Muslim oral tradition transforms the Biblical motif of the opposition between Sarah and Hagar, so giving the mother of Ismail a status equal to that given by Jewish and Christian tradition to the mother of Isaac. Thus the first step towards

the justification of the idea that it was Ishmael who was “the only son” of Abraham, “the one he loved most”, is made. Mehmed Iusek’s text strictly follows Qur’anic tradition as far as the name of the boy/sacrificial victim is concerned. In his story, in contrast to the Biblical text (as rendered by Jewish and Christian storytellers), the boy is called Ishmael, not Isaac.

As we can see, according to this version, Ishmael becomes the ancestor of all Muslims, and the Turks in particular. There are several ethnonyms in Bulgarian for them: *Agariani*, because their ancestors were born of *Agara* (Hagar), and *Ismailtiani*, because their forefather was *Ismail* (Ishmael) [Tüpkova-Zaimova and Miltenova 1996: 94, 155-6, 159, 176, 180 285, 305-08]. The ethnonym *Agariani* can also be traced back to apocryphal Biblical sources [Nachov 1894: 146-47; Tüpkova-Zaimova and Miltenova 1996; Badalanova and Miltenova, 1996: 209-11, 230] as well as to Christian oral tradition; similarly, the ethnonym *Ismailtiani* goes back to either the canonical Biblical text [Gen. 25: 16-18] and its apocryphal interpretations (such as the “Erotopokriseis Razumnik-Ukaz” texts [Tüpkova and Miltenova 1996: 293-308]), as well as being found in both Christian and Muslim folk narratives. The fact that the ethnonym *Ismailtiani* is interchangeable with *Agariani* emphasizes the importance of both matrilineal and patrilineal kinship among Balkan Muslim communities.

Segment 3: It is his second wife (whose name was Hazhder) who prays to God for a boy. She promises Him that if He answers her prayer, the child will be sacrificed as a *Kurban* to the Lord

This detail corresponds neither to Qur’anic nor Biblical themes, but instead to folk motifs functioning as the semantic kernels of songs and/or narratives about filial sacrifice in Slavia Orthodoxa [Nachov 1894: 149-50],(14) as, for example, in the ritual song from the village of Momina Bania, near Hisar in southern Bulgaria. The song was performed by Christian women on St George's Day after their husbands had sacrificed a lamb. The text of the song along with an explanation of the ritual it accompanies, was described by one of the local singers of tales as follows:

When the lamb is slaughtered, we go to the spring, where the water flows down the ravine, to pour the blood in there... So that it may flow down the ravine — for a good

harvest, for everything [to be born]. We [offer this sacrifice] to God and/or Saint George sincerely, so that he may help us all. And they [the men] make the sign of the cross on the forehead [of each child] with the blood of the lamb - for we are already offering the lamb and making the sign of the cross on ourselves. We present it all wholeheartedly. And then [we sing] the song, the song that is sung about the lambs...  
Let me see...

A mother gave birth to  
A single son, Stoian;  
And she should not have had him!  
And so she brought him up to adulthood,  
And the mother betrothed him  
And the mother settled on his marriage  
But they did not have a child from their heart...  
Yet his bride Petranka,  
Petranka, a beautiful bride,  
Was walking along the yard,  
Holding golden censers,  
Gaining favor with them before God,  
And praying to the Lord: "Oh God! Oh Almighty God!  
Please, give me God, please give me,  
One single male child,  
To bring him up for three years  
Then I shall slaughter him as a sacrificial offering!" (15)

As Nachov shows, songs about filial sacrifice in which the mother prays to God for a son are widespread amongst the Bulgarians [Nachov 1894:149-50]. Often they have a particular proem portraying Abraham's future as a mysterious riddle "in the stars,"(16) thus resembling not only the Bulgarian folk conceit of parenthood (which in Christian oral tradition is represented as the ultimate manifestation of prosperity),(17) but also the implicit, or perhaps one should say "coded", Biblical designation of the "Father of multitudes" as the progenitor of offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven [Gen 15:5].

These songs start with a formulaic dialogue between the Morning Star [*zvezda Zornitsa*] and the praying mother and/or father [Bogdanova et al. 1993-4: 364-73 esp. 485, 486, 489]. They promise the star that if God gives them a son, his name will be the “One Who Belongs to God” [*Bogoumcho*] and he will be offered as a sacrifice to Him [Nachov 1894:150].

The star topic is a significant element in the Abraham story in Islamic tradition; in the Qur’anic text there is a direct indication that, after saying to his father Azar, “Takest thou idols for gods? I see thee, and thy people in manifest error” [Qur’an 6: 73-74], Abraham was shown by Allah “the kingdom of the heavens and earth, that he might be of those having sure faith” [Qur’an 6: 75]. (18) In fact, according to the Sacred Book of “those who have submitted,” the divine revelation took place “when night outspread over him,” and the prophet “saw a star and said, ‘This is my Lord’.” [Qur’an 6: 75-80].

On the other hand, in the story “How Abraham learns to worship God” [El-Shamy 1995: II, 5, Type Z 452.2], there are striking parallels between Slavic apocryphal tradition,(19) the midrashic tradition,(20) and the Qur’anic text. Thus, according to Mohammed’s account, after observing the Heavenly bodies rising and setting, Abraham rejects astrology, declaring: “I have turned my face to Him who originated the heavens and the earth, a man of pure faith; I am not of the idolaters” [Qur’an 6: 79]; at the same time, Slavic apocrypha and midrashic texts also contain a concise version of this episode. Indeed, the star topic serves as key characteristic of the Abraham cycle in these three traditions. More than that, as the results of fieldwork in South-Eastern Europe indicate (see above), the dialogue between the prophet and the stars has survived in Bulgarian folk interpretations of the saga of filial sacrifice even today.

Returning to the image of the mother as found in the Bulgarian Muslim versions of the Abraham saga, it appears that these accounts differ significantly from orally transmitted stories of filial sacrifice, told in some areas formerly part of the Islamic caliphate. Thus, according to some specialists in Islamic studies, Combs-Schilling, for instance, the stories of Ibrahim, circulating in Morocco, completely ignore the image and/or the function of the mother. He claims that:

Hajar, the natural mother, is absent from Islamic cosmic trial, so absent that she does not even appear in the Qur’anic text. The Qur’an’s tale of ultimate sacrifice is a purely

male story, involving a male-imagined God, a father, a son, and a male domestic animal. The Qur'an mentions the mother in connection with Ismail's natural birth, but not in connection with the transcendent birth which the father, together with God, gives. The mother plays no part, has no say... So distant is the mother in awareness, understanding, and space that she cannot possibly participate in the play with death that brings about eternal life. Hajar is down on the plains — probably baking bread or washing clothes — while the fate of her son and the fate of the cosmos are being decided [Combs-Schilling 1989:240].(21)

It must be emphasized, however, that as far as the function of the mother in the cosmic trial is concerned, Bulgarian folk materials indicate that the situation is much more complicated than Combs-Schilling suggests, and as such is a topic for future research. In fact, Bulgarian folk songs and narratives, recorded among both Christian and Muslim communities, reveal that the image of the mother in the vernacular Biblical and/or Qur'anic saga of filial sacrifice is of crucial importance.

Segment 4: And so the boy Ismail is born as a blessing from God

Although, as already mentioned, the boy's name is never mentioned, Muslim tradition identifies him with Ishmael [Yunis 1995: 150-53], rather than Isaac as in the Jewish and Christian religions.

Segment 5: But by the time the child reaches the age of six, his father Ibraim has forgotten the promise his wife had made. Apparently, Hazder has also forgotten, although this is not mentioned explicitly in the text.

The folk motif of the parent who, desperate for a child, pledges him to a deity, supernatural being or animal who can grant their wish, and who then forget about their pledge is widespread in the Balkans as elsewhere. It is found predominantly in the thematic kernel of certain wonder tales (Type AT 310). Bulgarian folktale experts have also detected specific local interpretations of the motif of the forgotten pledge, classifying the tales in which they appear separately as Types 313A, 313C, \*315A, \*316\* [Daskalova-Perkovska et al. 1994: 109-12, 117-19].

If we look at the age of the son, Mehmed Iusek's story tells us that he was six when the time for the Great Trial had come [see also Appendix, Text 2]. He was, therefore, on the threshold of boyhood, no longer an infant. This detail suggests that the tale recorded by Mitseva reflects, to a degree, the conventional setting of ceremonial practices akin to initiation rites among Balkan Muslim communities. In the classical Qur'anic text, however, we are simply told that, after being given the good tidings, the Prophet is asked to sacrifice his offspring when he reaches "the age of running with him" [Qur'an 37: 99-101]. An indirect reflection of this detail is to be found, surprisingly enough, in some folkloric versions of the Abraham saga among Christians in some parts of Bulgaria. These songs are sung by women during the *Kurban* ritual, on *Gergiovdan* [St George's Day], when the priest blesses the ritual loaves and censes the roasted lamb. According to the text of a song I recorded in 1977 in the village of Glavan, in the southern Bulgarian area of the Thracian Lowland, the childless Abraham (*Avram*) prays:

"Give me, My Lord, give me  
 An offspring from my heart,  
 To walk around the courtyard,  
 To say 'Mother!' and 'Father!'  
 To go then to the field,  
 To go to the field and plough it,  
 To fetch a cart full of firewood,  
 Of firewood and flour!  
 I vow to slaughter him then as a sacrifice  
 To the Lord God and to Saint Georgi!"  
 God stood there listening,  
 And they had an offspring from the heart,  
 And they gave him a Christian name,  
 A Christian name, after the name of Saint Georgi.  
 And the little boy named Georgi grew up  
 And became a fifteen-year-old youngster.  
 And they sent him to the field,

To the field, to plough it,  
 To fetch a cart full of firewood,  
 Of firewood and flour.  
 When he came back home,  
 His mother was baking bread,  
 Baking bread and weeping.  
 His father was whetting knives,  
 Whetting them and weeping.(22)

It is essential to note that the canonical account of Abraham's sacrifice in the Book of Genesis does not refer to the age of his most beloved son either. This song, which is entirely typical of Bulgarian folk tradition [Petkanova-Toteva 1978: 191-92], together with the stories recorded by Mitseva in Eastern Bulgaria [see Appendix, Texts 1 and 2], thus appear to represent an earlier version of Abraham's saga that preceded the Holy Scriptures in the written form that we have them. It may be assumed that it was only transmitted orally amongst the People of the Book (Jews, Christians and Muslims). It is highly significant that the detail about the age of the son was included neither in the Qur'an, nor in the Bible, but yet has survived in the folk tradition of Balkan Muslims and Christians - an enduring memory of the oral hypostases of the Holy Scriptures.

Segment 6: One night Ibraim has a dream in which he is reminded that he must slaughter Ismail as a Kurban offering

This passage partly corresponds to the Qur'anic text from The Rangers (Surah 37); while revealing his vision to his son intended as an offering to God, the prophet says: "My son, I see in a dream that I shall sacrifice thee; consider, what thinkest thou?" [Qur'an 37: 102-3]. Mohammed's account, however, does not contain a precise description of the dream; nor is anything said about the way God utters this command. Abraham merely discloses God's will to his son.

According to Muslim Neoplatonists of the tenth and eleventh centuries, however, the dream topic is regarded as an important component of Islamic tradition. As Ian Netton points out, "the projected sacrifice of Ismail, who replaced the Old Testament Isaac in many

Islamic versions of the story, is invoked by the Ikhwan to make a point about the truth and reliability of dreams. Abraham knew that dreams must contain some truth or he would not have submitted to such a sacrifice” [Netton 1982: 85]. On the other hand, as the analysis of the morphology of the plot of Mehmed Iusek's tale shows, the dream topic serves to link the various units of the text, integrating them into a larger whole.(23) At the same time, Abraham's vision is emphasized and amplified: “Hey, Ibrahim, don't you have to offer Ismail as a sacrifice? Haven't you promised to slaughter Ismail? Ismail is supposed to be offered as a sacrifice!” Whereas in the Qur'an Abraham's dream represents a condensed scenario of the actual Great Trial (the test of his faith in God) in Mehmed Iusek's tale the detail has a predominantly stylistic function, in which Ibrahim's vision is portrayed as a clear call from above, but not as a revelation. It is no more than a reminder from Allah, albeit a powerful one, that Ismael is to be given as a *Kurban* offering.(28) In other words, while in the Qur'anic text the motif of the prophetic dream encapsulates the entire plot of Abraham's sacrifice, in the folk narrative it serves merely as a linking component in the plot of the Great Trial.

Segment 7: The father sacrifices one hundred oxen and one thousand sheep, but still the dream repeats itself over and over again, seventy times, until finally he understands that there is nothing to be done but to fulfill his vow

The theme of the attempt to revoke a pledge of this nature by sacrificing domestic animals belongs to classic folk narrative. Here “one hundred” and “one thousand” symbolize multitude. It is, however, relevant, that the dream is repeated seventy times; this detail fits into the register of traditional Christian oral epic, where seventy and seventy seven are considered the numbers of completion.

Segment 8: The prophet keeps his decision from his wife

This detail correlates with both Biblical and Qur'anic interpretations of the story of the Great Trial, in which the mother is unaware of what is about to happen to her son. Some versions of the Abraham saga in Christian oral tradition, follow the same pattern. Furthermore, the theme of filial sacrifice, as interpreted in some legends about the

experiences of Grandpa Lord (*Diado Bozhe* or *Diado Gospod*) wandering around the land of the Bulgarian Christians [Dragomanov 1889: 65-97], often involves the detail of the mother unaware too. In some of them, God appears to a righteous man as a poor old man. After being invited to enter the house, he is told he may ask for anything the Lord gave his host. Then the old man asks for a special meal: the father is to slaughter his little son and roast him in the oven. The father fulfills the old man's wish, while keeping his action secret from the mother [Petkanova-Toteva 1978:199-201].(25)

On the other hand, it appears that in Mehmed Iusek's text the mother's function undergoes a process of transformation. While at the beginning she is the most active personage, towards the end of the text her parental presence becomes almost invisible. It is Hazhder, not her husband, who initially encounters the celestial world through her prayers, acquiring a child whom she promises to sacrifice. In the later stages of the plot, however, she is gradually replaced by the father; eventually the stage is reached where he acts for her. In terms of the plot, this shift is expressed overtly; the mother will not be even told of the forthcoming sacrifice. This turning-point in the logic of the text may be regarded as a contradiction by readers of the Bible and/or the Qur'an, but certainly not for oral tellers of the Holy Scriptures, for whom the religion of the book exists merely in oral performance, as a divine text in the making.

Segment 9: Hazhder is told by Ibrahim that he would take the boy to the forest to collect wood

This part of Mehmed Iusek's story has no counterpart in the classical Qur'anic text; instead, the detail of Abraham's going to collect wood for the burnt offering comes from the Bible: "And Abraham rose up early in the morning... and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him" [Gen. 22: 3]. The ritual songs about Abraham sung by Christians also generally mention the wood topic; it has been already noted that the texts performed during the *Kurban* ritual explicitly say that the boy is to be sacrificed when he is old enough to collect wood (see above). Numerous analogous ritual texts exist. For example, in another St George's Day song, the boy called Georgi who is to be a *Kurban* sacrifice is sent for the first time:

To go to the hill  
 To collect a cartload of wood...  
 When he was back from the hill,  
 His mother was baking bread,  
 And crying as she did so.  
 His father was honing sharp knives  
 And crying as he did so.(26)

This text demonstrates how oral tradition creates local versions of the story of Abraham's sacrifice in which different cultural and/or confessional patterns are often interwoven. It is particularly significant, however, that not only Christians, but also Muslims refer persistently to the wood topic. Whereas in the Christian tradition this can be explained easily, the roots of this phenomenon in Muslim tradition are not so evident. Since it is not mentioned in Mohammed's account at all, it obviously does not come from Qur'anic tradition. How then, it may be asked, does the wood mytheme survive in Muslim oral tradition? The text recorded by Mitseva in Eastern Bulgaria indicates that story-tellers somehow know that they ought to preserve this detail. Elucidating the source of this knowledge is the subject of the following analysis.

In Mehmed Iusek's tale, the wood motif appears to bear traces of the latent stages in the evolution of the Abraham saga, thus exemplifying yet again the encounter between Christianity and Islam at the popular level: this text literally embodies the interaction between the oral hypostases of the religions of the book, the Qur'an and the Bible, so casting light on their common roots. It also illustrates how the Muslim religion at a popular level draws on sources beyond the classical Islamic tradition.

But it is not only the oral tradition, whether Christian or Muslim, that considers the wood topic of particular importance for the internal logic of the saga of filial sacrifice. Early patristic tradition also acknowledges it: christological exegesis interprets the figure of Abraham's son carrying the wood on his shoulders as he climbs the hill where he is to be sacrificed as a foretype of Jesus carrying his cross to Calvary [Cignelli 1995: 123-26; Paczkowski 1995: 101-21]. This typology was extensively developed by the Church Fathers, and by Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen in particular [Doughan 1995: 167]. Hence,

in Christian tradition the figure of Isaac carrying wood on his shoulders was connected with the Crucifixion.

Of course, the way popular faith spells out this typology out is quite distinctive, but it is nonetheless evident that the folkloric renderings of either the Biblical or the Qur'anic versions of the Abraham saga constantly consider the wood topic of great importance. Analysis of the Mehmed Iusek tale indicates that a series of semantic transformations have occurred to it in the particular textual context. The oral tradition, both Christian and Muslim, seems to have considerably changed the emphasis put on its various components. What is regarded as the most important component of the fragment is not that the father and the son go to collect wood, but the fact that they go to the forest (see also Appendix, Text 2). In this way, the forest becomes the emblematic setting for the filial sacrifice. At the same time, it recalls the folk concept of the forest as a classical locus for initiation rites. Thus, via the reference to wood topic, the forest is apparently recognized by storytellers not only as the obvious setting, but also, because it is mythologically transparent, the ultimate setting for the drama of the Great Trial.

Segment 10: Hazhder is asked by Ibrahim to put henna on Ismail's hands and feet.

This episode would seem to reveal that the ritual dyeing of the boy's hands and feet with henna is considered an important component of the Muslim rituals which are performed as part of the sacrificial offering. In this, the function of the mother is quite transparent; she is to prepare her son for his encounter with the world beyond her territory. On the other hand, it is intriguing that the henna topic is also encoded in the ritual vocabulary of the *Kurban-Bairam* feast [Blagoev 1996: 76, 83], as well as in phraseology related to sheep-breeding. Thus, the descriptive epithet that traditionally applies to the noun denoting a particular breed of ram, "the one who has black round the eyes," is *kanŭlia*, which literally means "with eyes decorated with henna." According to local Muslim popular belief, the divine ram that descended on Allah's behalf during the Great Trial as a substitute sacrifice was one of these (see also Appendix, Text 3). That is why, the saying goes, a *kanŭlia* ram is the preferred choice for a *Kurban* offering. It is also the most highly valued breed of sheep. Undoubtedly, the ramifications of the use and distribution of this noun-epithet unit are

complex, but despite this, it does indicate that the Great Trial mytheme still functions as the underlying code in the tradition of Balkan Muslim communities.

Segment 11: When the father sets off with his son to collect wood in the forest, *Sheytan* [Satan] comes to Hazhder and tells her that her son is going to be sacrificed by his father. She does not believe him.

It is particularly intriguing that, as far as the relationship between Hazhder and Satan is concerned, there is a striking correspondence between the folk interpretations of the Abraham among Bulgarian Muslims today, and Islamic oral tradition in the Holy Land recorded almost a century ago by J. E. Hanauer. Thus, according to the account given to him by "one of the sheykhs of the great Mosque at Hebron," Ibrahim El-Khalil, after escaping from Nimrud:

was commanded to go to Mecca and build the *Maram*(27) or sanctuary there. On reaching his destination, he received instruction first to offer up his dear son *Ismain* (Ishmael) as a sacrifice upon Jebel 'Arafat, the mountain where Adam had recognised Hawa. *Iblis*, hoping to make trouble between the Patriarch and his friend, went to our Lady Hagar, on whom be peace, and implored her to dissuade her husband from the cruel deed. She snatched up a stone and hurled it at the tempter. The missile did him no harm, but the pillar against which the stone dashed is still shown to pilgrims. From this incident he has the name "*Ash Sheytan er Rajim*", meaning "Satan, the stoned One", or "he who is to be stoned" [Hanauer 1996: 27].

On the other hand, this tale and that of Mehmed Iusek both bear some relationship to midrashic texts. Thus, according to the story to be found in *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer*, "after Satan found that he could not convince Abraham and Isaac to be unfaithful to God he went to Sarah" [Kunin 1995: 53]. In the midrashic tradition, however, the fragment about the encounter between Satan and the mother, whose name there is, naturally, Sarah, evolves differently. When told that her husband has killed their son, the mother dies of grief. This detail, in turn, is seen as serving as "part of the logical structure in which the natural parents are progressively denied, leaving only the divine parent as the agent of the rebirth" [Kunin 1995: 53].

Yet this is, generally speaking, the logic inherent in any birth-rebirth mystery, and initiation rites in particular. The separation of the boy from the world of the mother is the first step in achieving his acceptance into the realm of men. In this, the temporal opposition, before/after, acquires additional, spatial dimensions. These, of course, require relocation, or, in other words, the son leaves his mother's territory.

This is, however, how the situation appears from the outside, to the observer rather than the participants. This is also how it may be presented from an objective point of view, and how external observers, including the storytellers themselves, may describe it. But what if one considers how it looks from the boy's standpoint? From the stance of the individual involved in the actual performance of the ritual, everything is seen reversed. The participant's perspective is, therefore, opposite to the storyteller's. The world is seen from the inside looking out rather than from the outside looking in. So the boy undergoing the initiation ceremony experiences the act of leaving the house as the exclusion of his mother from his circle. In terms of the ritual, this step is seen as a further elimination and even denial of her function as parent. In terms of the narrative, she stays at home while her boy goes away. She is static, while her child and husband's state is dynamic. In other words, in the story of filial sacrifice, when the boy crosses the boundaries of the domestic world, the mother has to be detached from him.

That is also why father and son in Mehmed Iusek's narrative set off to the forest to collect wood, while Hazhder stays at home; though the subtext of the birth-rebirth mysteries is evidently taken for granted by the story-teller. The mother is still the first to encounter Sheytan. More than that, according to Mehmed Iusek, she is also the first to resist him, being the initial obstacle to his efforts to stop Abraham fulfilling her vow. It is also the last time Hazhder appears in the Great Trial.

Segment 12: Then the devil goes to Ismail and tells him that his mother has heard his father is going to sacrifice him and therefore she wants him to return home. The child picks up a stone and hits the devil in the eye. That is why Sheytan only has one eye.

If, in the story Hanauer recorded from "one of the sheykhs of the great Mosque of Hebron," it was the mother who hurled a stone at the devil (see above), in Mehmed Iusek's

story, it is the son who hits him. This detail about the encounter between Satan and the boy is another that corresponds with midrashic accounts; in the *Midrash Tanchuma*, the Devil, after unsuccessfully approaching Abraham, attempts to talk to his son who also refuses to listen [Rappoport 1995: 292-93]. According to Muslim convention, "the *ta'awwudh* formula of 'taking refuge in God from Satan the stoned one' is spoken before reciting the Koran, and before the *basmalah* or consecration through the Divine Name, 'In the Name of God', when undertaking ritual action" [Glassé 1989: 166]. At the same time, the image of the Satan as "the stoned One" or "He who is to be stoned," in the story of Mehmed Iusek, corresponds to etiological legends found among Bulgarian Christians. Thus, according to one of the stories I recorded in 1981 among Bulgarian settlers in Bessarabia, after creating the world God decides to take a nap, during which the Devil tries to destroy it; the Lord wakes up and, throwing a stone at him, declares: "May you be the one who is stoned!" As He spoke, so it goes, God hit the Devil in the eye, since when he only has one eye. In colloquial Bulgarian there even exists a stock epithet attached to the appellations Satan and/or Devil: "The one-eyed one" [*Ednookiiat*]. This detail indicates that the correlation between Christian and Muslim oral tradition was quite profound, clearly encompassing various aspects of folk culture and vernacular language, including phraseology.

Segment 13: When they get to the place where the boy is to be sacrificed, his father tells him that he will slaughter him, for the Lord has told him to do so. Ismail answers that if that is what God wanted, then that is the death he wants but he does not want to be tied up.

Although in the Qur'anic rendering of the Abraham saga there is nothing about whether the victim is to be bound, this motif is considered important by storytellers; none of the folk texts from Bulgarian Muslim communities omits it. This motif is apparently also considered of theological significance in Jewish and Christian ritual tradition, since in the Bible it reads: "And they [Abraham and his son] came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son [Gen. 22: 9-10].

This fragment, in turn, is considered the kernel of the ritual *Akedah* (the tying-up of the sacrificial lamb). As J. Doughan emphasizes,

The memory of the *Akedah* lies close to the heart of three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is reflected in the liturgy of the Jew at Rosh-Ha-Shanan, of the Christians at the mass (Catholic) or Holy Communion (Orthodox and Protestant), and of the Muslims at the great sacrificial feast ('Id-al-Kabir). The same sacred story is remembered in these three traditions as an important element of their religious identity, yet the commemoration takes place at different times and represents variant meanings. In a sense, the *Akedah* can be looked upon as standing at the crossroad of these three traditions as one significant sign of their common origin and also of their theological divergence [Doughan 1995: 165].

As far as Christian typological interpretation is concerned, the motif of Abraham's bound son prefigure the Crucifixion; as Melito of Sardis (second century) declares in his Homily on the Pasch: "if therefore you wish to contemplate the Mystery of the Lord, look at Abel who is similarly murdered [Gen. 4: 8], and Isaac who is similarly bound [Gen. 22:9]... He [Christ the God-Man] is the Passover of our salvation. It is he who endured many things: it is he that was in Abel murdered, and Isaac bound [Cignelli 1995: 124].

This pattern seems to be followed by Christian oral tradition too. It is significant that recently recorded Bulgarian folk interpretations of the Abraham saga still retain this detail. In the text of the *Kurban* ritual song from the village of Glavan (to which I have already referred), the boy victim asks his father:

"Father, my dearest father,  
Tie my hands securely,  
My hands, father, and my legs -  
Lest I could reach with my hands,  
Lest I could move with my legs!"  
His father tied his hands,  
His hands, as well as, his legs.

It should be noted, however, that Mehmed Iusek's Muslim text emphasizes that the boy ought to be untied (see also Appendix, Text 4). That is why nowadays, the story goes, when

Muslims give a Kurban offering, they are supposed to leave one of the ram's legs untied. Hence, the narrative provides mythological justification for the ritual setting of the *Kurban-Bairam* feast.

In contrast to these accounts, however, some other texts recorded from Bulgarian Muslims, as we shall see later, have closer links with the Bible, suggesting that in the Balkans a plurality of versions reflecting original differences between the confessional patterns of the religions of the book existed.

Segment 14: Seventy times Ibraim passes the knife over his son's throat but it does not cut it.

It is noteworthy that there is numerical symmetry between the description of the fragment portraying Ibrahim's attempt to avoid fulfilling his vow (he has one and the same dream seventy times over) and the actual attempt to carry it out (the knife is passed seventy times over his son's throat). This detail functions as a prelude to the miracle which forms the climax of the story.

Segment 15: Then a ram descends from the sky.

This detail does not have its counterpart in the canonical Qur'anic rendering of the Abraham saga, and it is generally accepted that it originates from some complementary extra-Qur'anic sources, and from the *Hadith*, one of the chief compendiums of Islamic law, in particular. The *Hadith* (account or speech), it is agreed, contains stories about the Prophet and early Muslim communities which were initially transmitted orally, and later, in the ninth and tenth centuries, systematically collected and written down to create an extension to Islamic tradition.

On the other hand the motif of the ram descending from heaven corresponds to some midrashic and/or rabbinical interpretations. In these, after taking a rope and a knife and going to the mountain, "Ibrahim directed the knife against the throat of his son but three times it slipped and glanced aside. Then a voice called to him... Then a ram appeared which... had hitherto been in Paradise; it was offered as a sacrifice" [Houtsma 1927: 2: 532].

Finally, it should be noted that the detail from Mehmed Iusek's story about the ram descending from Heaven as a sign of divine intervention, corresponds, of course, to the Biblical account as well: "And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns" [Gen. 22: 13].

Thus Muslim oral tradition appears to "remember" not only the story from the *Hadith*, but also, evidently, the canonical Biblical account of the saga of Abraham.

Segment 16: It was delivered by Dzhebrail, the emissary of the Prophets.

It is significant that the archangel Gabriel, the stock mediator for Christians has a similar function in Muslim tradition. In fact, within the context of classical Islam, his appearance recalls Mohammed's call and revelation.

Segment 17: This ram was slain and from then on the *Kurban-Bairam* ritual remained a tradition for the Muslims.

At the end of the story Mehmed Iusek provides a lengthy explanation of why Muslims celebrate the *Kurban* ritual and what the sacred meaning of this mystery is, thus emphasizing the righteousness of his fellow villagers. Again seven, the number of completion and perfection, serves as a structuring device both in the narrative and the ritual: those performing the *Kurban* ritual should give some meat from the sacrificed animal to seven of their neighbors' households. At the same time, as it is performed by "those who have submitted", this sacred ritual connects the history of every single family with the family of *Ibrahim* the Prophet and, thus, with the sacred time of the prophets.

As shown above, the narrative structure of Mehmed Iusek's text consists of a series of episodes framing the actions of the protagonists on two hierarchically different levels, the terrestrial (represented by Ibrahim, Hazhder and Ismail) and the celestial (God, his messenger Dzhebrail and the ram that descends from above). There is also an antagonist involved in the story about the origin of the ritual of *Kurban-Bairam*, Sheitan. A significant point is his appearance to Ismail in a marginal place at a liminal time; the encounter takes place on the road, during the boy's journey to the forest where the sacrificial offering is to

take place. Thus the story of Mehmed Iusek implicitly recalls the classical ritual pattern of initiation within the universal cultural paradigm of the rites of passage (and/or birth/rebirth ceremonies). Moreover, it is a *sui generis* example of how the mytheme of filial sacrifice is realized in the acting-out of the folk narrative.

Furthermore, as the story of Mehmed Iusek indicates, interaction between the two levels of the universe, the terrestrial and the celestial worlds may be accomplished either by prayer (an invocation from below) or by the ritual of *Kurban-Bairam* (God's response from above). At the same time, the actions of the terrestrial subjects involved in the narrative take place mainly at a horizontal spatial level, with apparently a single exception, at the culmination of the story, when Ismail is replaced by the ram. Otherwise, the plot strictly follows a horizontal line, progressing from the centre of Ibrahim's world prior to the Great Trial, from inside of his house outwards to the forest, and back to the village. Yet neither Ibrahim nor his village remains the same, for he brings back the new law of the sacred ritual, revealed to him in the Great Trial. And last but not least, the period after the Great Trial marks the final stage of the spiritual metamorphosis of Ibrahim and his village. Thanks to the law of *Kurban-Bairam*, his world is a newly reborn and rearranged universe. Qur'anic tradition recognizes in him the very first Muslim.

On the other hand, the deeds of the celestial characters are accomplished in a vertically framed perspective, with God's Heavenly Throne on top, the place beneath where Dzhebrail functions as a mediator, and still further down, where the ram, being betwixt and between, emerges. At the base stands the earth. Thus the place where Ibrahim stops to slay Ismail may be considered the earthly counterpart to God's Heavenly Throne, since this is where the ram and Ismail meet, though now as two equal and therefore interchangeable participants in one cosmological drama. The first descends from above, the second ascends from below. Thus they represent not only the terrestrial but the celestial world too, and more importantly, the encounter between them. More than that, they also create a precedent for the *Kurban-Bairam* ritual as a strategy for making the world of Muslims the earthly counterpart of God's Heavenly Throne. In this way, every village, via the ritual, can be transformed into Mecca.

Along with the explanation of the origin of the *Ram-Bairam* feast as a sacred precedent established by the prophet Ibrahim, the text contains one more significant detail: in Mehmed Iusek's oral interpretation of the Qur'anic version of Abraham's sacrifice, Ishmael is the personification of a sacred genealogy, the ancestor of the Islamic community.

Mitseva recorded another version of the story of the Great Trial in Venets, a village near Mehmed Iusek's own (Appendix, Text 2). It was recounted by a sixty-two year old Muslim man, Marin Angelov. On the whole, the narrative pattern coincides with Mehmed Iusek's variant, as one would expect, but though generally typical of regional folk culture, it possesses local features. Thus, details such as the mother's prayer and/or pledge, the episode about collecting wood or the appearance of God's messenger, Gabriel that were considered important by Mehmed Iusek, are not in Marin Angelov's account. The storyteller spins his own yarn by inserting a series of new threads and so transforming certain traditional fragments. These, as fieldwork amongst storytellers in the Balkans indicates, consist, often but not always, of a number of textual units that constantly re-emerge from a dormant but potent community cultural memory. These patterns also spell out the vernacular vocabulary of local narrative tradition, by revealing its store of conventional words and expressions, together with the general paradigmatic rules of its transformational grammar. These text-units are repeated *en bloc* in the actual performance of the story (the Parry-Lord thesis), thus creating in a genuinely original manner the next (though never the ultimate) variant. The absence of certain components shows that a change in the substructure of the given narrative is inevitable. Often the law underlying the process of textual transmission in a traditional oral environment demands the insertion of a new fragment, or a transformation of the old. Or, to put it more precisely, these patterned text-units determine the configuration of the motifs which shape the metatext of any traditional narrative.

Thus, in contrast to the story of Mehmed Iusek, in the account given by Marin Angelov, the wood topic appears absent: father and son go not to collect wood, but to pick crocuses. Yet in this way the forest topic becomes even more palpable; whereas in Mehmed Iusek's narrative the passage about Ibrahim and his son going to collect wood appears

initially to conceal the real task of sacrificing the boy there, in Marin Angelov's variant the text-unit about picking crocuses frames the forest as the ultimate locus for the filial sacrifice even more directly. At the same time, through the name of the crocus in local Turkish dialect (*navruz*) the symbolic dimensions of pre-Islamic concepts of the New Year (*Nawruz, Navruz, Nayruz, Nau Roz*) festivities in Zoroastrianism are evoked.(28)

From the structural point of view, this story is held together as a narrative entity by blocks of direct speech inserted into self-contained units. More than that, as far as Allah's presence is concerned, in Marin Angelov's narrative there is only a voice from above. The first piece of direct speech comes immediately after the introduction when God declares: "You will have a son!" It marks not only the father's first vision in this text, but also the Biblical and/or Qur'anic motif of the divine promise. There then follows the second vision in which Allah calls upon Abraham again, now speaking in the imperative mood: "You must slaughter this boy! You must slaughter the boy!" This second call from above functions also as a test of faith for God's bosom friend.(29) For the third time God speaks. Then the father submits. Since Islam means "submission," so the Muslim interpretation of the saga of Abraham from Venets portrays him as the first among the men "who had submitted", whilst the *Kurban-Bairam* ritual re-enacts what happened to him on the sacred threshold of a new beginning. Such is myth, "a sacred tale about past events which is used to justify social action in the present" [Leach 1983: 8]. Thus too, the proem of Marin Angelov's story declares that the saga of filial sacrifice is simply an account of what "remains from Muslim times", and what "has been left to us from our grandfathers, and the saints."

Later, when the voice of God demands the sacrifice of his only son, we hear the echo of this in the father's order to the mother: "Woman! Give the boy his coat; we are going for flowers, for crocuses!" Once again direct speech marks the next step in the Marin Angelov's account. At the same time, the opposition of heaven and earth is further developed. In terms of the gender dimensions of the universe in which the Prophet and his offspring act, it may be presented as an interaction of the type, father equals high while mother equals low, or in other words, Allah gives orders to the father which he passes on to his wife.

The climax of the drama is indicated by the next insertion of direct speech, the dialogue between slayer and victim: "Father! What are you going to do?" "I am going to slaughter you!" Subsequently, the story is presented by the narrator as third-person narrative, a silent drama about the divine test of the first among those "who submitted." It ends though with direct speech signifying Allah's intervention: "Finally, on Allah's behalf, on behalf of God, a ram descended to him from above! At that very moment a male ram came and replaced the boy! 'Slay this ram!'" Thus Allah's final appearance in the Great Trial in Marin Angelov's tale, is heard rather than seen. It is also the voice that returns the son to his father to live and replaces the boy with the sacrificial ram, thus encoding the mystery of transcendent birth. In other words, according to the story from Venets, eternal life is created by the ceremony of *Kurban-Bairam*.

A few further details in Marin Angelov's story require elucidation. The narrator emphasizes that the father takes "a big knife and a rope" with him to the forest, a detail which serves to introduce the most dramatic part of the scenario. It follows the canonical Biblical account of the saga of Abraham, thus presenting a version different from Mehmed Iusek's. This contradiction is important, since it indicates that, whether the boy is actually bound or not in the story, this motif is regarded as a crucial element in the justification of the ritual behavior of the main participants in the *Kurban-Bairam* rites.

Finally, in the Venets story, the prophet who is prepared to sacrifice his son is Ismail, not Ibrahim. Thus the character in folklore, who epitomizes the Muslims' ancestral roots, combines the image of the father in the Biblical and/or Qur'anic versions of the Abraham saga with the name of the son. As far as Slavic and Balkan oral tradition is concerned, this reversal of the characters' names is not unusual (see Appendix, Text 4), and shows that folk convention has its own ways of interpreting Biblical and/or Qur'anic themes, often remembering types labeled by particular names rather than the actual names themselves.

Another version of the saga of Ibrahim was recorded on 28 November 1986 in north-eastern Bulgaria, in the village of Malük Porovets (Razgrad district) by Milena Benovska. The storyteller had previously been a *hodja*-helper, and at the time of the recording had just been appointed a *hodja* (priest). He was quite reluctant to tell the Ibrahim saga and refused

pointblank to relate "The Handsome *Iusuf* (Joseph)," because "they are from the Qur'an, and it is wrong to recount them incorrectly." In his view, these stories should either be read from the Qur'an or recited by an *afuz*(30) (professional storyteller of spiritual texts), who knows them by heart.

The plot of the legend recorded by Benovska generally adheres to patterns dominant among Bulgarian Muslims, though it includes the *Akedah* topic; the father binds Ismail's arms and legs. Particularly significant here, though, is the fact that the divine ram that replaces the son is a *kanūlia*, a detail implicitly relating to the ritual of henna-dying in the mystery of initiation (see above). It also has silver horns, a detail signifying its divine origin.

One final characteristic of the traditional culture of Slavia Islamica: according to the legend, "Issa Peigamber who sacrifices his son", recorded in 1982 by Stoianka Boiadzhieva from Bulgarian Pomaks in Ribnovo village, (Gotse Delchev district between the Rhodopes and Pirin mountains), the father's name is Issa, and the interrupted sacrifice of the son is regarded as usual as the divine event that gave rise to the *Kurban-Bairam* ritual.(31) What is important in this variant, however, is that, according to the storyteller, the Great Trial is believed to have taken place in his own village, "on that hill over there." Biblical or Qur'anic toponymy has here been replaced by Bulgarian geographical landscape, with the result that the Abraham saga not only acquires a familiar setting, but also transforms the storyteller's neighborhood into a blessed land. So Bulgarian space, and therefore Bulgarian toponymy, acquires sacral status, and Bulgaria becomes the Holy Land. In this way, the hill where the Great Trial is believed to have taken place turns into the Heavenly Altar, with the folklore text revealing in ethnopoetic terms the symbolic dimensions of the altar concept. The Latin word *altare* derives from *altus*, (high), and hence means "that which is higher than the rest of the temple" [Fasmer 1986: I, 72]. Thus, in the Pomak version of the legend of filial sacrifice the world of the storyteller encompasses the entire universe, becoming its sacred centre, its "altar."

It is obvious from the folkloric versions of the Qur'an, recently recorded in Bulgaria, that Ibrahim, (Ibraim, Ibriam) personifies obedience to Allah, just as in Christian folk

tradition Avram epitomizes obedience to God. Thus both Muslims and Christians use the character of Abraham to spell out the paradigm of the "true faith."

I cannot but share Haim Schwarzbaum's conviction that "there is no doubt that a folkloric approach to the Qur'an's extremely interesting stories does more to advance our knowledge of the Holy Book of Islam than many a theoretical treatise ignoring the intricate process of *oral* narration" [Schwarzbaum, 1982: 12]. The folk interpretations of the Abraham saga found among Balkan Muslims strongly corroborate his statement.

### Conclusion

The results of my fieldwork amongst rural communities in Eastern Europe, the Balkans in particular, indicate that the oral tradition of non-literate story-tellers of Slavia Orthodoxa and/or Islamica is an intriguing cultural phenomenon, in which the three religions of the children of Abraham are often interwoven. Analysis of these folklore materials can, therefore, play a crucial role in an anthropological approach to the oral dimensions of the religions of the Book. It offers a starting point for the further critical evaluation of the vernacular scope of the Holy Scriptures, for it shows explicitly how the Biblical and/or Qur'anic account of Abraham goes through various transformations, facilitating the comprehension of these processes within the context of comparative religious studies. Moreover, analysis of folklore at the syntagmatic level explains how the storyteller puts together a structure, which has links with various cultural and confessional paradigms seen from both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, into a single linear text which is performed in accordance with the canons of local tradition. This analysis illumines a forgotten stage in the oral evolution of the Biblical and/or Qur'anic account of Abraham, revealing also how the oral hypostases of the sacred books came about. On the other hand, it also shows how the cycles of Islamic folk narratives about Abraham emerge and coexist in a given local tradition; that is, by scrutinizing these folklore materials at the syntagmatic level we can explain the correlation between the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions at the paradigmatic level. In fact, a study of the morphology of the Abraham legend can also reveal the underlying rules of the "transformational grammar" that generated the basic cultural and confessional patterns of the three monotheistic religions. In other words, these

rules shaped an initial paradigm from which Judaism, Christianity and Islam eventually sprang.

It is in the light of these points that the significance of folk tradition can be appreciated. However, as Schwarzbaum emphasizes, some classical scholastic approaches to the Qur'an are reluctant to recognize that "Mohammed's deviations from the Biblical pattern or from the Biblical text would seem quite natural and even reasonable" if one is acquainted "with the basic laws of oral storytelling, as well as of oral transmission and diffusion of tales" [Schwarzbaum, 1982:11-12]. While contemplating the relationship between the Qur'anic stories and their Biblical counterparts, Schwarzbaum also points out that:

Mohammed's dependence upon his Jewish and Christian informants is well known. Anyone studying the Qur'an at once perceives that its main narrative fibre has been spun from hearsay. It is by no means derived from literary, written sources.

Undoubtedly Mohammed obtained his Biblical tales from *oral* channels, or from scraps of oral information assiduously gathered by him during several years (both in his Meccan and Medinah periods), from both learned and ignorant Jews and Christians, i.e. both from persons well-versed in the so-called "Asatir al-Awwalin" = "Ancient Stories", and from persons who were not well versed in the Biblical stories [Schwarzbaum 1982: 11-12].

Furthermore, the folkloric versions of the story of Abraham's sacrifice, as told by Muslims, contain certain motifs foreign to the canonical Qur'anic text. These can be traced back either to the Old Testament account (in its canonical and apocryphal forms), or to the Hebrew narratives of rabbinic and midrashic tradition.

Last but not least, this essay presents evidence of the survival of folk religion in Eastern Europe despite decades of "aggressive totalitarian atheism" [Sedakova 2001: 131-36], offering survival strategies not only to those who did not share the communist creed, but also those who did. It may be hoped that it will provide answers not just as to how, but also as to why today folk religion remains such a vibrant force in the region.

## NOTES

- 1 The Biblical saga of Abraham is found in Gen. 11: 26-35: 10; some New Testament references to the Old Testament Patriarch may be found in Acts 7: 2-19 and Hebrews 11: 8-22.
- 2 The Qur'anic account of Abraham's (Ibrahim's) life is scattered through the text of Suras 2, 4, 6, 21, 29, 37, 51.
- 3 The term "Slavia Orthodoxa," together with its counterpart "Slavia Romana," were coined by Riccardo Picchio. He stresses "the impact of ethno-linguistic factors on the formation of Slavic cultural systems in Central and Eastern Europe" [Picchio 1984: 1], taking his point of departure from "the division of historical Slavdom into two main areas, belonging to the jurisdiction of the Eastern Orthodox Churches (Slavia Orthodoxa) and to that of the Roman Church (Slavia Romana) respectively." At the same time, he points out that "the boundary lines between the two cultural areas of Orthodox Slavdom and Roman Slavdom were never fixed in a definite way... This means that the concepts of Slavia Orthodoxa and of Slavia Romana apply to cultural traditions rather than to territorial or administrative units. Within each of these two main areas of civilization, the self-identification of the Slavs with certain cultural and linguistic systems was directly affected by the ideological and linguistic models that the ecclesiastical organizations introduced into their spiritual patrimony" [Picchio 1984: 3; also Tolstoi 1998: 30-42].
- 4 Picchio's term allows for further expansion to embrace non-Christian religious communities as well. Thus, in order to clarify the ethno-confessional framework of Muslim Slavdom as a counterpart to Slavia Orthodoxa and Slavia Romana, it may be useful to employ the term, Slavia Islamica (or Musulmana), so making it possible to place Muslim communities, where the Slav language is the mother tongue (such as the Muslims of Bosnia, Hercegovina and Sandžak, and the Pomaks of Southern Bulgaria and Northern Greece) in a separate socio-cultural category. In this way not only is Pax Christiana taken into consideration, but also the realm of Islam. Thus, instead of the traditional division of the Slavs into Western, Eastern and Southern, based on formal

geographical principles and the linguistic differences, I have proposed, and will use here, a new approach to the division of the Slavic world based predominantly on religious faith. This new paradigm has regard not only for traditional cultural patterns in Slavic communities, but for their current transformations; thus the division of the Slavic domain into: Slavia Orthodoxa, Slavia Catholica, Slavia Evangelica, Slavia Islamica, and Slavia Judaica. In this not only formal geographical location, but also socio-cultural (including linguistic and religious) parameters of the communities concerned are regarded as determinants in the shaping of their ethnic, national and religious identities [Badalanova 1994; also Zhivkov 1994: 5; Karagiozov 1996: 80].

- 5 On the epistemological status of folk religion as a field of research, see Gustavsson [2000: 97-117; 2001: 5-8], Barna [2001: 9-21].
- 6 On the sacred dimensions of the celebration of the Great Sacrifice amongst other Muslim communities, see Combs-Schilling [1989: 233-244, 320-321], who also offers an analysis of the Islamic myth of Ibrahim as a counterpoint to the Jewish and Christian myth of Abraham [1989: 262-271]; for the blood sacrifice ritual in the framework of the heterodox Muslim Alevi and Bektashi belief systems, see Erginer [1998: 471-478]. On Muslim legends about Abraham, with special regard to extra-canonical Biblical tradition, and to "further midrashic expansion among the Arabs" in particular, see the entry on Abraham in Singer [1901: 83-96].
- 7 See in this connection Andersen [1991: 17-58], Aune [1991: 59-106], Damrosch [1987: 10, 155, 233-241], Kelber [1983], Kirpatrick [1988], Lang [1985], Niditch [1993], Petkanova-Toteva [1978], Rogerson [1978], Ruger [1991: 107-120], Schwarzbaum [1982: 10-60], Soards [1991: 334-350], Stojčevska-Antić [1987]. On the theological interpretation of the Abraham saga, see Herbert [1962] and Janzen [1993]; on the textual interpretation of the Biblical story about Isaac's ordeal, see Greenwood [1985: 123-129].
- 8 In the preface to the special issue of Bŭlgarski Folklor on popular religion as a cultural phenomenon, Mikhailova offers an excellent analysis of the content and range of meanings of the two terms, "folk Orthodoxy" and "customary Christianity" in Slavic folklore studies [Vol. 26: 3, 2000: 3-15].

- 9 Especially Evgenia Mitseva, Stoianka Boiadzhieva and Milena Benovska (now at the Ethnographic Institute), to whom I express my sincere gratitude. These texts have been published in Bulgarian in the essay written with Anisava Miltenova on the representation of apocryphal texts about Abraham in Balkan folklore and medieval literature [Badalanova and Miltenova 1996: 246-49].
- 10 On the life and customs of the Bulgarian Pomaks [*bŭlgaro-mokhamedani*] in the Rhodope mountains, see Nikola A. Kŭrdzhiev's letters/travel notes in the newspaper, Napred 06.12.-11.27.1888 or Vasileva et al. [1999: 63-67]. According to the preliminary results of the census of 1885 in Eastern Rumelia (*Iztochna Rumeliia*), Bulgarian Pomaks [*bŭlgari mokhamedantsi*] and Turks, who comprised the Muslim population of the region, numbered 200,498, with Christians 681,734 and Jews 3982 out of a total population of 975,030. The term, Eastern Rumelia, denoted Bulgarian territory between the Rhodope and Balkan ranges that, after the Treaty of Berlin, 1878, was regarded as an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire. On the numbers and location of Bulgarian Pomaks and ethnic Turks nowadays, see Poulton [1994: esp. chs 9-12], and the bibliography in Blagoev [1996: 70-82], as well as Venedikova [1996: 4-20] and Lozanova's [1996: 21-37].
- On the political discourse of Pomak ethnic and/or confessional identity, see Brunnbauer [1999: 35-50] and Balikci [1999: 51-57].
- 11 The appellation *Peigamber* (messenger) traditionally appears en bloc with the name of Muhammed. Hence, in the folk narratives of Bulgarian Muslims, the image of the father is related to that of "Muhammed the Seal of the Prophets". On the other hand, the name Isa also underscores the Arabic version of name of Jesus Christ: Isa, the son of Mary, also recognized by Qur'anic tradition as a prophet. On the image of Isa (Jesus Christ) in the traditional belief system of Bulgarian Muslims, see Lozanova [2000: 63-71].
- 12 A term used by Todor Ivanov Zhivkov, Liubomir Mikov, Vania Mateeva, Tsvetana Georgieva and others to define the popular dimensions of religious phenomena in Muslim cultural traditions [Georgieva 1999: 76-78].
- 13 The motif of the barren matriarch who conceives in her old age is a Biblical locus

classicus; see Gen. 16: 1-21: 2; on its interpretation in Bulgarian folk tradition, see Petkanova-Toteva [1978: 190-91].

- 14 The motif of "barrenness removed by prayer" is also found in Arab folk tradition (type D 1925.3 in El-Shamy [1995]).
- 15 Recorded by me in February 1994 from the best singer of tales in the village of Momina Bania, a seventy-year-old Christian woman Stana Todorova Kasurova, who was born and married in the same village. She did not attend the local school ("Because I was a girl, but not a boy, and thus not expected to go to study, but to stay at home and take care of my smaller brothers instead," she said). However, she was a gifted woman with a quick mind, sharp memory and a beautiful voice which enabled her to become the ultimate leader of the village, recognized not only by the women but by the men too.  

Square brackets in oral texts indicate insertions to make the meaning clear.
- 16 In midrashic tradition even the birth of Abraham, very much like that of Christ in Christian tradition, is associated with the appearance of a bright new star [Vermes 1961: 68-69].
- 17 The blessing "May this household be blessed with children as many as the stars in Heaven" is a verbal component of many magic rituals accompanying marriage ceremonies; it also functions as substructure to several Christmas carols which are traditionally sung to the head of the household [Kaufman 1982, nos 713, 718, 720, 727, 820, 821].
- 18 Quotations from the Qur'an are taken from Arberry [1982]
- 19 Intriguingly, the star motif also features strongly in apocryphal versions of the Abraham legend; for example in the "Sermon of Abraham the Just" [*Slovo o pravednago Avraama*], MS of 1628 [Badalanova and Miltenova 1996: 228-33].
- 20 On Abraham's interest in stars, see also Gen. 15: 3. On the star topic in the Abraham cycle in midrashic tradition, see Genesis Rabbah 14: 10 and Exodus Rabbah 36: 6 [Vermes 1961: 81-82].
- 21 As Combs-Schilling argues, "popular understanding of the textually absent Hajar is that she would have missed the point... and hence would have lost for all of humanity

the hope of divine connection" [Combs-Schilling 1989: 241]. Further he asserts that such "is the nature of women as codified in basic cultural understandings, understandings upon which the founding myth depends, understandings that the ritual powerfully reproduces through time" [Combs-Schilling 1989: 241]. Bulgarian Muslim folklore materials do not support such misogynistic conclusions. Moreover, "the framing of the female" (in Combs-Schilling's terminology) in Mediterranean monotheistic religion (in this case Islam) "as natural and by consequence inherently limited in terms of cosmic and collective things" [Combs-Schilling 1989: 241] is not compatible with recent findings based on fieldwork among rural communities in Bulgaria.

- 22 Recorded from Stana Bozhkova Vlaeva, age 66, born and married in the same village, no schooling, a peasant farmer.
- 23 The prophetic dream motif is characteristic of Arab folk tradition: Type D 1812.3.3.5); see also Types D 1810.8, M 209.1, V 511, V 512, V 513, V 515, V 517 [El-Shamy 1995] where supernatural knowledge is associated with prophetic dreams and/or visions. In Muslim tradition the dreams of prophets and/or saints are regarded as commands from God [El-Shamy 1995: 542].
- 24 The Islamic folk motif of the dream as a reminder of an unfulfilled vow is Type M 209.1 [El-Shamy 1995, I: 274]; also Types M 201.0.1, M 202, M. 205.5 and M 183.
- 25 The story of Grandpa Lord visiting the Bulgarian Land is the first Bulgarian folktale to appear in print. Collected in Vidin in 1817, it was published in 1826 [Nicoloff 1979: xviii-xix].
- 26 Recorded by me in July 1976 from an elderly Christian woman, Neda Miteva Miteva from Rogozinovo village, the Sakar mountain area, Southern Bulgaria.
- 27 Perhaps an erratum; one may suppose that the word used by the storyteller was *Haram* [sacred territory].
- 28 In Islamic tradition (and in Arabic literature in particular), the word *Nawrūz* (often spelled *Nayrūz*) denotes New Years Day, the first day of the Persian solar year, either the spring vernal equinox or, more popularly, the midsummer solstice [Bosworth et al. 1993: 1047]. For further information on the *Nawrūz* celebration as a "fossil-text" in

which traces of pre-Islamic New Year celebrations survive, see Hughes [1895: 431] and Esposito [1995: 243-44].

Ivan Miglev has shown that the *Nawrūz* ritual is still alive among the Muslim communities in Bulgaria, though his work is based predominantly on materials recorded among Crimean Tatar communities [1997: 152-56]. The ritual crocus picking occurs when the pubescent boys of the village go to the nearby forest; for further information [Miglev 1997: 153-56].

- 29 The concept of Abraham as God's bosom friend is classified by El-Shamy as Type V213.
- 30 Apparently, from the Arabic hafiz.
- 31 The storyteller, Iliia Lakov, b. 1925 in Ribnovo, was a local farmer with four years schooling.

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## APPENDIX

### TEXT 1

#### THERE IS A FEAST DAY CALLED *RAM-BAIRAM*

There exists a feast day called *Ram-Bairam*. Where did this feast of *Ram-Bairam* come from? It came from the offspring of the *Peigamberi* [prophets]. There was a certain *Peigamber* called Ibrahim, who was childless. His second wife, for he had married twice, called upon God:

"Give me a boy, a child! When he reaches six years of age, he will be offered to You as a *Kurban* sacrifice!"

So the unborn boy was promised by her to be slaughtered as a sacrifice.

They were given a child, and they called him Ismail.

He turned six, but his father Ibrahim forgot the pledge his wife had made. One night, while he was sleeping, he had a dream in which he was told:

"Hey, Ibrahim, don't you have to offer Ismail as a sacrifice? Didn't you promise to slaughter Ismail? Ismail is supposed to be offered up as a sacrifice!"

Then the father sacrifices a hundred rams, a thousand sheep and other creatures. Yet every night he has the same dream. It happens seventy times. Seventy times he has the same dream:

"No, you did not keep your word!"

After that he understood that he really must slaughter Ismail.

They didn't tell his mother. Her name was Hazhder.

Ibra[h]im said to Hazhder, "Hazhder, put henna on Ismail's hands and feet. He is to come with me to get wood. We are going to the forest!"

The mother took the boy into the house and did what she was told. Ibra[h]im took his child by the hand and said:

"Come on, let's go!"

Then the Devil, *Sheitan* went to the mother and told her: "Ismail is gone! His father Ibra[h]im is going to slaughter him!"

She answered: "Why would he slay him? Whoever heard of a child being sacrificed!"

When the Devil saw that there was no point trying to convince Hazhder, he went to Ismail, who was on the way to the forest with his father, and told the boy:

"Your mother", he said, "heard that your father is going to slaughter you and she wants you to come back."

Ismail took a stone and hurled it at the Devil, Sheitan. That is why now the Devil only has one eye. He was hit and now he does not have one of his eyes!

They reached the place, Ibra[h]im took a knife and said:

"My boy, I shall kill you! God told me to do it!"

Ismail replied:

"If God said so, then I want to die just as I am! Don't tie me up! Slaughter me without tying me up!"

That is why today when we sacrifice an animal, we leave one leg untied. Seventy times Ibra[h]im tried to kill his son by cutting his throat, but still he didn't succeed, for the knife would not cut. Finally, there appeared a ram from above with the messenger, whose name was Dzhebrail [Gabriel], he was the postman, he was the postman of the Peigamberi!

Then the ram was slain and God said:

"Ibra[h]im, you did what you had to!"

After that they returned home. Since then that day has been named the Feast of *Ram-Bairam*. *Ram-Bairam* is *Kurban-Bairam*, the day we offer a sacrifice. We give pieces from the sacrificial animal to our neighbors. I give some and say:

"Here, neighbor! This is for you!"

And he gives me back some of his own food in return.

One has to give meat to seven houses. The meat has to be from the right side of the animal. The left side we eat at home.

06. III. 1987

*Chernoglavtsi village*

*(Shumen district)*

*Recorded by: Evgenia Mitseva*

*Story told by:*

*Mehmed Ibriamov Iusek,*

*born 1920*

## TEXT 2

### YOU MUST SLAUGHTER YOUR BOY!

This has survived from Muslim times; it has come down to us from our grandfathers, from the saints. Once there was a man called Ismail who was going to sacrifice his boy. Before that he had been childless. Before his son was born he had a dream in which he was told:

"You will have a boy!"

So the boy was born; he grew and reached an age between five and six. From God he was sent another dream in which he was told:

"You have to slaughter this boy! You have to slaughter the boy!"

This voice was sent from above by Allah. What could he do after that, but take the boy. He dressed him in his best outfit.

Three times Allah called upon him:

"You have to slaughter the boy!" He had appeared to him.

He took the boy in his best clothes and said to his wife:

"Woman! Give the boy his coat; we are going to get some flowers, some crocuses!"

So they set off with the boy. He [the father] took a big knife and a rope with him. He went to the forest and tied up the boy. He tied his hands, and he tied his feet so that the boy could not move. His son asked:

"Father! What are you going to do?"

"I am going to slaughter you!"

Thereupon he began to do what he had to. He was going to slaughter the boy. He tried to cut with his knife, but the knife could not cut. It would not cut the boy! He hit a rock with it — and the rock split in two!

Finally, on Allah's behalf, on God's behalf,\* a ram descended to him from above! At that very moment a ram appeared to replace the boy!

"Slay the ram!"

That is why we now observe this celebration — it is called *Koch-Bairam*. That is why we commemorate it every year at this time by sacrificing a ram [*koch*]!

The feast of *Koch-Bairam* changes its date every year; it can take place in the summer or the winter! It always changes, by ten days! Every year it comes ten days earlier than the previous year! These deeds survived from Muslim times! What I say is true. He was going to slaughter his son, but instead he slaughtered a ram, a male lamb.

04. III. 1987

Venets village

(Shumen district)

Recorded by: Evgenia Mitseva

Story told by:

Marin Iosifov Angelov

born 1925

\* Sometimes informants use the Arabic word Allah, and *Bog* [the Slavic word for God] side by side.

### TEXT 3

#### A RAM HAS TO BE SACRIFICED AS THE *KURBAN* OFFERING

This is an old story. It's an old story about how Ibriam was about to sacrifice his son Ismail as a *Kurban* offering, as a *seliam* [a sign of acknowledgement], and how he tied his hands. He took a knife, but just as he was about to kill him, there appeared a fat *kanŭlia* ram [a breed of sheep with eyes as though painted with henna] with silver horns, descending from above on God's behalf. It was sent by God. Then the father was told: "You are supposed to kill this one instead!"

Since then it has been the tradition to sacrifice a ram, from that time it is. Then a book\* descended [in which this was written down], so they decided that a ram must be slaughtered for the *Kurban* offering!

The lamb must not be blind, and it has to be at least a year old. It should be as big as its mother and it can't be lame; it has to be healthy. Otherwise even if you slaughter five lambs, your sacrifice will not be acknowledged!

28. XI. 1986

*Malŭk Porovets village*

*(Isperikh area*

*Razgrad district)*

*Recorded by: Milena Benovska*

*Story told by:*

*Atanas Savov Ivanov*

*born 1920*

\* According to canonical Muslim tradition, the month of Ramadan was the time when the Qur'an was revealed by Allah (Sura 2, col. 185).

TEXT 4  
WHO WAS ISSA

Issa was a *Pengamberin* [a prophet]. When he married, his wife gave birth and Issa gave God his word that he would slaughter his offspring as a *Kurban* sacrifice to Him. Time passed and the day came. He was to see it in a dream! There was something above *azreti* Issa — well, Allah on high, I suppose, who said:

"O, *azreti* Issa, when will you fulfil your promise? When will you give it to Me?"

Issa wondered what promise he had to fulfil. He didn't have anything that had to be given back to anybody, nor could he remember what he was supposed to offer. Suddenly he remembered his promise and it occurred to him that it was time to sacrifice his child. He got up and told his wife, I cannot remember whether her name was *azreti* Fatma,\* or Aishe,\*\* to get the boy ready to go to the market, because he wanted to buy him some clothes.

He told her:

"Get up and get the child ready. Make him look smart, sew him an outfit — for I am taking him to the market!"

As if they were going somewhere... As if they were going to buy clothes... He did not tell his wife that he was going to sacrifice him as a *Kurban* offering!

She got up, washed the child, combed his hair and dressed him smartly in beautiful clothes...

His father took him to the top of that hill over there! He took the boy to that hill over there! Then he took a knife, a special knife used for slaughtering... When they reached the hill, he started sharpening the knife. The child, who was old enough to talk, asked Issa:

"Father, what are you doing?"

"When you were born I gave God my promise to sacrifice you as a *Kurban* offering", Issa answered. "I saw in a dream that they want me to fulfil my promise!"

"Well, fine. I don't have anything against that, but I ask you not to tie my hands or feet!" begged the boy, for his father was preparing a rope to tie the hands of his child, so that he wouldn't struggle. Again he pleaded:

"Father, do not tie my hands or feet; I shan't struggle, but try to kill me in one go! I don't want you to make me suffer!"

The boy lay on the ground and the father began cutting the child's throat, or rather trying to cut it, for no matter how hard he tried, or however hard he pressed on the knife, there wasn't a scratch to be seen on the child's neck. Once, twice, still nothing. Next to the boy there lay a rock. It said:

"Hey, fellow, why on earth are you trying to kill your child?"

The father swung his knife in anger and split the rock into two. But still the knife did not cut the child's neck. Suddenly, Issa heard a ram bleating. It was Allah who had sent the ram. He didn't really want the child as a sacrifice; He was just testing Issa to see if he was ready to give his child to God as he had promised! So, Allah sent a ram; Issa heard its cry and a voice came from above:

"Hey," He said, "*azreti* Issa, you fulfilled your promise," He said, "but don't kill the child," He said, "slaughter the ram instead!"

So he killed the ram as a *Kurban* [sacrifice] and let the child live... That's it. That's all I know; I don't know any more than that. I heard it like that, from the old folk, from the *hodja* [Muslim priest].

21. X. 1982

*village of Ribnovo*

*(Gotse Delchev area)*

*Recorded by: Stoianka Boiadzhieva*

*Story told by:*

*Ilia Lako*

*born 1925*

\* According to Muslim tradition, Fatima was the favorite daughter of the Prophet Mohammed.

\*\* Ayesha was the Prophet Mohammed's most beloved wife; he married her when she was still a child and died in her arms