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THE «DAYS OF THE OLD WOMAN» IN AREAS OF SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

A short comparative approach of the narration in other peoples of
Southeastern Europe

The central axis of this paper is mainly lore and beliefs of the Greek people about weather changes and their connection with the old herdsman and March, in a narrative, which is circulated in many population units of Southeastern Europe. So I will separate the paper into two chapters:

I. The narrative in the area

The most representative variation from this group of narratives is the one about an old herdsman, who had had a very hard time during winter. When March was forby, the month she feared the most as the hardest, she was so glad, that on his last day she cried out «*Get it, dear March! I have got my kids past winter!*» March was mad because the old lady offended him and borrowed a day from February. Therefore is February a day shorter than other months. March made on this borrowed day very bad weather, forcing the old lady to coil under her caldor so as not to freeze. But even there she could not endure the cold; so she turned into marble, like her kids. (Arcadia).¹ The kids are in other narratives mentioned as sheep or lambs and goats.²

A variation mentions that the old lady was poor and had had only three kids, which she pastured herself. After all the hardships of winter she swore at March, who became mad and borrowed a day from April and froze her where she was the moment she swore at him (the place is called, The jump, spring of the old lady) (Lakkobikia of Macedonia).³

1. N. G. Politis, Μελέται περί τοῦ Βίου καὶ τῆς Γλώσσης τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ λαοῦ, Παραδόσεις, part A', Athens 1904, p. 163, no. 298.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 164, no. 299-301.

3. *Ibid.*, p.165, no. 302.

In another variation the old lady lead the sheep from the valley to the mountain and it started snowing but the old lady said «*In defiance of you, dear March, I have lead my lamps and goats through*». Then it snowed much and the old lady froze along with her lamps and goats. (Lasta of Gortyna).⁴ Or old March was mad and sent the wint soroko after borrowing a day from February (Sopoto of Kalabryta).⁵

The old lady was dancing and saying «*In defiance of you, dear March, I have lead my lamps and goats through*» (Arta).⁶

The old lady boasted because all the goats of the island except from her own had died due to bad weather in March. So she said «*Get it, dear March, you came and went away, but did not freeze my kids*». March became mad and borrowed two days from February and it was so cold that everything froze. The old lady covered with the caldron three thousand kids and so saved them.

The old lady lived alone on the mountain and had countless herds of kids. She would also make cheese and bring it to shore to load it on ships. Her cheese was so much that it could form a rock. When the weather turned better the old lady «*Drakena*» indignated that her cheese had remained so long on the shore climbed on the rock of cheese and started threatening God. God cursed the old lady and she became petrified along with her cheese.

The kids became wild and are on the islands Imbros and Samothrace, as Imbros and Samothrace used to be one island and later they were separated (Imbros).⁷

In Sifnos we have a herdsman, who swore at March on the last day of month, when he thought that he needed March no more. He said «*Get it, March, I don't need you any more*». March was mad; he borrowed two days from February and covered the whole island animals and goats. The paysants found the kids and sheep frozen and the shepherd petrified in his hut⁸.

In the cultural unit of Thasos it is said that the old Popina boasted that her herd had nothing more to fear. March had two more days. The weather became bad, there was snow and cold for three days and all goatsheep that were outside died except 4000 which she could rescue. When she felt she would die she cried out and her voice reached beyond the sea and her son on mount Athos could hear her. After her death her whole herd was transferred

4. *Ibid.*, p.164, no. 299.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165, no. 301.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 168, no. 306.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 166, no. 303.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169, no. 307.

to mount Athos. The copper caldron of Popina is also still there and all her olive trees in Batheia Potamia belong to the monastery of Filotheos because this monastery bought her from the monastery of St Laura, where the son of old Popina was a monk⁹.

Of course I cannot mention other variations here.

This narrative is classified in petrifications.

The cultural units where the narrative is circulated are in the whole greek area and usually it is connected with toponyms.

The anthropological data of the narrative are specified and classified as follows:

a. Cause

b. Causality, result, consequence.

a. Cause: The cause is breaking the code of values. The non acknowledgment of the superior power and of the position of man. Only once not the herdsman is mentioned but instead a herdsman. Only once a herdsman is mentioned instead of the herdsman. The weather is made by March.

b. Causality, result, consequence: The function of the code of values. From breaking the code of values came the punishment.

Ἡ τιμωρία προῆλθε ἀπὸ τῆς ὕβρις.

The way of restoration of the function of the code of values.

We have three parts:

1. **March borrows days for the function of the moral code** (but we have the questions):

a. How many days does he borrow?

b. From which month does he borrow them?/ Who are the months he borrows them from?

2. **Demonstrative places.**

3. **Connections and the unequal in number of days of the month February.**

1. **We come to one.**

a. How many days does he borrow?

He borrows one, or two or three days.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 167, no. 305.

- b. Who are the months he borrows them from?/ From which month he borrows them?

From February and exceptionally from April, or he has himself still a few days.

2. The Demonstrative places

The narrative in the greek area is connected with the place where the herdsman, or in one case the herdsman, was petrified. The numerous toponyms will not be mentioned here due to lack of time.

3. Connections and the unequal in number of days of the month February.

These formations of the ethnographical data about the days seem to be deriving from the change of weather in the frame of anthropological thought, to justify the fact that February is shorter. These changes of weather seem to form the dynamic of the narrative, to be its structural elements. To this approachment seem to belong also the skepticism of common sense, which leads to the variations «*March had still a few days*» and «*March borrows days from April*».

Also these last days of March are called the days of the old lady or the days of the old ladies. In particular the people name these last days according to the name of one of the elder ladies of the village. If the weather is good on a particular day, they say the old lady is good or if the weather is bad, they say the old lady is bad.

The narrative is so common that there are many proverbial expressions referring to the ones that neglect their duties and think they need others no more.

II. A short comparative approach of the narrative in other peoples of Southeastern Europe.

From the numerous variations of the narrative spread in the whole greek area we approached and recorded the one most representative of the ethnographical systems included in the narrative.

Now let's turn to the cultural spreading of the narrative and touch the

cultural planning. We note that the ethnographical data we could gather are not complete and furthermore the time we have for this presentation is very limited.

This narrative is circulated also among other people, like Albanians, Serbians, Bulgarians, Rumanians.

In Albania in the area of Argyrocastro the last two days of March and the first of April are called *pliakete* «*the 29th and 30rd March and the 1st April are called πλῆξατε = the Old ones (old ladies)*».¹⁰ The researcher Hann mentions that the reason for this name is not known. Besides it is said that until these days are past one is not safe from winter and when winter's cold comes, people believe that the *pliakete* are offended (culpables).

A Gegiki proverb about the easily changing weather in March goes certainly back to this narrative. It contains the main cultural formation of borrowing days. It says March, my brother, lend me two days to freeze the old lady with her whole herd¹¹.

In the version of the narrative in Albania there were three old herds-women who had their sheep in the winter pen. On that year winter was very harsh and lasted very long. At the end of March the old herds-women took their sheep to the top of the mountain. One of them took the distaff and knitted. Because it was a good day, she told the others: «*I climbed the top of the mountain and took a shit in the face of March*». The other old lady says «*Why did you say that?*» And she answers «*Because half the day March makes the horse day and the rest of the day he makes the warm eat the horse*». When March heard what the first herds-woman said, he got mad and started snowing. Until noon the old herds-woman froze and then it was so warm that worms started eating her. The other two herds-women saw the bad weather and took their sheep to a cave and so they were saved. Since that time they say that the 30th and 31st of March and the 1st of April are the old ladies and that on one of these days the weather is bad.¹² We note here that March is known

10. Hann J. G., *Albanesische Studien I*, Iena 1854, p. 155: «*Der 29 und 30 März und 1 April heissen πλῆξατε, die Alten; bis dahin hält man sich noch nicht sicher durch den Winter. Wenn er sich aber an diesen Tagen fühlbar macht so wird die Schuld den alten Weibern zugeschrieben. Statt des deutschen Alt-Weibersommers finden wir also in Albanien einen Alt-Weiberwinter, den Grund des Namens wußte Niemand anzugeben*». «*Η 1^η, 2^η καὶ 3^η καὶ ἡ 15^η, 16^η καὶ 17^η Μαρτίου ὀνομάζονται δριμύμες ἡμέρες (δριμύμ.)*» p. 155, *ibid.*; see also N. G. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 878.

11. Gustav Meyer, *Albanesische Studien VI*, p. 21.

12. Holger Petersen, *Zur Albanesischen Volkskunde*, Kopenhagen 1898, p. 112; Gr. G. Tocilescu, *Materialuri Folkloristice*, Bucuresti 1900, vol. II, pp. 774-5; see also N. G. Politis, *op. cit.*, pp. 878-879.

for the sudden changes of weather also in the greek area, where is circulated the proverb «*March makes until noon die and until evening smell bad*»¹³.

By the Rumanians we have the days named old ladies (dilele Babei) like in Greece, only they refer to the first nine or twelve days and the people name each day,¹⁴ as in Peloponnese.¹⁵ So the first old lady is named Baba Dochia, connected with St Eudokia, whose name's day is celebrated on the 1st March. They say that on the first days of March it was snowing and the old Bdokia took her sheep out on the mountain for pasture. March warned her that it was too early, but the old lady laughed at him. She took nine furs and went to the mountain. March felt offended and he snowed to 30 feet and froze/petrified the old lady with all her sheep.

The difference to the greek version is that by the Rumanians the petrification is missing and, more importantly, the old lady took a warning from March, from a superior power, which, as I think, is not a popular element.

On the mountain Bucegi of the Carpathians there is a rock named Babele (= old ladies) connected with this narrative. A similar narrative is mentioned about the mountain Ceblau of Magdania. In the spring of the river Arges there is a rock named rock of the Goat-herdsman and they say that an old lady bet that she could go anywhere in winter with her furs, but the weather was very cold and she froze with her kids.

Other narration: In Almasi of Rumania in the southwestern borders of Transylvania, in Banato in the northern area, we have a narrative containing the ethnographical elements of bad weather, the bad old lady with the nine furs and the final freezing of the old lady and her son. But this narrative is connected with the formation of the bad mother in law and the daughter in law. In particular it is exactly mentioned the system of kinship, the data of patrilineal kinship system and motifs of stories about the mother in law and the daughter in law. For example in the motif of betting for the realization of the impossible the daughter in law should make black wool – white which she accomplished through frequent hair washing. The daughter in law should wash wool in the river in winter and come back with the first flowers of Spring on her hair; the mother in law thought it was already spring, she took

13. N. G. Politis, op. cit., p. 879,1.

14. L. Shaineanu, Les jours d' emprunt ou les jours de la Vieille, Romania 1889, vol. XVIII, pp. 107-127; B. PatriceŃu – Hasdeu, Dictionarul limbei Istorice si poporare a Romănilor, Bucuresti 1893, vol. III, pp. 2278-2282 w. Babele and Baba pp.2275; Zeitschrift für österreichische Gymnasien 1887, p. 393 ff; see also N. G. Politis, op. cit., pp. 881-882.

15. N. G. Politis, vol. I, pp. 164-165, no. 301.

of her furs and went with her son and her herd on the mountain and they all froze. We note that the first nine days of April are named the days of the old lady. We see that the ethnographical data of our narrative are mixed with the elements of the story and the system of kinship. We still have the furs, the nine days and April in legends.

Among the Bulgarian population units is circulated the following proverb «*go my kid to the mountain, fart the beard of March*» (Tsiechte koritsa na planina, perdnem Marchou na bredina), which has similar meaning to «*Get it, dear March! I have gotten my kids past winter!*»). It is also mentioned that the last two days of March are named *babini dene* (= days of the old lady). This subject has been approached by the researchers *Ad. Stausz* (= die Bulgaren, 336) and *Miladinovtsi* (= Beulgarski narodni piesni 523-524).

The former researcher says that St Martha, who is celebrated on the 1st of March stole these two days from February to help the old Baba in going to the mountain with her kids, so February is two days shorter than the other months. The latter says that the old lady, like in the greek version, thought that the weather was better and took her kids to the mountain after saying the proverb mentioned above. March became mad, because she offended him and took two days from his brother April to freeze the old lady and her herd, that one can still see today on the mountain Skardos.

The Serbian population units call the last days of March or the first days of April days of the old lady (*Babini dni*) or kids of the old lady (*Babini Jartsi*) or sheep of the old lady (*Babini Kozlitsi*) or borrowed days of the old lady (*Babini pozajmenitsi*) or the bind sheep of the old lady (*babini ukovi*). They say that an old lady went to the mountain when there was north wind and said «*Get it, March, I don't fear you any more or do my sheep with five horns*». March got mad, borrowed days from February and snowed and petrified the old lady along with her kids. They say that one can see even today in some place on the mountain the old lady petrified with her kids around her.

The serbian version contains many common elements with the greek one. The difference is that the old lady offended March although it was snowing, because she knew that his days would soon be over. An indication of the influence from another cultural unit is that the place of the petrification is not exactly indicated.

The narrative is very widely spread, met also by the Slavs of the Carpathians, the Russians, the Turks but also the Belgians, French, Spaniards and Katalans, Portuguese, Swiss, Italians, Scots etc.

Many scholars have tried to find an archetype of this narrative in the

petrification of the old lady, like Hasdeu,¹⁶ a subject that we will not examine here. We just note here that:

1. This spreading out of the narrative should not be attributed to polygenetism, to a similar expression of the observation of the same weather phenomenon or to a simple coincidence, because the narrative includes many similar details and the main elements are repeated. So we can assume that the narrative was spread out having one common origin.
2. The most complete narratives are the ones that have a specific reason of existence and so include the relative details. These narratives can be considered as closer to the archetype, especially when they are connected with a place, a toponym where the event of the petrification is thought to have taken place. The petrification, the main element of cultural happening is not present in all variations from other population units.
3. The narrative indicates the harshness of late winter and the sudden weather changes on the specific days and the accidents due to bad weather that happen mainly to older people. In an agricultural type of economy it is natural that there exist differentiations of jobs according to sex and age. So we have an old herdsman, a fact which justifies the petrification, although women are not so often shepherds on mountains.

The narrative seems to have been formed after a real event in an area where such weather changes were rare and therefore the event and its cause was so vividly depicted in a narrative.

It seems that the exception to the rule, the old herdsman, was turned into a herdsman, which is a frequent men's occupation, a change which denotes an intellectual elaboration. So we have the only one variation, as far as I know, from Sifnos in the greek area. We also note that the versions of the narrative from Italy, Corsica, France, Belgium and Spain mention a herdsman and especially that in Ipiros it is mentioned that the old lady had lost her husband and so had to become herself a herdsman.

4. The wide spreading of the narrative and the completeness of the narration in the greek area compared to the variations in other countries shows that the greek version is closer to the archetype. The version closer to the greek one is the Serbian which seems to approach the archetype. Besides, the differences show that the ethnographical elements have

16. B. PatriceŃu – Hasdeu, *Dictionarul limbei Istorice si poporare a RomŃnilor*, Bucuresti 1893, vol. III, p. 2281-2.

gradually fainted and led to the thought that this fainting is due to the distance from the creative cultural centre.

5. All greek variations are connected with a specific place which has the name «*old lady*» or a similar toponym, where the narrative is common knowledge.
6. The reason for the differentiation in what regards the time, I think, should be sought in finding a more plausible time that would justify the events according to the weather conditions in the various cultural units probably after some logical elaboration in the cultural unit or when the narrative is recorded from an informant who lives in a different area with a different climatogeology (the first version from Koutsoblachia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Rumania, the second from Albania), putting the events of the narrative at the end of February and the beginning of March and some from Italia and France in January. It should be stressed that there is a version mentioning borrowing days from April, which seems more natural, because April is after March. Nevertheless April cannot justify so bad weather (Bulgaria, Spain, Katalania, Italy, Scotland, once in Greece). It seems that the origin of this variation should be sought in a learned influence, because the borrowing from a previous month seemed not so natural. The greek testimony could be due to the influence of the neighbour units.
7. We have the justification of the difference of the number of days of February in the greek narrations, who is named crippled February, a name that was also used by ancient Greeks.
8. The petrification the main cultural formation of the narrative is met by the Greeks but also by the other people: the difference is that by the others the old lady freezes, whereas the petrification as marble, is characteristic of the greek population units, where the consequences of the cold are described with such expressions as also astonishment, the reaction to an unexpected event, like the sudden change of weather.

Moreover the punishment of human beings by supernatural powers is known to the greeks from ancient times with numerous testimonies in ancient texts.

9. Finally and more importantly this narrative is mentioned with its main ethnographical elements by Pausanias.¹⁷ Moreover there is a narrative connected with the ancient building by Herod of Attica on the west side of the hill Kotroni between the villages Oinoy and Brana. Its yard

17. A, 32, 7: «καί τό καλούμενον Πανός αἰπόλιον, πέτραι τά πολλά αἰζῶν εἰκασμέναι». («and thus called goatherd of Pan are stones very similar to goats»)

is named «*the old lady's pen*» and the people tell about the petrification of the old lady and her herd. Besides, one of the headless statues, which is thought to be a sitting man, is indicated by the people as a woman's statue and is called the old lady of Oinoy.

We should note here that about one and a half kilometer away to the north there is the cave of Pan mentioned by Pausanias. Even if the toponyms are not exactly identified, it is sure that there is an ancient greek testimony for this legend by Pausanias.