

THE LOCAL IMPACT OF MIGRATORY LEGENDS: THE PROCESS AND FUNCTION OF LOCALISATION

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ABSTRACT

Folk narratives are one of the mechanisms by which humans form their cultural reality; and space is an important part of this reality. In the majority of examples, contemporary legends do not explicitly refer to individual elements of the local space, however the messages that they convey are always placed in the local environment, i.e. the space that the legend-bearers directly perceive and evaluate. This placement of the folklore material is enabled by the process of the localisation of motifs. Legends that are treated as migratory due to their general geographical extensiveness can convey their message, and thus fulfil their role, only by the inclusion of an element occurring in actuality of the given space. On the level of content, in contemporary legends the local space is presented primarily as the backdrop of the events, and the fact that it is stated at all creates the impression of the apparent closeness of the events described, which enables an even stronger effect. Thus, the contemporary legends about foreigners in Velenje, which at their core are stories about the Other, are also characterised by their experiential backdrop.

KEYWORDS: Localisation • contemporary legends • migratory motifs • appropriation • the Other

INTRODUCTION

Apart from being a physical reality, space is first and foremost a social or cultural construct created and perpetuated through various mechanisms, one of which, no doubt, is narrative folklore in all its plethora of forms that circulate among people: "Landscape is experienced through the process of 'imaginative reconstruction'" (Aitchison et al. 2002: 78). And vice-versa: the proper role of narrative folklore can only be understood by the researcher through the environment in which it dwells, i.e. the context of a general societal and cultural state.

There is not much exaggeration in the statement that folklore texts as such, be they proverbs, legends, or folktales, tend to be empty and meaningless unless they are provided with contextual information and placed in their own social and cultural environment. (Bauman et al. 1980: 33)

Thus contemporary folklore, namely contemporary legends, the topic of my research interest and of this article, can be talked about and analysed precisely because of the fact that its content is deeply rooted in the contemporary world (Marks 2001: 227).

Folklore's ability to adapt – in content as well as in form – is the feature that keeps the forms and motifs of folklore alive and grants them access to new contextual situations. And localisation of content is one of the most important modes of this adaptation process. Localisation ascribes local attributes to a migratory (i.e. spatially and chronologically widely distributed) motif, mainly by incorporating real or concrete features from a physical environment. The localised variants of migratory tales bring a general confirmation that a certain presented issue is relevant for the narrators and their audience here and now. And more – the stories localised through content play a decisive role in answering the questions of the construction of space and subsequently the construction of cultural identity, which not only speaks of who we are, but also who we are not, by communicating who the Others are. "No community exists that has not known these legends in the past, and there is no community that does not know them today" (Dégh 2001: 158).

CONTEMPORARY LEGENDS

Contemporary legend, amidst all the forms receiving the attention of folkloristics after having recognised the presence and significance of folklore in modernity, is the only one to reflect 'contemporaneity' in its name. Contemporary legends are mainly defined as reports of unusual, incredible, even bizarre or horrifying events entering people's everyday routine, which neither the listener nor the narrator were a part of, and yet the events are presented as at least probable if not real. They depict a social reality, an environment that can be perceived in modernity, and their existence has a significant impact on emergence in the media and the worldwide web. Stewart Sanderson wrote in 1981:

The modern legend constitutes one of the most, may indeed even constitute *the* most widespread, popular, and vital folklore form of the present day; and what strikes me as perhaps its most outstanding feature is the creativity, imagination, and virtuosity brought to its performance by all kinds of people (cited in Brunvand 2001: XXVII).

Contemporary legend is a folklore form (genre) that has a very strong connection with the context¹ in which it dwells. In the pragmatic sense this means that the analysis of these narratives, accompanied by a correct and justified interpretation, can lead the researcher to a certain insight into this context, which is a very valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary analysis of modern human society as well as of culture as a whole. Research into the human way of life and worldview has become, through various paradigmatic frameworks, a certain maxim of folklore research in the past three decades, especially by the interpretative analysis of data gathered in the field (cf. Bronner 2007).

In respect to this statement contemporary legends are – like every other form of folklore – much more than just texts. The messages they communicate are enhanced by their contextual framework, which ascribes them with a specific meaning and a specific function. Thus in order to truly understand and interpret them one must, alongside

the narratives themselves, also collect comprehensive information about the context in which they exist and spread: "A consideration of these texts alone is insufficient; they would not spread unless people found their core ideas credible. To understand the worldwide popularity of these stories, we need to consider their grounding in real life." (Campion-Vincent 2002: 33)

The messages conveyed by contemporary legends can manifest on many levels. Mainly they are direct and concrete, thus fulfilling the educational function by illustrating (negative) examples. Other narratives are subtler, thus being a means by which topics, otherwise non-presentable due to outward pressures and limitations, can be conveyed. To put it another way, contemporary legends are the lens through which one can distinguish a general critical view of the events and changes in a social environment. On the other hand, they carry a strong symbolism as well as more intricate secondary messages that can only be discerned by employing a detailed knowledge of the symbolic context and human psychology.

APPROPRIATION AND LOCALISATION OF MIGRATORY MOTIFS

Questions of credibility and veracity of contemporary legendry – the core notions about its definition – draw attention to one more aspect of these narratives. One of Brunvand's definitions of contemporary legends, for example, states that these stories *must* be fictional, because the same bizarre incidents could never have happened "in so many localities to so many aunts, cousins, neighbors, in-laws, and classmates of a hundred and thousand of individual tellers of the tales" (1981: XII). The simultaneous emergence of identical motifs in geographically very distant areas as well as the continuity of their content through a longer period of time point to the fact that contemporary legends are actually migratory. This means that their basic ideas are not only limited to one social or language group or political body, but are a part of a broader tradition. Contemporary legends are, more than any of the narrative forms, an international or a transnational narrative genre, whose emergence and proliferation know no geographical or social boundaries (Hobbs, McCulloch 2007: 117). According to Ulrike Wolf-Knuts the 'migratory legend' is the only valid description of these narratives, for they contain the geographical (synchronic axis) as well as the temporal (diachronic axis) dimension of continuity in their content (1987: 173).

However, the fact that these migratory narratives tend to localise can be of a larger importance from the perspective of understanding their concrete context, the narrative's placement in that context, and its relation to the general social environment. Migratory tales are distributed by means of selective appropriation (Bird 2002: 522), i.e. by (conscious) instilling, acceptance (cf. Muršič 2000: 308) or selection of facts, descriptions and the like by potential narrators. And yet it is only by localisation, reformation and adaptation of motifs that migratory legend or any other form of narrative folklore can settle in the new environment. Localisation is thus one of the most important processes of creating certain (new) cultural constructs to fulfil certain functions demanded by the new context. And so the appropriation of migratory folklore as well as its localisation most commonly unfold directly in the folkloric event and are mostly influenced by performance details of narration such as the narrator's style or knowledge, and the

structure of the audience. They are thus always arbitrary and subjective, and the motifs that form the final version of the narrative are emotionally charged (Bird 2002: 528). An important aspect to understanding these two processes is also the fact that narrative communication, at least in the case of legends, is always reciprocal and bidirectional, i.e. dialogic (Dégh 2001: 45).

The main characteristic of localised narratives is that they present a physical, visible element from an environment that their bearers are acquainted with (buildings, material goods, technology, natural qualities, as well as real people), around which the narrative's content oscillates. Legends can thus be directly linked to that particular element and can, for example, try to explain or justify its existence (like legends that accompany individual toponyms), physical appearance, or its relationship to the environment (cf. Hrobat 2008). But more frequently, these parts of visual experiential space, which are always named (!) (Frake 1996: 235), play the role of a backdrop wherein the events of the legends take place. In contemporary legendry, space, or rather its 'use', takes this role more often, and with that it brings evidence that the events described did in fact happen. Even more – they happened in 'my' (i.e. the narrator's) immediate vicinity. The addition of the illusory proximity of the event, which is a direct result of motif localisation, increases the possibility that the story will achieve its intent or fulfil its function. Edmund Leach wrote in 1984:

Without [...] anchoring into concrete details of the landscape, the fictional nature of stories becomes obvious. They may still have value but of quite a different kind. More generally, it is only when stories have a material reference that we ourselves can see and touch that we are prepared to suspend our faculty for disbelief. (Cited in Bird 2002: 539)

And so it is the localisation itself that enables the legends to convey the message and achieve the desired effect with its audience anytime and anywhere. "[L]ocal legends² do not develop randomly but according to particular concerns and fears" (Bird 2002: 532).

Although the localisation of a specific migratory legend can limit the number of its variants, acquired in a particular geographical area or in a particular society, the empirical data demonstrating their absence may also be very informative and insightful.

LOCALISED CONTEMPORARY LEGENDS ABOUT FOREIGNERS

To illustrate the process of localisation I will present some examples of contemporary legendry that I collected in Velenje, an industrial town and the fifth largest urban centre in Slovenia. Velenje has been marked by rapid development since the nineteen-sixties – when coal-mining and parallel industries took off – and by the following waves of immigration from all the republics of former Yugoslavia and from Albania. This created a sort of a melting pot disabling prevalent nationalistic tendencies (eliminating real conflicts), and opening ways to all kinds of architectural, economic, developmental, social, and other (sometimes rushed) projects, resulting in Velenje being set forth as a 'bright' example of development under socialism by the governing establishment of the time (up until the year 1990, just before Slovenia claimed its independence, it even bore the name of the late Yugoslavian leader, Titovo Velenje). Today Velenje is in slight

developmental stagnation as the economic focus shifted from industry onto trade, but it is still a very important energetic and political centre. All these specific historic and ethnographic development brought about a unique cultural context that can be truly insightful and interesting for a folklore researcher.

Collecting folklore material in this town took place between the years of 2009 and 2010. The majority of material was gathered by me organising storytelling sessions, where a group of people, aged 18–30, were presented with a couple of narrative examples, triggering mental connections to the stories they already knew or had heard of. This un-structured mass interview proved to be a very good method of gathering folklore material that is in circulation today, because it evoked strong reactions, vivid dialogue – participants were sending me stories even long after the session was over. The other method of collecting was by inciting a couple of discussions on the internet forum that connects inhabitants of Velenje in discussing local and national matters (Velenje.com 2009–2010). In order to get a further comparative perspective on the localised folklore material I also shuffled through a significant amount of local and regional press, but much to my surprise no journal has ever picked up these particular narratives and made a story of them. This is interesting information, which can be interpreted as an indicator that despite their significant distribution, these narratives are not regarded by their realistic value, but are rather fun and ridiculous slants, not worthy of journalistic application. This assumption was confirmed by the informants during the live interviews as well.

All of the examples that I use in this article to illustrate the topic on legend-localisation were localised into Velenje using a single spatial landmark and symbolic element of the town – a popular fast food restaurant called Mladost ('Youth'). Established in May of 1987, before Slovenia claimed its independence, this restaurant stands in the vicinity of important public buildings, an education centre, and public recreational areas and is open twenty-four hours a day, making it a popular overnight eating place. The owners and employees at Mladost are Albanian immigrants from the western-most part of the Republic of Macedonia. Roughly one third of legends I collected in the town of Velenje use Mladost as the point of localisation of their content.

All legends that are attributed to this particular fast food joint are migratory – I have not only found the same motifs throughout the rest of Slovenia,³ they are also collected and analysed by contemporary folklore researchers worldwide (see, for example, Brunvand 1981; af Klintberg 1986; Brednich 1990, etc.). In the case of Mladost its attributed motifs are migratory on the diachronic axis as well, since their initial inception is unclear but there is some narrative evidence showing that the same plots existed even before the establishment of this particular fast food joint in the same geographical area.

Interpretative analysis of contemporary folklore material has shown that all of the narratives, localised through Mladost, are legends about the Other – a social category, required by the majority of the population to identify itself through comparison and exclusion. "We" are the measure of the good life which "they" are threatening to undermine, and this is so because "they" are foreigners and culturally "different" (Stolcke 1995: 2). The Other is a quintessential social category and can be covered by various kinds of marginal social groups, i.e. homosexuals, women, the unemployed, etc. The representations of this Us/Others discourse make "foreign characteristics, different from ours, more visible. Because of the attention, directed at foreign and unusual, their

representations are keen on satire and tendentious depiction of 'foreignness'." (Jezernik 1987: 29) And among these representations, folklore is one the most important (cf. Kvideland, Sehmsdorf 1988: 379–382).

The first important platform for differentiating between Us and Others is language and communication, whether oral or written down. Legends convey modes of language-discrimination by emphasising incoherencies and nonsense in communication, attributed to foreigner's inability to make the switch to the 'right' language. Furthermore, if the foreigners are 'granted' the ability to learn the language of their new environment, it is clearly stated that they will never be able to pull it off completely – even though they can learn grammar and vocabulary, they will never be able to grasp the metaphors, phrases or the proper accent. All of this perpetuates the notion of their in-adaptability and, subsequently, enhances the division between Us and Them:

In Mladost, this one guy ordered a kebab, and the vendor said to him: "Are you eating here or are you eating by walk?"⁴

I know of a story that once, people came to Mladost and there was a message on the door, saying: "No burek today, oven broken at all." [Laughter]

Once the vendor wasn't in the shop, so he put an inscription on the door that said: "I'll be back all of a sudden!"

This one guy came to Mladost to have a kebab and asked for a kebab without onions. And the guy said to him: "I don't have onions – do you want your kebab without something else?"

The most prominent corpus of legends oscillating around Mladost is that dealing with the contamination of food. In narratives this contamination is manifested through parts of human or animal bodies, and various inedible objects allegedly found in hamburgers, kebabs, and other food Mladost serves. The motif of food contamination can be found throughout the Western world (and beyond) and is thus without a doubt migratory (cf. Brunvand 1981; Brednich 1990; Buchan 1992). In worldwide legends, accidental or conscious contamination is attributed to different kinds of social actors, from big corporations (Fine 1992: 141–163) to immigrants. In the latter case, legends directly or indirectly accuse the foreign owners of fast food shops of poor hygiene, of being plainly ignorant, and even of being evil, malevolent, or spoiling the food on purpose. It is within these attributed (alleged) characteristics where their general role in society – as the Other – is most recognisable.

When Mladost was still a kiosk,⁵ when you placed an order, he opened this hole in the wall, called the order in and closed it again, so you could not see into the kitchen, how everything was being done. Because god knows, what was happening with your food in that kitchen!

When we were still in high school, everybody was saying that in Mladost the cheese was not the best quality – well they had the best cheese burek, but, so they said, the vendors and cooks never washed their hands when preparing the food. And so once they found semen from one of the cooks on the food. Now, I don't know if that's true or not, but that's how it was.

Do you remember, when once in high school our teacher – we were late or something, because we went to Mladost to eat. And we came back and our teacher was like: “Where were you?” And we said that we were in Mladost, and she said: “You go there and eat their burgers? But they are contaminated with sperm!”

And they were doing this – when Mladost was still that orange kiosk – they were making burgers out of rats. That’s what I heard, they were using rat meat.

Yes, and they kill pigeons with a shovel and they make hamburgers out of them!

There are other tangible elements of Velenje’s physical reality used to localise these same and similar legends (for example immigrant-owned sweet- and ice-cream shops), but Mladost is a proper lightning rod for the stories, proving to be the key element for the migratory legends to localise in this town. This probably has to do with the fact that it is the biggest, central and most popular fast food joint among the inhabitants of Velenje. This is what Gary Alan Fine (1992: 141–143) described as the Goliath effect, that is to say that being the most prominent also burdens you with the biggest symbolic potential. And it is that exact symbolic potential that is being employed every time Mladost is mentioned in legends by the inhabitants of Velenje.

CONCLUSION

The folklore genre system in general as well as specific examples of (contemporary) folklore are one of the most important mechanisms with which people form their own cultural reality, an integral part of which is space. In the majority of examples, contemporary legends do not explicitly refer to individual elements of the local space, however the messages that they convey are always placed in the local environment, i.e. the space that the legend-bearers directly perceive and evaluate. These communicated messages are thus always spatially fixed, which is enabled by the process of motif localisation – legends that can be treated as migratory due to their universal appeal and appearance can only transfer the message and fulfil their function if they employ a real, visible element from the physical, tangible space of a particular community. Even more, only after a migratory element of folklore, present at many different independent geographical locations, has undergone the process of localisation, can it situate and label the bearers (the narrator and his or her audience) as a member of a community and thus creates the cultural identity of individuals and the community as a whole. The same goes for contemporary legends about foreigners, localised in Velenje, Slovenia, that use one element of the town’s physical space – the fast food restaurant Mladost. From them, one can distinguish the locals’ attitude towards foreigners/immigrants (the Other), their perception, fear and the general consequences of the clash of two or more ethnic communities in a town historically characterised by processes of mass immigration.

NOTES

¹ It should be noted at this point that when I am talking about a context or contextual data, I am describing a broad (yet somewhat enclosed) cultural landscape – a dynamic socio-cultural

situation functioning as the platform where stories are in circulation – and its subcategory; the narrative context wherein individual motifs are put when they are being localised (i.e. contextualised). Where the context is meant to be understood as the context of performance by which folklore material is transmitted and collected, this is emphasised separately.

2 My emphasis.

3 My collection of Slovenian contemporary legendry is one of the very first in this country, meaning that there is a general lack of comparative narrative material.

4 Sample texts here and below are approximate translations of the transcripts of folklore material, which is sometimes untranslatable verbatim, but the general idea is preserved. In this and some other examples the translation is grammatically wrong on purpose.

5 Mladost was a rather small plastic kiosk up until 2007, when a more permanent building was erected.

SOURCES

Author's collection of Slovenian contemporary legends.

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