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Identification Narratives, Local Stories, and Virtual Communication

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author summarizes some conclusions drawn following her field research on narration and identity. Language itself is approached language itself as a guardian of ideas, structuring society, using humor as an integrative barrier. It is introduced the term *identification narrative* as crucial for understanding the self in the context of the community. The author briefly describes the cases of a popular local story that changed local oral practices and of a less popular local story that preserved local oral practices. She analyzes the natural transformations of local stories compared to their translations into the "language" of virtual communication. The author explores the impact of new forms of communication on local cultures and how the narrative of the desired identity comes to replace the traditional social narrative of the self.

KEYWORDS

Narratives; identification narrative; orality; identity; Bulgaria; virtual communication.



In this paper, I present current insights into the relation between orality and identity, drawing on several researches I have conducted. I introduce the term *identification narrative* for a text that openly or covertly expresses the belonging of an individual to a specific group. I analyze several relations: between the act of narration and the self, between the individual and the community, between local narratives with their importance for the community identity and the narrative in digital communication. I search for patterns of linguistic behavior in all the cases described.

Apart from being a means for communication, language itself is also a guardian of information. Each different language has its own internal logic, inertia, associations, and cultural allusions, thus preserving an entire and very specific complex of ideas. Different aspects of language are both

affected by this hidden semiotics and causing it. This statement is valid on different levels. It is based on cultural specifics in terms of history, linguistic groups and families, but it can also be found in regional dialects, sociolects, professional languages, and even in idiolects. For example, the Bulgarian language has vocabulary shared by the Slavic languages, but also many words which can be found in all the Balkan languages. The historical aspect of word accumulation does overlap with the regional one up to a point, but it also brings information about specific nomad periods and the integration of different ethnic groups over time. Professional language is shared by people from different countries who share a profession and a certain amount of basic knowledge in it. Still, it has its local diversity which can be so specific that even professional groups from one country cannot

understand each other—as is the case with the secret *Meshtera* language of the western Macedonian builders.

To preserve a specific professional group from outsiders, it is not obligatory to have an entirely different vocabulary. There are other linguistic methods to distinguish the group. In a previous research, I found humor to be one of the main barriers to integration that newcomers face in a social group. Humor is a certain view of the world, a perception of the world. If one can feel the world the same way as someone else does, then they will be able to react to the world in a similar way. The humor typical of a community maintains it as a whole and protects it, isolating it from dangerous “others.” Humor generates secrets of the perception and thus behavior. Its assimilation brings the person closer to the mechanisms that govern and maintain the structure of a community, thus giving them power over it. But since they are already part of this community, they are also subject to these mechanisms. This drives them to keep the community if they want to continue to be in it and share the specific type of humor only with “inside” people or with people they plan to bring into this community. Otherwise, this kind of humor does not affect the listeners, and even with all good intentions and efforts they could only understand it but not find the “funny part” in a statement. Those who want to understand it but do not want to be part of the group are a potential threat to it. For example, professional humor is usually based on prejudices related to community-specific activities, workplaces, and problems. It is possible that an unskilled worker who is not yet familiar with the subtleties of the job may not be aware of a simple solution to a complex problem, known among practitioners of this profession. Of course, if one has already worked in this field, and they do a good job, they would be more readily accepted due to their knowledge.

Individual manner of talking is also influenced by the social experience and the cultural background of the person. I use

the term *identification narrative* (Mincheva 2015b) to mean an oral or a written story, which is intentionally constructed and transmitted by the addresser, the latter being at the same time a kind of informant for us, the researchers. This type of narrative can be interpreted as a self-representational message of the speaker. In the process of selection and construction of the story, the author shares information that they consider important and significant in order to express their core beliefs. Each statement is subject to interpretive analysis. If it is a phrase, part of an oral or recorded conversation, it can be the subject of discourse analysis. In identification narratives, the identification can be considered an act of will. The mimetic mechanisms for culture assimilation are a basic condition for becoming someone via the presupposition that one acts, and therefore speaks “like” someone. According to Ivaylo Dichev (2002), this is caused by the desire for someone else’s image. It is assumed that interpretive analysis reveals the psychological motives for the behavior and explains the speaker’s position in a certain context. This can lead to the inferring of various mechanisms for prioritizing values from a person’s identification narrative.

The mechanisms for prioritizing values should be studied not only as a motive in the characters of the stories I have recorded, not even only in my respondents—the people who have chosen to share a constructed narrative (which is the generally accepted model for ethnological analysis). We must also look for them in the variant choices of the researcher constructing this, as well as every other scientific article. In fact, all information transmitted is inevitably refracted through the individual worldview of the narrator, directly dependent on the specific socio-cultural historical-political context, and not only. Also, willingly or not, the author tends to speculate on the information at his/her disposal, usually for personal direct or indirect gain. Thus, the recipient inevitably turns out to be



manipulated. This manipulation is doubled once more, since it comes not only from the source of the information, but also from the ability to perceive it, the cultural experience of the recipient. It is this experience that largely determines the values of the individual, as well as his/her tendency to succumb to incentives to (not) respond to the relevant suggestions in one way or another. In such cases, ethnologists have to avoid direct assessments of the facts they observe, by claiming that they are subjects and that any possible interpretation is a result influenced by accumulated various influences and impressions. In any scientific endeavor, this application corresponds to human instability and variability according to the environment, cultural background, and current situation. In the field of the humanities, the most humane approach to the study of human motives, perceptions, representations, and actions is the “purely human” understanding of the person in front of us.

Local stories and narratives have a similar function of identity preservation as professional humor and specific knowledge. Here I will describe briefly two radically opposite cases I have encountered during fieldwork. The first one is the story of a local narrative that has become viral and has been recognized as an identification narrative for the people of Pirin village. The second case reveals an old local oral tradition preserved in the description of *samodiva* fairies in the Elena Balkan through a half-forgotten narrative.

There are not many communities that have preserved a vivid image of a dragon, with individual examples of help or harm, especially one who has its own house. It should be noted that the popularity of the Ginchov *zmej* arouses broad interest in the village of Pirin, its people, and stories. Quite naturally, the image of the Ginchov *zmej* and the different versions of the story about him become an identification narrative for the people from the village of Pirin. It is the

disagreements and the apparently conflicting stories about the dragon that confirm the visitors’ doubts about the historicity of the *zmej* image, while also encouraging them to consider which story is more or less likely to be true and pleasant among the local stories. Whether the *zmej* looks like a flying snake, a man, or an angel, a sun or a whirlwind, whether he keeps a treasure, fights with the neighboring *zmej* or chooses a bride, his image remains indisputable. It can even be infinitely multiplied by geometric progression, as the varieties of this image are added to the places he can inhabit and the things he can do—at the discretion of the narrator. It should be noted that the people of Pirin have found yet another facet of the *zmej*: as a resource for local cultural, economic, and tourist development. But these people are not at all intrusive with the stories they can share. They wait, ask questions, test; one has to gain their trust, to convince them that you have all the desire, readiness and impartiality to believe them, to tell them that one relies only on them for information. The researcher has to let them know that whatever they tell him/her will be considered important and true; they can even bargain for the information they give. And finally, when the researcher has won their trust, they are ready to tell the most bizarre things, to connect their stories with real people and places from the village, to explain how they got to know one story or other, to reveal to you the humor or the magic of their folklore stories.

The study of an image gradually reveals different levels of its functioning. We can first look at the media’s popular presentation of the *zmej*, which aims primarily to arouse interest. Then there are the old publications of stories of people from Pirin, which have the value of real sources of Bulgarian folklore. Of course, we cannot ignore the scientific works that set various and interesting perspectives for the analysis of the original textual material. But then there are people’s stories that we can hear in the field, which



have a special significance that can only be felt when communicating with a person. And then comes the observation—what these people actually do; and how what they talk about manifests itself in their daily lives. Finally comes the researcher’s reflexive-interpretive analysis about the meaning and significance of all this. In my article “Being a *Zmej* in Pirin Village: Observations from the Night *Horo* Dance” (Mincheva 2015a) I analyze the *zmej* deconstructing its image on different levels. I describe its functions from the symbolic level of appearance through the folklore and the *zmej*’s social meanings for the people of the village of Pirin. I go further with my analysis, into social psychology, including the researchers and their place in the night *horo* dance as worship of the *zmej* of Pirin.

It is interesting to note that people are not always aware of the capacity of their folklore stories and the impression they can make on tourists and guests. It turned out that preservation of local narratives is possible even when they are not popular. For example, in the Elena Balkan I found two well preserved narratives about *samodiva* fairies that proved to be very specific for this region (Mincheva 2017). My informants did not point out that they were sharing something exceptional, apart from being somewhat supernatural. None of them claimed that the depiction of *samodivas* they gave me could be found nowhere else, which turned out to be the truth. The town of Elena and its surrounding villages have managed to stay out of the range of ethnographers.¹ In the materials I recorded in the field, there was a special coincidence in the description of the *samodivas*, which I have not encountered either in scientific works or in tales or songs from Bulgarian folklore. People from different parts of the Elena Balkan, who claim to have seen *samodivas*, describe them as identical in outer appearance. Not only do they look the same, but they are all the same, with the same faces: oblong and matte. This would be a strong argument in favor of

the existence of *samodivas*, but here I will perceive it as a confirmation of a strong local folklore tradition. It is this detail related to the image of the fairies that suggests sustained communication between people from different parts of the Elena Balkan and allows for considering it an independent folklore sub-area in the context of the Bulgarian folklore.

The other story I have had the chance to record is a narrative about an army of *samodivas*. According to my research, it has not been recorded or described before. Although I have written it down from people from villages from different parts of the Elena Balkan, from people who would not know each other, the description has been strikingly similar, though the storyline was different.

The images of fairies in folklore are complex and diverse. From primary hypostases of Mother Nature, through mythical creatures, to epic heroes of heroic folklore, nursing heroes or fighting them, to wives of heroes, the *samodivas* are harmful or useful, they are always different. It is interesting to seek the reasons for the sustainability of these mythical images in folklore narratives. Nowadays there are still people who claim to have seen them. I suggested three hypotheses: a hypnotic natural phenomenon, real young girls dancing in the woods, or a lasting image in folklore narratives. These hypotheses present different perspectives on the scientific understanding of the phenomenon. The historical development of the image of the *diva* must be traced, as well as the multiplicity of the *divas* and their different modes of interaction with people. Also, an analysis of the context for each individual meeting or story of *samodivas* should be included. These narratives should be analyzed both locally and comparatively against the corpus of texts of Bulgarian folklore—both traditional and contemporary. If stories and memories of *samodiva* fairies can still be found in the field, they are alive in the folk memory and



of shared memory and identity. In virtual communication the rules for differentiating and preserving a community do not differ much from the rules which are valid for real-life communication. In digital communication

the identification narrative is an inevitable part of communication, since one has to create their digital self, by teaching it how to become themselves. Thus, talk of the self becomes talk of the desired self.

NOTES

1. In 1913 the notorious Bulgarian folklorist Michail Arnaudov (1977) conducted field research in Elena and published a short report, *Folklore from Elena Region* (1913). Later, in 1972 students from Veliko Tarnovo University made a folklore expedition there, but the results of their work have not been published.

2. For more details, read my full research “Two Cases with *Samodivas’* Horo Dances in Elena Balkan” (Mincheva 2018).



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