

RELIGION AND FOLK BELIEFS

*Mustafa SEVER****Abstract:**

Folk beliefs, transmitted from generation to generation since the transfer from pre-writing and not included in any divine religion, but his side continued vitality of beliefs. Folk beliefs that have traditional as well as the local folk beliefs, include beliefs and practices, and personal features, divide two main types as a magic and experiential people's beliefs. In this study we'll focus on the qualities, differences and functions in everyday life of divine religion and folk beliefs and functions.

Key words: Belief, Religion, Folk Belief, Ritual.

Introduction

Since the creation on earth, the mankind has been in the struggle of understanding, interpreting and denominating primarily himself, the incidents, conditions, existences around. He developed beliefs under unexplainable conditions, events, incidents, beings; constituted an alliance of beliefs according to the time and environment conditions he experienced. This alliance of beliefs is a content that answers all questions, from the most abstract to the most concrete that occupy the human consciousness, the behaviours related to the life he experiences, his communication and relation with other people, his actions on the geography he lives and it also directs him. Socialization developed just as much as this content was shared and the mankind realized, denominating and explained himself as a social being. The arrangement of life as a society enabled the beliefs to reach a systematical form, become a common memory in the shape of moral principles in the direction of purposes, such as instituting the peace and happiness and it also enabled the people to develop knowledge related to the unknown, from the concrete to the abstract. From all these, a person should not make sense of developments that are experienced in a regular, gradual and linear way. It is certain that each geography and the community on this geography have a specific process of change and development. In parallel with the level of the intellectual progress in the mankind, "*that perfect being which controls the whole framework of the nature was reached*" (Hume, 1995: 35) as a result of reaching to the power of the development and extension of the belief in superior powers and being able to think more abstractly as the

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activist/activists of all events and conditions around that can not be explained and effected by him.

In this study, the characteristics of the public beliefs, which have existed as a truth from the preliteracy until today, in other words during the process which was experienced from worshipping natural forces until the monotheistic/bookish religions of today and which have still been sustained in our daily life and their differences from the bookish religion, functions in our lives as a society shall be discussed.

Folk Beliefs

The religion, which has aimed a peaceful and contented betweenness of mankind during the period extending from the first ages until today (from worshipping natural forces to polytheism and then to monotheism), has maintained its power as a uniting and regulating power in the social life. Of course, this process or the process of reaching the monotheistic thought or the religion, which could be expressed with a few sentences, did not happen immediately. As well as sustaining their existences systematically with the rules and practices of monotheistic religions, each society has had beliefs which were obtained during the process which was experienced until they reached the monotheistic religion and were carried in their memories in the form of pattern thoughts and rituals-ceremonies. These beliefs were entitled with different names and assessed by different disciplines. For instance, the beliefs and practices which were denominated as secular, unreasoning, superstition by the theologians, were assessed as public beliefs by the anthropologists, sociologists and folklorists. While it became a question for the theologian to analyse, assess the accepted religion/bookish religion (Islam, Christianity, Jewishness) from various aspects, separate the religious and nonreligious, religiousness and secular, unreasoning and superstition; the folklorist or the anthropologist analysed and assessed the maintaining beliefs as well as the the existing ones, the effect and function of these beliefs in the human life. Concerning the beliefs within the investigation area of folklore, Boratav says, "*Folklore deals with beliefs constituted by new forms, new contents and narrations as far as the requirements of the life conditions in the new religion of a certain society which is kept alive through inheriting from the former religions and applying to the conditions of the present age.*" (1984: 7). The beliefs which are inherited from the past, updated according to the conditions of the era and believed as "a new religion" are mentioned here; however, as well as the accepted divine religion and outside of its bookish provisions, the folklore deals with beliefs which ally with it from time to time and are commonly experienced as belief and practice in daily life. In a word, the beliefs which are carried in the common memory as an inheritance from the past do not take the form of a new religion, in other words, the form of a religion that is denominated

divine religion today, according to the conditions of the era. These may show restructures, changes, diversifications according to the geography, time and community; however, they do not become a systematical religion. The diversification possibility of a change in the divine religion almost does not exist. Because divine religion has a book and a prophet. Its rules are inalterable; however, while religious provisions, the divine book can not be changed, there might be some diversifications in the practices, due to the interpretation differences. For instance, the emergence of religious sects is the result of such developments and interpretation differences.

While the religion, which has a book and a prophet, includes universal principles and practices, public beliefs are local; in other words, these beliefs have local characteristics that are peculiar to a certain community on a certain geography. As a result of locality, they appear both within the traditional culture and the personal culture. Folk beliefs which are experienced traditionally go through changes, according to the era, time and geographical and humane conditions. In spite of the existence of people who are attached importance, believed within the tradition and whose guidances are obeyed (kams, wizards, public physicians, etc.), there are not any professional men of god who preach the folk beliefs systematically. On the other hand, the divine religion includes *“an occupational class of men of god, which defends, protects, interprets and reinterprets a complicated theology, a moral system and theology that are based on that theology, morality and worship methods”* (Yel, 2005: 154).

“Magic and bewitchery play an important role” in folk beliefs (Hırıyanna, 2001: 100). While magic and bewitchery (amulets or jewels that are the embodiments of magic and bewitchery) are widely utilised regarding, such as actualization of a purpose, protection from a disaster, treatment of a disease, etc., there is no place for magic and bewitchery in the divine religion; because magic and bewitchery are assessed as secular, superstition and a sin.

While the divine religion is sent by Allah (c.c.) with aiming the order and happiness of the whole mankind and conveyed by a prophet whose knowledge is accepted to be inspired by Allah (c.c.) in an ethnic environment, public beliefs maintain their activities as belief and behaviour forms which are constituted during the period from the unknown times of the society until the present time and fixed as long as they are kept alive. The conditions that are experienced by the society, such as the geographical environment, climate and surface forms, economic structure (livelihood conditions, livelihood resources; life style, nomadism, sedentation, etc.), war, commerce and migration, other societies which are contacted for some reasons, bookish religion and acceptance conditions of this religion are effective on the formation of folk beliefs. It might also become a “world

view” that determines the attitudes and behaviours of particularly the individual and commonly the mass during this process of formation.

Although the bookish religion has a book and a prophet, and consequently inalterable universal provisions, it might ally with local beliefs during the phase of interpretation and practice; it might be performed according to the environment and needs. But the fact that it has an institutional structure, which is the most significant characteristic, enables a person to learn, teach and practice it systematically. It has a place of worship, a man of god in the place that guides and the man of god has a divine book to guide him. Public belief, on the other hand, does not have a written text, a leader to guide and a place to worship. Because public beliefs are assessed as the whole of the knowledge that is perceived by the individual or the society naturally and supernaturally. It is hard to control or limit it, since it has a content beyond the concretely existing or possibly existing things, moreover, it is fictionalised on the limitless of the dream world of the human.

According to L. Lévy-Bruhl “*The mentality of the primitive is not only collective but also pre-logic.*” (transmitter Örnek, 1995: 17). We can use this determination of “pre-logic” for public beliefs, that are carried by the societies from the period of preliteracy/the unknown until the present day and especially those which have a magic. Considering this fact, we can assess the public beliefs in two great sets as magical and experimental public beliefs, with a general classification. While preternaturalness, good and bad purpose magics and bewitchery, mystical elements (amulets, constitutions, various objects, etc.), prohibitions, taboos and prophecies are in question in magical public beliefs,; beliefs and practices based on observation and experiments for generations; natural, discernible and perceivable incidents, conditions are in question in experimental public beliefs. The beliefs, inferences/interpretations and practices concerning particularly the climate, weather conditions, changes of plants, behaviours of animals are related to this type. They include the provisions that are fixed within the frame of a cause and effect relation. For instance, the beliefs concerning the fact that the winter will be severe if there are plenty of quinces, the estimation of the weather of the following day as sunny or rainy depending on the flying of the swallows high or low, the fact that the following day will be sunny if the sky is red during the sunset, a storm will occur soon if the crows fly up and down screaming are of this type. These beliefs have come until today through being transformed from generation to generation as fixed information that are acquired as a result of long observations and experienced many times.

Magical public beliefs are unreasoning; because logical rules can not be executed during their processes of believing and practising and their

reasons can not be questioned. Right foot is used while exiting or entering the house. Door sill is not a place to sit on. Finger nails should not be cut at night. Why? The answer to this question may not normally be satisfactory; because such kind of practices and beliefs include a belief and ritual that are traditionally taken, internalized from the person/persons around as a statement of practice. Here we should keep in mind that no matter magical or experimental, public beliefs are traditional. Because each belief and practice can become a tradition, as long as they are transformed from generation to generation and kept alive. In this process, belief and practice gain personality, at the same time divinity and consequently incontestability. The belief and practice of a person are the repetition of what have already been made and believed (the archetype in the common memory) by the person. However, concerning this repetition, personal preference, in other words contribution or diminishment, making a new form should not be forgotten. According to Peter L. Berger, the sacred “*is a quality of the secret and terrifying power. The sacred is related with the supernatural; but it is not the same thing.*” (Armağan, 1992: 39). The incontestability of the belief results from its divinity and the fact that it implies a secret power which scares people and some prohibitions. The fear in the subconsciousness “*means respected, honoured and immortal*” as the apparent sacred (Armağan, 1992: 40). In the public culture, the sacred is the absolute power and it indicates a purpose. The performance of a kut-ceremony (ritual) is required for the actualization of this purpose.

Value and Function

Value is the belief, which are accepted by the people who constitute the society as right –wrong, positive–negative, necessary–unnecessary, etc. in the social life and transformed from generation to generation through being kept within the common memory of the society and it also is consisted of moral principles. This belief and moral principles are protected in the common memory as the basic criterias for the arrangement of the social life and they determine the basic norms of the society. The traditional values have been carried up-to-date as fixed thoughts and behaviours from thousands of years. Starting from the family, the value is produced, adopted and shared by the societies expanding to the nation. The values of the family, race, clan, nation are practiced in the daily life as social norms and they emerge as perceptions, thoughts, behaviours (knowledge, belief, chastity, morality, cooperation, tolerance, commitment to the motherland, loving the nation, justice, etc.), which separate the family, race, clan, nation from the other family, race, clan and nation. Public beliefs and rituals also have important roles within these values and they fulfill many material-moral functions in the personal and community life.

As from birth, the mankind has some needs, desires, wishes, fears, anxieties and problems that can not be solved. Besides, there are also constitutions and developments he can not understand, denominate in the environment he lives. The mankind has developed beliefs, rituals in the meaning of finding a retribution to all of these, getting alienated from the fears and anxieties, reaching a spiritual satisfaction and feeling relieved. The greatest function of these beliefs and practices is that they enable the person to get alienated from fears and anxieties, protected from dangers, in short, to get relieved. Maintaining the beliefs and practices and protecting their validity undoubtedly depends on the characteristics of the environment in which the person lives, whether it is a village or a city, whether it is far from or close to the center, its demographic structure and institutional effect of the divine religion (activities of the mosque and imam, lessons, courses, quality of the community, etc.).

There are some incidents and conditions in daily life, which are often experienced by the person and which can not be overcome. In case of such incidents and conditions, the person often thinks that he is going through power or powers that surpass his own power; we can consider these powers as *“any power that surpasses the person, escapes from the person and sends him to an ultimate boundary which can not be dominated by instrumental and legalist rationalists”* (Jeffrey, 2001: 53). The person, who feels himself weak in overcoming these powers and consequently the effect or rather the damage they place on the person, shows some behaviours, practices; these behaviours might be assessed as deviation, superstition, vanity by the people who preach the bookish religion (primarily imams) and as frivolousness by other people. Some of the procedures in the folk medicine practices are of this kind. For example, when a paralyzed patient is made sleep in a tomb with the belief of getting healed by the charm of that buried divine person after sleeping there for one night, it might be assessed as a negative behaviour by religion and as frivolousness by other people. As the relatives of the patient try every way for this patient, who had been made paralyzed by powers or factors they can not resist, to get healed, they will get out of the normal and exhibit behaviours that would be assessed as frivolousness by other people. The progress in science and technology surely directs the people of the modern society to perform their behaviours more rationally and logically and it alienates them from such kind of beliefs and practices. *“Destructive attack[s] of science and technology against public beliefs cause the abandonment of some traditional religious practices and desertification of religious meanings”* (Jeffrey, 2001: 51); however, no matter how efficient the desertification is, public beliefs and practices become a part of the activity in the face of every incident and condition which can not be overcome by the science. Such kind of beliefs and practices enable a person to get relieved psychologically and face the future in safety.

Every person correlates the incidents and conditions he experiences with other incidents and conditions in the course of time; he comes through in his opinion. He produces some provisions about what might happen as a result of whatever he does or does not. These personal provisions and thoughts naturally do not remain within the person; they might be widespread through staying in the social life with the help of interpersonal interaction and also transforming into thoughts and a form of behaviours.

The practices, which are performed as a kut-ceremony (ritual) by an individual or a group in various places, have some purposes. It is possible to separate these purposes into three: *“preventing the events that have risks, anarchy, anxiety, fear, insecurity (the respected divine); 2. overcoming the non-continuous conditions of life, enabling the transition between them (the overcome divine); 3. causing non-continuity in order to place change, enthusiasm, creativity into life (the suspended divine).”* (Jeffrey, 2001: 43). Among these, the major aim of a person to perform a ritual is the desire to get alienated to his fears, insecurities. For example, while the provision of “If a person starts a work on Tuesday, that work will be delayed and will never be finished.” become a principle in the common memory through being transformed from person to person, it psychologically retains many people from starting a work on Tuesday. Because when such words are told by a person whose authority is accepted in the society, they become a statement. A woman who applies henna to her hand does not apply it again. Because she believes that if she does, she will be deceived by her husband and moreover, they will separate. When a person treats his neighbours or distributes candy, chocolate, etc. to the children who get out of school on Thursday, his desire, wish will come true. These beliefs and practices might spread among people as traditions and become fixed thoughts and behaviours. It is possible to increase the examples. The basic thought here is that, the basic function of a belief and behaviour provides a person a psychological relief, sureness of the future and protection from a danger, etc.

The beliefs could originally date back to old times; they carry the traces of the beliefs of the nation and their interactions with the encountered cultures during the prehistoric ages. Therefore, as well as beliefs and practices which protect their value and structure during the present time since they are transferred to the present time from thousands of years through being tested and experienced in terms of value and function, there are also some beliefs and practices that show new structurings according to the conditions of the day. The beliefs, which are the expression of the defence and desires of the mankind in the face of the power related to the unknown, fearful, divine become current insofar they are materialized as rituals. Assessing them as vanity, superstition, social deviation especially in terms of the bookish religion and trying to demolish them connotes to being unable to understand the importance of public beliefs, in terms of

value and function. The people who do not consider the public beliefs as a positive factor for the functioning of the social structure and who assess them as the remnants of the primitive periods of humanity, consequently as vanity, superstition, social deviation surely can not assess the effectiveness of public beliefs in daily life accurately. In fact, being the extants of the social experiences of a nation in the historical past, public beliefs are the means that shall be required in meeting the new incidents and conditions which are encountered during the present time. Each belief and ritual is a part of the education in the direction of making a person an individual within the social structure as from the birth, in other words, making him socialized. Because each belief and ritual is a whole that consists what shall be done and what shall not' and it unites the people who experience and perform this belief and ritual as a society that has a common memory.

Considering in general terms, since the beliefs and rituals that are experienced, kept alive and practiced on different geographies constitute the common ground of the nation, they establish the national unity, cooperation and relation to the collective identity. In terms of the person, on the other hand, public beliefs are means of therapy. For example, the fact that a mother, who has deep anxieties concerning whether his soldier-to-be son will return unscathed or not, puts the underwear of his son under the cover of a tomb's coffin in a sepulchre on a Thursday, takes it back the following Thursday, makes her son wear it and warns him not to take it off not only will relieve her spiritually, but also will bring a sense of safety for the son. Similarly, the candy, water, etc. on which prayers are sent and which are brought by a student to the university entrance exam, who has a great pressure concerning whether he will pass it or not shall provide him some moral support—motivation. The student, who has previously heard from the people who had passed the exam or the people around that the candy and water provide convenience in terms of comprehending and solving the questions during the exam and passing the exam, will have a conditioning and he will try to do the same thing. If he does so, he will enter the exam with a confidence that he will pass the exam, in other words, he will psychologically be self-assured.

Conclusion

The real identity of a person is constituted by the cultural environment he is born into. Therefore, beliefs and rituals are experienced within this cultural environment. While every culture forms beliefs with a mutual trading, every belief and ritual contribute to the culture. What matters is the forming, updating these beliefs within the frame of national culture and maintaining their existence, operability. Because international interactions have increased in the present era and some cultures have started to provide strength over other cultures through using their economic and technological

priorities within this process. Considering especially the activities that have been performed by the Christian missionaries in Turkey in recent years, the answers shall be sought for some questions: What are the common values of the Turkish nation (taking the factors such as living in different geographical regions, living conditions, differentiation in religious beliefs, etc. into consideration as well)? Through which values is the common ground of the Turkish nation constituted? To what extent are the similarities, commonalities or uniformities in the face of differences? Such kind of questions can surely be increased; however, attention must be paid to the commonalities, similarities and uniformities in beliefs and rituals, in terms of the answer to be given to the questions. Each belief and ritual is a means for establishing a relation between the people who adopt and practice them. No matter what religion or communion they adopted, the people of the same culture who lived together in the geography of Anatolia for hundreds of years did not leave the religion they had accepted and also their old beliefs and rituals. For example, the common ground of the Alevi and Sunni is provided by the Islam of which they are the members and evenly, perhaps greatly, by the beliefs and rituals that are brought from thousands of years. Because beliefs and rituals are among the most important elements that constitute their common ground.

Notes:

1. Because in the public beliefs, “the powers that are believed are sometimes positive, beneficent, good; and sometimes negative, scaring and bad. They evoke both respect and love and fear and anxiety. The whole religious life goes between these two opposite poles. They both originate from the same and unique universe, in other words, from the universe of divinity.” when under influence (Borgeaud, 1999: 51).

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