

*MARTENITSA*  
THE SACRED THREAD THAT CONNECTS  
THE BULGARIANS  
WITH THE PEOPLE OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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In the memory of my grandparents  
Mara and Marko Dimitrovs,  
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# Introduction

The martenitsa is one of the most beloved customs in my motherland—Bulgaria. On March 1 every year, we give one another these good luck charms made of red-and-white yarn, together with wishes for good health and good luck. They are often decorated in various shapes and colors. However, the basic part of the trinket, its essence, is the twined red-and-white yarn. Every child in Bulgaria learns how to make this basic martenitsa at home or at school. We learn that it is uniquely Bulgarian and at least as old as Bulgaria, a state created more than thirteen centuries ago. And all the children are told stories about the martenitsa and about a rather moody but all-around good old woman with a name that sounds in Bulgarian like the month dedicated to the martenitsa and spring—Baba (Grandmother) Marta. The martenitsa is worn until one sees the storks fly back from their winter journey or a blooming fruit tree—events that usually take place by the end of March.

Several years ago on a still snowy March day, I stepped into an elementary school classroom in Saint Paul, MN ready to speak about my Bulgarian culture starting with the unique amulet<sup>1</sup>. Almost immediately my eyes fell upon a shy Hmong girl whose wrist was tied with the familiar red-and-white thread! She explained to me and the class that this is a Hmong tradition and they use it to ward off bad spirits and to secure good health and fortune. Within a few months from that event, I was in the company of Indian friends in a religious ceremony that ended with the swami, the spiritual teacher, tying red-and-white threads on the wrists of his disciples.

Since then I have encountered different traditions among people from diverse cultures, religions and backgrounds that make use of sacred threads in order to bring health, and good luck and prosperity, and to ward off evil forces and spirits. Among them are the Hmong of Laos and China, various peoples of India, Sri

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<sup>1</sup> An amulet, also called a talisman, is an object, either natural or man-made, believed to be endowed with special powers to protect or bring good fortune. Amulets are carried on the person or kept in the place that is the desired sphere of influence—e.g., on a roof or in a field. ("amulet." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 18 Sep. 2011. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/21952/amulet>).

Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Pashtuns, and the Eastern Armenians. Additionally some typical stories about Baba Marta are told and some rites are also performed in countries like Iran and Turkey, although the thread that brings health is not known there. The *martenitsa* is also spread mainly among groups that have moved from Bulgaria in some Balkan countries and Ukraine.

The Bulgarian *martenitsa* was obviously not unique after all. But what is the explanation of its origin and significance? Was there a connection among all these traditions or were those merely coincidences? If there were a connection, how could we explain these occurrences of related customs in countries that are so diverse culturally, religiously and ethnically?

Here I will try to answer those questions. I will explore the possible connections among the sacred red-and-white thread amulets, and investigate whether they spring from a common ancestry, possibly with roots as far back as the times of the Neolithic Revolution<sup>2</sup>, when agricultural production started. And were they even perhaps part of the worship of the same powerful deity, most probably the Great Goddess? <sup>3</sup>

## The search

What is the possible correlation among the amulets made of thread and meant to bring health and good luck blessings? By the time I started my research I already knew of the *martenitsa*, the *raksha bandhan* in India and the Hmong amulets but could not find studies about similar ones among other peoples. My good luck was that I lived in the twenty-first century in the United States; I used the Internet and I interviewed people who came here from all over the world about their cultures and I am very grateful to them for their readiness to share their traditions with me. I followed the initial inquiry on the contemporary varieties of the sacred threads by search in every possible scholarly book and article for references.

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<sup>2</sup> The period when human society departed from the hunter-gatherer strategies and began food production. Although the process took thousands of years it is known as Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution.

<sup>3</sup> A concept introduced by the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas that will be discussed later.

The most studied amulet among the ones that will be mentioned here is the *martenitsa* and it is wrongly seen as uniquely Bulgarian. When attempts are made to uncover its origin, it is still perceived as local and associated with the ancient Thracians<sup>4</sup> who lived on the territory of Bulgaria in the antiquity. The *martenitsa* is associated with the Thracian goddess<sup>5</sup>, who is known by many names; and who is believed to be connected to the Greek goddess Demeter and the Anatolian deities. No associations are made beyond that geographic range.

Most of my findings would have been impossible if I had been trying to follow a line of correlated amulets: first to find amulets similar to the *martenitsa*, then others related to the first ones, etc. All the ones I was able to identify as interrelated traditions are viewed as isolated in one country or at best one region. The *raksha bandhan* is considered representative of the regional culture in India and Nepal—it is not perceived as a part of a bigger picture. No one, as far as I know, was thinking of the Armenian amulet as anything separate from the ritual of baptism, and that is why finding it was due to a happy accident, as were the Hmong and the Pakistan ones. I searched on purpose for some connection with the *martenitsa* or the *raksha bandhan* in Iran and I could not find anything until professor Bashiri suggested that I should check an early twentieth century account of prejudice in Iran where I stumbled on the ancient stories told among the Persians and which seemed so similar to the Bulgarian ones about *Baba Marta*.

Often the information I have is fragmented or very scarce. I make sense of it all through the work of Idries Shah about magic, the theory of Marija Gimbutas about the Great Goddess, and the study of Jared Diamond of the human history based on the development of agriculture.

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<sup>4</sup> Thracians were the Indo-European people who lived on the North-Eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula, including the territory of Bulgaria from the third millennium B.C.E. until the settlement of the Slavs and the Bulgarians between the fifth and the seventh centuries C.E. More about the Thracians and their gods see in *Ancient gold* (Marazov, ed.).

<sup>5</sup> The Thracian Goddess was known by many different names like Bendida, Kotito etc. They depend on the region, the exact tribe and the author of the written source and the associations with the Greek or other mythologies he made.

## The theories

### The agricultural revolution

While considering most of the amulets, I have come to the understanding that they were associated with the development of agriculture and animal husbandry. For example, the *martenitsa* was tied on fruit trees, farm animals and tools, the *raksha bandhan* is given in the time of the seeding the fields, and all of the amulets are made to secure good health and prosperity.

Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* emphasizes the role of food production in the development of the human societies. He also discusses the role of geographical conditions in the spread of this production. He demonstrates and explains the comparative ease of moving to the east or to the west and the great difficulty moving north and south. Moving to a higher ground was among the most difficult directions and took generations to master the new conditions. Thus, the spread of agricultural knowledge and production was directed east and west in Europe and Asia and the high mountains were avoided (Diamond 176-191).

Traditions, including those associated with farming and the sacred thread do not travel by themselves. They need human carriers—groups of people, who either move or interact with other groups and accept from them elements of their culture if they can serve them better. Accordingly, if there are direct parallels between two traditions, that would mean that they were passed from one place to the other by a group of people who carried this tradition to the new place where they were either accepted or they replaced the local traditions themselves.

### The Great Goddess

I will use as a theoretic base the fundamental work of Maria Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, which synthesizes huge archaeological material from the Old European (Pre-Indo European<sup>6</sup>) culture of the Neolithic period in Europe, the

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<sup>6</sup> The study of the origin of the Indo-European people started in the 18 century and is still one of the most discussed problems in social sciences. There is a theory placing the original homeland in practically every nation that is part of this large group. The place of origin brings lively discussions during scholarly conferences among the experts. Regardless of this they all agree that there were older cultures that were overtaken by the Indo-Europeans.



Mediterranean and Anatolia, as well as earlier and later examples from the same territory and some parallels with Pre-Vedic Asia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Americas.

Gimbutas called herself an archeo-mythologist who used archaeology, comparative mythology and folklore in order to reconstruct ancient beliefs and mythology. She treated Old Europe as a single symbolic system or a script and organized her volume as a dictionary of symbols. Her thesis was that all these symbols represented different aspects of the Great Goddess. This was a religion, which placed the feminine principle in its center, without ignoring the male; for this reason it was not a matriarchal but a “matristic” system<sup>7</sup>.

The major aspects of the Neolithic Goddess were the Life and Death Giver self-renewing lunar goddess, the Regeneratrix and the Earth Goddess of the seasonal cycle complete with rising, growing, fattening and dying. Her images included various animals, birds and insects, the birth-giving mother, water vessels, standing stones, white bones; but also a whole series of more abstract shapes: triangles, axes, ovals, spirals; and the Life Column: tree, phallus or snake. She was represented as a young woman with upraised arms, pregnant or as a dual mother/daughter image, summer/winter goddess. Her places of worship were stones, hills, caves and graves.

All these ideas she could trace back to the first sculptures of bone, ivory or stone, around 25,000 BCE, and some of her symbols: vulvas, triangles, breasts, chevrons, zigzags, meanders, cup-marks were even older. The main theme of the Goddess was the symbolism and mystery of birth, death and the renewal of the life and the cosmos. The main personality was the self-generating Goddess, giving life and death, receiving energy from the springs and wells, the sun, the moon, the stars and the moist earth. This system represented cyclical, not linear time, in which things go in a cycle and repeat: after the spring come summer, autumn and winter, and then spring again; after birth and growth come decline and death, but always

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<sup>7</sup> According to Gimbutas, in this social and religious system the female principle does not rule over or fight with the male. It simply has a leading role without oppressing the male principal.

after that comes birth again. That philosophy was embodied in art through spirals, coiling snakes, crescents, horns, sprouting seeds and shoots. Black was the color of fertility, similar to the rich soil and caves and the womb of the Goddess where life began; white symbolized bones and death; and red - blood and life.

Gimbutas idealized the epoch of the Goddess: the world in that time was peaceful, and free of warfare and male domination. When the Indo-European gods of thunder and war defeated the life-and-death giving Goddesses, they became divine brides and wives, or as queens and Ladies, were assigned military functions, and continued to exist. These mythologies were hybrid. The traces of the prevalent and enduring ideological system of the Goddess of the Neolithic period had survived in folk art and tales to our day (Gimbutas xv-xxi, 328-329).

### **Oriental Magic**

Let me consider now the question of magic and if it could be used to establish connections and influences of separate traditions. According to the work by Idries Shah on Oriental Magic, the occult arts spread from the Siberian shamans around the world and it was influenced and developed locally. From Siberia it was taken all over Asia, Europe and Africa, and through the Eskimos to the Americas; then it was synthesized and redistributed from several centers, including Japan, India, Babylonia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. The snake was one of the most important shared symbols; and secrecy is a common feature. Shah devotes chapters to the magic in different countries and different times leading to the conclusion that man is a symbol-inventing animal and despite the influences, magic thrived everywhere with both local characteristics and shared ones (Shah 3). That means that if we establish some similarities in certain magic practices that will not be enough, but complete traditions appearing in different places would be likely to point to a common origin.

In connection with shamanism, we should mention the use of threads in the shamanic quest to ascend to the divine realms. Red thread is still used by the modern shamans of the Hmong, who also wear red-and-white amulets for

protection from evil spirits (Armstrong 25; Mote 50). This is rather sporadic and detailed for an Introduction.

### **The roadmap**

I will devote the first two chapters to the *martenitsa* and *the raksha bandhan*. In the third I will deal with the stories about personified periods of time in the winter and the spring in Iran and in Bulgaria and compare them. The next two chapters will deal with more examples of the sacred thread based on the interviews I took from people from different countries who were willing to help me to understand this phenomena. In the last chapter I look at the map to understand the big picture of the distribution of the amulets. I also examine the association of the sacred thread and the Goddess.

# Chapter 1. The Bulgarian *Martenitsa*

In the past people believed that the world was bursting with potent creatures, some friendly, but others very dangerous. Women, who could create life, possessed great power, so did some men, and not all of them had good intentions; hence the need of defense (Paine188). Different means of protection were used against the evil will. Bulgarians met the spring decorated with *martenitsa*.

## Function, name, colors, forms and materials

The name of the martenitsa apparently is derived from the name of the month—March<sup>8</sup>. Its alternative names—baenitsa, from “baya”, to cast spells, to mumble incantations, and kitenitsa, kichilka from “kitja, kicha”, to decorate<sup>9</sup>—reflect the function of the amulet. The main function is protective while the decorative one is secondary (Jordanova 214). The basic and oldest type was made of twined red and white wool threads, but there were a variety of forms: tassels, pompoms, balls; some even resembled the human shape (Mikov *March* 46-52; Jordanova 201; Teneva 88).

The wool used to make them had to be spun to the left—opposite to the direction for spinning of the yarn destined for everyday needs.<sup>10</sup> The colors are red and white with the occasional addition of other colors, but the traditional ones included red and the natural hues of wool—white, brown or black in various combinations.

The white wool was picked from the pastures where it gained strength from the elements of Nature, and the red one was often a gift to the mothers from the

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<sup>8</sup> There are other possibilities like the name of the Roman god of war Mars, or the Slavic goddess of death Mort, but there is not enough evidence for any of those hypothesis, so I will accept here the traditional explanation.

<sup>9</sup> Баеница (baenitsa), from “baya”, to cast spells, to mumble incantations, and китеница, кичилка (kitenitsa, kichilka) from “kitja, kicha”

<sup>10</sup> The two sides left and right had different symbolic meanings and left was the side of magic, connection with the divine, the religious, the female, the Great Goddess. The right was the side of the material life, production of goods, the earthly kingdoms (Marazov *The Visible Myth* 114-117).

midwives<sup>11</sup> who helped them in the birth of their children. Through this gift the amulet was directed to the increase of fertility. Special elements like garlic and blue beads against the evil eye, snail shells, horsetail hairs, wolf or snake teeth and small golden coins were added to the amulets in order to build up their defensive power (Jordanova 201; Mikov “The Bulgarian Martenitsa”; Popov *Bulgarian Folk* 32).

*Martenitsas* were worn for protection, fertility and decoration and all their elements are means to this end. The wide range of forms and materials were a result of the decorative tendency, but also from the wish to make the amulets more powerful.

### **Who made them**

In our time *martenitsas* are sold in every price range and artistic skill and they are influenced by fashion, but the tradition of the making them at home is still alive. It was the duty of the mother or the older women in the family to make them before March 1<sup>st</sup> and to charge them with magical power by means of specific spells. Some women did not eat or go near the fire; some did not go outside even to the outhouse to prevent the snakes and lizards from going into the home. Others made the *martenitsa* with closed eyes to blind the snakes so they would not harm anyone. Yet others jinxed the wolves not to eat the sheep. In West Bulgaria maidens tied the *martenitsa* to a red rose<sup>12</sup> through the night to get the protective power of the color and the thorns of the flowers (Mikov *March* 52; Popov *Bulgarian Folk* 32; Teneva 88).

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<sup>11</sup> Midwives were called баба (*baba*)—grandmother like *Baba Marta*. Some communities had women who performed this service to other women. These might have been older women or they inherited this role from their mothers. Often the midwife was also the mother-in-law and grandmother of the children to be born; she would have been the oldest woman in the family, too.

<sup>12</sup> The use of roses is the only parallel with practices of Slavic nations. In Serbia a yellow silk thread tied to a rose overnight was used to cure jaundice (Kolossova 44, 53). The main healing power in this practice came from the rose, while the thread was used as a mediator. Threads were also used in similar fashion by shamans in their spiritual journeys, as explained by a contemporary shaman (Armstrong 25-6).

## **March 1<sup>st</sup>**

On the first day of the month, every house had to be clean, with a red fabric on the fence. The preparations started a few days in advance and in the morning of March 1<sup>st</sup> an older woman ritually swept and cleaned the house.

Every person in the family, above all young children and newlyweds, were dressed in festive clothes and received *martenitsas* with the wish “to be white and red”, meaning healthy and beautiful. Others would say, “Let your head become white like the snow on the Balkan mountain.” Depending on the regional traditions, they were worn pinned on the chest or tied on the wrists, toes or braids. Lasses could wear theirs on the necks to make them long and graceful, and to protect their faces from the summer sun, lads on the pinky, and married men in their right sock. Newly born domestic animals, fruit trees and vineyards also had theirs. So did various tools used in typical women’s home crafts like spinning yarn and weaving, and those used in the fields for transportation and food production like the plough and the cart (Mikov *March* 53-6; Ianeva 82)

## **Foretelling the future and disposing of the *martenitsa***

Magic actions are performed throughout the month of March to get rid of snakes and sickness. Women chased the snakes ceremonially by banging on metal kitchenware and shouting at them: “Run, snakes! Run, lizards! Baba Marta is coming and she will kill you off!” People hoped to get rid of vermin by ceremonial going around the house, making loud noise and shouting “Fleas out, Marta in!”

With the purpose of assuring a healthy family, the trash gathered through cleaning the house and the yard was burned with some straw and sticks. On the first day of March, a new fire, as a symbol of the sun, was started at home and bonfires were made in the yards. While jumping over it everyone would say “Here is my yellow complexion, give me your red one” (Arnaudov *Celebrations* 75-9; Mikov *March* 15).

Throughout the month women kept numerous observances to ensure good harvest, fertility, health and successful marriages. The Saturdays in March were days when womenfolk didn’t work, to make sure that there was no hail and thunder. For

the same reason no white clothing was washed and hanged to dry, so that hail, frost and snow would not destroy the crops. The full moon in March was auspicious<sup>13</sup> for predicting weddings for the maidens, thus connecting Marta with marriages and consequently the new generations. If a girl saw some of the precursors of spring, she would put her martenitsa under a stone, and if several days later she found a worm next to it she would marry, if not – this would not come to pass (Mikov *March* 53-6, 74; Popov *Bulgarian Folk* 33).



*Ill. 1. Martenitsa, tied on a tree near Dragalevtsi, Bulgaria, June, 2009 (Personal photograph).*

The *martenitsa* was worn for different lengths of time regionally, but usually in association with the advent of spring, and then it was tied to a blooming fruit tree, or thrown in water, or on the roof, or burned. While that was being done, simple spells were uttered like “Take my martenitsa, give me health”. At times the *martenitsa* was used to predict the abundance of the harvest and the stock. It was put under a stone, and if one later found ants next to it, this was a sign for numerous

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<sup>13</sup> The full moon is also special on the Indian tradition, as we shall see in the next chapter.

flocks of sheep; if there were black bugs, the water buffaloes would be particularly numerous (Mikov, *March* 60).

The methods of disposing of the amulet and the additional actions taken during the month, point to the agricultural character of the tradition. A second cluster of meanings is outlined by the use of the *martenitsa* to foretell the future and to assure the wellbeing of the future generation.



Ill. 2. *Martenitsas*, tied in a truck in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, July, 2009. Wearing *martenitsas* year-round is a new development (Personal photographs).

### **Baba (grandmother) Marta**

On the first day of March everything and everybody had to be clean and decorated to please *Baba Marta*<sup>14</sup>, the personification of March. The legends often accentuate the quick change of her mood and the effect it had on the weather. It was said that when she was in good mood the sun shined, when she was sad it was gloomy and rainy, when she was angry there were torrents or drought; winds and storms. When the weather was depressing, it was said that Marta, depicted as a young woman, was angry because she didn't want to get married to an old man.

If disrespected, *Baba Marta* could take life: once, an old woman, paying no heed to her, took her own goats to pasture in the mountain; annoyed, Marta sent a winter storm and froze both the woman and her goats. On another occasion, she

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<sup>14</sup> Баба Марта - *Baba Marta* – usually translated as Grandmother Marta/March, *baba* has the meaning both of the mother of a parent and of an old woman. In this case it is more of the second meaning.



gave prosperity to a poor man by advising him to pick firewood and then turning winter cold (Arnaudov, *Ritual songs* 76; Mikov, *March* 78; Popov, *Bulgarian Folk* 32).

On the first day of March, a new fire, a symbol of the sun, was started in the home. The bonfires in the yards were made for everyone to jump over them. Another solar symbol was made by jumping from two sides to form a cross sign. People, in this way received life energy and health; it was believed that *Marta* received her power from the sun too (Mikov, “The Bulgarian Martenitsa”).

In those stories and rituals *Baba Marta* was a cosmic goddess of all the elements of the weather: sunshine, wind, rain, and drought. She bestowed prosperity, health, fertility to the whole creation and also death. She does not belong to the system, in which the gods were separated as solar and earth deities – she was both, as demonstrated in the rituals with fire and snakes<sup>15</sup>. Her prototype was the Great Goddess, as defined by Maria Gimbutas in *The Language of the Goddess* (xv-xxi, 328-329).

The major aspects of the Goddess, as well as *Baba Marta* were the Life and Death Giver. Her functions included, like those of the *martenitsa*, the giving of seasonal fertility. Among her images were snakes, frogs and insects, which in the Bulgarian tradition *Baba Marta* controlled.

One of the places for wearing a *martenitsa* is in the pants of a married man (Mikov, *March* 53). According to Gimbutas, the household protector was an ithyphallic<sup>16</sup> man, or a snake or a phallus.

The main theme of the Goddess was the symbolism and mystery of birth, death and the renewal of the life and the cosmos. And one of the main functions of the *martenitsa* is to assure the continuity of the clan as well as the fruitfulness of the fields and the economically important animals.

The main personality according to Gimbutas was the self-generating Goddess, giving life and death, receiving energy from the springs and wells, the sun, the moon, the stars and the moist earth. Traces of this system can be found in the

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<sup>15</sup> Fire is considered solar, or sun symbol and snakes are chthonic, or earth symbol.

<sup>16</sup> A man with an erect phallus.

gathering of the wool from the pastures, the making of the amulets at night, and tying them to roses before wearing them.

In the beliefs that involved the Great Goddess, black was the color of fertility, similar to the rich soil and the womb of the Goddess where life began; white symbolized bones and death; and red represented blood and life. Two of those colors are the main ones for the *martenitsa*, and they are found practically in the whole ethnic territory of the Bulgarian people.

All textile crafts were also gifts from the Goddess and offerings were made to her in the shape of spindles and loom weights (Gimbutas 67-69). It would be natural that her symbol would be a spun thread like the *martenitsa* or the *raksha bandhan*. An additional aspect that points in this direction is the use of a spindle to make *martenitsa* (Mikov, *March* illustrations 7, 8, 11).

The Goddess was often represented as a bird, and an isolated intriguing tradition in Bulgaria involves groups of children carrying around the village a model of a swallow attached to a spindle—this appears again—singing songs and jumping over the yard fires (Mikov, *March* 66-9).

The *martenitsa* is not isolated in the Bulgarian traditions: the twined red and white thread was used to tie the posies of herbs and flowers with apotropaic and medicinal power that were an important part of the wedding ceremony and of the accepting of the newly born by the women of the family at the age of forty days (Assenova; Popov, *Bulgarian Folk* 12).

One of the enduring signs of the Goddess was the birth-giving woman. Some of the yarn for the *martenitsas* for the children was given by the *baba* or midwife. Again the bond between the ancient goddess and the folk personage fits precisely.

The stories about *Baba Marta* characterize her as the Goddess who ruled the weather, who gave and took life, and brought fertility. Through the *martenitsa* she was the one that protected from illness and granted prosperity.

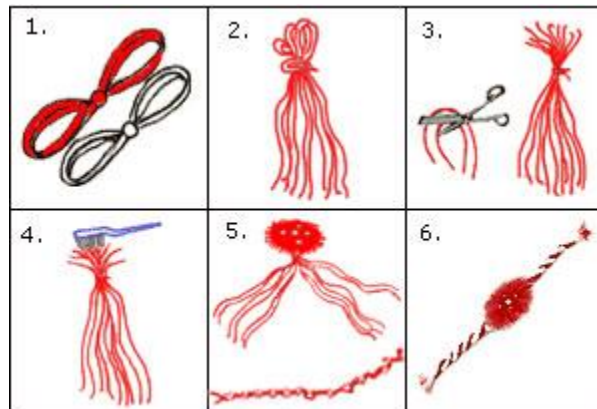
This chapter has demonstrated the correlation of *Baba Marta* and the *martenitsa* with the Great Goddess. The next one will examine the *raksha bandhan* of the Indian subcontinent and ask the question whether the two sacred threads can even be compared.

## Chapter 2. The *Raksha Bandhan* of the Indian Subcontinent

Far away from Bulgaria, on the Indian subcontinent, people use a similar amulet for protection from the forces of evil. This is the *raksha bandhan* or *rakhi*, which means protective tie. There are several varieties, of which the one given by a guru, the spiritual teacher, to his disciples is the closest to the Bulgarian *martenitsa*.

### Function, name, colors, forms and materials

The guru draws from the two separate balls of thread of red and white cotton yarn, twists them as he does so, and ties them to the wrists of the lined attendant disciples with his blessings. On the same day, every sister ties a *rakhi* on her brother's wrist and celebrates him. When a woman does that, the man is acknowledged as her brother and is obliged to help and protect her, while he himself is divinely protected from sins and disease.



Ill. 3. Instructions for making *rakhi* (How to make a Rakhi).

The *raksha bandhan* is known by various names such as *vish tarak*—the destroyer of venom, *punya pradayak*—the one that bestows boons, and *pap nashak*—the destroyer of sins (Das). The names are in accord with its functions to protect, to give good fortune and to install ethical behavior.

Similarly to the *martenitsa*, this amulet also has a wide variety of forms. Simple or elaborate *rakhi* are made by the women or purchased from priests or

various producers. Silk threads of one or more colors are usually used; the amulets are often embroidered with gold and silver threads, beads and sequins. Red and yellow are considered auspicious. Some are decorated with designer motifs, religious symbols or even studded with jewels and semi precious stones (Virtual Rakhi; Rakhi Festival; Das; V. Lal; Raksha Bandhan).

The *raksha bandhan* festival is often described as a day of the brotherly and sisterly affection, but it was much more: this day marked the end of the monsoon, the beginning of the fishing and the sowing season for wheat and barley. All this takes place on the full moon day of the Hindu month of Shraavan, which comprises the end of July or the beginning of August (Das ;Virtual Rakhi).

### **Why is the comparison of the *martenitsa* and the *raksha bandhan* possible?**

The times when the amulets are worn seem to be too separated to even consider comparing them—one is in the beginning of March; the other is in the end of July or the first half of August. This is the main reason for the link between the *martenitsa* and the *raksha bandhan* to have remained unnoticed. In agricultural societies, the place in the yearly cycle of a celebration would be of superseding importance because it points to a different place in the growing process. Ethnographers would consider that time discrepancy a very serious theoretical obstacle to put them together in the same category.

However, although it is not obvious, the two traditions under consideration take place in the same time—the beginning of the growing season.

In Bulgaria, the winter turns into spring in March; this is the time of the spring flowers, the returning birds and the awakening of the whole of nature for the new fertile season (Popov, *Bulgarian Folk* 32). In folk beliefs, from March 1 on the sun grows stronger (Mikov, “The Bulgarian Martenitsa”). Additionally, the year, according to the folk beliefs of the Bulgarians, was divided in two parts, marked by the two big celebrations—St. George’s day on May 6<sup>th</sup> and St. Demetrius’s Day on October 26<sup>th</sup>—the beginning and the end of the agricultural work and of the hiring of seasonal farm workers (Arnaudov 16). In order to understand why March is the

month of the *martenitsa* and not May, we should consider that wheat, which is a main staple of the Bulgarian diet, as well as several other crops like lentils, peas, beans and various vegetables, are sown in late February to mid March. It turns out that the actual growing season starts earlier than the date given by the folklore tradition.<sup>17</sup>

In India and Nepal, a key determining factor of the climate is the monsoons. By April the harvest is gathered, then for three months the land is “bare and brown,” and the dust particles in the air, carried by the wind, burn the skin. The monsoon is a great relief and by the beginning of August the new growing season starts. (Planalp 10-14) The Ayur-veda divided the year into an “absorbing” part from December to June, and a “liberating” part from July to December (Planalp 19-20). The month of Shravan, when the *rakhi* are tied, begins the good half of the year.

Thus both celebrations occur in the beginning of the growing season although not in the same month. In both geographic locations, this is also the time when people are especially prone to disease because of the unstable weather and thus need more protection.

### **The celebration – sisters and brothers**

In south India, the *raksha bandhan* festival is a strictly a family one with the sisters preparing feasts for their brothers and tying the *rakhi* they had prepared. Sometimes this includes a religious offering, puja in the home. In some places, both the brothers and the sisters wear new clothes and the women keep fast during the day. Women might also tie *rakhi* to other male relatives, neighbors, and close friends, signifying the special bond shared with them (Virtual Rakhi). When a girl feels a friend of the opposite sex has developed a kind of love too strong for her to reciprocate, she sends the guy a *rakhi* and turns the relationship into a sisterly one (Das).

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<sup>17</sup> This discrepancy should be studied further as it may lead to some insight into the mutual influences and intertwining of religious and folk beliefs through history.

At the *raksha bandhan* festival, the brothers take an oath to protect their sisters, and the sisters pray for the safety and well-being of their brothers (Rakhi Festival; Das). In the past, every woman, a wife, a daughter or a mother could tie this *rakhi* thread. The sages also used to tie it on the wrist of those who came seeking their blessings, and to themselves, to protect them from evil (Virtual Rakhi).

### **The celebration – the Brahmins**

On that day the Brahmins change their sacred white cotton threads, worn under their garments at all times. They commence reading the Veda for the next few months, as they believe that Vishnu, the lord of knowledge, reinstated the Vedas to Brahma on that day. The sacred thread is equated with God: it prolongs life and helps in the accomplishment of enlightenment and the ideal of human being. The thread is given to men from the high castes only. Its tied knots indicate that the wearer has achieved control over body, speech and mind. On the eve of the celebration, they clean themselves and observe a partial fast. During the ceremony, in the presence of the entire household, the family priest reads sacred texts, blesses the new thread and ties it to the recipient (Anderson 93-4; Virtual Rakhi). That ceremony seems to be connected with the other celebrations only through the use of tying a thread and blessing it, but that is significant as spinning threads and all textile crafts were part of the gifts of the Goddess (Gimbutas 67)<sup>18</sup>.

### **The celebration and the sacred Cow – Nepal**

In Nepal, everybody celebrates, regardless of caste, religion, sex or age. Hindus and Buddhists go to each other's temples and a sacred yellow<sup>19</sup> thread is tied on each person's wrist for good fortune (Das; Rai 129). That could be explained by the antiquity of the festival: if it is older than Hinduism and Buddhism and was later absorbed by them, the followers of different faiths can get together more easily on the basis of a tradition that predates their religions. That would place *raksha*

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<sup>18</sup> This was discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter 1.

<sup>19</sup> The use of yellow may be a later development closely connected with the worship of the Sun. On the other hand the term used is *rakhi* or *raksha bandhan*, the same as in India where it is often red and white. Further study is necessary.

*bandhan* before the Vedic times, as early as the Indus Valley Harappa civilization<sup>20</sup> in the second millennium BCE. The *rakhi* was worn for three months, and on the Festival of Lights, it was tied to the tail of a sacred cow, so that when death came a cow would be waiting to assist the diseased in the journey to the Gates of Judgment (Anderson 94).

That provides a very fruitful parallel. The idea about someone helping the dead after passing away is absent now in Bulgaria. But in India, the cow was a symbol of the Great Mother, as was the tree, to which the *martenitsa* was tied. One of the functions of the Great Goddess was the Mother of the Dead who would help the departed. In some of the oldest temples in the world, in Anatolia, she is represented as a mother giving birth with bulls, bees and vultures pictured around her (Gimbutas 328; Husain 49; Marazov, *The Visible Myth* 77-101). Only fragments of these old beliefs and rituals are preserved till our time, and a careful reconstruction is needed in order to create a more precise image of the common religion from which they sprang. We can conclude that there has been a similar understanding of what happened after death in both cultures.

The celebration in Nepal centered in the sunken square pond of Kumbeshwar in the temple of Mahadev or Shiva in Patan. In that temple there were two three-foot Shivalingams, phallic idols that represent the deity. One of them carved of gold and with a coiled serpent<sup>21</sup> around its whole body, was carried on the day before the festival into the pond on a platform. Young men splashed and dived in the pond while the red robed priest worshiped the god. Musical troupes with trumpets and drums circled the shrine and then a statue of the Goddess was carried from the neighboring temple and “presented to Lord Shiva.” The lingam was then carried to the platform in the pond; the stage for the festival was thus set (Anderson 94-5).

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<sup>20</sup> The Harappa or Indus Valley civilization developed along the Indus River in what is now Pakistan sometime between 6.000 and 1.500 B.C.E. before the Arians settled there. Mohenjo Daro also belongs to this magnificent civilization with developed agriculture, crafts, cities, religion, writing and political centralization.

<sup>21</sup> Dimock and Ramanujan discuss at length the role of Shiva in the control of snakes. (300-22)

The obvious meaning of the ceremony is the sacred union of the divine male and female<sup>22</sup>.

It is remarkable that the most important event, this sacred marriage on the eve of the festival, is celebrated with more rapture than the festival on the next day. That happens in some celebrations in Bulgaria, too, when a pagan festival is on the eve of a Christian one.<sup>23</sup> Maybe the reason for this is the absorption of an older very popular ritual which the population would not give up for a more recent religion; powerless to fight it, the new religious authority is content to participate and thus retain the privilege of having the last word.

On the festival day, women scoop pond water to pour on their heads and men jump in it, then each buys from the Brahmans, sitting nearby, the sacred *raksha* thread. The mantras the priests recite associate the *rakhi* with king Bali, who ultimately benefited from such thread as the goddess Lakshmi herself tied one on his wrist (Anderson 95-6; Das; "Rakhi").

Bali is worshiped as the king of the dead. It is remarkable that his sister Yamuna, personification of the river with the same name, gave immortality to the Lord of Death Yama through tying a *rakhi* (Virtual Rakhi). It seems that there was a particular link between the thread and avoidance of death and this is the way it is used by the shamans too (Armstrong 25-6).

### **The celebration and the food production – Gujrat**

In Gujarat, the devotees of Shiva seek forgiveness for any misdeeds on the *raksha bandhan* day. At the ceremony, a few twisted filaments of cotton are fastened around the Shivalingam<sup>24</sup> after soaking them in a mixture of cow's ghee<sup>25</sup>, milk,

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<sup>22</sup> A similar representation of that idea can be demonstrated in a six-inch and 5000 years old statue from Cyprus. The figure is the best example of many others, which represent a sitting female figure, from which a phallus rises. If watched from one side it was a sitting woman, from another – a phallus, and from a third perspective – a vulva. The effect could not be achieved accidentally, so it was aimed for consciously. Its meaning is explained by Gimbutas in connection with the life column, snake, phallus, and horns as symbol of regenerative energy (232). The similarity with Shiva's depictions is notable. It is also a parallel to the Patan ceremony.

<sup>23</sup> For example Christmas Eve has much more elaborate ritual than the next day's Christian celebration.

<sup>24</sup> This is the representation of Shiva in the form of phallus.



curd, urine and excreta, all used in the everyday life by the Indian population (Virtual Rakhi). The connection between the cow the tree of life and the Goddess was already discussed. I would only add that here the Shivalingam had its own *bandhan*, or tie, that drew its power directly from the Goddess-cow.

Everywhere the *rakhi* is prepared and the homes are cleaned before the festival, but the farming communities in Northern and Central India start a week earlier. A dark room where no sunlight or fresh air reaches is cleaned and washed with mud and cow dung. The women then decorate the place with rice solution designs that include the figures of a house, a child in a cradle, a mongoose and a woman with a pitcher. Then the mothers of sons go to the fields, bring earth in cups and sow in them a green leaf or barley. The cups are put in the dark room and worshipped. This is done for seven days till the full moon day. On this day the women keep fast and pray to Bhagwati for a good crop and the well-being of their sons. In the evening, they move out in a procession carrying the leaf cups on their heads to a pond or any other body of water and immerse them (Virtual Rakhi).

The whole ritual complex here is connected with the Goddess, called in this case Bhagwati. The water bodies and the image of the women with the cups with plants in them are symbols of the Goddess (Husain 25). The clean dark room, decorated with symbols of birth, rebirth, fertility and plenty, was a depiction of the womb of the Goddess from which all life was born.

Many authors emphasize that the *raksha bandhan* strengthens the dependence of women on the men in their lives by placing themselves under their protection (Gnanambal 10; Lal, V.). Actually, Lal argues that “*raksha bandhan* can be viewed as an occasion for reasserting a woman’s ties to her natal home” as opposed to her husband’s family. I would go further by positing that, at least symbolically, men cannot receive the blessing unless a woman decides to give the amulet to them and if they do not protect her. In many cases, it is the women that act as representations of the Goddess or as her priestesses. Without denying the sometimes-terrible situation of Indian women in abusive relationships, I would argue that the *raksha*

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<sup>25</sup> Ghee is purified butter.

*bandhan* festival is a possibility for women to exercise their power for the good of the family and the whole community and the *rakhi* is the symbol of their might.

For the people along the west coast of India, the Day of the full moon of Shraavan is the beginning of the new fishing season. Fishermen paint their boats and put flags on them in preparation. On the festival day, everyone is dancing and singing together, the sea god Varun is worshipped and coconuts are offered to him. A large number of devotees take ceremonial baths, and fairs are held at waterfronts. In the end, the decorated coconuts are thrown in the water with prayers for a plentiful fish catch. A coconut has three eyes and was a representation of Shiva, whose third eye had the power to kill. Thus the coconut is considered appropriate for offering to the Sea God, too (Virtual Rakhi). Although the festival is dedicated here to Varun, the connection with Shiva through the offerings is not lost.

### **The deities and the stories**

In Nepal and India the *raksha bandhan* is connected with different deities: some with deep roots in the pre-Vedic past while others are clearly part of the Aryan tradition. These are Shiva, Vishnu, the sea god Varuna and the lord of death Yama, as well as the goddesses Bhagwati, Lakshmi and Yamuna. In the *raksha bandhan* celebrations all the lords of the different worlds are worshipped—the lord of the mountain Shiva, the lord of the sea Varun and the lord of death Yama. Before those gods, the entire universe was under the care of the Goddess, and as she was celebrated before, now her successors are.

In this chapter I proved that the *martenitsa* and the *raksha bandhan* are both deeply connected with the agricultural calendar and the different transformations of the Goddess. In the next chapter, we are going to explore some stories from Persian folklore.

## Chapter 3. The Persian Folk Stories

People everywhere try to make sense of their surroundings and to pass their knowledge on to the next generations. In our day, we do that through schools, libraries and books. But what if we lived long before they were invented or we did not have access to them? We probably still would have liked to leave what we had learned about the world to our children and grandchildren, and we would have liked to leave not only what we already knew but also the questions with which we struggled and could not find answers, so that they could solve them.

For that reason, long ago people started putting knowledge in stories, songs, pictures and even dances. More than any other form, the story allows for metaphors, symbols and other means of expression to create new associations between subjects which can generate new ideas, questions and solutions. Let us examine two groups of stories—one about the Bulgarian *Baba Marta* and the other about the weather patterns in Iran— and see where they will lead us. Maybe they can help us understand the *martenitsa* and the *raksha bandhan* better.

### ***Baba Marta* and her brothers**

Here is the description of *Baba Marta* (Grandmother Marta)<sup>26</sup>, written by the renowned Bulgarian ethnographer and folklorist Mikhail Arnaudov.

The month of March, personified by *Baba Marta*, is considered variable and capricious. A story is told of a woman that took her sheep to pasture in the mountain, and, when she was told, “Grandmother, do not take out your sheep, for *Marta* is not to be trusted”, she answered, “*Marta* is a woman and I am a woman! What would she do to me?” But it got cold; a blizzard started, and took away the old woman with her sheep. On that day the old women do not go out early, so that they do not meet *Baba Marta*: she was going to be angry and the weather was

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<sup>26</sup> See chapter 1.

going to be bad. It is auspicious for girls to meet her, so that the weather is warm and good (*Celebrations* 76).<sup>27</sup>

On another occasion, a poor man asked to be freed from poverty and she advised him to pick firewood; she next sent winter cold and he was able to sell his wood at a good price (Panaiotova; Popov, *Bulgarian Folk* 32).

Growing up in Bulgaria, I have also heard stories describing *Baba Marta* as a sister of *Goliam Sechko* and *Maluk Sechko*—Big Ax-man and Little Ax-man<sup>28</sup>—who are associated with January and February. They are responsible for the winter cold and snow, but their sister is very dangerous with the unexpected changes she causes. There is an old saying “*Sechko* cuts, *Martha* skins, April harvests pelts.”<sup>29</sup> People are said to be careful to please *Baba Marta*: everything is cleaned, they put on their best clothes, only the young and beautiful go out, while the old stay inside in the morning – all that to make her smile in approval. When she is in a good mood the sun shines, when she is sad it is gloomy and rainy, when she is angry there are winds and storms, torrents or droughts. When she cleans her house and shakes out her bedcovers, it snows.

The two brothers and the sister sometimes quarrel with each other, which also upsets the weather. A story is often told of the three siblings making wine for the winter and dividing it among themselves equally. The brothers drank theirs quickly in the long winter nights and decided to take from their sister’s. Little by little they finished hers also. Then, one evening *Marta* decided to have some wine and when she went in the cellar to pour some, she found her cask empty and realized that her brothers had robbed her. She was extremely angry—the weather was horrible. But then she told herself that, after all, they were her brothers and she loved them, and next year there would be more wine, so she calmed down and smiled.

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<sup>27</sup> In other variations the story includes goats and the old woman is turned into stone.

<sup>28</sup> Голям Сечко и Малък Сечко - *Goliam Sechko* and *Maluk Sechko* - Big Ax-man and Little Ax-man. I often imagine them as Paul Bunyan.

<sup>29</sup> Сечко сече, Марта дере, Април кожи бере. *Sechko seche, Marta dere, April kozhi bere.* “*Sechko* cuts, *Martha* skins, April harvests pelts.” Good!

Two brothers and a sister personify periods of time during the winter and the beginning of the spring in Bulgaria. A similar structure can be found in Iran.

### **“The Old Woman’s Wind” and the folk calendar of Iran**

In Iran the time between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox—December 21 to March 21—is divided into several periods<sup>30</sup>.

First, the *Big Forty* lasts for forty days and forty nights—December 21 to January 31—and comprises the ancient month of *Dey* and ten days from the month of *Bahman*. The winter solstice, which is a major celebration in Iran, marks its beginning. Second, follows the *Little Forty* for twenty days and twenty nights—February 1–20—ending *Bahman*. Third, comes the month of *Esfand*—February 20 to March 20—with most unreliable weather. There is a verse in Iran, which says: “It is the month of *Esfand* and there are thirty kinds of weather, every hour – different [kind of] weather”<sup>31</sup> (Donaldson 95). After these three comes *Noruz*, or the Persian New Year.

Additionally there are transitional periods between those three. The last four days from the *Big* and the first four ones from the *Little Forty* have particularly bad weather because the *Big* and the *Little Forty* are fighting.<sup>32</sup> In turn, the last four days of the *Little Forty* and the next four days mark the “*Breathing of the Earth*”, when, awakened from her winter sleep, the Earth starts to breathe. The trees also breathe from the tips of their branches (Donaldson 95).

The next transitional period is longer, possibly because it also marks the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one: it is expected for the last ten days before *Noruz*, or the Iranian New Year—March 11-20—to be cold, while the days after the New Year day are symbolic of the four seasons.

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<sup>30</sup> The information on the folk stories and sayings from Iran are from a book on the Mohammedan magic and folklore in Iran or on “the old life with its fears and superstitions”, written by the Christian missionary Bess Allen Donaldson in 1938.

<sup>31</sup> “*Mah-i-Esfand ast wa si fand ast, har sa’ati yaik fand ast*” (Donaldson 95).

<sup>32</sup> The period between Jan. 28 and Feb. 4 is called in Persian *char-char*, or four-four.

This is how Donaldson tells the story of the four or five days after *Noruz* or the “*Old Woman’s Wind*<sup>33</sup>”—March 21-25.

Stories about this wind are not always the same, but the one most frequently heard is that at the time of [the prophet] Mohammad there was an old woman who possessed one female camel. One spring this camel failed to be with young at the usual time, so the old woman came to the prophet and asked him to pray that God would give five more cold days so that her camel might foal. The prayer was answered with five cold, windy days, and this wind has continued to blow every spring since that time, and it is very auspicious for camels (96).

### **Personified periods of the year**

The first two periods in the Persian tradition have suspiciously numeric names, Big Forty and Little Forty, almost as if the stories were telling us not to try and see anything behind the literary meaning of the number of days and nights. However they are believed to be fighting between themselves like persons, possibly brothers, for there is no word that they were ever hurt, but in the process they managed to change the weather like gods. These qualities and the adjectives “big” and “little” attached to the names, as well as the general association with January and February, all point to a possible common origin of the Iranian stories with the Bulgarian ones about *Goliam Sechko* and *Maluk Sechko*.

If the Bulgarian and the Persian stories are derived from a common source, we should be looking for this source at a time before the converting to Christianity in Bulgaria in the ninth century and before the spread of Islam in Persia in the seventh century AD for both religions are not favorable towards any superstition or magic<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> باد ی پیر زن - bad-i-pir-zan. Pir has been translated as **1. n.** master, oldster, preceptor (teacher, principal). **2. a.** old, aged, ancient, doddering, gray, hoar, senescent, senile, worm-eaten. It has the connotations of old age and its diverse effects of senility and wisdom.

<sup>34</sup> Even in our day there are calls from Bulgarian orthodox priests against the wearing of *martenitsa* (Frants).

According to the social anthropologist and human ecologist Massoume Price, the names of the twelve Persian months have a Zoroastrian origin and they are rooted in that pre-Islamic Iranian religion<sup>35</sup>. Zoroastrians believed in two primal forces, good and evil, life-reinforcing and life-threatening. The Lord of Wisdom – *Ahura Mazda* – created goodness; and the Hostile Spirit – *Angra Mainyu (Ahriman)* created all that was bad. They are constantly in conflict and finally the evil spirits will be defeated. Dualism is characteristic of many of the Bulgarian folk traditions and stories in which the struggles between good and bad, light and darkness, god and devil, take center stage (Popov, *Saints 20*). This struggle is also reflected in the division of the year into good and bad part both in Bulgaria and in India as we saw in the previous chapters.

The names of the twelve Zoroastrian deities have survived as months of the year in the modern Persian calendar (Price). The Lord of Wisdom and the *Amesha Spenta*, his six most important helpers, protectors of the sky, waters, earth, fire, plants, animals and humans, form the seven Holy Immortals. They also represent different aspects of Ahura Mazda's attributes and transfer them to humans. The immortals all have months dedicated to them.

The month *Day* or *Dadar*, which meant creator, is dedicated to Ahura Mazda. The eight, fifteenth and twenty-third of every month were also called "Day". *Vohu Manah* or *Bahman*, one of the *Amesha Spenta* and the protector of animals, is the patron of the next month. He is a powerful symbol of creative good and the personification of the principle of cosmic order and "Good Purpose" (Price).

The last month of the year is dedicated to *Spenta Armaiti, Espandarmaz*, or *Esphand*, Holy Devotion and Unconditional Love, also known as *Ameretat* or *Mordad*, immortality. This female deity protects Mother Earth, supports all plant life and is guardian of herdsmen and farmers. She is According to Price the Greeks worshiped her as Demeter and in Armenia she was known as *Spendaramet*.

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<sup>35</sup> In the Islamic period the same structure was taken and transformed into the Iranian version of Shiite Islam with the Twelve Imams (Price).

In the Zoroastrian beliefs there is no brotherly connection between *Dey* and *Bahman*, no sibling rivalry between the two of them and *Esphand*. Then again, *Dey* is obviously of superior power and that may account of the adjective “big” attached to the corresponding period, the *Big Forty*.

*Bahman*, on one hand is the protector of animals and symbol of creative good and does not seem to have a connection with the stories with which we started. On the other hand, in some peripheral languages of the Iranian group, like Ossetic, the corresponding period is considered a terrible or treacherous month. In Bulgaria the two brothers *Goliam Sechko* and *Malak Sechko* are also associated with danger and difficulty. Conversely, this is also the time of the ceremonial beginning of the work in the vineyards, the birth of the lambs, and the availability of milk in the diet of people after several months of not milking the animals (Popov, *Bulgarian Folk* 18; Price).

The month of *Esphand* and its association with the female deity, protector of Mother Earth and guardian of the herdsmen and farmers, fits quite well with our stories. It seems to have the same function as the Bulgarian March associated with *Baba Marta*, when the special amulets for protection, *martenitsa*, were tied to everything, including the young domestic animals, especially lambs and goat kids, as well as to the fruit trees. Additionally that month is considered unreliable in both traditions.

The beliefs in Pre-Christian Bulgaria and Pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian Persia about the different months form a match. The transitional periods, however are not reflected in the Zoroastrian calendar. Possibly, they are relics from older than the Zoroastrian traditions. This idea is supported by the scholars who study the development of the calendar systems (Panaino et al.). That means that these transitional periods originate in the time before Zoroaster, who most likely lived in the seventh century BC<sup>36</sup>, possibly from the Assyrian or Babylonian cultures. But

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<sup>36</sup> There are different opinions about the time Zoroaster lived, dating between the second millennium and the sixth century BC.



before we discuss that link, let us examine if there is a hint of the transitional intervals in the Bulgarian folk heritage.

### **The transitional periods<sup>37</sup>**

The *Char char* or the last four days from the Big Forty and the first four days from the Little Forty when the weather is bad because they are fighting can be easily associated with *Goliam Sechko* and *Malak Sechko* and their brotherhood and possible sibling rivalry. That accounts for the first transition between the ancient months.

A parallel to the period of the Breathing of the Earth could be provided by one of the biggest celebrations in Bulgaria—St. Tryphon’s Day on February 2<sup>nd</sup> (or 14<sup>th</sup>) when the ritual cutting of the grape-vines is done, but this needs further study.

The days after *Noruz* that correspond to the four seasons in Iran are reflected in the Rodopa Mountain in Bulgaria, where people believe that the so called “counted days” show the weather in the seven summer months—the weather on March 1 predicts what the month of March will be, March 2 corresponds to April and so on till March 7 which corresponds to August (Arnaudov, *Celebrations* 77).

The last period is the time of the “*Old Woman’s Wind*.” The story of the poor old woman who needs the supreme power to help her to survive economically through the prayer of Prophet Mohamed to Allah is connected with two of the stories about *Baba Marta*.

First, this is the one about the poor man who asked Baba Marta directly to help him. She told him to gather fire-wood, and because he obeyed, even though it did not make perfect sense to do that after the end of the winter, he was awarded with a very handsome profit which answered his wish. In both stories, the divine being helps a devoted follower. In the Iranian story, it is Allah who was approached by his prophet; remarkably, the period is not named after Mohamed name or Allah, but with that of the unknown old and poor woman. It is possible that here we observe the transformation of a powerful Ancient Goddess whose temple is a

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<sup>37</sup> See Appendix B.

natural feature like a mountain, a spring, a river, etc. into one of the revered Muslim ladies with a mausoleum(Sala).

The second story is the one about the old woman who made *Baba Marta* angry by not obeying her and going with her flock of sheep or goats before the allowed time to summer pasture. This tale seems to be the exact opposite of what can happen when *Marta* is not obeyed, implying what good luck could be had if one obeys and pleases her. The direct power of the deity over the weather and the birth of the young farm animals is obvious in both the Bulgarian and the Iranian folk tales. It is very becoming that each goat's kid and each lamb gets its own *martenitsa* also.

I will finally mention that *Marta* is *Baba* or old woman and the cold days after March 21 are the days of the old woman.<sup>38</sup>

### **Jumping over fire for *barakat***

As already mentioned in Chapter 1, in Bulgaria there is a tradition to burn the gathered garbage in the yard or in several places in the village and to jump over these fires saying “Here is my yellow complexion, give me your red one.”

An analogous tradition exists in Iran, but it is connected there with the New Year celebration of *Noruz*. On the Wednesday before the main celebration—it can fall between March 14 and 20—every family burns fires and jumps over them. Everyone says: “My yellow color I give to you, and your red color you give me!” (Donaldson 120). This is done for *barakat*.<sup>39</sup> In the contemporary Persian language, *barakat* is also used in the wishes on special occasions and it means blessing, bliss, benediction, beatitude, fatness, felicity.

Apart from the exact date, the tradition is identical, even the words are the same. Besides, the date is not matching because in both countries it is not a fixed day—in Iran, it falls on the Wednesday before *Noruz*; and in Bulgaria, it could be on any of the big celebrations in March depending on the region—March 1, or *Baba Marta*; the Forty Holy

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<sup>38</sup> That will be discussed at some length later in the chapter about Afghanistan.

<sup>39</sup> The information is from an interview I had with an Iranian student from Teheran in the University of Minnesota in February 2011.

Martyrs' Day on March 9<sup>th</sup>; and the Annunciation on March 25<sup>th</sup> (this is also when the Bulgarian Muslims use to celebrate *Noruz* (Popov, *Bulgarian Folk* 34-5).

Furthermore People in Bulgaria tie *martenitsas* with the wish “to be white and red” and “for *bereket*.” The word *bereket* is often translated as good luck, but it has the implication that this luck comes from a superior power in the form of fertility and plenty from the earth; it is also associated with someone’s hard work.

So many coincidences could not be accidental—there should be a common source for the folk traditions in Bulgaria and Iran in the time before Zoroastrianism. This leads us to a time when magic was part of official religious practices everywhere.

### **Magic rituals**

As pointed in the Introduction, the occult arts around the world share numerous common features because of their common origin in Siberia but they were developed and further influenced by local contributions. That means that a single common element like red thread or even red-and-white twined thread could not establish a satisfactorily correlation between the traditions in different countries or time periods. In order to do that, more parallels are needed like a common meaning or the use of the thread. In the case of Iran, we have the stories, fragmented though they may be, supported by the written evidence of magic rituals performed in ancient Babylon in which a sacred thread was used.

### **The Babylonian tie**

The sacred thread, surprisingly, can be found in an ancient Babylonian<sup>40</sup> text on curing a patient from the so-called *Mussuu*, a ritual tablet of more than thirty spells (Böck 1-2). According to Idries Shah, the Iranian magic was strongly influenced by the Babylonian one around the time of the conquest (Shah 103). The tablet is excavated at Assur in a private house belonging to the scribes of the temple. A similar tablet from Nineveh is used for the reading of the damaged parts of the *Mussuu* tablet. One of the rituals that are described includes the

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<sup>40</sup> Babylon lasted from 1900 to 538 B.C. when it is captured by Achaemenid Persia. Numerous clay tablets with texts on them are preserved. They provide priceless information about the life not only in Babylon but about the countries with which it came into contact.

therapeutic use of young date palm branches to tie on the hands and feet and then prophylactic binding with “woven wool from a not yet mounted kid (and) from a not yet mounted lamb (around his hands and feet)” and performing a massage in which “the overall direction of movement is from head to toe and, in particular, from the limbs downwards.” There is no question for Barbara Böck that the described massage (*Mussuåu*) was clearly a therapeutic practice; but the direction of its manipulation indicates relation to magic. It holds the belief that disease is caused by beings that the therapy was intended to expel. Once these beings were driven out, the body was protected by tying amulets to the affected parts (Böck 7, 11).

The act of tying, included in the tradition of *martenitsa*, is also present in the Babilonian ritual. Böck distinguishes between two effects of knots: beneficial and harmful, depending on the intention of the person who ties the knot. It is believed that the demons and their corresponding diseases were caught by knots, bands, threads, strings, or amulets, fixed around the possessed body parts. In the healing event, knots generally serve a benevolent purpose that can be further categorized according to its active or passive efficacy. Tying amulets might be passive apotropaic, but it could be the ultimate action of catching the demon. Knots symbolize also rings, which characterize completeness as well as protective encircling. The wrapping of red wool around the bed, pouring water around it, or drawing a circle of flour around the bed and the gates of the sick man’s house serve as a defense against demons and are intended to keep the patient safe. Demons were thought to have been unable to penetrate such a shield. The symbolic meaning of such protective circles is a contrast to the corners and angles where evil spirits could leave, enter, or hide in.

An illustrative example for the active effect of binding is the following incantation.

“Uttu took the thread into her hand, Istar made the thread of Uttu ready, made the skillful woman sit down to her piece of clothing; she spun with a spindle white wool, black wool, a double thread, a mighty

thread, a great thread, a multicolored thread, a thread that cuts the oath, against the words of bad portent, an oath (caused) by men, against the curses of the gods, a thread that cuts the oath; she tied the head, the hands, the feet of this man, so that Marduk, son of Eridu, the prince, could rip it off with his pure hands. May he remove the thread (representing) the oath into the field, the pure place, may the evil oath step aside, may this man be purified, cleansed, may he be entrusted into the propitious hands of his god!" (Böck 14)

The ritual calls among others for the use of red wool threads around the bed and the wrist and ankles of the sick person. The circles continue to be drawn in magic rituals and their traces are found in the shape of the Balkan and Slavic folk dances.

Having in mind the close connections of the Asia Minor people and the Thracians, who inhabited the Bulgarian territory from the late third millennium BC to the time of the Roman rule and the creation of the Bulgarian state in 681 AD, the magical practice could have been transferred in that time. It is more likely, however, that this happened earlier, before the Thracians, with the spread of the agricultural revolution from the Fertile Crescent to the Balkans and the consequent transactions between the people of the two regions for which there are numerous proofs and they are well documented (Marazov, "Afterword"; Fol).

The latest studies of the Neolithic Revolution, or the advent of agriculture, point to Mesopotamia and its neighboring territories from which moving human masses that had mastered the art of growing animals and plants for their food, clothes, transportation and other needs spread it as a package east and west: complete with the domesticated plants and animals, the knowledge, and the necessary technologies to prepare goods from the new resources. It was in the Fertile Crescent, that the Neolithic founder crops of emmer wheat, einkorn, barley, flax, chick pea, pea, lentil, bitter vetch; and three of the most important animals, goats, sheep and pigs, were domesticated (Diamond 101; McGovern 29). The development of the domestic crafts of making of threads, ropes, and

clothes was also part of this complex and connected to the cult of the Goddess. It was likely that this knowledge was coded in myths and rituals.

Features included in the traditions of *Baba Marta* like the care of the young domestic animals, characteristically lambs and goats, the prediction of yields and harvests, and the mention of wine and grapes all signify that tradition as part of such a complex agricultural package.

It is impossible to imagine that Iran did not get the whole complex of the Neolithic culture complete with the Mother Earth Goddess and the magic. It is possible, though that in different regions different parts of this complex survived due to later developments. One of the factors could be the early development in Iran of written culture and a strong bureaucratic state, which took over most of the spread of knowledge.

Conversely, in Iran we can observe how the change of the calendar does not destroy the previous system of seasonal celebrations. It could either incorporate them, sometimes, changing slightly the time and the stories, or establish parallel celebrations of both the old and the new. The same happened in Bulgaria, and these adjustments in the calendar systems can account for small discrepancies in the celebrations in the two countries.

Despite all the hurdles, this ancient knowledge is present in the very detailed weather chart for the winter and the early spring, formed by the Persian folk stories.

Both groups of stories reflect a temperate climate: Bulgaria and North Iran are in the temperate zone, with four seasons—maybe a bit warmer in the plains of Iran, all the same with four seasons. Writing from Minnesota, it is clear that this is not the continental temperate where the winter is not nearly over by March and two of the four seasons, autumn and spring, are much shorter than the other two, summer and winter. The Bulgarian and the Iranian type of climate is often influenced by large bodies of water—such as the Mediterranean, the

Black and the Caspian seas—which make the extremes milder and prolong the transitional seasons.

The climate model of the stories would fit mostly the skirts of the mountains in the northern half of Iran. Those were the best locations for the people from the Neolithic and the Bronze periods (Sala). Similar is the situation in Bulgaria. The deserts and the southern hot parts of Iran and the highest mountains in both countries would have different timetable for the change of seasons. Apparently, with the movement east and west, the Neolithic people looked for similar conditions and settled there, most probably mixing with the less numerous local populations.

As for the shamanism and the magic, if it did not develop locally, based on the common human experience, possibly it was spread by the nomadic herding tribes which lived in the mountains close to the agricultural settlements. The two groups were often in conflict but they needed each other<sup>41</sup>. Some of those tribes most likely were the Indo-Europeans, which later they settled and the new nomads were the Turks who moved from Siberia south and west in Central Asia and beyond (Sala).

This chapter has demonstrated that the folk stories of Iran and Bulgaria are rooted in very old times when agriculture was young and these stories likely have played a role in the spread of the original agricultural package. In the next chapter we will examine several other traditions of the sacred thread and will ask the question whether they belong to the same complex as the martenitsa.

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<sup>41</sup> Apart from the obvious trade connections, there are codependences in the production cycle. For example, the farmers needed the fertilizer provided by the grazing animals and the pastoralists needed the lower fields for pasture in the winter after harvest. A couple of years ago, my father in a conversation with me, told me that in the time of his youth in the Rodopa Mountain in Bulgaria the lowland peasants used to allow the sheep to graze in the winter wheat fields. The wheat, sown in the fall, grew before the snowfall and if it was higher than a few centimeters any freezing of the snow might pull it off the ground and ruin the crop. The sheep cut it at the desired height and broke the crust of the snow without damaging the stems.

## Chapter 4

### The sacred thread of the Hmong<sup>42</sup>

The Hmong are a little and partitioned nation. According to their legends, they originate in the Iranian plateau, southern Russia or Siberia and from there, around 3000 BC, they moved to China, where they appeared in historic sources as a barbaric tribe with shamanic religious practices. Constantly under pressure from the Han Chinese, they separated and moved around the empire. Finally some of them transferred to Laos at the end of the nineteenth century. Because of their participation in the Vietnam War as allies of the United States, many of them spent years in camps before they were able to move in the U.S.A. Their connection to the land and their agricultural skills are remarkable. Large groups live now in the Midwest and California (Mote 88-108).

Most of the information I have about the Hmong sacred thread comes from the beautifully written book of an American anthropologist, Sue Murphy Mote<sup>43</sup> and an interview I conducted with Chia, a Hmong woman in her thirties, who grew in Wisconsin and lives in Minnesota. Chia's family is also in the United States and she has consulted with them, mainly with her parents, about the thread. I am very grateful to her for the honest discussion of her heritage.

#### The name

I met several Hmong students from the University of Minnesota at a community festival in St. Paul in September 2010, and they told me that the name of the red and white amulet that I was showing to them—the *martenitsa*—was *hua-bao*. Chia asked her parents about the name and found out that this name is not

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<sup>42</sup> All the information about the Hmong traditions come from the interview that I made with Chia in June 2011 in Roseville, Minnesota, except when stated otherwise.

<sup>43</sup> The most important characteristic of Mote's work is the author's deep respect and understanding of the lives of her fellow human beings. The study of the Hmong traditions, the difficulties of moving to a new place for people closely connected with the land and their agricultural tradition, the role of the shaman are just some of the important aspects of this study that informed my work.



correct<sup>44</sup>. According to Chia's family, the action, the tying of the string on the wrist is *ki-te*<sup>45</sup> and the ceremony itself is called *hu-pli*. "*Pli* is the word for spirit and *hu* is the word for call", Chia translates, "so, call the spirits".

### **The white string brings good blessings**

The Hmong usually wear white string which brings good blessings. It can be used in any time of the year in various occasions—weddings, births and graduations<sup>46</sup>—when the family and some friends are invited.

For example, during weddings, all the family members tie strings on the bride's and the groom's wrists to wish them good fortune and good marriage. To welcome a new baby, the guests tie it sometimes on the baby and sometimes on the parents; they bless the child and all the guests say their prayers for that child.

Chia explains that the material does not seem to be important but the color: "I don't know if it is my mom's preference, but for her it has to be a little bit thick, not really thin. A small thread wouldn't really work. It has to have some width to it".

When preparing for celebrations, the yarn is cut and all the pieces are tied on chopsticks or skewers which are arranged on a large plate of goodies, flowers and fruit<sup>47</sup>. And then, when it's time, usually the women give the strings to the guests and ask them to tie them.

How long to wear the strings depend on the family tradition and the individual. Some people wear them for long time until they wear off. Others discard them the next day. After a big ceremony usually just one string is preserved and all the rest are cut off.

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<sup>44</sup> I mention this here because *hua-bao* could be the name of a sacred string in other region of the country or among the Hmong who are still living in China—I have no way to answer that question at this time.

<sup>45</sup> Mote spells this *khi tes* (159) according to a complicated way of representing the Hmong language through the Latin alphabet. I have used the phonetic transcription as with all the other names in this work. This is also the spelling that my informant gave me.

<sup>46</sup> Both Chia and Mote stress the importance of education for the Hmong. This is the reason graduations from high school or college are celebrated as weddings and births.

<sup>47</sup> "[In] the plate of goodies that goes [to the guests], the flowers have to be white—for wedding, for school celebration, for a baby, for all celebrations. White flowers would be the way to go. You could have accented colored flowers to go with it, but the main flowers, the big flowers have to be white. And I think that the white color just represents positiveness and just means good in our culture".

## **Welcome a new family member**

The blessing ceremony for a new baby is usually done before the baby's first birthday: the earlier, the better. People believe that if the ceremony for the baby is not done all the blessings are not received; he or she might not have good health in the future. "Most people try to do it between 3 to 6 months", says Chia. "I remember my in-laws trying to push us to do it before our son started to walk".

For the younger generation the ceremony is done to introduce the new baby to the relatives, and the good fortune part is not perceived as crucially important.

Every new member is welcomed by a string-tying ceremony. According to Mote, it ties the family together (84). When she visited the family of one of the Hmong refugees in Laos, white strings were tied on her wrist by the local elders. While they were tying the string, they were saying, "Ahhhh [on a descending note], today is a special day, a special night, that you come back to see us. And I'm going to tie this string for you and you will be healthy, won't have sickness. You will have luck. You can do what you wanted. You'll live for a hundred years and never be sick" (159).

This is a distinct function of the sacred thread—to introduce a new family member or a guest to the community, to symbolically tie that new person to this family and to this community and to secure good luck to the person and to the family.

## **Red or white string for the sick**

### **Serious or small illness**

When someone is sick the ceremony of tying string is performed in combination with a shaman ceremony. Here is the description that Chia gave me.

Other times we do white string tying on our wrists for someone who is very sick. When it comes to health it may be a little bit different depending on how sick the person is. If it was a serious illness like cancer it would often include a sacrifice of either a pig or a cow and with that you will do a string tying around the person's hand. It will only be for the sick person. Sometimes it will be for their family too; just to make sure that good health comes to the whole family; but when we are focusing on just one person, we just tie it on his or her hand.

And when it is a small sickness, like someone complains a lot of stomachaches or headaches, a string tying celebration isn't necessary, sometimes we will sacrifice a smaller animal like a chicken and that'll be fine. Sometimes they will do hand tying as well. Oftentimes when we tie hands there is some type of animal sacrifice to call in, to give to the spirits: "This is, you know, an exchange for your blessings (Interview Hmong)."

In some cases red tie is tied. My informant explained that, red is done more privately and the white string is used when all the family members and guests tie it.

She did not have personal experience with the red one, but she knew that sometimes an elder gives a red piece of yarn or cloth to a child. It is just one and sometimes it is yarn, but most of the times it is a red piece of cloth that is torn or cut into a long stripe and it is tied on. The white is usually the one that the Hmong use for different types of ceremonies and blessings. Not so much the red one.

### **Red protects from bad spirits**

"So, I think [the red] is used more when either a shaman gives it to a person who may be ill or not feeling well, or when a parent or a grandparent or an elder gives it to one of their family members or children to ward off the evil", she tells me. "The red ones aren't used [at] a party [where] everybody gives it out. So when there is a big party, a big ceremony for someone's wedding, baby, health, it's usually the white yarn".

The Hmong use strings for healing ceremonies in a way reminiscent to the ancient Babylonians. With the red string they tie the harmful spirit causing the illness and the white secures the help of the beneficial spirit bringing good fortune.

### **The ceremony**

There are elements in the healing ceremony that are included depending on the seriousness of the illness—the participation of a shaman or just a family elder, the sacrifice of a big or small animal, and the tying of a string done by one person or a whole family.

Said Chia: "And often times that is a bigger ceremony that involves a sacrifice of an animal and then tying hands. When we *hu-pli* for somebody it involves many

steps. It involves a meal and a shaman often times, and it involves elders talking, it involves tying, blessing strings on hands and maybe a second meal...”

In the Introduction, I shared the story of the young Hmong girl wearing on her wrist red and white twined strings. I remember she told me that the strings were given to her in her family and when they wear off new ones are tied<sup>48</sup>. In any case, I can understand now that the red yarn was tied to disable an illness in her family and the white was supposed to bring good blessings. This is exactly what the *martenitsa* is given for, although in Bulgaria, we have lost the separate meanings of the colors.

### **The elderly**

The tying of string could be done on any day, and sometimes it does not involve having a *hu-pli* ceremony or a shaman. If a person has a bad dream and the dream is considered a prediction for misfortune, the whole family may get a string to make sure that they are going to be well. Usually the elders initiate such ceremony.

### **“Just give it a good blessing”**

Chia elaborated on the giving of the blessings extensively. There is no set age at which the Hmong can start *ki-te*. Sometimes kids do it, but usually the teenagers tie the string for the first time.

“My parents always urge us to learn how to give blessings through the strings. It’s quite extensive, it sounds very poetic when the elders do it so it’s hard to catch what they’re saying and understand what they’re saying when they do it. It differs with the occasion. My parents always say “Just say it from the heart”. It’s not something that they learned or rehearsed, but then it just seems so smooth... The way they say it is very rhythmic, very smooth and it just sounds very poetic. And when me and my brothers and sisters, my generation, we try it, it just doesn’t come out that way”.

The strings are first offered to the men and then to the women. Not everyone is expected to tie a string and often the older people do it for the family. Some people decline to tie a string out of embarrassment or just because they do not feel it

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<sup>48</sup> She did not mention shaman ceremony, which may have been because an unfamiliar person asked in front of the whole class.

necessary. Making an appearance and showing that you are giving your blessings is important.

### **Two knots**

When tying the string it is important to think positive thoughts about that person and the words and the blessings that you are saying are positive to that person.

My informant explains: “You are supposed to try to hold on to the string for the whole time you are saying your prayer or a blessing... I know the elders will tie slower and they either speak slower or they have a lot to say. So, they’ll tie slower and when they are done tying, they will hold on to their string until they are done saying the rest of their blessing”.

Usually there are two knots—one knot and then a little space is left and then another knot, so there is this little loop. Chia says, “I don’t know if there is a meaning to it or it’s just preferred this way”.

The Bulgarian martenitsa is tied once, but in a similar way people hold on to it while saying the short blessing or wish. Maybe no one remembers why it is done that way but people repeat the actions that they have seen when they were young.

The saying of the blessings or the wishes when tying is important because it repeats the way an amulet is charged with power through a mantra or a magic spell. In this case this is thought of as a wish or blessing because the spell chanted over an amulet has to be positive, like a wish.

## **The Shaman**

### **The red strings on the shaman altar**

Mote was introduced to a Hmong shaman woman, and in the living room of this shaman were the altar and other arrangements. She speaks about the red strings stretched from the altar to the sides of the room and combined with two white bamboo stalks on the ceiling (60).

Chia tells me that some shamans decorate their areas like that—with red fabric strips tied to the bowls they use. “It’s not so much red strings or yarn as red

fabric; and again I don't know what it symbolizes, but it will be tied onto the bowls that they use, the drum that they use”.

Neither Mote, nor my informer discussed the meaning of the red strings on the shamans' altars. They may be seen as protection from the harmful spirits.

Some of the ceremonies can be long—only the shaman's part can extend from an hour to many hours and that's just component of the ceremony, there is always a meal for the guests and the hand-tying. When the shaman goes into a trance he or she words off the evil spirits, and calls on the “good, positive spirits”.

The hand-tying is usually done after the shaman ceremony. Maybe, because the shaman has already called the good spirits and called away the bad spirits.

### **The role of the shaman**

They are very important figures in the Hmong community. The shaman is like a priest, like a fortuneteller, or a psychic. Some seek a shaman to find out what's wrong with them, or find out what's going to happen in their future. A shaman would be called to bring good fortune, good luck for the family for the New Year or to heal the sick. The shaman that Mote met was healing people who sought her help with herbs and other remedies (70).

Some shamans prefer to keep their name small and to work within their family versus going out of their family; when a family looks for a shaman to perform a certain ceremony, they look first within the family.

### **Bad dreams and blessing for the car**

Apparently new spaces occupied by people can get their sacred ties. For example, my informant tells me about a contemporary development with her in-laws who have tied it to the car—the stick or the wheel. Both her brothers-in-law got in accidents and “they wanted to ward off those spirits that were causing the accidents, so they were tied onto the [inside of the] car”.

The Hmong always tie the strings on the wrists or on the ankle for babies. They do not tie it on animals or trees. On occasion white string is tied on doorknobs of homes.

Possibly, that is done to invite the good spirits inside. According to this logic, the red fabrics that are put outside the houses in Bulgaria<sup>49</sup> have the role to ward off harmful spirits. Indeed this is the explanation given by informers and repeated by the ethnographers.

This chapter discusses the Hmong sacred thread which is used to secure good health and good fortune like the other ties, but it is not connected with any seasonal or agricultural change. It is often initiated by the elders as a response to some mishap or illness or it is an important part of the rites of passage like birth or marriage. In more contemporary times, finishing a degree in education is added. The string is tied usually to a person. Remarkable exceptions are the house and—in our times—the car, where people need to feel secure.

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<sup>49</sup> This was discussed in chapter 1.

## Chapter 5.

### Other sacred threads—Pakistan, Afghanistan, Armenia and Sri Lanka

In the course of my research, it became clear that there are cultures in which there are sacred threads, but people either have no special names for them or do not think of them as such. When I showed the Bulgarian *martenitsa* to my various informants and explained that it is given for health and good luck, only then they would remember that there is something like that in their traditions and tell me about it. I had the same reaction after seeing the *raksha bandhan* and the Hmong thread. Only after the interviews<sup>50</sup> I was able to search in the scholarly literature for those phenomena.

In the previous chapters I reviewed the *martenitsa* and the *raksha bandhan*, which define the cultural identity of the people who use them—the Bulgarians, the Nepalese and the Indians. I also examined the sacred thread of the Hmong and the stories of the Iranians. If these traditions are in fact related, as the evidence suggests, then in the cultures geographically situated on the way between the two end locations—Bulgaria and Laos—there will be more threads or at least some relics from older practices connected with such sacred threads. An example of such culture is the Persian which still passes on the stories about the *Old Woman's Wind*, the *Big* and the *Little Forty* and their relationships but has no sacred thread or amulet<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> I have interviewed an Iranian and a Hmong woman, a man from Peshawar, Pakistan where there are many Afghan refugees, three persons from Armenia and three students from Sri Lanka. I have also had several shorter conversations with one Chinese person, two more Hmong, one more Armenian, one Serbian, one Bosnian, and two Turkish people. The Chinese person mentioned an amulet made of red thread and traditionally given for the Chinese New Year, but I did not conduct further study on it. The Serbian, the Bosnian and the Turkish did not know anything like that in their countries. In previous years I had talked also with an Indian guru, several other Indian people, another Chinese. I have no record of those, but they have informed my work.

<sup>51</sup> These stories are discussed in chapter 3.



Let us examine now several examples where the thread is known—Pakistan and Afghanistan, Armenia, and Sri Lanka.

## **The Magic thread of Pakistan and Afghanistan**

An intriguing connection surfaced in the conversation with Shahid from Pakistan. His origin from the northwestern territories of the country which are closest in cultural aspect to Afghanistan makes it possible to tie his account to the Afghan traditions, too.

### **The good luck talisman**

When Shahid saw the *martenitsa*, he told me that the people in the northwestern part of Pakistan—where the Pashtuns<sup>52</sup> live—use amulets which are tied on the neck with red-and-white threads, just like the one I was showing him. An amulet, according to the local tradition has to be obtained from a person who is “good, with good thoughts and righteous”<sup>53</sup>. Often this is the imam, the Muslim priest, who would write a verse from the Koran and then tie it with red-and-white thread on the neck of the person who needs the amulet.

Shahid, who grew up in Peshawar, Pakistan, in the time when Afghan refugees started settling in the area, knew such an imam—he was one of the refugees. This was a man who promoted learning and knowledge and who encouraged young Shahid to study. That imam gave him a very powerful amulet, and Shahid believed that it helped him to take his exams. Shahid, who is working on his doctoral degree these days, later passed the amulet to a friend of his. Similar amulets, called *tahwiz* are used in Pakistan for good luck in sports.

### ***Pir***

Amulets which do not contain Koranic verses can be given by magicians, as well. These men are called *pir*<sup>54</sup>, which means old in Pakistan and in Iran. They can

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<sup>52</sup> It seems that the connection with the Pashtuns is essential because in Tajikistan where both the language and the culture is Persian there is no knowledge of the thread.

<sup>53</sup> The phrase “good, with good thoughts and righteous” reminds of the Zoroastrian instruction that a person should have good thoughts, good words and good deeds.

<sup>54</sup> See chapter 3.

have good or bad intentions, so one should be careful where to go for an amulet, Shahid explained.

The person who prepares the talisman also gives the strings with which to tie it. Presumably they choose the colors to be used, and the twining of red and white yarn cannot be accidental. In the making of amulets usually every element matters and is used to make them more powerful.

The French scholar of Afghan origin, Idries Shah, in his study *Oriental Magic*, pays more attention to the Koranic texts that are written for the amulets than to the threads that are used to tie them, but Shah also mentions *pir*, the magicians, who are not representatives of the official religion (73). In Afghanistan the last group of pagans who were practicing a kind of pantheism were reluctantly converted to Islam at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century their practices were still lively in the mountainous regions (Katz). The word *pir* is the same used by my Pakistani informant and in the Persian expression *bad-i-pir-zan*, old woman's wind; in all cases it has the significance of old and wise. It stays in close correlation to the Bulgarian old woman, *Baba Marta*, the personage in the stories about the changing weather in March and the amulet, *martenitsa*.

### **The *mazi* or *rakhi* of Pakistan**

Another occasion when the red-and-white thread is given in Pakistan is when a sister gives it to a brother. It is called either *rakhi*, as in India, or *mazi* in Urdu. Again, its most simple form is the red-and-white twined thread. Unlike in India, it is only given on special occasions like a wedding. At a wedding two families become related. The new relatives use the *mazi* or *rakhi* like siblings use them—the women tie them on the wrist of their new relatives.

Thus, the *mazi* plays the role of tying the families together in the way the Hmong *ki-te* does.

### **Love magic**

Another talisman is used in Pakistan for love. Again it could be prepared by an imam or a *pir*.

A person ties the amulet to a tree where the wind will agitate it, and he believes it will make the heart of his beloved beat faster for the one who ties the talisman.

The tying of a charm to a tree as love magic seems to be closely associated with the Bulgarian practice of tying of the *martenitsa* to a tree after taking it off and also with its use in the wedding ceremony where it decorates the so called wedding tree, a symbol of fertility and good fortune. Whose love is sought in the Bulgarian case, I cannot tell—maybe the benevolence of the Goddess.

The amulet with the colors of the *martenitsa* that is given by an Imam is related to the Indian tradition in which the religious official gives the amulet to his disciples. The *rakhi* in Pakistan is also given during weddings where the bond with new relatives is strengthened. In any case, the sacred thread in Pakistan and Afghanistan is used occasionally, not on a regular basis as it is Bulgaria and India. Its main functions are to tie a family together and to increase fertility, good luck, or some skill (like studying or sport).

## **Armenia**

Armenia is a country with an ancient history and culture. It is also the north-western neighbor of Iran. Christianity became the state religion there in 301 AD and since has become an important part of the Armenian identity. Because of the strength of the Eastern Orthodoxy, I was surprised to discover the red-and-white thread amulet there.

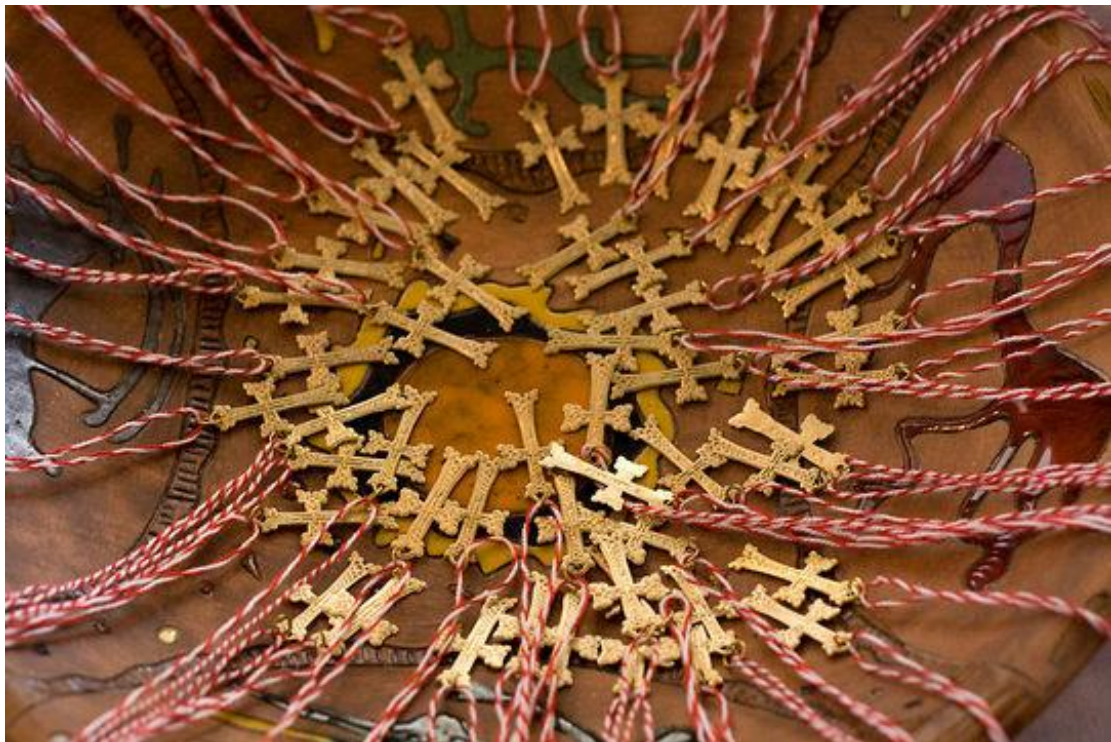
I met Vahan when I was showing the *martenitsa* to someone from Serbia, hoping that he would recognize it: instead, his friend Vahan, somewhat surprised, said that it looks familiar to him. Later, I spoke with four Armenians—Vahan, Nair and Diana were at that time exchange students from Armenia in the University of Minnesota; Shoghig, is a second generation Armenian American.

## **Baptism**

At the time of baptism in church, which happens in Armenia by the 40<sup>th</sup> day after birth, as in the other Orthodox Christian churches, a red-and-white thread is tied on the baby's wrist. Boettiger, who visited the country in the beginning of the

20<sup>th</sup> century, explains this tradition entirely within the context of the Church—he says that people believe it to represent the body and blood of Christ (80 footnote)<sup>55</sup>.

Vahan, a student from Armenia, told me that when he was baptized, a red-and-white thread with a cross was tied on his wrist. Soon after that it was cut off and is still preserved in his home in Armenia. He could not remember the name for this thread. Later he contacted me and told me that his parents did not know the name either. Diana and the other student, both from Ervan, Armenia, also had their amulets kept in their homes. Instead of crosses, blue beads to ward off the evil eye were tied on their wrists. As with the *martenitsa*, different additions, in this case a cross or a blue bead, can be added to make the amulet stronger.



Ill. 4. Crucifixes tied with red and white twined threads, prepared to be given to the newly baptized in Armenia in August, 2011 (Shamlia).

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<sup>55</sup> Indeed, I was able to find recent publication on the Internet about the baptism of a large group of people from a village in Armenia. The pictures that were provided featured crucifixes, tied with red and white twined strings, ready to be distributed among the newly baptized people. No comment was offered regarding the strings or the ritual (Shamlia).

The consistent choice of red and white colored strings can only be deliberate. I have mentioned earlier that in Bulgaria, many priests condemn the use of the pagan *martenitsa*. So, this tradition is obviously not of a Christian origin. The fact that the colors are now connected with the Christian faith is a fine example of the adoption of older traditions and loading them with new meaning in the time of the change of religion. This change happened in Armenia in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century when most of the population was Zoroastrian. However, the analysis of the Persian example showed that the Zoroastrian religion was not the source of the traditions related to the red-and-white sacred thread. If it was, we should have expected that these customs would have spread only or predominantly in territories where Zoroastrianism was spread. But in that case, we would not be able to explain the appearance, for example, of the *raksha bandhan* in the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, the red and white sacred thread in Armenia, as in the other places must have appeared in the time before Christianity and Zoroastrianism. This brings us to the time before the 1<sup>st</sup> millenium BC for the appearance of the amulet.

### **A necklace, a doll and a goddess**

Diana invited me to a presentation she was giving to schoolchildren, at which she showed several intriguing objects. I will just mention them here with the hope that someone will be interested enough to explore them. They may be related to the *martenitsa*, but only a future study can prove that.

The first is a handmade doll, which is a gift to a young girl of three or four by the paternal grandmother. It is mainly red in color and it is believed to grant wishes and protection to the owner. The doll—about 10 cm or 4 inches—is made of primarily red fabric. Diana, who has a bigger one in Armenia, keeps and cherishes her dolls even in her adulthood. She associates the doll, named Nana, with a festival dedicated to the waters where they dance and sing songs dedicated to Nana<sup>56</sup>.

Diana also showed necklaces which were partly knitted and had wooden and leather parts. Diana explained that they are made for protection. Although their

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<sup>56</sup> Accidentally or not, that is the name of an ancient Armenian goddess in charge of fertility, crops and water. That could be the theme of a future work.

color was not red-and-white, they had plenty of red and cyclamen. Despite the lack of white, they reminded me of the variations of *martenitsa* with pieces of wood and other natural objects meant to strengthen their power.

### **East and West Armenians**

Shoghig is Armenian American who did not know about any of these traditions. Her parents, who were born in Western Armenia, now part of Turkey, immigrated with their families to the United States. They were able to clarify that the tying of red-and-white threads and the giving of dolls to the young girls are Eastern Armenian traditions. The Western Armenians fled the genocide and dispersed around the world while the Eastern ones stayed in their country. Thus, this practice is unknown to most of the Armenians who live outside of the contemporary free country.

### **Sri Lanka**

When the three men from Sri Lanka saw the *martenitsa*, they immediately recognized it as similar to the *raksha bandhan* or *rakhi* in India. According to a woman from Sri Lanka whom I met earlier, they have a tradition similar to the Indian *raksha bandhan*. The women there tie red, white and black threads to their brothers and other male close relatives in February—not in late July or August as it is in India or March as it is in Bulgaria.

The name in Tamil is *jaba kayiru*, and the Sinhalese is *pirith noole*. *Jaba* is like the *japa*, which, in Hindi, means repetitive chanting of the divine names. *Kayiru* is hand or wrist<sup>57</sup>. The material used for the *jaba kayiru* in Sri Lanka is cotton thread which is usually white. That reminds one of the Hmong tradition where the white color thread is used most often and the red is added only in some rare circumstances.

People in Sri Lanka can get their *jaba kayiru* either in Hindu or in Buddhist temples. During big temple festivals or at other visits, the religious officials—Hindu priests or Buddhist monks—say prayers or chants over the sacred threads and then

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<sup>57</sup> *Kayiru*, in navigation, is also a measure using the hand.

give them away for a donation. Likewise, chanting is used in the ceremonies of the *raksha bandhan* as well; and in some regions in Bulgaria, the *martenitsa* was also made while chanting (Mikov “*The Bulgarian Folk*”).

The data about *jaba kayiru* from Sri Lanka gave me further proof that the sacred thread predates the establishment of the contemporary world religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. The practice is not created for these religions, but is instead it is tolerated and used by them. The same is the case in Armenia where the red and white strings are used during baptism in church, and in Pakistan and Afghanistan where the thread is sometimes given by the imams.

In Bulgaria, on the other hand, the *martenitsa* is not welcomed by the Church, just as the amulets are not tolerated by the Islamic institutions in Iran.

With this I complete the initial examination of the sacred threads in Eurasia. I have no doubt that there are other variations in other countries, but these are enough to create an initial geographic picture of the spread of the threads and their functions.

## Chapter 6. Analysis of the Geographic spread of the sacred threads

I have reviewed the various sacred threads in several countries and have found that they are similar to one another in detailed and significant ways. In this chapter I will draw a map of the spread of the amulet, examine the geographic distribution of its different functions, and follow the thread to try to understand why it was created and continued to exist for such a long time.

### The map of the red-and-white amulets

Based on my research, Bulgaria is the westernmost country where the red-and-white sacred *martenitsa* thread is still used, although special meaning is attached to the red and white color in several Slavic countries like Serbia, Ukraine and Russia<sup>58</sup>. The Romanian *martishor* and *Baba Dokia* need more studies, but as far as I can tell they are most probably late influences carried by Bulgarian refugees who settled there during the Ottoman rule.<sup>59</sup> Turkey is a vast country and rich in traditions, but so far I have no reason to believe that a tradition of the sacred red-and-white thread that gives health exists there.

After this gap, the East Armenian<sup>60</sup> example comes as a surprise. Further East, in Iran<sup>61</sup>, the stories of the Old Woman, the Wind and the camel, as well as the beliefs associated with the period between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, find numerous parallels with the Bulgarian beliefs. Despite that, the

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<sup>58</sup> See chapter 1.

<sup>59</sup> The main references about the *martishor* and *Baba Dokia* are in the sphere of Internet. The *martishors* there are sold as fairly expensive decorations—of course I may be wrong on that account. Beza's work on the Rumanian pagan customs does not include anything about *martishor* or any other thread amulets. And Golant only mentions the *martishor*. The time between the two studies is about eighty years.

<sup>60</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>61</sup> See chapter 3. The Kurds also celebrate Noruz, the Persian New Year, with jumping over fire. I am not familiar with their folk stories, but based on this fact, it may be expected that a trace of the use of an amulet like the *martenitsa* could be found among them.



threads are not found there. The Arab people to the south of Turkey and the Iranian people do not seem to have this amulet or the stories related to it.<sup>62</sup>

Moving east, in Pakistan we find a lively, albeit not advertised, tradition of the sacred thread that is not attached to a specific calendar time. The imam from Afghanistan who gave an amulet tied with red-and-white threads to his student leads me to believe that maybe this is one more country where this sacred thread is found. Tajikistan to the north seems to lack it, as well as the Turkic countries bordering with Afghanistan.<sup>63</sup> South and east of Pakistan lie India and Nepal—they keep the tradition of the *raksha bandhan* alive.

To the north, among the Chinese, there is a traditional knot of red silk cord for good fortune, often decorated with a small fabric doll. Knots like that are exchanged at the time of the Chinese New Year and they are part of that country's tradition in magic art.<sup>64</sup> Despite their red color and the symbolic meaning, further study is needed to answer definitively if the Chinese knots are related to the *martenitsa* and the *raksha bandhan*. A red-and-white thread with the occasional addition of black is used to guard people from evil spirits and illness, too, but that practice seems to be unknown to most Han Chinese.

On the other hand, this is a widely practiced tradition among the Hmong<sup>65</sup> of Laos, who moved there from China. A red or white thread is tied on the wrist during a shamanistic ceremony or by family members to protect the person from evil spirits and illness. The Hmong of Laos, probably, have the easternmost version of the *martenitsa* type of sacred string.

It is noteworthy that the area is large—from East Europe to East Asia, from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka—but the use of the amulets is not uniform there. The geographic distribution of the amulets is rather patchy. There are places like Bulgaria and Nepal where the traditions are still full of life and they are even part of

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<sup>62</sup> Red and white carry symbolic meaning for the Arabs, but I have no proof that they can be combined or expressed through threads or fabric.

<sup>63</sup> I have asked people from Tajikistan and the Turkic countries of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan.

<sup>64</sup> This is the information I received from a conversation with a Chinese student.

<sup>65</sup> See chapter 4.

the national identity of the people. In other places, the amulets have only a small role in the life of the community, like Armenia; and still others where the objects have disappeared but some related folk stories and other relics remain, as in Iran.

A patchy distribution is typical when one language or a culture is gradually replaced by another: the new one takes over the old, but separate pockets of the old still survive (Diamond 325). The pattern of distribution shows that the traditions of the thread amulets were common and distributed over a large territory in deep antiquity, but gradually the advent of the World religions—starting with Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, then Christianity and Islam—dispersed the amulets, which survived only in separate smaller areas.

Therefore the fragmented pattern of spread over a large territory shows the antiquity of the sacred threads.

### **The functions of the amulets**

There are three functions of the thread amulets—first, providing prosperity on a seasonal basis; second, increasing health and fertility during the rites of passage, birth and marriage; and finally magic assurance of health and prosperity performed at any time.

For example the *martenitsa* provides prosperity and fertility when it is tied on just about everything that is connected with agricultural production—the tools, the work animals, the lambs and kids and the fruit trees. The *raksha bandhan* itself is not given directly for that reason, but it is associated with the festival which ensures the prosperity for the farmers and the fishermen. In both cases, the sacred thread is used at the beginning of the good half of the year<sup>66</sup>. Both these amulets are used at a certain time of the year for a short time and have the function of keeping everyone who wears them healthy.

The increase of fertility, health and wealth during rites of passage is a function of the threads of the Hmong, the Pakistanis, the Armenians, the Indians and the Nepalese. In Bulgaria, the simple red-and-white form of the *martenitsa* is used in

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<sup>66</sup> See chapter 1 and 2.

wedding ceremonies as part of the wedding tree or the banner—two of the attributes in the folk wedding which are supposed to bring good luck, *bereket* and good health to the new family. The *martenitsa* is also used in a special ceremony to welcome the new baby in the family before the 40<sup>th</sup> day after birth, when a blue bead against the evil eye and a gold or silver coin for prosperity are tied to the baby's wrist or more often to the baby's hat<sup>67</sup> using a twined red and white string. This function is typical for the Hmong who give the thread at weddings and at the welcoming of a new baby. For them the tying ceremony is much more important and elaborate than it is in Bulgaria. In Armenia this is the only known meaning. In Afghanistan and Pakistan the use in weddings is its most popular role.

The magical function seems to be stronger among the Hmong and the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan. For the Hmong it is strongly connected with the shamanistic rituals and in the two Muslim countries the Imams can play the role of provider of the thread amulet. When this is done, the strings have the function of bringing good luck in any human activity and bringing good health. In Bulgaria this magical function is reflected in the foretelling through the *martenitsa*: a function that does not exist in the tradition of the *raksha bandhan*.

### **Amulets, given at any day of the year or in a certain season**

This review of the functions of the amulets allows the following classification of two main types—the amulets given at a certain time like March 1, and the ones that are given on any day.

The strings, given on any day of the year are more connected with the shamanistic tradition which has its roots deep in the past, possibly 30, 000 years ago in Siberia. They are used whenever someone needs protection from an illness or evil magic and are naturally part of the healing performed either by the shaman or a knowledgeable and wise caregiver in the family—often an older woman. This is also the type of the ancient Babylonian healing ceremony<sup>68</sup>. With time, the idea developed that this protection can be received before something bad happens at the

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<sup>67</sup> In the traditional practices, a baby is supposed to wear a hat all the time.

<sup>68</sup> See chapter 3.

most dangerous times of life, or the times of important change. Hence, the amulets are used when a child is born or at a wedding. The sacred string for wedding and birth are given whenever it is needed throughout the year, so I consider it part of the “any-time” type.

The second type, the amulet given at a certain day of the year, needs an exact calendar and must have developed much later, not before the time when people became interested in growing their food—in the beginning of the Neolithic revolution in the region of the Fertile Crescent<sup>69</sup>. One way of developing this seasonal kind of amulets may have been the ritual of the sacred marriage—hierogamy—of a god or a king with a goddess. In this, the symbolic fertilization of the land allowed the crops to grow and flourish and the red and white amulets are often used to increase fruitfulness during weddings.

Bulgaria is the only place in which, while the seasonal kind is much stronger, both types are used. One explanation for this may be that the Bulgarian nation was originally formed by the blending of different peoples who came in several waves to the Balkans. The Thracians—the oldest ones whose name is known, lived in the Balkans and in the western part of Anatolia (contemporary Turkey) after the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. The Slavs moved in from the north around the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the Proto-Bulgarians came from Central Asia, most probably from the territory of Afghanistan in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. All this movement and mixing of people led to the combining of their customs too. If the diverse groups had common elements of their cultures, then these common elements would have been strengthened. That would also explain why the neighboring nations do not have the martenitsa while it is so important in Bulgaria, since the last wave affected them only partially.

### **The farmers’ gods and the amulets**

To determine the exact day for performing the ritual of the seasonal sacred thread, a calendar is required. Although the hunters-gatherers were profoundly aware of their surroundings, the intricacies of the climate cycle of their homelands

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<sup>69</sup> See the Introduction.

and the exact time to harvest of various wild edible plants, the first calendars were developed at the advent of agriculture when it became necessary to know exactly when to plant. This means that agriculture is a necessary condition for the appearance of this type of amulets. Logically, they would emerge only when the agriculture and the calendar become known. Indeed, in the previous chapters it was demonstrated that a close association existed between the amulets—*martenitsa* and *raksha bandhan*—and the farm work at the beginning of the growing cycle. They are given at that time of year when crops have to be planted, and in some cases they are tied to fruit trees, young farm animals and tools. They were expected to bring fertility and health, and through them—prosperity. When the amulets are made, the divine power is implanted in them through incantations, mantras and prayers. This means that they were part of the worship of the deities which are seen as ruling over the natural processes on which agriculture depends. In Bulgaria, this is *Baba Marta*, and, in India, Shiva. These deities, as was discussed in the first two chapters, ruled over the weather and the natural cycle of life: birth, growth, life, reproduction, disease, death, decay and rebirth. Gimbutas (316-20) determines that this deity in Europe was the Great Goddess and she has survived in the ancient goddesses of later times, in the Virgin Mary or other saints and in personages from folk stories and songs. Her blessing is sought in the time of the planting of the most important crops for the survival and the prosperity of the early farming communities.

Yet, the existence of agriculture in our day does not explain why the amulets survived as well. For a tradition to survive in so many countries over so long time, it has to be very important. At least one of the roles that the religion of the Great Goddess performed must still be relevant. In order to understand these roles, I will consider next the time when the worship of the Goddess started. It all began with the Neolithic Revolution. Gimbutas (330) writes that the worship began before agriculture, acknowledging the role of women in reproduction and the natural cycles. With the food production, however, that role grew to include not only knowing when the foods were ripe to harvest, but also when and how to plant them and to perform other tasks.

## **The Neolithic Revolution**

Agriculture, according to the latest studies, started in several regions in the world through a very long period of time between 9500 and 5000 BC and spread to other territories. Scholars are still trying to understand exactly when, where and how the Neolithic revolution took place; there are still arguments even on the question of why humans started the process of domestication and the transition from the hunter-gatherer to a producing economy. However, it is clear that it was a very slow process of studying the animal and plant species, figuring out which may be domesticated and changing them to fulfill specific human needs. The domestication of the animals started with the dog around 17,000 years ago then the sheep, the goat, the cat and the cow, and the more recent additions such as the horse and the camel, some 6000 years ago. The first crop was likely that of the fig around 11,500 years ago, and although the grape must have been among the first ones, too, it took a long time, until about 3000 BC, to master the technology and make good wine from them ("Tamed"; Diamond 93-103; Janick; McGovern 40-63).

The result was a system quite similar to contemporary organic farming. It inevitably includes several different crops and domesticated animals. The farmers have to coordinate many tasks, which take place in different physical places, to plan ahead not just for their own sustenance during the winter, but also for their animals and the produce for the market. They also have to take care of each animal and plant on their farm, the different tools and machinery, the possible workers and the quality of the soil. Each month has certain tasks that have to be completed to secure future success (Berry 105-18).

But the ancient farmers did even more: they spread the system in other regions in a steady and slow expansion that took millennia. It is recognized now that in order to do that, humanity needed groups of people that had mastered the art of growing animals and plants for their food, clothing, transportation and other needs. From the Fertile Crescent—the oldest center of development of agriculture—the eight Neolithic founder crops (emmer wheat, einkorn, barley, flax, chick pea, pea, lentil, bitter vetch), and three of the most important domesticated animals (goats,

sheep and pigs) spread east and west. Agriculture spread as a set: complete with domesticated plants and animals, the knowledge and the necessary technologies to prepare goods from the resources (McGovern 29). Pottery was probably part of that package, as well as some basic recipes like porridges, beer, boiled grain and legumes—still used as festival food—as well as yogurt and cheese. Therefore, the development through trial and error took a long time and there was a need to pass and grow the knowledge and experience in the course of many generations. As discussed in chapter 3, stories of characters or deities ruling the weather were able to serve this purpose.

The Neolithic revolution allowed people to produce the greatest part of their food, to eliminate the need of constant movement and settle. The surpluses created by agriculture allowed the existence of administrations, armies, states and empires, as well as organized religion. Was religion of any help for agriculture?

### **The role of the religion of the Great Goddess for agriculture**

I think that the role religion and ritual played in the early development of agriculture was indeed vital. First, it provided a schedule for the exact timing of the different tasks to be performed on a farm; second, it strengthened the community, without the help of which the farmers could not survive; and third, it bestowed a sense of connection with everything in nature that ensured the sustainable use of its resources.

The religious complex of the sacred thread played all of these roles and that can be the explanation why the thread survived to our day. The reason it did not survive Eurasia is the advent of the more recent world religions which took over some of these functions and fought actively against the old beliefs.

### **Farmers' almanacs**

There are, and there were a lot of diverse components, which need to be considered when taking care of a farm. There is need to have some device that could help the farmer to keep track of what should be done and when.<sup>70</sup> It is helpful to

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<sup>70</sup> This need is illustrated by an almanac from Sumer from around 1700 BC. It advises the owner of a farm about the types of work and the periods in which to fulfill it; he is counseled to stand

have paper and pen if not a computer for that. But how did they do it in Neolithic times before even writing was invented? Undoubtedly agriculture was developed and spread by groups of capable and knowledgeable people, who assessed the suitability of new locations, moved and started farms, using what was familiar to them as a model. Instead of an almanac, the first farmers carried with them their religious systems which were closely connected to the agricultural cycle. The rituals and ceremonies together with numerous connected beliefs played the role of an almanac for the farmers—for example, Saint George's Day and Saint Demetrius's Day frame the beneficial and the difficult time of the year; one should not allow the sheep and goats to pasture before March 1<sup>st</sup>, dedicated to Grandmother March, and the planting of onions should take place as soon as possible after this day. The religious celebrations measured the time, determined the proper period for each work, and gave advice.

The work on a farm can be very complicated and the knowledge of when to do what is essential for its success. The statement that folk celebrations are connected with the agricultural cycle is deceptively simple and is repeated without further explanation by many. However, no one elaborates why it is so important for the work on a farm to be done at an exact time and that only a few days deviation may mean survival or starvation for a family.

Calendars reflect the idea of the cyclical movement of time, the idea that everything has to be repeated on the level of the human life, on the level of communities, nature and even on the cosmic level where the heavenly bodies perform their cyclical movement. The idea of the cyclical character of the world lies in the foundation of the cult of the Great Goddess, as described by Gimbutas: it is

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over his laborers and see to it that they did not avoid their work. The almanac states these agricultural rules were from god Ninurta, the son and "true farmer" of the leading Sumerian deity, Enlil (Janick). The almanac is influenced by the further development of human society, but the need for such advice existed before that.



also in the foundation of any calendar. The advent of the monotheistic religions did not change the need for a farmers' calendar<sup>71</sup>.

A cyclical vision of the world serves agriculture and is quite foreign to modern industrial times where everything is produced and used regardless of the change of seasons. As industry gained importance, Western Christianity moved away from any connection with nature. This means that the older stories and beliefs had to be preserved by the farming population in order to help them in their work. Some of these stories which helped in agriculture were told as folk tales; others were put in songs or transferred to the new religions.<sup>72</sup>

Islam, on the other hand, with its lunar calendar was quite unfit for keeping track of the developments in agriculture from its very beginning. It, nevertheless, spread in regions where agriculture was first invented. The large agricultural population in Iran, even now, continues to use a number of calendars for different spheres of life, causing great confusion. The beliefs of the peasants, pertaining to weather patterns crops and animal husbandry, are still attached to the traditional calendar<sup>73</sup>. The most complicated one seems to be the calendar system of India due to the many religions and the regional climatic differences in this vast country. The continuous use of ancient calendars or their elements demonstrates the need of farmers to have guidance when to perform certain tasks on their farms.

The amulets which were used in the beginning of the growing cycle are part of the same religious system as the calendars and the stories. They were loaded with the power of the goddess and had the function of keeping everyone and everything healthy and fit in this busy time of the year.

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<sup>71</sup> The American-Armenian theologian Vigen Guroian provides an interesting example of the idea of the cyclical time in religion while explaining the liturgy in the Armenian Church. Typically for the Orthodox liturgy, there are eight weekly services and the last is a repetition of the first one, indicating that the first and the eight services are both beginning and an end of a cycle. The yearly cycle is represented in the celebration of Good Friday which proceeds as if the Resurrection has already happened, suggesting a repeating circle of life, death and resurrection (Guroian). These ideas serve the farming population of Armenia and are similar to the ones associated with the Great Goddess.

<sup>72</sup> For example, in Bulgaria, the celebration of St. Triphon, dedicated to the growing of grape vines and wine, clearly springs from a pre-Christian source.

<sup>73</sup> Iranian calendars are discussed in chapter 3.

### **Tying the community together**

Agriculture is by no means an easy endeavor. Even in the modern times of insurance, state subsidies and national and international help in case of disaster, the business of the farmer is very risky—a late snowfall, a hurricane or a change of prices due to political unrest on the opposite side of the globe can cause distress and threaten the financial and physical survival of the farmer and the farm.

One of the best insurance policies, used for millennia, is a strong community. Each farmer takes care of the wellbeing of his or her neighbor; labor, equipment, animals and food are exchanged and shared. Each member of the traditional farming settlement depends on the help and the good will of the other members of that community. And an excellent way of strengthening the bonds of the community is a celebration. Agricultural communities have festivals during important moments—people stop work to give thanks for the good fortunes, to ask for further protection and support, to praise God's creation and to eat, drink, sing and dance together. This provides both relaxation and the strengthening of the social bonds.

Religions also provide norms of conduct for the people. The rules against murder and anti-social behavior, against stealing and false accusation are common in many religions, also the duty to help the elderly and the young. Among them is also the request to love one's neighbor. These provisions were not always in place, they were formulated historically in the time of the advent of agriculture and the development of a sense of community.

### **The bond with nature**

History can give numerous examples of people encroaching on Nature too heavily. The disregard of the balance and wellbeing of all the elements of a farm and its natural surroundings leads to depletion of the resources of the soil, the fresh water and the ocean, pollution of the environment, cruelty to animals, and spread of disease among people. Religions provide solutions. For example, in India, the need of the farmers for fertilizer was satisfied by the sacred cows which were allowed on the fields during fallow years, while providing some animal protein food; and by promoting vegetarianism among the higher ranks of Hindu society, the use of

resources is regulated (Shiva 57-9). Similar results are reached in the Eastern Orthodox countries, with abstaining from eating of meat in more than half of the days in the year. Likewise, the cult to the Goddess reached the same end by describing rivers, mountains, trees and plants as dwellings of the deity. Contemporary science gives comparable reasons for doing this for our own good. All these religious concepts achieve in similar ways the same goal—to preserve the environment and to make sure that the resources that are of greatest importance to human societies, the ones used in the production of food, are sustained.

These functions of providing calendar references, strengthening the social bonds and preventing the overuse of the natural resources can be performed by other, nonreligious institutions, possibly science, courts, assemblies; but given the movement of large human masses and the big changes of society, to use religion for that task was a fairly creative solution.

### **The amulets now**

The Bulgarian *martenitsa*, as well as the *raksha bandhan*, is a part of a religion that was developed in service of agriculture and animal husbandry at the time of the Neolithic Revolution. With the movement of people from the Fertile Crescent throughout Eurasia, the tradition of the sacred thread spread too. Subsequently elements of this tradition were changed or lost mainly because of the advent of the world religions which took over the vital for agriculture and community functions. In some cases new meaning was loaded on the threads. Even so the red-and-white thread survived in several countries partly because of strengthening of the tradition through later waves of population that used the thread, and partly because of assimilation and of the tradition of tying a thread by the new religions. The string amulets, as part of the religion of the first farmers, are useful mainly for the role of tying the community together. That is the reason they have survived. And even to this day, they play the same role.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, the Bulgarian *martenitsa* comes to be seen as an amulet—a sacred thread—that historically connects the Bulgarians with the people of the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. There are also a number of similar amulets in a wide range of cultures, including India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Armenia and the Hmong people of Laos. They are all made of material that is not durable, and that is why it is unlikely to find them through archaeological excavations. Using a comparative method, I was able to prove their association with the ancient religion of the first farmers. Most of these amulets were attributes of the deity, the Great Goddess, which ruled over the foundations of civilization—food production, textiles, communities. These amulets were later absorbed by successive religions, and traces of them can still be found in the folk traditions, songs and stories of various countries.

The amulets are still used for one of their original functions, namely to bind together individual people and the community. They also can be viewed as a way to bind together peoples who live far away from one another.

This is just a beginning of further research on the sacred threads. Hopefully more scholars will be intrigued enough to conduct their own inquiries into similar problems until we can uncover more strands that unite humanity.

## Appendix A

### The sacred threads by country

Bulgaria	<i>martenitsa</i>
Armenia	no name
Iran	no amulet, celebration of <i>Noruz</i>
India	<i>raksha bandhan</i> (bond of protection), <i>rakhi</i>
Nepal	<i>raksha bandhan</i>
Pakistan	<i>mazi</i> or <i>rakhi</i>
Sri Lanka	<i>jaba kayiru</i> (in Tamil), <i>pirith noole</i> (in Sinhalese)
Hmong in Laos	<i>ki-te</i> (tying of the string), <i>hu-pli</i> (call the spirits)

## Appendix B. The Iranian calendar periods according to Donaldson and Price

Gregorian calendar	Iranian months according to Price	Folk periods according to Donaldson
Dec. 21- Jan. 31	<i>Day (dadar)</i> means creator. Dedicated to Ahura Mazda. The 8, 15 and 23 of every month were also called "Day". The 1 of <i>Day</i> month was <i>Khoram Ruz</i> –a feast of charity.	<b>Big Forty</b> consists of 40 days, 40 nights (First 30 days are from the month of <i>Dey</i> , last 10 days are in the month of <i>Bahman</i> ). The night before the Big Forty is on Dec. 21—the festival <i>Shabe Yalda Shab-e Chelleh, Yaldā, یلدا</i>
Jan. 28- Feb. 4		<b>Char char</b> (four, four)—last 4 days from the <i>Big Forty</i> , first 4 days from the <i>Little Forty</i> —bad weather because they are fighting.
Feb. 1-20	<i>Vohu Manah (Bahman)</i> means good purpose, creative goodness and personifies the principle of <i>Asha</i> (cosmic order). He is the protector of animals.	<b>Little Forty</b> consists of 20 days and 20 nights (Last 10 days of the <i>Big Forty</i> and all of the <i>Little Forty</i> are in the month of <i>Bahman</i> ).
Feb. 17-24		<b>The Breathing of the Earth</b> —4 last days of <i>Little Forty</i> . In Khorasan, the Earth wakes on the first of <i>Little Forty</i> and breathes after five or six days. The second breathing is at the end of the <i>Little Forty</i> . The trees also breathe.

<b>Feb. 20 - March 20</b>	<i>Spenta Armaiti (Esphand / Espandarmaz)</i> , Holy Devotion and Holy unconditional love, is a female deity protecting Mother Earth and is a guardian of herdsmen and farmers. Also known as Ameretat (Mordad) who supports all plant life and represents immortality. Greek Demeter, Armenian Spendaramet.	<i>Esfand</i> is known for the unstable weather.
<b>March 11- 20</b>		Last ten days before <i>Noruz</i> (March 11-20) should be cold
<b>March 21</b>	<i>Noruz</i> —the New Years Day	<i>Noruz</i>
<b>March 22-5</b>		4 days after that are symbolic of the 4 seasons.
<b>March 21-5</b>		5 more cold days— <i>bad-i-pir-zan</i> — the “ <i>Old Woman’s Wind</i> .”

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