

Supernatural Beings in Macedonian Beliefs

Ana Kechan*

(ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4128-361X)

Makale Gönderim Tarihi

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Makale Kabul Tarihi

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Abstract

The peoples of the Balkans have a profoundly rich folklore with an exuberant oral and written tradition, and North Macedonia is no exception, although it mainly shares its characteristics with the other folklores from the region. This essay will present one area of the beliefs of the Macedonian people and that area are supernatural beings. They include the vampire, the specter, the fairy, the dragon, the lamia, the witch, the fates and the talasam. What is interesting is that the beliefs in some of these creatures is not a simple matter of history, but they are to be found persisting in certain areas up until now, the 21st century.

Keywords: Supernatural beings, folklore, tradition, Balkans, North Macedonia.

Makedon İnançlarında Doğaüstü Varlıklar

Özet

Balkan halklarının coşkulu bir sözlü ve yazılı geleneği olan son derece zengin bir folkloru vardır ve özelliklerini esas olarak bölgedeki diğer folklorlarla paylaşan Kuzey Makedonya da bu geleneği paylaşma konusunda istisna değildir. Bu makale Makedon halkının vampir, hayalet, peri, ejderha, lamia, cadı, kader ve talasam gibi doğaüstü varlıklara olan inançlarını ele alacaktır. Enteresan şekilde, bu yaratıkların bazıları hakkındaki inançların basit bir tarih meselesi olmamasıdır ve bu durum şimdiye kadar bazı alanlarda kalıcı ve ısrarcı şekilde sürüp gitmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Doğaüstü varlıklar, folklor, gelenek, Balkanlar, Kuzey Makedonya.

* Ph.D., International Balkan University, North Macedonia, a.kechan@ibu.edu.mk.

Апстракт

Народите од Балканот имаат неверојатно богат фолклор и исто толку богати усна и пишана традиција. Македонците не се исклучок иако македонскиот фолклор генерално ги дели истите или слични карактеристики со останатите фолклори од регионот. Овој есеј ќе ги претстави верувањата на македонците во натприродни суштества, кои ги вклучуваат вампирот, привидението, самовилата, змејот, ламјата, вештерката, наречниците и таласамот. Она што е интересно е дека верувањата во некои од овие суштества не се дел од историјата, туку перзистираат во одредени региони и до денес, во 21-иот век.

Клучни зборови: натприродни суштества, фолклор, традиција, Балкан, Северна Македонија.

Introduction

Beliefs have a tendency to persist and persevere, even when they seem to be outdated or simply not in line with modern beliefs, especially when, like in the 21st century, the scientific evidence against those beliefs is unquestionable. On the other hand, the beliefs of a people, their mythology and folklore, make up a fundamental distinguishing feature that must never be underestimated.

The peoples of the Balkan Peninsula share a lot of beliefs, even though those beliefs seem to vary from village to village, with overlapping onomasticons. These beliefs are a palimpsest of centuries upon centuries of indigenous, pre-Slavic, Slavic pagan and, later on, Christian influences, each set of beliefs transformed by a variety of influences and evolutionary change. The result is a rich tapestry of rituals and anthropomorphic (and theriomorphic) creatures that are either deified or vilified.

This essay is going to present several of those creatures, which we found not only interesting, but the belief in some of which seems to defy time and persists even nowadays. The popularity of the creatures to be presented here is further aided by popular culture, mainly literature and film. For reasons that are not the focus of this essay, supernatural beings continue to provide inspiration through the centuries.

The mythology of Macedonians

When it comes to the beliefs of the people of North Macedonia, they follow the general characteristics of the Slavic folk culture in the traditional archetype of which, according to Tanas Vrazinovski¹ “are inscribed tendencies towards a mythological and symbolic personification of occurrences and processes that took place in nature” and these tendencies play an important role in the formation of fantastical mythological characters and images in human consciousness². The collective folk psyche has been partially built upon the mythic-religious (connected with the ritual) and the mythic-heroic (related with the legend). Mythology (any, not just the Slavic one) answers questions such as when, how and why the world was created, with all its beings and people, what is the meaning of human existence, while also containing guidelines on how to live.

Myth, therefore, expresses, emphasizes and confirms belief, it keeps and asserts moral principles, and it ensures the efficiency of the rituals and gives practical rules to people. What is more, mythology gives birth to the belief in gods and other supernatural beings. The religious and mythological motifs on the Balkans, including North Macedonia, comprise of rudiments of the old Indo-European mythology as well as segments of antique and indigenous Balkan ritual culture and cults.³

Supernatural beings are numerous in Macedonian beliefs and we are, therefore, going to limit our presentation to only a handful. Most of these beliefs have been collected by the most famous collector of folk work in this region and that is Marko Cepenkov, who is believed to have gathered over 800 works, making him one of the top collectors of folk tales in Europe⁴. Two other collectors of folklore material and of great importance are Stefan I. Verkovic and Kuzman Sapkarev. In recent decades, two members of the Institute for Folklore in Skopje, namely

¹All translations from Macedonian and Serbian are done by the author of the text.

² Танас Вражиновски, *Народна митологија на Македонците* книга 1, Скопје: Книгоиздателство Матица Македонска, 1998, p. 9.

³ Вражиновски, *Народна митологија на Македонците*, p. 14.

⁴ Кирил Пенушлиски, *Книга за приказните на Марко Цепенков*, Скопје: Матица Македонска, 2003, p. 5.

Tanas Vrazinovski and Leposava Spirovska, have contributed greatly to the understanding of the current state of beliefs in rural areas of the country, witnessing the persistence of some old beliefs.

Albeit there are numerous supernatural beings in the folklore and mythology of North Macedonia, the ones we have chosen to present are: the specter and the talasam; the vampire, the dragon, the lamia, the witch, the fates and the fairy. The choice was influenced by several criteria: first of all, creatures which are specific to the region, namely the talasam, the lamia and the fates. The talasam can be found in Serbian and Macedonian folklore, whereas the fates and the lamia come from Greek folklore and mythology. Even though the vampire has gone on to have an international career on its own – we felt it was important to demystify its roots. The fairy and the dragon can be found in most European mythologies and folklore (Celtic, Slavic, German, English, and French). The specter proved the least easy to define of all beings and the witch is the most universal being.

Supernatural beings in Macedonian beliefs

The talasam (таласам, таласман, т’л’с’м, толосом, таласон)

This supernatural being is quite an elusive one. The two stories we have collected by Marko Cepenkov⁵ refer to it in two ways: one is a nominal reference to a ghost-like creature, usually to be found in places where people have been violently killed and buried; and the second is an adjectival reference to what would be translated as ‘haunted’ as in house or place. In both these instances, the term talasam can easily be replaced by ghost or specter. In Serbian beliefs, however, the talasam or talason, gets its specific role: as a house demon, a keeper of bridges or houses, which reflects the adjectival form Cepenkov was using. So, the talason is linked to builders who, wanting to ensure their creation lasted longer, would often use the measurement of a person in their building and thus the person would forever remain attached to that object, after death. Although generally a benevolent, protective

⁵ Марко Цепенков, *Македонски народни умотворби*, книга деветта (Народни верувања. Детски игри). Скопје: Македонска книга, 1972, р. 105 and 123.

creature, the talason could, of course, be very frightening and vindictive.

The specter (сениште)

Marko Cepenkov has collected 20 stories which tell of specters – their equivalent would be the generic term ‘ghost’. The specter is, however, not immaterial - in some of the stories it appears as either as human⁶, a goat⁷ or a dog⁸, whereas in the others it resembles a shape-shifter: either each night or to each person, it appears differently, some of the forms including that of a huge ox, a huge bull, a huge cat, a rabbit, a kid. When it could not be seen, it could be heard, producing sounds resembling a donkey, a cat, screaming and crying sounds. Cepenkov says that the forms it could take were as many as there were days in the year.⁹ When in human form, it interacts with people, but in most interactions, the people involved in the experience seem to be in a trance, or a dream-like state, from which they recover either when the roosters announce dawn, or someone else addresses them.

The fates (наречници)

Belief in fate is universally present in all pre-modern societies and belief systems and the people from the Balkans are no exception, with the determining of a newborn’s fate being one of the most present motifs.¹⁰ In Macedonian beliefs, the fate is determined at midnight, on the third night of the birth of a child by three women, commonly considered to be three sisters. This is done in gradation: the fate of the child is prophesied by the youngest woman first, then the middle and the oldest at the end – it is her decision that is final and cannot be changed. In some parts the gradation is reversed, with the oldest giving the worst fate first, which is then ameliorated by the middle and the youngest, so that the child has some good and some bad in his/her life. The fate is inscribed on the child’s forehead or written down in a book.

⁶ Ibid., p. 91

⁷ Ibid., p. 92

⁸ Ibid., p. 95

⁹ Ibid., p. 82

¹⁰ Вражиновски, 1998, p. 193.

It was important for the fates to be welcomed properly, so parents would leave honey and other sweets on the table, making sure the fire was on during the night. There were also certain rituals to be performed on the night of their arrival, including placing three objects in the baby's crib, tying in a ring in its clothes, etc.

The purpose of all activities was to ensure longevity, on the one hand, and material wellbeing on the other.

The lamia (ламја, ламња)

The lamia of Greek mythology - a woman who became a child-eating, half-woman, half-serpent monster after Hera killed her children as revenge for Zeus' infidelity with her – only tangentially resembles the lamia of Balkan beliefs, where it is a serpent-like creature, but with no anthropomorphic characteristics. It is, however, female and in some areas, it is believed to be the sister of the dragon. According to Vrazinovski, there are insufficient authentic materials to reconstruct precisely a complete image of the lamia in Macedonian beliefs¹¹, except for a few: it is known that she is hunted by St. Ilija, who throws thunderbolts at her in the summer when she is destroying the wheat crops. She is also known to drink the wheat and grapes as they ripen. In Macedonian beliefs, it is also St. Gjorgjia who kills the lamia (in western Christian beliefs, it is a dragon in question) for, as an exceptionally negative demon, she is considered the bringer of sleet-filled clouds and the destroyer of the harvest.

She is described as being an animal with a huge mouth, wings, four legs and a long tail. She can have more than one head – 3, 7, 9 or 40 and, in some beliefs, can breathe fire as well, which blurs the distinction between her and the dragon even further.

The dragon (змеј, змев)

The dragon is yet another being inherited by the Macedonians from the pagan beliefs, where it differs greatly from the image and the function given in fairy tales and stories. In the beliefs of Macedonians, the dragon is a protective creature, protecting its town or region, as a 'sleet-protector' whose function was to stop the sleet-carrying clouds,

¹¹ Вражиновски, 1998, p. 188.

brought on by different demons (mainly the lamia) – each weather storm was a huge threat for the livelihood of the peasant and these protectors had, therefore, a very important place in their beliefs. The dragon has gone through significant changes and alterations through the centuries – an example of an aspect no longer pertinent is the image of the winged, fiery creature stealing beautiful women.

As for his form, he can even be dimorphic – half human, half animal, although he is generally either theriomorphic or anthropomorphic. It is this anthropomorphism that is unusual for the modern reader, as Macedonians believed the dragon to be human, just like them, with the ability to procreate with women, who then give birth to baby dragons – humans with tiny wings, and only those pure of heart are able to see them.

The fairy (самовила)

The fairies are one of the most common supernatural beings in the folk beliefs of many European nations, but particularly in the beliefs and folk tradition of the southern Slavs, in which they are connected with the cults of water, rivers, springs, forests and mountains. In Macedonian beliefs they are also very popular, and are known under several other names, such as самодиви (samodivi), јуди (judi), личници (lichnici), перии (perii), мајки (majki-mothers)¹², even though, generally, people avoided saying any of their names, for fear of invoking their fear, and instead used personal pronouns.

They are, almost without exception, female, the exception being an area in western Macedonia where they can also be male. Although they are always thought of as beautiful and benevolent (aided, without a doubt, by the fascination with them in popular film and television), they are actually considered demons and, in some areas, are thought to be ugly and malevolent. Oftentimes, they are described with a beautiful face, green eyes and usually red, very long hair which they never cut, for within in lay their power. In contrast to this, they are also thought to have goat's hooves instead of feet. They are also described as lustful, choosing strong human men as their partners – but these secret partners often waned away. Fairies are also known by the fairy wedding

¹² Ibid., 166.

and the fairy folk-dance, both filled with magic, music and joy, in many areas believed to continue up to today.

The witch (вештерка, вештица)

The most universal of all supernatural beings mentioned here, the witch is yet another way to demonize women. The belief in them predates Christianity and they are thought to either send illnesses to people, turn them into animals, bring discord between spouses, cause storms, but also sometimes heal.¹³ In the one reference by Cepenkov¹⁴, similarly to the vampire, the witches became old women after death, so in this case it is as a female equivalent to the vampire. However, in most cases they are live women who live just like everyone else, but have contact with the devil and therefore, their soul leaves at nighttime, sometimes in the form of a butterfly, and roams the village, often causing trouble. Some women were able to become witches just by being very bad or by performing certain rituals.

They are also famous for their secret meetings to which they flew on broomsticks, and at which they feasted on human hearts. Similar to the fairies, they had dance and music, but overall these were more sinister meetings. Just like in other belief systems, the traditions in the region also mention different ways of recognizing and destroying a witch, but these are about as preposterous as the ones used to persecute witches in the famous Salem witch trials.

The vampire (вампир, вапир, вопер, вопир, вампирин, јапер)

John Lawson¹⁵, it would appear very justifiably, called the vampire an invention of the Slavs, and for this essay two aspects related to the vampire are of importance: the first is the etymology of the term vampire and its relation to this region; the second is the stubborn persistence of the beliefs and popularity of this being, which is reaching all-time heights in the 21st century. Milisav Popovic says that many today believe that they know all there is to know about vampires, if we take into account the sheer volumes written about them, but the secret

¹³ Ibid., 237.

¹⁴ Цепенков, 1972, p.124.

¹⁵ in Лепосава Спировска, Танас Вражиновски, *Вампирите во македонските верувања и преданија*. Институт за фолклор Марко Цепенков, 1988, p. 8.

ties that keep these creatures bound to the mountains of the Balkans have never been fully unveiled.¹⁶

According to Spirovska and Vrazinovski¹⁷ there are no thematic, content and aesthetical differences between the stories Cepenkov collected in the 19th century and what they both collected in the 20th, confirming the continuity of the beliefs in this creature. Testifying to its popularity that as recently as the very end of the 20th century, they were able to gather no less than 50¹⁸ legends involving vampires in just one village.

The etymology of the word still remains a mystery, although Kazimierz Moszynski¹⁹ insists that the origins are Macedonian, from whence the word was taken by Serbian and Croatian and then it found its way to all European languages. It is interesting to note that all Slavic people have very similar terms: Russians and Ukrainians call it upir or vapir, vepir, vampire; Belorussians call it vupor, Czechs upir or vlhodlak, Poles vampire or upjur, Bulgarians call it vampir, vapir²⁰.

In Macedonian beliefs there are elaborate details as to who and how one can become a vampire, how to prevent the becoming of one, and how to destroy a vampire. There are also different types of vampires:

- Husband, sexual partner. This type of vampire is trying to conceive a child with the woman who used to be his wife while he was alive (interestingly, he never attacks someone else's wife). If a child is born, he becomes a vampirdzija (вампириџија) – a vampire hunter, i.e. a person who can recognize and destroy a vampire.
- Family man. This is a benevolent type of vampire who helps with the cattle, providing the family with money and clothes.

¹⁶ Milisav Popovic, *Zaboravljena gora: Mitska bica drevnog Balkana*, Laguna, 2009, p.131.

¹⁷ Spirovska, Vrazinovski, *Вампирите во македонските верувања и преданија*, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁹ Kazimierz Moszynski, *Kultura ludowa Slowian: Kultura duchowa*. M, Warszawa, 1967, p. 654.

²⁰ Spirovska, Vrazinovski, 1988, p. 8.

- A damage causing vampire. This is the most common type, causing damage to his close ones, the property and the cattle.
- Butcher. This is the rarest type, who becomes a butcher to be close to blood.
- Animal. This type of vampire can transform himself into a dog.

Several other characteristics come up in the legends as well: the infidelity of the wife, physical harm and damage, scaring the cattle and the other villagers, the digging up of a body that is bloated with blood, killing it with a stake, involving the local clergy, etc.

Many rituals²¹ were performed to ensure the dead one does not become a vampire: burning the body, throwing the body in a swamp, burying it at a crossroad, weighing it down with stones, burying it facing downwards, or placing poppy or a scythe in the coffin, placing a pebble or a coin under the tongue, cutting his heels, tying his arms behind his back and, more often than not, the head was cut and placed at the feet, on the stomach, or the heart was pierced with a stake. Another measure of prevention was to never leave the body of the deceased alone, for fear an animal might jump over his body and to ensure the burial rituals are performed precisely, so the body is watched over day and night, with the lights on.

As for the type of person who was likely to become a vampire after death, there many different descriptions, ranging from very bad and sinful people, to those who have died alone, or have died with an unfulfilled desire, or those who died either childless or with another unfinished obligation towards the family or society, or those who have died a violent death.²²

From the descriptions given above, it is clear that the vampire of the legends and folk beliefs is greatly different from the image of the vampire we have today – that image is based mainly on the literary character of Count Dracula from the novel by Bram Stoker, further shaped by Hollywood.

²¹ Вражиновски, Народна митологија на Македонците (книга 1), p. 222.

²² Ibid., 223.

Conclusion

The brief descriptions of some of the supernatural beings to be found in the beliefs of the people of North Macedonia, on the one hand, provided proof that most mythologies, at least the Indo-European ones, have many universal beliefs and many beings in common, and the Slavic ones have even more in common. On the other hand, it was important to present the origins of these beings, in their original form, before the advent of literary works and Hollywood which, in most cases, drastically changed the image of these beings. It is also noteworthy how not just the image, but the beliefs in some of these creatures persist until now, the 21st century, pointing to the more archetypal and primeval nature of supernatural creatures, and not just the function they have in each folklore or mythological system. It is our belief that these creatures will persist in the centuries to come as well, for they form a part of our collective and inherited tradition.

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