

Articles

Male Mythological Beings Among the South Slavs

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The South Slavs have a long tradition of belief in protective domestic spirits and in malevolent demons of the field, forest and water.(1) Such mythological creatures were prevalent among all Slavic peoples and are part of the common Indo-European heritage.(2) Whereas most beliefs of this type receded among the East and West Slavs by the end of the nineteenth century, they were maintained in many areas of the Balkans until the beginning of the Second World War.(3) Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the 1960s-1980s has shown that many farmers and stockbreeders in the more remote villages (of former Yugoslavia) have not abandoned their traditional beliefs. For example, the protector housesnake,(4) mischievous forest and dangerous water spirits, and many lesser mythological beings have been reported in several South Slavic territories in the last forty years. Many traditional domestic rituals have their origin in the conviction that the family ancestor's spirit resides under the threshold or near the open hearth and, if properly cared for, will ensure happiness and good fortune for the family. In Russia that spirit was manifest in the domovoj, "house spirit," but as this name itself was taboo, he was referred to in euphemisms such as ded or deduška, "grandfather," and xozjain "master." Offerings of food, especially bread and salt, the traditional symbols of hospitality, were routinely left for the domovoj at night before the family retired.

The corresponding belief in a protector-ancestor spirit in the South Slavic territories saw the male founder of the family incarnate in a housesnake which was euphemized most commonly in Serbo-Croatian as čúvarica "protector," čúvarkuća "house protector," and kúćarica "household one," and in Bulgarian stópanin or stópan "master of the house"; compare English "stoop," i.e., the threshold, the resting place of this spirit.(5)

The South Slavs' perception of mythological beings was based on a dualistic view which incorporated both positive and negative features. This was true of snakes as well. Most snakes were considered incarnations of demons living in the Underworld (Donji svet) and were to be killed on sight, poisonous or not. Yet the white snake rarely seen, but thought to live under the threshold, in the foundation, or near the house was considered to embody the spirit of the family's first male ancestor.

In Serbia the protector snake was sometimes believed to live in the foundation wall near the threshold, but in most areas it was said to dwell in, behind, or under the hearth. Likewise, both locations were thought to be the dwelling place of the domovoj in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and each has been the site of domestic rituals in all parts of the Slavic world. The family's albino protector snake not only caught

mice and kept other, more dangerous snakes from the house, but was considered the source of good fortune and well-being.

Representing a positive force, it was most often visualized as white. The white snake was called by many names, the most common being (f.) sretna zmija "snake of (good) fortune" and (m.) zmijski kralj/knez, "snake king/prince." Incorporated into the Christian belief system, it was thought in some areas to be sent by God Himself. Care was taken to protect the čuvavica, for it was believed that if it were killed, the master or another person in the household would soon die. As a mediator between the Underworld, Nature, and humans, this snake was thought to understand speech, to be able to teach man about medicinal herbs, and to induce fertility in wives and female livestock. Many legends associate man and snake, and metamorphosis of one into the other is common in South Slavic folklore.

Belief in a protector snake spirit has almost disappeared. Yet, as recently as the early 1970s Macedonian field researchers examined evidence of a snake cult in the Skopje suburb of Orman, which is known for the veneration of snakes, a custom surviving among the older generation. Many people still believe in the power of the zmija-sajbija, or proprietor snake, and they are convinced that if the snake should leave its dwelling place permanently, misfortune will come to the family of the house in which it lives. Many Orman residents collectively celebrate both the coming of spring and the return of the snakes from hibernation on March 22 (Orthodox), a day which is officially called Denot na proletta "Spring Day," but which retains its religious name, Četirieset mačenici, or "Forty Martyrs." In 1969, after a new church was built at the foot of Zmijarnik ("Snake Hill"), hundreds of villagers celebrated this holiday by bringing bits of their clothing and laying them on the ground in the hope that the returning snakes might touch them and thereby ensure good health and fortune for the owners. Belief in the magic power of this ritual imitation of the snake's shedding of its skin, i.e., a symbolic renewal of life, was strong enough that relatives brought the clothing of the sick to the sacred hill. It is believed that only those whose clothes are "blessed" by a returning snake will be cured or have their wish come true.

Post-World War II field research in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia has demonstrated that mythological beings remain integrated into the belief system of a notable portion of the (mostly) rural populations. For example, ethnographic research conducted in the 1950-1960s in the Bilo-gora region some seventy kilometers east of Zagreb (including the sizeable towns of Bjelovar, Koprivnica, Virovitica, Grubišno Polje, and Križevci) disclosed several tenacious beliefs stemming from pre-Christian demonology. A prime example is the male spirit called ved, who lives in the forest (his name is derived from the Old Church Slavic verb věděti "to know, to have secret knowledge"). Vědi (pl.) were thought to be as tall as a house and physically similar to men, but covered with hair. (Compare the Russian lešii who were usually perceived as old men of human size and whose primary activity was frightening lone wanderers in the forest.) The Croatian ved were thought to inhabit the forest, long considered a transitional zone between our world and the "other world".(6) There they lived in sociable groups or even in their own cities.

Their singing and talking could be "heard" from far away. According to local tradition, there were both good and bad vedi. The latter usually avoided humans and stayed in the forest; hence, they were called šumski vedi, or "forest vedi." If a person strayed into the forest and came upon one or more of the latter he could be tortured, starved, or beaten before being released.

Conversely, good vedi could be counted on for help. Each family or household had its own ved for protection against hail, floods, and other dangerous natural phenomena. Thus the dual perception of vedi incorporated both the positive features of the domestic protector spirit, and negative, demonic qualities associated with forces from the Underworld. Several expressions survived in the Bilo-gora area which attest to the folk belief in this combination forest and domestic spirit. A common exclamation in the Kajkavian dialect of this region was Daj, Bože, da nam naši vedi pomognejo! ("God, let our vedi help us!") Another expression suggests that the borderline between good and bad vedi was less than clear: while a family depended on its own spirit for help, that same ved could be induced to harm an unliked neighbor's family and crops. This may be illustrated by the expression: Bože ljubljani, daj da nam naši vedi pomorejo, a da nam njihovi vedi ne nahudijo! ("Dear God, let our vedi help us and don't let their vedi harm us"). It was believed that after one pronounced such a prayer, the spirit would come quickly to the person's aid. Belief in the vedi has generally receded by now, but many of the older generation in Bilo-gora still spoke of the them in the late 1960s.

A second male spirit, the vodénjak or vódeni čóvjek "water man," has proven more durable in the Bilo-gora region, as elsewhere in former Yugoslavia. The vodenjak is thought to live in whirlpools or other places where there is deep water. When someone drowns it is usually said that the vodenjak has claimed his victim, or has taken him to his realm deep below the surface. Reports as to the physical appearance of this dangerous spirit are fairly consistent: when seen in the water, he is naked but his skin is green and entirely covered with blue or green hair which makes him look like a submerged tree stump. Out of the water, he looks like a man but is dressed in green and carries a stick for beating his victims and implementing magic charms. He is thought to be very strong, so strong that a person can rarely escape his grasp. Explanations of drownings as being caused by the vodenjak are very frequent in the Bilo-gora region (as elsewhere in Southeastern Europe).

In Serbia, The water spirit is known as nečástivi, "evil one" or "devil," especially in northeast Serbia, surrounding the town of Donji Milanovac; because of the danger of invoking his presence by calling his name he is usually referred to as ónaj stári "that old man" or onaj máli "that little man." His reported size varies between fifty and one hundred centimeters, and he is similar in appearance to the common European devil, i.e., he has a cloven hoof, horns and goat's ears (usually disguised by a bathing cap or red [Turkish] fez), and he is dressed in black or white, colors of chthonic gods. He is said to change his shape at will, and often to take the form of a baby or relative calling someone to the river. It is thought unwise to answer if one's name is called three times at night, for it means that the nečástivi has set the time for one's

death. The various localities' water spirits are thought to gather once a year on Devils' Day (djavołji dan) and, after their elder gives them instructions for the remainder of the year, they are said to celebrate by dancing the kolo (round dance).

The Serbian villagers of this Danube region believe that it is dangerous to see one's reflection in the water: should this happen the spirit will try to claim that person as his victim. Danger lurks not only in the water, but also nearby: if one falls asleep on a river bank or in a moored boat there is a chance that the water spirit(s) will dance the kolo around the site; or one may awake, as reported in the case of three fishermen, several kilometers downstream. Field researchers have recorded much "eyewitness" testimony telling of such incidents, and these and similar explanations are especially common in July, the month in which the nečastivi is thought to be most active.

The mythology surrounding the Serbian variant of the water spirit is well developed. For example, as in the case of vampires, the water demon can only be "seen" by persons born on a Saturday. And sighting of the nečastivi by a villager is a sign that death or misfortune is soon to strike. Yet, it is also believed that certain women voluntarily fraternize with them. Such women are reputed to go out at night in order to visit with the spirits. They are said to be naked and with hair unbraided but with their genital area demurely covered by a pan or pillow (to protect them from the devil's lust). It is said that if a woman has sexual relations with one of them her husband will soon die and she herself will become infertile or her next child will be born without a skeleton.

Many villagers in this region are convinced that some women give themselves freely to the water spirits and thereby gain power over them. Such women are usually the village conjurers (vráčare/bájalice). They take care to reinforce their power by whispering magic charms (básme),(7) and by performing special rituals involving nine grains of wheat (i.e., thrice three, the most important magic number, which increases their power threefold), nine pieces of salt, garlic, and a special staff with which they strike the water. When the spirit appears the conjurer tosses money as a tribute to him, or promises an animal or human sacrifice. If this ritual is done properly, her wish will be fulfilled.

Conjurers in this region are often hired to enlist the aid of the water spirit in support of the customer's desire for success in fishing, hunting, and even catching thieves. Furthermore, it is thought possible to sell one's soul to the nečastivi to ensure successful fishing. As in the case of other such demons and devils, the pact guarantees only temporary success; eventually, the spirit will claim what is his. When a drowned man is found, a proverbial expression confirms this belief: Došao đavo po svoje. ("The devil came for his own").

A third male creature, and one considerably less dangerous than the water spirits, is the Croatian vrag or "devil," who can be met in a forest, a meadow, or on a path, but is most often encountered at crossroads (the traditional haunting place of witches as well). This minor demon dares not enter a church, yet he is often reported to have been in the vicinity of nearby cemeteries. In Croatian Bilo-gora he is

described as physically similar to a man, but bearing the familiar distinguishing marks of traditional European devils: a cloven hoof, horns, and a tail.

It is thought that the vrag is strong enough to stop a pair of running horses; however, in combat with humans he is neither crafty nor agile. Rather he is thought to be a relatively simple and trusting creature who can be deceived easily. For example, the vrag likes to fight with priests and women, but he always loses the contest. He is afraid of the cross, holy water and rosaries, and his constant goal is to turn believers from the "true faith," to win over souls by "registering them in his book."

The ved, vodenjak/nečastivi and vrag are examples of male mythological beings which are supernatural extensions of, or mediators from the Underworld.

Yet there is a fourth male creature, one who originates from the soul of a deceased human: the vampire. Belief in vampires is still strong in certain areas of Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean basin, but for our purposes is most concentrated today in Macedonia. Common Croatian-Serbian terms for vampire are vúkodlak "wolf-hair," vámpir, and ténac "shade" (= ghost) or "werewolf;" in Macedonian he is called vóper or vópir (cf. Russian upír, Polish upiór), gróbnik "graveman," and tálasam, a term derived from Arabic, which has a second meaning in Macedonian: (probably from Turkish) "evil house spirit." According to reports from Macedonia, when seen, the vampire may look like a person but, as he has no skeleton, his body is filled only with blood. His voice can be heard and his red eyes seen, but he has no shadow. He can also change his shape freely; he is most often seen as a cat, rabbit, rooster, or in fact any living creature.

Like other South and East European vampires, the Macedonian voper attempts to suck blood or at least to frighten his victim to death. However, when less violently inclined, he merely makes noises in the house, stirs up the ashes in the hearth, or starts fires (!). Not a wholly negative creature, he is commonly believed in Macedonia to return to his former place of work and even continue to live with his widow. Explanations of the origin of this phenomenon are generally traditional, the most common being that an animal jumped over the deceased as the body lay in state. For this reason, no corpse is left unguarded at night: a "wake" is held for three days and nights. Should it happen that a cat, chicken, rooster or dog jumps over the body, the offending animal (thought to be the devil in disguise) must be made to jump back over it in the reverse direction so as to prevent the creation of a vampire from the Devil's theft of the deceased's soul.

Other reasons given for the origin of Macedonian vampires are that a person died during the "unbaptized days," that is, in the period between Christmas and Epiphany (January 6) when Christ was said to have been baptized; died a violent death and was not mourned properly by ritual lament; died with an unfulfilled wish; or died on the spot where a star fell. In addition, there is another explanation which has been given: a vampire is "a corpse which has been urinated on by the devil (mrtovec što go pomočal ĝavolot).

To summarize, many of these spirits support a dual function: the family's protector spirit, whether snake or progenitor incarnate, is counted on for health, fertility, and prosperity. The family's adopted ved is likewise helpful, but those of neighbors may be detrimental to one's well-being. The Christianity-inspired vrag is a generally mischievous sprite, and one seen most often in a humorous light; still, the best defenses are caution, one's own superior wits, and a firm belief in the principles of the Church. But the pre-Christian, purely mythological vodenjak, nečastivi, and especially the semi-human vukodlak, vampir or voper, are dangerous spirits to be avoided if at all possible. The water spirits are demons lurking below to catch the unaware, yet even they can be the source of power for certain villagers (ordinary women as well as female conjurers); one must always be careful in and near the water.

There are yet other mythological beings in traditional South Slavic folklore which have become for the most part only figures in legends and folktales. In addition to the male creatures discussed in this paper, there are those such as the vúčji pástir "wolf shepherd" thought to control the countryside; drékovi, souls of deceased soldiers; drekauci, souls of children who died during the nekršteni dani; and the Christian ánđeo i đávo, angel and devil. Note: There are a number of female spirits including personified diseases such as Ćúma or Kúga, the plague, and Karakónđuła, an old hag who is thought to ride drunken men at night.(8) There are likewise many meteorological and animal spirits, e.g., ala, the summer hail demon; duga, the rainbow thought to drink from rivers, lakes, and oceans; Zmaj, the serpent which spreads fire everywhere and is visualized as a bolt of lightning; or even Psoglava, a dog-headed monster with iron teeth who lives in a dark cave in a land where there is no sun, but who comes to our world to seek out victims for gnawing. No longer believed in as are the personified male and female spirits, these may still be named as the cause of otherwise inexplicable phenomena in many parts of former (and present) Yugoslavia and constitute a significant portion of the body of folk belief in the mythology of the South Slavs.(9)

NOTES:

1. Research for this study was conducted at the Zagreb Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku (formerly Zavod za istraživanje folkloru) under the auspices of a Senior Fulbright Research grant (sponsored by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars) Consultations were held with folklorists and ethnographers in the Slovene and Serbian academies of sciences and arts, as well as with those in museums and universities in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade.

A somewhat expanded version, "Mythological Beings in South Slavic Folklore," was read May 6, 2000, at the Balkan and South Slavic Conference, held at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.

2. For a comprehensive survey of traditional Slavic mythology, see A Afanas'ev, Poètičeskija vozzrenija slavjan na prirodu, I-III (Moscow: 1865-69; reprinted in Slavistic Printings and Reprintings 214/1-3 [The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1970]). More specifically for the East Slavs, consult S.A. Tokarev,

Religioznye verovanija vostočnoslavjanskih narodov XIX-načala XX v. (Moscow: Akademija Nauk, 1957). See also the more recent Enciklopedičeskij Slovar': Slavjanskaja mifologija (Moskva: Ellis Lak, 1995).

For discussion of Balkan mythology, Špiro Kulišić, Stara slovenska religija u svijetlu novijih istraživanja posebno balkanoloških. Sarajevo: ANBiH, Dijela, knj. LVI. Centar za balkanološka ispitivanja, knj. 3, 1979.

3. For a general introduction to South Slavic folk belief, see E Schneeweiss, Serbokroatische Volkskunde. Erster Teil: Der volkstümliche Glaube (Second edition, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1961), pp. 3-33. For a similar introduction to Bulgarian folk belief, see Christo Vakarelski, Bulgarische Volkskunde. Zweiter Teil: Geistige Kultur (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1968), pp. 207-47.

Specialized information concerning almost all aspects of Yugoslav mythology can be found in Veselin Čajkanović, Mit i religija u Srba. Izabrane studije (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, kolo LXVI, knj. 443, 1973). For a more recent treatment of the mythological spirits and demons discussed in this chapter, see Slobodan Zečević, Mitska bića srpskih predanja (Beograd: Vuk Karadžić, 1981).

For traditional Bulgarian mythology, see Mikhail Arnaudov, Očerci po B"lgarskija folklor vol. 2 (Sofija: B"lgarski pisatel, 1969).

4. zmija, the usual word for snake, is fem sg. but refers to the male progenitor of the family. As it is related to zmaj, "serpent" which is masculine, it fits into the category of male mythological spirits.

5. Please note that the accent marks are not those used by traditional linguists for Croatian/Serbian- rather they are merely to indicate the stressed syllable for those interested in South Slavic folklore

6. Similarly, rivers are considered fixed boundaries between "this" world and "that" or "the other" world

7. For discussion and analysis of charms and rituals used by vračare, bajalice, and their basme, see Joseph L Conrad, "Magic Charms and Healing Rituals in Contemporary Yugoslavia," Southeastern Europe 10 (1983):99-120. See also my "Bulgarian Magic Charms: Ritual, Form, and Content," Slavic and East European Journal 31, 4 (1987):548-62; and "Slovene Oral Incantations: Topics, Texts, and Rituals," Slovene Studies 12/1 (1990):55-66. For comparison, see Conrad, "Russian Ritual Incantations: Tradition, Diversity, and Continuity," SEEJ 33, 3 (1989):422-444.

For a solid collection of South Slavic charms, see Ljubinko Radenković, Narodne Basme i Bajanja (Udruženi izdavači: Niš: "Gradina," Priština: "Jedinstvo," Kraguevac: "Svetlost," 1982). See also his recent Narodna Bajanja kod Južnih Slovena (Beograd: Balkanološki Institut SANU, and "Prosveta," 1996).

8. For information concerning more important female demons, see Conrad, "Female Spirits Among the South Slavs," SEEFA Journal vol 5, no. 2 (Fall 2000):27-34.

9. For commentary on these lesser demons in Northeastern Serbia, see Slobodan Zečević, "Narodna verova