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### SLAV BELIEFS ON CHANGELINGS \*

*Abstract:* Beliefs and legends that certain mythological creatures – fairies, witches, the devil, (vile, *veštice*, *đavo*, *boginka*, *mamuna*, *baenik*, *domovoj*, *leshi*) etc. can take away the child from the mother and exchange it for its own in the image of the abducted child, are widespread with the West and East Slavs, while with the South Slavs they are found only in the northern parts, in Pannonia. Such demonic child is most often called: *podmeče* (with the Serbs), *podvršće* (with the Croats), *podmenek* (with the Slovenians), *odmienjec* (with the Poles), *одминок* (with the Ukrainians), *обмен* (with the Russians), etc. According to the folk beliefs, a changeling differs from the other children by its sluggish growth, voraciousness, and persistent desire to harm or spite other members of the household. Slav legends mention the ways of stealing the human and planting the demonic child (a), recognizing the demonic child (b), and disposing of it and restoring the rightful child (c). In order to prevent the demon from exchanging her child, the mother must observe certain rules of conduct during pregnancy and in the 40 days following the childbirth. Certain measures of magical protection are also undertaken, as: placing sharp iron objects near the nursing woman, then brooms, leaving the candle to burn all night, burning frankincense in her presence, sprinkling her with holy water, etc. The legends on changelings were most probably adopted by the Slavs from the neighboring western peoples (Germans), and included in the already present beliefs that the birth of a child is a gift from the other world, and that the mother must take great care of the gift and be grateful for it. Otherwise, the one bestowing the gift may take it away as well.

The beliefs and legends that a mythological creature may take away the child of the careless mother and exchange it for its own, are widespread with the East and West Slavs, while with the South Slavs they can be found mostly

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in northern parts, and parts of Pannonia (Kaernten (Koruška), Prekomurje, Podravlje, Slavonia, south Banat). According to the available documents, the southernmost point in the Balkans where such beliefs are documented is in Bosnia (Zupca near Breza, north of Sarajevo). Taking into consideration that the said place in Bosnia is in the mining area, where there are settlers from other places, it can be assumed that such beliefs on changelings may have been introduced from more northern areas, or from Austria (mining administrators).

With the Serbs, a changeling is called *подмече* (Here in Banat, Northern Zlatica); with the Croats *podmeće* (Otok in Slavonia), *podvršće* (Podravlje Croats in Hungary), *mali veštac* (Potnjani near Djakovo, Slavonia); with the Slovenians – *podmenek* (Mezniska Valley, Prekomurje), *podvrženo dete* (Kaernten), *podmeno dete* (Prekomurje); with the Poles – *odmienec*; with the Ukrainians – *одминок* (Usicki County), *видминник* (Proskurovski County); with the Russians – *обмен*, *обменёк*, *обменённый*, *обменёнок*, *обменёныш*, *обменок*, *оммен*, *омменыш*, *лешачёнок*, *чертёнок* (mostly in the Russian north).

According to the beliefs held by the Serbs, the child is planted by fairies – *vile* (Orlovac in Slavonia; Zupca near Breza in Bosnia), the devil – *đavo* (Here in Banat, north Zlatica); with the Croats, fairies – *vile* (Otok in Slavonia), witches – *veštice* (Potnjani near Djakovo, Slavonia), *coprnica* (Croats from Podravlje in Hungary); with the Slovenians – *škopnjak* (Mezniska Valley, Prekomurje; Kaernten), the devil – *vrag* (Prekomurje); with the Poles – *boginka*, *matina*, *satanica* (it is most often the same creature); with the Ukrainians – *богиня* (*чертовка*) (Proskurovski County), *повітруля*, *лісова відьма* (the Carpathian Mountains), *черт*; with the Russians *баенник*, (*баянник*), *банница*, *домовой* (*гуменник*, *дворовой*, *овинник*, *ригачник*), *леший*, *лешачиха*, *обмениха*, *обдериha*, *дьявол*, *черт*, *вещица* (*ведьма*).

A changeling can be recognized by its sluggish growth; it is constantly restless, cries a great deal, sleeps badly, it is ill-behaved, and insatiable. Most often it is said to have a large (or a very small) head, a big belly, thin arms and legs, a body covered in hair, and it is slow at starting to talk and walk (cf. Baranowski 1981:142; Bošković-Stulli 1997:399–400, Власова 1998:364; Криничная 2001:202–203; Максимов 1996:13; Новичкова 1995: 445–446; Рејка, 142; Franković 1990:29–32; Чубинський 1995:197–198). The Serbs also say that “it looks oddly”, that it is “craving” (Filipović 1958:281), “of unhealthy color”, “with no bones”, (Fabijanić-Kajmaković 1973:155); with the Ukrainians it is said that it has large ears and growing horns (Чубинський 1995:196); with the Russians it is said that its head is drawn out like in a fish, and that it has big eyes (Криничная 2001:66); with the Croats it is said that “it knows what everybody is saying and then it laughs weirdly, and it

is repulsive, old, hairy” (Bošković-Stulli 1997:399), etc. According to the beliefs in the Russian north, when a mythological creature steals a child from the mother, it plants the double in the same image, made of aspen stump, log or of broomstick made of stripped twigs (Власова 1998:364; Криничная 2001: 66). The changeling does not live for long (the Russians believe that it lives up to 15 years).

The largest number of legends concerning changelings has a three-part structure, consisting of the following elements: a) the stealing of human and planting the demon child; b) recognition of the changeling; c) disposing of the changeling and the return of the rightful child.

#### *Stealing a human and planting a demon child*

According to general beliefs, a mythological creature may exchange the child of a mother disobeying some of the rules of conduct during pregnancy or during the first 40 days following childbirth. It is most often that the exchange happens if mother *goes away from* her unbaptized child and leaves it alone and without anything to protect it – goes to fetch some water (Криничная 2001:66), works in the field and leaves the child on the boundary (Peška 1987:149), gathers fruit in the wood and leaves the child under a tree (Baranowski 1981:138), goes out of the house and leaves the child in the crib (Franković 1990:29). According to the beliefs of the Poles, the *tamunas* tempt the nursing mother into leaving the house and abandoning her child by creating the delusion that songs and music can be heard from the village inn (Baranowski 1981:136–137).

A child can be substituted as well in case its mother *cursed* it, e.g. if she says: “Хоть бы леший тебя унес!” (“May the *leshi* take you”) (Максимов 1996:13), or “Хоть бы баянник взял тебя!” (“May the *banyik* take you!”) (Криничная 2001/1:66). With the Slovenians, the devil exchanged the child of a mother whose husband cursed her while she was pregnant (Kelemina 1997:136).

Other reasons for exchanging children are mentioned as well. With the Russians, this may happen if no one makes a sign of the cross over the child, or if no one blesses it when it sneezes, or if someone yawns in the steam bath when the nursing woman is present (Максимов 1996:13). With the Poles it is believed that *boginka-tamunas* exchange the children of mothers who are not pious enough, and fail to have their children baptized, and to observe other church rites (Peška 1987:150). The *boginkas*, according to what the Poles believe, could even exchange unborn babies. In the night, they would come stealthily into the house, and take the child from the sleeping pregnant woman’s womb, and put theirs instead of it (Baranowski

1981:136–137). According to a folktale from Poland, in the small hours of the night a *mamuna* burst into the house in the form of a woman, and tried to grab the child from the appalled mother's arms. The mother succeeded in driving it away by prayer (Baranowski 1981:137).

From the beliefs and legends stems the conviction that creatures from the other side constantly follow the puerperal woman, and that they are always ready to punish her. According to the belief of the Slovenians from Kaernten, a fiend (*škopnjak*) sits on the roof of the house every night and it is always ready to enter the house through the chimney, take the child and plant its own (Zablatnik 1982:22). By the tales of the Russians from the Russian north, as soon as the mother said some curse words to her infant child, from above the house was heard a terrible gushing wind, and an evil spirit came down into the house and took the child from the mother, and planted its own (Черепанова 1983:50). According to an account from Poland, in case a nursing woman is left alone in the steam bath and the midwife on leaving her fails to make a sign of the cross for all the four corners of the bath, an evil spirit in the form of gushing wind may also come down from the roof and exchange the child (Максимов 1996:13).

#### *Recognizing the changeling*

According to the beliefs, a changeling is difficult to recognize because it has the same features as the stolen child. Besides, it is cunning, and successfully hides its demonic nature. That is why people can find out only by chance that it is not their offspring, or they may place him in a situation that would make it reveal itself. According to the accounts from Poland, the woman of the house by some chance failed to fall asleep, and saw the child get up in the middle of the night, go to the larder, take a box of rat poison, and throw a bit of the poison into the milk pitcher. The woman realized that the child they were taking care of was not theirs, but a changeling, and that it was secretly poisoning the whole family (Baranowski 1981:140–141). According to the tale from Russia at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, an old man, lying on the furnace, saw a child come out of the cradle and walk around the house, eating voraciously all the food it could find. But there was a knock on the door, and the child jumped back into the cradle, and looking at the old man, threatened him by waiving its finger at him (Новичкова 1995:446).

In some tales the parents realize that their child was a changeling by witnessing its dialogue with the other demon, on the way from the house to the church or some other place. At that time they talk to each other as if they were friends from long ago, and they address each other by their first names. So, as the Ukrainians (Usicki County) report, a woman, coming back from

the church and carrying a changeling with its horns growing, heard a voice on the road from near a large stone: “Имберес! Где ты был?” (“Imberes! Where have you been?”). The changeling answered: “У бабы” (“With the woman”). The demons went on with their conversation: “Что ты там делал?” (“What have you been doing there?”) “Ел и пил” (“Ate and drank”). A woman who was following the mother with the child, told her to throw it to the devil, since it was not her child (Чубинський 1995:196).

In some legends, when parents bring the changeling close to some body of water, it answers to the demon, which leads the parents to throw it into the water. According to the accounts of the Croats from Hungary (Podravlje), people brought a child not being able to walk or talk to the church (to St. Antun). When they came near the canal, a voice was heard: “Пуклић Шимена, кам тебе носакajo?” (“Puklic Simena, where are they taking you?”) “Мене носакajo светим Анталару нек ја знам одакат, говоракат, а ја, боме, нећу” (“They are taking me to St. Antun so that I can learn to walk and talk, but I don’t want to”), answered the *podvršće* (changeling). The people threw it in the water right away, and back in the house they found their own child (Franković 1990:29). A similar story was recounted by Martin Luther: parents from Halberstadt were taking a changeling to Hockelstadt in order to pray before a miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary. When they were crossing the river, a sound was heard, generally used to call the birds: “Hilero!” The child from the basket answered: “Hoho!” “Where to?” asked the voice from the water. “They are taking me to Hockelstadt, so I could grow faster!” On hearing this conversation, the father threw the basket with the child into the river, and the laughter of both demons was heard from below the water (Махов 1998:102). According to the accounts of the Croats from Slavonia (Potnjani near Djakovo), the parents, talked into it by a fortuneteller, were taking a changeling in the cart to throw him into the river from the bridge near Beli Manastir. When they were near their destination, from under the bridge a voice was heard: “Kuglin!” The child answered: “Oh, Vuhin, is that you?”. On hearing the voices, the exasperated father, with a curse, threw the child into the river (Bošković-Stulli 1997:399–400).

In order to recognize whether their offspring is actually a changeling, it was laid on the peel or a shovel and for a moment placed in a red-hot bread baking oven (Vanat, Филиповић 1958:281), into the bread baking oven behind the breads (Otok in Slavonia, Lovretić 1902:138), brought before a red-hot oven and told that it would be thrown into the oven if it was not theirs (Prekmurje, Kūhar 1988:125; Podravlje Croats, Franković 1990:29). According to the belief, after the voiced threat (which in Prekmurje had to be repeated thrice: “Child, tell me, are you a rightful child, or not! If you don’t tell me, I’ll put you in the stove!” (“Dete, povej mi, ali si ti pravo, ali ne! Či

mi nepoveš, te notri v peč vržem!” – Kūhar 1988:125), the demonic creature would take its child and restore the rightful child to the parents .

According to some legends, on being placed into an unusual, and for it an entirely new situation, the changeling in wonderment reveals itself for what it is. In Slavonia (Potnjani near Djakovo), following the advice from a fortuneteller, a mother would break a lot of eggs, and putting the shells one into the other, she would place them around the hearth. Then she would put a child on the ground, and hide in the attic. The child, having been left alone, would get up and, in wonderment, say: “Oh, my, what many pots, there weren’t so many even when our Kurciban got married!” (Bošković-Stulli 1997:399–400). With the Croats from Podravlje in Hungary it is told how a woman had the changeling play with a small pot and a big ladle. The child was puzzled and said: “I have traveled for a hundred years, and I have never seen a ladle bigger than a pot!” (“Па веч сем сто годин прешел, па још такво несем видел да векша сокача него лонец!” – Franković 1990:29–32). In the tales of the Slovenians in Prekmurje, there is also a motif of “giving a child a bigger spoon than a pot”, but there it serves the purpose of disposing of the changeling and getting the rightful child back. That is to say, when the devil sees that its child cannot eat from the pot because the spoon is too big, it takes it away and in his place lays the stolen child (Kūhar 1988:55; Kelemina 1997:136).

#### *Disposing of the changeling and the return of the rightful child*

According to the legends, when people are sure that they are taking care of the changeling, they try to dispose of it and get back their own. With that goal in mind, they expose it to a threat, punishment, take it to the church, and sprinkle it with holy water, or they, as already mentioned, throw it into deep water. The purpose of the threats and punishment is to provoke the pity of the demonic mother (*boginka*, *татина*, *чертовка*, *враг*) who, on seeing her child suffer, takes it back and gives back the rightful child. The most often mentioned form of punishment is *switching*. According to the accounts of the Slovenians in Prekmurje, on the Virgin Mary’s day, the mother cut three green hazelnut bush branches and used them to switch the “*podmenac*”, until the *škopnjak* came and took its own child, and restored her own (Kelemina 1997:136). With the Ukrainians in the Carpathian Mountains, the mother switches the changeling at the crossroads with nine dogwood switches, until *лісова відьма* (a forest witch) comes and gives her back her child (Левкиевская 1996б:8). In the Russian north, the changeling was switched beside a burning stove (Власова 1998:366); with the Poles, mother switched *odmijenac* with birch twigs at the dunghill (Peřka 1987:150).

In several accounts, the demonic creature, on taking its own child, would scold the mother for treating it badly: “Jaz sem s tvojim otrokom tako lepo ravnal, ti si pa mojega tepla” (“I treated your child so nicely, and you beat mine) (Kelemina 1997:136); “На тебе твое. Бей свое, а не мое” (“Here is yours; beat your own, not mine”) (Левкиевская 1996б:8); “На тоби твою дитину: ты над мою збыткуешся, а я твій ниц не кажу, дивись, яка вона гарна и чиста” (“Here is your child: you beat mine, and I don’t say anything to yours, look how clean and tidy it is”) (Чубинський 1995/1:198). According to the tales from Poland (in the vicinity of Lublin), two mothers switched the changelings until *boginka* came with their children and told them: “Here, here!” (Baranowski 1981:138). In Podlasje, also in Poland, parents took the changeling to the church, where they, following the order of the priest, sprinkled it with holy water. It screamed piercingly, until the *diablica* came, took it, and returned to them their own offspring (Baranowski 1981:139).

With the East and West Slavs there are other accounts, where specific cases are reported, concerning people getting rid of the changeling. So, according to the accounts from the northwest of Russia, a traveling healer staying the night in the peasants’ house, noticed the devil stealing the child of the man of the house from the cradle, and exchanging it for a stump in the likeness of that child. The traveler succeeded in taking away the child from the devil, and hid it into the bag. In the morning, before the eyes of the parents, he took the changeling from the cradle, cut it in half and threw it into the fire, and gave back to them their own rightful living child (Криничная 2001/1:201). According to another tale, which is somewhat anecdotal, the thief, finding himself in someone else’s house, at the moment when a *leshi* was getting ready to take away the child, saved it by chance because, on hearing it sneeze, he said: “Будь счастлив на день, крещеный!” (“Bless you, you baptized one!”) (Криничная 2001/1:422). In the Ukrainian legend, a midwife taken away by force by the devil to his wife, recognizes there the child whose mother she had assisted in childbirth, and sticks the needle in his head. Since the child kept crying all the time because of that, the devil took it back to its parents. (Чубинський 1995:197)

In some Polish legends on changelings, after the parents see that it has some special abilities, they enter into some kind of partnership with it. So, according to the tale from Конопница (Vjelunjsko), the changeling tells its guardians which numbers to play on in the lottery, and in return for it they prepared the food it wanted (Baranowski 1981:141). In another case, when the parents discovered that the child they were taking care of was not theirs, it persuaded them to grant it life, and in return it would bring them money. Following that, every night it brought money, and the couple bought it vodka,

which it would drink up straight away (Baranowski 1981:140–141). After the child was gone, money earned in that way would turn into plain paper or a dog's excrements.

Folktales evolved around the motif of a changeling bringing wealth to people were derived from the legends of a household servant spirit, which is called *тасіć* with the Croats living near the sea, *мамниче* with the Bulgarians, *скжатец* with the Poles, *хованец* with the Ukrainians, and so on. (cf. Левкиевская 1996a:185–212).

In Russia as well (Vyatka Guberniya), it was thought that the *обмењонок* (changeling) was a “knowing” child, and that it possessed magical powers. It was thought that it could be of use to the family where it lived. However, after its death, it turned into a wandering dead – *жеретик*, and could not find peace until its bones had rot. (Власова 1998:365)

In Russian beliefs there is a different manner of explaining the fate of the stolen children. If the child is taken away by the *devil*, it places it in a narrow dungeon where there is no light or fire, and where it forever curses its mother for not having protected it from the abduction; the devil takes it with him, ordering it to start and spread fires; he gives it to *rusalkas* and cursed maidens to be raised by them, and eventually it turns into *rusalka* (if it is a girl), or into a *leshi* (if it is a boy) (Максимов 1996:13–14). According to other tales from Russia, stolen children are taken by the *leshi* to a cottage in the woods, and raised and brought up by forest graybeards (*лесные старики*) or fathers (*отцы*). There the children gain secret knowledge, and when they go back to the human community, they become healers and sorcerers. However, the child living with the *leshi* (a forest spirit), can gradually go wild and forget how to speak, stop wearing clothes, get covered in moss, lose shape and become invisible (Криничная 2001/1:420).

According to the account from the Vologod region in Russia, the stolen girl was seen from time to time to run around the house, dressed in a white gown and with a red belt (Черепанова 1983:50).

In German tales about water demons (and also in Slav legends from the border areas), the explanation is given about where the children exchanged by the demons come from. They are born by the maidens, deceived and abducted by the water demons, who then married them and took them into the river.

With the Russians there are also beliefs loosely associated to the subject matter here, claiming that the mother, if she could manage to stay awake for three nights in a row, alone in the church, exposed to continual threats of the dark forces, can save the soul of her stolen child. (Максимов 1996:14; Власова 1998:367). Such beliefs have similarities to apocryphal curses, where a saint (St. Sisinius, St. Theodor, etc) pursues and apprehends



the demon who has taken away (i.e. murdered) his sister's newly born baby. With the Greeks from Byzant, such a demon was called *gilu (gilo)*, and in Slav translations, it is either a *witch* or a *devil*. The issue considered here does not include the tale motif "man unknowingly makes a gift to the devil of what he does not know", i.e. his child, because he did not know that his wife was pregnant.

### *Protection from child abduction*

In order to ensure that the demon should not exchange the child of the nursing woman, various forms of magical protection were undertaken. Next to the woman in confinement some sharp metal object was left (Baranowski 1981:143–144; Черепанова 1996:37; Власова 1998:366); a candle was left to burn (Милорадович 1991:416; Власова 1998:366); the Russians put a "broom-guard" next to the doorstep or under the cradle, or a stick in the corner, and ordered it to keep watch over the puerperal woman and the infant; they burned frankincense in her presence, they sprinkled her with holy water, they would leave a bowl of water under the icon, the husband reading chants against the stealing of the newborn baby, and then they gave the woman that water to drink (Власова 1998:365–366). The Poles put consecrated herbs above or next to the bed of the woman in confinement, they put medallions with the images of the saints in the doorway and in the windows, the priest made chalk signs of the cross, they sang religious songs, they put red caps on the heads of the children, and so on (Baranowski 1981:143–144). The Croats from Podravlje in Hungary would cover a child after birth with a man's shirt, and the mother did not leave its side for seven weeks, lest it be exchanged by a *цопрница* (Franković 1990:29–32).

### *Final notes*

With the Slav peoples there is general understanding that the birth of a child is a gift from the other world, or a gift of the ancestors. When a child is born to some family, the Serbs say that they "have got a new arrival". The bestowing of a newly arrived actually depends on the goodwill of the ancestors, who may be represented in one figure – the mythical founder of the kin, the founding father. With most Slav peoples he may be present in the house in the form of the snake (the so-called *house snake*). With the Bulgarians he was called by the name of *стопан* ("patron", "husband"), and he was called upon and honored when a family or one of its members were in trouble. With the Russians, the one looking after the property and health of the family, and probably most likely after its development and growth as

well, is the *домовој*, who can share his ‘responsibilities’ or ‘competences’ with some other spirit (spirit of the yard, or of a grain shed, of the steam bath). For the woman in confinement and her child the spirit of the steam bath – *bayenyik* (*баенник*) or *bayanyik* (*баянник*) is of great importance; the steam bath is situated outside the house, and the nursing women as a rule live there with their infant for seven weeks after childbirth.

The child coming out of the mother’s womb is understood also to be the opening of the door to the other world, when, together with the child, the invisible ancestor, who has presented the family with a newborn, comes out as well. He constantly keeps watch over the way they are treating his “gift”, and if he notices that the mother, as a new member of the kin, is not worthy of being the means for further multiplication of the kin, he takes back his “gift”. In that way, the growth and development of the family is brought to a standstill, and the family, doomed to be without heirs, may even die out.

The woman in confinement and her child within the first 40 days of the birth are stalked by the souls of the ‘tainted’ dead – women who died in pregnancy or in childbirth, violently slain infants, etc, who try to murder her and her child, and in that way increase their ‘herd’ or ‘flock’ (children who died unbaptized are often imagined as birds).

Such beliefs related to childbirth, and to the dangerous spell of time for the woman in confinement, were instrumental for accepting the motif, often with an elaborate folklore structure, that a careless nursing woman may be punished not only by the death of her child, but also by it being exchanged for a demonic child in the same image. In all probability, the core storyline for such beliefs and legends spread from the Alpine (Germanic) communities to Central European ones, and further, to the East Slavs, and, to a certain extent, to the Pannonia regions where the South Slavs live.

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## СЛОВЕНСКА ВЕРОВАЊА О ПОДМЕТНУТОМ ДЕТЕТУ

### Резиме

Веровања и предања да одређена митолошка бића (*виле, вештице, ђаво, богинка, мамуна, баеник, домовој, лешиј* итд.) могу мајци однети дете и подметнути своје, са истим ликом као и њено, распрострањена су код Западних и Источних Словена, док су код Јужних позната само у северним, панонским крајевима. Такво, демонско дете, најчешће се назива: *подмече* (Срби), *podvršće* (Хрвати), *podmenek* (Словенци), *odmienjec* (Пољаци), *одминок* (Украјинци), *обмен* (Руси) итд.

Подметнуто дете, по народним схватањима, разликује се од остале деце по нескладном развоју, прождрљивости и израженим склоностима да људима у кући где живи чини разне пакости.

У словенским предањима говори се о начинима крађе људског и подметања демонског детета (а), препознавања демонског детета (б), ослобађања од њега и враћања свог детета (в).

Да не би демон заменио мајци дете, она се мора придржавати одређених правила понашања за време трудноће и 40 дана после порођаја. Такође се примењују различите мере магијске заштите, као што су: стављање поред породиље оштрих гвоздених предмета, затим метле, остављање свеће да гори целе ноћи, кађење породиље тамјаном, њено шкроплење светом водом итд.

По свој прилици предања о подметнутом детету Словени су прихватили од суседних, западних народа (Немаца) и уклопили их у постојећа схватања да је рађање детета дар оностраног света и да се према том дару мајка мора односити с пажњом и великом захвалношћу. У противном, онај који дарује, може свој дар и одузети.