

# THE SACRED FIRE AMONG THE SLAVIC RACES OF THE BALKAN.<sup>1</sup>

AN ETHNOLOGICAL STUDY.

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THE domestic hearth-fire is sacred among all Slavic peoples, without distinction of stage of culture. It may never be started by blowing with the mouth. A bride, on entering her new home, is led thrice around the hearth by the groomsman; she must stir the fire with the poker, and utter the following words: "As many as

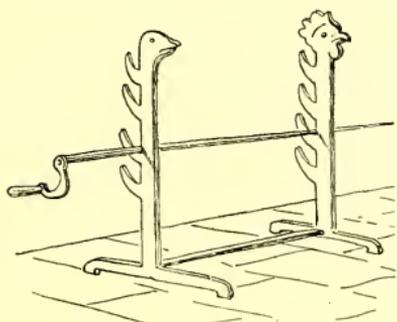


Fig. 1.

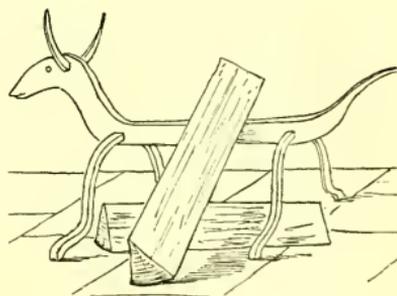


Fig. 2.

ANDIRONS OF BALKAN PEASANTS.

the sparks that fly, so many may the cattle be and so many the male offspring that shall bless our new home."

The form of the andiron in the peasants' houses has from time immemorial been either that pictured in Fig. 1, where one side is shaped to represent a snake and the other the head of a cock; or that pictured in Fig. 2, where some domestic animal is represented.

The fire on the hearth is never permitted to go out. It is the

<sup>1</sup> Translated from *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*. Bd. XIII. Leyden: Brill. 1900.

eternal sacred fire of the peasant's home. Its extinction betokens misfortune, or is a sign that some member of the family will die.

The servants employed on the farm gather about the fire and pass away the long autumn and winter evenings in lively conversation. On Christmas eve, the sacred billet, *Badujak*, is lighted, and is sprinkled by the father of the house with wine, olive oil, and honey. On St. Ivan's Day, the Ivan's fire is lighted, and maintained through the whole night. The young people of the village gather together and dance the *kolo*, accompanying their dance with songs. But the "living fire" is prized most highly of all, because, as the Slavic tradition goes in the Balkan peninsula and the Carpathians, it possesses special curative powers.



Fig. 3. METHOD OF GENERATING THE SACRED FIRE IN WESTERN MACEDONIA.

The living fire is generated as follows :

In some places (as in the mountains of Old Servia) it is customary to select two children, a boy and a girl, between eleven and fourteen years of age, who are entrusted with kindling the fire. They are conducted into a perfectly dark chamber, where they are obliged to remove all their clothing, and not to utter a single word. Two dry cylindrical pieces of linden wood are given to them, which they alternately rub briskly together until the pieces are ignited. A piece of tinder is fired by the sparks thus produced, and dedicated to sacred uses. This manner of obtaining the sacred fire is the oldest, but has now passed almost altogether out of use.

Another method prevails among the Servians of western Macedonia. Two slabs of oak wood are driven solidly into the earth, and in their upper extremities two round holes are bored in which a cylindrical piece of linden wood is so inserted that it can be rapidly rotated (see Fig. 3). A stout cord is drawn tight around the two upright slabs to prevent their springing asunder. A primitive violin bow is then constructed, the string of which is wound once around the piece of linden wood. By moving the bow to and fro the cylindrical piece of wood is brought into rapid rotation and through the heat of friction thus generated a piece of tinder inserted in the holes of the uprights is ignited.

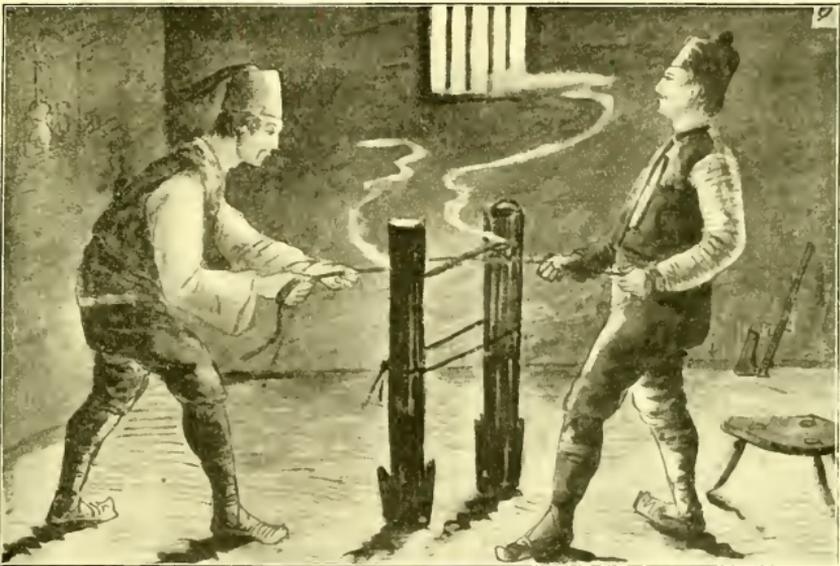


Fig. 4. METHOD OF PRODUCING THE SACRED FIRE IN THE KOSMAJ HIGHLANDS.

In the autumn of 1899, while in the Kosmaj Highlands, I saw the sacred fire produced in a different manner (see Fig. 4): Two peasants drove two semi-cylindrical pieces of wood into the ground and drew a rope taut about them. The piece of light linden wood was so inserted that it could be readily rotated by means of a simple rope wrapped once around it,—a device which was even more efficacious than that of the primitive violin bow, and led quickly to the desired end.

In Bulgaria, I once saw the living fire, *živā vatra*, kindled by shepherds. They selected the stump of a tree for this purpose

(see Fig. 5), and nailing to the flat top of the stump a prismatic piece of linden wood, they drew back and forth across it a second piece, by the friction of which the fire was kindled.

The purpose for which the sacred flame or living fire is used in the peasants' homes remains to be explained :

While on a scientific journey in the interior of the great forest districts of Servia, several years ago, I accidentally had an opportunity of witnessing a ceremony which illustrated the uses of the sacred fire.

It was in the autumn. In the village of Setonje, at the foot of the Homolje Mountains, there raged a general epidemic among



Fig. 5. SHEPHERDS MAKING THE SACRED FIRE IN BULGARIA.

the children which the prejudiced peasantry concealed from the authorities for fear that the physician of the province would visit the place. Two old women, who were obliged by tradition to have the names *Stana* (from *stati*, to stand, not to spread) repaired to a spot outside the village. One of them carried a copper kettle filled with water, the other an old house-lock and key. The first one then said: "Whither goest thou?" Whereupon the one with the lock in her hand answered: "I have come to lock out misfortune from the village." With these words she turned the lock, and cast it, together with the key, into the kettle of water. She then walked

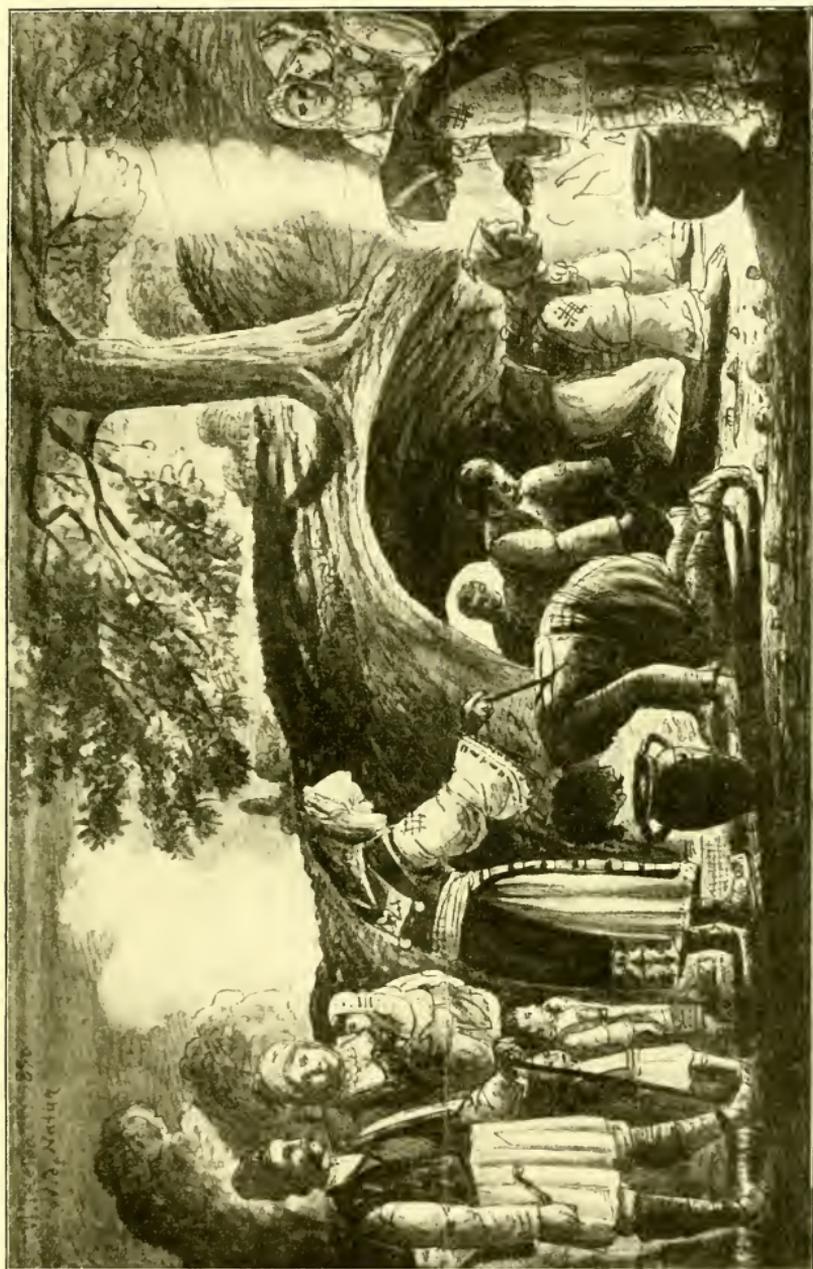


Fig. 6. SERBIAN CEREMONY FOR CHECKING AN EPIDEMIC.

thrice around the village, repeating each time the same ceremony as she passed the "woman of the kettle."

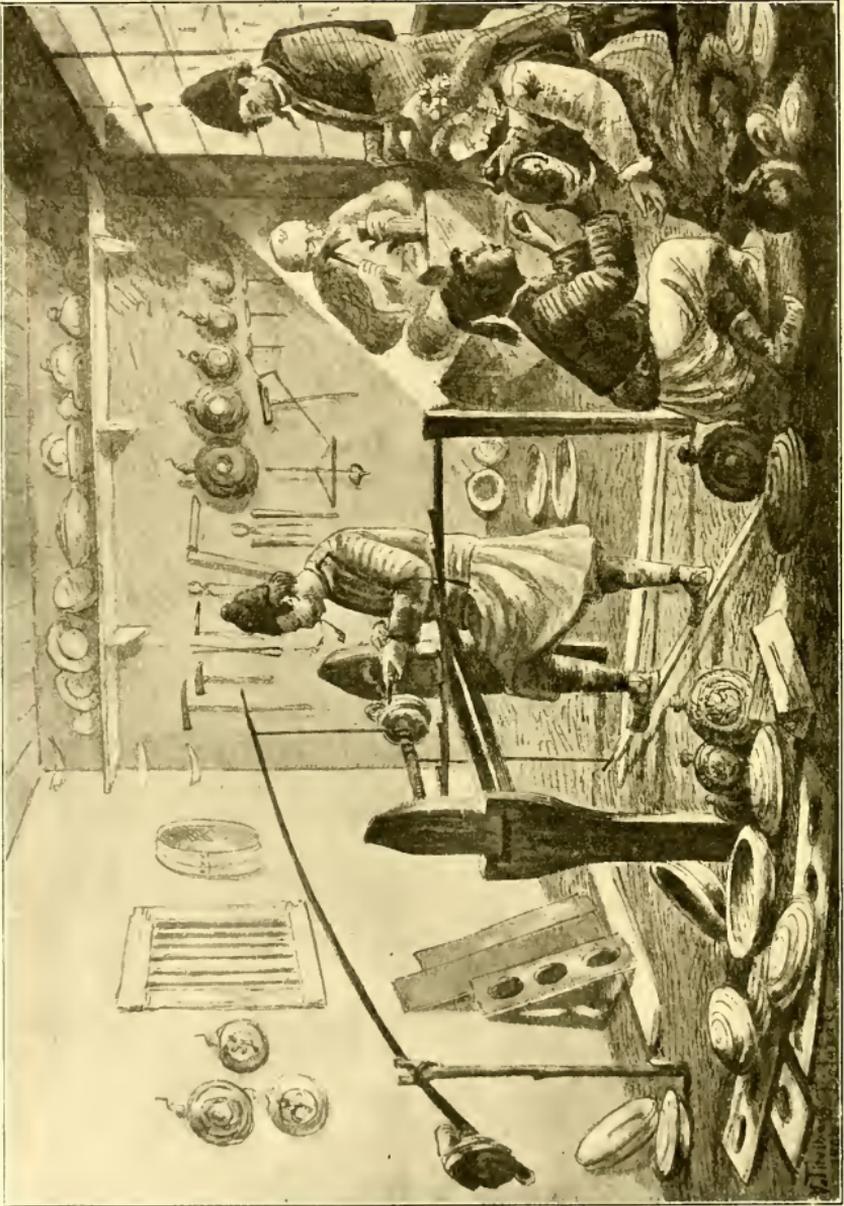


Fig. 7. WORKSHOP OF A PROFESSIONAL SERVIAN FIRE-MAKER.

In the meantime, all the inhabitants of the village gathered together, arrayed in festive attire, having extinguished before leav-

ing home the fires burning on their hearths. Two sturdy peasants then constructed on a hillock, to the right of an oak-tree, a tunnel sufficiently high to enable a person to crawl through comfortably on all fours. Lengthwise in the tunnel a wide board was laid and at its exit a second board was placed crosswise, the two together forming a T. In the meantime, an old woman and an old man had kindled on both sides of the tunnel the "living fire," in the manner represented in Fig. 6. When everything was ready, the woman with the kettle took her place to the right of the fire at the entrance to the tunnel, and the woman with the lock was stationed at the other end. To the left of the exit a peasant woman with a large pot of milk stood. To every one who crept through the tunnel she gave a sup of milk from a wooden spoon. At the other end of the tunnel stood a pot containing melted hog's fat, into the surface of which each person gazed as he crept through. Then, on the back of each person that crept through a third peasant woman drew a cross with a piece of charcoal. After all had crept through, each person present placed several of the glowing coals in a jar and hurried home to kindle the fires of their hearths. They then cast some of the charred wood into a vessel containing water and drank of it, in order to render themselves proof against the epidemic.

I learned afterwards that there existed a professional maker of fire for sacred purposes, and accompanied by a peasant I visited his workshop. He was a manufacturer of wooden-ware, and generated the sacred fire upon a primitive turning-lathe which he had constructed, selling small portions of it for twenty para (4 cents). Fig. 7 shows his workshop with the apparatus accurately represented. The mechanism is set going by means of two systems of levers, as appears from the drawing.