

## **"THE LEGEND OF THE DRAGON FROM OHRID LAKE"<sup>1</sup> - INTERPRETATION OF ITS REGIONAL AUTHENTICITY**

**Abstract:** This article examines Macedonian folk legends, beliefs and images, that concern the existence of the dragon from Ohrid lake (the Lamia). Separate points of analysis of this topic are the universal and mythological notions that take part in the construction of regional authenticity, emphasizing the interpretation of the cosmological aspect. The relation between the imaginary and the real in the domain of interpretation of reality is theoretically examined.

**Key words:** folk tales, legends, dragon, imaginary, and real, interpretation

### **1. Universal and local mythological notions in the construction of regional authenticity**

One folk legend from Struga states:

"This is what I have heard from old people. We had partners (...), his name was Gligor Topuska. When we were sitting together in the shack he would say: Yes, now we can go in the middle of the lake, but earlier it was forbidden to do that. We were scared of the dragon that lived in the middle of the lake and attacked the boats of the ones that were passing by. For example, this Dio that had a big boat for transporting livestock to Podgradec in Turkish times. Thus it was only in 1900, around 1850-1900 that they felt free to pass over the lake. In fact there was no real dragon. But they believed there was. Only if they had a big boat that could carry 4000-5000 kg, only in that case they would be brave enough to cross the lake. Otherwise, if the boat was small, they would not go."<sup>2</sup>

The comparative analysis of the Macedonian folk tales collected by our collectors in the 19th century, containing motifs of the lake dragon, as well as the stories collected during the second half of the 20th century, speak about a widely spread belief among the population around the lake, of the existence of a lake dragon.

The contemporary manifestations of the existence of the lake dragon as we have seen from the above mentioned example are much more explicit compared to the examples and motifs that are found in the collectors' works. This is a result of the different methodology of investigation. This is why in the collections of folk literature we can only indirectly feel that there is a belief in the existence of such a dragon and we can just separate it from a context of a certain general and universal type of stories.

In the collection of K. Shapkarev, the story "The son of the Tsar and the Devil", for example, says: "The one who would go there, he would not return alive; since the whole lake was sur-

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this article is taken from a legend with the same title told by Nestorovski Klime in 1969 in Struga, recorded by Chakar Krste and Milev Stefan. This legend can be found in the archive of the Institute for folklore in Skopje, under n. AIF.816.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, AIF, 816.

rounded by a very big snake, it's head and it's tail were very big, so that it could immediately feel the one who would come near to take water from the lake and it eat him".<sup>3</sup> In the works of Stephan Verkovic, in the story "The Tsar's daughter that turned into a boy"<sup>4</sup> we find the following: "Another day she was sent to bring a mare, and it had nine foals in the middle of the sea..."<sup>5</sup>

In the collection of M. Cepenkov we find the following motif: "...the Moon shone like it was day time, and he was facing the lake and watching the clear water, clean as a tear and he was happy that it was a beautiful lake and that there was a beautiful field around the lake. Watching the lake, he noticed that there were waves in the middle of the lake.

- Where did these waves come from now - the boy said to himself - without any wind? We should go away from these waves.

Thinking what to do, Petre was one big snake in the middle of the lake, around hundred steps long. It had a head like an ox. It had eyes like a horse. If you see her three hundred fears would jump upon you, no one would dare to beat it..."<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the contemporary Struga variation that we mentioned at the beginning, keeping in mind the tales collected in the second part of the 20th century, the variations taken from the collection of Dimo Stenkovski<sup>7</sup> are also interesting for our investigation. Their title is "How did the boy turn into a child". One of them says: "In the middle of the lake - he said - you will go to this tree - he said - you will brake the gree (...) - When you go - he said - to the tree, you will look down from the tree into the lake, and there will be a dragon under the tree - he said. If it's eyes are wide open - he said - you should run - he said"<sup>8</sup>

All of these motifs that were mentioned by now present parts of two universal types of tales that speak about the hero who pursues a certain goal with the assistance of some miracle assistant, or the hero who changes his gender.

According to the international classification we can find these tales as At 513 (The helpers)<sup>9</sup> and At 514 (The shift of sex)<sup>10</sup>. The motif of the lake dragon in these types of stories and their variations is not as explicit as in the above-mentioned tales by K. Shapkarev, S. Verkovich and M.

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<sup>3</sup> Kuzman Shapkarev : *Izbrani dela*, vol. 5, tales (from Ohrid), Misl, Skopje 1976 p.182

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Verkovic, *Makedonski narodni umotvorbi*, vol. 4 (south-Macedonian folk tales), Makedonska Kniga, Skopje 1985 p.196

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 200

<sup>6</sup> The title of the story where this motif was found is *40 sons of the tsar and his 40 daughters in law, the big snake, the dragon, the Arab and the dervish* and we found this tale in the collection of Marko Cepenkov *Makedonski narodni prikazni*, ed. Kiril Penushliski, Skopje 1989, vol. 1-5, book 1, n. 69 (the extract is taken from p. 320)

<sup>7</sup> Kshishtov Vroclavski: *Makedonskiot naroden raskazuvach Dimo Stenkovski*, II (texts), Institut za folklor Marko Cepenkov, Skopje, 1984, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> The types of the folktale, Antti Aarne and Smith Thompson, Helsinki 1964.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

Cepenkov. In the typological index of Eberhart and Borotav (W. Eberhard, P. N. Boratav)<sup>11</sup> under number E. B. 207 (Die Elefantenzane - ivory)<sup>12</sup>, we also find similar motifs where the hero is trying to pursue a certain goal. In this case we find the motif of the sea and the hero who, following the advice of a certain woman, pours wine into the sea: the elephant gets drunk and throws his teeth so the hero can take them to the tsar.

Closer to our tales are the Turkish variations that we find under the type E. B. 77 (Die übernatürlichen Helfer)<sup>13</sup> - supernatural assistants. In these variations collected in Ankara, we find motifs regarding the sea monster.

The thing that is characteristic for the tales collected in Macedonia is the similarity between the motifs of the lake dragon. Although in the international tales there are similar motifs, they are mostly connected to the sea and to the existence of different monsters and events. Such is the example of the above-mentioned tale from the collection of S. Verkovic, where in the middle of the sea there is a mare with nine foals.

These are just a few examples, which give a possibility to suppose that there is a frequent traditional belief in the existence of the lake monster among the population of the settlements around Ohrid Lake.

The thing that is most typical and surely guides us to the numerous assumptions regarding the regional authenticity is that this monster that lives in the depths of Ohrid Lake is called Lamija.

We will not go into describing the numerous assumptions regarding this type of monster that many scholars locate in the Balkans, but we will just mention what T. Vrazinovski says in his book on Macedonian demonology: "The character of the lake dragon is one of the least examined demonic characters, from its ethnological but as well from its folklorist side. The reason for this is that we have very modest amount of data about this creature, which means that our collectors did not pay enough attention to it in the past".<sup>14</sup>

"The appearance of the Lamija is related to the snake and it looks like a huge snake that is 4-5 meters long. According to some beliefs this is in fact the king of the snakes, it has long hair and usually lives by the lakes and the seas, periodically going out of the depths and looking of a victim."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <sup>11</sup> *Typen türkischer volksmärchen*, von Wolfram Eberhard und Pertev Naili Boratav, Wisbaden 1953.

<sup>12</sup> <sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> <sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> <sup>14</sup> Tanas Vrazinovski: *Narodnata Demonologija na Makedoncite*, Institut za staroslovenska kultura, Prilep, 1995. p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> <sup>15</sup> Vrazinovski, *ibid* p. 48

Among the population of the Ohrid region there are many beliefs regarding the lake dragon that lived somewhere in the base of the Galichica mountain and that during the battle with St. Naum, made a hole in the mountain through which the water from Prespa lake flowed into Ohrid lake.<sup>16</sup>

#### a) Cosmological Interpretation

In the above mentioned example taken from the collection of Shapkarev, we find a pure example of a universal mythological motif transfigured into an element of a local belief: the belief concerning a lake dragon or more precisely the lake monster presented as a snake that bites off its own tale.

In world mythology this motif is very common. In the domain of symbolic interpretation of this image, this image is interpreted as a symbol of the repetitive cosmic cycle.

"In the Greco-Roman world, the artist usually presented the year that flows as an infinite cycle of time, as a snake with a form of a circle that swallows its own tail. This symbol is used in Indian culture, as well as by the contemporary cultures to symbolize the infinite cycle of time".<sup>17</sup>

Regarding Hindu mythology and the concept of the snake, E. B. Havel says: "This philosophical concept of the evolution of the Universe in Hindu art is often symbolized by the image of Ishvara, under the name of Narajana, that sleeps in the waters of chaos, upon a snake. Sesha or Ananta "The Infinite" - symbol of eternity, that is wrapped around the world".<sup>18</sup>

Without going further in the mythological symbolic of the notion of the snake in different world mythologies, we will try to investigate the cosmological aspect of the synonymous traditional notion of the lake dragon in Ohrid Lake in Macedonian narrative folklore.

The comparison of these universal mythological images with the local Ohrid variation of Shapkarev, presents images that emerge from the mythological archaic conscience, as an explanation of the unexplainable regarding the folklore images of the lake monster.

In other words, the lake dragon as a local or regional imaginative image, presents a synthesized variation of the universal archetypal model in which all traditional folklore conscience is concentrated, conscience about the space limits and the infinite time flow of the universe.

Thus, in the folklore conscience of the lake population, the dragon presents the only master of time and space.

We find an explicit universal cosmological moment in the variation of the legend of Dimo Stenkovski in which the dragon lives around one tree situated in the middle of the lake. The lake and the tree in the middle of the lake in this case present a substitute of the universal mythological images of the primal ocean and the cosmic tree that we find as elements of creation in many world mythologies.

The tree in the middle of the lake is a regional realization of the notion about the center of the world (axis mundi) from which life on earth has emerged.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Naum Celakovski: *Sveti Naum ohridski chudotvorec* Raster. Prilep, 1999 p.103.

<sup>17</sup> Grejs Kenrs: *Filozofii na istorijata*:Kultura, Skopje, 1993, p.9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>19</sup> About the cosmic tree in world mythology and its relation to the primal ocean see the following: Toporov, *L'arbera universale*, Risherche semiotiche, Torino, 1973, and by the same author: *O strukture nekotarih arhaicheskikh tekstov, sootnosimi s koncepcieñ "mirovogo dereva*, vo Trudi po znakovim Sistemam,

The relation of the dragon with this pure visual image presents an explicit and absolute attempt to present the life space as a part of the cosmos. The rulers of this area are the necessary elements from which the world was created in many world traditions: the primal ocean, the cosmic tree and the deity that creates. In this case the deity is substituted with the demonological entity presented in the image of the dragon.

Globally seen, these few images do not present a local innovation in the domain of the mythological logic, which is made actual in a certain locality. However, one must take in account the regional aspects of the dragon that help in emphasizing the authentically folklore of the Ohrid region. In fact it is this regional authenticity that is the bearer of the main characteristics of this motif.

The next question that is maybe equally important in the interpretation of regional authenticity of this motif surely lies in the mutual relations of the "two realities", the reality of the folk tale that is the legend and the reality of contemporary life.

## 2. The relation between the imaginary and the real

### a) Interpretation of reality

In order to establish certain communications between the reality of the above-mentioned narratives and the context of contemporary reality, first we have to make a distinction between the real world of legend, and the world of tales in general.

In the frames of the general theory of folk narrative types "the reality" of legends is distant from the "reality" of fairy tales. The "reality of legends is usually considered to be something more historic and by this it is closer to the real reality, which is not the case with the total "imaginative reality" of the fairy tales.

Such separation of the two realities is however facing certain problems that lie in the definition of the characteristics of the legend as folklore narrative genre, keeping in mind the fact that in the narrative folklore we really cannot set clearly the borders between the genres and types. Such is the case with the distinction between legends, historical narratives, notions and beliefs.

The English and the French notion of the term "legend" is the same as the term "saga" for the Germans.

In German science regarding folklore the term legend is associated with Christian holy stories. But this does not mean that the reality of these legends could be clearly separated from the unreality of the other genres.

From the point of view of a narrative this legend of the dragon from Ohrid Lake does not fit the given definition, but communicates more with the defining of the folk notions and beliefs.

Whatever the case, one distinct and clear classification is not possible. This is why in the above-mentioned case the term legend is taken conditionally, not as a term in the narrow sense of the word, but as a substitute of the folk notion or belief.

The question that we pose in this sense is the question of the relationship between the realism of these types of legends, beliefs and notions and the reality of the contemporary world.

To make this relationship clearer we will use the reality aspect of the folk tales, which was frequently analyzed up until now.

Max Luthi, one of the greatest European researchers of folk tales, said, "the tales do not show us how to behave outside this world, but how to understand the reality of this world. Thus, tales are not, as Joles

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Tartu 1971, - V.N.Toporov, *Drvo sveta*, Savremenik, n. 9-10, 1986. See also M. Eliade and his works about the cosmic tree.

says, one poetic contrast which is confronted to the real world, but one essential image of the real world."<sup>20</sup>

The thing that is interesting for us in the tales about the Ohrid lake dragon is that it in fact asks for an answer that would be at the same time universal and local and that would reflect the relation of the folk tales towards reality. What is the relation between the lake dragon and reality? In fact it is a matter of two "realities", one is the reality of the dragon legend, and the other is the reality of the contemporary world. Those are of a totally different logic, different concepts of the world, but which are still merged into one unique reality that does not recognize time limits.

Lutz Rohrich in "Marchen und wirklichkeit"<sup>21</sup>, analyzing the relation between the folk tales and reality, gives certain notes regarding the relation between reality and the tales taken from the book of J. Bolte and G. Polivka<sup>22</sup>, in which it is said that: the tales do not follow the rules of reality, they offer fantastic and miraculous events that do not take place in reality, because they do not follow natural laws. The term tale denotes the different stories that happen in a fantastic world where there is no usual relation between the reason and the consequence. Confrontation towards reality is what lies in the heart of the stories. They are poetic fabulous that happen only in fantasy.

The investigation of the relation between the tales and reality has to start from the recognition of the essence of the tales. There is a huge bibliography related to this subject.<sup>23</sup>

The relation of the tales towards reality points towards the problem of the relation between tales and the unreal. However, the definition of what is 'unreal' does not match fully to the definition of tales, since terms such as supernatural, miraculous, fairy tales, have limits.<sup>24</sup>

In both cases, the two poles have to be examined together. The question about the rational reality in the tales has not been solved, since in the tales there are obviously some rules, norms and laws that are characteristic for the supernatural.<sup>25</sup>

The topic of the relation between two realities, that is, the reality of the stories and the one of the contemporary world can be analyzed through analyzing the question concerning the meaning of the tales.

"The whole meaning of the tales lies in the difference between a rational reality and the fantastic aspect of the tales, whose primitive reality, since it can not be grasped, should be found in a new reality. In this context the meaning of the stories is a rationalistic attitude of a second degree"<sup>26</sup>

In other words, it is a matter of examining the question of the meaning and the sense of the stories. The term meaning denotes the "reality" of the stories, while the term "sense" denotes what the contemporary reality defines as stories. It means that for the contemporary world the meaning of the stories is an ungraspable category. The stories had their real meaning only in circumstances when the reality was set upon the basis of the mythological conscience. This is why in a contemporary sense the stories are offered to us only as poetic fantasies.

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2020 Maks Lüthi, Das Europäische Volksmärchen. Zürich 1951.

2121 Lutz Rohrich : " *Marchen und wirklichkeit*" Franz Steiner verlag - Wiesbaden 1964

2222 J.Bolte, G.Polivka: *Anmerkungen zu der Kinder und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, 5 Bde Leipzig 1932

2323 W.Wundt: Märchen, Sage und Legende als Entwicklungsformen des Mythos Archiv für Religionswissenschaft, 11, Bd., 1908, C.G. Jung; Die Wirklichkeit der Seele, Zürich 1934; N. Hartmann: Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit, Berlin 1938; W.Jürgen s : Der Wirklichkeitsgehalt des Märchen, Kiel 1937; A.Dymke: Die wirkliche Welt im deutschen Zaubermärchen, Würzburg 1951 R.Winter: Die geschichtliche Wirklichkeit im deutschen Volksmärchen, 1924.

2424 Röhrich, *ibid* p. 3.

2525 *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.

2626 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

This question can be transferred to the question of the existence of the lake dragon. In the frames of certain mythological logic, its existence is clearly relevant, while in the frames of the rationalistic logic; its existence is presented as pure imaginative speculation.

One very important category, the category of "me"<sup>27</sup>, the storyteller, can be added to the concept of inner realism of the stories. This category helps in creating a complete image of the real reality of the stories, that is, the reality of the stories confronted to the category of contemporary. In this context the question of believing in such supernatural creatures by the storytellers is posed.

Let's go back to the above-mentioned example. Concerning the existence of the lake dragon, the storyteller not only believes but he is also convinced in its existence, and he tries to locate the existence of the lake dragon not only in space but also in time (from 1850-1900). This is without any doubt an example of a belief in the reality of the stories.

When the pronoun "I" is present in the course of the story telling this enhances the effect of the belief and the story in general.

We can note the following. Folklore as a category that denotes the two ways of thinking, that is, the mythological logic and the logic of the contemporary rationalistic and above all scientific conscience, is perhaps the only place where the objective meets the subjective understanding of reality and becomes, in general, eternal and unchangeable image of the world.

Summing up the conclusions about the mythological notions and their relation to reality in the case of the lake dragon from Ohrid lake, from a historical perspective we can say that certain archetypes of the archaic domain of the folklore-mythological logic, they are unchangeable categories that change only the way in which they communicate with reality, in accordance with the spirit of time.

Thus, with regard to the lake dragon's existence, one should just wait for the moment when it will again appear on the surface of the lake.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 223

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