

BARBARA IVANČIČ KUTIN
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KRIVOPETE

Wild women with backward-facing feet in Slovenian folklore

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The author of this monograph, Barbara Ivančič Kutin, is a member of the academic staff of the Institute for Slovenian Ethnography of the Science and Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Slovenian oraltradition stands at the centre of her research, in particular folk prose in Slovenia and among Slovenians outside the state borders of Slovenia. She is the author of the monographs “*Slovar bovškega govora*” [Dictionary of the dialect of the town of Bovec], 2007, “*Živa pripoved v zapisu*” [Live narration in records], 2011 and over 180 further scholarly and academic articles.

The unique Slovenian folklore heritage about *krivopete*, wild women with backward-facing feet is limited to a narrow geographical area. These beings are only known in the north-western border area of the Slovenian – and also Slavonic – ethnic lands, on the territory alongside the Slovenian-Italian state border (specifically in the Veneto region, where the Slovenian minority in Italy lives, on the Slovenian side of the border in the territory of the region of Livško, Breginjski kot and Trenta). It is this geographical delimitation of the *krivopete* which was one of reasons why these mythical beings had not been the subject of more in-depth analysis by folklore scholars until the publication of this monograph.

The author has divided the monograph into nine chapters, where the chapters one to seven (pp. 13-89) constitute the core, or the theoretical part of the book, the eighth chapter (pp. 91-142) being the part containing the material of the monograph, providing 150 units of narration and fragments on which the analyses are based. The literary folklore heritage about *krivopete* is presented in this monograph from various aspects. Ethnographic and folklore analyses are foregrounded, complemented by a presentation of the literary heritage from the point of view of the integration of these beings in physical space (microtoponyms), a linguistic analysis of the variety of names for *krivopete* and a reflection on the presence of these beings in contemporary culture.

In her cultural history and socio-demographic outline (the annexation of the Veneto to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, the poor economic situation at the end of the 19th century and the mass emigration of the population, the First World War, the systematic Italianisation of Slovenian proper names and geographical names, the abolition of Slovenian schools, the closure of the border between Slovenia – as part of Yugoslavia – and Italy, the destructive earthquake of 1976, up to the establishment of a bilingual school in the village of Špeter in the Veneto in 1984 and the passing of an act acknowledging the existence of the Slovenian minority in Italy in 2001), the author stresses the fact that the changes over the last 150 years had a decisive influence on the use of the Slovenian language and subsequently on Slovenian literary heritage on the territory where *krivopete* are present in the folklore tradition.

Based on their physical (with the exception of backward-facing feet) and characteristic features which overlap with their related female (sometimes even male) figures from the category of “wild people”, the author analyses the *krivopete* as part of the group of wild women and fairies.

She also takes an interest in similar anthropomorphic mythological beings with backward-facing feet in other folk heritages in Europe (the eastern part of the Pennine Alps, Piedmont, the valley of Aosta) and around the world (Himalayas, Nepal, Philippines, Armenia, Africa). She emphasises that a particularly rich heritage associated with beings who have deformed feet can also be found in the ethnic groups of Central and South America (for example, the beings of *masisikiri*, *chinigua*, *siguanaba*, *ciguapa*, *sisimite*). In relation to the universal symbolism of backward-facing feet, the author mentions that researchers (Thomas Crawford Cree, Ramon Sarró, Claude Lecouteux, Ljubinko Radenković, Monika Kropelj Telban, Svetlana M. Tolstaja, Charles Stewart, Niko Kuret) usually state that such a deformation of the feet is a feature differentiating the human and the mythical.

In her chronological overview of material concerning *krivopete*, in which she refers to the dynamics of records made over time, analyses archive material and publications from the 19th century while stating that *krivopete* were first mentioned in the 18th century by the botanist Karel Zois who was researching

plants in the Alps. The first verified and documented mention of *krivopete* dates from 1873, in the materials of the linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay who studied Slavonic languages and dialects in the last third of the 19th century. The Catholic priest Ivan Trinko, who tried to preserve the endangered linguistic and cultural heritage of Slovenians in Italy by writing an article in 1884 about the fact that references to *krivopete* were unique and special, played an even more important role in spreading knowledge about *krivopete*. Other authors, such as Simon Rutar, Anton von Mailly, Milko Matičetov, Marija Jagodic, Vlado Pipan, Janez Dolenc, Svetka Zorč, Andreina Ciceri and Ada Tomasetig also wrote about them.

Following an analysis of content and motifs, the author ascertained that the main motif which is always repeated, almost without exception, in the materials is the backward-facing feet of the *krivopete*. According to her, many other descriptions of their physical characteristics and their character are scattered in the materials (for example goodness, the willingness to help, wisdom, beauty, anger, ghastliness, ugliness). The characteristics are often opposites, which points to the ambivalence of this being. According to the author, all variants highlight the wisdom of the *krivopete*; in some records, their clothing and enthusiasm for dancing and singing are also described. In other records, the motif of cannibalism also appears. However, this sign of cruelty often disappears as time passes and where it is potentially present, it remains with the function of an educational regulation of children's behaviour (*krivopete* as beings who eat up disobedient children). Based on their central motifs, the author has divided the material into eight groups: a) the terrifying nature of the *krivopete* (kidnapping, revengefulness, cannibalism); b) human fear and the subsequent cruel relationship between people and *krivopete*; c) a captured *krivopeta* teaches people things which they do not yet know; d) the kindness of the *krivopeta*; e) the *krivopeta* marries a human; f) *krivopeta* as a Fate; g) the *krivopeta* as the possessor of riches; h) rarer motifs (*krivopete* as healers, *krivopete* in the context of customs and superstitions). According to the author's findings, the motifs changed in the course of time; in the nineteenth century, their negative properties in particular were highlighted, and their more delicate features later on. The author also mentions an interesting difference relating to the motif of the captive *krivopeta* who teaches people in the Veneto region to make cheese, curd cheese and butter, but in the north-western area of Slovenia, specifically in Trenta, this knowledge is not passed on to people by a *krivopeta* but by a wild man.

Barbara Ivančič Kutin mentions that on both sides of the Slovenian-Italian border *krivopete* do live near people, but are also distant from them by the fact that they live in dangerous and inaccessible places, and always without male individuals. She emphasises the fact that the tradition of *krivopete* is part of the cultural (perhaps even a remnant of a mythical) land, as shown by the toponyms and microtoponyms with the semantic root of *krivopeta* (Krivopeta cave,

Krivopekina cave, Krivopeta stream). In her monograph, she writes in detail of the sites associated with this tradition (sites where these beings might appear, or live), and these sites on the Slovenian territory are also marked on a map. The table indicating the dwelling sites of *krivopete* on the Italian side of the border is also very clear; this concerns 42 sites, eight of which are microtoponyms with the semantic root of *krivopeta*.

The Slovenian language is highly differentiated in terms of dialects; seven groups of dialects are known, which include 48 dialects and subdialects. This variety is also demonstrated in the example of names for the *krivopete*. On a relatively small geographical area of the north-western Slovenian ethnic territory, the author found 22 variants of the name given to the *krivopete*. Certain forms differ only phonetically, but others also have other word-formative roots. The greatest number of names relate to their most marked bodily feature: backward-facing feet. They include the most names based on the word-formative roots “*kriv*” and “*pet*” (for example *krivopeta*, *krivapeta*, *kriva peta*, *krivjopeta*, *krivopetnica*, *karjupeta*, *krevjapeta*, *krivepeka*, *predopetnica*, *patanoga*). The author also found words in the material which refer to their way of life, to their knowledge or which highlight their physical or moral characteristics (*bradvika* – they advised how peasants should tie the vine known as *bradvika*; *dujepetka* – wild woman; *častitjove* – a respectable woman; *skarbababa* – toothless witch). All the names for these beings are discussed by the author with the aid of a linguistic map recording their geographical occurrence.

According to Barbara Ivančič Kutin, in its primary form (folk narrative) the tradition is rare at present, but is transformed into other forms, meaning that unlike the 20th century, when *krivopete* had almost been forgotten, today they are experiencing a new flowering and becoming a symbol of local identity. At present, they are part of artistic expression (illustrations, painting, sculpture), literary work (the reinterpretation of the tradition in contemporary poetry and prose), theatre (theatre and puppet theatre performances) and music. Their name and figure appear more and more frequently in tourism and other activities (tourist trails, thematic excursions, gastronomy, souvenirs); they are also present in education (school projects, collections of written material). In relation to this, the author raises the question of whether the transformations in contemporary culture are folklore or folklorism.

In the materials part of her book, the author has included 150 units of narrative, or their fragments. These are texts dating from 1873 to 2018. The material was obtained from archive sources, field research and other publications. Only two excerpts come from literary texts. The texts are numbered, marked with a subtitle and each unit also contains information on the informants and recorders, and information on the source. The texts differ according to the type of transcription and quality of the record; one of the reasons for this variety is the professional focus of each of the recorders in particular.

The largest number of units were noted by Ada Tomasetig, a recorder who collected materials about *krivopete* over the course of thirty years among Slovenians in Italy. In the monograph, this material is also enriched with illustrations by Slavica Mlekuž, Dana Ivančič and Irena Kenda, showing depictions of *krivopete*.

Barbara Ivančič Kutin's monograph brings together in one place basic information on the wild women with backward-facing feet who were on the one hand a symbol of local identity due to their narrow geographical limits in the past, but on the other hand a symbol of national identity among Slovenians in Italy. As a result of the high-quality and wide-ranging academic analysis of this hitherto unstudied material in Slovenian folklore which the author has presented in this monograph, we can confirm that the *krivopete* have moved beyond their local dimension and found a path to the global map of similar mythical beings around the world.

Saša Vojtechová Poklač

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