Folk Spiritism: Between Communication with the Dead and Heavenly Forces

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Abstract: Examples of how Spiritism merged with local beliefs have been the subject of research in religious studies, ethnology, and folkloristics. Serbian Spiritism can also be viewed as such, but its history is an under-researched topic. We examine the syncretic product we will call ‘folk Spiritism’, being different from the ‘high Spiritism’ of elite and middle-class intellectuals. Folk Spiritism was part of a grassroots movement for Church reform in the first half of the 20th century. The difference between folk and high Spiritism is also confirmed in the emic perspective. Based on a closer reading of its texts, we can discern a better image of the dead and communication with them in the practice of folk Spiritism. We conclude that the difference between the traditional and Spiritist image of the dead is that the former causes fear, while the later brings comfort; folk Spiritism gave preference to communication with heavenly forces (God, Christ, Holy Mother, angels, saints) while retaining the traditional view of the dead.

Keywords: Spiritism; narratives; folk religion; folkloristics; genre; vernacular religion

1. Introduction

The aim of this research is to present Spiritism in the Serbian culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries, what its characteristics were, and how the relation with the dead formed within its framework. The central topic of this research is a form of Spiritism peculiar to Serbian society of the period we designate as “folk Spiritism”. We will not dwell on all aspects of the history of Serbian Spiritism, but, after providing a short overview of its historical trajectory, we will give a portrayal of the communication with the dead in folk Spiritism.

The lower time limit has been selected because the majority of the available sources originate from that period, though we will make a few remarks, as much as the limited sources allow it, regarding the period after 1945. Written sources, either official Spiritist publications or different testimonies about Spiritism (periodicals and non-periodical publications; memoirs, published correspondence, archival material) will also be used in this paper. While Spiritism itself is a phenomenon whose research today extends into different fields, a significant possibility for its understanding has been offered by folkloristics too, and “folk Spiritism” will be contextualized not in historical circumstances alone but within the framework of folk beliefs, practices, and narratives.

1.1. Spiritism as a New Understanding of the Dead

Since there is no need or possibility to outline the entire history of Spiritism here, we will single out from its history only those points relevant to our topic. Research on Spiritism has marked it as the rupture in the understanding of communication with the dead within the traditional, at least Western, framework. In the words of Italian scholar Simona Cigliana, while in the traditional worldview, ghosts disturb people and are to be avoided, in Spiritism, the communication is bidirectional: the interactivity and participative aspects are the elements of change that indicate the influence of modernity, analogous to
the arrival of modern printed media (Cigliana 2018, p. 22). Another difference lies in the fact that the appearance of the dead causes no fear, as it did in traditional culture. Within the folklore genre of belief legends, even family members coming from the otherworld are seen as threatening. In funeral rites, the dead person is contaminated, and the practices serve to avoid polluting and the dangerous touch of death. The minutes of Spiritist séances, on the other hand, reveal optimism, hope, and joy because of the encounter (and that impression is not disrupted even by the reports of malicious spirits being slowed down in their otherworldly progress). As known to the study of folk religion, a closer look can reveal more diverse examples of living–dead interactions (for example, in dream narratives, the meeting with departed loved ones brings comfort), but overall, it can be taken that the distance between the living and dead in pre-modern European folk culture is marked by fear. The rupture that Spiritism reveals is associated with numerous changes in relation to the traditional worldview, both in terms of traditional folk beliefs and official Christianity, brought by modernity.

The very beginnings of Spiritism themselves reveal a rapid and conspicuous transformation. What is usually considered as the “official” birth of Spiritism is the case when the Fox sisters in the US in 1848 started “communicating” with a spirit haunting their house through raps. News of this, and even more important, the practice, caught on across America, giving birth to an entirely new worldview.1 As noted by Kenneth Pimple, in Spiritism, the raps are not related to one house alone (as in folk legends of haunted houses), for they can appear at any séance anywhere, and it is unclear where they come from. Any Spirit could be summoned from any sitting room (Pimple 1995, p. 80). He points out the following transformation phases: a rapper becomes a ghost; a ghost later turns into a spirit (ibid, p. 78). That is where the story of the Fox sisters departs from one of many narratives about ghosts and hauntings. Or, as Owen Davies puts it in Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts: “Up until the advent of Spiritualism and formal psychical investigation, the ‘traditional’ purposeful and memorial ghost . . . had been integral to the debate about the Spirit world. The modern Spiritualist movement may have arisen from what was originally a typical case of noisy haunting, focused around adolescent girls (the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York State), but it quickly broke from tradition. The Spirit of the dead became ‘a mobile Spirit, free of earthly bonds, including the tragedy of its own death,’ and in the process a new necromantic religion was born. Spiritualism was about the human desire to make contact with the dead, while much of the prior history of ghosts was about Spirits seeking out the living and attempts to prevent or limit their earthly appearance. With Spiritualism the tables were turned in more senses than one” (Davies 2007, p. 132).

1.2. The Conceptualizations of Change—A Historical View

That swerve became even more emphasized with the codification of Spiritism penned by Allan Kardec in France. The American practice crossed the ocean, and in its reception by Kardec, it became theoretically articulated: the entire doctrine of Spiritism2 was formed there, with cosmology and eschatology, which were heavily influenced by the contemporary positivism and progressivism. Kardecist Spiritism exerted an influence on the European soil.3 Kardecist progressivism (spirits progress in the otherworld) and the inclusion of reincarnationism cancelled the doctrines of heaven and hell. Therefore, in the Catholic “Latin” countries of Europe and of Southern America, Spiritism often took an anticlerical turn. English Spiritism, on the other hand, remained closer to Christianity and did not include reincarnationism. The history is even more complex, since it involves the rise of modern psychology and psychiatry, from Mesmer via Flournoy to Freud and Jung (Ellenberger 1994; Crabtree 1993). Mesmerism,4 Spiritism (strictly speaking), psychology/psychiatry, and the new field of psychic research/metapsychology/parapsychology competed (and overlapped) by offering alternative paradigms and interpretations of the same phenomena.

We single out those traits from the history of Spiritism that played a role in the formation of Serbian Spiritism in the reception process. Evolutionism, progressivism,
scientism, the adoption of new media (printed media) as a means of communication, and the democratic character of the relation with the otherworldly have brought researchers to the conclusion that Spiritism is a modern phenomenon. It is regarded as part of a more encompassing complex of alternative ideas (family of reforms) (McGarry 2008, p. 4), i.e., as a “progressive underground establishment” (Webb 1974, p. 352). This character is beyond the mere qualification of Spiritism as a purely historical phenomenon of the 19th and early 20th centuries due to its subsequent influence. In his seminal study about the New Age, Wouter Hanegraaff, starting from Weber’s thesis about the disenchantment of the world, regards Spiritism as an example of how an older (premodern and early modern) esotericism adapted to the new disenchanted image of the world, making it not some kind of “survival”, of “superstition” in the modern age (as contemporary critics of Spiritists often claimed) but part of that modern age. Therefore, it has earned its place in the genealogy of the modern New Age (Hanegraaff 1996, pp. 435–41). Spiritism as part of modernity and its relation with Christianity and the Church, depending on the cultural setting, are elements that come into the limelight in our case.

1.3. The History of Serbian Spiritism

Spiritism as part of Serbian cultural history was virtually nonexistent in the humanities and social sciences for a long time. It was only in the 21st century that the first studies about this phenomenon started to appear. But even on the level of bibliographies, or pure collection and description of sources or historical data there is still a lot of work to be done, let alone the various possible interpretations. Some editions (monographs or journals) have not been preserved, and one can only find information about them indirectly. The attributions of some of the authors have not been deciphered, and some editions that have been considered Spiritist are actually Theosophical in their character (and, in concert with Theosophical anthropology and eschatology, they are highly critical of the Spiritist conceptualization of the soul).

The history of Spiritism in Serbian culture (which also encompasses the Serbian community in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, influential in the culture of the Serbian state) could be described in this way: Spiritism came from Central and Western Europe. It was a part of the cultural transfer from Europe to Serbia in the period of 19th century, when Serbian society rapidly sought to modernize itself. This is an important point: critics of Spiritists among contemporaries also came from the progressivist and modernist camp, but today, we can see that Spiritism was also part of that process of transferring ideas from Europe. Sources used by Serbian Spiritists show the influence of authors writing in German, English (directly of translated from German), and, from the beginning of 20th century, French. Spiritism gained its adherents among the elite of that time. While we have some testimonies about the early presence of Spiritist practices, it was in 1887 that the first publications appeared: two books (Mijatović 1887a, 1887b) were published by Ćedomilj Mijatović (1842–1932) (under the pseudonym of “Teozof”), a reputable politician, diplomat, historian, and writer. Mijatović was an Anglophile, and his books draw on English and German sources. Although English influence in Serbian culture was not as strong as German or Russian, Mijatović’s involvement with Spiritism was part of it.

Two authors came from Austria–Hungary. A few books by the publicist Sima Stanojević appeared from 1898 to 1903 (Stanojević 1898a, 1898b, 1899, 1903). Another author was Stevan Nikolić Kučetina, who published two books in 1897–1898 that were widely popular in Belgrade. Later on, based on other testimonies, the books became popular throughout the South Slavic region: an area where he caused an entire new tide of Spiritist practice. That movement brought about Nikolić’s exile from Serbia at the request of the Orthodox Church. Until 1914, books by Stevan Runić (1911, the notes from séances), Kosta Simić ((1908, 1911), one about A. J. Davis, and the other about Spiritism and the Gospels), and Milovan Krstić (1907) had been published. There were also the translations (of Camille Flammarion (Flamarion 1905), for example, a few titles, such as the abridged version of L’inconnu, in 1903 and 1905 and the two little volumes entitled Psihičke studije [Psychic
studies] (Psihičke studije 1905a, 1905b), a selection of the texts from foreign editions). Anka Andelković, a pioneer of socialism in Serbia, became a devout Spiritist, editor, and writer of articles, and she translated some works from French (at the same time, turning towards Rudolph Steiner, whom she had listened to in Munich). Spiritist journals appeared too, including Dva sveta [Two worlds], whose editor was the popular writer Lazar Komarčić; Dušovni svet [Spiritual world], and Glas istine [The voice of the truth]. This activity shows that there were organized circles of Spiritists.

Serbian Spiritists were part of an international network, as can be seen based on the data on the exchange of the newspapers with Spiritist associations, not only in Europe but also on other continents, including South America. Certain people stand out in that respect. Čedomilj Mijatović, who spent the final thirty years of his life in Great Britain, had good contacts in the British Spiritualist milieu for decades (with William T. Stead, for example) in which he had published some articles too. The religious writer Ljudevit Vuličević, a Valdese church member, joined Spiritism in Italy. The contributions of Serbian authors were also present in Croatian official organs entitled Novo sunce [New sun] and Tajinstveni svijet [Mysterious world] (and vice versa). In general, the interest of some prominent cultural figures in Spiritism is yet to be investigated.

Spiritism also had an impact on the art of that time. Lazar Komarčić (1839–1909), the owner and editor of the journal Dva sveta, wrote a Spiritist novel (Jedna ugašena zvezda [An extinguished star] 1902), sometimes referred to as science fiction. The writer Dragutin Ilić (1858–1926), who is also included in the history of Serbian fantastic, was a devoted Spiritist. His depiction of Judas in a story on the New Testament theme is based on “the report” of a ghost. The influence of Spiritism can also be recognized in the proto-modernist or early modernist interest in the multiplicity of personality. Writers who were not Spiritists also used Spiritist topics, for example, for the ironical depiction of social snobbery. Spiritism thus can be seen as part of Serbian middle-class modernity, its discourse not being different from the discourse of any Spiritist journal of the period. It should be noted that the interest in Spiritism was generated together with the interest in the “magnetism” (Mesmerist) phenomena, hypnosis, and the phenomena which would be classified as psychic research in later terminology.

The reaction against Spiritism was also strong and came from a few directions, as it did elsewhere in the world.9 Left-wing criticism was present in the early stages of the reception of Spiritism (Stojković and Đorđević 1881). Moreover, scientific representatives of the elite, who were under the influence of positivism, did not criticize Spiritism only on the grounds of it being unscientific but they also pathologized it. Jovan Đanić, the pioneer of psychiatry in Serbia, Charcot’s student, wrote about Spiritists as abnormal. Even in the obituary to Cesare Lombroso, (who turned towards Spiritism), this interest of the Italian scientist was characterized as a sign of dementia by Đanić. A reputable astronomer and seismologist, Jelenko Mihajlović, attacked Spiritists a few times. One of the Spiritists, Petar Novaković, was even hospitalized for a psychiatric evaluation because of his Spiritist activities. It is quite conspicuous in that respect, for example, that in some journals, the authors, and even whole editorial boards, remained unsigned, that books were published under pseudonyms or anonymously, that Mijatović started writing about Spiritism openly only once he had stopped being politically active, and that in other places, authors defended themselves from pathologization.

The other stream of criticism came from the Orthodox Church. Church authors acted on various levels. On one, aimed at the common flock, they criticized Spiritism as heretical and demonic. In theological contributions, the criticisms were more sophisticated: they showed a good knowledge of Spiritist literature and the literature about Spiritism and dealt with the philosophical questions of epistemology, the supernatural and the like. Additionally, some of the articles showcased a certain open-mindedness, stipulating that a different kind of Spiritism interpretation might prove the existence of the phenomena themselves, irrespective of the Spirits. Nikolić Kucetina’s example demonstrates how the Church intervened in the government. The philosopher and paleontologist Branslav Petronijević
published the first non-Spiritist publication about Spiritism in 1900 (Spiritzam [Spiritism]), in which he criticized Spiritist epistemology and ontology, although he showed openness towards the parapsychological interpretation (to use the modern term) of phenomena. During WWI, as in all of Europe, a resurgence of Spiritism appeared, prompted by the deaths of loved ones. But testimonies show that communication with Spirits was more than contacting family members killed in the war: spirits were asked about the outcome of the war and general political questions.

In the interwar period, new editions appeared. The poet Kosara Katić published translations of Léon Denis (Denis 1926, 1933, n.d.a, n.d.b), as well as a collection of poems dictated by Spirits (Katić 1938), a rare example of channeled poetry in Serbian literature. More importantly, Spiritist groups became more organized and more visible. They had the journals Duhovni život (1931, 1932, 1933) [Spiritual life] and Život (1934–1936) [Life], the latter being all-Yugoslav in range. Some circles in that period established connections with British spiritualists (Harry Price, Arthur Findlay). Spiritism became much more a part of public debate (for example, in the journal Vreme in 1926, there was a debate on the topic in which many intellectuals participated). What was new in the interwar period in Serbia was the strengthening of interest, both among Spiritists and among the wider intellectual public, in the idea that phenomena recorded at séances might be real but should not be attributed to dead humans (or to demons, as theological criticism explained them) but to yet unexplained possibilities of the human mind and nature. This interpretation appeared in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries under the terms of psychic research, as it was called in Britain, or metapsychology, as the French called it.

Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that Spiritism, as shown by the history of texts, reveals but a small, visible part of the wider phenomenon. There is always a practice behind the history of texts. As is the rule with Spiritism, a number of small groups, being ephemeral in nature, remained invisible to this history. Some life stories are discovered in private documents (memoirs, journals). They give one an insight into the place that Spiritism occupied in the lives of its common practitioners and the mediums themselves, unlike theoretically articulated publications, which were usually based on foreign publications. One might find, for example, more about the position that the foretelling of “spirits” had in family life in Belgrade during the occupation during the First World War. A recently published diary by a Belgrade woman (Arandjelović 2018) depicts the role that séances had in the history of everyday life in that period, on the one hand, and how, on the other, those “messages” spread beyond the small circle, across the city, as rumors and prophecies (a kind of urban folklore).

Regarding the relation with the dead, the content of the contact in this particular case is no different from that encountered elsewhere in Spiritism: consolation, the joy in communication with the dead relatives, the conveyance of messages from those who have died. The motivation of some of the leading Spiritist authors (Nikolić Kučetina, K. Katić, A. Andelković) in Serbia was personal (the death of children). A new element introduced by Spiritism is reincarnationism. It was to be encountered in Serbian 19th-century culture rather sporadically, whereas it had become de rigeur among the Spiritists by the end of the 19th century, even among the ones who were prominently Christian. That affected the relation towards another world: the writer Dragutin Ilić asked at a séance: “Is Judas in hell?” and received the message from the otherworld “Nonsense, there is no hell” (Ilić 2003, p. 133), quite in accordance with the European progressivist model. Even the greatest sinner of Christian history is not to be confined to everlasting punishment. Still, Serbian Spiritists did not turn toward anticlericalism: the tone of their publications is Christian and not hostile toward Church.

2. Folk Spiritism

The history outlined so far is only a half of the story, focused on “high” or “classical” Spiritism “of the tables”. Spiritism spread outside the confines of the urban milieu among the widest of population layers. That process must have happened early on, because one
of the early testimonies (from 1881) speaks of its reaching the rural areas (Stojković and Đorđević 1881, pp. 266–67). However, in the history of Spiritism’s reception, a stage that is particularly interesting is the one in which Spiritism merged with the forms of folk Orthodox Christianity. At this point, it is necessary to say more about the movement of popular religiosity, the so-called bogomoljci (‘the ones who pray to God’) among whom Spiritism reverberated. It appeared at the end of the 19th century, first among the Serbs in Austria–Hungary, and later in the Kingdom of Serbia, and it was very much widespread between the two wars. Bogomoljci were laypersons who gathered in their houses and sang religious songs, prayed together, and encouraged people to be mindful of holidays and not to swear, smoke, or use make-up. Initially, the Orthodox Church had an ambivalent reaction to them. Namely, that form of laymen gathering for the sake of praying and calling for renewal reminded some Church representatives of the contemporary Protestant movements (like the Nazarenes) who had their missionaries among the Serbs in Austria-Hungary and in the Kingdom of Serbia at that time, and they were successful to an extent. But Bogomoljci themselves were Orthodox practitioners, and in addition to these house gatherings, they spoke of fasting and were church-goers. In the 1920s, thanks to a Church motion, the movement was definitely linked to the Church under the name of the Christian Folk Community. It was established in the local chapters, and it also had its own publishing activity. It should also be mentioned that the condemnation of contemporary intelligence as non-believing, as well as the criticism of science and culture, contemporary phenomena, Masons, Communists, and Protestant proselytizing groups were present in the bogomoljci movement.

Nevertheless, new controversies appeared, connected in particular to Spiritism within the movement. It all started even before the First World War, and in the 1920s in particular. Séances were practiced in the gatherings of the local bogomoljci chapters. Some of the members were mediums and claims of contact with higher powers were made. In the early 1920s, Dragoljub Milivojević (1898–1979) published a few books which were manifestations of this current. It is worthwhile to take a closer look at his biography. He was an educated theologian. Ever since his teenage period, according to his own statements in these books, he had been a Spiritist medium in a local bogomoljci group. He was a devout disseminator of the bogomoljci movement’s thought, and he also defended the Spiritist practice as a writer. One of his books is entitled Glas ‘Večne istine’ ili poruka iz duhovnog sveta [The voice of ‘the Eternal truth’ or a message from the Spiritual world] (three editions: 1920, 1921, and 1922), which a medium’s text, i.e., a channeled message from God himself. In its entirety an imitation of biblical style, this book mentions Spiritism, among other things. In 1921, he published Tajne nevidljivog sveta [The secrets of the invisible world], where he gave a theoretical explanation of his personal medium and visionary experiences. However, he also said of this book that it “was suggested word by word” by Christ. In his books, Milivojević reveals the elements of classical Spiritism, and some even have their roots in mesmerism (the concepts of fluid, suggestions, and magnetism as ways of affecting the medium). The description of the nine spheres of the otherworld was taken directly from a Spiritist book by S. Nikolić. Reincarnation is included, and the idea that souls go where they feel they belong after death is reminiscent of Swedenborg. At the same time, some elements are taken from Orthodox Christianity (the struggle with evil Spirits, visions of the otherworld). Subsequently, however, he deserted medium activity and became a monk under the name of Dionisije. He published a few articles in which he criticized Spiritist practice and described how he had stopped being a medium (Dionisije 1926, 1930). He climbed up in the Church hierarchy and became a bishop, leaving for the USA prior to the beginning of the Second World War where he had been assigned an episcopy. In the 1960s, he separated himself from the Serbian Orthodox Church, stating as the reason for his doing so that the Patriarchy in Belgrade was under the control of the communist regime. This is the so-called American schism that shook the Serbian Orthodox Church. Another Spiritist member of the bogomoljci movement was Milan Bozoljac, who was very active in the Spiritist periodicals at the time. He and Milivojević “went to the folk” for the sake of
spreading the *bogomoljci* movement, as he himself claimed (Bozoljac 1930). These texts are a smaller part of the testimony of Spiritism among *bogomoljci* articulated by its more educated members. Among the reactions of certain theologians to the *bogomoljci* movement, in the 1920s, it was indicated that, in addition to its similarity with Protestantism, it also had a tinge of Spiritism, to which Milivojević’s desertion of the medium practice contributed. Some groups were excluded from the Christian Folk Community due to Spiritism, so it seemed that the *bogomoljci* movement was officially cleansed of Spiritism. According to the meager data at our disposal, however, a complete break-up appears to not have occurred, and it also seems to be the case that after 1945, some members of folk Orthodox Christianity continued to practice Spiritism in secret. According to the testimony of the priest Nikola Milović, in the 1990s, he encountered among his flock (in the vicinity of Belgrade) a group of these believers who occupied positions in a local church government and who practiced this specific kind of Spiritism. Milović published a novel (*Hrabro i radosno veselim nogama* [Courageously and joyfully on happy feet], (Milović 2018) in which he speaks about this, and he has also confirmed to me that those were his authentic experiences. According to Milović, these groups, which claim to be practicing Orthodox Christians, exist even today in parts of Serbia and in Bosnia. They even have their own patriarch; they are just hiding their practice, which, however, is not unknown to some bishops. This would mean that folk Spiritism has been present for more than a century. This phenomenon is currently quite obscure, and it merits further research.

This form of Spiritism has distanced itself from the “classical” form, merging with the forms of folk Orthodox Christianity, i.e., becoming part of folk religion. This kind of transformation, which could also be readily classified as syncretism, has its parallels elsewhere in the context of Spiritism as a global phenomenon. It is known that Kardecist Spiritism, which has spread together with French cultural influence, has obtained new forms in two distant corners of the world. In Indochina, it has affected the creation of a new religious movement called Caodaism (Jammes 2010; Introvigne 2003, pp. 79–82; Benz 2005, pp. 19–30). Spiritism has merged with other religious forms in Brazil. An early article on Brazilian Spiritism distinguishes between the two types, a “low” one (merged with Umbanda) and a “high” one, i.e., Africa-derived, and the other Europe-derived (Warren 1968, p. 401). Certainly, similar examples can be found elsewhere in the European context. In a healing example from the French rural milieu, it has been noted that the syncretism of traditional (folk and Catholic) conceptions and the more modern scientific ones occurred (which contests the idea of rural practices as petrified) and that Spiritism actually prepared the ground for that syncretism to happen (Sharp 2005, p. 324). This observation speaks to the transformation of Spiritism itself. In the example of a Russian rural community, Alexander Panchenko concluded that in that case, Spiritism gained a specific form, different from the “classical” one (Panchenko 2005). Analyzing modern magic healing in Serbia (primarily the self-presentation of medium healers and their illness conception) elsewhere, we spoke about the “folk New Age” on account of the merging of New Age elements and traditional magic elements (Radulović 2019). Folk Spiritism could be regarded in the same way. Such processes can be described as what M. Espagne calls cultural transfer, unique from “reception” and “influence”: in transfer, something transferred to another culture takes on a new, hybrid form; not circulation, but transformation (Espagne 2013).

Before embarking upon the analysis of this Spiritism form’s content, it is necessary to digress and say that there is another, parallel form of Spiritism’s divulgation, only in this case, it is not a transition into a rural environment. It is a transformation into children and adolescent folklore, a phenomenon also present elsewhere (e.g., *Ouija* boards among American or Icelandic adolescents). From my personal memories of the 1980s, it can be stated that “summoning the Spirits” was a game practiced at parties; it was also accompanied in some cases by the narratives, which were some kinds of belief legends, or what qualifies as a children’s scary stories. Such testimonies should be collected and examined. In the Serbian case, there are fragmentary testimonies about the fact that at the very beginning of the spread of Spiritism, it appeared as a form of child’s play (Stojković
and Đorđević 1881, pp. 266–67; Stanojević 1898a, p. 38). For the time being, it can be said that there are two parallel streams of the spread of Spiritism, in folk culture and in children’s culture. In particular in the latter case, it would be of great importance to pay attention to “Spirit summoning” in teenage folklore, especially in a comparative context. After all, weren’t the Fox sisters teenagers when they started rapping?

3. Folk Spiritism and the Otherworld

It can be speculated that these two types of Spiritism exhibited social differences: the classical one was more connected to the urban milieu and middle class, and the other one to the folk milieu and rural areas (the Spiritist journal *Spiritual world* writes that the beginnings of Spiritism among Serbs were confined to haute monde—*Duhovni život* 1910, pp. 15–16). On the level of Spiritism as a local network, the boundaries are not etched with such precision—some names can be found on both sides: Bozoljac could be classified as a folk Spiritist, and in his journal, he also published the authors of the classical Spiritism, such as Léon Denis or Kosara Katić. The same person financed both the pre-war (“classical”) Spiritist journal and the one from the 1930s, closer to the folk type. Some other names close to Western Spiritism (also from the period prior to 1914) appear in the articles and groups connected to *bogomoljci* Spiritism. On the level of topics, too, the mixture of the two sources is present: in a prophetic book (*Milovan Krstić* 1907), the texts from saints received during séances are provided, but the author of the foreword refers to Flammarion. Milivojević made statements that revealed reincarnationism in his book—a trademark of not only Spiritism but also Theosophy. Milivojević retained the idea of both heaven and hell, but they are embedded in the Spiritist cosmology of nine spheres. His descriptions of heaven and hell (very “scenic”) in many aspects is traditional (Lucifer has horns and the wings of a bat). On the other hand, traditional thematic do exist in the Spiritism of S. Nikolić Kučetina. Kučetina kept hell in his cosmology, with a very graphic description (a burning lake 100 km deep). In Kučetina’s conception, Spirits that can be improved are placed in hell, which is a step back from progressivism towards a traditional image; he speaks explicitly of eternal torment and damnation (*Nikolić Kučetina* 1898, pp. 44–45). Darwin is also placed in hell according to his insights. There is also a stylization of the otherworldly, which is in accordance with the traditional behavior of Balkan society; for example, a godfather/best man’s 14 curse (which is considered to be particularly heavy in folkloric representations). In another example, someone did not celebrate their *slava* (their ‘patron saint’s day,’ a custom typical of Serbian Orthodox Christianity) for Saint Nicholas, but the saint said to him that he was not angry. Last, the Spirit of a girl kisses a saint’s hand in the otherworld (the sign of respect of an older one in traditional society) (*Ibid*, pp. 27; 84; 99–100).

Because of this interchange, the entire distinction between high and folk Spiritism might seem stretched. Still, in spite of the personal and some thematic exchanges, there is indeed a difference in the worldview and atmosphere of the two forms. A telling difference is between the high (or “classical”) and folk Spiritism with respect to the relation with the dead (it should be mentioned that the overview of publications of “classical” Spiritism, in addition to notes from séances and related reports about the direct meetings with the dead, also brings clairvoyant dreams, dreams about the deceased, “synchronicity” happenings (crisis apparitions in the British material), and signs interpreted as precognitive auguries. Moving on to folk Spiritism, one notices a change in the relation to the contact with the otherworldly. Namely, judging by the publications and statements, the contact with saints, angels, Christ, Virgin Mary, and God comes to the forefront, pushing aside figure of the deceased. This type of contact with the supernatural occurs even in the early versions of “classical” Spiritism, but only sporadically and in no way in the foreground (*Nikolić Kučetina* 1897, pp. 41–43; *Stanojević 1898a*, p. 66; *Stevan Runić* 1911; *Milovan Krstić* 1907). In the Spiritism of the *bogomoljci* movement, this type of communication was of vital importance. In that sense, it is important to highlight that the practitioners themselves saw this feature as the peculiarity of their practice. Namely, the historical trajectory outlined
infra is the research result deduced from the sources; therefore, the division into these two types could be taken as an etic classification enabled by its positioning in a wider comparative context of world Spiritism. However, the two Spiritism types, “classical Spiritism” and bogomoljci Spiritism, also differ from the emic perspective. The followers of folk Spiritism themselves emphasize this difference. Dragoljub Milivojević distinguishes the “real” séances (of the bogomoljci type) as Christian from the classical ones, which he marks as demonic. The real séance is the one in which prayers and censers are used, whereas evil forces have crept into Spiritism. Evil mediums receive their suggestions from Satan (“suggestion” is the term that Milivojević uses, in the sense of being richly hued by the heritage of mesmerism). As Satan’s mediums, they often use a table, a glass, or a cup, while in the “real” séance, angels help the “controlling Spirit”. He provides an exemplary tale about them (Milivojević 1921b, pp. 65–67, 77–78, 92–97). “The movements of gathering”, which seem to refer to the bogomoljci medium gatherings, are not against God’s will, and God allowed for the Spirits to appear and be photographed (Milivojević 1920, pp. 6–7, 13; 1922, pp. 23, 32). “Christ” says that his teachings are not disseminated through Spiritism but adds that Spiritism (using this very term) will be improved. Many have turned into Satan’s weapon through Spiritism, but when he “improves” it, it will be the same as gospel (Milivojević 1922, p. 25). Milan Bozoljac writes along similar lines ten years later. He emphasizes that Spiritism does not exist for summoning the dead. People should not meddle with that; they should leave it to God to teach us, and he will, should it be necessary, send us good Spirits (Bozoljac 1932b, p. 23). In the obituary for Čedomilj Mijatović, regarding the specificity of Serbian Spiritism, Bozoljac accentuates that “among our nation”, only saints and higher spirits appear to our mediums, not the souls of the deceased (Bozoljac 1932a, p. 7). Mijatović told him that he was unaware of such a phenomenon among the English. Bozoljac gives a definition of Spiritism: “a pure spiritual phenomenon which is not examined or studied obscenely, but accepted as the godsent force of the Holy Spirit where it appears alone irrespective of our will” (Bozoljac 1933, pp. 110–11). Evidently, when Bozoljac spoke of “examination” and “studying”, he had the purportedly scientific par lance of classical Spiritists in mind, maybe even the paraspsychological research that caught the attention of the public between the two wars. An author of one of the prophetic books (evidently incentivized by the messages from séances) also makes a distinction between Spiritism stemming from a higher power (“Christism”) and that with the tables forbidden by God. This is the message from the Virgin Mary herself (Veličković 1930, pp. 46–48). Another justifies the messages received during gatherings as prophesying, i.e., the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Hadžić-Tonić 1936, p. 18).

Ostensibly, the Spiritists of this milieu wished to distance themselves from classical Spiritism explicitly, and sometimes from the term “Spiritism” itself. Should one see in that only a strategy for distancing from a practice condemned by the Church? (It should be added that one of the reasons for the accusations by the Church was that the bogomoljci séances turned into orgies in the dark, sharing a fascinating resemblance with the type of accusations levelled at various heterodox groups in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and also within Hinduism). It does not seem to be the case of looking for an alibi; not only because of the explication offered by Milivojević and Bozoljac, but also because the primary sources truly confirm that the “appearances” are different from the classical Spiritist (appearances of God, angels, saints). Serbian folk Spiritism wanted to be a practice within the Church. But inevitably, “higher knowledge” learned at séances by mediums caused a tension with authorities.

The difference in elite Spiritism is visible in some examples that warn against calling the dead, in accordance with folk beliefs about not disturbing the departed. Milivojević gives an example of one of his visions. While he was looking at a widow weeping for her son in a church in Belgrade, a spirit (described as a dark man with a big head and deformed face) invisible to her approaches her and collects her tears in a glass. The tears in the glass start boiling, and the Spirit then pours them onto her son’s head, who is screaming in pain. The message is not to mourn the dead too much, because it can harm both the
living and the dead (Milivojević 1921a, pp. 35–36). In another example, a spirit of the dead appears and begs the living not to mourn him so much. He was in the sixth sphere, but the mourning agitated him so that he was on the verge of experiencing pain (Idem). This traditional narrative is combined with the cosmology of Spiritism (from S. Nikolić’s book) in a physical representation of the spiritual world. In another text (from Spiritist periodicals), a daughter’s spirit tells her mother not to go to the cemetery more than is necessary (Duhovni život 1933, pp. 22–23).

Even Ćedomilj Mijatović, who can be considered as an exponent of “high” Spiritism, in one of his letters mentions to the man whose son has died that his son is before a sapphire throne (as he has discovered in a séance): the spirit of Mijatović’s mother has brought the son who has stated that he is in a higher sphere but his parents’ grief prevents him from moving on (Duhovni svet 1933, pp. 7–9). Instead of elaborate communication with the spirits, these examples—not numerous, but very telling—convey the message that the dead should not be disturbed, revealing how deeply rooted they are in traditional concepts about the world of the deceased they are. In the foreground is, of course, the idea of the dead requiring peace, i.e., full integration into the world of death (on the importance of this conception in a wide area of Central and Eastern Europe, see Pócs 2019). The first quoted example (from Milivojević) can be classified as a traditional narrative (ATU 769 The Dead Child’s Grave; motif E324 in Thompson’s Motif-Index) known to Christian medieval and early modern literature as well as folklore; Serbian folklore included (a dead child’s spirit appears to his/her mother in a wet shirt and says that he/she cannot play with other children in the otherworld because their shirt is constantly wet on account of her tears). While traditional in itself, it is unusual only in that it is to be found in a Spiritist publication, because the worldview of Spiritism is quite different. Elsewhere, a spirit mentions that hell sometimes opens up, and the Holy Mother takes the souls out (Duhovni život 1932, pp. 22–23), which is a representation that is well-known in religious folk songs stemming from the apocrypha (Milošević-Dorđević 1971, pp. 204–13). The apocrypha themselves are not only the works of medieval literature, but they also live through popular books for the folk in this day and age. Another traditional motif is one that features in the presentation of the otherworld, where charmer is mentioned through whose mouth snakes come out (Milivojević 1920, second edition, pp. 15–16). In folklore, the image of snakes hanging from the breasts of a woman who aborted her child or of a rich and cruel man appears in the depiction of the otherworld (in religious folk songs and in iconographic representations).

Finally, publications close to this type of Spiritism bring texts that are different from the spirit report types. There are apocalyptic prophecies and visions (taking visions as a genre) about the future of the Balkans and the entire world. A certain number of authors from this milieu published their prophecies and calls for repentance in the form of chapbooks. Those can be categorized as folk prophets (a category known to Balkan folk religion) who now vocalize their thoughts through books. This is an entire corpus that is very interesting for the examination of prophecies, visionary states, ecstasies, and apocalypticism. Based on their statements, it is clear that some of them have transferred séance messages.

4. Conclusions

We can say that the Spiritism transferred from Europe followed the epistemology of European Spiritism in claiming a scientific character, while folk Spiritism used the authority of the celestial powers. The former was more interested in the deceased; the latter in the inhabitants of Christian heaven. However, when it comes to folk Spiritism, we should not forget that all these statements come from the small number of bogomoljci authors who took to the pen. It can be said once again that the relation between the two types of Spiritism can be seen both from etic and emic perspectives. The difference would be in the fact that from the etic perspective, folk Spiritism is a type of Spiritism that has been transformed; from the emic perspective, they are also very much aware of this difference (and the emic perspective partially overlaps with etc), but often, any kind of relation with Spiritism or the term itself is completely rejected.
With all the necessary caution, I wish to propose that in the case of the phenomenon referred to as folk Spiritism, one can postulate that a new phenomenon of Spiritism received from Europe and middle-class culture became a framework; a means that relied on the older layers of folk beliefs about the otherworld and of ecstatic practices, giving them a new articulation, maybe even a new impetus. Practices to attain ecstatic states and narratives about them are widespread in the Serbian region and, more widely, the south Slavic and Balkan regions. And older ethnology has often dealt in particular with their roots, seeking to find them in antiquity, such as old Balkan religions. However, as can be seen, it is important that these forms also exist in modern times, and they are related to ongoing changes (cultural transfer, the “grassroots” movements for renewal within Orthodox Christianity). The differentiation between the two types of Spiritism also draws one’s attention to something else. While it is often spoken of as the dynamics of traditional/disenchantment and disenchantment/re-enchantment, in the case of folk Spiritism, one can speak of various layers or forms of the enchanted world: one that is older and another that is younger.

Folk Spiritism is significant, as has already been mentioned, for the study of altered states of consciousness and eschatology. It is also important for the study of the relation with religious authority. Namely, what theological critics of these medium groups have emphasized is precisely the fact that they appropriate authority for themselves for the sake of direct communication with God, Christ, etc. This is completely in accordance with Spiritism itself, whose modern nature lies, in particular, in its democratic and participatory, “wild” character (Cigliana 2018, pp. 22, 54–56). We define this form as folk Spiritism, in the same way as folk religion. However, the notion of folk religion itself has been criticized for its opposition of high/low, elite/folk, after the article by Leonard Primiano (1995), where a new concept of vernacular religion has been offered (see Bowman and Valk 2012, pp. 1–19 for the possibility of its application in quite different contexts). Perhaps this dualist model should also be re-examined in this case. Spiritism in itself, observed not as a global movement but as a milieu of small circles of practitioners, could be regarded as a vernacular form. And, folk Spiritism could be seen in the same way. Thus, the distinction between high and low Spiritisms, justified in historical terms, becomes mitigated when both are seen as vernacular forms. Another possible view that does not exclude the previous one is that of a folklore that is ‘close to the church milieu’, as the Russian folklorists refer to it. Namely, this milieu, as part of the bogomoljci movement, was closely connected to practicing Orthodox Christianity. Should it be regarded in this way, the round-the-church milieu would show that much more vernacular and heterodoxic elements may exist in that folklore than it may seem. Serbian Spiritism could be put on the European map of Spiritisms, adding a chapter to the general history of Spiritism. Adding folk Spiritism help us to understand the various forms that Spiritism can take in different cultures.

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Notes
1 Of course, it is well-known that American Spiritism has its roots in European mesmerism and related phenomena.
2 The English term is Spiritualism, while French, German, Russian, and Italian use (some form of) Spiritism. We opt for the latter, since (a) it is used in Serbian sources (b) Spiritualism refers to a specific English form.
Quite interestingly, Pimple notes that the background of early American Spiritism is the belief in empiricism typical of that milieu—therefore, already the pre-Kardecist, early version experienced an influx of modern times or what Weber referred to as disenchantment.

Refering both to the doctrine of F.A. Mesmer and its later developments in 19th century, esoteric and non-esoteric (for a short overview, see Meheust 2006).

The religion sociologist Massimo Introvigne sees the predecessor of contemporary channeling and UFO cults in Spiritism (Introvigne 2003, pp. 47–132; on the similarities and differences between Spiritism and channeling, see pp. 91–93).

The author of this paper has been writing about Spiritism in Serbian literature from the 19th to the 20th century (since 2006) (Radulović 2009, 2020a, 2020b, 2022). The historian Radmila Radić published a history of Spiritism (up to World War II) in 2009 (Radić 2009). The historian Slobodan G. Marković included Spiritism in a biography of Ćedomilj Mijatović (Marković 2006).

I rely in this subchapter on the aforementioned history by R. Radić, as well as on my personal research, which has confirmed the main framework Radmila Radić established. It is also enlarged by new sources, as well as by the chronological upper and lower limits and new interpretations. In addition to my own published papers, in this article, I use the data that should appear in the article “Prilozi za istoriju srpskog Spiritizma [Contributions to the history of Serbian Spiritism]”, Serbian Studies Research (Radulović 2024).

In that sense, Andjelković might resemble European leftist radicals close to Spiritism. Strictly speaking, she turned toward Spiritism after the death of her daughter and after leaving socialist activity, but from her letters, we learn that she thought that Spiritism and Anthroposophy fulfill the same ideals as the socialism of her youth. We can definitely speak about the same attitude of people like her toward all kind of “alternatives” and reformism: those who were interested in one were usually interested in others (vegetarianism, crematism, female suffrage, and so on).

It is useful for the sake of comparison to mention the reactions that were sparked in the non-Christian milieu, like the late Ottoman Empire—criticism also came from these two directions (Türesay 2018).

About the role of reincarnation in the formation of the new worldview in the case of French culture, see (Sharp 2006).

Introvigne includes Antoinism and Neuffenbarungen, typical of the German speaking area and German cultural area, into the “post-Spiritist cults”: Roger Bastide, also in one of his early works about Brazilian Spiritism, approaches it somewhat differently, highlighting the difference between “Kardecism” and “Umbanda” in the class sociological context (Bastide 1967).

Bill Ellis (2004, pp. 174–96) interprets Ouija groups as adolescent folklore; according to him, those are not cults but folk groups (Idem, 185–186), with which I agree completely. He uses Victor Turner’s concept of community to explain why the young gather around Ouija, ranging from pure fun to the forms that are more than that: “in depersonalizing contexts, it is a way of generating a brief but satisfying form of community among young adolescents in the face of a danger that they feel they can ritually control. By generating and reacting to aggressive messages, the ritual allows them to tell off, often in obscene ways, representatives of the adult world who try to be their ‘master’” (Idem, p. 196). One should not be reminded to what extent adolescent narrative folklore forms (Bloody Mary in the American, the Queen of Spades in the Russian milieu) are thematically similar to Spiritism.

Relations could be even more complicated. Upon leaving this current, Milivojević criticized Spiritism as theosophy. The journal Duhaoni život (1933, pp. 33–38) responded to that by differentiating Spiritism from theosophy. The pneumatology and eschatology of Spiritism and theosophy are truly different, but Milivojević’s mention of theosophy did not have much to do with what could be found in Blavatsky or Besant.

In Serbia, kum is both ‘best man’ and ‘godfather.’

For example, a reporter says that he has seen his grandfather (who lives in another city) by his bed; later on, he receives a message stating that his grandfather died the same day (Duhaoni svez 1910, pp. 118–19). The deceased person appears in a dream with a message (Duhaoni svez 1910, pp. 137–38). The brother of a certain publicist dreams of the deceased man; the informer is woken up by his neighbor who says that he has seen a light by his bed (Novo sunce 1904, p. 373). Prophetic dreams about the death of children are also mentioned (Dva sveta 1903, pp. 62–63). Haunted houses are reported (Duhaoni život 1932, pp. 1–7), but the phenomenon is interpreted in the Spiritist key.

While mediums of classical Spiritism can be seen within the framework of altered states of consciousness, in the traditional séance, there is often no altered state of consciousness—the participants patiently number the raps and letters.

For an overview of these debates and their relevance for folkloristics, see (Radulović and Djordjević Belić 2021).

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