

Kukeri Festival

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Kukeri (Bulgarian: Кукери) is a traditional Bulgarian ritual for driving away the evil spirits. Every year around New Year and before Lent men dressed as monsters (and called kukeri), wearing decorated wooden masks of animals (sometimes double-faced) and bells on their belts would walk around the village while dancing in order to scare the evil spirits by means of their costumes and the sound of the belts. According to the tradition, this would provide a good harvest, health and happiness in the village during the whole year.

The kukeri traditionally visit the people's houses at night, so that "the sun would not catch them on the road", and after going round the village they would all gather on the square, where they dance wildly and amuse the people. The ritual may vary in different regions of the country, but its essence remains largely the same.

Kukeri Festival BulgariaIn the rural villages of Bulgaria, the "Kukeri" is a important masked ritual, carried forward from the Thracians. They dance in the last days of the winter, just before nature comes back to life and the trees and flowers blossom.

The participants in this ritual are male only, dressed in sheepskin garments and wearing ugly frightening masks and chanove (copper bells) on their belts, dancing and singing Christmas songs and chants, with the intention to scare away the evil spirits or ghosts which people believed came back to the living ones in winter.

The esoteric meaning in Kukeri ritual is that by pray to the God of vegetation together with magical operations there may be influenced by the idea of fertility of the nature and people. The ritual is a mixture between Christian and pagan traditions and symbols. There is a strong connection between the event and the peasant life. It is a unique and ancient folklore, which can be seen only in Bulgaria. The traditional mask is multi-coloured, covered with beads, ribbons and woolen tassels. The dress too, is colorful and florid once again up to the individual imagination. The heavy swaying of the main mummer is meant to represent wheat heavy with grain, and the noisy clang of the bells is intended to drive away the evil and sickness.

As recently as the end of the 19th century, the importance of the Kukeri was so substantial that fightings and quarrels between two different Kukeri groups from neighboring villages often end up in real, not imitative, murderings.