

Spinning – the Myth And the Reality

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Processing fibres into textile used to be one of the main domains of women. Many myths and tales talk about these procedures, mainly breaking flax and spinning. The latter has especially strong symbolic meanings. Many female mythical creatures are mentioned in these myths. It seems that they are but different variations of Mokoš, the Slavic female goddess that is understood as the mistress of nature's cycles and everything that is typically female. Women even seem to identify themselves with those characters in some stages of fibre-processing.

Miti so bili notranja zgradba njihove usode, simbolični model njihove zgodovine in medij njihove narave (Borislav V. Pekić, Atlantida).

By using the sources and findings of ethnology and mythology when writing my diploma paper, I asked myself questions about the activities of spinning and weaving with regard to time and the life of women, the nature of these activities, possibly the special social role of spinners and weavers in society, and beliefs and mythology considering spinning and weaving in the Slavic tradition.

First, let us see how two particular procedures- flax breaking and spinning- are carried out and which factors are present within them.

Breaking flax is hard physical work. Nevertheless it was, according to ethnological data, almost exclusively done by women.

The breakers (or *retters*)- women, who were retting flax, gained some kind of special position in that period of time. We can call this phenomena »retter's psychosis«. They are more daring than usual, which includes proverbial ravenousness and a violent, aggressive or at least cheeky attitude, mainly towards men (making noise with breaking machines, showing their behinds, physical assaults, shoving splinters behind men's clothes, etc.).

Although mostly festively dressed, in some places (for instance Slovenske Gorice) women smeared soot on their faces, thus resembling masks at Carnival (Kuret, 1989, 61).

The question is: are these activities some kind of a resort to escape from the patriarchal every day life, or are they an echo of identification with mythological characters-female demons?

Spinning is also a typical women's chore in winter time, most often done in groups.

We can follow a very strong concept of taboos- interdictions, considering spinning as a threatened punishment. These interdictions could perhaps be explained by belief in

imitative magic. People believed that, in certain periods of time, a kind of gateway between this and the supernatural world occurs, so in this time, some people's activities (spinning of wheel, twisting of thread...) could cause things, which are otherwise caused or done by gods or demons, active at this time of year, in this case, winter.

In the investigation of myths, superstitions and beliefs, connected to spinning, we come upon a creature, most often named Torka.

She was most dangerous on Ember weeks (Winter Embers are in the third week in advent), and spinning was especially forbidden on Tuesday (*sl.* = *torek*) night before the beginning of Ember Days. Therefore, she is also called Sredozimka («mid-winter woman»). Torka is a cruel punisher. She either eats the unobeying spinner, licks the flesh from her bones, or just destroys all the yarn and the equipment (Kuret, 1989, 514).

The character of Sredozimka directly or indirectly appears throughout all the procedures of fibre preparation.

In the old tradition, Sredozimka is the leader of souls (mostly children's) and, in the German-Slavic area, associated with spinning (Kuret, 1989, 458).

In Slavic tradition, such a female demon also goes by the name of Baba Yaga (Baba Jaga, Jaga baba...).

Baba Yaga usually only appears in folk tales and is associated with spinning in many ways: her hut is constantly spinning around its own axis as a spindle and stands on a bird's (usually hen's) leg which, in one version, has a spindle instead of a heel (Mencej, 2010).

Another being involved with everything that has to do with women, including typical women chores, is Mokoš. Toporov analyses the character of Mokoš in his study about pre- historical literature among the Slavs. Only Perun, Veles and Mokoš can be surely claimed as universal Slavic and ancient- Slavic deities (Toporov, 2002, 47).

Mokoš was seen as a female person, and as such was worshipped mainly by women, who remained her loyal worshipers for centuries after Christianization. In Northern Russia, Mokoš was seen as a woman with a large head and long arms, who spins at night. Toporov also mentions many interdictions, connected to her, her chores and her day (usually Friday); these usually regard laundry washing, sexual intercourse, clothing, food, children, kitchenware etc. And also leaving oakum- because she would come and spin it (Toporov, 2002, 47).

The motif of a tragic story, where a woman, who broke such commandments is cruelly punished, is widely present in numerous tales in which the happening is linked to the intervention of »Pjatnica« (Friday- woman)- in Toporov's reconstruction with Pjatnica herself and probably with Mokoš (Toporov, 2002, 49).

Also, one of the »vegetal« variations of what Toporov refers to as »the main myth« introduces flax as the main character, which is evident in Baltic and Slavic texts. Its importance lies mostly in the fact that flax endures horrible trials and suffering during its preparation (it's pulled out of the earth, tied in sheaves, thrown into water, exposed to heat, ground, etc.). Toporov thinks that it's very likely that in this motif, flax stands as a substitute for a chthonic person, because flax itself is chthonic. In the » flax version of the myth« we also spot traces of a female person- mostly it is a virgin who cultivates and tills flax and is responsible for the whole flax cycle from the beginning to the end – from »she sowed« to »she combed«, »she spun«, »she weaved«, »she bleached«... Furthermore, flax is eventually used to make the bridal gown and the main bride's attribute. The wedding bouquet- is essentially made of flax plant (Toporov, 2002, 82).

The previously discussed demonic characters seem directly or indirectly to influence the conception and actions of people, included in activities that have to do with processing raw material into fabrics. The question is how?

I believe we can conclude that all these female characters: Torka, Pjatnica, Jaga baba, Mokoš...are somehow identical, or at least act the same role on many levels.

We can also see how this mythical female figure is manifested within some human actions in traditional procedures of fabric- making.

But only in the process of flax breaking (retting) is this demonic female character present in the first- person through actions and behaviour of the retters themselves. It seems that the characteristics of a female deity or demon, who has control and power over spinning, are manifested in human actions during another activity, namely retting.

Mokoš, Torklja, Pjatnica, Jaga baba in connection with spinning

Punishing unobeying spinners by eating them, licking flesh from their bones, destroying yarn and/ or spinning devices, making noise, appearing as a dog's paw, etc. A tall woman with large head, long arms, big mouth or merely a voice. Eating and drinking a lot.

Women while retting – the »retter's psychosis«

Violent or at least cheeky behaviour- making noise with breaking machines, showing their behinds, physical assaults, shoving splinters behind men's clothes etc. Gluttony, drinking, blackening their faces.

CONCLUSION: The character of Mokoš has its variations and metamorphosis in characters that have to do with women, their lives and typical women's chores, such as breaking flax, spinning and, in some cases, weaving: Torka, Baba Yaga, Pehtra and even Sojenice.

It seems that some main characteristics of such female being – or, better, its chthonic side – were manifested in the behaviour of women during flax- breaking.

Literature

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Mit in stvarnost preje

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Pri pisanju diplome sem se pri raziskovanju virov in ugotovitev etnologije in mitologije spraševala o dejavnosti preje in tkanja glede na čas in življenje žensk, naravi teh aktivnosti, možnih posebnih družbenih vlogah predic in tkalk ter verovanjih in mitologiji v povezavi s prejo in tkanjem v slovanskem izročilu.

Poglejmo, kako potekajo nekateri posamezni postopki in kateri faktorji, pomembni za tematiko so pri tem prisotni.

Teritev lanu je težko fizično delo, vseeno so ga glede na etnološke podatke opravljale skoraj izključno ženske. Teritev je bila pravzaprav tudi domač praznik.

Terice dobijo v tem času nekakšen poseben položaj, ki bi ga lahko imenovali »psihoza teric«: dovolijo si več, kot sicer, med drugim so tedaj pregovorno požrešne in nasilne ali vsaj predrzne, predvsem do moških (»klepetanje« s trlico, kazanje zadnjice, fizični napadi, tlačenje pezdin za oblačila itd.)

Čeprav večinoma praznje oblečene, so se ponekod (Sl. Gorice) za to priložnost namazale s sajami. V tem so podobne pustnim šemam (Kuret, 1989, 61).

Vprašanje je, ali jim je tako vedenje pomenilo nekakšno zatočišče pred patriarhalnim vsakdanjkom ali v njem lahko vidimo tudi odmev istovetenja z mitološkimi liki – ženskimi demoni?

Preja je prav tako tipično zimsko žensko opravilo, največkrat je potekalo v skupinah. V virih naletimo na koncept prepovedi preje z zagroženo kaznijo. Te prepovedi se da morda razložiti z vero v imitativno magijo: v določenem času je mogoč prehod med tuzemnim in nadnaravnim svetom, ko bi ljudje lahko z nekaterimi dejavnostmi (vrtenje kolesa, sukanje niti...) povzročili stvari, ki jih sicer povzročajo božanstva ali demoni, dejavni v tem – zimskem – času.

Pri proučevanju mitov, verovanj in prepričanj glede preje vedno znova naletimo na bitje, največkrat imenovano Torka. Predvsem je bila nevarna ob kvatrnih tednih (zimске kvatre so v tretjem tednu v adventu), preja pa še posebno prepovedana na torkov večer pred začetkom kvatrnega posta. Zato jo poimenujemo tudi Sredozimka. Torka kruto kaznuje. Neubogljivo predico požre, zliže meso s kosti ali le uniči prejo in orodja (Kuret, 1989, 514).

Lik Sredozimke se pojavlja skozi vse postopke obdelave vlaken. V starem izročilu je Sredozimka voditeljica duš (predvsem otroških), na nemško-slovanskem območju povezana s prejo (Kuret, 1989, 458).

V slovanski tradiciji se tak ženski demon pojavlja tudi z imenom Jaga Baba (Baba Jaga). Ta se pojavlja le v ljudskih pripovedkah in je na mnogo načinov povezana s prednjem: njena kočica se ves čas vrti okoli svoje osi kot vreteno na kokošnjih nožicah, ki imajo v eni od različic preslico namesto pete (Mencej, 2010).

Še eno bitje, ki je povezano z vsem ženskim, vključno s tipično ženskimi opravili, je Mokoš. Toporov v svoji študiji o predzgodovini književnosti pri Slovanih analizira lik Mokoši in ugotavlja, da je le za Peruna, Velesa in Mokoš gotovo, da so splošnoslavska in praslovska božanstva (Toporov, 2002, 47). Mokoš je ženska oseba in zato so jo seveda častile predvsem ženske, ki so ostale zveste častilke te boginje še stoletja po pokristjanjenju. Na severu Rusije so si Mokoš predstavljali kot žensko z veliko glavo in dolgimi roka-

mi, ki ponoči prede. Z njo, njenimi opravili in njenim dnevom (petkom), so bile povezane tudi številne prepovedi, npr. prepoved puščanja kodelje, ker bi jo sicer Mokoš spredla, pranja perila, tabu spolnih odnosov med zakonci na ta dan ipd. ali pa predpisi glede opravljanja, vedenja, obleke, posode, hrane, otrok, ipd (Toporov, 2002, 47). Motiv tragične zgodbe ženske, ki je prekršila neko zapoved in je bila za to kruto kaznovana, je široko prikazan v številnih »biličkah«, v katerih je dogajanje povezano s posegom Pjatnice, v rekonstrukciji pa samo Pjatnico in verjetno z Mokošjo (Mokoš (Toporov, 2002, 49).

Zanimivo je tudi, da v t.i. »vegetativni« različici »glavnega« mita glavnega junaka predstavlja lan. To se vidi na podlagi iz baltskega, delno pa tudi slovanskega besedila. Pomembnost je predvsem v tem, da lan prestaja strašne preizkušnje in muke (ga populijo, vežejo v snope, vržejo v vodo, izpostavijo vročini, potem ga tarejo ipd.). Toporov meni, da je zelo verjetna domneva, da se v tem motivu »glavnega« mita lan ni nič drugega kot nadomestilo za htonično osebo, ker je tudi lan htoničen. V »lanovi« različici mita opazimo tudi sledi ženske osebe: predvsem je to devica, ki goji in obdeluje lan ter je odgovorna za celotni lanov ciklus od začetka do konca – od »posejala« so »razčesala«, »spredla«, »stakala«, »obelila«... Še več, iz lanu konec koncev sešijejo obleko za nevesto, za poroko in glavni nevestin simbol – poročni venček – je obvezno lanen (Toporov, 2002, 82).

Zdi se, da prej omenjeni demonski liki očitno posredno ali neposredno vplivajo na človeške predstave in dejavnosti, povezane s predelavo surovih vlaken v tkanine. Vprašanje je, kako? Menim, da lahko sklepamo, da so vsi ti ženski liki: Torka, Pjatnica, Jaga baba, Mokoš... nekako istovetni ali vsaj vsaj na več ravneh odigrajo isto vlogo.

Prav tako lahko vidimo, kako se ta ženska figura kaže v nekaterih dejavnostih ljudi med tradicionalno izdelavo tkanin. A le pri teritvi nastopi v prvi osebi skozi obnašanje teric, ki postanejo nasilne in požrešne. Zdi se, da se značilnosti ženskega božanstva ali demona z močjo nad prejo pokažejo pri drugih človeških dejavnostih, namreč pri tretju.

Mokoš, Torka, Pjatnica, Jaga baba v povezavi s prejo

Kaznovanje neubogljivih predic (jih požre, zliže meso s kosti, uniči prejo in/ ali pripomočke, zganja hrup, pojavi se kot pasja taca, visoka ženska z veliko glavo in dolgimi rokami, velikimi usti ali zgolj glas). Veliko pije in je.

Ženske med teritvijo – psihoza teric«

Nasilno ali zgolj predrzno vedenje- »klepetanje« s trlicami, kazanje zadnjice, fizični napadi, tlačenje pezdirja moškimi za obleke ipd. Požrešnost, pitje, mazanje obraza s sajami.

Lik Mokoši ima svoje različice in preobrazbe v likih, ki so povezani z ženskami, njihovim življenjem in tipično ženskimi opravili, kot so tretje lanu, preja in v nekaterih primerih tkanje: Torka, Baba jaga, celo Sojenice. Zdi se, da so se nekatere glavne značilnosti takega ženskega bitja, ali bolje njene htonske plati, kazale v obnašanju žensk med teritvijo.