

## THE STORY OF ‘SILJAN THE STORK’ AS A MACEDONIAN SELF-IDENTIFYING NARRATIVE

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**Key words:** Macedonian identity, history, identification, bird, metamorphosis, initiation ritual, stork

**Summary:** This text raises the question of creation of the cultural and historical identity of the Macedonian nation covering the famous Macedonian folk tale about Siljan the Stork. Macedonian obstinacy and the infringement of the law and order, which must be restrained by sentencing, is metaphorically indicated with the paradigm of parental anathema and the metamorphosis of the disobedient son in the bird-stork. The characteristics of Macedonian persistence, eternity and agelessness are also accentuated by the symbolism of the bird migrant, the return of which is connected to the revival of the nature and the cycle of the new birth. Admittedly, the bird figure is of crucial importance for the constitution of the solar disk present on the Macedonian flag, and the whole cyclic system as a symbol of rising and rescuing from evil. Since the time of Paeonian culture, it has been considered as one of the most important cultural symbols of this part of the world and represented the good harbinger of Macedonian versatility and longevity.

A cultural identity, as “self-awareness about belonging to a particular group which came to be and developed depending on the criteria it established in its relationship with other social groups” (Stojković, 202: 26), is necessarily tied to the question of identification markers, through which groups are distinguished. Namely, through these markers a cultural identity is established and signifying traits are formed, as those responsible for constituting the identity of various social groups. Through them, emblems and stigmas are expressed, as well as ways of thinking and acting, behavior and the specificities particular to the group itself. Their presence is evident and recognizable, not just through the group’s lifestyle and its specific conduct, but also through the process of creating and generating cultural products.

On this occasion, we will examine one such cultural product from Macedonian folklore. We are referring to the magical folk tale, “Siljan The Stork”, which contains markers characteristic of the specificities particular

to the Macedonian nation and its presentation in front of the Others, expressed through a number of segments. The most striking among them is the process of transformation, of the prodigal son into a stork, which can in turn be connected to the Macedonian people's tenacity and hesitancy, punished a few times over the course of history; then, there is the symbolism of the bird itself – the stork, which in Macedonian folk mythology carries the epithet of sacredness, its connection with the sun's disc that is present also on the Macedonian flag as a favorable sign of Macedonian endurance and longevity.

The link between the story's segments and Macedonian specificities is often pointed out by folklorists, who consider that "this story, in its delivery, is purely Macedonian although it contains a few borrowed elements" (Penushliski, 1968: 10). Namely, it is based on an old Slavic belief, today present with Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Bulgarians and Macedonians, of the stork origins of man, to which Macedonian superstition adds, that in the fall season, in far-away lands across the ocean, the storks bathe in a magical lake, and thus become human, while in the spring they bathe again to return to their stork form (Slovenska Mitologija, 2001: 470).

As Penushliski explains, "the number of magic folk tales to have originated on Macedonian soil and for which we cannot find suitable variants in the world's folklore is not that big" (Penushliski, 1968: 10). The story of Siljan The Stork is one of them, and another folklorist, Tome Sazdov, will say that it represents the most perfect creation of the collector of folk products, Marko Cepenkov, who had the habit of writing them down while having them shaped in his own style. According to Sazdov, Cepenkov used as the basis for the story "Siljan The Stork" "an old folk legend", which he then embellished with "an exceptionally rich fabula interwoven with a string of folk forms: beliefs, legends, adages, prayers and curses, which are most successfully synthesized and composed" (Sazdov, 1982: 152). Such a hybrid origin of the story, which in its format includes the recognizable penmanship of Cepenkov's, is just one of the factors that are part of the most particular markers of the Macedonian identity. Certainly, there are other markers at work, which we will pay special attention to in this text, and which refer to the apparent link between the fabula of the story and Macedonian mentality, one that undoubtedly leaves its imprint on the historical events too. As part of the same corpus of markers, we include the use of the bird symbol as a specific signifier of the movement process, tracing the new conditions and connecting with far-away worlds, which, in light of these traits, can be perceived as an evident sign of the self-renewal and continuity of the Macedonian state.

To examine our claim further, let us begin with the very structure of the story, which incorporates the old mythic scheme of the initiation into manhood, in whose basis, this time round, we also find the metamorphosis story, of man turning into bird, as justified punishment for disobeying the set standards of behavior in the collective community. Namely, the disobedient son from the story wastes his wealth on pursuing a frivolous life of a hedonist, with no concern for his family, who, as a matter of fact, have created that same wealth by working themselves to the bone. Such a conduct, by an adult member of the community, with offspring of his own no less, can only be viewed as a misguided, indecent and inadequate act.

The paradigm of human stubbornness, irrationality and disobedience, punished by a metamorphosis into a bird, akin to the story of Siljan The Stork, can be tied, without a doubt, to the events from the history of Macedonia, whence we come across a sling of examples of renown public figures susceptible to imprudence and a thirst for power, paying for their mistakes with their own lives, while inflicting irrevocable damage to their own nation. As examples, we can point out the fratricide of the heirs of the Macedonian dynasty of Tsar Samuil; the falling under the influence of the neighbor-states' propagandas, the betrayals and mutual murders between the members of the different VMRO [The Macedonian Revolutionary Organization] fractions, and other kinds of similarly deviant occurrences, which sadly take place even to this day. Even today, we encounter examples of such unconstructive frivolous behavior getting sanctioned, through and through, by numerous unfavorably detrimental events to the further progress of the Macedonian national history. Here, we are referring to the constant mutual misunderstandings that exist between the representatives of the different generational and political camps in the Macedonian social milieu. Their intolerance, vis-à-vis the need for mutual respect, the unnecessary rivalry, the crude insinuations and betrayals, show themselves as unproductive for the common welfare of the nation. Such inappropriate conduct, continuously practiced throughout history, carries only mutual mistrust, fear and unease about the country's survival. If we, however, wish to detect the reasoning behind these occurrences, the root to all such inappropriate conduct can be traced to the immaturity and non-pragmatism of the rulers and the political leaders.

As with history, so too in this story, although the mistakes multiply, still, the prospect of their solution is left open. Namely, the story of Siljan The Stork contains three penalties for disobeying the elderly, given in the format of bird metamorphoses, but also it contains the prospect of redemption after years of suffering. The first metamorphosis is tied to a warning Siljan's parents receive, about what may happen to children who

act like their son. They warn him, pointing out the familiar folk legend about the curse the parents of the feuded brother and sister, Sive and Chule, place on their children, which consists of the following: “so that you become chicks, and fly away from our home, into the field, to stand in thorns and look for each other without ever finding each other” (Cepenkov, 1972: 138). Nonetheless, this transformation which rests on the magical power that words possess bears certain contemporary trademarks. The second metamorphosis involves “the people-storks from the lower regions,” where Siljan arrives after the shipwreck while on his way to God’s tomb. It, too, comes as the result of children being disrespectful when they kill “the old man who was like a saint”, for which they are cursed to undergo abortive pregnancies, which according to the exact phrasing of the curse, has them “swim across both a white and a black sea”, so that “they can bathe into one spring, and turn into storks...there to bring children into the world, and then to return here and bathe into the second spring, so they can become people again” (Cepenkov, 1972: 157). The third metamorphosis, which is closely tied to Siljan’s character, also bears a temporal conditioning, consisting of him turning into a stork so that he can fly back home. However, Siljan’s metamorphosis as a stork lasts longer, due to his own folly, and as the Macedonian folklorist Lenka Tatarovska puts it, “most probably such a prolongation was needed so that he may have the time to surmise his erroneous conduct which goes against patriarchal norms” (Tatarovska, 2006: 152). Redeeming one’s sins through an ordeal is an old form of initiation which the new members of elite organizations pass through. Cleansed from their old sins, they learn and accept the customary ways of conduct, which will allow them entry into the world of adults, of the solemn and respectable members of the community. It is widely known that the process of achieving this status is riddled with self-denial and self-sacrifice, and that only those ready for such big compromises are mature enough to join the ranks of adults and their community.

Henceforth, we ask the question: why does the metamorphosis take the form of a bird transformation, i.e., why has the symbolism of the bird been chosen as the most appropriate form of a transformation and what are the motivations behind such a choice?

When thinking along those lines we come to the understanding that the symbol of the bird, despite its ambivalence which comes with any symbol, unquestionably points us in the direction of a link between the heavens and the earth through their pronounced bond, as part of religious concepts, for instance, through the heavenly messengers (angels) who are viewed as higher order creatures, or through the immortality of souls and their sojourn (beliefs contained in the Koran and the Bible). Through man’s

metamorphosis into a bird, in fact, we can witness man's link with God, his [God's] indestructibility and omnipresence, in the form of spirituality and knowledge. Birds, as incarnations of the soul and intellect, mentioned as early as The Upanishads<sup>1</sup>, are the most acceptable form for the processes of knowing to take place, as part of the complexity of the rites of passage for young individuals. Through them, the restlessness of knowing, willing and yearning, to overcome man's conditioning and limitedness is expressed. Their involvement in this story is a verification of the thought, that it is possible to reach divine perfection if we act with wisdom and insight. While we learn from other people's mistakes, and listen to the advice the more experienced ones offer us, we may find more adequate solutions to all of our individual and collective problems.

Namely, Siljan The Stork's troubles can easily be transplanted onto the social level, and thus interpreted as a kind of punishment for the irresponsible conduct of politicians which adds to the crumbling of the state. What is obviously the situation the Macedonian state finds itself in today. This interpretation rests on the micro-sociological analyses of Erving Goffman, which are "focused on understanding personal face-to-face interactions" that exert "their key influence also onto the realm of public life, and are of essential value for understanding the relations between the social groups" (Stojković, 2002: 27). In other words, the relationship between a son and his parents, that is to say, between the different groups in the community, is a key factor of the community's survival. Henceforth, we may say that the different social groups within a community, through the process of self-identification, define the other groups and enter into a specific relationship with them. Throughout this process of identification and establishing the differences, specific cultural markers (folk beliefs, curses, segments and motifs from other stories) are involved, such as those incorporated in the complex form of the story of Siljan The Stork. In it, amongst others, we also find universal forms and symbols, particular to the field of anthropology. The most striking one among them is the symbol of the bird, which we keep coming back to.

The phenomenology of the stork, incorporated in the title of the story, speaks of a certain kind of a temporary journey or conquest of space, which foreshadows the rebirth and return to the same form, but this time round, the individuals who have taken this journey have become enriched

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<sup>1</sup> The Upanishads mention two birds: one, which eats the fruit of the tree and symbolizes the active personal soul, and the other, which observes passively and represents the common spirit.

by new experiences and wisdom. The mechanism of taking action is as follows: a sudden change in the position from which we perceive things transplants us to a higher plane of knowing, which, until that point, was out of our reach, and which brings us to the very summit of knowing, something uniquely available to the all-mighty and holy.

As it is widely known, the bird is a symbol of the divine and the scared (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1983: 540-542). We encounter it in the different mythologies of the ancients, whence some gods adorn the bird form (Thoth as the ibis, and Horus as the eagle, from Egyptian mythology); then, in the beliefs of certain African tribes which took birds for their ancestors (the members of the Sotho tribe believe the pigeon to be their ancestor) (Cavendish, Ling, 1982: 208), which is all a part of the corpus of secrecy and holiness dedicated to the fundamental questions about existence. The beatification of the bird is often found too in the frequent relations between the sun and the bird, as a symbol of supreme divinity always tied to a tribal community.

Thus, its frequent use as a marker of belonging to a certain group or people. Within the same context, of a social marker, the bird, through the sun's disc, is incorporated in the Macedonian flag, as a sign of the endurance and longevity of the Macedonian nation.<sup>2</sup> The connection of the bird to the sun's disc can also be found with other ancient peoples, for example in the ancient Hindi mythology, the presence of the sun-bird Garuda (Erman, Temkin, 1981: 38), in Chinese mythology, the cosmic tree Fusan which reaches the heavens has suns resting on it, taking the form of birds (Bodde, 1977: 390-392), while in Slavic folklore, a mythologized flame-bird is mentioned (Afanasyev, 1865: 515-535). The bird's role, as the sun's symbolic substrate since antiquity, according to the anthropologist Chausidis, rests most probably on its presence and movement amidst the heavenly zones, its bodily features which are reminiscent of the sun's rays (the feathers, the crown, etc.), its activity which coincides, time-wise, with the sun's activity, as well as its efficiency, i.e., its speed of movement (Chausidis, 2005: 339).

As previously stated, the symbolism of the stork bears a specific meaning which alludes to the circular movement of migratory birds, of nature's awakening and the cycle of rebirth, segments characteristic of every ideology which covets longevity. The idea of eternity, continuity and perseverance, distinguishes itself as the most characteristic for the creation of Macedonian mythology, despite all of the ordeals during the process of

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<sup>2</sup> The same meaning of constancy is also bequeathed on the lion, another symbol with the solar insignia, inscribed on the crest of the Macedonian state.

constructing the Macedonian identity. This claim is not based on the idea segments the story entails, but also on the characteristics of the supreme deities from the pantheon of ancient Macedonians, the symbolism of the sun disc which is present in the state's insignia since antiquity until today, as well as all the ideology the present-day authorities are constructing through advertising campaigns so as to promote the state worldwide.

Such self-identification is necessary for the preservation of the state, while at the same time it is also paradoxical due to the centuries-long aspirations of our neighboring states. In fact, the actual process of identity formation is paradoxical since it is founded on the ability to self-represent, which is always directed and adjusted towards others. Since the days of Aristotle (Aristotle, 190: 217), who uses the term identity while relying on the parable of friendship based on common origins, or Plato (Plato, 2000: 79), who evokes the myth of two halves in love making a whole, sharing the same identity, the link between identity and the Others is pointed out. To this, we can add Lacan's claims that the start of identity formation begins in early childhood when the child understands its separation from the mother. According to him, the child in the mirror stage of its development constitutes its selfhood in its reflection or in the real mirror, or in the mirror which represents the eyes of others. In that first meeting with the process of constructing "one's self", by looking at the reflection of the realized self, which has its boundaries, the stage for further identifications is set. Thus, in Lacan's view, it is proven that subjectivity is divisible and illusionary, while identity is complex, since it stems from a lack, or the desire to return to a unity of the mother (Lacan, 1983: 12). This yearning produced the tendency to identify with the powerful and important characters outside ourselves. Therefore, a procedural process of identification takes place, where we are on the look-out for a unique meaning when it comes to us, through systems of symbolism and ways in which others see us.

To summarize, the contemporary concept of identity is not only tightly tied to the cultural development of the individual; which, according to Erving Goffman's findings (Goffman, 2003: 10) uses the term performance to refer to the marks through which the individual presents itself to others and enters into an interpersonal communication with them; but it also stands in reciprocity with the dynamics of the whole system of society. This standpoint is shared by Patricia Curtin and Ken Gaither (Curtin and Gaither, 2005: 91), accentuating the changing relational approach to identity which is dependent on external factors, and Michel Bassand (Bassand, 1974: 142), who understands identity as a dynamic and functional category which is maintained through social conditions that are in a constant flux. In fact, dynamics and external influence define identity as

a construct, which, in its relation to others, is ever changing and adjusts to the new-found conditions.

According to Raja Jayaraman (Jayaraman, 205: 476), it would mean that identity not only alters its constitutive parts, but that it endures simply due to this ability. Hence, we may conclude that our insistence on constancy and permanence is irrational and vain, since such a category cannot withstand the test of time. That which can indeed endure is the understanding that identity as a concept is not static, since both the biological and the sociological factors which determine it are prone to change. It keeps on growing and expanding, incorporating within itself the changes that occur around it. As self-awareness, about belonging to a group which had developed and grown historically, depending on the criteria that the group established through its relations with the other social groups, the cultural identity of Macedonians was always brought into question. Such a state forced the group to create cultural products, like the story of Siljan The Stork, which on the one hand stress a desire for constancy, while on the other, point out an awareness for the need of a dialog with the Others.

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