

СРПСКА АКАДЕМИЈА НАУКА И УМЕТНОСТИ
БАЛКАНОЛОШКИ ИНСТИТУТ

БАЛКАНИКА XXXIV

ГОДИШЊАК БАЛКАНОЛОШКОГ ИНСТИТУТА

Одговорни уредник
ЉУБИНКО РАДЕНКОВИЋ
Директор Балканолошког института

Редакцијски одбор
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КРАНИСЛАВ ВРАНИЋ (секретар)

БЕОГРАД
2004

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SOME TRACES OF INTERLINGUISTIC CONTACTS IN THE CENTRAL BALKAN MOUNTAINS

Abstract: The etymology of three Balcan tree names, S.-Cr. *munika* 'Pinus leucodermis', *molika* 'Pinus peuce' and *omorika* 'Picea omorika' is discussed. The latter is supposed to go back, together with Bulg. *morika* 'spruce', to Slavic **mъxorъ* 'fringe' describing here the hanging branches of spruce. The Bosnian pine *munika*, *munjika* growing in high and rocky places exposed to the thunder, the relation to S.-Cr. *munja* < Common Slavic **mьlnja* seems probable, and *molika* may be explained as a re-borrowing from Alb. *molikë* traceable to the same Slavic prototype **mьlnika*.

It is well-known that Slavic colonization in South-East Europe started by occupying the vallies and plains, while the mountains remained for a long time the domaine of nomadic shepherds of Rumanian and Albanian stock. Nevertheless, the subalpine vegetation of Balkan highlands with prevailing conifers happened to be more akin to that of the north European homeland of the newcomers than it was the flora of the subjacent lowlands. Consequently, the Slavs already had their own, inherited words for the main coniferous species they encountered in the new environment: pine (**borъ*), fir (**edla*), spruce (**smerka* or **smьrkъ*), as well as for conifers in general (**xvoja*).

There are, however, certain varieties of conifers endemic to the Balkans, and it is precisely the designations for these subspecies that the Slavs may have borrowed from the autochthonous population. At least it has been supposed for three South Slavic names of trees: the Bosnian pine (Pinus leucodermis) *munika*, the Macedonian pine or silver fir (Pinus peuce) *molika* and the Serbian spruce (Picea omorika) *omorika*.

According to Petar Skok the three tree names could reflect the same "Illyro-Thracian" designation. The alternance *r/l/n* he explains by the substrat

influence.¹ Actually, the variant with *l* exists in both Albanian *molikë*² and Rumanian *molid* (also *molidf*, *moliv*, *molitf*, *molif*). The latter is usually derived from the former, but within the Albanian the etymology of the word in question is controversial. Missing in MEYER, it is treated by Jokl as an inherited element of Albanian vocabulary, related to *mëllenjë* ‘blackbird’.³ Otherwise SELIŠČEV 198 gives priority to Bulg. *molika* and considers the Albanian word to be a Slavicism. However, he leaves the Slavic word unexplained, and his judgement seems to be based only on its suffix typical of South Slavic plant names, e.g. Alb. *borigë* / *borikë* ‘kind of pine’ < South Slavic *borika* S.-Cr. ‘pine’, Bulg. ‘fir-tree’. VI. Šaur⁴ derives Alb. *molikë* from S.-Cr. *omorika* and the latter – quite unconvincingly – from Turk. *orman* ‘forest’. SVANE l.c. joins Skok in assuming a probable substrate origin for *molikë* as well as for *omorika*. A new derivation of *molikë* from Slavic has been proposed recently by the author of a new etymological dictionary of Albanian, who traces it back to Common Slavic **moldika* ‘young tree, sprout, shoot’ (Orel l.c.).⁵ The South Slavic form *molika* would be in this case a “Rückentlehnung”.

From the semantic point of view this proposal is rather unconvincing,⁶ as well as Jokl’s idioglottic explanation as ‘black tree’ cited above. Yet the Slavic origin of the Albanian (and, consequently, of the Rumanian) word still remains likely, due to its suffix, and we will return to this possibility after considering the variant with *-n-*.

Besides *munika*, the form *munjika* also occurs, which is formally explainable as a derivative in *-ika* from Serbian *munja* ‘lightening; thunderbolt’. Semantically, this sounds like a plausible explanation, for this kind of pine is believed to attract the lightning more than the others do. This belief seems not to be unfounded. We read in the website of an Italian national park⁷ the following definition of *Pinus leucodermis*: “(Il pino loricato) vegeta ormai

¹ Skok 2:451 s.v. *molika*, cf. id. 555 s.v. *omar*.

² Svane 127 cites the variants *mëlikë*, *mlikë*, *mërlikë* in Malësia e Madhe, Puke and Tropoje and notices that the official designation for *Pinus leucodermis* in Albanian is *arneni i bardhe*.

³ N. Jokl, *Linguistisch-kulturhistorische Untersuchungen aus dem Bereiche des Albanischen*, Berlin/Leipzig 1923, pp. 196 f., 200, according to Orel 272 s.v. *molikë*.

⁴ Cited after BER 4: 216.

⁵ In Ylli no reference to *molikë* is found.

⁶ It also meets with a phonetic problem, since for such an early a borrowing, supposed to have taken place before the liquida-metathesis, we would expect Alb. *a* for Slavic short **o*, thus ***malikë* and not *molikë*.

⁷ The website www.parcopollino.it.



Phot. The Bosnian pine. From the website www.parcopollino.it

nelle zone rocciose piu impervie, modelatto dal vento, dal gelo, dai fulmini”. It is indeed a tree which is shaped by wind, by frost and by **thunderbolts** (see photo 1), and the designation “the lightning pine” seems quite appropriate for it. Since Serbian *munja* goes back to Common Slavic **mьlnьja*,⁸ the protoform of the tree name **mьlnjika* can be reconstructed, which underlies not only Serbian *munjika*, *munika*, but also Albanian *molikë*, the cluster Alb. *-ol-* regularly reflecting Slavic *-ьln-*.⁹ Consequently, the form *molika* in South Slavic is to be considered as re-borrowed from Albanian, and the Rumanian one cited above would be an Albanian loan-word too, perhaps transmitted by the

Slavs, since its *-itf* seems to be modified under the influence of the Slavic word *molitva* ‘prayer’, which in Serbian designates also a consecrated tree where annual processions take place.¹⁰

As for the name of Serbian spruce *omorika*, it is at home in the mountainous regions of Montenegro, Herzegovina and western Serbia, but not to be separated from West Bulgarian *morika* ‘spruce’. This parallel indicating a prothetic character of initial *o-* in *omorika*, the radical element *-mor-* may

⁸ An older form **mьldnьja* is probable, but irrelevant for us.

⁹ Cf. the place name Alb. *Vila* < Slav. *Vilna* Seliščev 309, *Molisht* < *Molnište* (1431 A.D.) Ylli 2:145, where the derivation from *molь* ‘moth’ by Seliščev 240 is accepted. However, such a place name would be unparalleled from both semantic and morphological points of view (an adjective in *-ьнъ* from *molь* is neither attested, cf. BER 4:214 f. and ÉSSJa 19:203 ff., nor probable). St. Rospond in *Onomastica Jugoslavica* 3–4/1973–74, p. 121 f. rejects—with good reasons—Seliščev’s interpretation, but the alternative he proposes (**Modln-išče*) is hardly more convincing. It is most likely that underlying the Albanian toponym is a Bulg. counterpart to Serb. family name *Munjići* < **Mьlnjitji*, going back to the very word *mьlnьja* ‘thunderbolt’ used as nickname, thus providing another instance of the phonetic development we are assuming in *molikë* < **mьlnjika*.

¹⁰ Skok 2:451 explains it as reflecting a Slavic *ū*-stem **moliky*, *-kьve*.

be compared with the dialectal plant name *m-or* ‘a kind of grass’ in East-Serbian region of Crna Reka, which goes back to Common Slavic **mъxorъ* as its phonetically regular continuation, whereas other dialectal forms *ma-hor* and *muhor* show secondary vocalisations.¹¹ The same word *mohorъ* / *mohorъ* in Old Russian means ‘fringe, tassel’, and it is worth mentioning that the synonymous **reša* may also designate the hanging branches which are distinctive of spruce in comparison with other conifers, especially the fir.¹² In view of these facts, the derivative **mъxor-ika* seems to have been originally used as an attribute to **edla*, designating the spruce as a subspecies of fir by describing it as a ‘fringed, frayed fir’. It is, indeed, the most conspicuous distinction between the spruce and the fir (see photo 2), which I can confirm from my own experience dating back to my childhood, as my late father taught me to distinguish different species of conifers in the mountain forests of Maljen in NW Serbia. In this region the name for spruce is *smrča* derived from Common Slavic **smerk-/smьrk-*; the renaming of spruce in the southwestern area as *omorika* may be explained through the fact that the dendronym *smrča*, *smreka* is there related to the juniper.



Photo. 2:
The spruce; to
the right side,
a fir

¹¹ ÉSSJa 20:215 s.v. **mъx(o)rъ* / **mъxra* cites only S.-Cr. *mahor*. Cf. also *māvra* ‘a kind of meadow grass *Festuca elatior*’ RSA s.v.

¹² Cf. BER 6:229, where s.v. *pecà* the meaning ‘увиснали клонки на ела’ is cited.

The etymology we propose here seems plausible from both the semantic and structural points of view, but it should be rendered hypothetical, due to the lack of evidence for *-h-* as supposed in the original form of the name. There are no records of the word in question earlier than the 19th century, which might either confirm or contradict our reconstruction. The fact must be taken into account, that the spirant *h* is either lost or instable in the majority of Serbian and in many Bulgarian dialects, and that in such a difficult cluster as *mh-* it would have been eliminated earlier than elsewhere. A trace of it would be the prothetic *o-* in *omorika*, otherwise inexplicable.¹³ Indeed, such a prothesis is usually provoked by the initial consonant clusters hard to pronounce, like Serbian *obzova* besides *zova* ‘elder’ from **b(ʷ)zova*, or Russian *omšar(a)*, WRuss. *amšara*, *imšara* besides *mšara* from **mъšar-* ‘bog, moss’.¹⁴

It is noticeable that the latter word is but a morphological variant of the form **mъxorъ* which we assume underlying to *omorika*. Actually, the vocalic alternance in Serb. *omara* ‘spruce’, *omar* ‘(spruce) forest’, Bulg. *mura* ‘Pinus peuce; Pinus leucodermis’, is better understandable if assumed to have taken place in the suffixal part of the word, since among the derivatives of **mъxъ* ‘moss’ in other Slavic languages we have not only **mъx-orъ* and **mъx-er-* > **mъšarъ* / *mъšara*, but also **mъx-urъ* in Czech *chmour* ‘conifer needle fallen down, putrid or dry’, with the same metathesis as in Czech *chmorek* ‘hair of a new-born child’, dial. *chem*, *chmu* ‘moss’.¹⁵ Consequently, we can suppose three variants of the same designation, **mъx-or(-ika)*, **mъx-ar-* and **mъx-ur-*, underlying respectively Serbian and Bulgarian forms *omorika* / *morika*, *omar(a)* and *mura*, all derived with *r-*suffixes from the word **mъxъ* ‘moss’ and semantically related to the “frayed” branches of the coniferous trees and consequently to their needles.¹⁶ Our etymology thus excludes the possibility, vague but repeatedly admitted, of a connection between *omorika* and Common Slavic **smerka*, **smьrkъ*.¹⁷

¹³ Skok 3:451 tries to explain it by a decomposed Roman article.

¹⁴ Cf. ËSSJa 21:13.

¹⁵ In ËSSJa 8:43 *chmour* ‘conifer needle’ is wrongly identified with the homonymous *chmour* ‘dark dust’ < Common Slavic **xmur-*. The etymological discussion in BER 4:330 s.v. *mypa1* is limited to repeating Mladenov’s reserve toward a connection with Gr. *maurós* ‘black’, Lat. *morus* etc. Cf. also Bulg. *mur* ‘Juniper’.

¹⁶ An alternative explanation of the latter meaning would be a likeness of the forest ground covered with the carpet of fallen needles to the moss.

¹⁷ Skok 2:451 s.v. *molika*, 3:295 s.v. *smreka*; M. Snoj in Bezlaj 3:276. Svane l.c. admits a connection between *molikë*, *omorika* and Alb. *hormoq*, *harmoç* ‘spruce’. Orel 142 follows Çabej 8:83 in deriving the latter, together with the homonymous *harmóç* ‘crumbled plaster’ and Geg. *hartinë* ‘kind of pine’, from *harmoj* ‘to destroy,

If we are right in proposing Slavic etymologies for the tree names in question, it does not mean that they cease to be a Balkan phenomenon. Their specificity lies in the limitation and the discontinuity of their areas matching the distribution of the species, which is, in its turn, conditioned by the relief.¹⁸ The sporadic distribution of words **mьlnika* and **mьxorika* and their various developments as reconstructed in this paper are imaginable only in the frame of nomadism connecting the highest mountain ranges of the region and practised not only by the Albanians and Rumanians but, since an early date, by the Slavs as well.

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to exhaust' (which is, in its turn, based on *harr* 'to weed, to cut down'). Such an explanation sounds rather as a folk etymology, which in fact may have influenced an earlier form of the word, perhaps **mharóc* < Slav. **mьxorъčь*, cf. **mьxorъkъ* > Czech *chmerek*, Russ. *mochorók* ËSSJa 20:215 f.?

¹⁸ Yet in a not so remote past the conifers may have had a larger distribution in the Central Balkans than today, cf., for instance, the folk tradition cited by R. T. Nikolić, SEZb 18, Belgrade 1912, p. 37, concerning the East Serbian regions of Krajište and Vlasina.

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НЕКИ ТРАГОВИ МЕЃУЈЕЗИЧКИХ КОНТАКАТА
У ПЛАНИНАМА СРЕДИШЊЕГ БАЛКАНА

Р е з и м е

Разматра се етимологија три балканска назива за четинаре, с.-х. *муника* ‘*Pinus leucodermis*’, *молика* ‘*Pinus peuce*’ и *оморика* ‘*Picea omorika*’. За овај последњи претпоставља се да се заједно са буг. *морика* ‘смрека’ своди на прасл. реч **тѣхоръ* ‘реса’, која би овде описивала висеће грање смреке. Како *муника* / *муњика* расте на високим каменитим положајима изложеним удару грома, вероватном се чини веза са *муња* < прасл. **тѣлнја*, а *молика* се дв објаснити као повратна позамљеница из алб. *molikl* сводљивог на исти слов. праоблик **тѣлника*.