
THE MOTIF OF DEATH IN SERBIAN AND CROATIAN FOLK NARRATIVE

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IZVLEČEK

Motiv smrti v srbskem in hrvaškem ljudskem pripovedništvu

Iz ljudske kulture je razvidno, da je smrt glavni dogodek v človekovi usodi. Določanje časa in okoliščin smrti je eden najpomembnejših (skupaj s poroko) aspektov obsodbe, ki jo izvajajo sojenice, demoni usode pri južnih Slovanih. Pojmovanje človeške usode je pogosto sinonim za pojmovanje smrti (sudjen dan = smrt, določen dan = smrt). Podobno imajo ljudje tudi demone, ki določajo človeško usodo, za demone smrti. Ti najpogosteje določijo nenaravno smrt, kot na primer, da se bo oseba utopila. Ne le, da predvidijo okoliščine smrti, temveč jo tudi povzročijo s tem, da obsodbo izgovorijo. Magična moč njihovih besed povzroči smrt (določiti usodo nekoga = izvajati "smrtno obsodbo" = ubiti).

Že dejstvo, da jim ljudje niso žrtvovali, včasih zadostuje, da se odločijo "ubiti" neko osebo. Iz primerov moralnih ljudskih zgodb je razvidno, da bo oseba, ki ne verjame v magičnost obsodb demonov, ušla napovedani smrti. Ne glede na to je glavna misel vseh ljudskih zgodb o človeški usodi, da je obsodba (smrt) neogibna, navkljub vsem poskusom, da bi jo preprečili. Oseba lahko živi dlje, kot je bilo določeno le, če ji nekdo podari del svojega življenja, da se tako ohranja "uravnoteženost". Na ta način je določanje smrti pravzaprav omogočanje ustreznega življenja in skupni seštevek ostaja konstanten.

Ključne besede: ljudsko pripovedništvo, Srbi, Hrvati, smrt, usoda

Key words: folk tales, Serbs, Croats, death, fate

My paper is dedicated to the issue of the predetermination of death in Serbian and Croatian folk narratives about people's fate. This body of texts consist of stories in which demons - *sudenice* ("rodenice") and angels - act who predetermine man's fate. Folk stories about a fixed death are non-fantasy and most of them are close to the genre of Saga. These stories are not equally common in all parts of Serbia and Croatia, and we should emphasise that they are less common than the belief in the *sudenice*. As an area where these stories have been preserved we can single out East Serbia: Kosovo, Kruševac, Levač (material gathered in the early 20th century), Takovo (mid-20th century), Požarevac, Niš (material gathered in the early 1970s for an ethnographic atlas of

Yugoslavia), Leskovac (1980s). The Croatian stories originate from Varaždin (late 19th century), Samobor (early 20th century), Dugo Selo and Đakovo (1920s and 30s).

M. Valjavec who collected folk stories about *sudenice* in the environs of Varaždin, established that in the stories we know positive verdicts are very rare. Of the eleven stories recorded in Varaždin there are only three in which the decision of the demons is positive, although in one of them it is only relatively positive: “If he doesn’t marry the daughter of the king of the *Vile* (nymphs), we shall kill him”. In other stories the judgement is negative. This means that because of the fact that their judgement is more often connected with death than with other events in human life, we can presume that originally *sudenice* were the demons of death, and only later became the demons of destiny.

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The most common plot in folk stories about destiny is as follows: after pronouncing a verdict, the person dies the death adjudged to him, in spite of all his attempts to avoid it. Parents don’t allow their child - if predetermined to drown - to come close to a river, but the child chokes when drinking water. Parents close the well in which the child is to fall, but it dies near it. Relatives don’t let a child, predestined to be eaten by a wolf, to go to the forest, but the rose the boy likes turns into a wolf, and the child perishes and so on. In non-fantasy narratives the basic function of *sudenice* is the emphasised predetermination of the time and circumstances of someone’s death. The story-teller perceives them just this way. “Three *rodenice* have come. They are women who decide what kind of death one will die.” We can thus say that the concept of fate in non-fantasy narratives is reduced to the predetermination of time and nature of death. Moreover, in language death is fixed as a result of judgement: *suden dan* - the adjudged day.

In the texts of folk narratives the semantic ‘to adjudge death’ is expressed by the words “to kill” or “to take away”: “If he doesn’t marry the daughter of the king of the *Vile* (nymphs king), we shall kill him”. In other words the *sudenice* cause the death of a person. But they cause it not by their own action, but through their words which in this case have the power of action and inevitably cause death. It is very important to note that their activity is not limited to the moment of someone’s birth. They supervise events of someone’s life, and if death was not adjudged at the moment of birth, they can cause it subsequently. “If he doesn’t marry the daughter of the king of the *Vile*, we shall kill him”. The image of murder corresponds with the fact that, as a rule, an unnatural death is adjudged. The *sudenice* usually decide that a person will drown, fall from a tree, will be murdered, bitten by a snake or eaten by a wolf. These motifs are not equally typical of various local traditions. In Požarevac all stories about fate (there are six of them, recorded when material was collected for an ethnological atlas of Yugoslavia) contain the motif of a child’s death near a well: “The first said: ‘Let him die at once’, the second: ‘No, let him die when he goes to school’. But the eldest said: ‘I’m the eldest and cleverest. Let him drown in a well on his wedding-day.’” In Niš we find a story which contains a motif “the child was to drown in a river on the day of his marriage”. Much more common are stories about death caused by a wolf, and their form is in our opinion typical only of the specific region of Niš: “A dead wolf was lying on the road, the groom touched it with his foot, the wolf moved, and the terrified groom dropped dead.” In Takovo we find either the motif of death caused by a wolf or the motif of

death in a well. In Kruševac and Leskovac we find only the motif of death in water: it is adjudged to a child that it will choke when drinking water or to “jump in a well on its Saint’s day”. Stories about death caused by the bite of a snake come from Levac and Takovo. The same motif is also found in Otok in Slavonia. In Varaždin the more common motif is to be eaten by a wolf.

The motif of death caused by a wolf also appears in stories about Saint Sava. St Sava (or the Archangel) is handing out food to the wolves and tells the last wolf to eat the man who accidentally overheard the conversation between St Sava and the wolves. The man attempts to avoid this fate but he fails: the wolf catches him even though he is sleeping between two shepherds.

The motif of “predetermination of death in the form of murder” is sometimes transformed in a series of motifs, and within this plot the *sudenice* can obtain the attributes of enemies, for instance of cannibalism. The sister of a new-born baby accidentally sees in a forest three women grilling a man (Levač). “Here, under a large tree she saw three women grilling a man: the first was turning the spit, the second was fanning the flames, and the third one was carrying firewood. /.../ The three women argued whether to kill a child which had been born that day in the wood”. However, their action is not a simple feature of cannibalism committed by a cruel creature or enemy like for instance a *psoglav*. It reminds us of the ritual of predetermining someone’s destiny in the same way as in some local traditions the belief exists that the *sudenice* sometimes spin a string (of human life?). In Čuprija, for instance, people believe that there are three *sudenice*: the first spins, the second knits, the third judges. Their roles in this action are precisely distributed and structured. Something similar is found in descriptions of the actions of an *Usud* (a judge who predetermines human fate in fantasy tales). During his lifetime the judge as a rule passes through three levels of prosperity, from poverty to richness, determining in this way the fate of a person. The process of announcing a verdict preserves its structure when each woman states her opinion, beginning with the strictest and finishing with the kindest, and turning into suggestions to kill a child and into a dispute on when to kill it. “The first said: ‘Let’s kill him’. The second: ‘We won’t kill him now, but when he is ten years old’. At the end the third said: ‘Let’s kill him when he gets married. He will marry a girl from an other country and when they return home they will have to sleep in a forest. He will take off his shoes, but a snake will sneak into his shoe and bite him, and he will die’”. It’s very important that the predetermination of death by the *sudenice* is considered as an act of murder on the person whose fate they predetermine. Because of this aspect there are no motifs of cannibalism or of being grilled to death in predetermination.

Frequently, the story-teller particularly insists that precisely the *sudenice* cause someone’s death: “She said: God said so and he died” - “God didn’t say so, but the *sudenice* judged that way”. A typical feature of all stories about fate is that the first *sudenica* suggests to “take” a child at once: “Three the *sudenice* came. The first said: ‘He must die at once’. The second said: ‘Let him live’”. Beside the first suggestion to kill a child at once, a typical formula of these stories is the gradual putting off of the day of death when every *sudenica* expresses her opinion: “Let him die at once” - “Let him die

when his mother loves him most of all - when he begins to talk” - “Let him die when he gets married, during the first night”. Quite often the *sudenice* fix as the day of death a person’s wedding day, when the groom takes his bride across a river (Leskovac, Kruševac); or in a forest on his way home (Levač); during the first night (Đakovo, Varaždin): “They judged: when he is twenty years old, he will get married and a wolf will eat him”. Usually this motif is typical of Saga about the predetermination of a person’s fate, but there are also interesting legends which include this motif. When childless people give shelter to a wanderer (God), he promises them in gratitude that they will have a child. On the night when the *sudenice* come, God overhears their verdict. They say that the child will drown on the day of his wedding. God tries to prevent this, but the man chokes on drop of water when crossing a river. Despite God’s request the *sudenice* refuse to prolong the man’s life by a few days. “We don’t change our decisions. This is the way it must be.” They agree to prolong someone’s life only in exchange for reducing someone else’s life. The *sudenice* can not get three additional days of life “out of nowhere”: all destinies are part of a total volume of vital energy and all of them are co-ordinated. When they determine how long a person will live, his life span, the *sudenice* give him some of this vital force, depending on the destiny and life span of other people. This is the reason why it is not possible to resurrect a person or to prolong his life unless an equal portion is taken from the life of someone else. In the mentioned stories parents never agree to offer a part of their life in exchange.

The decision of the *sudenice* often depends, as it is laid down in non-fantasy narratives, on the attitude of the child’s parents towards them and towards the visitors-travellers who sleep in the house the night the *sudenice* come. Disrespect for them is punished with the child’s death: “These people are such misers that they even didn’t put candles on the table for us to stay here longer. At this time of day they should put something on the table, at least bread and some meat for the child to be happy. So let it be then that he drowns when he is seven years old”.

The possible perception of the *sudenice* in folk stories as enemies aspiring to kill a person corresponds with the beliefs connected with the *sudenice* in traditional culture. *Sudenice* are considered to be enemies of new-born babies. Within the system of mythological creatures they are close to *babice*, the demons which harm pregnant women, mothers and new-born babies. The death of a baby is explained by the actions of the *sudenice*. It is considered that those children die at once to whom the *sudenice* predetermined death in infancy: the reason for the child’s death is connected with the fact that the *sudenice* decided to *take* him. There is a system of protection against the *sudenice* as well as against other demons which are harmful to mothers and children. In local traditions *sudenice* are considered to be the personification of a mother’s illness and as mythological creatures which harm women with children.

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BESEDA O AVTORICI

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