

THE EXCEPTIONAL IN THE WORKS OF VAN GENNEP

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Abstract: This article is exceptional in the work of Van Gennep because of the breadth of historical views to which it bears witness. Indeed, we know his reluctance towards history, which is mainly due to two reasons: on the one hand, the difficulty of crossing the terra incognita which separates the end of the Roman Empire from the high middle age and on the other hand the fact that folklore is the study of living facts. Van Gennep maintained this position throughout his work and sometimes even in rather violent terms, such as when he describes the historical point of view as a “psychological and methodological disease” . It is therefore very surprising to note that, in this text, he allows himself to affirm the existence of a folkloric continuity in France from Gallo-Roman paganism until the 19th century, taking into account the contemporary stagnations or regressions of the great historical cataclysms (invasions, wars, revolutions, etc.).

Keywords: the general public, folklore, synodal constitutions , customs, folk phenomena , the Revolution .

INTRODUCTION

It's also an assumption. boldness that he proposes to explain the greater folk continuity in certain regions: it would most often be a question of marshy or wooded countries, where communications are difficult, more difficult paradoxically than in the mountains where they are "long and painful, but durable. This text probably dates from before 1939 (Van Gennep alludes to German National Socialism); it is probably more or less contemporary with the two volumes of the bibliography (1937 and 1938). It is only about France here, although I mention the results obtained in other countries by comparative ethnography and folklore.[1] On the other hand, I only take into account the general impression felt by the general public, educated to various degrees, but not by that of professional historians, archaeologists, scholars in various branches. This impression is that the history of France is a succession of periods of calm and catastrophic periods; wars, long-lasting or very cruel, invasions and controlled cutting of populations, sieges and mass massacres, bloody factional struggles, devastating plagues and famines, political and administrative upheavals. The reaction on the folklore would therefore be represented not by a curve with slow and weak oscillations, but by marked zigzags with maxima and minima very distant from each other. Popular life would have developed from a certain historical point, let us say from what is called Gallo-Roman paganism and would have had its minimum, for example during the Germanic invasions, then during the Merovingian struggles, again during from the dismemberment of the Carolingian empire, and so on until the last cataclysms, the Revolution of 1789 and the war of 1914-1918. [2] For the High Middle Ages and up to the end of the Renaissance, or better said up to the cataclysm of the Reformation, we are too often obliged to have recourse to the hypothesis to ensure that folk continuity persisted under the political and military discontinuity. But from this moment we begin to have more and more information on popular life in towns first, then in the countryside. The reign of Louis XIV coincides with a stabilization of a large number of ancient customs which had persisted despite the Wars of Religion: at this time many corporations and brotherhoods ask for confirmation of their previous statutes; the movement of recatholization better fixes the cult of the Virgin and of the collective patron saints.[3] The bishops enact synodal

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constitutions, write catechisms, order inquiries into devotional practices, protest against superstitions and “vain observances”.

METHODS

The analysis of these documents, which deserve a monograph which I must leave to others, proves the persistence of a very large number of customs and beliefs possessing all the characteristics of the period from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, and the little influence that the religiously based political upheavals of the Reformation had on the mass of the urban and rural population. Only a part of the rather noble and bourgeois nation eliminated an entire category of folklore; the so-called superstitious cult of the Virgin and the Saints; in some regions of France (Hautes-Alpes, Cévennes, especially) this modification penetrated deep enough into the people to modify the mental and ritual plan, without however reaching another domain of folklore, therapeutic and surgical magic, nor the domain yet broader beliefs and customs of passage (birth, marriage, funeral).[4] In the cities, Protestantism eliminated certain popular elements, notably the cult of corporate patron saints; but momentarily during the seventeenth century this cult was everywhere re-established in an almost automatic manner. We are therefore dealing, in a general way, as far as folklore is concerned, with a continuity of several centuries, from the twelfth to the end of the eighteenth century, despite the successive discontinuities, whether political or military, or both at the same time, with repercussions economic variables depending on the time and the region.[5] We thus arrive at the Revolution, a political upheaval, and the Empire, a military upheaval, both of a relatively long duration and of undeniable social depth. Formerly the Revolution was presented as an abrupt fact, a sort of sociological mutation. It was under this aspect that I was taught it in my youth. Since then, historical research has proven that it was the culmination of more or less general tendencies and more or less latent that have evolved for at least a century and even more, in fact from the Reformation. But this research focused only on political (parliament), judicial, financial and general economic organization.[6] No monograph has been published on the evolution of beliefs and customs since 1615, nor even on the popular aspect of a particular class of folkloric phenomena, for example on the ceremonies of brotherhoods and corporations. Thus there remains in this popular domain this illusion that the Revolution, by the suppression of this form of both professional and religious groupings on the one hand, then by the suppression of official Catholic worship and the persecution of priests, the devastation of the churches of on the other hand, determined a profound change in the mores of the people. In other words, between the mores and customs of the 19th century and those of the 18th century, continuing those of previous centuries, there is an absolute discontinuity, a kind of chasm which the re-establishment of worship only partially and with difficulty filled. This impression is correct for one folklore domain, but only for this one: the professional corporations were not re-established; large-scale industry changed workers' orientation and all the old processions, acts of worship, badges, symbols disappeared definitively during the Revolution. The continued appeal of the younger classes also prevented the connection. Here and there they tried to reconstitute certain annual festivals, by the walk of an animal or a Giant, by the reconstitution of old costumes, by the invention of new costumes like those of the Incas at Valenciennes.[7] But these festivals remained secular and it is in this capacity that they have sometimes persisted down to us, although in a few cases, such as that of the Tarascan, the religious element has remained. In all the other domains there was no stopping as the memoirs published by the Celtic Academy and the Royal Society of Antiquaries of France directly prove it until around 1830: the authors of these memoirs describe what they have seen during their childhood and youth, therefore during the second half of the 18th century; they take care to indicate the persistences and the disappearances.[8] No doubt we thus have information not for the whole of France, but for certain regions only. To these chronologically comparative documents are added those which were published in the departmental directories from the Consulate until 1830, and in

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the first imperial then royal statistics, by department. At this time, local learned societies also began to form, many of whose members described the manners and customs before the Revolution and during the Empire. By grouping this mass, quite heterogeneous it is true, of materials, we find that there has been no stopping or suppression in the major part of folklore. Thus, the priests had been driven out, the churches closed; but they continued to go to the sacred springs endowed, according to local belief, with a therapeutic virtue.[9] There was no more mass, but the statues of Virgins and miraculous saints were carefully preserved and they were addressed to them in secret quite often, but more often still in an open, individual way, but even collectively, for example in the event of drought. The belief in fairies, white or green ladies, wisps, domestic elves, werewolves was not touched by the tremor. The authors quoted all declare that the popular ceremonies of childbirth, birth, marriage, and funerals were only modified on one point: the intervention of a priest. And again from the Concordat this element, which in the eyes of the people continued to keep a sense of protection that the registrar could not provide, returns to its former place. I also have a large number of cases of the destruction of rural chapels and oratories located near a spring which they hastened to rebuild even before restoring the parish church.[10] It goes without saying that the Revolution affected neither popular songs, nor marvelous and fantastic stories, nor rural decorative art, nor the hundreds of observances in which the official clergy did not previously participate, nor the use of bonesetters and to healers of all kinds.

CONCLUSION

Even in the cities, the men howled against superstitions and their henchmen, the women retained their beliefs; and as at the end of the Empire there were only a few men left in the families, the women quietly restored the situation according to their own mental and ritual tendencies. This movement, partially stopped by the 1914-1918 war, took on great importance during the first post-war years and reacted to the training of Catholic scouts. However, it will be noted that in the scout movement, the symbols and emblems are not religious; or rather that the religious manifestation remains strictly Roman Orthodox. The symbols chosen on the other hand come to be attached to the emblems of the totemic clans, to those of the nomes of Egypt, to the Roman signs. I leave it to others to analyze to what extent they create in children and adolescents a special feeling, more or less magico-religious, involving a feeling of directly effective protection and solidarity. We are dealing here with child psychology, obviously close to folklore, but which in this Manual can only be pointed out. I must add that Boy Scouts' games do indeed have quite a different internal character from ordinary children's games. To play Robinson Crusoe or Swiss, the Savages, as we did in our childhood was an individual initiative; for the scouts the same games are a kind of moral duty and a training of oneself in relation to the international children's community .

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