

The Donkey in the Narrative Culture and Changing Sociohistorical Epistemology

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This article analyses folklore and narrative tradition about donkeys through the prism of ecological paradigm. It explores the impact of the changing philosophy, stereotypes, and peoples' attitudes towards animals, the donkey in particular. Researched are also changing aspects in the donkey breeding and narrative culture which was for a long time oriented towards speciesism and anthropocentrism, and is now turning towards ecocentric philosophy, which is part of the newly emerging discipline of zoofolkloristics. This ontological shift is projected on the different perceptions of animals in folk literature, language, and everyday life.

KEYWORDS: donkey, folklore, zoofolkloristics, multispecies ethnography, ecology, literature, mythology.

INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the millennium, we have been witnessing many changes in the perception of nature and culture, mainly because human disruption of ecology has become one of the major problems of our world. Vittorio Hösle claimed that a new moral and political paradigm – an ecological paradigm – is taking part in our lives now (Hösle 1996: 26). Conscious people became aware that nature and all the living creatures within it are our partners, and do not take them for granted. Along with that, we are witnessing the development of more ecologically oriented sciences. The new discoveries have compelled philosophy and anthropology to redefine the objectivity of “nature” and “culture” (Descola 2013). Critical evolutionary anthropologists began to re-examine issues of race and gender in the context of new genetic technologies; and more anthropologists have become curious about the lives of animals on farms, in agricultural production, as food, and in rapidly changing ecosystems. Creatures previously appearing on the margins of anthropology – as part of the landscape, as food for humans, as symbols – have been pressed into the foreground in recent ethnographies. As Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich stated: “Multispecies ethnography asks cultural anthropology to reengage with biological anthropology and to craft new genres of naturalcultural criticism” (2010: 565).

Eduardo Kohn was of the opinion that the goal in multi-species ethnography should not just be to give voice, agency or subjectivity to the nonhuman – to recognize them as others, visible in their difference – but to force us to radically rethink these categories of our analysis as they pertain to all beings (Kohn 2013). Clearly the animal psyche exists, which is just as vulnerable as the human one, and animals, like humans, are spiritual creatures with a soul and a spirit; therefore, we can talk about spiritual equality and bodily diversity.

Among ancient cultures and still today among aboriginal societies, humans, animals, and spirits are seen as “endless mimetic doubles of one another”. Philippe Descola claimed that the transmission, a way of guaranteeing and reproducing the physical and moral dependence of the living on the dead, instantly eliminates the possibility of treating animals and plants as subjects, since all its efficacy rests upon a relationship of a hierarchical subordination between one generation and others: the central articulation of collectives is formed of human lines of descent that are differentiated one from another and maintain relations solely through reference to groups of ancestors from which they have inherited riches, rights, and all the components of personalities and destinies (2013: 394).

Today, we can see that ontology is becoming increasingly oriented towards ecocriticism and that anthropocentrism is making way for multispecies ethnography. Marjetka Golež Kaučič stated that according to the so-called “ontological shift” in the social sciences, zoofolkloristics predominantly researches animals as beings in their own right, not as animals in service of humans from the anthropocentric point of view (2015: 17).

In this article, the impact of the changing philosophy and stereotypes on man’s attitudes towards animals and the donkey in particular is explored. The focus of this research is therefore primarily oriented to the ontological turnabout in the perception of the donkey as a representative of the horse family and towards the reflection of this in folklore and literature.

NATURALCULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE DONKEY TRADITION

Different attitudes towards animals and nature are also reflected in literature and folklore. Miranda Levanat-Peričić pointed out that the origin and the evolution through the history of civilizations caused the differences of perception of the horse and the donkey in the conceptual world of Western civilizations (Levanat-Peričić 2012: 995). While the horse was often extolled in literature, the donkey received somewhat less extravagant praise. It was characterized as stupid and stubborn. These stereotypes prevailed in fables and various animal tales, songs and other parts of the literary tradition, and often in everyday life as well.

The donkey, *Equus asinus* in Latin, is (together with the zebra) a significant representative of the horse family. The Mediterranean domestic donkey has evolved from the African wild donkey (*Equus Africanus*) that was domesticated around 4000 B.C. The African wild donkey differs from the Asian wild donkey, which is now an endangered species and was once widespread in the territory spanning from Iran to India and Mongolia.

Domesticated donkeys were bred mainly in Africa, Asia, and the Mediterranean, and these territories still constitute their primary home. These areas are also the home of the hybrid between the stallion and the jenny (female donkey) – the hinny (*Equus hinnus*), and between the donkey and the mare – the mule (*Equus mullus*). One can also encounter donkeys of the *kiang* species (*Equus kiang*) in Central Asia; the steppe *kulan*, or the *džigitaj* (*Equus hemionus*) in the semi-desert of Turkmenia and Iran; and the *onáger* (*Equus onager*) in the Middle East and in the area spanning to North India (Keber 1996: 247).

Linguistic palaeontologists, who have established a theory of the north as the prehistoric homeland of the Indo-Europeans, use as one of the proofs for this theory the fact that none of the Proto-Indo-European languages has a term for the donkey. It was thought that it was possible to breed horses but not donkeys in the north (Beekes 1995: 36, 47). James P. Mallory, however, points out that in the area of the Pontic-Caspian steppe, which is the supposed Proto-Indo-European “Urheimat”, the remnants of the subspecies of the Asian breeding donkey, the *onager*, have been preserved (Mallory 2006). Jaan Puhvel notes that while the Sumerian language does not have a term for the horse it does have the term “anšu kurra”, the breeding donkey; this, according to Puhvel, indicates the culturological primacy of the donkey among the ancient Sumerians, who used them for transporting heavy loads and for pulling chariots used in warfare as early as in 2600 B.C. (Puhvel 1987: 36).

In his “Itinerary” from the 13th century, missionary Riccoldo da Monte Croce mentions the wild donkey, whose beauty surpasses all the other beasts of this world. This description refers to the Asian mountain donkey Riccoldo had seen in the vicinity of Baghdad while traveling around Mongolia. According to Levanat-Peričić, this donkey could very well be the *džigitaj* (Levanat-Peričić 2012: 997).

While wild donkeys have an average life span of twenty years, the average lifespan of domesticated donkeys is forty-seven years. Most European donkeys can be found in Sicily (the Ragusa breed). In Slovene Istria, the autochthonous breed is the Istrian donkey. Mediterranean donkeys living in Istria and Dalmatia are grey and smaller than the donkeys of Greece and Spain, which can also have brown coats.

The antagonistic attitude of people towards the donkey and the favourable one towards the horse are reflected in a number of prominent events in cultural history. The differentiation between the horse and the donkey is metaphorically reflected in the attitude towards the privileged and the oppressed. It can be perceived in the language, myths, religions, and literature, and as such has resulted in insurmountable semantic differences (Levanat-Peričić 2012: 995). Despite this prevalent perception, however, the donkey was not always, and not everywhere, perceived in a negative light. Some peoples, particularly in the East, held it in high esteem and treated the donkey similarly as cattle, which was appreciated as a species vital to the survival of people; as a result, they were well fed and treated more humanely and with particular care. Historical data also indicates that some peoples, for examples the Persians and the Greeks, often used donkeys for warfare. Others used them to pull military loads, and although slower than horses, donkeys are much more cautious and hardwearing.

Based on religious concepts and perceptions, people of the past divided animals into two halves, the divine and the demonic. We may even speak of the dualism of the animal world in which some animals are attributed a divine, and others a demonic character. In the case of the horse and the donkey, the dualistic symbolism of the two animals is rather obvious. While the horse was usually attributed divine and mediatorial properties (Kropej 1998), the donkey was generally associated with the negative, demonic aspect. Very rarely did it assume the role of the mediator and this only in cases when it had the role of a sacrificial animal.

Due to a multitude of economic and cultural factors and events throughout history, in numerous religious beliefs and myths, the donkey symbolized mainly a negative aspect and was perceived as a personification of human weakness.

In India for instance, evil deities such as Nairrita, the guardian of the world of the dead, and Kâlarâtrî, the negative aspect of Devi, ride a donkey. Asura-Dhenuka even assumes the form of the donkey.

In Egypt, the red donkey is perceived as one of the most dangerous creatures whom the soul of a deceased can encounter while journeying to the afterworld. The red donkey may be equalled to the ossified monster of the Apocalypse, or possibly to the scarlet beast from the Revelation of St. John in the New Testament; the latter influenced the French saying *As evil as the red donkey* (Keber 1996: 159).

In ancient Egypt, the god Seth was associated with the wild donkey and was depicted with a donkey head. Plutarch, who believed that recklessness, stupidity, impiety, and impurity were attributes of the donkey, equated Seth with the Greek Typhon. Like Typhon, who kills Dionysus, Seth kills Osiris. Moreover, the donkey can have a red coat, which is the colour of Typhon's fur. Egyptians believed that due to these similarities the donkey is an impure animal possessed by an evil spirit (Levanat-Peričić 2012: 998).

Even in ancient Greece, donkeys did not always have a negative connotation; therefore, the donkey had a significant role in the Apollonian cults. In Delphi, it was used as a sacrificial animal. Since it was the donkey that carried the chest that served as the crib for Dionysus, the animal is also an attribute of Dionysus.

Pindar speaks of Perseus partaking in a feast organized by the Hyperboreans, which sacrificed wild donkeys to the gods. In the "Frogs", a play by Aristophanes, Bacchus puts a load on the back of his slave, who thus represents a donkey that carries secrets. The image of the donkey carrying secrets is by no means an isolated case and is explained as a symbol of the king and his secular authorities.

The inferiority of the donkey can also be perceived in the Greek myth of King Midas. Apollo punished King Midas by giving him donkey ears for having claimed that the pan-pipe was more pleasing to the ear than music from the temple of Delphi. Translated into the language of symbolism, this preference means that the search for sensual seduction is more important than the harmony of the spirit and preponderance of the soul.

However some scholars have stressed that the donkey can under certain circumstances have solar aspect (Gura 2014: 97). The donkey, and especially the jenny, is perceived in the Holy Bible as being a humble and modest animal and, as such, has an important role in Christian symbolism. For example, it appears in the scene of Abraham's sacrifice of

his son Isaac. Job's herds had 500 jennies and many foals. In order to pacify his brother, Jacob presented Esau with ten donkeys and 20 jennies (Keber 1996: 248). Genesis states: "Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds" (Gen 49:14). The Bible describes the jenny as a symbol of peace, poverty, humility, patience, and bravery, as in the following two examples: Samuel sets off to find the lost jennies. A jenny carrying Balaam saved him thrice from death when Yahweh sent an angel armed with a sword upon him. The animal had disobeyed Balaam three times, trying to call his attention to Yahweh's angel's sword, but since Balaam could not see the angel he merely punished the jenny by beating her (Balaam's Donkey).



Christ's Arrival to Jerusalem, 1889, beehive panel (Makarovič, Rogelj Škafar 2000: no. 714) Slovene Ethnographic Musum in Ljubljana (photo: Marko Habič)



The Good Samaritan, 1883, beehive panel (Makarovič, Rogelj Škafar 2000: no. 14) Slovene Ethnographic Musum in Ljubljana (photo: Marko Habič)

When Christ was born, the first creatures able to recognize the child as the saviour were the donkey and the ox standing by the manger. In the New Testament, riding on horseback symbolizes violence while riding on a donkey indicates modesty and humility. In the Bible and iconographic depictions of the Flight from Egypt and Christ's arrival to Jerusalem, Jesus rode on the back of a jenny. Christianity appreciated the donkey's humble and God-fearing character, which is clearly indicated in a prophecy made by Isaiah: "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib (Is. 1:3).

Even though the donkey, like the goat, was associated with base instincts and the devil, on beehive panels – as in Christian iconography in general – it was often depicted in Biblical motifs, where it was portrayed as a humble and God-fearing animal. Such examples are the motifs of The Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt; The Birth of Christ – Mythic Nativity; Christ's Arrival to Jerusalem; and The Good Samaritan.

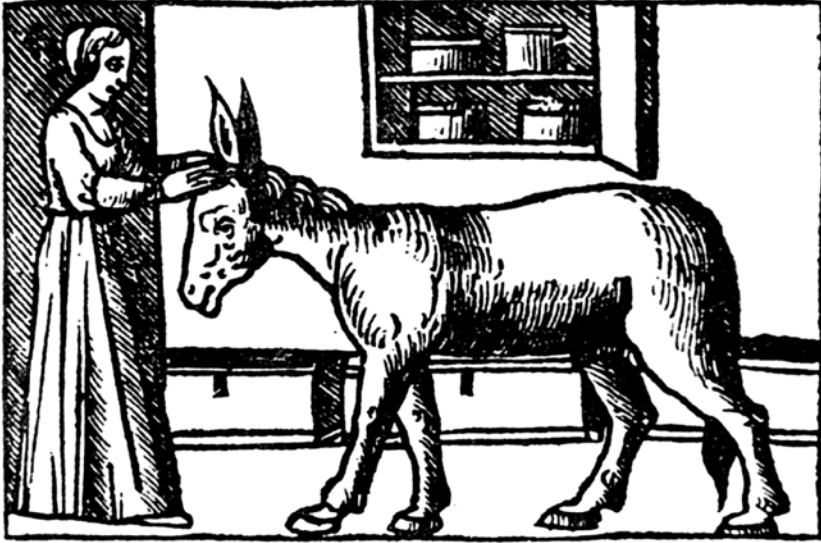
The donkey also features in the biographies of saints, for example in an apocryphal legend about St. Anthony of Padua. The saint tried in vain to convert a Jew to Christianity. Finally, he lost his patience, exclaiming that even a donkey would be quicker to kneel down in front of the holy sacrament than the Jew would comprehend the truth of his evidence. The donkey promptly knelt down, and upon seeing this, many of the Jews converted to Christianity.

In apocryphal legends, a donkey at its own initiative carried firewood for St. Hieronymus to the monastery (Keber 1996: 259–260).

Aleksander Gura has pointed out that in Balkan apocryphal legends, in old Orthodox sacral scripts, and in Greek novel written by pseudo-Lucius – probably Lucius of Samosata: *Loukios è ónos*, *Loukios/Lucius* or *The Ass* we can follow three versions of the mythopoetic motif of the marriage of the Sun (Gura 2014: 103).

The donkey personifies also man's libido, which is among other evident from Lucius Apuleius' novel "Metamorphoses, or the Golden Ass." The story, which begins in the perfumed chambers of a lustful courtesan, tells of Lucius and his transformation into a donkey. His trials are depicted in many mishaps and misadventures he experiences in the donkey body and concludes with mystical contemplation in front of a statue of Isis, where he is restored to human form. Lucius follows the path of redemption, the path of purity, and undertakes the highest goals. As he goes through a number of increasingly severe trials he truly experiences divine revelation, but this happens only after he sheds the body of the donkey and once again becomes human. Lucius' spiritual development, which takes place through initiation, is illustrated with a number of adventures he experiences as a donkey. His transformation denotes transition from calamity, mediocre impulses, and slavery in the hands of blind pleasure to exquisite bliss and to serving an omnipotent deity. It represents the first, inner resurrection. After becoming human again, Lucius takes the path of redemption, the path of purity. He has access to the innermost secrets. It is only after being transformed from a donkey into a human that he can experience the intimacy of God's revelation.

The process of development experienced by the literary character in the body of a donkey is always linked to a specific period of crisis in his life. Although the donkey generally represented ignorance in the language of symbolism that is but the secondary



Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis (c. 124 – c. 170), *The Golden Ass* (Apuleius 1981).

meaning; according to the more general concept in such rituals, this animal denotes a symbol of darkness, and even of satanic proclivities. This is the origin of the donkey's association with human instincts, sexuality, and libido.

During medieval feasts of fools, royal honours were bestowed upon the donkey. These holidays represented a parody of the existing values, which during the festivities were temporarily reversed. The principal purpose of this reversed world was to side line all inferior proclivities and thus eliminate malevolent consequences in society. These rituals represented a controlled release of instincts and also served to deter negative tendencies, which in this period were subjected to ridicule. In this carnival twist, the donkey took over man's instinctual element, the life that goes by only on the earthly, sensual plane.

DONKEY IN (FOLK)LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

The donkey was despised and also belittled in Aesop's opus of fables which contains over thirty tales about the donkey wherein the animal is almost invariably presented in the light of stereotypes that have come to characterize it. In ancient fables, in which the donkey has different roles, it is often possible to detect an imperious attitude of the nobility toward the lowly born. A characteristic trait of the aristocrats was the contemptuous attitude toward the donkey and their emphasis on its stupidity and cowardice. This attitude may be observed in the majority of the most common fables, such as: "The Sick Lion" ATU 50, "The Lion's Share" ATU 51, "A Donkey Induces Overworked Ox to Feign Sickness" ATU 207A, "Hard-Hearted Horse and Donkey" ATU 207B, "The Two Donkeys and Their Loads" ATU 211, "The Donkey Tries to Caress His Master" ATU 214,

“The Donkey Tries to Get a Cricket’s Voice” ATU 292, “Thief Claims to Have Been Transformed into a Donkey” ATU 1529, “Teaching the Donkey to Speak” ATU 1750B – to mention but a few.

The fable “The Donkey in Lion’s Skin Unmasked” ATU 214B tells of a donkey who finds a lion’s skin in the woods. It puts it on and scares others but when it brays everybody recognizes it as a donkey. The fable alludes to the fools who feign importance.

The idioms “the donkey’s verdict” or “thrashing the donkey’s shadow” has spread from the anecdotes about the Abderits (the inhabitants of Abdera in ancient Greece. In this anecdote, the donkey is accused of having attempted to eat the cabbage growing in the field of a city counsellor. Therefore, it was brought before the court and punished with the beating of its shadow. This anecdote has become very popular, and has also been preserved in literature, as for instance in a humorous Slovene novel written by Josip Jurčič “The Goat’s Verdict in Višnja Gora” (*Kozlovska sodba v Višnji Gori* 1867; Jurčič 1884).

Similar idioms are: “to debate about a donkey’s shadow” and “to go to court over a donkey’s shadow”, in the sense of quarrelling for no reason. They originate from Aesop’s fable “Donkey and Its Shadow” and are classified as folktale type ATU 1804D “The Shadow of the Donkey”. The fable tells of a young man who on a hot day hired a donkey to ride from Athens to Megara. At noon, when the sun was too scorching, he dismounted to rest in the shade made by the donkey. However, the drover started to chase the young man away, claiming that he had hired only the donkey but not its shadow. While they were arguing, the donkey got tired of waiting and galloped away, and the two men were forced to continue their journey on foot (Keber 1996: 256, ref. 20).

From the opus of Slovenian fables and animal tales, Alojzij Bolhar presented a slightly different story about the donkey’s shadow, which is titled “Lion and the Donkey’s Shadow”. In this folktale, a donkey sets out on a journey across the desert. Evening was approaching, and the sun started to set. The donkey notices that his shadow was becoming increasingly longer. “I’m so large that it’s me who should be the king of all the beasts, and I’m not scared of the lion one bit!” he exclaims. However, he fails to notice an approaching lion, and soon enough there was neither donkey nor its shadow (Bolhar 1975: 84-85).

In the fairy tale type “An Old Donkey Meets the Bear” ATU 103C*, and in the similar tale type “Contest between Donkey and Lion” ATU 125B*, the donkey defeats the superior antagonist, although only due to fortunate circumstances rather than the donkey’s prowess (Kropej 2015: 221, 260; Bolhar 1973: 199–204).

Remorselessness towards donkeys is also reflected through people’s cruelty. An example is Aesop’s fable entitled “The Donkey, the Crow, and the Wolf”, in which a man mocks the suffering of a donkey. The tale tells of a donkey with a wound on its back grazing in the meadow. Then a crow descends upon him and begins to peck at his wound. The donkey starts to bray and jump in pain while the drover just stands there laughing. When a wolf sees this, he says to himself: “We wolves are indeed wretched! If we just glance at a herd, we are immediately chased away – but this one is only laughed at!” (Levanat-Peričić 2012: 1003).

The proverbially negative attitude of Europeans towards the donkey is demonstrated in the fable “Human and Animal Life Spans Are Readjusted” ATU 173, which can also

be found in Aesop's fables. After God has created the world and each animal received a certain life span, the donkey laments that thirty years is too much to bear. From the early morning until the dark evening, it has to carry heavy bundles and drag large leather sacks of grain to the mill so that others can eat bread while it receives only the sticks, dry leaves, or feed rejected by other animals. God took pity on it and took away several years, then did the same for other animals; it is only the humans who want to prolong their lives (Kropej 2015: 308).

A similar attitude may be detected in the motifs, for example, in G303.7.2: The devil rides off on a donkey, A2537.2: Why is the donkey stupid?, A2325.3: Why does the donkey have long ears? The donkey is presented in a favourable light only in the abovementioned biblical motif V237: Balaam's donkey, and in motifs related to mythology and beliefs, such as B843.2: Immortal donkey and B19.11: Mythical donkey.

In the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the perception of the donkey was not much more favourable. The donkey of the proverbial "Buridan's Ass" ATU 1210 (an idiom that is still in use today) mocks a person who is unable to make a decision. Jean Buridan, who taught at the Sorbonne in Paris in the 14th century, gave as an example of indecision a hungry and thirsty donkey. The donkey is standing exactly midway between a bucket of water and a stack of oats but is unable to decide which to sample first, so it dies of hunger and thirst (Keber 1996: 257).

Two similar metaphors that denote "to have no clue about something", "Asinus ad lyram" (donkey by the lyre) and "Asinus ad tibiam" (donkey by the flute), may have their parallel in the fairy tale of the type "The Donkey" ATU 430, in which a donkey plays the lyre. The tale tells of a king's son who was born as a donkey but soon learned a number of skills, one of which was playing the lyre. When he beholds himself in the mirror one day, he flees to the neighbouring kingdom, where he entertains the court by playing the lyre. He falls in love with the king's daughter, but when he wants to return home, the king persuades him to stay and offers him the princess for his bride. On the wedding night, the donkey sheds his skin and transforms into a handsome prince.

As we can see, a humiliating and mocking attitude toward the donkey, which is still prevalent today evolved over the centuries and the millennia in Western societies. Emphasizing the animal's stupidity and stubbornness is reflected in the language, folk tales, fables, proverbs, idioms, etc. The donkey is often ridiculed for its stupidity, laziness, gluttony, fickleness, stubbornness, sluggishness, his long ears, hoarse voice, and his appearance in general. In English, it is sometimes called an ass, jackass, moke, duffer, dunce, and so on. In Slovenian, some of the frequently used synonyms for the donkey are *dolgouhec* or *uhljač* (the long-eared), *rigač* (the one who brays), and *sivček* (the grey one). Many European languages have the following, or similar, idioms: stupid as an ass; stubborn as an ass; to work with the patience of an ass.

Furthermore, the proverbs degrade the donkey: to descend from the horse to the ass (meaning to come down in the world); to mount a donkey (to make a mistake); to make an ass of somebody (to take the mickey out of somebody); the donkey only goes on the ice once (even a fool learns by bitter experience); where the ass lies he leaves his hairs (a white wall is a fool's paper); even if you send the ass into the world it comes back with

long ears (Keber 1996: 248); the donkey carried water but died of thirst; quarrelling over the ass' shadow; there is more than just one ass in the grass; don't make a horse out of an ass; better a donkey's head than a horse's tail; looking for donkey wool; if a farmer dies of hunger let donkeys toll for his funeral (Šašelj 2932: 25–26).

There are expressions for concepts and objects that also reflect this humiliating attitude towards the donkey: donkey bench (a bench in the rear of the class reserved for bad and undisciplined pupils); asses' bridge (*pons asinorum*, help for those who have difficulties with their studies); Whitsunday donkey or Palm Sunday donkey (one who sleeps late on Whitsuntide or Palm Sunday, or who misses the procession through the field on Whitsuntide) (Keber 1996: 250-251).

There is also a children's game known as "Beating the donkey", "Beating the judge", or "Beating the goat", in which one of the players tries to guess who has hit him or her on their behind.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, even the so-called "professional literature", such as the bestiaries and the physiologues, furthered the stereotypical and distorted image of the donkey. It was not until the 19th century that natural history books started to present it in a more realistic manner, and also adopted a more ethical attitude towards it.

In children's literature, the donkey is frequently presented as a sad, modest animal that never expects to be taken into consideration. A good example is the donkey Eeyore from A. A. Milne's books for children "Winnie the Pooh" (1926) and "The House at Pooh Corner" (1928). A similar character is featured in George Orwell's "Animal Farm" (1945). Orwell's book introduces the donkey Benjamin, which is described as the oldest and the smartest animal on the farm, and one of the few that can read. Benjamin is sceptical, cynical, and has a temper. His motto is: "Life will go on as it has always gone on – that is, badly." According to critics, Benjamin reflects a part of Orwell himself, namely his timeless scepticism. His friends even called him Donkey George after his grumpy character Benjamin.

In his drama "Zôon politikon animalistikon – Commedia musicale dell' arte animale," Jani Kovačič presents the character of the donkey as a "sage, faithfully puts up with the king, apolitical, and unpractical" (Kovačič 2014: 1047).

Very popular among children is the cartoon "Shrek" produced by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Janson in the US (DreamWorks 2001, 2004, 2007, 2020), in which Shrek's Donkey typically represents friendship by saying: "That's what friends are for".

DONKEY BREEDING TODAY IN SLOVENIA

The changing attitude towards donkeys can also be followed if we compare the description of the donkey breeding in Slovenia by the natural historian and writer Fran Erjavec from the mid-19th century and contemporary donkey breeding in the Litoral part of Slovenia. Slovenian writer Fran Erjavec wrote the following about the donkey bred in our territory in the mid-19th century:

Of all domestic animals, the donkey suffers most. He pulls or carries loads all day but still receives the cane more than anything else. Maltreatment and starvation, the cane, and the cudgel have killed all of its good innate qualities. [...] Yet the donkey does not deserve such contempt. Above all, man is to blame for this [...] the donkey does not like our soil nor our weather, and moreover, its long servitude with scoundrels has altered its physical qualities and confused its mental capacities. [...] The donkey is a much better beast of burden than the horse. Since it is slower than the horse, it walks more safely and more cautiously. It has excellent eyesight and hearing. It is satisfied with worthless feed that neither horse nor cow would even look at. It is also very patient and not subject to so many diseases as the horse. [...] Like the horse, the donkey remembers every path it has ever taken. Even in a completely unfamiliar place, its instinct takes it in the right direction. [...] Where the donkey has stumbled once it is not likely to stumble again. (Erjavec 1868: 73–75).

This description clearly reflects the typical attitude of the Istrian population towards the donkey, which in the spirit of the times was unkind. Even worse was the manner in which the animal was handled. Erjavec adds that the one who is to blame for the donkey's moodiness, stubbornness, and proneness to biting and to stamping its hind legs is man himself, for people had been beating and oppressing donkeys for centuries, and had no sympathy for them. Since donkey's senses are much keener than those of the horse the donkey can quickly sense danger, and promptly stops. Yet instead of trying to understand this behaviour and pausing for a moment, the animal was usually promptly beaten.



Donkeys in Kazlje (photo by M. Krojej Telban, April 22, 2015)

Largely due to a new, more ethical and ecology-oriented attitude to nature and culture nowadays people have started to breed donkeys again. Some of them admit that they use the donkeys as natural lawn mowers, but mostly they use them for the agro-tourism, eco-tourism, and donkey-assisted therapy (zootherapy). It can even be said that it is these people who have been responsible for the revival of donkey breeding. Donkey milk is extremely healthy and the closest to human milk, but it is also very rare. Even healthier is donkey cheese, which has recently been put on the market in Dalmatia.

However, some of the breeders, particularly those who have large herds of donkeys on their agrotourist farms, in addition to donkey rides and walks, offer dishes from donkey meat. One of these is the Trnulja agrotourist farm in Črna Vas, a marshy area near Ljubljana, which offers donkey and goat meat. In this particular case, the donkey has simultaneously become a gastronomical victim and an object with tourism value.

However, many agrotourist farms, particularly those in the Karst and in Istria, now offer ecologically oriented tourism, which includes only donkey rides and walks with donkeys. In Gornje Cerovo, for instance, Rado Brelih organizes trekking with donkeys, which is a unique tourism service in the Goriška Brda region and is advertised in the Dobrovo Castle.

Donkey breeders are often people who have come to Primorska (Litoral part of Slovenia) from the city. Riccardo Kalin for example, who was born in Trieste and now lives with his family in Kazlje, has two jennies named Lili and Liza, which he bought in Dolenjska (Lower Carniola). He knows that a donkey needs to have a peer for companionship, or it may feel lonely, unwell, and burdened with psychological problems.

Also Stane Sušnik, a former music editor, moved after he had retired from Ljubljana to Gabrovica by Komen in Karst. Now he owns a herd of donkeys and is the *spiritus agens* of “Oslarija”, an institute for the breeding and research of donkeys.

Approximately 1000 donkeys, mostly home- and cross-bred, are now reared in Slovenia. Many farms breed them in addition to other animals in order to increase the total number of grazing livestock, which makes them eligible for agricultural subsidies. The *Association of Breeders of the Istrian Donkey* (DRIO) was founded in Dolenja Vas in the Karst on April 11, 2014. Its members come from the Postojna area, the Karst, Idrija, Brkini, and Bela Krajina (White Carniola). They share the core breeding program for the breeding of the Slovene Istrian Donkey. The Slovenian Association has linked up with the *Agriculture and Forestry Institute* in Nova Gorica (KGZ), and with the *Association of Breeders of Istrian Donkeys* (the so-called *tovari*), which has been active in Croatia for several years, and also with the *Agency for Rural Development of Istria* (AZRRI) from Pazin in Croatia. By offering a financial incentive for every donkey entered in the pedigree book, whose owner is actively involved in the breeding program of the Istrian donkey, Croatia has ensured that this Croatian indigenous breed has not died out. DRIO has also cooperated with their Croatian colleagues in the project Cross-Border Initiative for the Protection and Revitalization of Environment Biodiversity Using Autochthonous Breeds (AZRRI).

People who have constant contact with donkeys have developed a highly ethical and ecological attitude to these animals. Donkeys are raised extensively on grassland, where

there is only a roofed fold in which they can take shelter in bad weather. The breeders have established an emotional connection with their animals, and stories about them are occasionally published on the “Oslarija” website. One of these is the story about a new-born donkey which was published on October 1, 2013, and written by Mojca Sušnik Klemenčič, who was inspired when her large herd of donkeys received a new member, a baby donkey named Car (Tsar). The story talks about:

[...] a cute baby donkey was born on a sunny morning in May. After lying down for a bit, he stood up on its tiny legs, and a moment later he was already running around the meadow. He started to speak to the horses, but they only mocked his body shape. The cow chased him away, and the sheep were afraid of his large teeth. The goats did not like the grey colour of his fur. Saddened, the little donkey sat down beneath a walnut tree. When night fell, an owl woke up in the treetop. Upon hearing him cry, she asked why he was crying. Although terrified of her, the donkey described his experiences, and the owl listened. Afterwards, she explained to him that animals differ from each other, that his particular features were beautiful and special, and that he was, like any other living creature, unique. Thus comforted, the little donkey set off to find his mother. Then he cuddled close to her and calmly fell asleep.

Donkey’s external appearance is often mocked in traditional folktales (for example: Bolhar 1975: 88), and also in this tale “Each in their own way” the donkey is mocked by the owl.

Those who still harbour prejudice against donkeys and believe stereotypes about the “dumb ass” are assured by donkey breeders that donkeys are smart, patient, and humble animals. Their properties are studied with the aim of revitalizing and creating a new database for donkey-rearing.

CONCLUSION

The principles of speciesism and anthropocentrism, which long held sway, have been replaced by ecology-oriented philosophy. As we can see, the perception of the donkeys has also experienced significant changes during the ontological shift, which can be perceived in folkloristic and ethnographic research.

In literature, a distinct shift in the attitude towards the donkey may be detected especially in the period following the First World War. Why do Greek fables mock even the suffering of the donkey whereas millennia later, philosopher Jacques Derrida writes “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (Derrida 2008), and George Orwell presents the donkey Benjamin as the smartest animal on the farm?

It is true that one of the reasons for this is the economic, social, and spiritual turnabout in the Western world. It is beyond doubt that better economic conditions and the

rapid development of engineering have made life easier for the donkey. However, it is precisely this progress that has significantly reduced its population. Only recently, and due to increased ecological awareness and care for the natural and cultural heritage, has the number of donkeys begun to rise again.

Attitudes towards animals are now mainly focused on cultural ecology and ethical awareness. In addition to veterinarians, animals can also be treated by “animal whisperers”, or psychiatric therapists. Like the horse-, dog-, and cat-whisperers, such therapists also treat donkeys that, for various reasons, do not behave as people expect them to; for instance, they bray excessively, bite, kick, and so on. However, all of this is frequently the result of human misunderstanding and mishandling of donkeys.

However, in spite of the new paradigm by which animals are thought to be equivalent to people, in our daily lives animals are not treated as equal members of the cultural and natural environment although they are – according to the philosophical shift – thought to be ontologically equivalent. The politics of animal breeding and exploitation cannot be expected to change in the era of Anthropocene, but changing sociohistorical epistemologies and ecocentric philosophies of understanding nature and culture can make some changes.

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OSEL V PRIPOVEDNI KULTURI IN SPREMINJAJOČI SE DRUŽBENOZGODOVINSKI EPISTEMOLOGIJI

MONIKA KROPEJ TELBAN



Članek analizira pripovedno izročilo, v katerem nastopa osel, v prvi vrsti skozi prizmo človekovega razumevanja narave, ki je pogosto v nasprotju z ekološkim pristopom k naravi in kulturi.

Človek je v preteklosti živali razdelil na božanske in demonske. Govorimo lahko celo o dualizmu živalskega sveta, v katerem nekaterim živalim pripisujejo božanski, drugim demonski značaj. Zaradi najrazličnejših gospodarskih in kulturnih dogajanj skozi zgodovino je osel v številnih religijah in mitih pogosto simboliziral negativni aspekt in poosebljenje človeških slabosti. Vendar pa je ravno zaradi razlikovanja med višjimi in nižjimi v krščanski simboliki, ki se odraža v Svetem pismu, prevzel vlogo ponižne in skromne živali. Že ob Kristusovem rojstvu sta med prvimi bitji poleg jasli prepoznala Odrešenika osel in vol.

Ezopovo basnopisje pozna prek 30 basni o oslu, v katerih je skorajda brez izjeme prikazan v luči stereotipov, ki so se ga oprijeli. V antičnih basnih se pogosto odraža tudi visokostna drža aristokratov do nizkih kast. Značilen je zaničljiv odnos do osla in poudarjanje njegove neumnosti in strahopetnosti.

Ob srednjeveških praznikih norcev so bile oslu namenjene kraljevske časti. Ti prazniki so bili parodije na obstoječe vrednote, ki so bile začasno obrnjene na glavo. Namen je bil kanalizirati manjvredna nagnjenja na stranski tir, s čimer naj bi se odpravile zlohotne posledice v družbi. Ti obredi so predstavljali nadzorovano sprostitev nagonov in postopek odvrčanja negativnih nagnjenj, ki so jih podvrgli posmehu. S karnevalskim preobratom je osel prevzel človekov nagonski element, življenje, ki je omejeno samo na zemeljsko, čutno področje.

Tako se je tekom stoletij in tisočletij izoblikoval danes prevladujoči odnos do osla, ki je ponižujoč in posmehljiv ter poudarja njegovo neumnost in trmo, kar se odraža v jeziku, povedkah, basnih, pregovorih, frazemih idr.

Novi vek je prinesel spremenjen odnos do osla, ki se kaže predvsem v literaturi, še posebej otroški, kjer je osel pogosto predstavljen kot otožna, skromna žival, ki nikoli ne pričakuje, da se bo kdo spomnil nanjo. Takšen je npr. osliček Sivček v otroških knjigah Alana Alexandra Milneja, *Medved Pu (Winnie the Pooh)*, 1926) in *Hiša na Pujevem oglu (The House at Pooh Corner)*, 1928). V noveli Georgea Orwella *Živalska farma (Animal Farm)*, 1945) nastopa osel Benjamin, ki je predstavljen kot najstarejša in najpametnejša žival na farmi ter ena redkih, ki zna brati.

Danes so nekateri ljudje predvsem zaradi novega – bolj etičnega in ekološkega odnosa do narave in kulture, pa tudi zaradi kmečkega turizma, ekoturizma in onoturizma (terapija z osli – *onotherapy, zotherapy*) razvili drugačen odnos do oslov, ki so jih začeli ponovno rediti. Sodobni rejci oslov vedo, da so to pametne, potrpežljive in skromne živali. Ustanovili so tudi različna društva, npr. Društvo rejcev istrskega osla (DRIO), ki se med seboj povezujejo. Odnos do živali je usmerjen v kulturno ekologijo in etično ozaveščenost. Vendar je tak odnos do živali danes, žal, redkost. V dobi, ki jo antropologi imenujejo antropocen, je skoraj utopično upati, da bo človeštvo tudi v praksi razvilo drugačen odnos do narave in sprejelo živali kot sebi enakovredna bitja. Rejo živali v prehrabne namene bo težko spremeniti, toda ekocentrična filozofija in spremenjena družbenozgodovinska epistemologija oz. moderno razumevanje narave in kulture lahko privedejo do nekaterih sprememb na bolje.