



Djurdjevdan (Herdelezi)

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The celebration in honor of Saint George, *djurdjevdan (herdelezi)*, is one of the most important holidays for the Roma in the Southern Balkans area. It is one of the rare holidays to be celebrated by both Muslim and Christian Orthodox Roma.

Religious Background

St. George, mostly portrayed as "virtuous knight" fighting a dragon, is – among others – the patron saint of soldiers, smiths, travelers, and artists, and one of the most important saints (Great Martyr) of the Eastern Church. Particularly the Serbian-orthodox Roma consider him as their patron saint. In the Orthodox church year, *Djurdjevdan* (George's Day) falls on the 6th of May, but the festivities begin one day earlier. The Muslim counterpart to the Orthodox George's Day – *herdelezi* – comes from the Turk name *hidrelez*, which is a blending of *hızır* and *Elias*. According to legend, a meeting between the popular patron saint *hızır* (Arabic: *el khadr* – "the green one") and the prophet Elijah in the 9th century was at the origin of this once very popular Turkish spring celebration.

Like for *djurdjevdan*, the festivities can already begin on the 5th of May. Turkish Non-Roma do not celebrate *herdelezi* anymore. If they do, it is as participation in the Roma's festivities. Today, *Herdelezi* is seen as the true Roma celebration in Turkey¹.

Most probably, a blending of Jewish-Christian worship of Old-Testament Prophet Elijah and the Christian's worship of St. George took place very early. Es dürfte bereits frühzeitig zu einer Vermischung der jüdisch-christlichen Verehrung des alttestamentarischen hl. Elias mit dem christlichen Georgskult und der muslimischen Verehrung von *El Khadr* gekommen sein. *Herdelezi* and *djurdjevdan* are, therefore, expressions of national religiousness which, less dogmatic than theology, allowed mutual influencing and thus made the different celebrations merge into one supra-religious spring celebration notwithstanding their different religious roots. The Roma took this celebration over from the Non-Roma, and adopted the ceremonies to their own beliefs.

Significance and Ceremony

Both *djurdjevdan* and *herdelezi* are celebrated in different ways depending on the groups and the religion. The significance and meaning of the celebration, however, are the same. It is a spring celebration lasting several days which marks the beginning of summer and allegedly brings good fortune and wealth. In all festivities, candles, fresh twigs and "holy water" serve as symbols of life and spring.

In earlier times, both Muslim and Orthodox groups of Roma would fast the weeks before the celebration. They were not allowed to eat sheep's meat, milk or cheese². Today, the preparations begin on the 5th

¹ In his work on the Roma in Turkey ("Études sur les Tchinghianés ou Bohémiens de l'Empire Ottoman"), published in 1870, Alexandr Paspati mentions the Roma *Kakkava*, which fell on the same day as *herdelezi*, but was not – according to him – identical. However, it can be assumed that only another name was used. As ethnologist Tihomir Gjorgjević points out, the once Turkish Roma who emigrated to Serbia replaced *Kakkava* by *herdelezi*, and later *djurdjevdan*. The ceremonies proper, however, weren't influenced by this change in terminology.

² In this, the ceremony shows parallels to the Christian Easter celebration. Corporal and spiritual cleaning, and consecrated food which is eaten after a period of fasting, are also central symbols of new life in this case.



of May. The house is cleaned and decorated with candles and twigs. In Prilep (Macedonia), the Roma climb the Mount Dabnica every year on the evening of the 5th May, spend the night there, prepare dinner together and, on the next morning, bring water from a specific mountain well to their families. On the foot of the mountain (*o pindo*) they are welcomed with music. The spring water is said to have healing and protecting powers. Water and the cleansing ritual might have played an even more important role in the old days, as explained by ethnologist Tihmor Gjorgjević in his dissertation on "Die Zigeuner in Serbien" (The Gypsies in Serbia), published in 1903.

On the 6th of May – the day of the celebration proper – all participants dress festively. Each Roma family should have bought at least one sheep, in order to be able to start with the preparations in the morning. The Muslim → Gurbet-Roma groups in Kumanova (Macedonia) use the blood of the slaughtered animal to paint a line on their children's forehead. Some groups used to decorate the family's dining room with twigs from a pear tree, to which they fastened Easter eggs and candles. Sometimes, candles, twigs and money was also fastened to the horns of the slaughtered sheep.

Apart from their religious and ritual significance, *djurdjevdan* and *herdelezi* are most of all celebrations that help keep social contact. Financial considerations probably do not matter. Each family gives a part of their roast sheep to friends and relatives. Tihomir Gjorgjević explained that also the *mulo* belief had some influence on this ritual. The Muslim Roma of Aleksinac distributed the sheep's grilled liver to their neighbors, for the souls of the deceased.

djurdjevdan and *herdelezi* can be celebrated for up to a week. In most groups, all Roma of the town or city meet on the town square and, as the highlight of the celebration, give a big party with music and dance.

Literature

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