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FOLK TALES, MAGIC, AND POLITICS INTERPRETATION OF FOLKLORE IN SLOVAK ETHNOGRAPHY[1]

TATIANA BUŽEKOVÁ

Abstract: Myths, religion and magic have been important areas of investigation in the social sciences and humanities; their interpretation in concrete political contexts can illustrate both theoretical advance and political processes. The paper is aimed to demonstrate that the explanation of folk tales with supernatural elements and magical practices in Slovak ethnography and folkloristics reflected the development of these disciplines in terms of theoretical thinking as well as specific historical conditions in which the academic works emerged. I consider certain studies corresponding to four political bodies to which the territory of today's Slovakia belonged: the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867 – 1918), the Czechoslovak Republic (1918 – 1939), the Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945), and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1948 – 1989). The selected works point to the main ideas of the theoretical perspectives that were dominant at these time periods in the study of folklore: the mythological school, the evolutionist interpretation, the structuralist trend, and the Soviet school of ethnography based on the ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

Key words: folk tales, magic, politics, folklore studies, Slovakia

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Introduction

Myths and magic have been important objects of ethnographic research since its beginnings in the eighteenth century. Their scholarly explanations reflected the general development of the social sciences and humanities; at the same time, ethnographers' interpretations were influenced by specific socio-political conditions, in which individual scientific traditions were established and advanced. My aim here is to illustrate this influence by considering how supernatural folk tales and magical practices were understood in the works of scholars who studied Slovak tradition in the 1870s – 1880s, the 1930s – 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1970s. These time intervals correspond to the political bodies to which the territory of today's Slovakia then belonged: the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867 – 1918), the Czechoslovak Republic (1918 – 1939), the Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945), and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1948 – 1989). I will address the ethnographers' ideas in relation to the dominant theoretical perspectives and the political regimes in which these perspectives developed.

The changes in the ethnographic research in Czechoslovakia in relation to political transformations have been investigated by many Czech and Slovak ethnologists (see, for example, Kiliánová & Popelková, 2010; Skalník, 2005; Podoba, 2005; Ferencová, 2006; Uherek, 2002). My goal in this paper is to consider a specific aspect of these processes: I will focus on how the development of Slovak ethnography was manifested in the study of supernatural folk tales and magic. I will pay attention to the selected works of four scholars who analysed Slovak folklore: Pavol Dobšinský, an important author during the time of Slovak national revival; Rudolf Bednárik, a prominent ethnographer of the interwar and post-war periods; Piotr Bogatyriov, a Russian folklorist who carried out research in Czechoslovakia and played a vital role in the development of Slovak ethnology; and Mária Kosová, one of the most significant Slovak ethnologists of the 1940s and of the later socialist period. I will consider how their arguments reflect the theoretical frameworks that developed in certain political contexts.

"Folk treasures"

The beginnings of the ethnographic research date back to the Age of Enlightenment, which proclaimed values such as reason, knowledge, individual freedom and the well-being of society. From this perspective, ethnography was part of science understood as cumulative universal knowledge and integral part of the moral and cultural development of mankind. At the end of the eighteenth century a new trend of Romanticism started to emphasize the specifics of indi-

viduals and nations, in contrast to the universalism of Enlightenment. The ethnographic traditions, which emerged in European countries, were shaped by both intellectual perspectives, albeit in different ways. Ethnologists and anthropologists in the colonial empires, such as Britain or France, studied "others" – the "primitive" tribes, often represented as "noble savages", and operated by the universal concept of culture. In politically fragmented Central Europe ethnographers combined the positivist methods of Enlightenment with a focus on their own traditions and used the concept of *folk* (Barth et al., 2005). The latter notion was based on the ideas of German Romanticism that emphasized specifics of individual nations and was influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder's concepts of *Volk* and *Volkgeist* (Kohn, 1950). The basic assumption was that the most authentic expressions of a people's character, beliefs, and customs could be found in culture of *folk*, living in the countryside, uncorrupted by modern civilization, and linked directly to the past by the chain of oral tradition. Interest in collecting and publishing "the lore of the folk" as a means of defining national identity was fuelled by Romantic Nationalism that emerged in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth- century Europe and laid the basis for nation-states (Haase, 2008, p. 662; Hroch, 2007).

The mythological school was the first theoretical direction in the study of folklore. Its main theses were formulated by Jacob Grimm (1785 – 1863) in his *German Mythology* (1882). In accordance with the ideas of Romanticism, myths were supposed to reflect the spirit of a people, which was manifested in language. Folk tales and customs, especially those with supernatural elements, were interpreted as remnants of pre-Christian pagan mythology. The most important feature of early folklore studies was the collection of folk tales and their interpretation in accordance to the idea of reconstruction of Indo-European myths (Uther, 2008, p. 429). These notions together with Herder's ideas profoundly influenced scholars and educated people in the Slavic lands of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire and partly inspired the movement of Pan-Slavism (Trencsényi & Kopeček, 2007; Krosny, 2004). In the Czech lands and Slovakia this trend was represented by works of several intellectuals, including Ján Kollár (1793 – 1852) and Pavol Jozef Šafárik (1795 – 1861). Both emphasized the specifics of the Slavic languages and cultures in comparison with the non-Slavic (German and Hungarian) environment and sought to awaken national consciousness.[2] In later publications of Slovak ethnographers the focus

[2] National revival at the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had unique features in every land. In Slovakia, this process was different in comparison with other areas, such as the Czech lands or Serbia: those countries, unlike Slovakia, had a historical experience of their own states and much more extensive literary production. In general, from the beginning national revival took the form of defending a specific national character reflected primarily in language (Bakke, 1999, pp. 121–128; Hroch, 2016. About the analysis of national revival in relation to ethnography in Slovakia see, for example, Urbancová, 1987; Dzubáková, 1976; Leščák & Sirovátka, 1982; Leščák, 1991; Profantová, 1996).

had shifted from Slavic to Slovak folk culture (Marčok, 1996, pp. 122–123). The works of Pavol Dobšinský (1828 – 1885) are considered to be the culmination of the Slovak mythological school, although the search for the "spirit of folk" is present in argumentation of many scholars of the late nineteenth century – early twentieth century, including such prominent figures as Svetozár Hurban-Vajanský (1847 – 1916) and Andrej Kmeť (1841 – 1908) (Profantová, 1996). Dobšinský's work is perhaps the best illustration of the methodological approach, in which Slovak folk tales and customs were interpreted as indicators of pagan mythology and pre-Christian Slavic worldview.

Dobšinský's book *Reflections on Slovak tales* (*Úvahy o slovenských povestiach*, 1871) is the first comprehensive theoretical treatise on oral tradition in Slovak folklore studies. The author's basic idea is the antiquity and relatedness of the folk tales of all Indo-European nations. In accordance with the premise of the mythological school, Dobšinský considers folk tales as myths and therefore as a source for detection of the core of poetry, from which art, philosophy and science evolved: "Everywhere the legends and myths were the first art of the nations, the beginnings and the foundation of other beautiful arts" (Dobšinský, 1871, pp. 9-10). Thus, Dobšinský set himself the goal of "unravelling the obvious secrets" of folk tales: their essence is "the spirit of life", and as soon as researchers "disenchant" this spirit, they elucidate a special national worldview, which must not be missing in the building of the national edification. This project was in line with the goals of national revival: it aimed to contribute to the self-knowledge of the nation, because Slovaks had their own "national opinion and worldview", which had to be "discovered and cultivated" (Dobšinský, 1871, p. 5). Dobšinský notes that in the beginning of national revival in 1840 – 1948 folk tales were interpreted as the description of "the real events and many deeds of Slavic sons and daughters" (Dobšinský, 1871, p. 7). For him, however, this genre does not refer to historical events or characters. Rather, the tales emerged in response to the first questions asked by the human spirit and reflected how people explained the world. Dobšinský's goal is to reconstruct this worldview on the basis of poetic images.

For the development of Slovak folkloristics, Dobšinský's works were important also in terms of a methodological shift in the collection of oral tradition. He paid attention to the transcription of folklore as well as its interpretation. His personal correspondence revealed his concern about the possible loss of the original meaning in the process of recording and processing folk tales (Bocánová & Žeňuchová, 2019, p. 132). Dobšinský was also interested in the "living language" and the genres of folk prose that were closest to the everyday life – proverbs and sayings. In addition, he described customs and magical practices. In the book *Slovak folk customs, superstitions, and games* (*Prostonárodnie obyčaje, povery a hry slovenské*, 1880) Dobšinský presented his own observations of peasants' life in several areas of today's Slovakia, but also

referred to other ethnographers' works. In every sphere of tradition, he paid primary attention to language and observed how linguistic expressions corresponded to specific situations. In the preface to this work he noted: "I strive to write by using the words and expressions of folk" (Dobšinský, 1880, without paging). It is an important methodological note that stems from the basic assumption of the mythological school: language plays the essential role in explaining culture and only through knowledge of people's verbal expressions one can understand their "spirit"; at the same time, Dobšinský's statement also reflects his concern for accuracy in mediating folklore.

Unlike earlier *Reflections*, this work is not a theoretical treatise on pagan myths transformed to fairy tales, but an empirical study on contemporary tradition. Although many motifs and supernatural beings mentioned there appear in fairy tales, Dobšinský underlines the difference between folk tales referring to unreal, fantastic situations and folk tales referring to people's everyday life:

> I do not want to speak about tales that describe fantastic and non-fantastic ideas and beings created by the imagination of the folk and nation; but I only remain in real life, in which here and there, especially in remote mountains and valleys, people to this day believe in mythical beings and consider them to be real figures influencing human lives and destinies (Dobšinský, 1880, p. 113).

These mythical beings are not just a fiction for people, they do not belong to the ancient past: they are perceived as powerful agencies affecting people's lives. It is important to notice that although Dobšinský acknowledges the importance of such beliefs, he calls them "superstitions", in the sense that they are a product of insufficient knowledge and do not refer to real phenomena. In the chapter entitled "Superstitious and fabulous beings" Dobšinský lists twenty-five types of such entities with supernatural characteristics (Beťah and Madra, Bobo and Baba, the sorcerer, the black goat and the black man, the ghost, the night spirit, the midday spirit, etc.). The list includes human beings – *strygôň* (male witch) and *striga* (female witch). Dobšinský describes them as "people of extraordinary qualities and gifts of the spirit, especially the old ones" who can fly and turn into animals, who practise black magic and after death become *vlkolaks*[3] (Dobšinský, 1880, p. 116). Witches are mentioned in many contexts, from sending nightmares and causing diseases to harming cattle. Ordinary people also can practise magic, although Dobšinský notes that it is often

[3] Slavic words *vlkolak, vlkodlak, vukodlak* and similar terms are derived from *vlk, volk, vuk* (wolf) and refer to people who can turn to animals. Thus, they are usually translated to English as "werewolf". However, their characteristics differ from werewolves' properties in western, especially Germanic, traditions because Slavic *vlkolaks*, unlike Germanic werewolves, are often pictured as revenants (see, for instance, Afanasiev, 1995, pp. 186, 197, 201-203). Thus, this folk category overlaps with other Slavic folk concepts, especially with the notion of vampire (see Wollman, 1920 – 1926).

just a matter of talking: "… they just refer [to magic] by words, they tell that this or that would be done; they often joke about that; but again, they do cast spells, they do want to harm others, and they do believe in magic" (Dobšinský, 1880, p. 27).

References to harmful as well as apotropaic charms are scattered throughout the whole Dobšinský's text. They appear in relation to the important aspects of life, such as birth, love and wedding, family and children, domestic works and farming. Dobšinský also mentions magical healing that is primarily based on the expert knowledge of medicinal plants. He links it with superstitions, but at the same time appreciates the effectiveness of natural remedies. The experts on healing are called *vedomec*/*veštec*/*veštík* (male seer) and *vedomkyňa*/*veštica*/*veštíčka* (female seer):

> Almost in every village there is a *vedomec* or a *vedomkyňa*, a *veštec* or a *veštica*, a *veštík* or a *veštíčka*, an old man or an old women (*baba*), or they would call them in other way. These people know herbs better than others and dispone by healing skills. They treat people and cattle, and the latter is treated especially by shepherds; they treat internal diseases and wounds. Certainly, this treatment is usually associated with superstitions, incantations and charms aimed to heal illnesses and injuries; but usually under this nimbus of magic a real remedy is hidden (Dobšinský, 1880, p. 68).

Dobšinský here presents a rationalist view: magic is superstition, while natural remedies are real. Similar interpretation is characteristic of ethnographic studies of later period, especially the works of Jozef Ľudovít Holuby (1836 – 1923) who paid particular attention to magic and folk healing (see, for instance, Holuby, 1883; 1931; 1958). The division between "real" treatment and "imaginary" treatment became an obligatory part of the subsequent ethnographic publications, although various interpretations of folk tradition corresponded to different theoretical ideas.

Dobšinský's work exemplifies a perspective on folk culture in which "simple folk" (peasants) was romanticized but at the same time needed edification: folk poetry was seen as a source of "the spirit of nation", but superstitions were to be erased. Such interpretation had fully developed in works of the next generation of Slovak ethnographers and folklorists. At the same time, the study of folk culture still followed the concept of research, which served not only for scientific purposes, but also for ideological justifications for the "national spirit". However, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the methodological orientation of the Slovak ethnography had changed – romantic interpretations gave way to the systematic description of folk culture (Kiliánová & Popelková, 2010, p. 413).

Folk culture and survivals

After the First World War, the political map of Central Europe had dramatically changed. The Habsburg Empire disintegrated, and several national states were formed on its territory. One of them was the Czechoslovak Republic, founded in 1918. In the academic sphere in Slovakia, this political transformation led to the institutionalization of the scientific practice, which included the establishment of the Comenius University in Bratislava in 1919. Ethnography belonged to the oldest fields of study at the Faculty of Arts at this university. The beginnings of education in Slovakia were characterized by involvement of Czech researchers. In ethnography, one of the main figures was Karel Chotek (1881 – 1967) who significantly contributed to the development of this discipline in Slovakia. He defined ethnography (*národopis*) as the study of material, social and spiritual folk culture and folk art (Chotek, 1933, p. 294).

Chotek argues that folk culture has been developing in accordance with the law of change and differentiation: the more influences and possibilities there are in environment, the more changes and variations occur. It follows that traces of the past are mostly preserved in isolated and economically backward localities, especially in rural areas. Accordingly, ethnographic research should continue to focus on the study of the rural environment (Chotek, 1933, p. 296). This idea was reflected in the works of Chotek's students. One of them was Rudolf Bednárik (1903 – 1975), who later elaborated on the tasks of ethnography and ethnology. Like Chotek, Bednárik considered folk culture as the main object of ethnographic research; he distinguished between ethnography, which is aimed to collect and classify material, and ethnology, which must draw general conclusions about the development of folk culture. Both ethnography and ethnology are auxiliary historical sciences, because they must explain the genesis of cultural phenomena and their historical development. In this, the term "folk" refers to people living in the countryside. After German occupation of the Czech lands in 1939 and establishment of the Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945) this argument did not change, although the focus shifted to the national orientation of the ethnographic research.

In his *Handbook for ethnographic research of the Slovak people* (*Príručka pre národopisný výskum slovenského ľudu*, 1942) Bednárik argues that it should be done "only by the Slovak", "the own son [of the nation]" (Bednárik, 1942, p. 8, cited in Kiliánová & Popelková, 2010, p. 413). In the next methodological work, *Slovak homeland studies* (*Slovenská vlastiveda*, 1943) Bednárik reiterates his teacher's argument that folk culture is alive and changeable and that these transformations need to be examined in historical perspective; at the same time, he points to the complex influences to which Slovak culture has been exposed due to its location in the heart of Europe. In his research program,

Bednárik pays special attention to magic, which was included into the category of superstition as part of oral tradition and folk customs. He considers magic to be the most characteristic "symptom" of Slovak folk culture and describes the task of ethnographers as follows:

> To find out the old condition, the current condition, if it is distinctive Slovak, and the foreign influences on it, and the related development of folk culture. Furthermore, to ascertain the basis of folk beliefs and how people express their beliefs, say, in magic and witchcraft, which do not belong to the Christian faith; or to consider their beliefs only in so far as they influenced the old religion; eventually it will be necessary to pay attention to folk beliefs only as part of tradition maintained by the proverbial Slovak tenacious adherence to the ancestors' heritage, especially in women's world (Bednárik, 1943, p. 16).

Bednárik claims that Slovak customs are mostly rooted in the Slavic pre-Christian religion. He distinguishes two stages of its development: demonological and theological. The first stage was characterized by magic, while the second stage by creation of a pagan pantheon. The old religion did not disappear with the advent of Christianity, but was transformed into folk customs and superstitions:

> The old religious system has changed under the influence of Christianity. However… for the most part it was the functions of individual customs and superstitions that have changed from prehistoric times to the present day… The unravelling of these functions will bring us many important insights into spiritual culture of prehistoric and modern periods, as well as the understanding how the whole prehistoric religion has gradually changed and how it certainly is coming to the end... It is the inevitable process, in which humankind moves from prelogical thinking to logical thinking. In this, the last century has manifested extraordinarily progress that partially erased the old spiritual and material culture of our people. This process, although ethnographers do not welcome it, cannot be stopped and our effort must be to capture the rural culture as soon as possible, so that the progress would bring our peasant the good which he tried to protect by magical means; thus, the oncoming edification would not disrupt his quiet and blessed work (Bednárik, 1943, pp. 16–17).

Bednárik's argument manifests a remarkable combination of the romantic search for the national spirit (superstitions reflect the original Slavic religion/culture and for this reason it is necessary to document them), the evolutionist perspective (superstitions are survivals which will eventually disappear[4]), and functionalism (superstitions have certain functions in folk

[4] The term *survivals* was introduced by the founding father of socio-cultural anthropology in Britain, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832 - 1917), in his explanation of the development of human societies. He defined survivals as "processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had

culture), with a notable inclusion of Lévy-Bruhl's idea of prelogical thinking.[5] This mixture of evolutionary, romantic and functionalist perspectives on supernatural folk tales and magic persisted in works of Slovak ethnographers and folklorists until the end of the twentieth century, with an important exception of the structuralist trend, which emerged in Slovak ethnography in the 1930s – 1940s and offered a different interpretation of folk culture.

Folklore and structure

Since its beginnings, folklore studies have been connected to philology. In the first half of the twentieth century the development of the latter discipline brought a significant change to interpretations of folklore through elaboration of the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913), the pioneer of structuralist linguistics. In the 1920s and 1930s, this trend developed in several countries, including Russia and Czechoslovakia. In Russia, it was represented by the Moscow Linguistic Circle (MLC), which united linguists in the period 1915 – 1924 and was influenced by the literary school of Russian formalism. In Czechoslovakia, the structuralist linguistics was developed in the works of researchers belonging to the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC), which emerged in Prague in the 1920s (Berezin, 1984, pp. 192-195).

The key concepts of the Prague school were structure and function. Thus, this trend is sometimes called the Prague structuralism or functionalism in linguistics. The notion of structure places it into the broader stream of structuralism, while the notion of function distinguishes it from other structuralist theories. From this perspective, language is to be examined on a pragmatic level, in conjunction with social reality. The classical theory of the functions of language within the Prague school was elaborated in the works of Roman Jakobson (1896 – 1982), who emigrated to Czechoslovakia from Russia.[6] It was

their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved" (Tylor, 1920, p. 16).

[5] The concept of prelogical thinking was introduced by a French sociologist Lévy-Bruhl (1857 – 1939). According to him, the level of organisation of society and the mentality of its members are mutually dependent. People living in societies with simple organisation have primitive mentality characterized by mysticism (which means that people do not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural) and prelogical mode of thought (which means a violation of Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction – people do not try to avoid logical inconsistencies and accept coexistence of mutually exclusive states, for example, life and death or the unity and multiplicity of one being). The differences between the primitive and the civilized mentality are the result of differences in the social environment and in the collective representations that this environment creates and supports (Lévy-Bruhl, 1926; 1923).

[6] In the interwar period, Prague was a popular destination for Russian scientists, writers and journalists who did not agree with the political changes in their home country. Since 1921, their emigration to Czechoslovakia had been facilitated by the so-called "Russian action" ini-

through Jakobson that the PLK was influenced by the ideas of Russian formalists who were closely connected with the MLC (Berezin, 1984, pp. 190-195; Alpatov, 2005, pp. 178-194). In the work *Folklore as a special form of creation* (*Die Folklore als eine besondere Form des Schaffens*, 1929), Jakobson together with Piotr Bogatyriov (1893 – 1971) applied the PLC's approach to the analysis of folklore.

Bogatyriov was a Russian folklorist who worked in Czechoslovakia for several years, taught at the Comenius University in Bratislava, and contributed to the development of Slovak ethnography. He employed the ideas of functional structuralism in ethnographic research which he carried out in Czechoslovakia. He published the results in three studies: *Magical acts, rites and beliefs in Subcarpathian Russia* (*Actes magiques, rites et croyances en Russie Subcarpatique*, 1929), *Costume functions in Moravian Slovakia* (*Funkcie kroja na Moravskom Slovensku*, 1937) and *Czech and Slovak folk theatre* (*Lidové divadlo české a slovenské*, 1940) (Bogatyriov, 2007). In these works, he consistently applied the original method, which he called functional-structural, static, or synchronous. His main idea is that the ethnographers must record the tradition in everyday conditions. They should not focus on the historical genesis of folklore phenomena, but on their functioning. At the same time, the study of culture presupposes not only the record of the tradition, but also explanations of the bearers of tradition because they convey the meaning that people ascribe to events and human acts. Thus, these explanations are essential in identifying the functions of folklore phenomena (Bogatyriov, 2007, pp. 24-30).

In *Magical acts*, Bogatyriov pays particular attention to the role of magic in everyday life. He notes that any ethnographer who recorded stories about evil spirits or witchcraft, or heard people talking about effectiveness of charms, can understand that the belief in the supernatural is strong indeed. At the same time, people's explanations are constantly changing, and it is this change that leads to the persistence and vitality of traditional beliefs and practices. Therefore, magical beliefs cannot be considered only as survivals that are passed down from generation to generation – they have certain function in the system of folk beliefs (Bogatyriov, 2007, p. 31).

Bogatyriov argues that any element of tradition has several functions that form a certain structure – a "grouping of functions" which can include religious, ceremonial, festive, artistic, aesthetic, erotic, or other functions; the structure of functions can change over time (for example, a magic function can be re-

tiated by President Tomáš G. Masaryk. "Cultural forces" from Russia received support from the Czechoslovak government, and young emigrants were able to continue their university studies, which were interrupted by the dramatic political events. Institutions such as the Council of Russian Professors and the Russian Academic Group were created. Russian scientists had taught at universities in Prague, Brno and Bratislava. Due to the concentration of Russian academics in the 1920s, Prague was sometimes called "Russian Oxford" (Petrusheva, 2006).

placed by an aesthetic one and vice versa) or in relation to other elements; in any given context the functions display a specific hierarchy, where the main function determines people's use of the object as well as their emotional reaction to the situation; and any change of a function leads to a change of the structure of functions. The aim of the ethnographer is not only to generalize ethnographic data and to find out the meaning that people attach to magical practices, but also to analyse the relations between different practices and their interpretations. Bogatyriov demonstrates that folk beliefs and practices vary and reflect the influence of various neighbouring traditions and Christianity. More importantly, however, is that the characteristics of supernatural beings display a tendency of constant transformation and overlapping. Thus, the reconstruction of pagan pantheons and mythology on the basis of contemporary folklore material is irrelevant – even if the researcher manages to describe an image of a supernatural being at present, it is impossible to say with certainty that this image was the same in the past (Bogatyriov, 2007, pp. 124–129).

Bogatyriov's ideas became an important inspiration for Slovak ethnographers, as in the period 1937 – 1940 he was teaching at the Faculty of Arts of the Comenius University in Bratislava and also participated in the work of the Association of Scientific Synthesis that united the young generation of Slovak scientists. His approach significantly influenced the work of Andrej Melicherčík (1917 – 1966), Mária Kosová (1918 – 1985) and Soňa Kovačevičová (1921 – 2009) (Kiliánová & Popelková, 2010, pp. 412–413). In his *Theory of ethnography* (*Teória národopisu,* 1945) Melicherčík identified folklore as the main subject of ethnographic research and outlined a corresponding methodology based on the theory of functional structuralism. He notes that previously the subject of ethnographic research in Slovakia was defined by the term "folk", the meaning of which, however, was never specified. But the definition of the term "folk" is not essential – the boundaries of ethnography are determined by the quality of the phenomena it examines. Instead of folk, Melicherčík proposes to study folklore. That is defined primarily by the collective aspect of tradition, but also by what people think and believe. Any individual expression is influenced by tradition – the "(more or less) blind belief in the correctness of preserved ethical and legal norms and evaluations as well as technical and cultural rules" (Melicherčík, 1945, p. 94). The individual is the creator and the bearer of tradition, but individual expressions are "censored" by the norms of the collective and will not become a *folklore fact* until the collective accepts it. Historical origin of a folklore fact is not essential – important is its function in social life.

Functional structuralism found its application in several works of Slovak ethnographers, which were published in the 1940s and addressed such aspects of tradition as the wedding ceremony (Melicherčík, 1946) or folk dress (Kovačevičová-Žuffová, 1946; 1947). However, the onset of the communist regime

in Czechoslovakia in 1948 brought the promotion of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism in the social sciences and humanities. At the first national ethnographic conference in Prague in 1949, which defined the tasks of Czechoslovak ethnography, participants were instructed that they must follow the model of the Soviet science; the theses of the Soviet ethnographic school became the imperative for Czech and Slovak ethnographers (Petráňová, 2000, p. 308). In the Soviet Union, Bogatyriov's method, together with other non-Marxist conceptions of Russian folklorists and ethnographers, fell into the category of bourgeois theories (Sokolova, 1948; Alymov, 2009; Toporkov, 2011). This had important consequences for the followers of functional structuralism in Slovakia. In the 1950s the Marxist approach became a dominant framework for the interpretation of folk culture and functional structuralism was severely criticized as a "harmful bourgeois influence" (Melicherčík, 1950, p. 20; see also Melicherčík, 1952a).

Folk culture and the class struggle

It has been noted that although Marxism-Leninism was based on Karl Marx's theory, it was not a theoretical platform, but an ideology created by Stalin and used by the Stalinist bureaucratic apparatus for its own ends (Lisichkin, 1989; Butenko, 1996). In Soviet ethnography and social sciences, it meant introduction of Marxist terms and elimination of theories that were uncomfortable for the political regime (Slezkin, 1993; Solovey, 2001). The Soviet ethnographic school deeply influenced the development of ethnography in Slovakia during the post-war period. Magical beliefs and practices have henceforth been interpreted in terms of the stages of the historical development of social formations. In this, the evolutionist concept of survivals passed from previous ethnographic works to new ideological rhetoric without any problems. While religion came to be an instrument of oppression and exploitation, magic was considered as a survival of beliefs characteristic of early (egalitarian) societies. Both religion and magic were to gradually disappear from life of "progressive" nations, but their division made it possible to examine supernatural folk beliefs and practices separately from the religious context. They have become the object of folklorists' and ethnographers' inquiry as superstitions (*povery*) (see, for instance, Horváthová, 1975; Ratica, 1981; Michálek, 1991). On the other hand, the role of religion in socialist society (where exploitation should have had no place) was to become negligible. As an object of research, it passed to history and practically disappeared from ethnographic studies on contemporary folk culture.

At the same time, the meaning of the word "folk", which was an adjective of any traditional phenomenon, had changed ideologically. In older works, this

term referred to the nation (romantic perspective), but also to the lack of knowledge resulting in survival of supernatural beliefs (evolutionist perspective). In the socialist context, folk became an oppressed class that led struggle against richer classes and their representatives, including religious figures. Folk tradition reflected this struggle, albeit to an unequal extent. The "most progressive" part of folk oral tradition was legends about outlaw figures, in which the class struggle was manifested most explicitly. Outlaws were heroes whose images reflected the level of awareness of folk and the collective effort to improve people's lives (Melicherčík, 1952b; Hlôšková, 2018). Supernatural folk tales and magic, on the other hand, fell into two overlapping categories: superstitions (referring to the genre of demonic tales in oral tradition and to magical practices in folk customs); and folk medicine. The latter included not only "irrational" (magical) treatment, but also "rational" (natural) remedies.

Such interpretation is exemplified by Rudolf Bednárik's synthetic work *Folk healing in Slovakia* (*Ľudová liečba na Slovensku, 1954*). In the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, folk is presented here as an oppressed class fighting for their liberation. Bednárik considers science and religion as "two incompatible worldviews" (Bednárik, 1954, p. 7), but at the same time criticizes the "bourgeois science", which perceives folk medicine only as a manifestation of backwardness. He emphasizes the "progressiveness of the folk":

> Today, in the research of folk healing, we look for just those rational elements that have been verified; those that helped people to be successfully cured; those that included medications from the natural environment, without the intervention of science. Even the medical science uses this source today. Folk medicines, especially herbs, today are massively gathered. And it is folk who gathers them. Revealing this progressive side of folk, revealing folk healers' skills and knowledge supports our building efforts. It is true that we cannot neglect magic: it illustrates the general living conditions of folk – economic, social, and spiritual... Today, as a result of the systematic edification, folk transfers trust in magic… to medical doctors and medicaments. In short, people believe in science, not in the superstition! And that is a manifestation of the progress of socialism! (Bednárik, 1954, pp. 7-8).

Like previous ethnographers, Bednárik distinguishes between the "real/ rational" causes of diseases corresponding to the scientific medical knowledge and the "imagined" ones – that is, witchcraft. However, even the latter reflects the class struggle:

> ... the class struggle was also a struggle for personal freedom, "where one could better breathe", it was a struggle for better living conditions. It was a struggle for health, for getting rid of dependence. Folk often considered the material and personal dependence to be the direct cause of illness, and rightly so. No wonder that people turned magic against their feudal lords and tried to harm them. They sent diseases to the feudal lords through cursing and charms. ... Here, too, we see that the class struggle used various means

> to achieve its purpose. Witchcraft was thus a means of the class struggle (Bednárik, 1954, p. 27).

Bednárik's classification of folk healers is based on the rational/irrational distinction, but also on the type of expertise (midwives, herbalists, shepherds, etc.). Folk healers, who mostly use magical means, are classified into further categories. They include contemporary terms which I replicate here after the author in the plural form: *chýrne ženy a chlapi* (renowned women and men), *božci* and *bohyne* (masculine and feminine nouns derived from a verb *bohovať*, to pray), *bosorky* and *strigy* (feminine nouns referring to witches), *baby* (old women), *veštice* (a feminine noun meaning "seers") and *vedomkyne* (a feminine noun derived from the verb *vedieť*, to know) as well as the terms borrowed from historical sources – *vračari*, *volchvi* and *čarodeji* (masculine nouns referring to sorcerers or wizards). Here, too, Bednárik tries to present folk, including magical healers, in a positive light – he calls their practice "rational-magical" and emphasizes their important position in people's life. He describes *čarodeji* (sorcerers) as "the first folk physicians" and contrasts them with the Christian priests who exploited people:

> Here it is necessary to distinguish between sorcerers, who grew up from folk and were connected with their original religious beliefs, and priests, who represented the Christian view. ... Sorcerers were representatives of the old religion and the old verified healing practices. They were an important factor in the fight against Christianity (Bednárik, 1954, p. 17).

Overall, Bednárik stresses ethnographers' active role and their practical task: they must focus on those manifestations of folk culture that reveal people's skills, their initiative and rationality, because these qualities help to build socialism. At the same time, ethnographers must do theoretical work rooted in the historical Marxist-Leninist approach – they must underline "the developmental stages and the aspects of the class struggle" (Bednárik, 1954, p. 61).

Although the next generations of Slovak ethnologists did not to such degree emphasize the active role of ethnographers in eradicating superstitions, they continued to consider supernatural folk tales and magic in accordance with the scheme corresponding to the idea of the developmental stages. I would call this scheme "no longer exists" – "still exists": superstitions should gradually disappear; in some places, they no longer exist, but in other places they still exist (see, for instance, Horváthová, 1974; 1975; Leščák & Sirovátka, 1982; Chorváthová, 1995; Kiliánová, 2000). In a way, Marxism-Leninism "conserved" the evolutionist notion of survivals. Even in the 1990s, superstitions were defined in Slovak ethnology and folkloristics as "a traditionally fixed inaccurate designation for the sum of pre-Christian beliefs and practices surviving in folk religion on the basis of faith" (Chorváthová, 1995, p. 68). The only exception to this line of argument during the socialist period was a study, in which Mária Kosová addressed local witchcraft beliefs and a corresponding magical practice.

Structure and meaning

In the article *The magical killing of an adversary at distance* (*Magické usmrcovanie protivníka na diaľku*, 1973) Kosová presents the results of ethnographic research, which she carried out in northern Slovakia in 1947 – 1948, before the onset of the communist regime, at the time when Slovak ethnography was oriented toward functional structuralism. In her interpretation of the ethnographic data, she incorporates the structuralist ideas that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. It is probable, however, that the basis of this text originated at the time of the field research, but could not be published after 1948 – not only because it presents a non-Marxist interpretation of folk culture, but also because the author's life circumstances made it impossible to publish academic works. Due to the political change of 1948, in the 1950s the researcher's family was expelled from Bratislava, and Kosová had to leave the academy, where she did not return until 1968 (Hlôšková, 2006, p. 23). In the 1970s, structuralism in Slovakia again became a legitimate intellectual trend, despite a theoretical discrepancy with the official Marxist orientation of ethnography. This development corresponded to the emergence of the so-called Soviet structuralism in the 1960s.[7]

In this article, Kosová analyses a magical practice called *morenie* that she observed in the villages of Veľké Rovné and Kolárovice in Kysuce, a mountainous area of northern Slovakia. Under difficult economic conditions, which forced men to go to find work in the outside world, in the environment where most women were in need of men, there was a local belief that every woman had a man who was destined for her (*osúdenec*). Thus, a woman felt entitled to fight for her "destined" man even if he was married to someone else. This fight was done through magical means, with the help of a local expert on magic and folk healing – a *vedomkyňa*, also called a "wise grandma". To help a woman to kill her rival – a wife of a "destined" man – *vedomkyňa* made a doll out of straw and named it after a victim. Then she was sticking a needle into the figure and asked questions, such as: "Who fell ill?", "To whom is the priest going?",

[7] The Soviet version of structuralism had been developing in the USSR since the early 1960s and was the only direction in the humanities that openly proclaimed a non-Marxist (but not an anti-Marxist) perspective. The terms structure, system, semiotics, and function used by Bogatyriov and members of the PLK had once again become part of the study of folklore and literature, even though the representatives of the official literary science rejected them. In the 1960s, the structuralist approach was applied mainly in linguistics and to a lesser extent in the study of mythology, folklore and literature. In the study of supernatural folk tales and magical practices it was applied within the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School that was formed in 1964 and led by Juri Lotman (see, for example, Ivanov, & Toporov, 1965; 1974). Soviet structuralists elaborated on the ideas presented by Bogatyriov in the 1920s and 1930s: the use of structural and functional linguistics in the analysis of mythology, folklore and art; and implementation of both synchronic and diachronic analyses (Toporkov, 2011, pp. 145-146).

"Who died?", and so on. The woman who sought help was supposed to reply by the name of the victim. The doll was treated as a sick person, then as a dying person and finally, as a buried person. It was believed that the victim would feel what was happening to the representative object and would eventually die (Kosová 1973, pp. 514-515).

Kosová argues that the magical killing of an adversary at distance is a universal practice of imitative magic that appears at different times and in different cultures. To explain it, it is necessary to pay attention to the relation between a sign and its meaning – that is, to use the semiotic approach. A notable aspect of her argument is that she seeks to place the interpretation of cultural phenomena in the overall structure of interconnected sciences. She assumes that the perspective of semiology should be used in the ethnological analysis, because in linguistics it has reached the level of natural sciences. Thus, semiology can bring to ethnology a new logic of interpretation:

> The cultural communities are most significantly distinguished from animals by one fact – the position of the language and creation of meaning in the cultural system; and that requires a different logic of interpretation (Kosová, 1973, p. 514).

Kosová starts with a synchronic analysis of a local magical practice and continues with a diachronic analysis of relevant magical practices from different cultures dated by different time periods. She understands the act of magical killing at distance:

> As a sign which together with other signs create a system; a specific process of symbolic killing in a concrete environment and at a concrete time takes place within this system. ... The task of the researcher is not to focus on the form or "content" of the sign, but to highlight the continuous dynamic relationship between the two components of the sign (represented and representing), the process that connects them, the denotation (ascribing significance), the creation of meaning, through which a human being, "homo significans", makes sense of things (Kosová, 1973, pp. 516-517).

After a detailed analysis, Kosová concludes that the magical killing of an adversary at distance is a universal scheme that includes certain types of actors (executor, client, helper and victim), who are connected by the relations of conjunction and disjunction and have certain functions in the commutative chain that expresses the intention. In different cultures these abstract categories are filled with specific content – for example, executors could be sorcerers, healers, scientists, etc. (Kosová, 1973, p. 529).

Importantly, Kosová perceives the formal analysis as a means to understand the effectiveness of magic in a particular social and cultural environment. During her research, she encountered a "deeply rooted belief" that the magical killing actually works – as soon as a woman suddenly begins to feel bad, she

attributes her condition to *morenie*. Kosová states that she witnessed a woman who even had to be hospitalized as a psychiatric patient because she believed that she became a victim of *morenie*. Her conviction was supported by silence of people around:

> Many of them were resorting to the traditional knowledge and "experience", which confirmed that a woman who was a victim of *morenie* had to surrender to this powerful spell. And since the physical existence of the afflicted could not resist the social decision based on the tradition, her mind succumbed to the idea of a strong curse directed against her. This case confirmed the well-known fact that the effect of magic implies belief in magic (Kosová, 1973, pp. 515-516).

Kosová here argues similarly to Claude Lévi-Strauss, who addressed the effectiveness of symbols in his early studies *The Sorcerer and His Magic* (1949) and *The Effectiveness of Symbolism* (1949), which were later included in *Structural Anthropology* (1963). Lévi-Strauss considers a question: why a shared system of beliefs has an impact on human health? He argues that if a person is convinced that they are enchanted and that is confirmed by the whole community, this belief would directly affect physiological processes because "physical integrity cannot withstand the dissolution of the social personality" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 168). Symbols and myths play a central role in the effecttiveness of magical practices. Just as the disease can be caused by the belief in magical harm, so the success of symbolic healing is guaranteed by the fact that both patients and the whole community believe in healer's power:

> The cure would consist, therefore, in making explicit a situation originally existing on the emotional level and in rendering acceptable to the mind pains which the body refuses to tolerate. That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to an objective reality does not matter. The sick woman believes in the myth and belongs to a society which believes in it. The tutelary spirits and malevolent spirits, the supernatural monsters and magical animals, are all part of a coherent system on which the native conception of the universe is founded. The sick woman accepts these mythical beings or, more accurately, she has never questioned their existence (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 197).

In the case described by Kosová, such a shared system of beliefs is what previous ethnographic works call "folk culture". However, Kosová does not operate by the concepts of folk culture or folk – rather, she puts an emphasis on the notion of tradition as a system of knowledge that explains the world. She concludes that the efficiency of people's beliefs depends on the meaning ascribed to the given idea in the given environment, and this meaning is produced by tradition. At the same time, although magical practices aimed to kill an adversary at distance and their meanings in different cultures are specific, the creation of meaning is subject to the universal underlying scheme. Every

cultural phenomenon, like an element of language, is part of a structure and the task of ethnographers is to identify this structure which is a product of the human mind and collective life. Therefore, the semiological analysis of an individual phenomenon reveals social relations and the universal psychological mechanisms.

Kosová thus follows up on the perspective of structuralism with its emphasis on the human mind as well as on the functional structuralism addressing the social functions of folklore phenomena. Needless to say, her argument did not agree with the perspective of Marxism-Leninism and the corresponding interpretation of folk culture. It was probably the reason why her work remained a singular structural explanation of magical beliefs and practices in Slovak ethnology during the socialist period.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to demonstrate that in Slovak ethnography and folkloristics the explanation of supernatural folk tales and practices reflected the development of these disciplines in terms of theoretical thinking as well as specific historical conditions in which academic works emerged. I considered selected studies corresponding to four political bodies to which the territory of today's Slovakia belonged: the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867 – 1918), the Czechoslovak Republic (1918 – 1939), the Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945), and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1948 – 1989). These works point to the main ideas of the theoretical perspectives that were dominant at these time periods in the folklore studies: the mythological school, the evolutionist interpretation, the structuralist trend, and the Soviet school of ethnography, based on the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Among them, the structuralist approach appears first in the 1930 – 1940s and then again in the 1970s in a singular study.

All these directions developed in concrete political conditions. The mythological school with its focus on origins of language and oral tradition was a leading trend in the time of national revival and self-identification of Slovak nation; evolutionist perspective was useful in the rationalist interpretation of folk culture, which was vital during formation of the science and national scientific institutions; the use of structuralist ideas in folklore studies matched the progress in linguistics; and the supremacy of Marxism-Leninism in social sciences and humanities was a direct result of the onset of political dominance of the Soviet Union in the post-war period.

The application of structuralist ideas is of particular interest, if we compare the development of this trend in Slovakia with western scientific traditions. In the study of folk tales and magic structuralism did not become a mainstream trend, as it happened in western anthropology during the post-war period. While

in the West structuralist interpretations of myths and magic influenced formation of such important schools of thought as symbolic anthropology and cognitive anthropology, in Slovak ethnology until the end of the twentieth century magical beliefs and practices have been mainly interpreted as survivals, in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist perspective. Folk tales and customs were meticulously described and classified, but their theoretical explanation in relation to other cultural phenomena did not develop, with an exception of one study that I analysed above.

To conclude, the investigation of theoretical development could not be sufficient without considering social and political conditions, in which this development takes place. In this, various fields of study are influenced by political scene in different ways. Myths, religion and magic have been important areas of investigation in the social sciences and humanities; and their scholarly interpretations in concrete political contexts can illustrate both theoretical advance and political processes.

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