POSSIBLY ORIENTAL ELEMENTS IN SLAVONIC FOLKLORE.

MAMUNA [PART 1]*

Keywords: Slavonic, Oriental, etymology, mythology, folklore

Abstract

A specialist in Middle Eastern languages will likely be quick to associate Pol. *mamuna* ‘an ape-like mythological creature’ with Ar./Pers./Tk. *majmun* ‘ape’. It is possible and indeed probable that this name is an Oriental borrowing applied to an ancient native belief, but a closer inspection reveals at least several other possibilities tangled in an ethnolinguistic web of potential conflations and contaminations. This paper presents the ethnographic background and some etymological ideas, though without as yet a definite answer.

1. Introduction

The present paper is concerned with the character and the name of *mamuna*, an evil spirit that often takes the shape of an ugly, hairy woman who abducts children and places her own in their stead. It is one of just three words apropos which Dźwigoł

* Several researchers were more or less directly involved in the preparation of this paper. In particular, we want to express our gratitude to Prof. Anna Tyrpa and Prof. Barbara Grabka of the Institute of the Polish Language at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków for their cordial help and allowing us access to the library and unpublished materials for *Słownik gwar polskich* (SGP), and to Vít Boček, PhD, of the Czech Academy of Sciences for Slavist consultation. Needless to say, all remaining errors are ours alone.
KAMIL STACHOWSKI, OLAF STACHOWSKI

(curently perhaps the most comprehensive simultaneously linguistic and ethno
graphic inquiry into Polish demonological vocabulary) mentions a Turkic language.
These three words are: *cur* (suspected of Turkic origin only in passing; the idea seems
to have become quite obsolete by now), *upiór* (discussed in more detail in Stachow-
ski K., Stachowski O. 2017), and *mamuna* (Dźwigoł 2004: 115, 66, 164). To find our
way between the many red herrings this demon appears to have planted all around
herself would require much broader and more detailed data than we have. We will
not provide a complete, ready etymology; instead, we will describe the ethnographic
and linguistic situation, summarize the state of research, and add some commen-
tary and new ideas to it, hoping for this paper to become in this way a convenient
starting point for further exploration.

The geographic distribution of *mamuna* ‘an evil spirit’ (after Moszyński et al. 1934–1936,
vol. 3, map 7), against 1938 borders (De Groot 2010) as those better reflect the reach
of Polish population over the past several hundred years than the post-World
War II ones

2. Ethnography

When reading about the demon known in Polish folklore as *mamuna*, one encoun-
ters mainly two quite inconsistent patterns. One, which we will now elaborate on,
is a description of a spirit that looks like an old, hirsute woman with abnormally big
and baggy breasts, and whose main function is kidnapping of unguarded children
and swapping them for their own (Pełka 1987: 147f). The other, of which we will
write more in the later part of this section, is the image of the *mamuna* as a water
nymph who lures travellers, especially young men, into lakes or rivers and drowns
them (Szyjewski 2003: 177). Both mythologems seem fairly common, though rather
mutually exclusive when required to describe one creature; it is our opinion that
this apparent discrepancy may be elucidated by a short comparative analysis of the
material we have concerning this nowadays fairly forgotten spirit.

Let us begin with a more detailed description of the child-stealing complex.
The common motif recorded in the sources is that a human child which is left unat-
tended and unprotected by magico-religious means (the most common ones being
tying a red string around the child’s wrist or giving it a red cap; the colour red has
apotropaic meaning in many cultures of the world due to its connection to life and
vitality through the colour of blood; it is also worth noting that it is said that either
only unchristened infants are endangered or that they are endangered the most, being
preferred by the spirits; cf. Pelka 1987: 150f) may be swapped for a changeling, called
*odmieniec* in Polish. Such a creature, the offspring of the *mamuna* who swapped
it for a human child, is usually exceptionally unruly and loud, though all kinds
of abnormal behaviour may be attributed to the child being a changeling (Pelka
1987: 150; Szyjewski 2003: 172). The *odmieniec* is usually physically disfigured in one
way or another, most often an overgrown head is mentioned (Grimm 2007: 364). The
child may grow very slowly or not at all, despite exhibiting ravenous hunger
(Szyjewski 2003: 172). This belief complex has been usually explained as the folklore
interpretation of congenital genetic defects (Szyjewski 2003: 182), allowing both for
the explanation of an uncontrollable and very much feared phenomenon as well
as for the alleviation of the psychological trauma that may result for the mother,
through the setting of the occurrence in a ritualized context. It is also important
to note that it is quite common for the mother to feel somehow disconnected from
such children, a feeling which is adequately explained by the changeling myth. It is
also important to note the traditional ways to make the *mamuna* give the human
child back – most involve either performing ritual purifications, usually by burning
herbs (Pelka 1987: 150), surprising the child through unusual behaviour (a similar
method is noted in Germany and the Celtic countries where a custom is known
of brewing eggshells with the intention to make it speak aloud, and this reveals its
nonhuman nature; cf. Yeats 1986: 47; Grimm 2007: 364), or maltreating the change-
ling to make it cry so that the *mamuna* returns and takes it back out of pity (Pelka
1987: 150). This last solution to the problem usually involved whipping the child with
sticks outside, sometimes having him or her lain on a heap of manure outside the
household, which occasionally resulted in the child’s death. Such an occurrence may
not have been always accidental. It is worth noting (Pelka 1987: 149; Ashliman 1997)
that a traditionally emphasized aspect of the belief was always the insatiable hunger
of such children, who obviously could not work for themselves and for the family
as it was required of its other members in the often starving peasant communities.
The belief may then have served (not necessarily in a conscious way on the part of the
parents and in general, believers) also as a psychologically-soothing structure allowing
for the infanticide of developmentally disabled children whose life endangered
the other members of the family. Very similar beliefs are well-documented in other European countries too; the understandable psychological background serves in our opinion as a satisfactory explanation of such a widespread distribution, without the need for a monogenetic theory of origin of that myth. It is however worth noting in regard to the last paragraph of this section that the kidnapping of children and putting of changelings in their stead is attributed to elves or trolls (cf. Keightley 1850: 125–126; Hofberg 1893: 176–178) in Scandinavian countries and to fairies in countries with a strong Celtic substrate (cf. Gregor 1881: 60–62; MacDougall 1910: 115–119). This probably quite ancient stratum of such beliefs among Indo-European peoples should be remembered as a comparative background allowing for a better understanding of how the complex may have functioned among the Slavs, who did not leave written records of their religion.

Let us now move on to the idea of the mamuna as a riverbank nymph luring travellers and killing them, usually by drowning. Such an idea is also very common. The difference in the appearance ascribed to the spirit is striking: it is seen as a beautiful young girl, usually naked or clad in a simple white gown (Szyjewski 2003: 171). Its function is also quite different. Some light may be shed on the topic by the comparison of the different names used with reference to creatures of this kind – they are also called, among other names, boginki, dziwożony and wily (Pełka 1987: 93f; Szyjewski 2003: 170), while one of their most popular names among the Eastern Slavonic peoples is русалки. As such, they are one of the most enduring motifs of traditional stories and legends in Russian folklore, which is, incidentally, thought to preserve comparatively more of the original Slavonic mythology than the cultures of Western Slavonic peoples. All these names appear in accounts regarding different female spirits, not necessarily connected with child-stealing but usually retaining a trickster characteristic, luring travellers into dangerous areas or deceiving them (Pełka 1987: 93f). Szyjewski, writing from the standpoint of comparative religion, proposes that those creatures, at first called probably wily or dziwy, originally formed a wide class of female spiritual beings associated with apparently supernatural or anomalous happenings in nature, inhabited the wilderness, especially marshy areas, and were traditionally depicted as beautiful (Gieysztor 1982: 226; Szyjewski 2003: 170f). Boginki under their different names were also associated with circles of evenly-growing plants or mushrooms that are sometimes found in nature, which were explained as the paths in which the spirits had danced and referred to as wilnie koła, igrowyszczca (Szyjewski 2003: 173) or czarcie koła. This connection seems noteworthy with regard to our previous argument about the comparison of the idea to the Germanic and Celtic lore – where such phenomena are called fairy rings or elf rings in English (Chambers W., Chambers R. 1841: 55) and Hexenringe or Feenringe in German (HdA s.v. Hexe).

We would like to propose that the mamuna is a comparatively late development of the more ancient wila/boginka/rusalka/dziwożona complex (which we will henceforth refer to as wila for the sake of brevity), as one of the more “specialized” spirits into which the wila complex subsequently split, reflecting the gradual simplification of Slavonic mythology as a result of the chaotic transmission of the lore for want of
Possibly Oriental elements in Slavonic folklore. Mamuna [Part 1]

written sources as well as due to the systematic suppression of indigenous beliefs by Church authorities. Such a historical scenario may be reinforced by the fact that the name *mamuna* is most apparent in Poland and areas that were under Polish cultural influence, while the very same motif of child-swapping is well-known and attributed to *wiły* in Eastern Slavonic countries (Szyjewski 2003: 172), where the more ancient Slavonic tradition is usually preserved. It is notable too that *boginki* are linked with child-swapping and conflated with the *mamuna* in the Kraków region while in the more rural and traditionally conservative Podhale these spirits are seen as distinct (Pelka 1987: 146–152), the *mamuna* being a specific kind of *boginka* associated only with child-stealing. We, therefore, think that there may have existed a multi-faceted *wiła* belief complex which in time split into simplified and distinct stories of different creatures having different characteristics, in a way similar to the transformation of the fairy lore in the Celtic countries. The names and functions of those second-generation creatures may have been conflated and misinterpreted due to the lack of living tradition or textual sources. Specifically, the description of the creature as hirsute and ugly, but decidedly humanlike, may have served as the basis for the conflation with the image of the ape, an equally mythological creature in the eyes of Polish pre-modern village folk and known only through stories of travellers and possibly from the Bible. This may explain the use of *małpa* ‘monkey’ with reference to the creature in some regions, reflecting not a different indigenous belief, but a different name under which the (natural) monkey or ape may have been known. Such a historical transformation process is opposite to what was proposed by Pelka, who suggests the mixing and conflation of previously distinct creatures into one internally conflicting image (Pelka 1987: 93), which seems to us less probable considering the widespread distribution of the *boginki* complex in the Slavonic countries in comparison to the relatively local variation that is *mamuna*, itself not quite convincing for the very same reason as a relic of an older belief stratum.

References