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“BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER.” WHEN *THE FOLK*  
TALKS ABOUT ITS LORE: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE  
PROVERB IN THE BALKANS

**Abstract:** Folkloristics as a discipline is interested in all folklore genres, and of course also in the proverb. However, it is often attempted by the folklorists to collect as many variants as possible, giving thus particular emphasis to quantity. But this seems to ignore the *folk*. In this article we aim to attempt a metafolkloristic approach for the proverb “blood is thicker than water.” We will try to see how this proverb is interpreted from informants from the Balkan Peninsula in an attempt to bring together the *folk* with the *lore*.

**Keywords:** Metafolklore, proverb, interpretation, Balkans, socio-historical approach.

***I. Introductory remarks***

It is commonly accepted that the two basic elements that define folklore genres are collectivity and, by extension, traditionality. In particular, Alan Dundes points out characteristically: “When I speak of folklore being collective, I mean that a myth or a folksong is known by more than a single individual – usually many individuals – and it is transmitted from person to person, often over the course of generations” (Dundes 2007, 275).

All of the above automatically lead us to the two basic characteristics of folk culture: multiple existence and variation (Dundes 1999, viii). Since the diffusion of elements of folk culture is mainly oral and from person to person and indeed over time, this means that they are displayed in many variant forms and this is certainly of interest to Folkloristics.

However, the versatility of elements of folk culture may vary according to the folklore genre. The proverb as one of the short types of folk speech (Abrahams 2005, 30) also displays variations, but not so much in form, as to the meaning and circumstances of use, that is to say, the context.

This must be paid special attention to by Folkloristics. Contemporary folklore analysis should be multilevel and beyond the text to pay particular attention to the texture and context (Dundes 1980). In particular, the context has to do with the social situation in which a folklore genre is used. The meaning of the context is very important because precisely in this way the variants are revealed (Dundes 1980, 27). The texts are specific. The variations of the different folklore genres may therefore be due to the different social contexts of the texts, where the various texts are transformed in order to respond better and more fully to their new situations of use.

And in these cases, however, one could study the concept of the context historically in order to understand why we have been driven to the creation of specific variants. This means, therefore, that such studies are ignoring - in a sense - again the *folk*. After all, "... it seems clear that if an item remains in tradition, it must have meaning for the carriers of the tradition" (Dundes 2007, 276). And this significance/meaning the folklorist is called to highlight. Therefore, one could speak of a historical and, at the same time, synchronic, socio-historical approach to elements of folk culture (Meraklis 2004, 19).

Especially for the synchronic approach, the folklorist should bear in mind that: "... despite the fact that they (the folklorists) are accustomed to thinking of variation in texts of folklore, often wrongly assume that there is only one correct meaning or interpretation. There is no one right interpretation of an item of folklore any more than there is but one right version of a game or song" (Dundes 2007, 81).

Therefore, one of the demands of folklore research should be the metafolkloristic approach to elements of folk culture, that is the emergence of the knowledge that the people themselves produce for their folklore. Consequently, the folklorist must urge his informants to give their own explanations/interpretations of folk culture, something Alan Dundes has very much likened to psychiatry: "A tale or song might be treated by the folklorist - collector much as a modern psychiatrist treats a dream. As the psychiatrist asks his dreamer - patient to 'free associate' and to comment on the various elements in the dream, so the folklorist - collector should ask his informants to 'free associate' in the same manner, attempting to explain or comment on each element

in the tale” (Dundes 2007, 84). This of course applies also to the proverb. Consequently, this approach could also lead to the revealing of even new proverbs in use, something which is necessary for modern paremiography too (Mieder 2012, 128).

All of the above can lead the folk getting together with its lore. Besides, especially in Folkloristics, it is not possible to leave out from the interpretation of phenomena the main subject of its study, namely the *folk*. Indeed, this can be a reverse course of research and interpretation for folk phenomena, so that the folklorist begins his research of what the people say in order to find out what conditions could have led to such interpretations/perceptions of folklore.

Of course, all of this can be applied to proverbs. This is what we will attempt in this article. In particular, we will deal with the proverb “Blood is thicker than water”, an internationally known proverb, by placing it in a Balkan context, and to look at the interpretations that informants from the Balkans give to it, as this proverb is also very popular in this area of the planet.

## ***II. Methodology***

As mentioned earlier, the proverb “Blood is thicker than water” is well known among the peoples of the Balkans. Indeed, in a quantitative research<sup>1</sup> that we conducted in order to extract the paremiological minimum of the proverbs used by the Balkan peoples in relation to family relationships, the percentage of knowledge of this proverb was very high.

In particular, among Albanian informants, the percentage of knowledge of the proverb is 90%. For Greek informants, the percentage is 80% while for some variations it is 90%. Among the Bulgarian, Romanian and Serbian informants the percentage of knowledge of the proverb reaches 100%.

In any case, the proficiency levels of the Balkan people for this proverb are quite high. For this reason we wanted to see what are the significations that modern Balkans (Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians, Serbs in particular) give to this proverb through interviews that we conducted based on the focus group methodology<sup>2</sup>.

In these interviews we have encouraged the informants to imagine/invent contexts in which the proverb could be used or to remember situations of use of the proverbs which they have ex-

perienced. It is the technique of field research known as the *hypothetical situation technique* (Herskovits 1950). Thus, the key questions asked to the informants were: who, to whom, when, where and why (Barakat 1980, 7), in order to create hypothetical situations. Indeed, this fact brings to the foreground a metafolkloristic dimension of analysis and what Alan Dundes calls *oral literary criticism* (Dundes 2007, 81). As Dundes points out, folklorists should let people themselves comment on the elements of folk culture, tell stories about them (Dundes 2007, 81) and not only care about those who know a lot of them.

### ***III. Folk commentaries on the proverb***

At this point, we would like to quote the proverb in question in all the languages we studied. Thus, our proverb is as follows:

Albanian: Gjaku ujë s' bëhet  
 Bulgarian: Кръвта вода не става  
 Greek: Το αίμα νερό δεν γίνεται  
 Romanian: Sângele apă nu se face  
 Serbian: Крв није вода

In all cases, the proverb is related to the kinship and it is thus related to the fact that family relations as difficult or as disturbed as they might be, are not easy to dissolve. In the following we will only quote the views of our informants and then we will go on to comment on them.

#### *Albanian informants*

Commenting on the proverb "Blood is thicker than water", informant G.K.<sup>3</sup> says: "We say it all the time. It is very often used. In case of agreement, in a difficult situation. Let me tell you an example. When Tsipras<sup>4</sup> goes to make an agreement with the lenders he will say *gjaku ujë s' bëhet*. Guys, I'm not going any further. I am a man. My blood is blood." Another informant, B.<sup>5</sup> says: "It can be used in the worst and in a vendetta. For example, there may be people, you can owe them and have vendettas and in one stage it's enough, he says, after what happened, we could do that, we forget that, but in politics is somewhat fake." G.K. continues by saying: "I told you, as an example, that Tsipras shows his masculinity: the blood is thicker than water guys ... It is masculine and tough." B. again also referred to an-

other case: “One can look very bad and the other says, since you did this, I forgive you, because I am not you.”

However, informants of Greek descent from Himarra<sup>6</sup> in Northern Epirus (South Albania), commenting on this proverb, do not share the view that this proverb could only be used by men. Women too can use it. What is possibly changing is the context of use. L.R.<sup>7</sup> mentions: “A man uses it more in the sense of honor. For other things, women use it [...] Women use it more to fraternity.”

*Bulgarian informants*

For the same proverb S.A.<sup>8</sup> says: “... It means that because it is your blood, so you forgive him/her, whatever he/she does.”

*Greek informants*

In the case where blood becomes water, it is not drinkable.<sup>9</sup> Especially for this proverb, F.H.<sup>10</sup> says: “Yes, that was what used in older times, that is to say they (relations) were more family-based, meaning that they would try, for example, if there was a situation that one should take care of a friend of theirs or their brother, let's say, although he did not like his own brother, he would still try to do good to him, because that's basically: blood is thicker than water, and this is not the case in recent years, because now many relationships strengthen that are no longer blood based and began to weaken those who are so. Yes, I hear a lot of examples from those around me who say that they have very bad relationships with my parents, etc., so I do not think of them anymore as my parents or something and so I will give more support to my friends and the people close to me. Obviously, I do not know whether it is right or not, it is subjective, I do not know such situations, but yes it is something that is mostly true in the oldest years and that is why I believe it was often told.” H.B.<sup>11</sup> says: “And more so for siblings I have heard this saying” and she adds: “Yes, my child, yes ... that is, even if blood becomes water, that water is not drinkable, whatever my child does it means that our relationship cannot be harmed.”

*Romanian informants*

A.S.<sup>12</sup> gives us the following interpretation: “For example, when you scold your child and you do that to your child in a point that you hate each other, for example the father or the

mother, let's say, but at some point you will forgive your child because it is your blood. That's how I see it." K.S.<sup>13</sup> adds: "Not only to the quarrel. And when you notice some similarities between... Let's say some siblings have some similarities. That is, I have noticed with my brother when we have done or have thought of the same things at the same time, and there is some observation, so we say so: that blood is thicker than water. And in similarities" (is used).

#### *Serbian informants*

The informants told us that this kind of proverb is usually used to highlight the similarities between relatives. I.S.<sup>14</sup> says: "For example, he (she points to another informant) is my cousin and we have the same interests ... E.g. we both like beer, then we will say: Крв није вода", and S.S.<sup>15</sup> mentions: "It could be something similar to English *it runs in the family*. It could be the same as here. So if you want to say that your son or daughter is very similar to your father or mother, you will say Крв није вода and it means that you look very much like your parents." Also, I.B.<sup>16</sup> gives another perspective: "Well, even in some cases, if you want to show someone that there is a real similarity between the family, warn someone, that they should not do this because, for example, his parents did not." It is interesting to note that in Serbia this proverb appears to have a more masculine character. According to our informants, the proverb is used mainly by men or older women.

#### ***IV. Analysis of the folk commentaries – Conclusions***

From the above annotations of the proverb, one observes that the proverb is well known, which in some cases leads our informants to very short answers to the commentary on the proverb. A typical example is that of Bulgarian informants, where the commentary is so small because the importance of the proverb is considered as given and self-evident that they thought that there was no need for any further explanation. However, again we can draw some conclusions.

We believe that in this proverb the keyword is *blood*. Especially for the Balkans we can observe that the system of origin is mainly patrilineal with emphasis more or less on the father's side (Alexakis 2006, 103). However, the kinship system is mainly complementary (complementary affiliation). Thus, the Balkan

peoples have developed different ways to symbolize the origin of the father and mother respectively. The characteristics of the father's kin are assumed to be transmitted with blood, while the characteristics of the mother's kin with milk (Alexakis 2006, 106). We therefore appreciate that this proverb is related to the phenomenon of patriarchy in the Balkans, which we believe is something that also arose from what our informants told. In particular, we have to notice the following:

As for the Albanian informants, there is a plethora of cases where the proverb “Blood is thicker than water” can be used. We see the functionality of the proverb in the present (the example of the reference to Greek political figures and the case of business partnerships). Moreover, what is of interest is that the proverb is described as “masculine” and “tough.”

” In fact, the informants told us that in Albania it was difficult for a woman to use this proverb. We appreciate that this fact finds its explanation in the patrilineal system of affinity that governs the Albanians and, more generally, all the Balkan people (Alexakis 2006, 103). In particular, the Albanians use the term “tree of blood” (*lisi gjakut*) for the patrilineal origin (Alexakis 2006, 115), while Albanian ideology itself is patriarchal (Doja 1995, 651).

For the Bulgarian informants, the case seems to be the same in terms of the patrilineal kinship system. In Bulgarian, there is the word «род» (*rod*), which is interpreted as follows: “a root, a blood” and we would say it refers to a patriarchal system of kinship, since relatives on the father's side are relatives of all, something that applies to women until they get married, since they are then considered to belong to their husband's kin (Luleva 2001, 50). Besides, the bloodline does not form only households but even neighborhoods, something very common in the Balkan village (Risteski 2010, 210).

And the Greek case seems to be similar, since it seems from the above that the proverb is used rather for very close relatives and especially for blood relatives (e.g. siblings). This in turn suggests that blood is what determines the affinity of kinship and that is why other similar proverbial phrases such as “we are one blood”, “the blood pulls” (Alexakis 2014, 63), etc. are used. And to move one step further, it seems that in Greek folk culture blood relatives are considered mainly those who come from the

father's side, since the blood also symbolizes local ideology and it is considered to be transmitted only through men (Alexakis 2014, 294), while the blood is identified with both the seed and the vein, since a kin corresponds to a vein, of course, meaning that the origin comes from the man (Alexakis 2014, 385). Of course, these observations relate mainly to the traditional society. But even in the context of traditional society, if the origin is considered to be from the side of the father, the kinship system is bilateral (Alexakis 2006, 103), meaning that the mother is not ignored.

The same seems to be true for both Romanians and Serbs. Indeed, especially for the Serbs, this proverb refers to the patrilineal origin, while - and to the Serbs - the affinity from milk denotes the maternal origin, which suggests that even at that time this people developed a bilateral affinity system on the other side, but not absolutely symmetrical (Alexakis 2006, 116).

It is obvious that this proverb in the Balkans has a specific meaning, but it is also related to the affinity patrilineal system. Patriarchy emerges as a key element of the Balkan family and seems to impose a strict hierarchical structure among its members. This kind of family structure, according to Kaser, has its roots in the pastoral economy of isolated mountainous areas (Kaser 1997, 152). This is because the pastoral societies had as their basic constituents the worship of the ancestors, the patrilineality and patrilocality (Kaser, Halpern 1997, 65).

However, apart from these observations, it is worth noting that our informants can make various projections on the way they use the proverb, and it is thus very important to show the adaptation of folklore to every occasion and to each present, which makes it up to date and necessary for the *folk*.

Finally, it is once again proven as far as proverbs are concerned, that it may be one thing for someone to know a proverb, another thing how he/she uses it, another if he/she thinks that this is true in the present or that it is different, and another thing to consider that it does not apply today. Surely, according to literature, the family in the Balkans is patriarchal, but the views of our informants show, in some cases, that this patriarchy is probably not as intense as it used to be, or that family relationships may not be considered as sacred as in the past, and that we are in a process in which things are changing. This modern dimension,



given by some of our informants, we consider as a strong proof of the necessity of a metafolkloristic approach to the phenomena of folk culture.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> This methodology was developed for the needs of my doctoral dissertation in the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens – Greece. The title of the dissertation is: “The proverbial discourse of the Balkan peoples. Themes – Uses – Interpretations – Communication. A contribution to Comparative Folkloristics.”

<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted in Greece (Athens), Serbia (Belgrade) and Albania (Himarra). In Greece we worked with Greeks and with foreign immigrants in the country from Albania, Bulgaria and Romania.

<sup>3</sup> G.K.: Giovanni Kurti, 48 years old, from Puka (Albania), he lives 25 years in Greece, he works as a builder and he has finished high school in Albania.

<sup>4</sup> Alexis Tsipras is the prime minister of Greece (since 2015). The informant refers to the negotiations within the European Union for the loan the other Europeans would give to the country due to the economic crisis.

<sup>5</sup> B.: Ben, 39 years old, from Puka (Albania), he lives 15 years in Greece, currently he is unemployed and he has graduated from an Albanian university.

<sup>6</sup> A Greek minority lives currently in Himarra and generally in South Albania which is recognized by the Albanian state. The members of the minority there of course are of Greek origin but they also know fully the Albanian language. What we wanted to see is how the Albanian proverb is considered from members of the minority, since the same proverb exists in Greek too.

<sup>7</sup> L.R.: Lefteris Rondos, 73 years old, from Himarra (Albania), he used to work as a math teacher and currently is retired.

<sup>8</sup> S.A.: Shasha Alexandrova, 44 years old, from Dimitrovgrad (Bulgaria), she lives 14 years in Greece, currently unemployed, she has graduated a technical high school in Bulgaria.

<sup>9</sup> This is a greek variation of the proverb: Το αίμα νερό δεν γίνεται, κι αν γίνεται δεν πίνεται.

<sup>10</sup> F.H.: Fotini Hadjidaki, 16 years old, she is a student in senior high school.

<sup>11</sup> H.B.: Hrisa Baklava, 51 years old, currently unemployed, she has graduated university.

<sup>12</sup> A.S.: Antonis Stathopoulos, 37 years old, he lives 23 years in Greece, he has graduated senior high school, currently he works in a company which manufactures wires.

<sup>13</sup> K.S.: Konstantina Stathopoulou, 18 years old, she was born in Greece by Romanians, she has graduated senior high school.

<sup>14</sup> I.S.: Ines Subotić, 27 years old, she has graduated university, currently works in Serbian public sector.

<sup>15</sup> S.S.: Slobodan Stambolić, 41 years old, he has graduated university, he works as an English teacher in a Serbian high school.

<sup>16</sup> I.B.: Ivana Bikar, 49 years old, she has graduated university, she works as a teacher of Serbian language and literature in a Serbian high school.

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*Nota bene (W.M.):*

For the general European distribution of the proverb “Blood is thicker than water” and its occurrence in the Germanic languages in particular see:

- Paczolay, Gyula. 1997. *European Proverbs in 55 Languages with Equivalents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese*. Veszprém, Hungary: Veszprémi Nyomda, p. 233-235.
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